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High School Students' Perceptions of Banned Books

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High School Students' Perceptions of Banned Books in Schools

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Abstract

This research study consisted of interviews with twelve students ages 14-18 at a Northeastern Ohio high school to determine their opinions regarding banned books and content restrictions in schools. With book bans increasing and becoming a divisive topic, many adult figures such as parents, politicians, educators, and school administrators have made their opinions known, but student perspectives are often disregarded. This study seeks to further the research on opinions of book bans by extending these questions to students to fill this gap in research and gain deeper insight into the perception of high school students in regard to school curriculum. There is a long withstanding history of literature restrictions in the United States, and it has continued today with many figures challenging texts utilized in the education system. Currently, the Board of Education, parents, and educators have the greatest control over the school curriculum, but students want to make their voices heard and be given the opportunity to impact their own education. These figures often speak for the students and make decisions without their input, leading to topics such as those relating to diversity, violence, sexual content, and profane language being frequently restricted. However, through these interviews, it has been found that most students have no issue with this subject matter, and the adults creating the curriculum have eliminated this content based on the false pretense that it will negatively impact adolescents. These students are old enough to speak for themselves, and they want to make their views known so that they can have control and exert influence over their own education to ensure that they have a positive, beneficial school experience with valuable literature.

Introduction

American schools that were once filled with popular and educational literature, such as *The Great Gatsby* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, are facing restrictive bans of books due to outrage over the content within these works. Parents and politicians have shared concerns as they work to remove literature that they believe could be detrimental to children, while teachers express the importance of teaching certain texts. Yet throughout this debate, few people have considered the views of the students themselves. Research has been conducted to show a wide range of data about these book bans, such as which titles, topics, and genres are most frequently targeted and which groups are challenging these texts, covering the opinions of many people, but often excluding the students' perspectives. Instead of asking them how they feel and what topics they can and cannot handle, adults speak for them and make regulations based on their own views, disregarding the students' important and unique perspectives that could be incorporated into their education to shape the curriculum. Restrictions on literature within schools have become a divisive topic in the United States over the last several years, with many parents, teachers, and politicians voicing their opinions on the subject; however, the opinions of students, while lesser-known, share a different perspective that many of them would like to share so that their views can be used to shape school curriculum and have a positive impact on their education.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to discover the students' perspectives on school literature and determine their views on various texts and topics that adults frequently deem controversial. This study allowed students to share their position on this heavily debated topic to understand the impact that school readings have had on them throughout their education. While the opinions of parents, educators, politicians, and many adult figures throughout the country have been studied

and shared regarding this divisive topic, student opinions have been largely ignored. This lack of consideration for adolescent views has prompted this study to fill this research gap and encourage those creating school curricula to incorporate student perspectives when choosing literature in schools.

Research Question

This qualitative study seeks to answer the following question:

- What is the perspective of current high school students on banned books and how do they feel these books impact them?

Significance of Study

There has been a significant amount of research about the perspectives that various adults and groups have on banned books and curriculum literature, but this study reveals the often ignored views of students to reveal their thoughts and how classroom literature impacts them. Students are rarely given the opportunity to share their opinions because adults see no purpose in this due to the perceived immaturity of adolescence, which frequently leads to the rejection of their ideas. Although many people feel that adolescents are too young to know what is best for them, the reality is that they may know better than anybody else, and dismissing their thoughts has a detrimental effect on their education. Incorporating student perceptions into the curriculum can have a positive impact on their education and social-emotional growth. Having consideration for students' views in the classroom and creating a curriculum that supports their ideas can increase engagement and academic success, so it is essential that educators know and understand the views of their students. By filling in this research gap and consulting high school students, this study has the potential to aid in ensuring that students have a positive learning experience

and that their curriculum is not harmful or upsetting, but enriching to provide them with the valuable education that they deserve.

History of Banned Books

While literature restrictions have become an increasingly debated topic recently, schools have been facing censorship for many years. The first banned book in Colonial America was Thomas Morton's *New English Canaan* published in 1637. It was banned in Puritan society, located in modern-day Massachusetts, due to his critique of their culture and customs, harshly criticizing their values and making it the first banned book due to content going against societal norms (Bush, 2020). Puritan society did not want to allow books that went against their belief system, and this still occurs today. It is not uncommon for people to justify challenging a book due to content that they disagree with or that goes against their values. They did not want people to read books that critiqued their way of life and encouraged people to break away from the status quo. This would threaten their lifestyle and potentially change their way of life from the way that is most familiar and provides consistency and order, making them opposed to such literature.

The censorship of literature going against traditional societal values has continued since then. It became especially common for the teaching of history to be censored or restricted due to people not wanting children to gain a negative perception of dominant groups. This was a common practice in the Southern states following the Civil War, so from 1870 to 1910, many white activists, parents, and social/political groups moved to censor history taught in schools. Groups such as the United Daughters of the Confederacy worked "to ban textbooks that contained accurate and critical portrayals of slavery or that criticized Southern Civil War leaders" (Haltermann, 2023). They felt that many texts had biased portrayals that gave readers a negative

perception of the South and the Confederacy, so they wanted these texts removed to prevent their children and others from learning anything they found derogatory, regardless of its accuracy.

Because of pushback from these groups, textbook companies created contrasting textbooks for the Northern and Southern schools, allowing the South to only adopt literature that praised them and gave a positive portrayal (Halterman, 2023). Society tends to only want texts taught if they enforce what the general population considers to be culturally acceptable and supportive of their lifestyle, leading to pushback for literature that goes against the core beliefs of those who feel that they deserve control over the education of students.

This theme continued in the United States throughout the 1940s and 1950s when history curriculum continued to be censored for new concerns following World War II. A group of activists feared students may be susceptible to the negative influence of “communist ideas or foreign influences in schools,” so they fought to restrict the teaching of different forms of government to prevent children from learning about these concepts (Halterman, 2023). Through their efforts, they were able to influence school curriculum texts, but only in some districts. However, where they had success in controlling textbooks, they often had large victories for their cause. In some schools and districts, they had enough of an impact to expel school leaders, such as Willard Goslin, a well-known progressive educator who was a superintendent in Pasadena, California until 1950 when he was forced to resign (Halterman, 2023). This level of control over school curriculum did not have a major widespread impact, but in certain districts, the effects were immense by not only impacting literature, but administration as well. This shows that activism can have a large role in altering school curricula, giving precedence to those who lack educational involvement and may not even be aware of the significance behind the chosen curriculum. This often seems like a victory to opposing groups and organizations, but these

restrictions themselves have also faced pushback from education staff and students who see the value in controversial works.

While book bans have been occurring since the 1600s in the United States, people began taking a stand against these challenges in the 1980s with the Supreme Court case of *Island Trees School District v. Pico*, where it was ultimately ruled that school officials cannot ban literature based on content alone (Bush, 2020). In 1975, parents had complained that books taught in this school were “anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic and just plain filthy,” prompting them to be removed from the school, but not without backlash from students who challenged this case and took it to the Supreme Court where students were ruled to be granted access to the book due to First Amendment rights (Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico by Pico). This ruling stated that “public schools can bar books that are ‘pervasively vulgar’ or not right for the curriculum, but they cannot remove books ‘simply because they dislike the ideas contained in those books’” (Webb, 2009). One might think that this ruling would bring book bans to an end, but censorship remains prominent in schools because community standards are considered in curriculum decisions, so literature may still be removed from schools if considered obscene or inappropriate.

Since this ruling, many works of literature have still been challenged, banned, and removed from schools due to content and concerns from parents or others. The first banned book was restricted due to differences of opinion and values, and that continued through this Supreme Court case and continues to happen today. Literature restrictions in the United States have been occurring for hundreds of years, showing how “[e]ach generation has grappled with questions around who should be included in our concept of the nation, which individual identities are culturally acceptable, and how events from the past shape our present society” (Halterman,

2023). Many topics can be divisive and cause conflict due to different values, so even after many years, it is no surprise that there are still many disputes regarding content taught in schools.

Throughout history, many disagreeable topics have been banned due to concerns over content and the impact it may have on people, generating debates and questions about how to create a school curriculum that benefits students without controversy.

Literature Review

Defining Book Bans

Schools have become riddled with censorship as various books and content topics are being removed from libraries, classrooms, and curricula. A book ban is defined as any action or challenge taken against a piece of literature due to content, which “leads to a previously accessible book being either completely removed from availability to students, or where access to a book is restricted or diminished” (Farid & Friedman, 2022). These bans may lead to works of literature being removed from the required classroom curriculum, and they may also be removed from the school library to prevent students from having any access to these works even outside of the classroom during their own free time. Before a book is banned, it is challenged, usually by a parent, social/political group, or school board, and the challenger makes their reasoning for why that work is inadequate or inappropriate for school, giving it reasonable cause for a full ban or restriction.

The movement to ban books has been increasing through social and political agendas with at least 50 groups in the United States pushing for these bans. Political pressure in particular has had a large impact on these bans with at least 40% of bans in the 2021-2022 school year being applied by state officials or lawmakers (Farid & Friedman, 2022). Fears regarding the effects of teaching certain content and literature have become a rising issue that has been

addressed by many politicians in America aiming to resolve it by removing and restricting books in the classroom. These politicians can have a large impact on districts and schools, but they are not the only people behind these bans. In 2022, challenges against books were initiated by multiple groups and figures made up of 30% parents, 28% patrons, 17% political/religious groups, 15% board and administration, 3% librarians and teachers, 3% elected officials, and the remaining 4% of challenges come from other sources (*Censorship by the Numbers*, 2023). This shows that it is the worries of parents that often led to book bans in schools and districts. If a parent disapproves a text that will be taught in their child's curriculum, they are able to work with the Board of Education to make changes, often leading to challenges and restrictions based on the opinions of parents rather than those of students and teachers. Those who initiate these bans are also more likely to object to certain subject matter, causing specific types of content to be more frequently prohibited, and revoking student access to information.

Restricted Content

A wide variety of topics are being targeted as the people pushing for these bans and restrictions often feel that certain content will send a message that they disagree with or share topics that they feel high school students are not ready for at their age. These restrictions often affect certain types of books more than others, with young adult novels accounting for roughly 56% of banned books, adult books at 24%, middle-grade literature at 15%, and picture books and chapter books only making up 5% of these bans, showing how adolescent literature is frequently targeted (Meehan & Friedman, 2023). This shows that primarily literature intended for adolescents in middle or high school is targeted most likely due to an increase in more mature topics as students age, while parents and other figures may still see them as children who do not have the maturity for such texts. Young adult literature is catered to students of this age, which

should show that it is likely appropriate, manageable, and even beneficial for the reading level of these students, but instead, many adults see an increase in advanced or controversial topics and fight back against it. In this category of literature, real-world issues may be explored, which can bring up controversial or mature subject matter such as politics, religion, individual identity, sexuality, and a wide array of content that authors feel is appropriate and even beneficial for adolescents, but others find harmful.

In these young adult novels, many worldly topics are addressed that may concern parents and others, leading to frequent bans on specific content areas. PEN America listed the following topics as targets of frequent book bans: LGBTQIA+ themes and characters, characters of color, sexual content, display of religious minorities, issues of race and/or racism, and themes of rights and activism (Farid & Friedman, 2022). These topics are often deemed controversial and divisive in society, and many people may disagree with the perspective displayed in books, making them feel as though students are being forced into a specific viewpoint by reading a text containing these subjects. Those who support these bans do not want children and adolescents to be taught something that goes against their own personal beliefs, leading to a desire to ban this content altogether so that schools cannot control a child's perspective. In reality, a lot of these topics can be very beneficial to students and will not sway their opinion on controversial issues, but will show them a diverse range of lived experiences of others to help them with empathy and understanding while also allowing them to see a representation of themselves in literature.

Diversity in Literature

Beyond maturity level and adult content, some Americans believe that books showcasing certain identities and diverse characters, such as members of a certain race, religion, or the LGBTQIA+ community, should not be shared due to their personal beliefs. Despite this concern,

research has shown the positive impact of teaching literature that shares diverse characters and stories. Banning books with difficult topics or minority characters limits students' knowledge and understanding of other peoples' experiences while also restricting some students' ability to see reflections of themselves in the school curriculum, potentially making them feel excluded and ostracized in a way that their peers are not (Gallo & Herrmann, 2020, p.7). While reading diverse literature may not always feel impactful for students who are a part of the majority population, many minority students find it to be a positive experience of representation when they are able to read books following characters that have backgrounds similar to their own. Growing up as a minority can feel isolating for students and make them feel different from their peers, but reading stories about people similar to them can make them feel less alone and more understood, as reading these stories can also help their classmates better understand them and their identity.

A controversial element of more inclusive texts is often the way that they seek to change perspectives by identifying inequalities and working to rectify them. This can be done through transformative literature, which shares multicultural stories that “name injustices while orienting characters and readers toward desired futures that envision unconditional freedom, dignity, love, imagination, and sustenance,” portraying a sense of diversity that may be targetted in book bans but has proven to have high value for students (Enciso, 2019, p.85). This can often be viewed as too progressive for some; however, identifying and recognizing injustices faced by certain groups can help students be more understanding and gain greater empathy. Reading transformative literature can help to create an inclusive school that encourages diversity and dispels inequality or biases faced by certain groups, having a positive effect on students of all backgrounds. Only reading texts that enforce the status quo and include characters of the

majority population can isolate minorities and prevent others from learning about different cultures and backgrounds, limiting progression toward a society that embraces all identities.

Despite its controversy, diverse literature and many other books with targeted topics can have a profound positive impact on students.

Maturity of Adolescent Readers

Many adults fear for the young minds of adolescents because of their perceived immaturity, but in schools, students are most often given developmentally appropriate texts that include concepts that will benefit them. While many people are attempting to ban books with challenging topics, it is important to remember that “[w]e can’t let our own fear of talking about these stories prevent us from sharing them with students who might need to hear them” (Gallo & Herrmann, 2020, p.8). These topics worry adults as they are concerned with what their kids will learn and how it can impact them and their values, but educators should choose literature based on students' needs and ideas rather than parental fears. Their focus is the students and what will have the most positive impact on their education and their lives long-term, so it can be important to teach these topics and realize that they are not as inappropriate for students as many adults may think and instead provide great benefits. When considering the education of adolescents, adults must remember that they are no longer young children who lack understanding about the world, and they are nearly adults who often know more than people may think.

Many adults worry about sharing mature topics such as sexual content, drugs, violence, and vulgar language in school literature, but the reality is that many students are exposed to these things outside of school, so if adolescents are already exposed to this, there is no need to remove it from school literature where it can be taught in a more structured, supportive way. Alyssa Niccolini explores the inclusion of sex, violence, and inappropriate language in literature read by

students, questioning “[i]f I censor a racy scene or erotic book, how much is my decision motivated by the implicit notion that my students aren’t mature enough or ready to handle the content?” (2015, p.23). It is easy to perceive students as children who cannot handle anything difficult or mature, but during adolescence, students develop psychologically, and not only can they handle these topics, but they often want to. They are at an age where most high school students are able to handle topics such as sex, violence, or language, and they have likely already been exposed to this outside of the classroom. If they are able to manage watching films or television shows that involve these topics or may have even experienced some of these things first-hand in their own lives, then they will also be able to experience organized classroom discussions with support from educators covering these same content areas.

While these students are still children, they have grown up significantly and have developed to a point where they can emotionally, psychologically, and educationally manage topics they were once deemed too immature for. Many parents, politicians, organizations, and even educators follow a “quest to protect the imagined innocence” of young adult students, worrying if a topic is too mature, inappropriate, or may provide some sort of negative influence on the impressionable youth, but even students recognize that there can be some value in controversial content (Niccolini, 2015, p.24). High school students and adolescents are often exposed to these controversial topics daily in the real world, and they bear little to no negative impact from this, so they are capable of handling mature classroom discussions surrounding a work of literature with educational benefits. They are at an age where they do not need to be shielded and protected from the realities of life, so it can be very beneficial to teach books with controversial content to help support them through these real experiences and also encourage them to learn about diverse groups and people.

Individuals and Groups Choosing Classroom Literature

In many cases, specific books are a target of book bans, even if they have been shown to have a positive impact on students and their education. The American Library Association has found that many of the most banned and challenged works of literature are also the books that are frequently taught in schools due to their educational value, such as *The Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Great Gatsby*, *1984*, *The Lord of the Flies*, and many other classic works of literature (2013). Many books from this extensive list have been taught in schools for years or even decades with little to no concern from parents, students, teachers, and school administration, but in recent years they have become more controversial. Many readers and students would list some of these works as their favorite books and are able to state a notable positive impact that these works of literature have had on them. These works are also shown to have immense educational value. Because of the benefits for students, these books have been an influential classroom tool for many years until recent controversies. Educators are often able to find quality books that will have a positive impact on students because they understand that “the books we choose to offer in our classrooms can provide powerful support for students, allowing them to see themselves in literature, examine difficult situations through a new lens, and engage in conversations with peers about life’s challenges” (Gallo & Herrmann, 2020, p.7). Teachers know and understand the responsibilities they have for choosing books and curricula that benefit students and will have the greatest impact on their education. They find rich texts that have proven to be influential and should be trusted to teach these books because there is always a reason a text was chosen. Educators want what is best for the students and could choose valuable literature if given the freedom to do so, but instead, it is often others making decisions regarding curriculum.

Many parents, politicians, groups/organizations, and educators express a desire to make decisions about school curricula and determine which texts are appropriate, with the Board of Education making most decisions regarding school literature. Section 3313:21 of the Ohio Revised Code states that in each district, the Board of Education is the sole authority for selecting textbooks, instructional materials, and curriculum (*Chapter 3313: Boards of Education*, n.d.). This excludes important groups and individuals such as teachers and students who are most directly involved in education and are in the classroom experiencing the effects of the curriculum texts. While the Board of Education may give some educators and schools more freedom in selecting their own texts, they can also restrict a lot of valuable literature or curriculum topics without consideration for the perspective of others. By inhibiting others from sharing input for creating the school curriculum, they disregard the opinions of many key figures who could give valuable information. The perspectives of many are disregarded by the Board of Education, but parents are excluded from this, as they have the right to influence the school curriculum as well.

Section 3313:212 states that parents are able to review all texts and instructional materials used in schools, and a parental advisory committee may be established to review these materials so that the parents of students can make decisions about curriculum in schools (*Chapter 3313: Boards of Education*, n.d.). Parents of students can work with their city, school district, and Board of Education to create a curriculum that they approve of. This gives the Board of Education and parents of students more precedence over educational texts than the teachers who work with the students, allowing them to know and understand what texts would work best for their classroom. While it is understandable to be considerate of parents' opinions since they have concerns and thoughts about their child's education, their opinion should not be placed at a higher value than that of the students and teachers who through their experiences in the

classroom can and should have greater significance than that of parents. The Board of Education and parents are given the greatest amount of consideration in deciding curriculum, and they are also the ones who are restricting literature the most. Through all of their considerations and opinions, the perspectives of students themselves are rarely considered and are usually disregarded.

Research Study

While the opinions of parents, politicians, and teachers are constantly seen in debates and controversies about book bans, the opinions of students are often dismissed or never even acknowledged, despite the fact that it is their education that is impacted by these bans. Based on this premise, twelve students from a Northeast Ohio high school were interviewed for this qualitative research study to share their perspectives on banned books, covering topics such as what content restrictions they believe schools should have and who they believe should make decisions on curriculum and the literature taught in the classroom. Three students from each grade level between ages 14-18 completed these interviews to give a wide range of insight and discover their views on this growing issue in schools. This research seeks to answer the following question: what is the perspective of current high school students on banned books and how do they feel these books impact them? Questions asked to student interview participants are listed in the Appendix.

The questions included in these interviews were chosen to address the key factors that play a role in modern-day book bans. The focus is on understanding the impact that curriculum literature can have on students, addressing the positive and negative effects, and identifying the ways this may impact a student's perception. These questions allowed the students to share their thoughts on how school literature has affected them and how their views compare to those of

others. Participants were questioned on their views regarding topics and books frequently shunned by adult figures such as parents, politicians, and the Board of Education. They were also given the opportunity to address issues that they believe should be considered and managed within schools, allowing them to vocalize their perspectives based on their own experiences. These interviews allowed high school students to make their voices heard by sharing their perspectives on an issue that adults have monopolized to impact their education, allowing them to have their own perspectives considered and develop a deeper understanding of their views and the impact that curriculum literature has on students.

Results

Diversity in Literature

When asked questions regarding controversial content in school literature, the opinions of students were not aligned with the fears of adults who felt certain subject matter is inappropriate for students of this age. When presented with the topics of LGBTQIA+ themes and characters, characters of color, display of religious minorities, issues of race and/or racism, and themes of rights and activism, nine of the interviewed student participants stated that they felt that none of these topics should be banned. One freshman student even stated that she believes that all of these topics should be presented in school literature because, within the right context, they can all have a positive impact on students. While these subjects have caused many adults to worry about the message this sends to their children, these students feel that they have experienced no negative impact from these topics, and many even encourage the expression of diversity. Many students want to see more diversity because it allows them to learn about the experiences of others or even see a reflection of themselves in literature to feel more accepted and understood. While a majority of the interviewed participants had no issues with these topics, other students

had varied concerns with certain content areas. Two participants stated that themes of race/racism and rights or activism should be omitted from school literature and one student felt that LGBTQIA+ characters and themes should not be present in literature taught in high schools. These students feel that these topics could send a negative message to students that they do not ethically agree with, sharing concerns over a potential negative impact on impressionable youth. They feel that adolescents are susceptible to influence from this literature, which could sway their opinions or lifestyle based on the teachings of books with this content. Racial diversity in literature is justifiable for most interview participants, but other topics were more conflicting for students.

Diversity of race, religion, and sexual orientation in school curriculum literature has also been a concern for many, but most students see no issue with such topics and actually encourage the inclusion of various identities and backgrounds. Students who participated in the interviews did not express negative feelings towards diverse characters in literature, with the exception of one student who felt that LGBTQIA+ characters and themes should not be shared in school literature. This student expressed concerns about these books “pushing their belief onto other people,” while the other eleven participants thought that these ideas were reasonable for schools. People have concerns over educators indoctrinating students and teaching them concepts that may go against a parent's, family's, or community's belief system. When given the topics of racial and religious diversity in literature, all twelve interview participants stated that they do not feel that those topics should be removed or restricted in literature. No student participants expressed any issues or aversion to characters of color or religious minorities, showing that many students are open to books with diversity and inclusivity.

While students have no issue with racial diversity, three of the twelve interview participants expressed negative feelings towards racism as a topic in literature. These students felt that presenting this sensitive topic in school literature can potentially have a negative impact or make students uncomfortable, but it can also be important to teach, having great educational value in some instances. It is important to be considerate of the context and message being sent to the reader in literature that contains racism, so these topics must be properly handled and managed in the classroom for them to have value and benefit students while preventing negative consequences. Reading stories with content regarding racism can be difficult and cause discomfort, but sometimes people need to feel that discomfort to reach understanding and grow as individuals, making these books a positive reading experience for many students.

Topics Conflicting to Students

While a majority of students accepted topics involving diversity, other content areas were more widely divisive and described to be more complicated as participants qualified their statements and viewpoints. Of the twelve interviewed students, only four felt that sexual content is inappropriate for school literature, and one student stated that excessive gore can also be unacceptable. However, these students all qualified their statements by explaining that they only feel that these topics should be omitted when presented in more extreme, crass, and unnecessary ways. One student explained that these subjects can play a positive role in literature “[i]f it’s part of the story, and it helps drive the plot,” thus giving these scenes a purpose and making them beneficial rather than disturbing to students. Classroom literature must be chosen with intention and good reason, giving it a logical purpose and thus making scenes with gore or sexual content acceptable. There must be a practical application for these works to make content such as this

sensible for adolescents in a school environment; otherwise, these topics can be unnecessary and a source of discomfort without any positive benefit of the literature.

When confronted with content that is frequently the target of book bans, several students expressed that they felt that in high school they are mature enough to handle these topics. One sophomore interview participant stated, “[m]ost high school students are getting mature enough that it’s not necessarily a problem.” These students have likely been exposed to these topics prior to literature in school through books, movies, television, music, social media, and other forms of media, so discussing these topics in a classroom is nothing new to them. During adolescence, they are also at an age where most students are capable of being mature and handling these topics in a supportive classroom environment with an involved teacher who is guiding them through these serious subjects. With the proper support, discussions, and reasoning behind teaching these works of literature, they can be quite beneficial for students without them facing any harm because they are at a more mature age where this content is manageable.

While most student participants expressed that a majority of the given banned topics were appropriate for schools, some participants named their own topics that they felt could make a book inadequate for a school environment. One freshman stated that political propaganda should be omitted from school literature because of the strong impact it could have on impressionable students who do not know how to receive or address this. This student felt concerned about teachers having a significant effect on student political views, which could be considered indoctrination. Any propaganda used in school literature could alter the political views of students, so it is best to omit this from literature to prevent impacting student views in an unethical way. A sophomore student said that books containing false information and “anything that directly goes against what is known and what is supposed to be taught” should be removed

from schools to prevent any negative educational impact on students. This would prevent students from learning inaccurate information that could have a negative impact on their education. Educators are obligated to teach what is true and accurate to give children a valuable education that can be beneficial to them, so removing literature that spreads false information would be positive for students.

Another freshman student expressed negative feelings towards slurs in school literature, specifically citing *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a book that brought discomfort at times, especially when reading the text aloud in class. This participant feels that such language would have a negative emotional impact on students who are a part of the groups that are impacted by these slurs. It can be difficult for minority students to hear about people like themselves being referred to in such a derogatory, horrific way, so removing this language from school literature would make the class feel more welcoming and comfortable for them. This would also prevent them from having to hear classmates or educators use slurs if reading aloud in class which could give these students a negative perception of peers and teachers due to the association with these words. Students of diverse backgrounds are the ones primarily impacted by the use of this language in the classroom, but this brings about a larger concern about diversity and inclusion in school literature as a whole.

Reading Controversial Literature

Through these content restrictions, some books are facing more challenges and bans than others for numerous reasons; however, the interviewed students had little to no issues with some of these controversial texts that they have been taught in school. The following books from a list from the American Library Association naming commonly banned books are taught between grades 9-12 at the Northeastern Ohio high school that the student participants attend: *To Kill a*

Mockingbird, *The Great Gatsby*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Animal Farm*, and *Of Mice and Men* (2013).

While all of these books have been banned or restricted in other schools due to concerns from parents or the school board, students who have read these texts do not share the same issues. Not a single student in any grade level had read any books in their high school courses that they felt should be banned for any reason. All students felt that every book they read in their school curriculum was appropriate and reasonable for a school environment. These books have been banned or restricted in many places because people see them as unsuitable for high school, but these students had no issue with any of these texts and often found them very educational, with many students being able to share examples of the positive impact that school literature has had on them throughout their high school experience. Even though some adults in charge of these students restrict these texts under the guise of it being beneficial to these impressionable adolescents, in reality, they are preventing students from accessing literature that could be greatly beneficial to them and their education.

Positive Effects of Literature

Many of these commonly banned books or restricted topics have been shown to have a positive impact on students. Interview participants shared books that they felt had a positive mental and educational impact on them, despite that others may have found these works to be harmful to students. Several students from multiple grade levels made positive comments about *To Kill a Mockingbird*, showcasing its positive impact and the benefits of teaching it to high school students. One freshman student stated “I read *To Kill a Mockingbird*; that was amazing. It helped put things in perspective. A lot of people like it for different reasons, but I just really enjoyed it, and I thought that it was a very meaningful book.” Students are able to look past the controversial language such as swearing and slurs to see the true meaning of the novel and feel

the value and importance of the story. In high school, this controversial language is not as distracting and inappropriate as many adults may assume. Instead, it can add value to the text through the use of strong diction that impacts the meaning of the literature and amplifies important ideas and themes. The topics regarding race are also valued by many minority students for showing the realities of certain issues that they face in their lives while giving other students a glimpse into the lives of others, helping them to develop empathy and understanding. These racial issues in literature also show up in other ways through more difficult topics, but students still feel value in learning these important stories.

Several students mentioned the positive impact of learning more about slavery and the facts behind this in American history. A sophomore shared his belief that “nowadays schools don’t really teach what slavery was like for black people,” expressing an interest in learning the realities of this difficult history rather than receiving a watered-down version that minimizes events to prevent discomfort. Sometimes the most uncomfortable topics are that difficult because they are important and necessary to learn about. People do not want students to feel negatively about themselves because of the impact of slavery, but hiding that history does not change the fact that it happened. People not only deserve to learn about it, rather they need to gain that knowledge and understanding. The teaching of racial issues and slavery can be difficult to navigate, but students want the truth and see the value in it, so educators should be willing to give them that education that they desire.

Several students also cited the positive impact of the book *Giannis Antetokounmpo: The Inspiring Story of One of Basketball's Rising Superstars*, outlining how they learned from this inspirational story. One junior expressed that “[i]t shows that somebody can do something, from being poor to doing something great if you put your mind in to it.” This book has inspired

multiple students and shared a positive story that they enjoyed and even related to their interests for those who enjoy sports. The inclusion of this story in the school curriculum is a great display of relating literature to students' lives while sharing a positive message. This book not only has a positive impact through the story itself, but because it is interesting to students, it will keep them engaged and encourage them to read more. By finding adequate texts that encourage reading, educators can promote literacy and enhance reading comprehension skills by providing a story that makes students want to come to class and learn. This shows that educators are capable of choosing literature that is beneficial to students and their education, having a positive impact on them despite the fears of parents, politicians, and the Board of Education that they may not be choosing adequate, appropriate texts.

Choosing Curriculum Literature

While currently the Board of Education and parents are often the ones making most decisions regarding school curriculum, students had other opinions about who should be granted this task when they were asked who should be in charge of determining what literature is appropriate for schools. When student interview participants were asked who they believe should choose the literature taught in schools, there were a variety of answers, with most students naming multiple figures or groups who should have this responsibility. When discussing who should decide the literature that is most suitable for the school curriculum, two students said librarians, two said the Board of Education, and one said the superintendent. The Board of Education and superintendent often do have an impact on curriculum, but typically librarians may only have an impact on books kept in the library, and even then they may still face restrictions. Students felt that librarians know a lot about books and likely read a lot so they should be able to know which books are appropriate for students; however, they may not know

how to add these works into the curriculum in the way that teachers do. The remaining seven participants expressed that these decisions should be made by teachers, students, or a combination of both, emphasizing that those directly involved with the school and the students' education should be making those decisions. They feel that teachers possess the knowledge and experience to decide if a text is appropriate and adequate to provide the desired learning outcomes, but students have an understanding of what they enjoy and which books may relate to them the most.

Student Voice in Choosing Literature

Over half of the students who participated in interviews expressed a desire to share their own voice and help make decisions about which books they should learn, arguing for greater autonomy over their education. One senior argued "I feel like the students should get to decide because they're the ones that it's gonna affect. I feel like there should be no reason that people should be banning books that could benefit a student." While adults and authority figures are banning literature even for minor controversies, this student sees no reason for banning any book when it is beneficial, which applies to most curriculum texts. Educators always have a purpose and objective when assigning a book to students, but students could also have input on this literature to ensure that it applies to them, their lives, and their interests, keeping them more engaged in the text.

Literature can be beneficial for them to voice their opinion on their education and take the initiative to impact their classroom curriculum. "Students should have that right to pick and choose," stated a freshman interview participant, "I think students should have a say because they're the ones learning. It's their education." High school students are at an age where they are expected to be responsible, reasonable, and make good choices, so those choices should begin in

a monitored classroom environment where they have the support and guidance of a licensed educator. Some adults and authority figures assume students do not care enough to make those decisions and that they do not want to take control over their education, but many students would love an opportunity to make those choices. A junior student expressed that a student council should be able to discuss and vote to make decisions on school curriculum since it is dependent on their studies and members of the student council are often intelligent, responsible students who are capable of helping make these decisions. This could be a valuable way to allow the students to express their thoughts and allow their views to be considered in education without relinquishing full control over the curriculum. If students are passionate about their classroom literature and have a desire to express their own views, then that should be considered to ensure that the chosen curriculum pertains to student interests and will have a positive impact on their education.

Discussion

Through these interviews, most participants made it apparent that they disagreed with the current system for deciding curriculum and school literature. They care about their education and want to make their voices heard, so they should be allowed to start making their own choices by having their perspectives considered when creating a curriculum. Through an analysis of current commonly banned books and topics, it is apparent that the current curriculum choices made by parents and the Board of Education are not aligned with student values. To give students a positive educational experience, it is important to express the use of their interests and beliefs in the classroom. They are banning and restricting topics that most students have no negative feelings towards, and they are revoking access to positive learning tools due to their own fears and claiming it is for the sake of the students. This is unfair to the students and can give them a

negative view towards school and their education, reducing their motivation and engagement, ultimately having a negative impact on them.

Some students do share a common perspective with many adults when it comes to topics such as sexual content, as several students expressed issues with this subject. This shows that when considering all perspectives, it is reasonable to conclude that there should be some content restrictions or at least monitoring of content so that nothing too extreme or intolerable is taught to students. Regardless of these concerns, it is conclusive that the restriction of many topics and books has gone overboard and is too extreme compared to student views, so there must be more consideration of these perspectives to reduce these bans for the sake of students. Students are much less concerned with the negative impact of books than adults who restrict these works of literature. No student participants have had any negative experience with any book taught in schools, and there are none that they believe should be banned, which shows that banning works would not help these students at all. It is harmful to take away something that has, or could potentially have, a positive impact on them. Parents, politicians, the Board of Education, and others are removing books for their own concerns rather than concern for the students because if they were concerned about the students, they would be considerate of their perspectives. The fears of adults are standing in the way of students having access to educational materials that can greatly benefit them, so allowing high school students to have more freedom to choose their own literature and figure out what is best for them could have a strong positive impact.

These students are nearly adults who will soon be required to make much more important and influential decisions, and if they can be expected to decide their entire future, then they can decide if a book is appropriate for them. Adults and authority figures feel a responsibility to protect children, but at a certain point, it is no longer protecting them, it is shielding them from

the real world and preventing them from growing. It is possible to choose age-appropriate books that students enjoy and benefit from without infringing upon the innocence of adolescence. If these high school students feel mature enough to handle this literature and responsible enough to make choices on their own, educators, parents, and schools should be supportive and guide them through that rather than restricting their opportunity to make decisions to impact the school curriculum.

Conclusion

Continuing Research on Student Perspectives

While the findings of this research are significant in the future considerations for decisions regarding school literature, there is much more research that could be done to explore other sides of this issue and dive deeper into the student perspective. This study gave a broad scope of the general perspectives of the average high school students, but responses to these interviews could also potentially differ for students of different backgrounds. Demographics were not recorded for this study, but similar interviews could be conducted with consideration of demographics such as race, religion, sexuality, and gender. By considering these demographics, it could be determined if there is any correlation between a student's background and their responses to the interview questions. This could be beneficial in determining which groups may have positive or negative feelings towards specific topics, which could be beneficial in helping to choose literature for students. Expanding upon this research would provide a greater understanding of who these students are as individuals and how their individual identities and experiences shape their perceptions of school literature and book bans. This information could also help educators, students, and others choose classroom texts based on student interests and aversions toward various topics and books. This research study has provided context on student

perceptions as a general population, but looking into the ideas of other groups and demographics would greatly benefit students and the school curriculum.

Value of Incorporating Student Voice

This study was conducted with the purpose of developing a deeper understanding of high school students' perceptions of school literature, content, and book bans, shedding light on their views as opposed to those of the adults who formulate the current curriculum. It is unfortunate that parents, the Board of Education, educators, and others are so confident in speaking for students without any regard for their opinions, especially when these students are adolescents who are not only capable of sharing their views, but they want to do so. These students want to be heard. They want people to listen to them and give them a chance to make choices and learn about things that interest them without having to face adults who tell them that they are not old enough or mature enough to handle such topics. They do not want people to tell them what they can and cannot read and be forced to let everyone else choose what is best for them while they sit on the sidelines and are forced to passively accept whatever is given to them regardless of their own views. So many adults are so worried about these students because they care and want what is best for them emotionally, educationally, and developmentally, but they have become so concerned that they forget to actually consider the students themselves.

As people debate the values and drawbacks of various works of literature and the topics within them, it is important to consider the impact on the students. While many people have expressed worries about the impact of books taught in schools, students do not express the same concerns and frequently see benefits. A lot of these students enjoy reading and have been positively impacted by school literature, even with books that others deem controversial and abhorrent. They even want controversial topics; they desire diversity and mature content because

they see the value in it even if others do not. These students deserve to have a quality education with influential texts that are not only beneficial to them academically, but also spark their interest and include subject matter that they can benefit from in social and emotional ways.

Book bans are becoming an incredibly prominent issue in schools throughout the United States, but if people would consider student perspectives, their fears could be put to rest. Most high school students see the benefits of these controversial books and topics and feel that they face no harm from them, so instead of allowing parents, politicians, and teachers to speak for the students, it is best to listen to the students themselves and allow them to have more control so that they can access works that they know they benefit from and have a positive educational experience.

APPENDIX

STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What grade are you in?
2. Are there any books that you have read in high school that had a negative mental or educational impact on you? If yes, explain.
3. Are there any books that you have read in high school that had a positive mental or educational impact on you? If yes, explain.
4. Please read over the following books and name those that you have read in a high school course.
 - *To Kill a Mockingbird*
 - *1984*
 - *Othello*
 - *The Catcher in the Rye*
 - *The Lord of the Flies*
 - *Of Mice and Men*
 - *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*
 - *The Great Gatsby*
 - *Animal Farm*
 - *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
 - *The Color Purple*
5. Please read over the following topics/content and name any that you believe should not be present in literature used in high school curricula.
 - LGBTQIA+ themes, characters, etc
 - Characters of color
 - Sexual content

- Display of religious minorities
 - Issues of race and/or racism
 - Themes of rights and activism
 - other
6. What elements of a book make it inappropriate for a high school environment?
 7. Are there any books you have read in high school that you think should be banned from schools?
 8. How does the literature in high school curriculum impact you as a student? Have your experiences with school readings been positive, negative, or neutral?
 9. Who do you think should decide which books are suitable for school curriculum?

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