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The 21st Century's Pandora's Box: Books

Knowledge is a potent force that can make or break communities. Throughout history in all regions of the world, possessions of books have symbolized the hierarchy of who has power and control and who does not. From the banning of the *Odyssey* due to its radical ideas of freedom, to slaves being denied access to education, the efforts to erase knowledge and instill ignorance stem from a fear of indoctrination by those in power. There is a positive correlation between times of political tension and a rise in book banning as seen in Nazi Germany during World War II, or the United States barring novels about the war in Afghanistan after the events of 9/11. Although there is not an active military war in the United States, there is an unspoken cultural war - a clash of ideologies and perspectives over race, identity, sexuality, religion, and government resulting in over 1400 books banned in schools and public libraries (Friedman). At the forefront of this battle are adamant parents fighting to preserve their children's innocence, while those on the other side are fighting to protect the 1st constitutional Amendment and amplify narratives that feature minority voices. Although book bans are enacted to protect children from inappropriate content and uphold religious and cultural values, book bans are ultimately ineffective as they hamper academic and social growth, and increased negative attention stirs students to find alternative ways to read censored content.

Although proponents of book bans claim to be protecting the innocence of their children, they are violating the 1st amendment by silencing minority voices and contributing to a negative

perception of certain identities. The United States is the symbol of democracy, a nation where every voice should be seen and heard and can find its way to the American Dream - except seemingly in classrooms. Since the *Island Trees Union Free School District v. In The Pico* Supreme Court case, the United States federal government has chosen to take a sideline view and delegate local and state education boards with jurisdiction over what students can learn in school. Because of the lack of institutional control, over 1400 book titles were banned in 32 states by 2023 (Pfeifer). Each parent fighting at the forefront of this cultural war wears a facade of armor claiming to protect their children from “pornographic cartoons and graphic descriptions of violence or sex act how-to-articles” (Leipzig). The Moms of Liberty is a coalition of concerned parents pushing to create safe classrooms, chanting the following defense: “Moms of Liberty does not ‘ban’ books. Write the book, print the book, sell the book. School is for age-appropriate material meant to educate children ” (Leipzig). Although their defense of not exposing their children to mature content too early is valid, the statistics narrate a different story. Of all the banned books across school districts, only 22% are removed due to sexual content, while over 41% are banned due to LGBTQ+ themes and protagonists, and 40% of the banned books highlight a character of color as the protagonist (Friedman). The numbers make it evident that underneath the adamant push for protecting children’s innocence, xenophobia is fueling proponents of banning books. David Kopp, a Christian editor and author, explains a common fear among Christian parents that reading certain books, especially with LGBTQ+ themes, will not only normalize such ideas but may cause their kids to become homosexuals (Tucker). In efforts to save their children from indoctrination, parents ultimately commit the same crime when only permitting their children to read books that depict the world in the ways it should be, instead of the way it actually is. By not providing exposure to stories from different walks of life,

parents and school districts are sabotaging the growth of culturally aware and compassionate citizens, and reinforcing generation-long prejudice towards minority groups.

Book bans not only silence minority voices, but they also propagate a negative perception towards the LGBTQ+ community and racial minorities, generating fear of indoctrination and unjustly labeling some identities as taboo, not only culturally but institutionally. In 2022, law HB 1557, also commonly known as the “Don’t Say Gay Bill,” was put into effect by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. This bill prohibits the discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity in certain grades and is just one of many series of anti-gay legislation that bans the recognition of an individual’s gender identity by refusing to use correct pronouns and granting parents the authority to decide the content their kids (and also other students in the district) receive (National Education Association). Unfortunately, this is not the first instance that children’s education has become a political issue, where social truth and systemic discrimination have been draped in a coat of fictional utopia due to political and geographic lines. While some parents may be genuinely concerned about shielding their kids from mature content, by doing so, they are creating more harm than good by enforcing harmful stereotypes and moving the nation away from its ideals of democracy and free speech. Schools are designed to serve as a haven and equip students with the knowledge and awareness to be respectful citizens of a culturally interconnected society, but instead, the education of the future generation is at the crossfire of a political identity crisis.

While parents and educational institutions are battling over books and constitutional rights, students become the victims by internalizing the ideas they are presented with and their voices often fall through the cracks. In a survey by the *New York Times* of high schoolers nationwide, students shared why reading books deemed as “too inappropriate” is important to

them. Jake Petocz, a high schooler from Florida shared that “having books with LGBT+ topics and characters constantly in contention of whether they will be banned or not has an effect on LGBT+ youth because it shows them that their existence is a topic of debate” (The Learning Network). Students whose identities deviate from the traditional white cis-gender, two-parent household, do not view themselves as valued due to the lack of representation in books and classroom discussions. Such biased and prejudiced representation can have repercussions on an individual's self-perception and build a negative view towards other communities. The other students in the survey share a common sentiment of how having exposure to books that not only reflect their own identities but also other students’ cultures helps them gain a deeper understanding and equip them with the awareness to be emphatic and knowledgeable members of society (The Learning Network). Their voices are strengthened by a study that demonstrated a positive correlation between students who read culturally relevant books and their involvement in community service. Learning about the challenges faced by marginalized communities encouraged these students to invest their time and energy to learn about societal issues and contribute towards charitable causes (Ferguson). Having exposure to narratives and literature that reflect the rich plethora of cultures and identities around us and valuing the students’ perspective in curriculum decision-making is key to cultivating self-confidence and compassionate members of society.

In addition to encouraging community involvement, banned books represent diverse ideas and cultivate greater thinking and analytical skills about the real world, resulting in improved academic performance. Reading is a fundamental skill that every child should cultivate as strong reading comprehension skills are predictors of future academic success (Pendharkar). According to Jason Reynolds, the author of the Library of Congress’s national ambassador for

young people's literature and author of the oft-targeted *All American Boys*, children are more likely to develop a stronger relationship with reading if they are learning about narratives and stories that are culturally relevant and help them better understand their own identities and those of people around them (Leipzig). Many parents worry that their children will develop unhealthy habits they read in books, such as smoking, drinking, and violence; however, psychologists dispute the validity of such claims. Books do not directly cause bad behavior and children are not mere lumps of clay that are easily molded (Tucker). Instead, books open gateways to new ideas, life experiences, and perspectives, and build a greater understanding of others and themselves. Studies have shown that when students are presented with the choice to read books between banned and non-banned books, there is a 78% increase in student engagement in reading (Rice). Having access to a vehicle to a fictional world where one's identity is seen, heard, and valued allows one to envision oneself, build one's self-confidence, and invest in that vision.

The benefits and drawbacks of censoring books can be discussed at length, however, do the decades-long energy and time invested in banning books ultimately achieve their goals? The simple answer is no; book bans are inherently ineffective in barring young minds from seeking such knowledge. The 'Streisand Effect' is the unintentional effect of censorship, where heightened negative attention can result in greater public awareness and attract more readers (Pfeifer). Book bans in the 21st century are unlike book bans previously. Youth today have unprecedented access to social media, so when news and social media posts about banned books come to the forefront of their attention, they are more likely to find alternative ways to read such content and fill in knowledge gaps, often from unregulated and biased sources. Online reading sites and social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok allow teenagers to read content they otherwise may not have access to in schools. For example, the novel *Maus*, a graphic novel about

an individual's first-hand experience in the Holocaust, skyrocketed to the top of Amazon's best-seller list shortly after the McMinn County School Board branded it as banned (Pfeifer). This is just one of many examples that demonstrate that canceling a book inherently increases its popularity amongst the population for which such great efforts are being taken.

Whether it is the large-scale silencing of certain voices or parents trying to present an artificial utopian world to their children, book banning has been and will continue to be a never-ending battle of power and control, however, its harms outweigh its benefits. Like Pandora's box in Greek mythology, books contain stories of the evils and harms of the real world, yet covering the reality out of fear only quenches hope for compassion and growth. Instead of wasting time and energy banning books, such efforts should be redirected to educating young minds about controversial social and historical topics through enriching and eye-opening discussions in a safe school environment so everyone can graduate with greater awareness, empathy, and the tools to be changemakers.

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