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Reading Between the Lines: The Truth Behind Book Bannings

America: the land of the free—except when it comes to the books Americans can read. During a time with no technology, books allowed humans to express ideas and paved the way for endless stories and vivid imaginations. Although reading and writing are highly valued in American society, “books and all forms of writing have always been objects of terror to those who seek to suppress the truth,” says Nigerian playwright and Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka. Just as books have been around for hundreds of years, book bannings have been around for just as long. Book banning is a form of censorship where individuals or organizations remove books from libraries or schools because they object to the book’s content or ideas (Webb). As public schools attempt to become more socially aware, it seems ironic that book bannings are more prevalent now than in the past. According to *Penn America*, schools banned 1477 books in the first half of the 2022–2023 school year, a 28% increase compared to the prior six months (Meehan). Those who support book banning may think this movement is necessary, but it hurts students instead. The reality of book banning is the desire to control the perspectives of students, endorsed by the vague language in legal bills, hurting many students from learning about new perspectives and important issues.

The legal statements that have been used to facilitate the efforts of book banning related to censorship are vague and go against the core values of American democracy. Suppressing certain works of literature is a clear violation of the First Amendment, which grants freedom of

speech. Freedom of speech is a fundamental right that enables individuals to express their thoughts and ideas openly, allowing for a great exchange of diverse perspectives. Our Founding Fathers knew the importance of having controversial opinions and the importance of expressing those viewpoints. Throughout history, many of the greatest thinkers and authors have been rejected for their ideas. Yet, it is often those very ideas and books that become the foundations for intellectual growth and social progress. In fact, the Supreme Court states in the Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico (1982) case that “the right to receive ideas is a necessary predicate to the recipient’s meaningful exercise of his own rights of speech, press, and political freedom” and makes clear that “students too are beneficiaries of this principle” (Desai). The Pico case was a vital court ruling regarding book bans. Despite the court ruling that public schools cannot remove books simply because they dislike the ideas in those books, they ruled that schools are allowed to ban books that are not right for the curriculum. Freedom of speech is a right granted to everyone, including students, and cannot be revoked by angry parents. However, Florida recently enforced the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, which severely restricted the freedom to discuss topics such as sexuality and gender identity. Not only is this bill in clear violation of the Pico case, but it has been used as a justification to ban books about gender in schools. The bill states that “classroom instruction...on sexual identity or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3” (*House Bill 1557 (2022) - The Florida Senate*). In conjunction with this bill, another bill states that all books must be “Appropriate for the grade level and age group for which the materials are used or made available” (*House Bill 1467 (2022) - The Florida Senate*). However, these two bills do not define what is considered age-appropriate. Additionally, it is hard to decide what is and is not right for the curriculum, especially when about 40% of book challenges are from parents (Davis). Rather than school

administrators deciding what is appropriate, parents tend to use their biased views and opinions to ban books in the school district. When parents are deciding, a conflict arises in what is “objectionable.” The standard may be different from household to household, and “limiting access to books might solve one family’s concerns about their child reading a particular text, but it removes the opportunity from another child” (Kirker). Different people have different views on these topics, which raises concerns about how much parental opinion should be present in their child’s education. The many legislations that promote censorship are poorly defined, which allows parents to ban books to push their own ideas into the school curriculum.

The real motivation for book bans is the desire to control the perspectives and opinions of students. It is in a war on education and the open discussion and debate of ideas. There has always been a long history of book bans, although the reasons for book bans have changed as our society’s values have evolved. Historically, books were banned to protect the religious and social ideas of that time. As our society grew to accept different religious ideals and cultures, modern book banners claim to focus on restricting books containing violence, sex, and graphic content. However, their true motives often echo the historical motives of book bans, aimed to preserve the status quo and suppress opposing viewpoints. By censoring literature that is deemed controversial, modern book banners continue a legacy of hindering intellectual freedom and promoting conformity, similar to earlier censorship driven by fear and ignorance. For example, The Moms of Liberty is a group often at the center of book bans and claims that their movement is purely motivated by their concern for their children’s curriculum. They question whether “pornographic cartoons and graphic descriptions of violence and sex act how-to-articles educate public school student to read and write?” (Leipzig). While their concern is understandable, the true statistics on book bans reveal the underlying motivations for book banning. 41% of books

were on topics related to LGBTQ+ and another 40% of the titles had main characters who were people of color, while only about 22% of books had sexual content (Friedman). If groups and individuals such as the Moms of Liberty claim to ban books purely to “protect” their children from graphic violence or sexual content, then almost all, if not all banned books should contain such content. However, the truth behind book bannings is clearly supported by the statistics: they are a form of control, stemming from ignorance and rooted in fear. Given that children are the future of our nation, it is logical that parents and teachers “merit a more influential role in their children’s education [and]... advocate for banning certain titles to provide their children with what they perceive as the most suitable and advantageous education” (Rice). However, the reality of book banning “highlights the greater trend towards anti-intellectualism masquerading as anti-pornography” (Collins). The “influential” role of parents should not hinder the freedom of choice, or the freedom to explore diverse perspectives. Banning books on important topics and minority groups is not advantageous to children, and can keep them uninformed instead. Adults tend to ban books that are against their values and beliefs, which limits children’s ability to learn about varied ideas and experiences. Rather than reading and understanding the significance of the books, many parents and administrators read certain words or paragraphs out of context and attempt to suppress the entire book. Evidently, book banning, often masked as a concern for children’s well-being, ultimately serves as a tool for controlling perspectives and stifling intellectual freedom.

Despite this, many parents “contend that children should be shielded from specific information, particularly involving violence and sexual themes. The American Society of Pediatrics found that exposure to violent content during childhood can lead to heightened aggression and desensitization” (Rice). However, the only way students can learn to be sensitive

to other perspectives is to be exposed to them. According to Lindsay Weisner, a clinical psychologist, children who are exposed to diverse perspectives exhibit more pro-social, pro-civic behaviors as they are more informed about the diverse perspectives in their community (Weisner). In fact, reading books about various perspectives allows children to be more mindful of others who are different than they are, making them more thoughtful, accepting citizens. Additionally, it is important to read books about “real” life topics, even disturbing ones. Writer Clay Jenkinson emphasizes that “banning books does nothing to protect them from dealing with tough issues. Instead, it denies young people resources that can help them deal with the challenges that confront them” (Jenkinson). Book banning is a way to erase ideas that make us uncomfortable. Excessively protecting children from the outside world dangerously limits their perspective, giving students a narrow and incorrect view of our world. Adults have banned multiple books that present the moral failures of humanity, including racism, slavery, and anti-Semitism (Dupont). Sheltering students does not prepare them for the real world, as students do not learn about the negative aspects of our history. In order to stay informed, students need to understand relevant, unbiased topics in our society. Especially as technology and social media become more prominent in schools and households, it is important that students are able to form their opinions based on reliable sources. It is almost impossible to distinguish misinformation from reliable sources on the internet and social media. On the other hand, books are almost always reliable sources of information, as they undergo a long process of writing, editing, and publishing before they are placed in a library. Especially for young adults, books can teach students about important topics in history and the experiences of individuals from other backgrounds can increase empathy, fostering peace and acceptance.

As book bans are placed on books about important topics or minorities, it can prevent students from learning about diverse perspectives and hurt their education. Banning books, especially about minority groups, can make kids feel excluded or that their opinions do not matter. This could potentially emphasize the internalized racism in our society, as children have a skewed perception of our world and kids from minority populations feel the need to silence their ideas. After observing many book bans in their school community, a student in Michigan agreed that “People in the L.G.B.T.Q community and in the minority groups use these books as an outlet, and a way to connect to the world to feel support” (Network). Through the prejudice and adversity these groups face, books and representation are some of the only ways to feel heard and understood. Openly banning multiple books about the same groups or opinions can create a feeling of shame, making individuals in those groups feel unworthy. Additionally, all students need to have diverse perspectives to foster empathy and become better leaders who advocate for everyone. Understanding other backgrounds and cultures can help them thrive in a workplace full of disagreements or different opinions. If students learn about different experiences and struggles, it could help our society grow to be more accepting of people of different races and sexualities. Additionally, book bannings can potentially have the opposite effect of what books were meant to do: it can hinder a student’s knowledge and keep them less informed. After witnessing multiple book bans in their town, a student in Clay County was “disheartened to find the literary graveyard of lost opportunities for the students in [their] country” (Collins). Books are used as a way to tell stories and develop important life lessons. All books contribute an important message to society, and book banning is a way to erase the messages that make us uncomfortable. This opportunity had been taken away from the students in Clay County as many culturally transforming books were banned. Book bans affect all students in the school

community, and it is not fair to deprive children of learning opportunities simply because adults disagree with them. Children should be armed with the ability to explore diverse perspectives and form their own opinions, even if those viewpoints differ from those of their parents.

Additionally, educators have found that reading diverse books benefits their reading scores and fosters a passion for reading. The recent Diverse Books Impact Study found that diverse books increased reading scores by three percent higher than national averages, and collective classroom reading time increased by four hours per week on average (First Book Staff). These findings reinforce the necessity of diverse books and topics in schools to support student achievement. Removing books on minority groups can hurt the academic growth of children, putting them at a disadvantage. In conclusion, banned books are often the very texts that diversify our perception, provoke meaningful dialogue, and foster student success.

The only way to grow ourselves and society is by reading books and informing ourselves about relevant topics. However, book bans prevent students from doing so, and they become sheltered and uninformed as a result. Just as John F. Kennedy once said, “If this nation is to be wise as well as strong...then we need more new ideas for more wise men reading more good books in more public libraries...Let us welcome controversial books and controversial authors.” Book bannings hurt American education as they limit exposure to diverse perspectives and inhibit academic freedom. Book bans especially affect the most marginalized communities and hurt their ability to put their perspective into the world. Public schools must urge for a more diverse book curriculum to prepare their students for the real world.

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