

# CENSORSHIP IN SCHOOLS

## How Does Banning Books Impact the Student Learning Experience?



Asra Albaaj

she/her

Sophomore

Investigative and Medical  
Science

Language. It is a form of identity. It is a medium for human connection and consciousness. It manifests itself in the cadence of our steps to each movement, idea or thought we have. When language is obstructed, the human experience is consequently deprived.

The banning of books—therefore, the banning of language—in public schools and libraries has escalated in the United States, with around 330 book challenges in the fall of 2021 according to the American Library Association. The rise in book bans is a movement to reshape the education system through policies such as educational transparency and the banning of critical race theory. It is an act to promote certain ideologies while omitting other sides to the historical narrative of the United States.

The banning of books is an example of censorship in society, particularly in the education system. Censorship can be defined as the control of information ambient in society. This can include the prohibition of books, films, images, and other forms of media due to being obscene, harmful or a threat to security. These reasons for censorship are often ambiguous, and the meaning commonly stretched based on varied interpretations usually related to social, political, religious and

ideological explanations.

Many of the books being banned or challenged in the United States are written by minority writers. One of these writers is Toni Morrison, known for being the first African American writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. In the Wentzville School District in Missouri, the school board recently reversed its 5-1 decision to ban “The Bluest Eye” by Morrison after being sued by the American Civil Liberties Union of Missouri. This book describes the experience of a young African American girl who has internalized racism by wishing to have blue eyes. Other books being banned in the United States include titles such as “The Hate U Give” by Angie Thomas, “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” by Maya Angelou, “The Color Purple” by Alice Walker, “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison, “George” by Alex Gino, “Of Mice and Men” by John Steinbeck and many more. Many of the books in this list are by African American writers. By banning these books, school boards and lawmakers are attempting to conceal topics related to LGBTQIA+, race, politics, gender norms and discrimination from the eyes of students. Books that are being censored seemingly exude graphic violence, offensive language and are harmful to social order.

Advocates for banning books fear the content can influence children by presenting ideas that promote inquiry and curiosity. It can be argued that this is counterintuitive as being a student means to acquire knowledge and that banning books can prevent students from being able to approach real-life challenges.

Historically, book bans were primarily due to obscenity prior to the 1970s. In 1873, Congress passed a law that made it illegal to mail, give or sell a book, image, advertisement or other media if considered obscene and lewd. This act was known as the Comstock Act of 1973 which was created through the persuasion of an official named Anthony Comstock. The definition of obscenity in this act even led to the banning of anatomy textbooks. Later in 1933, the court case—The United States v. One Book Called Ulysses—helped create a new interpretation of freedom of expression. A judge overturned the banning of the book Ulysses which is known for containing obscene content. The judge deemed that such a book can be read if it is a form of serious literature. While the Comstock Act was not terminated until 1957, many other cases led to the definition of what is considered obscene to be more ambiguous and less related to personal preference. This aided in setting the precedent for new interpretations in law. One can examine the history of banned books to learn what the educational systems were like in the past, and how they are transitioning to be either more liberal or more conservative depending on the leading governmental officials.

In book bannings taking place today, many conservatives are advocating for transparency bills or “parents bill of rights.” Such bills will dictate what can be taught in the classroom. The legislation that is being pushed in at least 12 states would require all instructional material to be posted online to enable parents to monitor teaching materials. Those in support of education transparency view it to be beneficial; it would allow parents to be more active in their child’s

education. However, others in opposition to such policies argue that this can lead to parents protesting the material being taught, and it can disengage their children from important socio-political issues in society. It can induce parents to prevent their child from entering the classroom if they are displeased with the material, particularly on important subjects such as race.

Natalie Monzyk, an English and Women and Gender Studies professor at Saint Louis University, states “Not all parents are trained in education theory. While they have a say in their children, they still send them to schools so they can be taught by teachers who have a variety of knowledge and expertise in different areas. Educational transparency is a good goal but flawed in implementation. It doesn’t allow for flexibility to adjust to every student in the class.” According to Monzyk, flexibility makes the best teachers. Each student learns differently so when one method is particularly helpful to a student, a teacher can adjust to meet the students needs. If the class material was posted at the beginning of the year, little room would be left for adding something new or changing things as students grow.

The rise in censorship these past few years, and the political divide in society can further be exhibited through a new bill in several states aimed to ban critical race theory. Critical race theory (CRT) is an academic and social movement where race is inherently a social construct and that racism is institutional and systemic. CRT contends more than individual bias, but rather it is embedded in society as seen in policies, educational institutions, criminal justice system, labor market, health care system, housing market, etc. CRT was first developed in the 1970s and 1980s in response to institutions being “color blind.” Attention to this theory rose after the 2020 election, and this theory is continuously attacked by groups who do not want to acknowledge racism in the United States. People may recognize the United States’ past with race, but refuse to see its impact on society today making such a ban similar to a blind spot. Opponents of this theory argue that it is “white shaming” and that it pushes the idea that white people are inherently racist. Acknowledging racism means acknowledging an embedded societal problem.

Rachel Greenwald Smith, an author and associate professor in the Department of English at Saint Louis University, states “The 1619 Project should not be controversial. It’s a historical study. The fact that it is controversial has been entirely manufactured by a panicked right-wing, under the belief that producing a culture war will scare white suburban voters back into voting for a party whose policies (tax policy that concentrates wealth at the top, taking away health care benefits, allowing for unrestricted resource extraction, ignoring accelerating climate change) are widely unpopular.”

Due to current policies, one may wonder what the limits of censorship are, and what or who gets to decide that they can be moral enforcers. Missouri legislators, including Rep. Nick Schroer, a Republican, plans to outlaw curricula related to race and equity, particularly in teachings of U.S history. Shroer states “I think CRT, and in particular the 1619

project, does in fact seek to make children feel guilt and even anguish, not because of anything they’ve done, but solely based on the color of their skin.” The 1619 Project is a long-term initiative of the New York Times beginning in August of 2019. It is a collection

of stories that shift America’s historical narrative particularly to change how it is taught in schools. According to the New York Times, “The project was intended to address the marginalization of African-American history in the telling of our national story and examine the legacy of slavery in contemporary American life.” Nikole Hannah-Jones started this pioneering project and she states “Every American child learns about the Mayflower, but virtually no American child learned about the White Lion.” The White Lion is a slave ship notable for forcing the first Africans to be taken to a colony in Virginia in 1619, hence the name, the 1619 project. The omission of the White Lion, she says, is “symbolic of how history is shaped by people who decide what’s important and what’s not. And that erasure is also a powerful statement.” The people who choose which parts of history to promote and which parts to erase can control the dynamic of society as a whole. This is impactful as it incites a single-story narrative of society and this can lead to questions regarding the intersection of self and society.

After assessing the recent policies being implemented, it is important to acknowledge who is most affected, students. Banning diverse literature can mean that minority students will feel less represented. It can convey that their experiences do not matter. Many schools in the United States remain heavily segregated, and books are a way for students to learn about experiences different from their own. Diverse books teach empathy and collective tolerance. Erasing such books from public schools and libraries promotes single story narratives in the education system. It deprives people from the human experience.

*I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings*

**THE HATE U GIVE**

*The Bluest Eye*

*OF MICE AND MEN*

*To Kill A Mockingbird*