

A Crisis in Critical Thought: Adverse Effects of Book Banning on Students

Topic: Adverse Effects of Book Banning on Students

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Abstract:

The pendulum of book banning in America is once again swinging in the direction of restriction of literature for teenage public school students. Organizations such as the American Library Association and PENAmerica have compiled data revealing which books are challenged in schools and how often, and research has been conducted on reasons for book challenges, how and why teachers self-censor, and other effects on teachers when book challenges prevail; however, there is a paucity of research concerning the effects book banning has on students, both in the short-term and long-term. The research proposed here hopes to illuminate the patterns between which parents/students support book challenges and the effects of successful challenges on students' ability to raise questions, to incite critical inquiry, and to empathize with others. The goal of this research is threefold: 1) to aid in the creation of uniform guidelines and policies for school districts to follow when books and curriculum are challenged, 2) to guide parents who are deciding what books and curriculum their children should or should not be exposed to, and/or 3) to assist teachers and teachers' aides when determining which books and curriculum are acceptable in their particular classrooms.

Keywords: book banning; challenged books; intellectual freedom; public school; intellectual restriction; censorship; censored texts; literature

Introduction:

Book banning has a long and storied history in the United States, in some reports dating back to the earliest European settlements. After public education became compulsory in the United States in 1918 followed by national funding of public school libraries by the National Defense Education Act of 1958, the doors opened to infiltration by book-banning extremists. Challenging books within public school libraries and those included in the curriculum became particularly prevalent in the 1970s and '80s as the Moral Majority began to target books on health and family. Challenges of books in schools continues into the 21st century, with not only a focus on depictions of sex, but also on sexuality, gender, and race.

Since the 1990s, there has been a calculated effort to explore the adverse effects of book banning both on students and on society as a whole. In schools across the country, English teachers have become increasingly concerned with not only their desire to offer diverse reading materials to their students, but with self-censoring in an attempt to keep their jobs and avoid scrutiny by administrators and parents.

The knowledge gap existing in current research lies in what the adverse effects of book banning on students are. There does not seem to be much research related to long-term studies in this area. Potential outcomes of this type of research could guide educators and school boards to make wiser decisions when books are challenged in schools and as information ekes out to the general public, could change the direction of the current trend to ban books that include topics on gender, sexuality, and race.

If this problem is not addressed, the potential exists that our youth become less empathetic and lose the ability to think critically, both important aspects of being a productive

and responsible citizen. The question remains *how does book banning in American public schools adversely affect students and society as a whole?*

Literature Review:

Research in the field of book banning is inconsistent, but these curated sources focus on how censorship at the middle and high school levels affects teachers' methodology, reasons, and themes for why parents challenge books, and the relationship between banned books and childhood behavioral and mental health. The sources range in dates from 1994 to 2019, covering the fallout from the banning instigated by the Religious Right in the 1980s and early 1990s, to contemporary issues concerned with books incorporating themes within the LGBTQ+ and CRT realms, instigated by Moms for Liberty as well as many other local grassroots organizations across the country. Most of the research that exists involves tabulations of banned and challenged books across the U.S. gathered from libraries and schools or guidelines on how schools and libraries should deal with book challenges; however, my research focuses specifically on the effects of book banning on students and society. General agreement within the education community shows that opponents of book banning view it as an intrusion into Americans' intellectual freedom, sometimes bordering on a first amendment violation.

Though the research spans across decades much earlier, I began with data presented from 1994 by Elizabeth Noll. In the early- to mid-1990s, teachers and students were still dealing with fallout from the effort of the Religious Right to remove books from schools that they deemed "sexually explicit" and/or "morally corrupt." Noll's research (1994) involved surveying teachers across the country to determine the extent and reasons for their self-censoring in their classrooms. She reviewed written comments solicited "from middle school, junior high, and high school English teachers in seven states (Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, and Vermont)" who "offer[ed] a fuller understanding of how the threat of censorship affect[ed] teachers and thus influence[d] the schooling experiences of their students"

(p. 59-60). This research revealed that the teachers' level of self-censorship was influenced mostly by whether the teachers had been "personally involved or had close ties to incidents" (Noll, 1994, p. 60). She discovered that those whose curriculum had been challenged and those who had been adjacent to those instances were more likely to self-censor in their own classrooms in an attempt to avoid future backlash.

In 2000, Lauren Freedman and Holly Johnson conducted two studies that revealed the difference in the way teachers approached a controversial text and the way students viewed that same text. To conduct the study, Freedman and Johnson (2000) read a controversial book aloud to a group of teachers during in-service. They then repeated the same experiment by reading the same book aloud to eleven middle school girls. Following the reading, both the teacher group and the student group were asked to respond in writing and through discussion. The researchers discovered that:

The teachers demonstrated a keen awareness of the pedagogical importance of the power literature has to engage young people in deliberate questioning, genuine dialogue, and critical reflection, yet their feelings of insecurity pressured them into opting for a less provocative piece," prompting the researchers to name this juxtaposition the "self-censorship paradox" (Freedman & Johnson, 2000, p. 358). While there were a few opinions on which the students agreed with the teachers, overall, [the students] viewed [the controversial aspect of the book] as part of the novel's significance and strength." (Freedman & Johnson, 2000, p.358)

In 2018, Kara Lycke and Thomas Lucey focused their research on teacher candidates rather than on active teachers and/or students. This allowed the overall body of research on the effects of banned books to concentrate on pre-service teachers, focusing on a demographic that had been previously overlooked. Their research results "provide[d] accounts of several participants and interpret[ed] their perspectives on controversial issues at the beginning and end" of one of two classes on teaching methods (Lycke & Lucey, 2018, p. 10). Lycke and Lucey (2018) present four case studies as evidence that these teacher candidates "largely

conceptualize a curricular approach that reaffirms the views of the dominant culture, while implementing discussions of controversial texts and ideas in a manner that avoids disruption of stakeholder relationships” (p. 21). This research revealed that even pre-service teachers are keenly aware of, and feel insecure in, the role they may play in book challenges.

In 2019, Emily Knox “expand[ed] on a previous discourse analysis of censorship on challenges to diverse books through more robust analysis of the challenge cases” where she “focused on two common themes found in the arguments that book challengers [gave] for the redaction, restriction, relocation, and removal of diverse titles in and from school curricula, school libraries, and public library collections” (p. 24). Knox (2019) gathered the challengers’ “arguments against diverse books. . .from documents including forms, emails, and letters...obtained through state public records act requests” (p. 28). As a result of this research, Knox (2019) discovered two main themes explaining why books are challenged, that the literature is “unsuitable for [the] age group” (p. 29) and that “something else would be better” (p.32). Understanding the perspective of the proponents of book challenges and bans can illuminate their causes for concern, causes which opponents may be able to confront later when trying to argue against book banning.

In 2014, Christopher J. Ferguson of Stetson University explored the possible “relationship between [banned] books and negative outcomes in children” (p. 354). Using participants that “include[d] youth from a small city in South Texas” (p. 356), Ferguson (2014) discovered that “a relationship does exist between banned book reading and mental health symptoms” (p. 354). His results showed that “banned books correlated positively with mental health symptoms, both externalizing and internalizing” (p. 357); although, he posited that “whether that relationship is causal or cathartic requires further research” (p. 354). Ferguson’s research, along with any future research in this area, could help stakeholders involved in book

challenging or banning to understand what the long-term effects on students, and thus society, might be.

Other than Ferguson's research, there seems to be a lack of data concerning the effect on students when their intellectual freedom is inhibited. The previous research I have compiled from Noll, Freedman and Johnson, and Lycke and Lucey provides insight into how teachers self-censor in their classrooms, which is a factor in how students are affected by book banning, so I needed to take that into account when proposing my own research. Knox's research on the reasons challengers question certain books' literary and instructional merit will prove insightful to me because the ultimate goal of my research will be to explore the negative effects of book banning and thus counterargue those reasons. Ferguson's research will probably prove to be most useful to me because it directly relates to negative outcomes that *may* be a result of book banning. The recognition of this gap in the research inspires a lofty goal of exploring this seemingly immeasurable effect of book banning on America's youth.

Method - Research Procedure:

Through an exploration of existing research in the realm of book challenging and banning, it has become clear that very little research exists on the effects of book banning on students and, thus, on our future society. For this reason, the I am choosing to conduct a study that should reveal a correlation between attitudes toward book banning and perceived effects on students. This exploratory research will be conducted to gain a better understanding of an existing potential problem, that of adverse effects of book banning on students. It will not provide conclusive results; however, it should help identify issues that can be used for further research.

Previous research has revealed that teachers have been self-censoring in their classrooms for years, which allows for speculation that students may be adversely affected by this censorship. The concept of intellectual freedom in America is a multi-faceted and nuanced

argument with no clear-cut philosophy dictating how the county's youth's reading habits should be monitored. The results of this research can be used to support future guidance for schools, libraries, and parents concerning the impact of suppressing certain controversial texts for teens.

This research will be a study on the perceived effects of book banning on high school-aged children. It will be conducted by gathering survey research in the form of questionnaires from participants including students currently enrolled in high school, parents of high school students, and teachers of high school students. The demographics considered will be:

- Religious affiliation of students, teachers, and parents.
- Gender of students, teachers, and parents
- Income level of teachers and parents
- Ages of teachers and parents (students will be 9-12th grades, so they will all be in the 14-18 year range)
- Education level of parents and teachers OR education level of students' parents
- Race/ethnicity of parents, teachers, and students
- Geographical distribution of parents, teachers, and students (rural, urban, or suburban classified using U.S. Census Bureau's 2020 census data)
- Political orientation of students, teachers, and parents

In addition to demographic questions, surveys will include questions concerning students', teachers', and parents' attitudes toward book banning and how they believe book banning affects them and/or their children/students. Because actual effects are difficult to measure, this research will serve to predict the *potential* impact of book banning based on attitudes and perceptions of the main stakeholders: students, their parents, and their teachers.

Approximately twenty of each type of participant will be randomly selected from public high schools across the country, from a combination of conservatively- and liberally-political states

and regions, as well as from a combination of rural, urban, and suburban locations. Permission will need to be granted by the schools and/or school districts, but the goal will be to make the sample size as large as possible. The focus will be on schools and/or school districts who have faced challenges to literature within the past three years, without regard to the origin of those challenges (parent-directed challenges, school board-directed challenges, government-directed challenges, etc.)

Data will be analyzed by looking for patterns between attitudes and demographic information. From that data results can be determined on potential future effects of book banning on students. This research will also reveal correlation or non-correlation between certain demographic information and attitudes on book banning. Some correlation between these items has been speculated by teachers and community members for decades but has not been evidenced in currently existing research.

Method - Data Analysis:

The data collected from this research will use mixed methods of quantitative and qualitative, with the majority of the results coming in the form of qualitative data. Demographic information will be collected quantitatively by having respondents answer questions concerning race, gender, median income of the household, religious affiliation, ages of participants, education level, political orientation, and geographic location.

Some questions concerning attitudes and beliefs on the purposes and effects of book challenging and/or banning within a school system will be posed using an ordinal scale of measurement. Respondents will choose from answers such as “strongly agree,” “agree,” “neutral,” “disagree,” and “strongly disagree.” This will allow the data to be tabulated quantitatively to identify patterns between the answers to these survey questions and those of the demographic questions.

There will also be several open-ended questions on the survey that require the participants to respond in their own words concerning their beliefs on the effects of book banning, both long-term and short-term. These open-ended questions will require categorization of answers created by the researchers. This creates limitations in the research because of the nature of categorizing open-ended answers; however, this is the area of the survey where researchers are likely to find the most revealing patterns of respondents' beliefs and attitudes.

Expected Results:

After all qualitative and quantitative demographic data is gathered, the expectation is that patterns will emerge. General conjecture by English and history teachers across the United States is that these opinions are closely aligned with religious and political affiliations, along with parents' education levels and a rural location of residence. I suspect that the emerging patterns will prove to validate this general supposition, aligning political and religious affiliations with the more positive opinions on book banning, particularly with teenage students. While I do not expect any respondent to fully agree with book banning, I do believe that some respondents will believe that teenage readers' literature should be closely monitored and restricted when the literature is deemed a threat to family and/or religious values.

Discussion:

Ideally, once the data from the surveys is received and analyzed and patterns are identified, future research will be able to use the results in the following ways: 1) to aid in the creation of uniform guidelines and policies for school districts to follow when books and curriculum are challenged, 2) to guide parents who are deciding what books and curriculum their children should or should not be exposed to, and/or 3) to assist teachers and teachers' aides when determining which books and curriculum are acceptable in their particular classrooms.

Identifying adverse effects of book banning on teenagers is a difficult task. It is difficult to determine direct causal relationships between book banning aimed at teenagers and future mental health or behavioral issues that may affect both the individual and society as a whole. This research should serve to open the floor for future discussion on why we restrict students' access to literature and whether such limitations are worth the potential risks to a stable and healthy citizenry.

Conclusion:

Because of the emergence of unprecedented access to information on the internet, Americans are increasingly concerned with what their children are being exposed to. Due to the diverse range of religious and political opinions in the U.S., parents and caretakers are concerned with anything that may cause a moral breakdown of society. Books are sometimes considered one cause of that perceived moral breakdown; therefore, book banning has been a continual, potential solution for centuries.

Opponents to book banning argue that restricting the youth's access to literature will stunt their ability to raise questions, to incite critical inquiry, and to empathize with others. They believe that restricting intellectual freedom, even amongst young people, is critically dangerous and in the long-term, will inflict far more harm than good.

This research aims to alleviate the concerns school districts have when balancing the relationship between parents and other stakeholders in the community and the students' best interests. If this research enables districts to set up clear guidelines and those guidelines are communicated with stakeholders, then some of the stress that enters the individual classroom will be alleviated before it begins.

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