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Overzealous: The Harm Caused by Parental and Administrative Censorship of Books in an
Intellectually Free Education

In March of this year, The Walt Disney Company drew a great deal of criticism and backlash over donations it had given to Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and his campaign. The problem is not about the money invested itself, as Disney has been known to invest in various campaigns of politicians within the state of Florida, all trying to obtain backing from the Orlando-based Mega Corporation. The problem is Ron DeSantis. He has been the governor of Florida since January 2019 and has been an infamous supporter of many conservative pieces of legislation and initiatives, not least of which is the “Don’t Say Gay” bill recently passed by the Florida Senate. This bill, along with its many variations in multiple states, has many provisions, but the most controversial is its prohibition of any discussion or use of any material regarding sexual orientation or gender identity in elementary schools. Members of the LGBTQ+ community and their supporters have been outraged about this law’s passing and have turned their anger towards Disney, who they claim has been “enabling this measure’s passage” with their donations to DeSantis and other conservative Florida politicians (Skolink 1). Clearly, this bill’s focus affects education and the early upbringing of every student in the Florida school system going forward, especially students and faculty members who are part of the LGBTQ+ community.

While this controversy is shocking, it is hardly the first time that a public entity outside the classroom has attempted and succeeded to control what goes on inside the classroom. Book banning, in particular, is a centuries-old phenomenon and is one that has sparked countless Freedom of Speech debates. Because parents, school administrations, and, as we have seen in

Florida, legislatures have so easily been able to dictate what does and what does not get read in schools, students and teachers have been robbed of the rich perspectives found in so many banned books and have been forced into mindsets of fear and ignorance when faced with controversial ideas in the world around them. Without exposure to new ideas, our learning becomes stagnant and education becomes useless. So, it is clear that control needs to be put back in the hands of teachers and students to resist the censorship facilitated by so many interfering parents, school administrations, and legislatures who claim to want to protect students, but end up harming their development as intellectuals and people in the end.

Book banning over controversial material is not simply a Florida issue, but a global issue that affects everyone indiscriminately and changes the way we interact, express ourselves, and learn. For us in America, with a Constitutional right to an education, we are used to reading books in school, likely for an English or Social Studies class, and then discussing the significance and messages of those books as part of our learning of not just literature, but the world around us and the perspectives of the different people living in it. For many, this is where thoughts about books in schools end. However, the situation is much more complex, considering the effort it takes to keep books on shelves in schools, and especially in a time when parents are more involved in their childrens' education than ever before. Randy Bobbit, in his book *Controversial Books in K-12 Classrooms and Libraries*, lays out many instances of controversies over books because of the profanity used in them, an alternative fire-starter to sexual and gender identity that have been debated over in Florida and other southern states this year. Bobbit names several books that have raised eyebrows across the country, usually for profanity and for themes that promote the disrespect of authority: *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier, *Blubber* by Judy Blume, *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Big Round Things* by Carolyn Mackler, and perhaps

most notably, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger. Bobbit is quick to point out the perspectives of these books' defenders, quoting Ramona N. Kirby, a children's literature professor at McDaniel College: "By modeling tolerance for all kinds of books and stories and ideas, we are showing our students that we trust them. We trust them to handle the idea and put it into perspective, no matter how scary the idea" (Bobbit 61). Without this trust, education cannot function because students cannot be exposed to new, uncomfortable ideas. To add on, Sara Zeigler, in her article titled "Book Banning" from *The Encyclopedia of Civil Liberties in America* broadens this idea, explaining that book banning "is usually motivated by the conviction that public access to certain materials might be harmful to the public's common interest and morals," which, she says, "raises issues involving the right to free speech found in the First Amendment to the Constitution," (Zeigler 106). In Zeigler's article we again encounter this idea of a lack of trust in the consumers of contentious books and the fear that their ideologies will be skewed because of these books. While this argument is certainly valid in certain instances regarding young students, it excuses neither the censorship seen in high schools across the country or the aforementioned debate surrounding the discussion of sexual and gender identity being banned in states like Florida. It is clear that those forces attempting to take books out of schools often do not know their audiences well enough to trust them in consuming ideas and content that may be uncomfortable but helps diversify the perspectives of the students that do get the opportunity to consume them.

While the problem has certainly escalated in the present day, book banning has been a hotly-debated issue for centuries and has even been the center of multiple infamous legal cases. In 1975, one of these infamous cases was the *Island Trees v. Pico* Supreme Court Case, started by a conservative parents' rights group known as the Parents of New York United which set up

an official meeting with the district board of the Island Trees school district of Long Island, New York to request the banning of thirty-three “Objectionable Books” in libraries across the district, mostly containing sexual content (Foerstel 11). Not only did the school board comply with PONYU’s request, but they even carried out the task themselves, sneaking into one of the district’s schools in the middle of the night to confiscate all of the objectionable books unilaterally. Beyond this act’s violation of the district’s established policy of book removal, the incident caused an outrage, especially among students who rightfully felt that their First Amendment Rights were being violated by the school administration they were supposed to trust. Steven Pico, one of the more vocal students, had this to say about the incident: ““Now please don’t ask me why book banners feel more comfortable working during the night... I guess they decided that is how censors should act. So, they had the janitor unlock the library, proceed to go through the card catalog, and found that our district had eleven of the books on that list,”” (Foerstel 11-12). It would be Pico that, with the help of the American Civil Liberties Union, would eventually sue his own school board over First Amendment infringement. While Pico lost the first case, he appealed to the U.S. Court of Appeals where he did win. The school board appealed that decision to the Supreme Court, who granted ultimate victory to Pico with their decision.

While this was a victory for students’ rights, the law has not always granted so much favor to those rights. Fifty years earlier, in 1925, John Scopes was teaching science classes in a Tennessee high school using a book, *A Civic Biology*, that promoted the theory of evolution. Recently, the Tennessee legislature had banned the use of any book that taught anything contrary to the Bible’s account of man’s origin. Because of this, Scopes was taken to court in the infamous Scopes Monkey Trial and found guilty of violating the law and was forced to pay a

fine of \$100, a symbolic blow to the cause of teachers' and students' rights. In her article "The Parent Trap," Jill Lepore analyzes this now-famous case and how it connects to modern issues of classroom interference. Speaking on objections to certain historical curricula from parents specifically, but broadly on the idea of interfering groups like parents, school administrations, and legislatures, Lepore says, "the idea of public education is dedicated to the cultivation of that bigger sense of covenant, toleration, and obligation. In the end, no matter what advocates of parents' rights say, and however much political power they might gain, public schools don't have a choice..." (20). What Lepore means is that education cannot be filtered and censored and still be effective. If it is to be done correctly and well, education needs to give students and teachers the freedom to explore new, uncomfortable ideas without fear that parents or a school board will ban that material or start a controversy so inflammatory that the only way to stop it is to stop talking about that material. That is a textbook definition of censorship and it is unacceptable in any college, high school, or even middle school, where the point of reading books is to learn.

To understand where this sort of censorship originates, it is important to understand what groups are actually censoring this content and how their involvement is more like interference than anything else. To illustrate who these groups are, we need look no further than the court cases mentioned in the previous section, in which all three of the major interferers come into play. For the *Scopes* case, it was the Tennessee legislature which, much like many politicians in Florida this year, interfered so much that they used their own religious doctrine to inform the book laws of Tennessee and ban any book that contradicted the Bible's account of man's origin. For the more recent *Pico* case, it was originally the Parents of New York United who introduced the book controversy to the Island Trees school board who then worked in tandem with those parents by sneaking into a school at night to avoid the valid objections of other school

administration and faculty. Terry J. Larsen, in his article “The Power of the Board of Education to Censor,” explains why this interference is attractive, especially for parents and school boards who are closer to the action than state governments: “On the one hand, citizens and parents turn to the school board, demanding that it act as censor for them. This side contends... that the primary function of schools is to pass on to the younger generation the traditional values of our culture” (Larsen 139). This cause for the “traditional values” that Larsen describes is a common and valid one, but it often serves to give opponents of intellectual freedom the opportunity to challenge books which have uncomfortable yet still appropriate ideas and start school-wide controversies which bind students and teachers to only “safe” ideas while also instilling fear in them that any controversial idea in a school must be met with large, public conflicts. Larsen goes on to say that this interference is simply a part of schools, and in fact, puts much strain upon many school boards desperate to quiet parent concerns: “In a sense, the local school board is caught in the middle of a dispute that seems almost built into a school system catering to our pluralistic society” (Larsen 142). Larsen reveals here that, while school administration does play a large role in the unnecessary banning of many books, they often act as representatives of parents who so often get worked up about what their students are learning without the necessary context given by actually being in the classroom. The same goes for many state legislatures which ban books through the law without knowing why those books are being used in the classroom. This issue has only been exacerbated with the advent of remote learning, brought on by the pandemic, which has given parents increased, though still indirect, access to the classroom and allowed them to raise more objections based on conversations that they still have insufficient context to understand. So many students know too well the anxiety of learning within earshot of their parents during the lockdown phase of the pandemic, as their learning became increasingly

interrupted by skepticism and outrage. Even moreso, school administrations were forced to bear the brunt parents voicing their frustrations with topics heard at home. In all, it is often those furthest from the classroom who raise the most objections about what is taught in it, causing controversies in schools and precipitating the censorship of so many appropriate books.

The book censorship seen so commonly around the country is so unacceptable because it undermines the fundamental aims of schools and education and their efforts to free students' minds from fear-based ignorance of uncomfortable ideas. What this censorship does is threaten the existence of an education based in intellectual freedom, a term used in the field of education to describe schooling that takes in a range of ideas and principles, regardless of how uncomfortable they are to teachers, students, and especially outside interference groups. Emily Knox, in her article titled "Books, Censorship, and Anti-Intellectualism in Schools," describes the inverse of intellectual freedom, (which she refers to as "Intellectualism") "Anti-Intellectualism." Quoting historian Richard Hofstadter, she describes the concept as "...resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are considered to represent it; and the disposition constantly to minimize the value of that life'" (Knox 29). Knox's and Hofstadter's point is that those who resist intellectual freedom essentially resist the mind's growth and development as a complex, critical, and alive system that is able to take in uncomfortable, controversial, or perhaps even inflammatory information and analyze its value and validity objectively. In other words, anti-intellectualism is the supporter of sheltering students from consuming controversial topics and opinions because they believe that that content might scar them forever. While more and more arguments can be made, of course, for this doctrine's aptness as one decreases the age of a student group, there is no defense for the mass amounts of censorship occurring in high schools across the country, where the student population

is easily old enough to critically analyze divisive topics in a mature manner. Not only does anti-intellectualism demonstrate a clear divide between what effect content has on students in actuality and what effect groups like parents and administrators believe that content has on students, but it poses a serious threat to the effectiveness of teachers within the classroom. As Richard Allington points out in his article “Book Banning: No Easy Answers,” the mere mention of a book banning controversy is enough to paralyze a teacher into frightened submission to parents and administrators: “Educators routinely select noncontroversial instructional materials rather than risk raising the ire of the censor” (Allington 204). Here, Allington puts a much-needed lens up to the plight of the taxed educator, who ideally desires to enrich students’ lives with challenging content but is deathly afraid of losing respect or even employment as a result, because of the resulting resistance. Clearly, then, we can see that both students and teachers are taught to be fearful in a community of anti-intellectual-freedom: fearful of new ideas and fearful of teaching new ideas respectively. Both factors result in an education system whose growth is stunted and ceases to enrich anyone, whether they be teacher or student. When intellectual freedom is taken away from education by overzealous interference, education stops helping anyone grow and normalizes safe, noncontroversial, meaningless ideas and practices for all involved.

Furthermore, it is vitally important to understand how censorship within the classroom, whether it be targeted at materials or what is said, affects a student’s image of themselves and their culture. Samuel Burmester and Lionel C. Howard, in their article “Confronting Book Banning and Assumed Curricular Neutrality: A Critical Inquiry Framework,” highlight how censorship can often go beyond giving students an aversion and ambivalence to things like swear words or sexual content, to make them ignorant of the other students’ cultures and identities as

people. Their opening point emphasizes how volatile school social environments can be, especially for minority students who are not always represented in media like the books read in schools: “For students from non-majority backgrounds including race, ethnicity, social class, gender, immigration status, language, disability, sexual identity, other social identities and cultural backgrounds, schools can also be sites where their identities, cultures and lived experiences are affirmed and/or marginalized” (374). What this means is that the type of content that is being taught in schools has a much larger effect on these non-majority students than it typically does on white students because of their cultures and identities, which are as much a part of them as any white student, or often misrepresented or not represented whatsoever. This has the potential to negatively affect a student’s self-worth or even their confidence that they belong in the education system at all, if they feel as if their cultural identity is not welcome within the four walls of their school. Burmester and Howard go on to say that this issue of students’ cultural identities is especially important when talking about the English or Language Arts class because the books commonly read in those classes are the stories of characters who represent different cultural experiences and viewpoints. They explain that when only certain texts are presented to students with only certain viewpoints, those texts are more associated with truth than texts that are hidden away by censors like parents or administrations: “When presented uncritically, a text, its mode, and its values are represented as something exceptional. They are more deeply entrenched in the social and literary canons; common, overrepresented texts - and their (re)presentations of the past, present, and future - gain association with reality, accruing social and cultural value” (Burmester, Howard 377). Burmester and Howard claim here that what is read in the classroom is what is accepted as the truth. Therefore, it is alarming that so much censorship goes on within the classroom, because that censorship often comes from outside

sources which are not intimately familiar with the full scope of a text that they deem to be controversial based on selected passages arbitrarily decided to be problematic. While it is understandable that interfering groups who aim to protect students from harmful ideas want to ensure that those harmful ideas are not put in classrooms where they might be conflated with the truth, that, like other mentioned concessions, does not excuse the overzealous censorship of books in classroom that have legitimate merit and should be presented as the truth because they contain minor controversial points that make some uncomfortable. When we take away books that have ideas outside of the norm, we silence the cultural experiences of so many people, especially those in minorities, and present as truth only the comfortable ideas that represent a fraction of our culture and its actual truth.

While the issue of domineering book censorship is a serious one that affects schools across the country, there are ways to resist it and perhaps even remedy the problem. While a book may be banned in one or some areas, it is difficult to ban them universally, which means that people in one part of the country or even simply a different school can resist the banning of a book in another area or school. Such is the case with Doctors Marilyn Maxwell and Marlene Berman, two high school English teachers in Long Island, New York who have implemented a “Book-Banning Project” into their curriculum in the name of “... establishing the classroom as an arena for the free and mutually respectful exchange of ideas, whether controversial or not...” (Berman, Maxwell 93). The project has students research and read a commonly-banned book, such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and then tasks them with either advocating for or dissenting to the book’s banning through live debate in front of members of the community. This project allows students to not only read books that many are denied access to but also to assess the merits and problematic areas of those books in a safe and intellectual space. Besides efforts

like this, there are many programs like Banned Books Week and Freedom, which many organizations and schools participate in to highlight banned books across the world so that people can freely read and discuss them in a similarly safe and supportive environment. These are, of course, impermanent ways of combating book banning, but there are also more lasting policy changes that many have advocated for to make these inclusive practices the norm. In her article “The Unlikely Censor,” Monica Josten lays out multiple suggestions for “tailoring” class discussion to the different needs of both students and parents (Josten 16). She suggests first that curriculums offer different books from a predetermined set that have similar subjects but can cater differently to students’ reading abilities or interests. Her second suggestion is that teachers put an emphasis on giving students advanced warning (such as actual trigger warnings) of what they will read in the books they choose so that they and their parents are not caught off guard by the content of the books they choose. Finally, she suggests that curriculums allow students to choose which books they read, to not only give them more control over what they consume but also to take the onus off of teachers, who are often the first to get blamed when parents become upset over the books their students are reading. These solutions serve not only to help students make appropriate choices for their own personal beliefs and needs, but also helps teachers avoid the pressure of pleasing every parent and student while ensuring that students are able to learn what the curriculum demands of them. While these are only a couple of the many worthy solutions to mitigate the harmful impact of book banning in schools and our society, they represent not only the tangible, collaborative efforts we can participate in to normalize controversial ideas but also how we can make learning adaptive so that engaging with controversial ideas can become less painful and perhaps even more engaging for students in classrooms across the country.

In all of this, it is clear that censorship of books, while sometimes done with good and helpful intentions, is often carried out by groups like legislatures, parents, and school administrations who do not know enough about discussion and teaching in classrooms to adequately know whether or not the books that students are reading should be banned. It is also clear that when they do go through with banning those books, or even threatening to start controversies over them, they get in the way of effective, intellectually-free education. Along our journey we have seen how governments, administrations, and parents across generations have threatened to take books out of the hands of students, the ones who need their ideologies and attitudes about the world challenged the most. Book censorship, in its unchecked state, is most often useful for giving students fearful and ignorant mindsets toward the world around them because of the fear instilled within them and the safe ideas they are told to consume as an alternative to divisive, controversial ones. However, this situation is not hopeless, as there are many educators and organizations in the world who, through their bold programs and curriculums, are on a mission to tear down the fear and ignorance taught to so many students. While not all books are appropriate for all audiences, book banning is an all-too-common occurrence in schools, including high schools and even colleges, where the spreading of new, transformative ideas and a shedding of old, passive ideas is the whole point of education. As we continue to combat book censorship, it is important to remind ourselves of the purposes of education and how students are sent to school to grow not just in their knowledge of facts but their beliefs and mindsets about the world around them. If we are not challenged by what we read, we end up as a society of like-minded people with nowhere to go. It is when we are challenged that we start to grow as students and people, and real change and progress can begin, for all of us.

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