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Censorship in Schools:
Reading's Position in the Landscape of Policy Creation

Rachel Beckham

Advised by Dr. Amy Qualls

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Abstract

Censorship is not new to current issues. It has affected authors and speakers for centuries, but it is especially prevalent today, especially in schools. Teachers and librarians are often challenged for the materials they choose to provide to students. Concerned parents object to the materials for containing sexual content, profanity, or LGBTQ+ characters or themes. This study aims to answer the question, “What role, if any, do books containing controversial topics serve in the literature classrooms of today’s students?” To answer this question, the author of this study conducted a literary analysis on the top three most banned books of the 2021-2022 year: *All Boys Aren’t Blue* by George M. Johnson, *Lawn Boy* by Jonathan Evison, and *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe. During this analysis, the author considered the books holistically and how the most controversial sections affected the overall message. The study closely looks at the impact of these works on readers and how their personal experiences might bring deeper understanding to the text through reader-response theory.

Through this research, the study concluded that these books contained beneficial messages to readers, so long as they are handled with care. Each book is recommended for a specific age group and classroom setting, and the author emphasizes the importance of addressing sensitive materials with thoughtful consideration. Based on this information, the author makes applications to policy and teacher preparation. The study concludes with a personal reflection from the author which discusses the Christian perspective of handling controversial literature.

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Introduction

The Issue

The American education system is currently facing many issues. Among them is an increase in parental demand to be involved in their child's education. This interest has resulted in many changes, including a rise in the number of books being challenged, restricted, removed, and banned in students' classrooms and libraries¹. The censorship of ideas is not new to our time. However, this lack of novelty does not make book banning any less concerning to the readers and literary educators of today. Currently, concerned parents and citizens are challenging books for reasons ranging from sexual content, racial slurs, or LGBTQ+ themes and characters². Many of these challenges are based on a single scene or section of the book; challengers have failed to examine the piece holistically.

Challenges to school reading materials can only be expected to increase following new legislation in many states. In the state of Florida, House Bill 1467 was passed in March of 2022³. The new legislation is a step towards curriculum transparency and parental involvement in Florida schools⁴. Districts must provide more opportunities for parents to view and object to materials used in their child's curriculum or in the libraries⁵. For decades, teachers have been sending home letters and making phone calls to encourage parents to take part in their child's

¹ Shawnda Hines, "American Library Association Highlights Increasing Censorship Attempts During Banned Books Week Programming," American Library Association, September 15, 2022, <https://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2022/09/american-library-association-highlights-increasing-censorship-attempts-during>.

² Jonathan Friedman and Nadine Farid Johnson, "Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Censor Books in Schools," PEN America, published on September 19, 2022, <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>.

³ "CS/HB 1467 — K-12 Education," The Florida Senate, accessed October 10, 2022, <https://www.flsenate.gov/Committees/billsummaries/2022/html/2823>.

⁴ Jacob Oliva, "House Bill 1467, K-12 Education, School District Responsibilities," (official memorandum, Tallahassee, FL: Florida Department of Education, 2022), <https://info.fldoe.org/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-9557/dps-2022-83.pdf>.

⁵ Oliva, "House Bill 1467."

education. However, there is a boundary between involvement and disrespect of the professional educators. If one group is allowed to dictate the literature of an entire school, specific groups of people who lie outside the ideas of the in group could be completely removed from accessible literature.

Reading is a multi-purpose tool. It can be used for connection with self and connections with others who might have lived hundreds of years before the reader or in a country thousands of miles away. By reading literature that includes a diverse group of people, students can gain insight into the experiences of those who lives look nothing like their own. Even if their circumstances may never be the same, students can learn empathy for others. Additionally, students who relate to those experiences will have a sense of belonging. It is important that they have access to a diverse selection of literature, so that they might find themselves within the pages of a book. The overall message and impact of these books outweighs a single scene, theme or character.

Definitions of Terms

Because this study will use language specific to the conversation of censorship in schools, it is important to define some of the terms that will be repeated throughout its course. The following paragraphs provide definitions of some keywords in order to achieve clarity throughout this study.

Challenge

A challenge is “an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group”⁶. Challenges do not only allow the expression of personal beliefs, but also

⁶ “Banned Book FAQ,” American Library Association, published October 25, 2016, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/banned-books-qa>.

involve a request to remove the item from the school curriculum or library, therefore restricting access of all students⁷. Those who challenge specific materials often do so with the intention of protecting children from “inappropriate” or “offensive” content, especially in regard to a specific age group⁸.

Banning

Banning a book, according to the American Library Association, is “the removal of [challenged] materials⁹. PEN America expands the definition to include the restriction of a previously accessible book¹⁰. Book bans are the result of “parent and community challenges, administrative decisions, or in response to direct or threatened action by lawmakers or other governmental officials”¹¹.

Restrict/Remove

When a book is challenged, there are two common actions that can be taken against the material: restriction or removal.

To restrict a material is to limit access to it. In order to curb book censorship, many school libraries have created a “restricted” section¹². To access the materials in this section, students must have signed permission from a parent or guardian¹³. By doing this, schools can accommodate those who find the material inappropriate while still providing others with access

⁷ “Banned Book FAQ.”

⁸ “Banned Book FAQ.”

⁹ “Banned Book FAQ.”

¹⁰ Friedman and Johnson, “Banned in the USA.”

¹¹ Friedman and Johnson, “Banned in the USA.”

¹² Carolyn L. Carlson, “Readstricted: Censorship in Public School Libraries,” *The Advocate* 23, No. 3 (2017): 55-60, <https://doi.org/10.4148/2637-4552.1028>.

¹³ Carlson, “Readstricted.”

to it. There is a great deal of controversy around the “restricted” section and the message it sends to students¹⁴.

Removal is the physical elimination of a material from the school library or classroom¹⁵. This is what is most commonly thought of when considering a book ban. However, some discussions of book banning have argued to include restriction as a form of banning¹⁶.

LGBTQ+

LGBTQ+ is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer, with a plus at the end to include other gender or sexual identities that might not be included in the abbreviated term¹⁷. The acronym LGBTQ+ is an “umbrella term” that people use to “refer to the community as a whole”¹⁸.

Literature Review

History

The censorship of books can be traced back for centuries. In 259 B.C., Chinese emperor Shih Huang Ti is said to have burned most of the books in his kingdom¹⁹. He kept only a few copies for his personal library, which were destroyed before his death in hopes that humanity would believe history began with him²⁰. In A.D. 35, Roman emperor Caligula opposed the public reading of Homer’s *Odyssey* because he believed it encouraged Greek ideas of freedom²¹. While

¹⁴ Carlson, “Readstricted.”

¹⁵ Friedman and Johnson, “Banned in the USA.”

¹⁶ Friedman and Johnson, “Banned in the USA.”

¹⁷ “LGBTQIA Resource Center Glossary,” UC Davis LGBTQIA+ Resource Center, modified January 14, 2020, <https://lgbtqia.ucdavis.edu/educated/glossary>.

¹⁸ “LGBTQIA Resource Center Glossary.”

¹⁹ “Bannings and Burnings in History,” Freedom to Read, accessed October 23, 2022, <https://www.freedomtoread.ca/resources/bannings-and-burnings-in-history/>.

²⁰ “Bannings and Burnings in History.”

²¹ “Bannings and Burnings in History.”

these challenges are extreme examples from a different time, they speak to the longstanding relationship between literature and censorship.

At the start of the U.S.A.'s history with banned books, most of the censored materials contained ideas that religious leaders found offensive²². Massachusetts Bay colonist William Pynchon published his pamphlet entitled "The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption" in 1650²³. The author argued that all who were obedient to God while on Earth would be saved, which was in direct contrast to the Calvinists' teachings on predestination²⁴. In response, colonists burned and banned Pynchon's pamphlet; only four copies still exist today²⁵.

During the Civil War era, multiple states outlawed the written expression of anti-slavery sentiments²⁶. Harriet Beecher Stowe defied this legislation in 1851 with the publication of her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*²⁷. The book was burned and banned, and some who owned the book were sentenced to jail time²⁸. Additionally, some northern states banned pro-slavery literature²⁹.

In 1873, censorship became federal with the passing of the Comstock Act³⁰. Anthony Comstock came to Congress with illustrations of materials that he considered to be obscene and urged Congress to outlaw such things to protect the nation's children³¹. Under the new legislation, it was illegal to send "obscene, lewd, or lascivious," "immoral," or "indecent" publication through the mail³². It was also unlawful to sell, give away, or own any obscene

²² Erin Blakemore, "The history of book bans – and their changing targets – in the U.S.," National Geographic, published September 6, 2022, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/history-of-book-bans-in-the-united-states>.

²³ Blakemore, "The history of book bans."

²⁴ Blakemore, "The history of book bans."

²⁵ Blakemore, "The history of book bans."

²⁶ Blakemore, "The history of book bans."

²⁷ Blakemore, "The history of book bans."

²⁸ Blakemore, "The history of book bans."

²⁹ Blakemore, "The history of book bans."

³⁰ Blakemore, "The history of book bans."

³¹ Brandon R. Burnette, "Comstock Act of 1873," The First Amendment Encyclopedia, Middle Tennessee State University, published 2009, <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1038/comstock-act-of-1873>.

³² Burnette, "Comstock Act of 1873."

material³³. The law prohibited materials that discussed anything regarding abortion or contraception, even if written by a physician³⁴. Comstock was designated as a special agent in the United States Post Office and was given authority to make arrests of individuals in violation of the new act³⁵. This legislation remained in effect until 1936³⁶.

During the 20th century, the censorship conversation turned its focus to school libraries³⁷. Parents requested the removal of books for various reasons: challenged social norms, profanity, or sexual or political content³⁸. These bans left many librarians scared to order new, possibly controversial materials³⁹. However, the Supreme Court weighed in on students' rights under the first amendment in two landmark cases: *Tinker v Des Moines* and *Island Trees Union Free School District v Pico*⁴⁰. Both cases established that schools did not have the ability to take away students' rights⁴¹.

In spite of these rulings, book challenges continued to the point that Banned Book Week was created in the early 1980s, and it continues to be held annually throughout schools, libraries, and book stores⁴².

Current Trends

Book banning is not a new issue, but its presence is on the rise, especially within schools. In 2021, the American Library Association recorded 1,597 book removals or challenges, which is more than any year since they began recording over twenty years ago⁴³.

³³ Burnette, "Comstock Act of 1873."

³⁴ Burnette, "Comstock Act of 1873."

³⁵ Burnette, "Comstock Act of 1873."

³⁶ Blakemore, "The history of book bans."

³⁷ Blakemore, "The history of book bans."

³⁸ Blakemore, "The history of book bans."

³⁹ Blakemore, "The history of book bans."

⁴⁰ Blakemore, "The history of book bans."

⁴¹ Blakemore, "The history of book bans."

⁴² Blakemore, "The history of book bans."

⁴³ Hines, "American Library Association."

In a PEN America report on book banning in the USA, the state of Florida, specifically, ranked second in the number of bans, second only to Texas⁴⁴. During the 2021-2022 school year, twenty-one Florida school districts accounted for 566 bans⁴⁵. Those numbers are likely to increase in the 2022-2023 school year in response to HB 1467, which adds more restrictions to school materials and more opportunities for outside objections.

Of the thousands of titles banned, PEN America found that forty-one percent were objected to because of “LGBTQ+ themes, protagonists, or prominent secondary characters”⁴⁶. Materials ranging from novels to memoirs to children’s picture books have been removed from school libraries for featuring a character who identified as LGBTQ+. In 2021, the American Library Association found that, out of the top ten most commonly banned books, half of them were challenged for LGBTQ+ content, including the top three⁴⁷. Among the most popular were Maia Kobabe’s *Gender Queer*, Jonathan Evison’s *Lawn Boy*, and George M. Johnson’s *All Boys Aren’t Blue*⁴⁸. In response to these challenges, many school districts moved the materials to a restricted section of the library. In order to access this section, students must receive parental permission, thereby limiting access and choice.

Policy

As parents seek a more significant role in their child’s education, many turn to legislators to assist them in receiving more opportunities to have their voices heard. In the state of Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis responded to parents’ desires in the 2022 legislative session, which he

⁴⁴ Friedman and Johnson, “Banned in the USA.”

⁴⁵ Friedman and Johnson, “Banned in the USA.”

⁴⁶ Friedman and Johnson, “Banned in the USA.”

⁴⁷ “Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists,” American Library Association, published on March 26, 2013, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>.

⁴⁸ “Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists.”

stated was the “Year of the Parent”⁴⁹. DeSantis signed several bills regarding education into law, including HB 1467 entitled “K-12 Education”⁵⁰. The law limits board members' term limits and enhances the instructional material selection process, making it more transparent⁵¹. Under HB 1467, schools are required to hold open meetings for the purpose of selecting public materials⁵². Additionally, districts are required to make public a searchable list of all instructional materials used, so that parents have ample opportunity to object to questionable material⁵³. Any objections the district does receive must be reported annually to the Florida Department of Education, who will then create a comprehensive list of all objections within the state and distribute it to districts⁵⁴.

The 2022 Florida legislature passed not one, but multiple controversial bills regarding education. Among them was HB 1557, the “Parental Rights in Education” law, which is more commonly referred to as the “Don’t Say Gay” law. The passing of this law prohibits the teaching of “sexual orientation or gender identity” from kindergarten through the third grade or in any manner throughout 4-12 grades that is not “age-appropriate” or “developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards”⁵⁵. Schools have already made changes in response to this bill, including removing dozens of books from libraries that contained references to LGBTQ+ ideas or people⁵⁶.

⁴⁹ Tre Goins-Phillips, “‘We Want Our Kids to Be Kids’: Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis Dubs 2022 ‘Year of the Parent,’” CBN News, March 16, 2022, <https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2022/march/we-want-our-kids-to-be-kids-florida-gov-ron-desantis-dubs-2022-year-of-the-parent>.

⁵⁰ “CS/HB 1467 — K-12 Education.”

⁵¹ Oliva, “House Bill 1467.”

⁵² Oliva, “House Bill 1467.”

⁵³ Oliva, “House Bill 1467.”

⁵⁴ Oliva, “House Bill 1467.”

⁵⁵ The Florida House of Representatives, “CS/CS/HB 1557 – Parental Rights in Education,” Accessed December 12, 2022, <https://www.myfloridahouse.gov/Sections/Bills/billsdetail.aspx?BillId=76545>.

⁵⁶ Giuseppe Sabella, “Genderbread person? Gone. Schools chief asks teachers to pull books, materials ahead of new law,” Palm Beach Post, published June 13, 2022, modified August 5, 2022, <https://www.palmbeachpost.com/story/news/2022/06/13/palm-beach-county-school-books-under-intense-scrutiny-amid-new-fl-laws/7530289001/>.

In *Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v Pico* (1982), the Supreme Court ruled against banning of materials based only on a dislike of the ideas it discussed⁵⁷. The school district in question had created a “Book Review Committee” to review the quality of materials and their suitability to specific age groups⁵⁸. The committee proceedings led to the removal of several books because they were, “anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and just plain filthy”⁵⁹. Steven Pico challenged the committee’s decision on behalf of several other students⁶⁰. The federal district court upheld the school board’s decision, but Pico won in the U.S. Court of Appeals⁶¹. The Supreme Court decision stated that schools have a respectable inclination to promote certain values, that is secondary to their obligation under the First Amendment⁶². A previous court case — *Tinker v Des Moines Independent Community School District* — had already ruled that students do not “shed their constitutional rights” when they step onto school property⁶³. Under the *Pico* decision, materials cannot be banned because of personal dislike for their content, but for specific characteristics such as “pervasive vulgarity” or “educational unsuitability,” though the Supreme Court failed to define those terms⁶⁴. This lack of clarification left it up to school officials what exactly is considered “vulgar.”

Several first amendment interest groups expand the interpretation of this case to include the student right to access of materials⁶⁵. They argue that “students have a First Amendment right

⁵⁷ “Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v Pico by Pico,” Oyez, accessed October 23, 2022, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1981/80-2043>.

⁵⁸ “Board of Education,” Oyez.

⁵⁹ “Board of Education,” Oyez.

⁶⁰ “Board of Education,” Oyez.

⁶¹ “Board of Education,” Oyez.

⁶² “Board of Education,” Oyez.

⁶³ “*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*,” Oyez, accessed October 23, 2022, <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1968/21>.

⁶⁴ “BOARD OF EDUCATION, ISLAND TREES UNION FREE SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 26 et al., Petitioners, v. Steven A. PICO, by his next friend Frances Pico et al.,” Legal Information Institute, accessed October 23, 2022, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/457/853>.

⁶⁵ Judith Haydel, “Libraries and Intellectual Freedom,” *The First Amendment Encyclopedia*, Middle Tennessee State University, published 2009, <https://mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1125/libraries-and-intellectual-freedom>.

to receive information”⁶⁶. Therefore, schools have an obligation to provide students with materials, so long as they are not vulgar or unsuitable.

Research Methodology

Research Question

Book banning is a prominent issue in the education system, especially as parents continue to seek a larger role in their children’s education. This study focuses on the role of literary study in the classroom. Specifically, the author seeks to discover the role of challenged books within the school setting. The question driving the research is, “What purpose, if any, do books with controversial topics serve in literature classrooms?” The topic of focus will be LGBTQ+ content, as this is the top reason cited for challenging books in the 2021-2022 school year⁶⁷.

Nature of the Study

In order to answer the research question, the author of this study will conduct a literary analysis of three texts that have been challenged for LGBTQ+ content, themes, or characters. This analysis will allow the author to conclude whether or not the book has a role in the classrooms of today’s students. This analysis will look at the works holistically and consider the role of reader-response theory in their interpretation.

The Setting

While censorship is a global issue, this study required a narrower geographic focus in order to be effective. The conversation will involve challenges on a nationwide level within the United States of America. In some instances, the study will refer to the state of Florida, which

⁶⁶ Haydel, “Libraries and Intellectual Freedom.”

⁶⁷ Friedman and Johnson, “Banned in the USA.”

was specifically chosen because of its recent legislation and standing in the top locations for book challenges. Additionally, it is where the author of this study will reside following the completion of a Bachelor of Arts in English. Both its personal significance for the author of this study and its prominence in the book banning conversation make Florida the best choice of setting for this study's data focus.

Methods of Data Selection

The three books selected for analysis are as follows: *All Boys Aren't Blue* by George M. Johnson, *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe, and *Two Boys Kissing* by David Levithan. These books were selected because they a) have been banned/challenged in the past ten years, b) were banned/challenged for LGBTQ+ content, and c) are among the most frequently banned books in the past decade⁶⁸.

All Boys Aren't Blue made its way to the top three most challenged books on the American Library Association's list in 2021 for a list of reasons, including profanity and LGBTQ+ content⁶⁹. In this nonfiction work, George M. Johnson tells readers their story growing up as a queer black man in hopes that it will help those experiencing similar struggles to their own⁷⁰.

Lawn Boy by Jonathan Evison was number two on the American Library Association's list of ten most banned books for 2022⁷¹. The coming-of-age novel focuses on Mike Muñoz, a young, Mexican-American man who continues to deal with the hardships of his childhood.

⁶⁸ "Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists," American Library Association, published on March 26, 2013, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>.

⁶⁹ "Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists."

⁷⁰ George M. Johnson, *All Boys Aren't Blue: A Memoir-Manifesto* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers, 2020).

⁷¹ "Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists."

Challenges to this work of fiction were made because of its LGBTQ+ and sexually explicit content⁷².

At the top of the list of most banned books in 2021 is Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer*⁷³. Kobabe uses the panels of a graphic novel to tell the story of growing up confused about eir gender identity. *Gender Queer* has been banned in over 40 school districts⁷⁴ for its LGBTQ+ focus and some images considered to be sexually explicit⁷⁵.

Methods of Analysis

To address the research questions, this study will conduct a literary analysis of the three selected texts. During this analysis, the author will focus on the overall themes of the book. The analysis will then narrow in on the specific elements of the text that have been challenged, including specific scenes, images, or words. After examining these sections of the text, the author will compare their message to the overall purpose of the literary work. This will allow the author to conclude whether or not the challenged sections have value in a literature classroom.

Reader-Response Theory

As part of the literary analysis, the author will consider the application of reader-response theory. In this form of literary criticism, the reader is assumed to be more than a stationary part of the literature⁷⁶. Readers are an active part of forming the meaning of the text⁷⁷. Reader-response theory works under the assumption that the text finds meaning through a

⁷² "Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists."

⁷³ "Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists."

⁷⁴ Friedman and Johnson, "Banned in the USA."

⁷⁵ "Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists."

⁷⁶ Cagri Tugrul Mart, "Reader-Response Theory and Literature Discussions: A Springboard for Exploring Literary Texts," *New Educational Review* 56, no.2 (2019): 78-87, <https://doi.org/10.15804/ner.2019.56.2.06>.

⁷⁷ Mart, "Reader Response Theory and Literature Discussions."

“transactional” relationship with the reader⁷⁸. In other words, “Readers breathe life into texts through their prior knowledge and personal experiences”⁷⁹. This theory puts the reader in a position to find deeper meaning in the text than they might through other forms of literary analysis.

Reader-response theory was first developed in the 1930s by Louise Rosenblatt⁸⁰. The new theory was a response to New Criticism, which completely disregards the reader’s role in understanding the text⁸¹. Rosenblatt argued that there are two types of reading: efferent (informational) and aesthetic⁸². While efferent reading does not allow for multiple interpretations, aesthetic reading is for enjoyment and easily invites readers to consider their personal experiences while analyzing text⁸³.

Because of reader-response theory’s personal nature, students in a literature classroom can feel more agency in the discussions. Often, teachers of literature take a “telling” approach when it comes to analyzing texts⁸⁴. Many believe there is only one correct answer, and fear that turning the discussion over to their students will result in chaos⁸⁵. However, reader-response promotes interaction between a) students and each other and b) students and the text⁸⁶. By doing so, the theory also increases students’ critical thinking, understanding, and engagement⁸⁷.

⁷⁸ Mart, “Reader Response Theory and Literature Discussions.”

⁷⁹ Amanda H. Woodruff and Robert A. Griffin, “Reader Response in Secondary Settings: Increasing Comprehension through Meaningful Interactions with Literary Texts,” *Texas Journal of Literacy Education* 5, no. 2 (2017): 108-116, <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1162670.pdf>.

⁸⁰ Woodruff and Griffin, “Reader Response in Secondary Settings.”

⁸¹ Woodruff and Griffin, “Reader Response in Secondary Settings.”

⁸² Woodruff and Griffin, “Reader Response in Secondary Settings.”

⁸³ Woodruff and Griffin, “Reader Response in Secondary Settings.”

⁸⁴ Diana Mitchell, “Reader Response Theory: Some Practical Applications for the High School Literature Classroom,” *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* 9, no. 1 (1993), <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1604&context=lajm>.

⁸⁵ Mitchell, “Reader Response Theory.”

⁸⁶ Woodruff and Griffin, “Reader Response in Secondary Settings.”

⁸⁷ Woodruff and Griffin, “Reader Response in Secondary Settings.”

Reader-response theory does not support all interpretations of a text, but it does allow readers to bring their own understanding and experiences to the text so that they might interpret the deeper meaning⁸⁸. This requires readers to fully understand the specific literary elements of the text they are reading, so that they might be able to support their understanding (Woodruff and Griffin 110). This combination of personal agency and deep comprehension makes reader-response criticism valuable in a secondary literature classroom.

Research Rationale

In order to answer the research questions, the author of this study chose to conduct a literary analysis. This form of research is common in the field of literature and is easily applicable to this study. By completing close reading of three banned books, the author can discover their deeper meaning and how they could be beneficial in the classroom setting. While this type of study could be considered objective, the author will focus on specific elements of the text that are clear and refer to previous research. Additionally, this is a limited study of only three books out of hundreds that have been banned in recent years⁸⁹. However, by looking at a selection of these challenged works, this study can play a part in the overall conversation regarding censorship in American schools.

Literary Analysis

All Boys Aren't Blue by George M. Johnson

In their memoir *All Boys Aren't Blue*, author George M. Johnson — who identifies as nonbinary and uses the pronouns they, them — tells their personal experiences as growing up a Black and queer. Their book has been challenged across the nation, with aggressive measures

⁸⁸ Woodruff and Griffin, “Reader Response in Secondary Settings.”

⁸⁹ “Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists.”

called for in one Florida school⁹⁰. A board member called for the criminal prosecution of whoever allowed the memoir to be on the library shelves⁹¹. Johnson acknowledged the widespread banning taking place, stating that they have “always been prepared for the moment that it was going to be attacked and banned because in America people have an issue with books that tell the truth, and my book tells the truth”⁹².

The majority of challenges against *All Boys Aren't Blue* have referenced the book's sexual content as a primary reason for its removal. Johnson acknowledges the inclusion of some graphic content in the “Author's Note” chapter of their book: “This book will touch on sexual assault (including molestation), loss of virginity, homophobia, racism, and anti-Blackness,” and “at times may be a bit graphic”⁹³. Johnson continues by explaining the book's purpose is not to flaunt their sexuality but to provide representation⁹⁴: “They are experiences that many reading this book will encounter or have already encountered. And I want those readers to be seen and heard in these pages”⁹⁵. By touching on some difficult aspects of their life, Johnson is able to give representation to the “marginalized communities whose experiences have not yet been captured between the pages of a book”⁹⁶. The author believes that all “stories matter and deserve to be celebrated and told,” which is why they choose to include the challenging parts of their

⁹⁰ Nicole Chavez, “A Florida school board member filed a criminal complaint over a Black queer memoir,” CNN News Network, published November 18, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/17/us/florida-flagler-county-schools-all-boys-arent-blue-book/index.html>.

⁹¹ Chavez, “A Florida school board member.”

⁹² Chavez, “A Florida school board member.”

⁹³ Johnson, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, viii.

⁹⁴ Ninna Aalbæk Timmerman and Rebecca Strunge Mortensen, “Queer Temporality and Literary Representation: A study on censorship, identity, and book bans in contemporary America,” Aalborg University (2022): 68.

⁹⁵ Johnson, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, viii.

⁹⁶ Johnson, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, viii.

novel⁹⁷. It is not for shock value, but for the sharing of stories and representation of those who have gone unrepresented for far too long.

Johnson divides their book up into acts, which are then subdivided into chapters. Two of these chapters contain the majority of sexual content found in Johnson's memoir. The first of these chapters is found in Act 3: Teenagers. In chapter 11, entitled "Boys Will Be Boys...", Johnson shares the story of their first sexual encounter at the age of 13⁹⁸. The author and their cousin were both staying the night at Johnson's grandmother's house when their cousin instigated oral sex. Johnson uses phrases like "made me touch it," "told me to," and "grabbed my hand" to describe the lack of consent in this situation⁹⁹. Through their narration, Johnson is able to reveal to readers that they knew this act was wrong: "I knew what was happening wasn't supposed to happen. Cousins weren't supposed to do these things with cousins"¹⁰⁰. The scene is tainted with corruptness, creating a connection between queer actions and forbidden acts¹⁰¹. However, Johnson makes clear to readers that it is not the homosexual act that is wrong, but the sexual relations between family members. Towards the end of the story, Johnson describes this feeling of wrongness: "The whole time I knew it was wrong, not because I was having sexual intercourse with a guy, but that you were my family"¹⁰².

In spite of their guilt about the act, the author admits that they felt a "euphoria" at their first sexual encounter with a male¹⁰³. Through this, readers can feel the complexity of Johnson's feelings regarding their sexual identity. They describe how they did not know that sexual relations could occur outside of heterosexual relationships. The author states, "At the time, I

⁹⁷ Johnson, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, viii.

⁹⁸ Johnson, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, 200.

⁹⁹ Johnson, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, 201.

¹⁰⁰ Johnson, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, 201-202.

¹⁰¹ Timmerman and Mortensen, "Queer Temporality and Literary Representation," 72.

¹⁰² Johnson, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, 204.

¹⁰³ Johnson, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, 204.

knew that relations and relationships could only be between a boy and girl. I never even imagined a day would come when I would be able to explore what I had always felt inside”¹⁰⁴. This story was included in the book not as purely sexual content, but to teach readers about consent and relationships outside of heterosexual norms. Johnson shares with readers that they were “very unaware of what sex involved at the time”¹⁰⁵. They cite their lack of sex education in schools, describing it as “bare minimum”¹⁰⁶. Johnson shares their experience with readers in hopes that they might learn from the story. To conclude the chapter, Johnson describes how they struggled with the decision to include this story or not, but that they ultimately decided that it was “important to tell...to a generation of young queer explorers who need to know” the truth¹⁰⁷. When read in context, this story can be understood as educational for those exploring their own identities, especially young people who do not have the resources to learn such complicated things from trustworthy individuals.

The second chapter that contains sexual content can be found in Act 4: Friends, which occurs later in life while Johnson is in college. Chapter 15 is called “Losing My Virginity Twice,” and tells the story of Johnson’s first consensual sexual encounter¹⁰⁸ (262). From the first sentence, readers get a sense of the grip that heterosexual norms have on Johnson’s perception of sexuality¹⁰⁹. They describe how they have “never daydreamed about sex with another boy” but instead imagined themselves as a girl because “that was the only thing that ever made sense to [them]”¹¹⁰. During chapter 11, the author explained that there was not much representation of

¹⁰⁴ Johnson, *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, 202.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, 205.

¹⁰⁶ Johnson, *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, 206.

¹⁰⁷ Johnson, *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, 212.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson, *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, 262.

¹⁰⁹ Timmerman and Mortensen, “Queer Temporality and Literary Representation,” 72.

¹¹⁰ Johnson, *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, 262.

queer relationships throughout their childhood¹¹¹. They also did not find this information in school sexual education courses¹¹². The lack of representation in the media and sexual education courses left Johnson confused and with inhibitions towards sexual relations with anyone. The author stresses their own experiences with a lack of information to help readers understand the purpose of this story within their memoir.

During the sexual encounter that this story revolves around, Johnson returns to their ideas of heterosexual relationships, as they have no other guide for their actions¹¹³. They describe how they do not want to seem inexperienced because their partner obviously has prior knowledge that guides them¹¹⁴. For Johnson, the only previous experience they have is nonconsensual. They refer to that occurrence throughout the story in chapter 15, putting it in contrast with the current encounter: “For once, I was consenting to the sexual satisfaction of my body. This moment also confirmed that sex could look how I wanted it to look. And that it could be passionate and kind, but most importantly, fun and satisfying”¹¹⁵. Johnson uses this contrast to describe the joy that can be found in sex when it is consensual, “but also that sex can be queer, and that queer sex is valid in an otherwise heterosexualized society”¹¹⁶.

At the conclusion of the chapter, Johnson reflects on their experiences and wonders what they would have been like if they were given the same educational opportunities as their heterosexual classmates¹¹⁷. They describe their sexuality as “one, big, risky crash course” and emphasize the dangers of this method of learning¹¹⁸. In these sentences, it is clear that Johnson’s

¹¹¹ Johnson, *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, 262.

¹¹² Johnson, *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, 263.

¹¹³ Timmerman and Mortensen, “Queer Temporality and Literary Representation,” 74.

¹¹⁴ Johnson, *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, 266.

¹¹⁵ Johnson, *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, 266.

¹¹⁶ Timmerman and Mortensen, “Queer Temporality and Literary Representation,” 74.

¹¹⁷ Johnson, *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, 273.

¹¹⁸ Johnson, *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, 273.

goal in sharing sexual content is to educate those who come after them, so they do have the same experiences of cluelessness.

George M. Johnson's memoir, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, has been banned for containing LGBTQ+ content, profanity, and sexually explicit content¹¹⁹. However, Johnson himself says that "no one has the right to deny us the resources we need to properly engage with one another"¹²⁰. If people continue to deny students access to literature that can educate them about safe sex, it puts them in danger of harmful relations down the road. Johnson concludes chapter 15 by acknowledging that the stories of their sexual encounters will "be met with pushback"¹²¹. However, they refuse to allow fear to get in their way of educating readers: "My greatest fear is that queer teens will be left to trial and error in their sexual experience. It's worth me feeling a little embarrassed so that you all are a bit more prepared"¹²². The language and message of Johnson's memoir clearly reveal that the sexual content is intended to educate queer youth so that they do not face more danger because of their identity. Because of these findings, this study concludes that *All Boys Aren't Blue* is of value to mature readers and should not be removed from schools.

It should be noted that this book does contain material that could be mentally and emotionally challenging to many students. Because of the sensitivity of the subject, this author recommends that *All Boys Aren't Blue* be reserved for mature audiences to ensure best handling of the subject. Specifically, this book would do best if reserved for older teens and young adults, such as juniors and seniors in high school. Additionally, these conversations should be held in an advanced learning class, such as honors or Advanced Placement. While students deserve to have

¹¹⁹ "Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists."

¹²⁰ Johnson, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, 275.

¹²¹ Johnson, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, 276.

¹²² Johnson, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, 276.

representation in literature, their maturity levels should be taken into consideration when choosing which materials to include in the course readings. Teachers should also be prepared to warn students of the sensitive subjects contained in this book, as Johnson does in the Author's Note¹²³. Despite the book's challenges, the conversations it starts will be beneficial to students.

Lawn Boy by Jonathan Evison

Lawn Boy is a coming-of-age novel written by Jonathan Evison. It follows the story Mike Muñoz, a 22-year-old Mexican-American who is trying to make a life for himself while simultaneously dealing with the hardships of his childhood¹²⁴. *Lawn Boy* comes in at second on the American Library Association's list of most banned books for 2022¹²⁵. The work has been challenged for LGBTQ+ content, profanity, and some sexually explicit material¹²⁶. After signing HB 1467 into law, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis stated the purpose of the bill was to protect the rights of parents and their ability to protect their children¹²⁷. When discussing literature to protect the students from, DeSantis specifically mentions *Lawn Boy*: "You have some groups that want to take away classic books like ...*Of Mice and Men*, but *Lawn Boy*, a book containing explicit passages of pedophilia is somehow accepted"¹²⁸.

The "pedophilia" that DeSantis refers to is found in one specific scene within the 300+ page novel. In this section, Mike reflects on a sexual encounter at the age of ten for which he still feels shame: "But there's one thing I'd never tell [anyone] in a million years, not that it really matters: in fourth grade, at a church youth-group meeting, out in the bushes behind the

¹²³ Johnson, *All Boys Aren't Blue*, viii.

¹²⁴ Jonathan Evison, *Lawn Boy* (New York: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2015).

¹²⁵ "Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists."

¹²⁶ "Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists."

¹²⁷ Brendan Farrington, "DeSantis signs bill targeting explicit books in schools," AP News, published March 25, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/entertainment-florida-ron-desantis-school-boards-libraries-da50c9c4091868e121484425d290385b>.

¹²⁸ Farrington, "DeSantis signs bill."

parsonage, I touched Doug Goble's dick, and he touched mine. In fact, there were even some mouths involved"¹²⁹. This story carries throughout the novel, a reflection of Mike carrying it with him throughout his journey of self-discovery. Later in his story, Mike is reunited with Goble and confronts him about their sexual interaction, but Goble denies it¹³⁰. Although the inclusion of such a story might seem random when read out of context, it can be understood that its inclusion points to conflict Mike is having within himself. He struggles throughout the novel to discover who he truly is, and the sexual encounter confuses his self-identity even more. Mike refuses to tell anyone, even his best friend Nick, because he is ashamed of his actions and the weight they carry in his mind¹³¹. Later in the novel, Mike realizes that he is gay, and he begins a relationship with a young man named Andrew¹³². The two characters have a sexual encounter, but Evison refuses to give the details to readers, telling them "I'm not writing erotica here"¹³³. From this passage, we see directly that the author's intention was never to include graphic content for the purpose of describing sexual acts. If he refused to describe a sexual encounter that was romantic in nature, then the one passage which he did include in full detail must play a greater role in the story.

Other complaints about the sexual content included in *Lawn Boy* have been directed at the crude language that Evison uses to describe the encounter¹³⁴. Jonathan Evison himself

¹²⁹ Evison, *Lawn Boy*, 19.

¹³⁰ Evison, *Lawn Boy*, 228.

¹³¹ Evison, *Lawn Boy*, 19.

¹³² Evison, *Lawn Boy*, 283.

¹³³ Evison, *Lawn Boy*, 283.

¹³⁴ "Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists."

addresses this complaint in an article, as well as issue some have with the profanity¹³⁵. He argues that the language is a part of Mike's characterization:

When your protagonist is a 23-year-old working class kid who is disillusioned with capitalism, racial assumptions, along with the deteriorating personal, political, and global events that seem to be conspiring against him, there's bound to be some shits and fucks if you're writing anywhere near the modern-realist realm.¹³⁶

Additionally, Evison also states in the aforementioned article that *Lawn Boy* was originally "intended for an adult audience," but it crossed into the young adult genre when it won an Alex Award through the Young Adult Library Services Association¹³⁷. This award is given to "books written for adults that have special appeal to young adults, ages 12 through 18"¹³⁸.

Evison did not originally intend for his novel to be read by young adults, but its overall message is one that can benefit readers. They can relate to the awkward process of growing up while learning about the systemic divisions between classes and racial groups. With the writing of this novel, Evison intended to look at "the state of America, at wealth and equity and the perils of late capitalism, racial assumptions, and the moribund American dream"¹³⁹. Students can read about Mike facing trial after trial and continuing to fight to overcome them all. The sexual content and profanity of this novel are present, but they do not overshadow the overall message

¹³⁵ Jonathan Evison, "The Would-be Banning of *Lawn Boy*, and Why I'm not booking any Flights to Texas in the Near-Future," NW Book Lovers, published September 28, 2021, <https://nwbooklovers.org/2021/09/28/the-would-be-banning-of-lawn-boy-and-why-im-not-booking-any-flights-to-texas-in-the-near-future/>.

¹³⁶ Evison, "The Would-be Banning of *Lawn Boy*."

¹³⁷ Evison, "The Would-be Banning of *Lawn Boy*."

¹³⁸ "Alex Awards," Young Adult Library Services Association, accessed November 8, 2022, <https://www.ala.org/yalsa/alex-awards>.

¹³⁹ Rachel Uda, "What's it Like to Be Banned? We Spoke to the Author of One of America's Most Controversial Books," Katie Couric Media, published May 24, 2022, <https://katiecouric.com/culture/book-guide/lawn-boy-jonathan-evison-banned-books/>.

but enhance it through deeper characterization. This study finds that *Lawn Boy* by Jonathan Evison is beneficial and should not be banned from schools.

While *Lawn Boy* does contain language and sexual material, it does not include a significant amount of inappropriate content. Therefore, this author would find it a suitable read for high schoolers, specifically readers ages 16 and up who are experiencing many struggles similar to the main character. Before reading this book as a class, the teacher should have a discussion with students about its contents, especially the amount of language, and how they will handle that as a class.

Gender Queer by Maia Kobabe

Gender Queer: A Memoir is a graphic novel in which author Maia Kobabe — who identifies as nonbinary and uses the Spivak pronouns e, em, eir — tells eir story of growing up confused about eir gender identity and sexuality. Kobabe’s debut novel reached the top of the American Library Association’s Banned Books List in 2022¹⁴⁰. A Florida school district removed the book in response to a parent complaint about various images throughout the novel that have “no place in education”¹⁴¹. In response to this complaint, the school district not only took Kobabe’s memoir off the shelves, but required all school personnel involved with purchasing materials to be retrained on the school’s selection guidelines¹⁴². Kobabe defended eir memoir, stating in a short comic strip, “Please, leave the queer books on the library shelves, where the queer teens can find them. As a queer teen, I desperately needed them. And the queer

¹⁴⁰ “Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists.”

¹⁴¹ Bailey Gallion, “Brevard Public Schools removes book with sexually explicit art from high school library,” Florida Today, published October 11, 2021, <https://www.floridatoday.com/story/news/education/2021/10/11/brevard-public-schools-removes-lgbtq-graphic-novel-library/6096924001/>.

¹⁴² Gallion, “Brevard Public Schools removes book.”

teens of today need them too”¹⁴³. Through eir statement, it can be inferred that the graphic novel is not meant to describe sex or contain sexual content for the sake of sharing personal pleasures, but with the intent of helping young adults gain knowledge about themselves or others close to them.

The bans of Kobabe’s memoir focus specifically on sexually explicit images, specifically two images which show two people participating in oral sex. These images and other like them throughout Kobabe’s book are chosen out of context to raise questions regarding the book’s obscene nature. However, the author intended for the panels to be read in a specific order. Within that context, readers can see the overall intention of the author was to provide an educational guide that e was lacking during eir own childhood. On the back cover, the description of the graphic novel reads, “By addressing questions about gender identity — what it means and how to think about it — the story also doubles as a much-needed, useful and touching guide”¹⁴⁴. Based on the description alone, readers can know Kobabe’s intends for this work to be one of value to an underrepresented community and not a highly sexualized graphic novel.

One of the main elements in an educational guide are images. By using images in eir novel, Kobabe is able to reach the visual learners, as well as those who might not be as likely to pick up a longer work. The use of pictures might seem more appealing to the struggling reader. Kobabe’s use of a graphic novel to tell eir story enhances the educational value of the memoir. Additionally, e is able to provide a visual contrast of what e imagined eirself to be and what e appeared to be externally during the journey of self-discovery. Readers can experience eir thoughts while seeing eir body, two images which do not align. The stark, visual contrast

¹⁴³ Maia Kobabe, “Schools are banning my book. But queer kids need queer stories,” *The Washington Post*, Published October 29, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/10/29/schools-are-banning-my-book-queer-kids-need-queer-stories/>.

¹⁴⁴ Maia Kobabe, *Gender Queer: A Memoir* (Czech Republic: Lion Forge, LLC, 2019).

emphasizes the central conflict in the story: Maia's self-identity versus eir appearance. The use of images in *Gender Queer* is beneficial to the reader and the overall story. However, it also leads to the challenges that Kobabe's memoir is facing.

Because it is a graphic novel about sexual identity, there are images throughout *Gender Queer* that depict a variety of sexual encounters. However, rarely does the author describe any sexual topic in a positive tone: "When describing sexual experiments or other conduct involving contact with eir body, Kobabe often reports feelings ranging from disappointment to distress; only sometimes does e report experiencing pleasure"¹⁴⁵. In one section of the novel, Kobabe discusses eir desire to have male genitalia¹⁴⁶. Later in the novel, that desire is expressed again when e depicts a sexual encounter with eir partner of two months¹⁴⁷. In the first controversial image, Kobabe describes what e imagined the experience of receiving oral sex while wearing a strap-on harness would be like¹⁴⁸. The second image depicts what the experience was actually like, with both people fully covered¹⁴⁹. Kobabe is wearing the harness over eir underwear and looking very uncomfortable¹⁵⁰. While both images do depict sexual acts, they are not about the sexual experience itself. Instead, Kobabe is expressing to readers eir struggle to discover eir sexual identity. The two panels contrast eir expectations versus the reality of the experience. The discomfort e feels after the event serves as a catalyst for eir relationship with Z and eir sexuality¹⁵¹. Additionally, Kobabe tells readers that e and Z had previously had sex prior to this

¹⁴⁵ Todd. E Pettys, "Serious Value, Prurient Appeal, and "Obscene" Books in the Hands of Children," William & Mary Bill of Rights Journal, Forthcoming, U Iowa Legal Studies Research Paper No. 2022-17, Published August 25, 2022: 31.

¹⁴⁶ Kobabe, *Gender Queer*, 60.

¹⁴⁷ Kobabe, *Gender Queer*, 166.

¹⁴⁸ Kobabe, *Gender Queer*, 167.

¹⁴⁹ Kobabe, *Gender Queer*, 167.

¹⁵⁰ Kobabe, *Gender Queer*, 167.

¹⁵¹ Kobabe, *Gender Queer*, 168-169.

encounter¹⁵². Because of this, it can be assumed that this particular instance was selected for a purpose greater than describing the sexual act itself.

Maia Kobabe's memoir entitled *Gender Queer* discusses the struggle of eir journey to discover eir self-identity of nonbinary and asexual in a heteronormative society. There are several images throughout the book that might stir alarm when considered out of context. However, the overall purpose of Kobabe's work is provide reliable source of information to those going through similar situations as the one featured in eir book. It includes conversations about identity, community, or peers. At the conclusion of the memoir, Kobabe tells a story about a time when e feared the repercussions of sharing eir gender identity¹⁵³. Upon reflection, e realizes that each time e fails to share eir identity, e is doing a disservice to the eir students who could be dealing with similar situations¹⁵⁴. Kobabe chooses, in spite of fear and awkwardness, to share eir identity with the next class comes¹⁵⁵. This graphic novel is eir story, shared not just with eir comics class but the world, with the intention of providing representation and information to a group of people who are lacking both. Therefore, the overall tone, themes, and message of this graphic novel lead this author to conclude that it can be beneficial in the literature classroom.

Gender Queer presents many challenges to teachers if they choose to include in their curriculum. It is crucial to address with students the controversial elements of the story, especially those which might trigger students. Additionally, it is important to explain the why behind including this text. The graphic novel contains many sensitive subjects and images, so it should be handled with careful consideration and intentionality. The author of this study would

¹⁵² Kobabe, *Gender Queer*, 166.

¹⁵³ Kobabe, *Gender Queer*, 237.

¹⁵⁴ Kobabe, *Gender Queer*, 237.

¹⁵⁵ Kobabe, *Gender Queer*, 239.

recommend that the memoir only be utilized in an advanced course with more mature readers of ages seventeen to eighteen. This novel might be best included in a personal choice assignment, where students have a list of graphic novels that they can read independently. However, it is a work that offers understanding and representation of people within society and is therefore an important work in an inclusive curriculum.

Application

Through literary analysis, this author found that three books that were frequently challenged and banned from schools could be beneficial to readers and, therefore, should not be removed from schools. It is understandable, however, that there would be some pushback with the complete inclusion of these materials within the school libraries and classrooms. This author suggests that schools who are hesitant to include these materials should do so in a thoughtful way. Libraries should ensure that the materials are placed in the appropriate section based on age or maturity level. If schools find it necessary, they could create a mature section that requires parent permission to access it. This would allow parents to have a voice in their child's reading selection while still making all materials accessible.

Although the literature contains some challenging topics, the controversial books are written by authors who include such content with intention. They do not discuss matters such as sex to stir up feelings of desire but to address difficult topics that are lacking representation in popular literature. Because of these findings, the author of this study believes there are some applications to be made in the areas of education policy and teacher preparation. Additionally, the author will reflect on personal beliefs as a Christian who appreciates a diverse array of literature.

Policy

In recent legislation, politicians have approved policies which help to limit the circulation of diverse literature. The state of Florida, specifically, approved HB 1467, which adds more measures to the selection and review processes of school materials¹⁵⁶. The law does not require that challengers or reviewers of challenges read the book in its entirety. The author of this study would argue that, based on the above findings, an individual cannot make a decision on a book's contents without first reading the entire work. Therefore, there should be laws put in place that work to protect the first amendment rights of readers, as well as the integrity of the work itself.

Based on previous Supreme Court decisions, it is understood that students do not leave behind their first amendment rights when they enter a school¹⁵⁷. All students —regardless of race, religion, sexuality, gender, etc. — have a right to read books that contain a reflection of themselves. Although the basis of the bans has been discussed as sexual content, the alarming rate at which LGBTQ+ literature is being banned suggests an underlying message: removal of an entire group of people from library shelves. Law makers need to look at these trends and evaluate who they are trying to protect. Parents have the right to choose how they raise their children, but they should not be given the opportunity to restrict access for all children based on their own ideologies.

Local school boards have been tasked with developing a review process for challenged materials, and they need to do so with careful consideration. Additionally, school districts should establish thorough procedures for reviewing parental challenges to literature, rather than reacting quickly to outside pressures. This process should include a representative from a variety of interested groups, including librarians, English teachers, community members, and students

¹⁵⁶ Oliva, "House Bill 1467."

¹⁵⁷ "Tinker v Des Moines," Oyez.

themselves. Schools should be cautious in these processes, not quick to label a material as obscene.

During reviews of this nature, school boards should remember the criteria for labeling a work obscene: 1) the work “appeals to the prurient interest,” according to “community standards,” 2) the work “depicts or describes” sexual conduct in an “offensive way,” and 3) the “work, taken as a whole, lacks serious...value”¹⁵⁸. According to these standards, as described by the Supreme Court, challenges based on sexual conduct must be reviewed through this lens, which requires reviewers to consider the entire work, not just randomly selection portions. Therefore, schools should implement thorough processes for reviewing challenges that reflect a care for literature.

Teachers and Training Programs

In the midst of the book banning debate, teachers find their curricular choices placed in the hands of parents and politicians. However, teachers and other school personnel are well educated in their field, have met training and certification requirements, and were selected by their district as a professional educator. Their knowledge of instructional materials typically surpasses that of those who are trying to control their content. Instead of creating an environment of conflict, legislators and school districts should be helping to foster relationships of cohesion.

To create a successful parent-teacher relationship, educators need a strong foundation. Teacher preparation programs should ensure that educators are well trained in communication, material selection, and overall mastery of their content. In a 2012 survey conducted by the American Federation of Teachers, one in three teachers felt unprepared on their first day of

¹⁵⁸ David L. Hudson, Jr., “Obscenity and Pornography,” *The First Amendment Encyclopedia*, Middle Tennessee State University, Accessed November 10, 2022, <https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1004/obscenity-and-pornography>.

teaching¹⁵⁹ (“Improving Teacher Preparation”). With clinical experience being a strong indicator of a teacher candidate’s future performance, it would be beneficial for future educators to have more first-hand experience in the classroom during their training¹⁶⁰. An extended field experience period would allow teacher candidates to gain insight into the many aspects of teaching that are not teaching themselves, such as paperwork, relationships with students, administration, and parents, and curriculum development. Some cities, such as Boston, have created residency programs that allow teacher candidates the opportunity to learn from a veteran teacher for a year-long period¹⁶¹. More opportunities like the one in Boston could benefit aspiring teachers and their future students.

Personal Reflection: Christians as Readers

While conducting this research, I carefully considered how my Christian beliefs factored into the study of such challenging literature. I found that parents or community members expressed concerns over language, sexual conduct, or other materials that did not align with their personal beliefs. For some, that focus was on books featuring LGBTQ+ content. For many Christians, this is a difficult subject, one to which they do not always know how to respond. Some point to the Bible as forbidding all practices relating to the LGBTQ+ community, but they also recognize the call to love others. When it comes to the literature featuring these voices, how should the Christian reader, especially the Christian educator, librarian, or parent, respond?

In my opinion, Christians should treat all valuable literature with respect. In fact, I believe it would be beneficial for Christians to read these works which feature characters who might act or talk in a way that conflicts with the personal beliefs of the reader. Through stories,

¹⁵⁹ “Improving Teacher Preparation,” America Succeeds, Accessed November 10, 2022, https://americasucceeds.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Teacher_Prep_Toolkit.pdf.

¹⁶⁰ “Improving Teacher Preparation.”

¹⁶¹ “Improving Teacher Preparation.”

readers can gain insight into the inner workings of another's mind, even one with whom they have little in common. In doing so, Christians can develop a deeper understanding, and therefore a deeper love, of those with whom they might not personally agree.

Additionally, Christians should not call for the removal of books which do not align with their personal beliefs. They should, however, have thoughtful discussions with their own children about challenging subjects, so that their children will be well equipped to handle the struggles of this world. It should be noted that I myself am not a parent, and I am speaking without the knowledge of what a parent experiences when raising a child. However, I address this subject from the perspective of a young person entering adulthood who had to navigate many of these challenging conversations on their own.

When religious believers attempt to remove specific content or voices from the shelves, they are taking away an outlet or representation from a young person who might not have much. Christians can show love to students by allowing them the opportunity to lose themselves in a book, to see a reflection of themselves in the literature, and to gain insight into the mind of a friend by reading. God's love is one of overwhelming reach. Christians are not called by this love to restrict but to be a light. Removing books that provide voices to the underrepresented is not a way of achieving this goal.

For teachers, this content can be difficult to discuss in a classroom setting. However, students have all kinds of information at their finger tips. They could find information from bad sources that is harmful and dangerous. When teachers have these somewhat uncomfortable discussions in their classrooms, they are showing God's love to their students by creating a safe place for reliable information.

Conclusion

Book banning is a major issue in the current school system as parents, students, and educators fight to have their voices heard. And while their voices are important, so are those of the underrepresented groups featured in the three novels this study reviewed. *All Boys Aren't Blue* features a Black queer man. *Lawn Boy* is the story of a Mexican American gay man, and *Gender Queer* tells the story of Maia Kobabe, who identifies as nonbinary and asexual. All of these individuals represent a variety of groups who lack representation in literature. Their books dive into subjects that are difficult and sometimes uncomfortable, but they also provide information and validation to those who are going through the same experiences. When these books are banned, their voices are not silenced, but raised louder as more people gain recognition of the work. However, students with minimal resources have no access to books outside of their schools and libraries. If the books which represent them are removed from those shelves, they will never have the opportunity to fully see themselves in a character. Through this study, the author aimed to show how even books with controversial content can be beneficial to readers. This was done for the readers of today in the hopes that there might be one less book ban tomorrow.

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