

Censorship of Literature in the High School Setting

Deborah S. Blanco

Introduction

“First Amendment freedoms are most in danger when the government seeks to control thought or to justify its laws for that impermissible end. The right to think is the beginning of freedom, and speech must be protected from the government because speech is the beginning of thought.” Anthony M. Kennedy, Supreme Court Justice¹

Banning of books is nothing new. In 1735, John Peter Zenger, a New York publisher, was tried for libel after publishing criticism of the Royal Governor of New York. Zenger was defended by Andrew Hamilton and acquitted. In 1792, Thomas Paine was indicted for treason in England for defending the French Revolution and was found guilty. In 1925, John Thomas Scopes, a science teacher, was found guilty of violating a Tennessee law which prohibits teaching the theory of evolution in public schools. In 1938, the United States banned *Life* magazine for publishing pictures from a public health film, “The Birth of a Baby.”² These examples are just a small representation of censorship as defined by Henry Reichman: “[T]he removal, suppression, or restricted circulation of literary, artistic or educational material – of images, ideas and information – on the grounds that these are morally or otherwise objectionable in light of standards applied by the censor.”³

Rationale

Conrad Schools of Science (CSS) is beginning its ninth year as a science and math choice school. Conrad serves over 1,100 students in grades 6 through 12. Students/parents must apply to earn a spot at the school. Due to the increase in applications, the vast majority of the students (about 95%) come from our district, Red Clay Consolidated School District (RCCSD). Once the appropriate paperwork is submitted, students are interviewed by a staff member on specific Saturdays in December and January. If students earn enough points in their interview process, their names are then entered into a pool. Names are pulled from the pool and students receive a letter offering them a spot. At this point, students can either accept or decline the offer. There is a long waiting list to enter Conrad especially in the sixth and ninth grades. Conrad is located just outside of Wilmington in a safe, neighborhood-type area off of Boxwood Road close to a bus line and I-95.

The RCCSD is a public school district in northern New Castle County. It was founded in 1981 and is located in the northwestern section of New Castle County,

including a portion of the City of Wilmington and the surrounding suburban and rural areas all the way to the Pennsylvania state line. Communities within the district include Greenville, Hockessin, Yorklyn, Pike Creek Valley, Stanton, Richardson Park, and the towns of Newport and Elsmere. RCCSD has 16 elementary schools, 9 middle schools, and 7 high schools. Included in those numbers are the Meadowood Program for special needs children and First State School located in the Christiana Hospital serving children with severe health challenges. The second largest district in Delaware serves 15,970 students.⁴

I am very fortunate because I teach my favorite grade – eleventh. I find the students not as overly confident as seniors, not needy like freshman and sophomores, but curious, inquisitive, young men and women who are on the precipice of adulthood. In just one short year, they will be able to vote, go to war, get married, and most importantly begin to see themselves as an important part of society. Traditionally, eleventh grade has been designated as American literature. This year, however, the district has ordered every ELA teacher to teach specific readings, and not all of these are written by American authors. I am delighted, however, that the district has kept some of the most important seminal documents including the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and The Bill of Rights. So, this censorship unit will fit perfectly after the Constitution.

Free speech and free press are paramount to a democratic society. Students, as productive members of this society, must know their rights under the First Amendment. Juniors in high school are exploring ideas of freedom of speech, and this is the perfect age to introduce the First Amendment rights. It is important to note that their First Amendment rights outside of school are different than their First Amendment rights in the school setting. We will also discuss how the First Amendment relates to school and the right to read novels of their choosing. After a quick survey at the beginning of this school year, my guess was right. Students do not know their rights as far as reading materials and the freedom the amendment allows. They do not know who chooses the books they read. Students will be given ample opportunities to express their ideas and understanding of freedom. At the end of the unit, students will understand their rights in and out of school under the First Amendment and recognize the discrepancies between their freedoms and restrictions imposed by others.

This unit will allow in-depth discussions of “banned” or “challenged” books. Why were these books censored? Who makes the decisions? The unit will allow students to interact with some of these censored books that have been banned or challenged in previous years. Students will decide for themselves what piece of literature has value and worth in the educational setting.

Because the unit's readings have been banned or challenged in the past, I feel it is my duty to distribute a permission form to be signed by a parent or guardian. In this way, students can freely experience pieces of literature that have been challenged. Students will determine if the pieces merit value in the classroom. Their opinions matter.

Who Challenges or Bans Books in the School Setting?

It is a daunting task to educate students in public schools today. It is a balancing act to teach the entire class all the while respecting the individual rights of all students. Since public schools are public institutions, they are bound by the First Amendment. But, this right applies a bit differently in schools than other public institutions. According to the Supreme Court in *Keyishian v. Board of Education* in 1967, "The classroom is peculiarly the 'marketplace of ideas.' The Nation's future depends; upon leaders trained through wide exposure to that robust exchange of ideas which discovers 'truth out of a multitude of tongues, [rather] than through any kind of authoritative selection.'"⁵

Typically parents challenge books. Parents object to the language or ideas that are different from their views or values. "The range of topics are limitless: religion, science, history, contemporary and classical literature, art, gender, sexuality, health, multiculturalism," gay or lesbian, transgender, occult. Reading such material may alter or change their child's views."⁶

In the RCCSD, there is a process to challenge a book – notify the teacher about the concerns, speak with the principal, and finally go before the school board. Typically a parent challenges a book. That parent must complete a form and schedule a time to meet with the school board. The school board makes the final decision. Note: the members of the school board are well informed about the First Amendment in schools.

Reasons Books are Challenged or Banned

Since 1982, 11,300 books have been challenged in the school setting.⁷ What is a challenged book? What is a banned book?

A challenged book is "an attempt to remove or restrict materials based upon the objections of a person or group" "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."⁸

A banned book is "the removal of those materials"

Some of the most challenged or banned books include: *Gossip Girl*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Fifty Shades of Grey*, *The Absolute True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, *Nickel and Dimed*, *Ender's Game*, and *Perks of Being a Wallflower*.⁹

Books usually are challenged with the best intentions—to protect others, frequently children, from different ideas and information other than their parents or to shield a person from sensitive or delicate topics. So, why are these books banned or challenged? Here are some of the reasons books are pulled off the shelves:

Offensive Language – Vulgar language in an academic setting can be unsettling for some. However, when a writer is discussing serious topics, sometimes it calls for jarring words.

Sexually Explicit – According to the ALA, this is the number one reason for banning books. Parents and guardians may feel that their child is not ready or mature enough to read about sex. Some parents want to keep the topic of sex strictly in the home where parents can monitor what their children are learning.

Homosexuality – Some parents and guardians may themselves feel homosexuality is wrong or inappropriate. They want their values instilled in their children. Some parents feel threatened about homosexuality and see it as a destruction of the family.

Violence – Although cartoons have enough violence to fill a child's mind, some parents do not want their children exposed to physical and/or verbal violence. I would imagine that some parents feel that this may influence their children.

Drugs – Of course, books advocating the use of drugs are frequently censored. But, even books that serve as warning signs against the dangers of using drugs have been removed from libraries. Parents are very fearful of drugs and for good reason. What parents should understand that children should learn the honest and real consequences of drug/alcohol use and at any early age when they are most impressionable,

Nudity – Descriptions of nudity is cited as a separate reason from sexually explicit. “Apparently teens can attend an art museum or read a biology book, but not experience fictional naked bodies.”

Religious viewpoint – Some parents are very strict about their religious beliefs and do not want any other influences on their children.

Occult – Parents object to occult because they feel it may be glorifying the “underworld” and have a negative influence on their children.¹⁰

Consequences of Reading Banned Books

Positive Results of Not Censoring

From *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to the *Hunger Games*, books have been banned from school libraries. Parents or administrators believe that they could be harmful to adolescents. They want to protect children. Research conducted by Christopher Ferguson suggests that these banned books may have an impact on adolescents – a positive one. Ferguson is known for his ongoing research on the effects of violent video games. He decided to study adolescents’ reading of banned books because not much was known about this topic.¹¹

Ferguson assessed “282 adolescents and preadolescents aged 12-18. Control variables included age and gender, parent and peer influences, neurotic and antisocial personality traits, and general reading for pleasure and required reading.” The results are the following: “Banned books did not predict GPA or violent/nonviolent crime. GPA was predicted by increased reading for pleasure, but not required school reading. Banned books are associated with increased civic and volunteering behavior and low risk of antisocial behavior”¹²

Reading banned books may present opportunities to discuss themes with parents or teachers. Removing these books, however, may remove these teachable moments. Reading the banned books “may foster higher-level thinking about these issues and promote more civic mindedness, even if the material is dark.” (Ferguson).

A small percentage of the adolescents surveyed, however, was high in both reading banned books and mental health issues. “It may be possible that youth with higher level of mental health symptoms may select books that speak to them, offer them a chance for introspection, or release from their symptoms,” writes Ferguson.¹³

Dangers of Censorship

The First Amendment was added to our Bill of Rights to keep Democracy healthy. It allows people to examine ideas from all angles. Consequently, an informed public can make wise decisions to govern America.

The United States has gone to war with countries that have adopted censorship. The ill effects of censorship is apparent in those countries. Those governments do

not serve the people, but only those in power. Censorship can keep their citizens uninformed.

Censorship is very dangerous. “First Amendment freedoms are most in danger when the government seeks to control thought or to justify its laws for that impermissible end. The right to think is the beginning of freedom, and speech must be protected from the government because speech is the beginning of thought.”¹⁴

Censorship in schools is complicated. In schools, censorship exists when adults remove or manipulate materials or the learning process. Many parents are well intentioned and wish to shelter children from materials they find offensive or questionable. They probably want to keep their children pure and innocent.

However, what censorship does to children in the school environment is restrict growth and learning. Censorship in schools can lead to a narrow view of the world and create holes in learning about cultures. We want our children to grow up and be aware of the world as it truly exists. We want our children to be prepared for the real world.

It is noteworthy to add that there is a difference between censorship and selection. A teacher who does not teach a book because she disagrees with the contents is considered censorship. Teachers have to make decisions to impact their students’ learning and keep their view private. This is selection. If a teacher does not have time to read a certain piece, it is selection. When personal opinions and biases get in the way of the selection process, censorship exists.

Censorship in schools will always be debated. There are pros and cons. In my opinion, there is more harm than good. Censorship can be used to prevent politically “motivated propaganda.” Freedom of speech is compromised. Censorship should not be in effect if we want the next generation of children to be well-rounded and open-minded. Reading of the “censored” or “banned” material exposes children to controversial or unpopular ideas. This can develop the foundation for critical thinking that we want all children to grasp.¹⁵

Overarching Understandings and Questions to Consider for the Unit

Enduring Understandings

This unit will focus on a thorough understanding of the First Amendment particularly as it applies to books in school. Henry Reichman, in *Censorship and Selection: Issues and Answers for Schools*, defines censorship as: “[T]he removal, suppression, or restricted circulation of literary, artistic or educational material – of images, ideas and information – on the grounds that these are morally or otherwise

objectionable in light of standards applied by the censor.” Students must be able to recognize when someone is jeopardizing their freedom of speech through censorship of reading material.¹⁶

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- understand their rights under the First Amendment regarding book selections in classrooms and libraries.
- understand the First Amendment protects freedom of speech, press, religion, assembly and petition.
- understand the connection between free speech ideals and the freedom to read and those who oppose it

Essential Questions

1. What are the rights of students in an educational setting under the First Amendment?
2. Who makes the decisions to ban or censor texts in the classroom or school library?
3. What would our nation be without free speech?

Unit Synopsis

The First Amendment: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The focus of the unit will be based on the struggle between censorship and free speech, specifically focusing on the banning or challenging of books in high school classrooms or libraries.

Classroom Activities

Lesson One

Literature is often a reflection of what is happening in the world at the time it was written. By studying the books that have been challenged or banned, we can begin to think of other cultures, other views, and other possibilities. Distribute Appendix B, the high school survey.

Students will be required to keep all papers pertaining to Censorship in one section of their binder. At the end of the unit, all materials will be submitted with a cover page.

Read the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights to the class and ask how this freedom applies to their lives in and out of the classroom. Discuss the relationship between free speech and the freedom to read.

Divide the class into groups of four. List the reasons both pro and con for censorship. The class will come together as a whole and list all possibilities on a sheet of chart paper and justify their answers. Discussion to follow.

Discussion Questions

History of Censorship

Other Forms of Censorship

Why do adults want to censor books?

What are the pros and cons of censorship, if any?

How does censorship affect society?

How does censorship affect students?

Who censors novels/readings for the classroom?

Is there a difference between censorship and selection?

What would our nation be without free speech?

Distribute the banned book list and discuss.

Do any books coincide with any historical change or social issues when it was written?

Lesson Two

Distribute handout on the five scenarios (Appendix B). In groups of four, students will make a decision. In half an hour students will come together as a class, list the results on chart paper, and discuss.

These are true court cases, but the names were changed to reflect Conrad. After discussions, I will enlighten the students with the Supreme Court outcomes. The facts and court decisions of the original cases may be found at <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/censorshipfirstamendmentissues/courtcases>.

Lesson Three

Distribute information about three pivotal cases related to free speech in public schools: *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent School District*, 1969; *Bethel School*

District No. 403 v. Fraser, 1986; and Hazelwood School District v. Kuhlmeier, 1988. Descriptions of each case may be found at www.firstamendmentschools.org/freedoms/speechcases.aspx. It is important for the students to know the significance of these three cases. Using Socratic Seminar format, students will be divided into groups, discuss, and report to the class as a whole. Students are very familiar with Socratic Seminars. They will be assessed on participation with a rubric.

Lesson Four

Distribute “The Ten Most Frequently Challenged Books of 2014” which can be found at <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10>. This list contains a short synopsis of the most frequently challenged book and the reasons they were challenged. Distribute “Top 100 Challenged/Banned Books 2000-2010” which can be found at <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top100>. This is an extensive list of the top challenged/banned books in public schools. Students will peruse this list and comment if they have read them, or question why they should be challenged. Are they surprised? Are they concerned?

Lesson Five

“Hills like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway
Selected poems by Shel Silverstein

Students will read in pairs and discuss if these should be censored or not. Instead of a formal multi-paper argumentative paper, students will agree, defend or qualify one of the above reading in a one-page essay using text-based evidence.

Prompts:

Agree, defend, or qualify the following question: Would anyone object to reading and discussing “Hills like White Elephants” in an eleventh grade English class?

Agree, defend, or qualify the following question: Would anyone object to reading the selected poem by Shel Silverstein to elementary school children?

Finally, return the surveys taken at the beginning of the unit. After studying censorship, students will add or delete information according to their beliefs about censorship.

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APPENDIX A

English Language Arts Standards - Reading: Literature – Grade 11-12

RL.11-12.1 – Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

RL.11-12.3 – Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama.

RL.11-12.4 – Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

English Language Arts Standards – Speaking and Listening – Grade 11-12

SL.11-12.1 – Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.11-12.1.a – Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas.

SL.11-12.4 – Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

English Language Arts Standards – Writing – Grades 11-12

W.11-12.2 – Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

APPENDIX B

CENSORSHIP IN HIGH SCHOOL

1. Do you believe that books should be censored in high school?

2. What are some reasons books would be censored?

3. How are the books and short stories selected in the classroom?

4. What is your interpretation of the First Amendment?

APPENDIX C

SCENARIOS – Read the scenarios and make a decision. Refer to the First Amendment.

1. Conrad has purchased a copy of the King James Version of the Bible. Should this book be on the shelf in your library?
2. The Jewish Society has objected to *Oliver Twist* in the Conrad library because it engenders hatred of the Jew as a person and a race. The Jewish Community finds this book very offensive. Should this book be on the shelf in your library?
3. The Red Clay School Board had decided to bar from tall high school libraries a poetry anthology, *Male and Female Under 18*, because of the inclusion of an "offensive" and "damaging" poem, "The City to a Young Girl," written by a fifteen-year-old girl. Should this book be on the shelf in your library?
4. Red Clay Consolidated School District removed the book *Voodoo and Hoodoo*, a discussion of the origins, history, and practices of the voodoo and hoodoo religions that included an outline of some specific practices, from all district library shelves. Should this book be on the shelf in your library?
5. Wilmington residents who were members of a church sought removal of two books, *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy's Roommate*, because they disapproved of the books' depiction of homosexuality. Should these books be on the shelf in your library?

¹Anthony M. Kennedy, “Ashcroft v. Free Speech Coalition,” April 16, 2002.

²“First Amendment in Schools: An Overview”

³Henry Reichman, *Censorship and Selection: Issues and Answers for Schools*.

⁴RCCSD Website

⁵“The First Amendment in Schools: An Overview”

⁶Ibid

⁷“Banned Books Week: Celebrating the Freedom to Read”

⁸Ibid

⁹Ibid

¹⁰7 Reasons Your Favorite Books Were Banned

¹¹Christopher Ferguson, “Is Reading ‘Banned’ Books Associated With Behavior Problems in Young Readers?”

¹²Ibid

¹³Ibid

¹⁴“Censorship in Schools and the Effects on Our Children”

¹⁵“Censorship in Schools and the Effects on Our Children”

¹⁶Henry Reichman, *Censorship and Selection: Issues and Answers for Schools*

Curriculum Unit Title

Censorship of Literature in the High School Setting

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KEY LEARNING, ENDURING UNDERSTANDING, ETC.

Students will be able to understand their rights under the First Amendment regarding book selections in classrooms and libraries.
Students will be able to understand that the First Amendment protects freedom of speech, press, religion, assembly, and petition.
Students will understand the connection between free speech ideals and the freedom to read and those who oppose it.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION(S) for the UNIT

What are the rights of students in a high school setting under the First Amendment?
Who makes the decisions to ban or censor reading materials in the classroom or the school library?
What would our nation be without free speech?

CONCEPT A

Students' First Amendment Rights

CONCEPT B

Library and Classroom Selection of Reading Materials

CONCEPT C

A Nation Without Free Speech

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS A

What are the rights of students in a high school setting under the First Amendment?

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS B

Who makes the decisions to ban or censor reading materials in the classroom or the school library?

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS C

What would our nation be without free speech?

VOCABULARY A

Interpret the wording in The First Amendment – establishment, prohibiting, free exercise, abridging the freedom, redress of grievances

VOCABULARY A

VOCABULARY A

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION/MATERIAL/TEXT/FILM/RESOURCES