

Book Banning Bans the Future:
The Negative Effects of Book Banning Regarding High School Students

Megan Palmer

Southern New Hampshire University

Abstract

This paper examines book banning, curriculum decisions, and the effects that both have on students. Book banning existed even before the formation of the current education system as well as far before the current status of democracy and free speech. Therefore, by studying its history, and its existence in today's culture, we obtain insight to its effects within English classrooms (K-12). The project explores book banning in the public library system as well as the library system contained within the schools in order to provide a view of the issue in all of its forms. While discussing the negative effects of book banning, research examines narrowing English curriculum and its impact on students in a modern society. Incorporating recent research based on book banning, the project focuses on the ways in which it is affecting and hindering free speech, access to information, and the formation of a generation. Using information at regional, national, and international levels, the research highlights the consequences due to book banning all around the world. Ultimately, this project seeks to rectify a wrong that is being done to today's students in an effort to stop it from being perpetuated on the students of tomorrow.

Keywords: book banning, curriculum, self-censorship, young adult literature

Introduction

Seemingly an attempt to preserve the innocence and integrity of our children, book banning presents many negative results and consequences for students, teachers, and classrooms alike. A phenomenon dating back as early as medieval book burning, Grecian cries of heresy, and WWII fires, book banning today exists on seemingly a much smaller scale. The effects though, are just as detrimental. The American history of book banning is much more recent and focuses on the information made available to students. Based on a system of criteria and process, the banning of books is not as formal or as organized as communities want it to be.

The research examines the “who,” “what,” and “why” of book banning in its preliminary stages and identifies the effects book banning has on different groups and communities. For teachers, book banning means shaky, ever-changing curriculum, fear for personal choices, and the tragedy of self-censorship. For students, book banning means a denial of First Amendment rights, a narrow world view, and psychological deficits. For the classroom, book banning means discourse is hindered. These effects are taken into account and solutions are presented to help foster culture, community and conversation.

Who, What, and Why

While highly publicized and media driven, the issue of book banning is perceived as a non-issue to many parents, administrators, and general educators. This is because the perception of book banning is incredibly dated, ethnocentric, or selfishly driven. Those who *deny* the existence of book banning tend to believe that it is not occurring because it has not directly affected them. And those who *do* acknowledge book banning are too often book banners who do

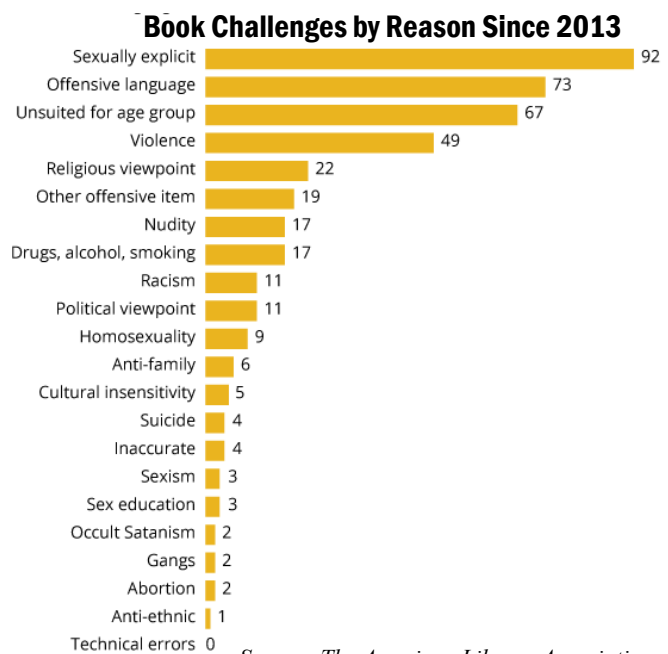
not see the full scope and implication of their actions. Contrary to both beliefs is the presence of book banning and the negative effects on a generation of students.

The next merited question is “why?” To answer this, it is critical to understand that books are banned not necessarily for their ideologies or content, but for the ideologies of those who have the power to ban. Books then, are banned because the population of banners is nothing more than parents concerned for

their children. These parents view the world that their children are growing up in and make decisions about what is and is not appropriate for the intellectual consumption of their child. Someone finds “a book or content in a book objectionable to their personal sensibilities... [And] they ask an authority to get rid of it so no one else can be

exposed to it” (Mariotte, 2013). But the line between protecting one child and affecting the mindset of a generation is slim.

The reasons for book banning are a means by which information is limited and include everything from sexually explicit content, violence, racism, homosexuality, drugs, alcohol, and suicide, among others. The umbrella term that tends to encompass all of the other reasons is, “Unsuited for Age Group” (The American Library Association). Books are banned with the intent of purporting political, religious, or generational ideologies. Hidden under the guise of concerned parent is the perpetuation of old world values in an attempt to halt progression.



Classroom Effects

Most affected by the implications of book banning is the everyday school classroom. Externally, the classroom is at risk because of procedure itself. When books are banned, unbanned, questioned and concerned, the footing of curriculum becomes shaky and unstable (Agee, 1994). Educators interviewed in both Agee's and Noll's studies attest to the in flux nature of their classrooms and the loss felt when books were pulled.

Arguably, even more powerful than the external agents acting upon a classroom are the internal forces. This refers to educators' abilities to personally and individually influence the information presented inside the classroom. In the world of technology, one teacher's conflict with a book merits another's caution. This instilled sense of fear results in self-censorship. As one teacher faces backlash for a book choice, other educators take it upon themselves to avoid the proverbial guillotine. Self-censorship arises because, "Too often teachers choose not to use certain books for fear that these texts will create controversies leading to confrontations with parents, the members of the wider community, or school administrator" (Freedman & Johnson, 2000, p. 357). Teachers often admit to acts of self-censorship including modifying books as they read aloud, whiting out passages of text to avoid controversy, and leaving books out of their classrooms altogether (Noll, 1999). Educators are not proud of the acts, nor do they believe in them, but they find them a necessity for making it through the school year.

In addition to the way that book banning *affects* curriculum, it is critical to look at the way that book banning actually *contradicts* curriculum and standards. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Education (2010) while having no specific standard for

what should or should not be read, makes an all-encompassing note regarding the ground that literature should cover. This side note is not unimportant because it is not a standard for it dictates the way that all of the actual standards and skills should be incorporated and instilled. It states:

To become college and career ready, students must grapple with works of exceptional craft and thought whose range extends across genres, cultures, and centuries. Such works offer profound insights into the human condition and serve as models for students' own thinking and writing. (p. 35)

These holistic affects are ones that breach the doors of all classrooms and can cause serious obstacles and violations regarding curriculum, teachers, and students everywhere.

Societal (Generational Effects)

The flow of information in the classroom then has the capabilities of influencing the larger picture of society by altering the mindsets and ideologies of a generation. Through the act of book banning, this information is inherently limited and intentionally restricted. Many times, the books that are banned from classrooms are controversial on the basis of race, religion, politics, and ultimately culture (The American Library Association). Despite the apparent harmless nature behind these book bannings, the information that they are withholding is critical to a developing citizen and a well-rounded world view (Agee, 1994; Church, 1997; Marriott, 2013; Noll, 1999). With book banning as a fundamental procedure in the American high school, a developing generation can be systematically molded by those who come before them.

This elitist position adopted by those with the power to ban books is one that is more detrimental to the student than it is well-intentioned. There is a common and prevailing belief that if we hide the truth, then it somehow stops being the truth. But by introducing these controversial texts into our classrooms, we open the door for discussion and collaboration. Church states:

As part of an agenda of social justice, for example, I believe we should make texts with themes of violence and misogyny problematic... I believe we need to make them [the books] part of the curriculum so that we can problematize the sexism, racism, and anti-social behavior that is so prominent in them. (1997, p. 531)

In order to effectively grow and develop, both intellectually and democratically, books that discuss the truth that adults so love to hide from kids might be the most beneficial.

Individual Effects

Easily, it can be understood the ways that book banning can affect whole groups of people. In the same way though, book banning effects individuals; ironically enough, doing so by separating people and leaving them alone. Book banning is an issue that divides communities and propels the idea that one group is more important, significant, or powerful than another (Church, 1997 & Marriott, 2013). With the processes for book banning often circumnavigating the teacher, the statement that, “the teacher has neither expertise nor power” becomes evident (Boyd & Bailey, 2009, p. 660). The separation of teacher from parent, student, and administration is the impetus for miscommunication and a lack of communication altogether. Teachers are pulled from one another and there is a struggle to be heard as a collective and not

just rabble rousing individuals fighting for one classroom (Agee, 1994 & Noll, 1997). With fear and retribution added into the mix, speaking up for our colleagues brings the possible consequence of reputation and even job loss.

But this isolation is even more significant and detrimental when it is examined as an effect that touches the lives of students and the consciousness of a generation. Books that are commonly banned are the ones the parents find “obscene” or “inappropriate,” and yet these are the books that most accurately and honestly portray the teenager experience as it is today (The American Library Association). The generational gap creates a difference in perception regarding the issues and the realities facing the current community of students: The Millennial Generation. This is a generation that is growing up surrounded by a set of incredibly unique issues. These include questions of sexuality, violence, drugs, family problems, racism, relationships, and are a brand new set of teenagers than the ones that came before them (Grafton, 2013). In order to help students through these issues, it is important that they not be ignored. Grafton states:

By acknowledging the problems, [we’re] also acknowledging the kids who are dealing with them. These parents think that they’re protecting the precious children. Turns out they’re doing precisely the opposite. Ignoring a kid’s reality doesn’t make it go away. It just means the kid gets to suffer alone. (2013)

In a world where teenagers are already hidden away, frowned upon and scolded for speaking up, sometimes these books are the only ones affirming that yes, you are okay (Green, 2007). Psychologically, this is invaluable.

Without these books and these discussions, we are left with two things: erasure and isolation. Commonly banned books in schools include Chbosky's *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Green's *Looking for Alaska*, and Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (The American Library Association). Banning these books on the grounds of race, homosexuality, racism, and drugs and alcohol essentially erases these from the teenage experience. Teenagers no longer see characters struggling with the identity issues they are, they do not hear the voices that reflect their own. Wiping them from literature sends the message that their experiences are null and void. This ultimately leaves them alone.

Solutions

But book banning need not always be a constant. Although the issue prevails, teachers, students, parents, and administration together can work for a world free from limits to freedom of information. There is no question as to whether or not this should be done. The methods are not always easy for the vulnerable and troubled teacher, but they are not unattainable.

Proactive Procedure

The first means for combatting book banning is on the part of the educators and their administrators. Taking a stand internally means that the foundation built for programs is sound and understood. Expectations, standards, and collaborating school boards can build the bridges early on in order to avoid later conflict (Noll, 1994). This can be done through formal policy that sets guidelines, not only for curriculum, but for the process of book banning. Part of the problem lies in the way that banning books occurs. Without a definitive series of steps that must be taken,

decisions can be made instantaneously without being rationalized (Church, 1997). Working from the bottom of the issue and creating a system of understood regulations is essential to tackling the problem at large.

It needs to be acknowledged that the issue of book banning exists in both the abstract and the physical sense. To combat the physical act of books being removed from curriculum, a physical act needs to be the basis for eradicating the problem. Being proactive can alleviate controversy and stress. With ground work being done *before* books are banned, the high tension environment that comes with the defending of ideas can be bypassed (Boyd & Bailey, 2009). By constructing syllabi that states intentions and intended reading lists, parent concern can be dealt with and discussed early on. By working with administration and respecting policy, processes can be carried out respectfully and lawfully so as to avoid rash decisions made in the wake of parental anger. (Agee 1999). Proactivity can be key to minimizing problems that can later arise.

Discussion

One of the most powerful ways to combat issues, especially issues of censorship, is to foster a culture of discussion and open the lines of communication. Discourse informs and allows teachers, students, and parents to speak on the issues affecting them. Noll argues, “The collective voice empowers us and others... as we all make choices about the literature we will share with our students” (1994, p. 64). It can be a powerfully effective and painfully simple tool that is often overlooked. Change is made when voices are heard. Books are banned because

someone has the thought to stand up and say something. But speech be not a privilege of the powerful, it is the savior of the masses.

Community

Discussion gains its momentum and its importance as a result of the communities within which it is cultivated. This entails including all points of view, including students, parents, and teachers alike. Intellectual committees and communities open the door for discussion and “break the usual silence and allay the kind of fearful self-censorship that occurs when teachers are isolated and uncertain” (Agee, p.68). By acknowledging the opinions of our students, we can better understand the ways in which our actions affect all factions. By acknowledging the opinions of our parents, we can build a bridge between one generation of viewpoints and another. And by acknowledging the opinions of our teachers, we can ensure they are protected, valued, and respected in their field. All three groups are a critical part of the education system and the learning process; by fostering a culture that respects and embraces all of them, book banning can be a path to progress—not prohibition.

Conclusion

Book banning is a multifaceted issue that cannot be conquered overnight. The power and the manner in which that power is wielded has the ability to cause positive change or to hinder a generation. As a result, the first step in battling book banning has to be in the way we look at our students and look at the Millennial Generation. In order to create a world better than the one we left, it is essential that we recognize that, even now, the world is not the one we always thought

we knew. By recognizing students as capable and integral, schools can put students' futures back in their own hands while using literature to instill a foundation of acceptance, questioning, and understanding.

References

- Agee, J. (1999). "There it was, that one sex scene": English teachers on censorship. *English Journal*, 89(2), 61-69.
- Boyd, F., & Baily, N. (2009). Censorship in three metaphors. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 52(8), 653-61.
- Church, S. (1997). When values clash: Learning from controversy. *Language Arts*, 74(7), 525-31.
- CCSS. (2010). *Common Core State Standards for English language arts & literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects*. 34-58.
- Freedman, L. & Johnson, H. (2000). Who's protecting whom? "I hadn't meant to tell you this", a case in point in confronting self-censorship in the choice of young adult literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44(4), 356-69.
- Grafton, E. (2013). Book banning needs to be a thing of the past. *University Wire*. Web.

Green, J. (2007, May 2). *Brotherhood 2.0: May 2: Book banning*. Retrieved from
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-endR24ZWw>

Hemingway, M. (2014). In defense of book banning. *The Federalist*. Web.

Mariott, D.W. (2013) Banning books hinders discourse in our communities. *University Wire*.
Web.

Noll, E. (1994). The ripple effect of censorship: Silencing in the classroom. *English Journal*,
83(8), 59-64.