



Empower Students with Banned Books as Essential Reads

Description

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Author's Memo

Censorship via banned books is an attempt to censor out groups of individuals and censor the future. The youth of today will not allow their voices to be silenced, however. There is no banning of ideas and books when the students are the future, and they will find a way to make it theirs.

Nearing the end of my master's program of English at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), I arrived at the moment where I had to decide what my thesis would pertain to and struggled to find the right topic. My instinct was to pick something more general but likely overdone, providing commentary on select literary pieces strung together by an underlying theme that resonates in today's society. Sure, it would have been a developed piece of commentary on those stories, identifying some type of major flaws in human nature or proposing ways to progress towards further equality somehow, but I continued to hit a road bump.

My professor continuously pushed me to find a greater purpose personally, something I found hard to do. I could not find a more personal purpose or connection beyond the fact that I simply found the ideas to be important. I had no justification for why this proposed piece would be significant to me, why it had to be written and why it had to be heard.

Consequently, I forced myself to consider not only what really matters to me deep in my core, but also what I felt impacts me greatly as well. What I came up with largely revolves around literature in the classroom, how it is utilized and how it is stifled. As a secondary education English teacher of grades nine through twelve, I have deeply enjoyed delving into the world of controversy head on with my students, embracing the unknown and expanding how they consider the world around them; this path is

one I knew I wanted to walk for a long time, but my understanding of its importance has only grown over time, as I progressed from being a student to a teacher myself.

I ask questions and probe their consideration of humanity and justice to lead them down a path of understanding that would justly reflect their own moral compasses. This is what education is all about—helping students find their voices by giving them the tools to explore ideas in a safe way.

Profound topics that should be safely explored, and which are fundamental to the development of young minds as they navigate the world and themselves, appear to be more happily banned than discussed by various community members in school districts who question the motives of the teachers in their children's classrooms. While teaching books like *Night* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* definitely broach difficult topics and identify human flaws, there is good reason to study them. To ignore the discriminatory nature that has existed in man and not allow students to comprehend the injustice in society is to paint an inaccurate picture that reflects a minority of human experiences and disallows them from growing by learning from the mistakes of the past.

As a secondary education teacher, I find that students have entered classrooms with questions and uncertainty regarding such difficult, but crucial, topics. While I have not informed them of my opinions or ideologies, I have provided necessary context regarding the historical background of the pieces that we read and discuss in class to allow them to form their own basis for understanding. Further, I ask questions and probe their consideration of humanity and justice to lead them down a path of understanding that would justly reflect their own moral compasses. This is what education is all about—helping students find their voices by giving them the tools to explore ideas in a safe way.

banned books
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To Ban or Not to Ban, That Is the Question: Exploring Why Banned Books Are Essential Reads

As a student in tenth grade, I sat in English class and read *The Great Gatsby* for the first time, a story that would change my life. This book introduced themes of love and loss in a way that was not romantic, but real and earth-shattering. It introduced realities to me that I had not previously been exposed to, showing me the doors that can be opened with an impactful book. Consequently, I set forth on my educational journey towards becoming an English teacher in hopes that I could show students in the future the real world that exists beyond their small bubble.

In my first year of teaching, I read *Night* for the first time, teaching it to my ninth graders. This memoir by the Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel showed me that stories are more than themes and bubble bursting moments, but instead they reflect the deepest, harshest realities of life that would remain

unknown and untouched without the words on the pages left to inform and guide humanity, reminding people of the flawed nature of the past to avoid repeating mistakes. While all writing is important, I found that impactful stories like *Night* create movement and develop understanding individuals, these stories which are seen for their power and feared for it, too.

As most educators are aware, myself included, these books are becoming increasingly banned throughout the United States in fear of the waves and conversations that they will spark, expanding thoughts regarding civil liberties and justice for different groups of people. However, I have found that these voices should not be stifled so that students around the country are able to grow and develop as advocates of themselves and others around them, fully cognizant of the historical and psychological implications resulting from the problematic nature of the past, echoed throughout time.

As a teacher, this is a sentiment that I have observed is being echoed around the country. I personally have spent my week nights, weekends, holidays, and even summers planning and searching for the stories and lessons that will best support my students on their educational journeys. While my English classes are but a blip in that trek, they can make big impacts if taught well. For that reason, I strive to provide my students with the best curriculum and reinforce the novels and stories presented with equally important and stimulating conversations and lessons, and I know that I am not alone.

Teachers are being controlled and censored, stifling the learning environment that creates conversations and critical thinking, also stifling the development of well-rounded, thoughtful individuals.

Teachers around the country work countless hours for little in return, only to be met with little control over what goes on in their classrooms. When teachers lose the opportunity to teach texts that are approved as state curriculum, we lose all autonomy in the classroom. Teachers are being controlled and censored, stifling the learning environment that creates conversations and critical thinking, also stifling the development of well-rounded, thoughtful individuals.

The reality of the situation at hand when it comes to the banning of books on critical topics, such as the Holocaust for example, is that censorship causes more harm than good. I hear daily about how students go home and watch movies full of violence and play video games wherein they actually simulate violent activities themselves. Furthermore, they turn on the news or see a TikTok about modern atrocities, like that which is happening in Ukraine or even the recent school shooting at Robb Elementary School in Texas, places seemingly so far removed from many, yet occurring in their present day lives. Despite all of this exposure, or perhaps as a result of this, students are being desensitized to violence, thus hindering their ability to comprehend the substantial and devastating realities of historical events such as the Holocaust.

In order to break through the surface, through the layers of unrealistic violence displayed on the screens in front of them and feel the psychological pull towards empathy for those who truly suffer tragedies, students require worldly truths. These truths can be difficult to hear and break down, but that is also why doing so in a classroom with guided discussion as well as a safe culture and sense of community among trained staff and students is the best opportunity that most students will have to engage in such essential topics.

While content can be difficult to discuss for students and educators alike, we go beyond classroom hours constantly to explore the boundaries of classroom acceptability in order to conclude which methods will be most beneficial in broaching complex topics. Typically, these ideas that seem too scary to discuss within the classroom fall under one of two areas: a social issue or one that resonates on a personal level, potentially creating a level of anxiety or discomfort for students. Conscious of these sentiments, teachers are able to construct lesson plans that reflect awareness and consideration of individual needs within the classroom and discussion. This can be seen through classroom norms and expectations that we share, tools that create safety and thoughtfulness surrounding discussions about any topic, particularly those considered most difficult.

Empathy and awareness are tools that may not be listed as benchmarks by Common Core State Standards, but they are unofficial skills that we must help our students foster and hone.

Essentially, teachers can create a comfortable climate in the classroom if this element is outlined and developed from the beginning of the term to allow for all students to enter with their preconceived notions, fears, and individual thoughts; this would further enable the students to listen, reflect, and consider the ideas of those around them, further allowing them to dive in beyond their initial understanding of topics to derive new meaning of themselves and the world around them. Developing an understanding of such essential ideas does not require students to change their personal opinions or disregard the viewpoints they hold closely to their hearts. Rather, teachers seek to provide students with the opportunity to develop an understanding of that which others around them have experienced, or even the tribulations of those endured in the past which remain fundamental touchstones of the world as it exists today. Empathy and awareness are tools that may not be listed as benchmarks by Common Core State Standards, but they are unofficial skills that we must help our students foster and hone. School is not only about learning how to add or subtract, swirl letters into cursive to create a signature, or even recall the timeline of evolution.

All of these lessons and skills contribute to well-rounded individuals so that they can move beyond the classroom in the following years and understand both how to survive and how to live in a shared world, respecting and embracing their fellow human beings, whether they be neighbors, coworkers, or even strangers. Without skills like empathy and understanding, these students lack the ability to grow in a community that is cohesive and flourishing rather than one weighed down by disregard to human differences. With an element of learning as essential as this, providing context can make a world of difference in the classroom, too.

In order to achieve these goals, as prescribed by my graduate thesis, many things may need to happen. First and foremost, more trust needs to be placed in teachers. As teachers, we are professionals who invest years and finances into the craft of developing classroom culture and fostering a curriculum that serves students to bring about understanding and awareness, shaping them into well-rounded individuals. If we can be regarded with high esteem and valued for our commitment to educating students, then conversations regarding curriculum and changes thereof can be more productive.

That said, if parents or others who vocalize discontentment continue to urge the banning or challenging of books within schools, there should be a requirement of further studies to determine whether or not there are truly detrimental impacts upon the masses as they encounter such topics prior to allowing such critical texts from being stripped from growing minds. There needs to be hard facts and legitimate reasoning other than personal opinion to make such vastly important decisions so that all students feel accepted and regarded as equally important, valued, respected, and understood. The banning of books is attempting to censor out groups of individuals and censor the future, but the youth of today will not allow their voices to be silenced; there is no banning of ideas and books when the students are the future, and they will find a way to make it theirs.

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Author

abby-schaitkin

The AutoEthnographer