

**The Censorship of Literature in American Secondary Level Public Schools and its Effect  
on Education**

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### **Abstract**

The implementation of censorship within the secondary level of education and its effects on students has not been fully examined. Thus, this thesis will first define what constitutes as censorship along with a focus on the First Amendment Rights of students, intellectual freedom, a book challenge versus a banning, and selection versus censorship. A brief history of censorship in relation to the secondary level of education will then be disclosed. This section will examine the censorship concerns from 1950-2020, the patterns established between the decades, and any substantial legal action. Next, the question as to why literature tends to be challenged will be addressed, i.e. who tends to challenge materials, their reasoning for doing so, the process of book challenges, and the impact challenges have on school systems. Additionally, the top five classic novels targeted for censorship will be disclosed to uncover common factors between censored literature. The impact of censorship on the education of students will then be explored in depth. Specifically, minor rights, the importance of student choice, the inequalities within education that censorship evokes, the value of diverse literature and alternative points of view, and the future repercussion that censorship leads to will be inspected. Lastly, how teachers can preserve the First Amendment Rights of students within the classroom and beyond will be examined.

*Key words:* censorship, First Amendment rights, minor rights, intellectual freedom, education

## **The Censorship of Literature in American Secondary Level Public Schools and its Effect on Education**

### **Introduction**

“Censorship promotes ignorance, which is a very real threat to humanity in that it widens the gap between people and encourages people to fear diversity rather than celebrate it” (David, 2019). Although the issue of censorship is present virtually within every aspect of our modern society in the United States, in particular it has and continues to be a topic of interest within education, spanning from primary education to higher education. Typically, the censorship of literature within education is viewed as a means to protect children from exposure to indecent material (David, 2019). Even though this is a valid viewpoint, the censorship of literature, especially at the secondary level, is a major concern because the purpose of schools is to educate and prepare students for the world that they will enter as young adults. When the literature that students read within the walls of a classroom is censored, they are sheltered from the realities and perspectives of our world. In order to combat the threat of unreasonable censorship, students must have their First Amendment rights upheld within the classroom and academic freedom must be preserved for teachers and students alike. To ensure students are provided with the knowledge to better understand and succeed within our world, active censorship cannot be tolerated within the classroom.

Before the topic of censorship and its implications in the field of education are further explored, it is crucial to understand what censorship is exactly. “To censor is intentionally to prevent someone from viewing and/or hearing meaningful verbal, graphic, dramatic, or sonic material for the purpose of protecting a preferred belief or attitude” (Sturm, 1983). Censorship is comprised of the techniques of interpretation, redaction, expurgation, interpolations, preclusions,

criticism, suppression, and condemnation. The entity under protection could be the individual, a special group, society, government, an institution, a doctrine, a policy, or a special interest. The population subject to censorship is society, children, youth, adults, etc. The belief behind the censorship could be factual, conceptual, valuative, or metaphysical. And lastly, the censor is a government official, institution, functionary, self-appointed person or group, or self (Sturm, 1983). Simply put, censorship in any form presupposes the right of a government, institution, or individual to decide what others will think through the presentation of the materials of word and image (Burroughs, 1962).

As mentioned previously, the censorship of literature within the classroom in order to “protect” students is a violation of the students’ First Amendment rights. As emphasized by the American Library Association (ALA),

“The First Amendment prevents public institutions from compromising individuals’ First Amendment freedoms by establishing a framework that defines critical rights and responsibilities regarding free expression and the freedom of belief. The First Amendment protects the right to exercise those freedoms, and it advocates respect for the right of others to do the same” (First Amendment and Censorship, 2008).

To further ensure these freedoms for all students, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), which is the only national professional organization for school librarians and the school library community, was formed and consequently, the Library Bill of Rights. As stated in Article V of the Library Bill of Rights, “students have the right to a relevant, balanced, and diverse school library collection that represents all points of view” (Intellectual Freedom, 2010). In the AASL Code of Ethics, it urges school librarians to “resist all efforts to censor

library resources and not allow personal beliefs to interfere with provision of access to information resources” (Intellectual Freedom, 2010).

Intellectual freedom is defined as “the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction” (Intellectual Freedom, 2010). Regardless of the First Amendment and the right of intellectual freedom, there is the argument that because of the differences between public and school libraries the enactment of censorship at the school library level is not a violation of the First Amendment rights of students. The viewpoint of these differences is summarized by Sturm as “Public libraries exist for the entire community and provide learning materials for users with a wide range of tastes, interests, and perceptions. The purpose of the school library is to supplement the curriculum and the textbooks” (Sturm, 1983, p. 2). Expanding upon this differentiation, “there are the interest and the age level of the students, the limit of available funds, the willingness of the teachers to use the books, the number of books owned that are of the same subject, and so on” (Sturm, 1983, p. 2). Because of these distinctions between public and school libraries, some individuals and courts insist that denying a student access to a book in a school library is not a denial of their First Amendment rights.

Although there is controversy concerning the presence of censorship within education, it is difficult to discern what constitutes as obscene in a work of literature. Specifically, whether the material should be deemed as obscene as a whole or only certain sections, and who is affected by the obscenity of the material. Originally, to determine whether a work of literature was obscene, the Hinklin Test was applied, which meant that “a small part of any work could be taken out of context to prove that it could “deprave and corrupt” a particularly delicate sensibility” (Conrad, 1982, p. 31). Eventually, by 1973 the Roth Test replaced the Hinklin Test. The new standard implied by the Roth Test was that

“the work, taken as a whole, must lack “serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value” to be considered obscene. The community “standard” to be applied is to be that of the locality or at least the state in which the work appears, not the nation as a whole” (Conrad, 1982, p. 53).

Despite this new standard, when the obscenity of a work of literature is called into question, especially at the level of secondary education, typically only select passages from the material are highlighted to emphasize the obscenity, and hence, the need to censor the work from vulnerable populations.

Another aspect that must be discussed regarding censorship is the difference between a challenge and the banning of a work of literature. As defined by the ALA, “a challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or a group. A banning is the removal of those materials” (First Amendment and Censorship, 2008). Challenges are an attempt to have the material in question to eventually be removed from the curriculum or library, which would restrict access to others. As declared by the ALA, “it is the responsibility of every library to have a clearly defined written policy for collection development that includes a procedure for review of challenged resources” (First Amendment and Censorship, 2008).

Furthermore, there is a fine line between selection and censorship. Although the selection of literature made by librarians, teachers, and administrators as of what to include within their school libraries may be viewed as censorship by some, it is important to remember that “would-be censors try to use the power of the state to impose their view of what is truthful and appropriate, or offensive and objectionable, on everyone else. The censor wants to prejudge materials for everyone” (First Amendment and Censorship, 2008). If librarians and school officials don’t allow their personal beliefs to influence their professional decisions of the

selection of literature for students, the selection of materials for school libraries and classrooms cannot be deemed as censorship.

Although the censorship of literature within the field of education has a long and tangled history, the impact it has on the quality of education at the secondary level is still unknown. Thus, I propose to explore the prevalence of censorship within the secondary level and inquire why certain literature tends to be challenged or banned. From these findings, I will investigate the effects the censorship of literature has on the education of secondary students and how the education community can maintain their academic freedom within the classroom despite censorship concerns.

### **What is the prevalence of the censorship of literature at the secondary level of education from the mid-twentieth century to the present day?**

Through this research, the censorship of literature at the secondary level will be explored from the 1950s until the present day. Since this is a substantial period to cover, only the major concerns of censorship will be accounted for per decade. This section will investigate what provoked this censorship and what materials tended to be challenged or banned. Any milestone Supreme Court or federal cases regarding censorship will also be detailed.

### **Why is literature challenged at the secondary level of education?**

In this section, the aspects that consist of book challenges at the secondary level will be inspected. Specifically, whom challenges are typically made by and the top four motives behind said challenges will be detailed. Additionally, the process of book challenges at the school library and classroom level along with the impact it has on secondary education will be highlighted.

**What are the top 5 classic novels that have been targeted for censorship at the secondary level of education?**

To further understand why certain literature tends to receive more challenges, the top five classic novels that have been continuous targets of censorship attempts at the secondary level of education will be detailed. Regarding this literature, similarities and differences will be explored in an attempt to identify what incites censorship concerns at the secondary level of education. Resolutions to the challenges or the banning of said literature will also be discussed.

**What impact does the censorship of literature have on the education of students?**

The impact of the censorship of literature on the education of secondary level students will be explored. The effects of censorship on secondary level students will be examined through an academic and personal lens. Specifically, minor rights, student choice, inequalities within education, the importance of diverse literature and alternative points of view will be detailed. Additionally, the future repercussions of the limitations that the censorship of literature imposes will be examined.

**How can academic freedom and the 1st Amendment rights of students be preserved and upheld despite censorship?**

This section will emphasize why it is important to maintain academic freedom within the classroom for students. Methods that can be applied to the classroom and educational setting to ensure the upholding of these rights will also be detailed. Specifically, the focus will be on what educators can do to promote awareness of censorship and its impact on students.

## **Summary of the Introduction**

In order to better understand the effects the censorship of literature has on secondary level education, the prevalence of censorship within the school system, the factors that influence the challenging of literature, and the literature that is challenged the most will be further discussed. These topics will be explored in detail because it is crucial to understand the impact that censorship has on education and ultimately what can be done to preserve the academic freedom of students and teachers alike.

## **The Prevalence of the Censorship of Literature at the Secondary Level of Education**

As previously stated, the censorship of literature at the secondary level of education will be explored from the 1950s until the present day. This period was chosen for research because the censorship of literature at the secondary level began to rise in the mid 1950s. As the decades progressed, censorship concerns of the literature read and taught at the secondary level of education has continued to grow tremendously. Throughout each decade that will be explored (the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s, and the ongoing 2020s), only the key factors of censorship will be included for the sake of time. Each section for the respective decade will detail how the censorship of literature increased, why these censorship concerns increased (cultural and individual concerns), and who expressed these concerns (school officials, parents/community members, outside organizations). When applicable, the top five banned or challenged books per decade will be highlighted. Additionally, any substantial court cases that have influenced or affected the censorship of literature within the field of education will also be discussed.

Through this survey of the prevalence of the censorship of literature at the secondary level spanning eight consecutive decades, the historical discourse surrounding this topic, along with the reasoning and implications of any action, will be evaluated. Although the concerns of censorship are everchanging, there are patterns rooted in the history of the censorship of literature at the secondary level. This section attempts to connect these decades in order to call attention to the historical similarities and the significance of this topic in relation to current concerns.

### *The 1950s: The Formation and Impact of the Gathings Committee*

In 1952, the Gathings Committee was formed in order to prevent communism from subverting the education of American school children. This committee comprised of the United States House of Representatives, with Ezekial C. Gathings as the chairman and H. Ralph Burton as the committee's general counsel (Burress, 1992). The Gathings Committee claimed that "the cheap paperback books which had become available were a serious moral threat to the Republic" (Burress, 1992). The main reasoning for targeting the sale of paperback books, which were widely available for purchase by youth, was that the ideas contained within these books promoted Pacificism, obscenity, and delinquency. Although just mere cheap paperbacks, these accusations coupled with the rise of McCarthyism during this time period created a sense of fear that Communism was infiltrating the minds of young people (Burress, 1992).

As a result, the Gathings Committee formed the Majority Report within the same year, which advocated the censorship of literature on a federal level. From this stemmed the proposed legislation to establish a federal censorship board which would ensure that no book could move across state lines without approval from the board. If the board decision was violated, severe fines or imprisonment would be imposed. Although this proposed bill was deemed

unconstitutional, and its rejection quickly dissolved the Gathings Committee by 1953, it is important to note that the very formation and purpose of the Gathings Committee established the framework for censorship within school libraries and classrooms in the decades to follow (Burruss, 1992).

### ***The 1960s: The Influence of Mel and Norma Gabler on Public Education***

In 1961, the Educational Research Analysts (ERA), which remains active to the present day, was formed by the husband-and-wife duo, Mel and Norma Gabler. This organization is a conservative Christian-based textbook reviewing organization based in Longview, Texas. The ERA was initially founded by the Gablers after discovering that the content contained within their son's public-school textbooks conflicted with their Christian values. After continuous involvement with local administration and increased awareness from similarly concerned parents, the Gablers eventually had enough influence to form the ERA (Educational Research Analysts).

The focus of the ERA is to approve textbooks that emphasizes the scientific weaknesses in evolutionary theories, phonics-based reading instruction, the principles and benefits of free enterprise, the original intent of the U.S. Constitution, respect for Judeo-Christian morals, and abstinence in sex education (Educational Research Analysts).

“In their view, textbooks apologized for communism and espoused secular humanism, moral relativism, and liberalism. They explained evolution but not criticism of that theory, highlighted Western civilization's shortcomings but not those of other societies, and encouraged loose morals rather than personal responsibility” (Cavanagh, 2005).

Although no committee members nor the founders of ERA have professional experience within the field of public education, the ERA argues that

“Our unique 50 years' experience gives us expertise equal to or beyond that of the education establishment itself in all phases of the public-school textbook adoption process, and in that our standard review criteria spell out what public school textbooks often censor on certain topics” (Educational Research Analysts).

Despite no public-school textbook companies or publishers funding the reviews of the ERA, they receive financing from individuals and private foundations. Still, the ERA continues to have substantial power in the review process of public-school textbooks because

“in some states, local districts are given broad discretion in purchasing classroom materials. But in others, like Texas and California, state officials influence what textbooks districts can buy with public money. Rather than attempting to satisfy the needs of each individual state, publishers tend to churn out materials that meet the standards of their biggest markets” (Cavanagh, 2005).

Even though the Gablers have both since passed away, the ERA still retains its power as one of the largest and most influential textbook reviewing organizations. Currently lead by Neal Frey, who was an apprentice of Mel Gabler, maintains the values of the Gablers. Regarding American literature, Frey emphasizes the standard that “Story content should present a universe that rewards virtue and punishes vice. [It must also contain] “behavioral role models and general positive attitudes toward, and relations among, children, parents, and others” (Cavanagh, 2005).

Although the ERA's focus is the review of academic textbooks, the formation and continuance of the organization has allowed private individuals and organizations to interfere with school curriculum. The ERA strongly encourages parents, teachers, and administrators to use their reviews as a basis for any curriculum concerns, as expressed by the instructions contained on their website for this process, “do not submit our reviews to school boards. A

presentation in your own words will be more effective. Contact us for instructions on making your own reviews. We can also suggest alternatives to inappropriate curricula” (Educational Research Analysts).

### ***The 1970s: Book Burning***

Rather than continuing the development and implementation of censorship committees, the 1970s brought a renewed wave of book burning. The increased burning of books is quite alarming because “people who burn books are insensitive, to say the least, to the frightening associations in many minds with the massive book burnings by Nazis in Germany in May 1933” (Burrell, 1992). Specifically, book burnings of literature read at the secondary level of public education became more common. These book burnings were usually led by disgruntled school officials or community members who disapproved of the content contained in the literature that was being read in the classroom.

One major instance of book burning took place on November 10, 1973, in Drake, North Dakota. Thirty-six copies of *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut were seized from the school and burned by school officials. The novel is a combination of real-life events and science fiction, and follows the story of the protagonist, Billy Pilgrim, who served as a WWII soldier. The reasoning behind the burning of school copies of *Slaughterhouse Five* was “some found the book’s pessimistic outlook and black humor unsuitable for school children” (Copies of *Slaughterhouse Five* are burned in North Dakota, 2021). It remains unclear whether action was taken because of a parental complaint or from concerns of school officials. The consequences of the book burning and whether the novel was banned from the classroom curriculum also remains unclear.

Additionally, another major book burning of school curricula took place in 1977 in Warsaw, Indiana. A local senior citizen's organization objected to the teaching of *Values Clarification* by Sidney B. Simon, Leland W. Howe, and Howard Kirschenbaum in the secondary classroom. This workbook prompts students to think about their current values and urges them to take action for improvement. The senior citizen's organization collected forty copies from school officials and set them on fire. Their reasoning behind this action was that the discussion of marijuana, divorce, and other controversial topics within the workbook were inappropriate for students. The final ruling of the school board and the consequences for the book burning remain unclear (Campbell, 1981).

### ***The 1980s: The Rise of Conservative and Liberal Concerns***

Influenced by the continued growth of the ERA, when Ronald Reagan campaigned for president in 1980, he told religious groups in Dallas, Texas that "great flaws" were in the theory of evolution and promised to initiate the introduction of religion into public education (The 1980s Education: Topics in the News). Once Reagan obtained presidency, censorship in public school libraries reached an all-time high according to the People for the American Way annual censorship watch (Abott, 1987). "The report lays much of the blame for increased censorship at the feet of the highly-organized conservative lobbies" (Abott, 1987). Specifically, literature classes were the most frequent targets and attempts to censor books within public schools tripled as compared to the previous decade (The 1980s Education: Topics in the News).

The 1980s also saw a resurgence of private organizations that promoted censorship. One such organization was the Moral Majority, which was founded by the religious leader and televangelist Jerry Falwell in 1979. The organization's goals included advancing conservative social values along with pro-American and pro-family beliefs. Specifically, the Moral Majority

sought to integrate church and state within public education, and strongly opposed the U.S. Supreme Court rulings that banned Bible reading in public schools. Although the organization was disbanded in 1989, they established the religious right in American politics (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018).

Conversely, “People for the American Way was founded in 1981 by television and film producer Norman Lear, Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, and a group of business, civic, religious, and civil rights leaders who were disturbed by the divisive rhetoric of newly politicized televangelists” (About Us, 2022). The purpose of People for the American Way, which is an active organization to the present day, is

“to fight right-wing extremism and build a democratic society that implements the ideals of freedom, equality, opportunity and justice for all. Our America acknowledges its history, respects difference and dissent, combats hatred and bigotry, nurtures creativity, and seeks justice and equity for all” (About Us, 2022).

People for the American Way also encourages “civic participation to defend fundamental rights and to fight to dismantle systemic barriers to equitable opportunity” (About Us, 2022).

The impact of a rather politicized environment surrounding the topic of the censorship of literature and curricula in public schools lead to increased challenges and solidified censorship as a common practice within the classroom. Compared to the 1970s,

“rather than burning books, the Moral Majority and other conservative groups have put the emphasis on having titles removed from the shelves or having their own titles included. Conservatives produce book lists composed of titles that meet with either their approval or their wrath” (Abott, 1987).

The power obtained by groups like the Moral Majority allowed censorship concerns to be monitored and executed by politics, religious organizations, and individuals rather than maintaining the intellectual freedom of school officials and students. Additionally, “followers of these groups are encouraged to take their lists to their local school libraries and compare the titles on the list with the contents on the card catalog. Depending upon whether the titles on the list are considered objectionable or desirable by the group, the patron either lobbies for exile of the title or inclusion” (Abott, 1987). Thus, individuals, particularly parents, were persuaded to express and exercise their censorship concerns to influence the decisions of their community.

### ***The 1990s: The Challenging of LGBTQIA+ Materials***

Between 1990 and 2000, the ALA reports that there were 6,364 challenges to various books in school libraries and classrooms (Censorship in Children’s Literature). Specifically, the challenges by reasons included: 1,432 challenges for sexually explicit content, 1,259 challenges for offensive language, and 1,162 challenges for material that is unsuitable for the age group. Challenges by type of initiator included: parent (3,421), patron (854), and school administrator (538). Lastly, challenges by institution included: school (2,095), school library (2,005), and public library (1,565) (Number of Challenges by Reasons, Initiator, & Institution: 1990-99, 2013).

Overall, “sexual conduct, such promiscuity, homosexuality, or even frank examinations of the physical act, is one the most frequently given reasons for removing a book from a library or school” (Censorship in Children’s Literature). This censorship extended to the genre of LGBTQIA+ literature and “books portraying homosexuality as normal or mundane are commonly questioned” (Censorship in Children’s Literature). Two examples of much disputed works of anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment was Leslea Newman’s *Heather Has Two Mommies* and

Michael Willhoite's *Daddy Roommate*, which a North Carolina challenge argued that the book "promotes a dangerous and ungodly lifestyle from which children must be protected" (Censorship in Children's Literature). As noted, the focus shifted to the censorship of materials that were deemed sexually explicit or those that contained LGBTQIA+ themes rather than works which demoted American or family values.

Beginning in 1990 the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) began collecting data about banned books. Consequently, there is no comprehensive data of frequently challenged books or authors before 1990. "OIF receives reports from libraries, schools, and the media on attempts to ban books and compiles this information into lists in order to inform the public about censorship in libraries and schools" (100 Most Frequently Challenged Books by Decade, 2013). Although this data has provided more detailed insight into the literature that are targets of censorship, OIF estimates that 82-97% of challenges remain unreported because for each challenge reported there are as many as four or five which go unreported (100 Most Frequently Challenged Books by Decade, 2013).

The top five challenged or banned books from 1999-2000 were *Scary Stories* by Alvin Schwartz, *Daddy's Roommate* by Michael Willhoite, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou, *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (100 Most Frequently Challenged Books: 1990-1999, 2013). Reasons for the challenging or banning of these books within the field of education ranged from unsuitable material for the age group, LGBTQIA+ themes, and derogatory language.

### ***The 2000s: A Continuance of Previous Objections***

With the arrival of the new millennium, the reasoning behind book challenges or bans remained relatively the same. The top three reasons for objections consisted of: sexually explicit

material (1,577), offensive language (1,291), and other objections (1,102). Challenges by initiator consisted of: parent (2,535), other initiator (1,191), and school administrator (489). Additionally, challenges by institution were: school (1,811), school library (1,639), and public library (1,217) (Number of Challenges by Reasons, Initiator, & Institution: 2000-09, 2013).

The top five most frequently banned or challenged books for the decade included the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling, the *Alice* series by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier, *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, and *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck (Top 100 Banned/ Challenged Books: 2000-2009, 2013).

When compared to the previous decade, the top reasons for challenges consisted of objections to sexually explicit content and offensive language. Additionally, the challenges by type of initiator remained the same as parent being the most common followed closely by school administrator. Challenges by type of institution remained the same but there was a slight decrease in the number of challenges at the school and school library level.

### ***The 2010s: Insensitive Content***

For the 2010s, the top challenged or banned books included a variety of reasons for their opposition, which included reasons previously noted but also expanded to include social issues. “The list includes books challenged for a variety of reasons, such as LGBTQIA+ content, sexual references, religious viewpoints, content that addresses racism and police brutality, and profanity” (ALA Releases List of Top 100 Most Banned and Challenged Books of the Decade). The five most frequently challenged or banned books were *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, the *Captain Underpants* series by Dav Pilkey, *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher, *Looking for Alaska* by John Green, and *George* by Alex Gino (Top 100 Most Banned and Challenged Books: 2010-2019, 2020).

### ***The 2020s: Resurgence of LGBTQIA+ Objections***

Within the ongoing 2020s, in the year 2020 alone, there were 156 challenges, and 273 books were affected by censorship attempts. The top three reasons for censorship attempts were LGBTQIA+ content, anti-racism/Black Lives Matter content (either commending or condemning the topic), and political viewpoints (Zalusky, 2021). Initiators consisted of parents (50%), patrons (20%), and school administrators (11%). Challenges by institution comprised of public libraries (43%), schools (38%), and school libraries (15%) (Zalusky, 2021). Like the reasons that fueled censorship in the 1990s through the 2000s,

“challenges to library materials and programs addressing issues of concern to those in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and/or questioning, intersex, asexual, and related (LGBTQIA+) communities continued unabated in 2019, with a rising number of coordinated, organized challenges to books, programs, speakers, and other library resources that address LGBTQIA+ issues and themes” (Issues and Trends, 2020). Within the 2020s, objections to LGBTQIA+ material has elevated to a more extreme level because

“a notable feature of these challenges is an effort to frame any material with LGBTQIA+ themes or characters as inherently pornographic or unsuitable for minors, even when the materials are intended for children and families, and they are age and developmentally appropriate” (Issues and Trends, 2020).

### ***Substantial Court Cases Regarding the Censorship of Literature***

Although the censorship of literature at the secondary level of education is prevalent in every community, legal action tends to remain at the local rather than federal level. There is one substantial case, Board of Education, Island Trees School District v. Pico, that reached the level of the Supreme Court. Beginning in early 1976, school board members received a list of books

that were considered unsuitable for school libraries and secondary level students by an anonymous source (Abott, 1987). The source claimed that the books were “anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic and just plain filthy” and quotations from the books along with anonymous editorials condemning the books as obscene and vulgar were also included (Abott, 1987). After reviewing this information, school board members asked a custodian to unlock the school library so they could check the library catalog for the titles. The school library contained several of the titles, and by February 1976 the school board ordered the books to be removed from the library. Upon this request, the superintendent intervened and appointed a book review committee to make a final decision instead. By 1977, five students filed a class action lawsuit against the school board, which reached the Supreme Court, because they deemed the removal of the books unconstitutional (Abott, 1987).

Ultimately, the Supreme Court ruled that “local school boards may not remove books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books” (Mullally, 2017). Although it was a narrow decision, Justice William Brennan reasoned that “if a board acted solely upon the “educational suitability” of the books in question or solely because the books were “pervasively vulgar,” such actions would not be unconstitutional” (Mullally, 2017).

“The law requires that if a book is to be removed, an inquiry must be made as to the motivation and intention of the party calling for its removal. If the party’s intention is to deny students access to ideas with which the party disagrees, it is a violation of the First Amendment” (Mullally, 2017).

Although the Board of Education, Island Trees School District v. Pico is the only banned or challenged books case that has reached the level of the Supreme Court, most local courts and

even school districts refer to this ruling when faced with the legality of censorship within secondary education (Mullally, 2017).

### **Why is Literature Challenged at the Secondary Level of Education: Who Tends to Censor and Challenge Materials?**

Concerning who tends to censor materials at the secondary level of education, censors tend to be more at the local level rather than national organizations such as the ERA. At the local level, censorship arises from parental and community concerns. With this in mind, the top three parties involved are: school librarians, teachers, and parents. Although quite different entities, their actions may lead to the censorship of certain materials. Despite popular belief, school boards are not the top initiators for book challenges. Rather, they are one authority present within the process of a book challenge. Occasionally, a school board may object to the use of certain materials within the school library or classroom, but school boards are typically involved as the neutral party when a book challenge occurs. As will be explained further on, school librarians and teachers employ the use of self-censorship for a variety of reasons, but mainly to protect themselves from the issues that can stem from book challenges. On the other hand, parents tend to initiate the most challenges because they are the community members with direct access to school materials, but their challenges do not always lead to the removal of materials.

Nonetheless, student access continues to be restricted because of the self-censorship of school librarians and teachers, along with parental objections.

#### ***School Librarians***

As the gatekeepers to libraries, librarians control which materials are accessible within the library's collection. Although school librarians should adhere to the ALA's principles regarding academic freedom, they still may censor certain materials for student access. School

librarians may adhere to self-censorship when selecting materials for the school library because they fear that some selections may prompt challenges from parents and school administrators. Additionally, school librarians may take certain materials off the shelves if a complaint has been issued in order to defer further controversy.

In 2006, a study was conducted by Rickman to determine the extent of self-censorship by school librarians. The study spanned the states of Arkansas, Delaware, and North Carolina because they are among the five states that require school librarians to have a master's degree. The study consisted of 1,069 school campuses and 395 school librarians. In the study, the selector was defined as an authority that seeks balance, inclusivity, and diversity of materials. A censor was defined as an authority that deems materials as inappropriate, values exclusivity, and controls content and access to it (Rickman, 2010). Additionally, self-censorship was defined as the "subtle censorship of selection" (Rickman, 2010,). For the study, three possible factors influencing decisions to self-censor were assessed: "(1) internal—self (individual belief system), (2) external—school (from within the school system), or (3) external—community (from the community at large)" (Rickman, 2010).

In the study, 51.36% of school librarians affirmed that they practiced self-censorship and 16% reported that self-censorship is the most prevalent at the secondary level of education. Additionally, 20% reported that their individual belief system did affect their selection of materials (Rickman, 2010). Concerning the external factors within the school system that may affect the school librarian's selection of materials, 12.6% provided the following reasons for self-censorship: "(1) and administrator might not approve a potential collection item, (2) an administrator might request avoidance of a potential purchase, and (3) the school board might request the avoidance of a potential purchase" (Rickman, 2010).

Conversely, 5.5% believed that external factors outside the school system may affect the school librarian's selection of materials (Rickman, 2010). The following were considered the top external factors outside the school system: "(a) parents might not approve a potential collection item, (b) community member might not approve, or (c) the possibility of a potential challenge might be avoided" (Rickman, 2010). Besides the reasons previously stated for the self-censorship of school librarians, "many of the more common reasons include limited budgets; lack of interest; limited shelf space; community values; the author's integrity; material content; and poor, unfavorable, or unenthusiastic reviews" (Rickman, 2010).

### ***Teachers and School Officials***

Similarly, teachers and school officials often partake in the self-censorship of controversial materials to prevent challenges by parents and other community members. Teachers and school officials are especially hesitant to retain any materials that have received negative press attention, either from a nearby school district or on a national level, because they fear the pressure that will come from the negative publicity. "When a book is attacked in one school, newspaper publicity makes the title well-known, and the book is then challenged or quietly removed in a number of other places" (Burruss, 1992, p. 26). Superintendents or teachers usually quietly make these removals or sometimes a single complaint warrants certain materials to never be ordered for use in the school library or classroom.

Specifically, secondary level English teachers tend to adhere to self-censorship most prominently and are the party to face the most backlash when challenges are initiated. As secondary English teachers, they are faced with a plethora of materials, and some may be more controversial than others, which they must decide what is appropriate for their students to read. If a secondary level English teacher is tempted to incorporate controversial material within their

curriculum, they must be aware of the negative consequences that may occur if a book is challenged. In an attempt to prevent any action that may be taken against them, teachers employ the use of self-censorship. For example, when asked if they ever hesitate to use certain literature within the classroom, one teacher responded:

“Always. I deliberately chose not to use *The Color Purple* and *Beloved* because of the language and concepts... I carefully read everything several times to be sure there is nothing blatantly dangerous (to my job!). I also “white out” certain words”  
(Noll, 1994, p. 4-5).

Teachers are also highly aware of the possible legal action that a challenge could entail. When a teacher may be tempted to fight back against censorship, “the experiences of friends in similar straits and the terrifying track record of teachers willing to go to court will often put a damper on the urge to respond to censorship through legal means” (Noll, 1994, p. 3).

Additionally, with the fear of complaints from parents and community members, which may lead to legal action (sometimes on a personal level), the environment of the school administration may cause teachers to adhere to the values of the administration rather than their own.

“Even when no controversy exists, there is pressure for teachers to align themselves with the views of the powers that be. Those who rock the boat or question the status quo are viewed as troublemakers. Being “good” teachers-like being good students-often means accepting the authority of others, not resisting or challenging it” (Noll, 1994, p. 6).

Although secondary English teachers should have the freedom to use their own judgement when deciding to use certain materials for their classrooms, unfortunately the pressure and the possible consequences from parents, community members, and the school leads English

teachers to often align their teaching practices with the values of these outside factors in order to prevent controversy and ultimately, the loss of their job and reputation.

### *Parents*

More so than school librarians, teachers, or school officials, parents are the most likely to challenge books at the secondary level of education. Parents are the number one initiator of book challenges because they tend to have direct contact with school materials because of their relation to the student. With this direct exposure to classroom materials,

“undoubtedly there are many parents who find themselves disturbed by some book used in the school, and who act quite independently on their feelings. Many of these people, as will be noted later, are quite amenable to reasonable explanations for the use of material that seems new or startling to them as parents” (Burruss, 1992, p. 32).

Although some parents may initially be shocked upon discovering controversial material in their child’s school curriculum and therefore complain to school officials, which is then categorized and treated as a potential challenge, many parents don’t carry the challenge further if the purpose of the material is explained to them by the child’s teacher or school officials. Conversely,

“some persons argue that parental objection to a book, periodical, or film used in the schools is not in itself censorship. The challenges do constitute pressure which, in some schools at least, erodes the willingness of the school to provide the best learning materials for students” (Burruss, 1992, p. 26).

Hence, parental complaints have a strong influence on the censorship of materials, which hinders the First Amendment rights of students and teachers. Although parental concerns regarding reading materials are valid and should be respected by teachers and school officials,

“librarians and governing bodies should maintain that parents—and only parents—have the right and the responsibility to restrict the access of their children—and only their children—to library resources. Censorship by librarians of constitutionally protected speech, whether for protection or for any other reason, violates the First Amendment” (About Banned & Challenged Books, 2012).

Regarding the topic of censorship, parents have the right to monitor and question the materials their child reads but cannot exercise that control over any other student.

### **Why is Literature Challenged at the Secondary Level of Education: Motives**

Now that the common initiators of book challenges have been addressed, the reasoning behind these challenges must be explored. Usually, censors have the best intentions for challenging books at the secondary level of education. They believe that they must protect children from ideas and information that may be age inappropriate or difficult for them to understand. Although these motives are valid, any attempt to restrict the access of materials, even for minors, violates the First Amendment.

“No citizen and no librarian can properly assume the duty or right to restrict or suppress legally protected expressions of ideas. The censor may not understand that a request that certain works be labeled or restricted, if fulfilled, would lead to an abridgement of the rights of other library users” (The Censor: Motives and Tactics, 2016).

Generally, there are four motivational factors that may lie behind a censor’s actions (The Censor: Motives and Tactics, 2016). The four most motivational factors are: family values, religion, political views, and minority rights. These four factors are not mutually exclusive and usually merge.

### ***Family Values***

Concerning family values, the censor may feel threatened by materials that challenge the traditional American way of life. Changes in attitude toward the traditional lifestyle and family values, especially works that contain explicitly sexual content, are often reflected in literature, but the censor views this as a deviation from the norm. Since the material challenges traditional values, the censor may want to protect children from exposure to alternative lifestyles and sexual themes (The Censor: Motives and Tactics, 2016).

### ***Religion***

Branching from family values is the issue of religion. Since the traditional American way of life is challenged, censors may perceive this as an attack on religion. Specifically, the censor may view explicitly sexual works and politically unorthodox ideas as a threat to religious faith. Additionally, the censor may consider antireligious works or materials which demean religious beliefs as contributing to the decline of religion within modern society. The censor may believe that these materials are further encouraging hostility to the religious way of life (The Censor: Motives and Tactics, 2016).

### ***Political Views***

Furthermore, political views tend to catch the attention of the censor. Materials which represent changes in political structure can also be threatening and the censor may consider work that promotes radical change as subversive. The censor tends to argue that these works attack basic values and commonly labels the challenged material as “communistic, un-American, or ungodly” (The Censor: Motives and Tactics, 2016). Additionally, if the works also contain crude language the censor may also choose to challenge the material based on obscenity. Sometimes,

the censor will cite obscenity concerns in order to cover up their objections on political grounds (The Censor: Motives and Tactics, 2016).

### ***Minority Rights***

Conversely, not all censors are interested in maintaining the traditional American social order. Opposing conservative censors are other groups who want their own values recognized and they will challenge materials that don't support those ideals. For example, women and ethnic minorities who struggle against long-established stereotypes may be anxious to challenge materials that they believe perpetuate those stereotypes. In order to establish this, groups interested in minority rights will also resort to the tactics of the censor, although maybe not in the traditional sense (The Censor: Motives and Tactics, 2016).

### ***Critical Race Theory***

Dissenting from minority rights, recently the movement against the implementation of Critical Race Theory (CRT) within the classroom has significantly grown since 2020. "CRT is an academic framework that proposes that racism is not just based on individual discrimination but has been systematically supported by institutions" (Dawkins, 2022, p. 3). Although CRT is a college level concept and is not traditionally taught nor implemented into primary or secondary education, CRT is used as a catchall by some groups to describe anything that deals with race, sexism, or culture. Despite this confusion, "bills have been introduced in more than 30 states and passed in 14 states to restrict how teachers might teach about racism and sexism" (Dawkins, 2022, p. 3). The defendants claim that the passing of these bills will ban any divisive material that makes children feel guilty of their race or sex. Still, the increased activity in the movement against the generality of CRT has created not only national but local pressure to reduce conversations within the classroom that focus on race, racism, gender, and sexuality.

Specifically, within the English literature classroom, there is an increased reluctance to discuss these topics because of potential backlash.

### **Why is Literature Challenged at the Secondary Level of Education: The Process of Book Challenges**

Now that the common initiators and the motives of the censor have been explored, the process of book challenges must be addressed. Although school libraries and classrooms differ slightly in their procedures for handling and processing book challenges, their approach is relatively the same. Before continuing, it is important to understand the differences between a book challenge and a book ban.

“A challenge is an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or a group. A banning is the removal of those materials. Challenges do not simply involve a person expressing a point of view; rather, they are an attempt to remove material from the curriculum or library, thereby restricting the access of others”

(About Banned & Challenged Books, 2012).

Therefore, both school libraries and classrooms classify book challenges and bans as stated above.

#### ***School Libraries***

To mitigate book challenges from community members or school officials, all school libraries should have a collection development policy, which includes a resource reconsideration policy, in place. This should describe the procedure that librarians will follow when a user requests a resource to be reconsidered, i.e., a book challenge. The policy will also help librarians confidently and fairly deal with library users who express concerns with materials. If there is no established collection development policy, school librarians are encouraged to refer to the

principles of intellectual freedom outlined in the *Library Bill of Rights* and form their own collection development policy as soon as possible (How to Respond to Challenges and Concerns about Library Resources, 2016).

When community members, such as parents or even school officials, initiate an objection concerning a library material to a school librarian, they usually just want their opinion heard and respected by the librarian. Regardless, school librarians still must follow their collection development policy, even in their verbal response to a book challenge. Included below is an outline of how school librarians should handle informal complaints and verbal concerns (How to Respond to Challenges and Concerns about Library Resources, 2016):

1. “Listen and try to uncover specific reasons for their concern, if they read the entire work, and specific action they would like library to take.
2. If they request the item to be removed, explain how materials are selected and all library members have the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment right to access information. If the material is for a child or young adult, explain that each parent has the right to decide.
3. Their concern usually declines after they have an opportunity to express their feelings. They only wanted to be heard and have their opinions acknowledged. No further action is needed but notes should be made and a report of the conversation to the library director/principal.
4. If the challenger is not satisfied and they want the item removed, describe the formal reconsideration process and its timeline. Censors usually want immediate action.
5. Provide a copy of the library’s collection development policy and resource reconsideration form. No action is taken unless the form is completed by the individual. Submission of completed form will trigger the formal reconsideration process. Documents will become part of public records.
6. Keep dated notes to provide information in case a formal reconsideration form is filed.
7. Keep principal informed of any concerns expressed, and whether the issue has been resolved or not.”

Occasionally, some initiators may want to take their concerns a step further and have the material removed from the school library. In order to do so, the initiator must fully complete a formal reconsideration form before any further action can proceed. Every school library has similar but slightly different reconsideration request forms since each creates their own policies regarding collection development. The following is a sample reconsideration request form. The reconsideration request form should include (Sample Reconsideration Form, 2017):

- Personal & contact info
- Represent self or organization?
- Type of resource, title, author
- Part of curriculum or library collection?
- What brought the resource to attention?
- Examined entire source? If not, which sections?
- Concerns about the resource?
- Suggested resources to provide additional info and/or other viewpoints on topic?
- What action requestion library committee to consider?

Once completed and returned to the school librarian or principal, the formal reconsideration form will be used as the basis for the next steps in processing the book challenge. The school librarian or principal will then refer the book challenge and the formal reconsideration form to the school board, in which the initiator can voice their concerns at a meeting. Once the hearing is complete, the school board should allow the school library staff to make a final decision regarding the challenged material since they are responsible for the selection and evaluation of library and educational resources. If the initiator opposes the decision, no further action can be taken at the school district level so the initiator must refer to outside entities if they wish to do so (How to Respond to Challenges and Concerns about Library Resources, 2016).

### *Classrooms*

Regarding book challenges within the classroom, it is also crucial to have an established policy and procedures to follow when faced with this issue. Teachers may employ self-censorship and may formulate their own individual procedures they will follow if faced with a complaint concerning reading materials. Since book challenges may escalate outside of the classroom, it is ultimately the responsibility of school supervisors, such as the department head, the principal, the school board, and the superintendent, to create a district wide policy that outlines the procedures to follow when school materials are challenged. District wide policies tend to consist of the same procedures as school libraries for verbal complaints and request reconsideration forms. For a classroom challenge, the formal reconsideration form will be submitted and reviewed by the school supervisors, either by each authority in consecutive order or just by one or several authorities depending on the policy of the school district. The formal reconsideration form may be reviewed by a schoolboard meeting if the issue is unresolved. If the book challenge remains unresolved, further action outside of the school district may be taken by the initiator (How to Respond to Challenges and Concerns about Library Resources, 2016).

Although it is extremely important for school districts to have a policy which outlines procedures for book challenges, sometimes administrators do not adhere to the policy. Similarly, the fear of negative publicity, legal action, or just unsettled parents or community members can cause administrators to defer from the policy in the hope to resolve the book challenge. To appease the initiator, administrators may denounce the value of the questioned resource or make a final decision based on their own perceptions. This mistake can be remedied, but it is best for school districts to have a policy in place to prevent confusion and escalation of the book challenge (How to Respond to Challenges and Concerns about Library Resources, 2016).

### **Top Five Classic Novels Targeted Within Secondary Education**

Although any book can be the target of censorship, the classics canon of literature tends to be subjected to more challenges and bans. In the following sections, the top five classic novels targeted for censorship within secondary education will be discussed. The genre of classic literature will be explored because classic novels tend to make up most of the curriculum of secondary education. Other genres may be taught in the classroom, but educators tend to gravitate towards the classics because of their familiarity with them. Additionally, classic novels tend to be more well known amongst students and parents alike.

Each section will detail the prominence of the novel's censorship, who the initiators tend to be, and their reasoning for proposed censorship. This research is based on the ALA's "Banned and Challenged Classics" list, which refers to the Radcliffe Publishing Course "Top 100 Novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century" as a starting point. From this list, forty-six of the top one hundred novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been challenged or protested at schools and school libraries (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). 82-97% of book challenges remain unreported and receive no media attention, but when challenged, classic novels tend to gain more attention because of the public's familiarity (Top 10 Most Challenged Books List). Additionally, when challenged at the secondary level of education, classic novels are occasionally removed. Although, they tend to remain in school libraries or the classroom because of the long-time critical esteem and long-established literary merit they have obtained (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). Still, the reputation of classic novels does not make them exempt from book challenges and bans.

#### ***The Catcher in the Rye***

Since its publication in 1951, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger has been a favorite target of censors. In the 1960s, censorship concerns consisted of parents citing the novel as being "anti-white and obscene" (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). Based on these motives, many

parents wanted the novel banned in the school library and classroom, but the school boards usually refused this request. Although by the 1970s, the novel was rapidly removed from suggested and required reading lists at the secondary level of education because parents deemed the language and content of the book inappropriate. Additionally, the 1980s brought more backlash against the title. Censors urged the removal of *The Catcher in the Rye* because they claimed the novel contained profanity, immorality, sexually explicit content, and statements that are defamatory to minorities, women, God, and the disabled. Consequently, at the secondary level of education access was restricted or parental permission was required to read the novel either in the school library or the classroom. The criticism continued throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Parents and now students claimed that the novel was vulgar, which led to the novel being removed or retained in school libraries and the classroom. Evidentially, *The Catcher in the Rye* continues to evoke multiple motives by censors (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013).

### ***Slaughterhouse-Five***

Similarly, *Slaughterhouse-Five* by Kurt Vonnegut has a long history with censorship attempts. Within a year of publication, by the 1970s the novel was banned throughout secondary schools nationwide for the explicit sexual scenes, violence, and obscene language it allegedly contained. Objections to the novel continued to grow in the 1980s with censors citing the foul language, act of bestiality, and the deviant sexual behavior present. In many school districts, parental permission was required to access the book, either through the school library or in the classroom (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). For example, in Racine, WI Unified District high school libraries parental permission was required because censors objected to the “language used in the book, depictions of torture, ethnic slurs, and the negative portrayals of women” (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). Censorship of *Slaughterhouse-Five* continued in the

1990s and by the 2000s the novel was regularly removed from required reading lists because of parent complaints. Parents tended to cite the “vulgar language, violent imagery, and sexual content” of the novel as their basis for their objections (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). As is illustrated, the censorship surrounding *Slaughterhouse-Five* continues to grow throughout each succeeding decade.

### ***To Kill a Mockingbird***

Although published in 1960, complaints concerning *To Kill a Mockingbird* began in the 1970s. Initially, complaints centered around the vulgar language contained within the novel. By the 1980s, objections included the apparent racism and racist language (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). For example, in Warren, IN Township schools, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was objected by parents because they argued it “represents institutionalized racism under the guise of good literature” (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). Criticism continued with The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) claiming the racial slurs within the novel were inappropriate for secondary level students. Additionally, on a more local level, school districts tended to remove the novel from school libraries/classrooms and required reading lists. Their reasoning usually consisted of the claims that the novel was degrading and conflicted with the moral values of the community. Objections continued to increase in the 2000s (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). In Brentwood, TN Middle School, censors stated that the novel “contains adult themes such as sexual intercourse, rape, and incest” and the use of racial slurs promotes “racial hatred, racial division, racial separation, and promotes white supremacy” (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). As for the present day, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is typically removed from school libraries and classroom curriculum.

***The Lord of the Flies***

*The Lord of the Flies* by William Golding and published in 1954, began receiving complaints from censors in the 1970s. Objections continued into the 1980s with censors claiming that the material was inappropriate, contained excessive violence, and bad language (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). Particularly, in 1981 Owen, NC High school deemed the novel “demoralizing inasmuch as it implies that man is little more than an animal” (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). In 1992 the novel was challenged in Waterloo, IA schools. Challengers claimed that the novel contained “profanity, lurid passages about sex, and statements defamatory to minorities, God, women, and the disabled” (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). In addition, some argue that the novel is racist and denigrates African Americans. To the present day, *The Lord of the Flies* is still challenged within secondary schools but is often retained (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013).

***Of Mice and Men***

First published in 1937, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck has continued to draw the attention of censors throughout the decades. Beginning in the 1980s, censors banned the novel from the classroom due to “profanity and its vulgar language” (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). The novel was also removed from classrooms because it “has profane use of God’s name”, according to Northside High School in Tuscaloosa, AL (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). By the 1990s, censors argued that the novel contains racial slurs and “blasphemous language, excessive cursing, and sexual overtones” (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). In 2003, the novel was challenged in Normal, IL Community High Schools because of “racial slurs, profanity, violence, and [it] does not represent traditional values” (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). Criticism continued but in 2007 the novel was retained in the Olathe, KS ninth

grade curriculum despite a parental complaint of the material being a “worthless, profanity-riddled book which is derogatory towards African Americans, women, and the developmentally disabled” (Banned & Challenged Classics, 2013). Although *Of Mice and Men* remains in the curriculum of many secondary schools, there is still a significant amount of concern regarding the content of the novel.

## **The Impact of the Censorship of Literature on Students and their Education**

### ***Minor Rights***

First and foremost, the censorship of literature directly violates the First Amendment rights of students. Although secondary students are still minors, and hence some may argue that First Amendment rights do not apply to them, library materials cannot be denied to users based on their age. Furthermore, based on the *Library Bill of Rights*, “every restriction on access to, and use of, library resources, based solely on the chronological age, apparent maturity, educational level, or literacy skills of users violate Article V” (Access to Library Resources and Services for Minors: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights, 2006).

Even though some may argue that censorship is necessary within the educational setting in order to protect children, “constitutionally protected speech cannot be suppressed solely to protect children or young adults from ideas or images a legislative body believes to be unsuitable for them” and “students and minors have the right to be free from any unreasonable intrusion into or surveillance of their lawful library use” (Access to Library Resources and Services for Minors: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights, 2006). Most importantly, libraries

“affirm the responsibility and the right of all parents and guardians to guide their own children’s use of the library and its resources and services. Libraries and their governing bodies cannot assume the role of parents or the functions of parental authority in the

private relationship between parent and child” (Access to Library Resources and Services for Minors: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights, 2006).

Ultimately, concerning school libraries, the First Amendment Rights of minors must be upheld despite censorship attempts. The only authority that can impose any restrictions on the access of readings materials upon a student is that student’s parent(s). Despite their concerns, parents can only limit the access of their child, not the reading access of any other student (s).

Concerning the rights of minors within the classroom, students still have their First Amendment Rights protected regardless of the policy of the school district. If censorship concerns arise about a certain reading material within the classroom, the decision is up to the classroom teacher or other school authorities to either remove or retain the material. The principles of the *Library Bill of Rights* should still be upheld within the classroom. Parents do not have the authority to impose restrictions of reading materials upon other students, because the only control they have is over their own child.

### ***Student Choice***

When censorship is implemented at the secondary level of education, it negatively affects the freedom of the students’ choice for reading materials. The censorship of classroom curriculum or school library selections demeans the ability for students to make their own choices regarding their reading materials. The censorship of reading materials demonstrates to students that authorities, such as teachers, school officials, parents, and community members, do not trust their integrity as readers to make these decisions (Denzin, 2013).

Rather, students highly value the power of choice and the results of making their own decisions as readers. Sometimes, the power of choice is what motivates some students to read. In a study conducted by Ivery and Broaddus, they found that there was a correlation between choice

and student motivation, particularly at the lower grade levels of secondary education (Denzin, 2013).

“In their survey of 1,765 sixth-grade students, the authors found that “to the question ‘What makes you want to read in this class?’ 42% of students responded they were motivated by finding good materials to read and having choice in the selection of these reading materials” (Denzin, 2013, p. 4).

When censorship is applied to education, the autonomy of students and their ability to make choices as readers is disregarded. Just as importantly, the relationship students have with reading can be negatively affected which may further impact their educational career.

### ***Inequalities within Education***

Additionally, the implementation of censorship within the classroom limits the access students have to reading materials. Even though the censorship of school library materials or classroom curricula does not completely eradicate the material, removal makes it significantly more difficult for some students to access the material. Although theoretically students may have access through outside resources, not every student has the same resources. Inside the school library or classroom, each student has equal access to reading materials (unless a parent has specifically requested their child to have separate material), but outside of the educational setting this is not a guarantee.

There are multiple factors that can contribute to unequal access to reading materials. For example, not all students have access to either public or private transportation to a library or bookstore in order to obtain the material. In addition, some students or their families may not have the financial resources to purchase the book. Another factor to consider is that some students in rural communities may simply not have resources such as a public library or

bookstore nearby. Granted, some reading materials can be accessed online but the student must have access to an internet source outside of school and they still may need money to purchase an online edition of the material. The removal of reading materials within the educational setting may prevent some students from having access to the material outside of school. With the limited ability to access these resources, students will not have the opportunity to exercise their First Amendment rights, the freedom of choice they have as a reader, and to explore the perspectives contained within the material. This inequality in accessing reading materials may have a strong consequence on the quality of the students' education (Dawkins, 2022).

### ***Diverse Literature and Alternative Points of View***

The ability to access and read diverse literature within the educational setting gives students the opportunity to question the status quo and to develop their own perspectives as they approach adulthood. With the enforcement of censorship, teachers must decide between the desire to teach their own beliefs in relation to what they want their students to learn versus the pressure to conform and use "safe" literature. Although classic literature is typically taught, and for valid reasons, sometimes teachers decide to use these well-known texts instead of branching out to include other genres because this familiarity is a safety net. Specifically, "most teachers are now reluctant to adopt any new texts at all, and this especially hits multicultural literature hard" (Noll, 1994). This reluctance to adopt new texts within the classroom prevents students from being exposed to a variety of genres and perspectives within the world of literature.

Although censors may claim that the exclusion of alternative points of view contained within diverse literature will ultimately protect children from the realities of life, this action hinders the students' ability to develop critical thinking skills. Specifically, censors tend to believe that a single book contains all truths but rather each book reveals something that gets

closer to the truth. Every book contains one perspective of many, and students must be able to decide what truths they believe in because what matters more is “how human beings experience truth than whether or not there is such a thing as truth” (Knox, 2020, p. 5). Additionally, the

“exclusion of alternative points of view strips us of our abilities to reason and to act because it makes us behave as if the world is static and that we are powerless to change it. [It] tells us that we can know only what others accept as fact [and] that we should accept our present circumstances” (Noll, 1994, p. 6).

Moreover, the censorship of diverse literature may alter students’ perception of reality since they are not exposed to every possible viewpoint. Through literature, English teachers, in a safe and controlled manner, can show students the realities of life, which will better prepare them for adulthood. English teachers must be able to use books, whether classic or contemporary,

“which do not lie to the young about the perilous but wondrous times we live in, books which talk of the fears, hopes, joys, and frustrations people experience, books about people not only as they are but as they can be. English teachers forced through the pressures of censorship to use only safe or antiseptic works are placed in the morally and intellectually untenable position of lying to their students about the nature and condition of mankind” (Town, 2010).

Besides learning about the world through literature, students can also explore their own reality through this medium. Students may be drawn to literature that they relate to on a personal level and that they believe represents them, either through the characters, plot, setting, etc. These commonalities cause students to create a connection with the book and to further develop their interest. When diverse books are challenged or banned, it signifies to students that the perspectives within those books are not worthy of expression or exploration. “Additionally, the

rhetoric around book banning, which labels books as disgusting, pornographic, or explicit, may cause students to feel that they are not valued because their stories are being labeled in harmful ways” (Dawkins, 2022, p. 5). These negative connotations surrounding literature, oftentimes diverse literature, imply that alternative viewpoints are not valued nor respected by the majority.

### ***Future Repercussions of Limitations***

As stated above, the censorship of literature can greatly impact not only the education of students, but their overall intellectual development. Although some may argue that censorship will protect children from the cruelties and realities of our world, we must consider what the future repercussions will be for these limitations. It is extremely important to ask ourselves “What will be the price tag of such caution? By providing access only to that literature that does not discuss sex, politics, violence, or question the role of the adult, what are we doing to children’s minds?” (Noll, 1994). The censorship of literature not only affects the secondary education of students, but their relationship to lifelong learning. When students’ choices are limited regarding what they can read and why, it creates a mindset of fear in relation to learning.

“When people of any age are too afraid of saying, doing, or reading something wrong, the tendency is to...withdraw into a frozen state of immobility; then learning dies. Fearful silence would seem to do more harm than any speech or text I could imagine” (Noll, 1994).

It is far better to discuss very difficult issues with the supervision of a teacher than to let students either believe half-truths or know absolutely nothing. When encountering literature, some tough issues are raised, such as drug use, incest, drinking, violence, love, and sex, but the academic freedom available without the hindrance of censorship allows students and teachers to face these issues together (Noll, 1994).

## **Conclusion**

Although the concept of censorship can be intimidating and daunting for many, it is mainly teachers who are on the front lines when handling this issue. Teachers must be knowledgeable concerning the different approaches they can take with addressing censorship concerns. Since teachers have the most interaction with students, they can have the most influence on how censorship is perceived within the classroom. Ultimately, it is up to the teacher to set the tone regarding censorship. Even though the options of teachers may be limited in some cases, teachers do have a significant amount of control over how they convey censorship and its effects to students.

### ***Standing by Initial Decision***

One solution to the issue of the censorship of literature within the secondary classroom is for teachers to stand by their initial decision regarding the classroom curriculum. Although some English teachers may face challenges which could result in the removal of the material, they should maintain their academic freedom when possible. Specifically, when teachers employ self-censorship to negate future concerns, this decision not only disregards their academic freedom as professionals but the intellectual freedom of their students. Still, this decision should not be taken lightly and as with incorporating any material into the curriculum the teacher should seriously think about the material before doing so (Rossuck, 1997).

First and foremost, context is crucial. Most censors do not read the entirety of a text before they challenge it. As a teacher, it is extremely important to read the entire material before adding it to the curriculum or introducing it to students. If questions arise either from students, parents, or school officials, teachers must be able to explain any concerns and defend the text if necessary (Rossuck, 1997).

Teachers must also weigh the positives against the negative aspects of teaching the text and base their analysis on which outweighs the other. If the text contains the literary merit to fit into an overall theme for a unit or class, this should outweigh the presence of any censorship concerns within the text (i.e., obscenities, violence, sexual content, or amoral values). For example, *Slaughterhouse-Five* could have the literary merit of an alternative way of telling the story of an anti-war novel. This would meet the requirements for a class that focuses on the alternative telling of stories or war novels. Granted the teacher must decide if these benefits outweigh the use of obscenities, violence, and disregard for religion and morals in the novel (Rossuck, 1997).

Additionally, teachers must realize that censorship is a form of denial. Although some parents or community members may argue that they want to protect the innocence of the children, students already have knowledge of the truth and the reality of our world. Specifically, parents may pursue an ongoing attempt to shield their children, but students are exposed to these concerns either through direct personal experience, their peers, or exposure to the media. Students want and need to address controversial issues with a responsible adult and many parents may not be up to the task. Teachers have a responsibility to not only teach students about the subject but also life (Rossuck, 1997).

Overall, if a teacher decides to stand by their initial decision for classroom curricula, it is necessary to seriously think about and consider the factors mentioned above. If the teacher decides to defend their choice, they must also be prepared for backlash. In order to combat this, they must have a thorough knowledge of the text and to be able to defend their decision.

Ultimately, since it is the decision of the student and the parents of the individual student, if

either has a problem with a piece of literature the teacher should still be willing to substitute the material for something else (Rossuck, 1997).

### *Compromise*

Alternatively, when censorship issues arise, the option of compromise may be contemplated. Teachers should not allow compromise to hinder their academic freedom but rather to form a solution to censorship concerns in which all parties involved will feel respected, heard, and valued. Compromise can have many different outlooks. For example, a teacher may want students to have the freedom to choose their own reading materials but are concerned about whether their choices will be appropriate for school. The teacher could limit their options by pre-selecting four novels already owned by the school and having students choose one of the four options (Noll, 1994).

Furthermore, some teachers may prefer to keep active communication with parents regarding reading materials. This could be utilized through email or newsletters sent to parents for each unit, sending a permission slip home for potentially controversial materials, encouraging parents to get in contact if they have concerns, or just emphasizing students to share what they're learning in class with their parents. As stated by one teacher,

“I always encourage students to share what they're reading with their parents. I'd rather keep the communication channels open, and even make changes, rather than to allow something to fester to the point of confrontation over censorship. So far-it has worked”  
(Noll, 1994, pg. 5).

Additionally, some steps can be taken by teachers to minimize the possibility of censorship concerns and the escalation of them. First, teachers can anticipate concerns about texts by knowing the community and their standards. When teachers select materials for the

classroom, whether for independent reading, teacher-guided instruction, or assessment, teachers should anticipate how the students, parents, and adults within the community will react to the material. Specifically, teachers should consider how community members will respond to the language and subject matter contained within the text. Teachers should also read the materials carefully before using them. They should not rely on published reviews, word of mouth, or credibility of the author. Reading the material themselves is the only way for teachers to truly understand what the text contains and whether it's appropriate for their classroom (Stumpf Jongsma, 1991).

Moreover, teachers should make sure the materials used are of good literary quality and contain accurate information. When challenges arise, it is not worth it to defend material of substandard literary quality. Teachers should also balance controversial and non-controversial items in the text. Most material will contain something that others might consider controversial. When considering materials for use, teachers should look at all points of view. Can the selection of the material be justified even if it contains some ideas others may find controversial? The purposes for selecting the materials for classroom use should also be communicated. Teachers must have a well-developed rationale for why the material is appropriate and important for students (Stumpf Jongsma, 1991).

Outside of the classroom, teachers can interact with the community and encourage censorship awareness through a variety of means. Primarily, teachers can initiate the development of support for the freedom to read in schools and the community. Teachers should encourage community members to inquire and know about student rights. Additionally, teachers can establish a public relations campaign, either with the involvement of fellow teachers or the help of administration. Letters can be written to local newspapers about the materials currently

being used in the classroom. Teachers can also invite people to look at the books that may be under consideration and can encourage parents to read and discuss materials together before students access them (Stumpf Jongsma, 1991). These strategies may lessen the tension surrounding censorship concerns and may provide a sense of security to community members.

Most importantly, teachers must be aware of censorship and intellectual freedom challenges, whether past or present. Teachers should know what books are causing difficulties in libraries and schools, and why. If the material is being used in the classroom, teachers should have explanations ready in case a challenge ensues. Teachers should also develop a written policy and procedures for complaints, either as individuals or as a department, and should follow them when necessary. There are plenty of resources available, such as the American Library Association, to help guide teachers in this policy making. Lastly, teachers can enlist professional literacy organizations in order to help them make wise decisions regarding reading materials. There are a multitude of professional literacy organizations, and their help can be useful if the defending of materials is needed (Stumpf Jongsma, 1991).

### ***Creating Opportunities for Open and Honest Discussion***

Although there are multiple strategies for educators to manage censorship issues within the educational setting, the conversation surrounding censorship tends to not begin until concerns arise or escalate. To fully alter the way as to how censorship is implemented within the secondary classroom and how it is handled by school professionals, opportunities must be created for open and honest discussion. This atmosphere must not only be created within the classroom and between school professionals but also with the communities that the school district serves. It will take initiative and time to establish this, but the process must remain proactive rather than the traditional reactive approach taken for censorship concerns. Action

must extend beyond specific yearly and school related incidents to fully make a lasting impact. Additionally, teachers and school officials can branch out to universities, unions, and national organizations for help with educating community members about censorship and its effects on education (Noll, 1994).

Censorship affects every party involved, but ultimately it negatively impacts the education of students the most. Specifically, when censorship is implemented into the secondary classroom level of education, these students suffer the most because this is a crucial period for their journey to young adulthood. As teachers, school officials, parents, and community members—all people who deeply care about the well-being of our students—we must ask ourselves:

“What are our individual and collective responsibilities in advocating our students’ intellectual freedom?”, “In what ways do we support and silence our colleagues’ freedom of expression?”, and lastly, “What are our beliefs about the roles and responsibilities of schools as institutions of a democratic society?” (Noll, 1994, p. 7).

It is only once we seriously ask ourselves these questions and contemplate them can the conversation surrounding censorship truly begin and true progress can be made.

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