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# Between Pages and Politics: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of Book Bans

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# BETWEEN PAGES AND POLITICS: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY EXPLORATION OF BOOK BANS

by

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Across the United States, school boards are being inundated with requests to ban books. While these conversations are often localized, what the rise in censorship across the country suggests is that there is a fierce movement behind censoring young adult literature. What is frequently erased in these campaigns are stories of people of color and queer communities, alongside topics such as sexuality, drugs, or violence. The presiding conclusion within childhood studies on how we have reached a point where censorship is abundantly common in American schools is that public discourse views children as less than or not fully formed, thus decidedly incapable about making choices in their education. Through the work of childhood studies, education, and developmental psychology, this is unmistakably false. In order to better approach children and adolescents more ethically and understand them as whole individuals, we must practice unknowing. It is crucial to meet children and adolescents where they are without preconceived notions about what an adolescent is. Teachers on a daily basis practice this unknowing with their students, and it is crucial for others to join the effort and give students the credit they are due when it comes to selecting books in order to treat them most ethically.

## Introduction

"[Banning] struck me as a purist yet elementary kind of censorship designed to appease adults rather than educate children. Amputate the problem, band-aid the solution"

– Toni Morrison

"Theory – the seeing of patterns, showing the forest as well as the tree – theory can be a dew that rises from earth and collects in the rain cloud and returns to earth over and over. But if it doesn't smell of the earth, it isn't good for the earth."

– "Notes Toward a Politics of Location," Adrienne Rich

Plattsmouth is one of many small towns in Nebraska and about a 30-minute drive from my own hometown. In the Spring of 2023, Plattsmouth local news stations alongside the school board were inundated with varying perspectives on book bans. While it is often easy to think of these small towns in red states as monolithic sites of conservative ideology, Plattsmouth reveals a more complex picture. The trouble began when Terri Cunningham-Swanson, a member of the national group Moms for Liberty, was first elected to the Plattsmouth school board in 2022. Moms for Liberty defines their mission as being "dedicated to fighting for the survival of America by unifying, educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government" (Moms for Liberty). While seemingly neutral in tone, what is upsetting about this passage is that the unifying and defending that Moms for Liberty is arguing for is centered around a racist, homophobic, and misogynistic agenda, as signified by the many materials and pleas against books like *Julián Is a Mermaid* across their site. Moms

for Liberty aims to “direct the education, medical care, and moral upbringing of their children,” citing “traditional” American values, opposed to educating children about race, sexuality, and gender (Moms for Liberty). Cunningham-Swanson, who ran for the school board on a platform of being a “Conservative Firewall” and promised her voting base that she would actively work against “programs such as Social Emotional Learning, Critical Race Theory, Gender Ideology and Comprehensive Sex Education” (*Terri Cunningham-Swanson*).

What Cunningham-Swanson is really promising here is a control over what children can read and know about geared toward upholding a structure that privileges cis, straight, white, men. By silencing the stories of queer people and people of color, Cunningham-Swanson aims to ensure that these experiences are left out of cultural consciousness and made to seem “inappropriate” for classroom conversations. The consequences of this erasure translate to perpetuating prejudice, hate, and real harm toward the people who are living these realities. Cunningham-Swanson's rejection of Social Emotional Learning and Comprehensive Sex Education likewise work as a form of control, denying students education to understand their own emotions and the bodies that they are living in. Because of this, Cunningham-Swanson's arguments hold weight in that they are engaging in a discourse that is racist and homophobic and that locks children and adolescents into a structure in which they have no access to critical thinking skills of their own. Many attempts at banning books outside of Plattsmouth are also aimed at this kind of control. In the interest of creating more inclusive and freedom-led environments in the classroom, we must call out book bans for what they are and bring attention to continued attempts.

On April 4th, 2023, Cunningham-Swanson requested by way of email that 49 books be removed from the school, describing them as “extremely problematic and inappropriate for school libraries” (Mejia). Cunningham-Swanson offered no further justification for challenging these texts outside of the statement above. However, many of the books Cunningham-Swanson deemed to be problematic featured queer or BIPOC characters or were written by or centered a character that identified as either queer or as a person of color. While these texts were never officially banned from the school library, they were removed from the shelves as they waited for a judgement from the school board on their status. Books such as *The Poet X*, *The Hate You Give*, and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* were taken out of circulation (MacKinnon). From the list of young adult texts that were challenged by Cunningham-Swanson, each book had some variation of conversations on drugs, sex, race, LGBTQ+ characters, or violence or death (KETV 7 News). While each of these topics falls under Cunningham-Swanson's very general description of inappropriate, what is at stake with each of the topics varies. For stories on drugs and sex, it can reasonably be argued that not every student needs books approaching these stories (and that there is room for romanticization of harmful behavior), but there are students that would benefit from these topics, as they may have already encountered it themselves. For stories about race and LGBTQ+ characters, what is at stake is a complete erasure of group of people along with their experiences. For stories that include violence or death, what is at stake is the loss of a resource for students who are experiencing these things every day. Ultimately, the negation of these both strikes out their representation in the classroom and places them outside of high school

students' capability to understand. The impact of this is a limited and uninformed perception of the capacity of high school students.

On April 26, students Ciara Basch and Carlee Petereit led a staged walkout alongside their classmates. Signs at the protest featured an array of arguments including, “Reading is our right!”, “Censorship is the child of fear and the father of ignorance,” and “One book can change lives” (Johnson). These signs suggest that the students understand the implicit control and manicuring of information that comes with book bans and the loss associated with this. Basch told reporter Ron Johnson that “we wanted people to know that we didn’t like what they were doing to us.” Petereit also got at the heart of why students were protesting, stating, “There are a lot of things that students in our building have experienced themselves, so taking [the books] out was kind of just pushing what they have experienced themselves under the rug” (Lundak). Petereit’s comment understands students as complex and as having a diverse range of life experiences that might be reflected by the content they are reading. The result of ignoring this reality is that students are belittled and restricted from exploring and existing in their identities the way that most adults are given permission to do. Another Plattsmouth High School student, Sam McKnight, echoed Petereit, saying, “I was very willing to protest this because it’s not within their rights to take away our books or our perspectives… it just infuriated all of us” (Johnson). In order to make their voices heard, students skipped their morning classes and stood outside of the school building, which garnered plenty of local media attention and led to more community members and parents becoming involved.

Former Plattsmouth High School librarian Christine Knust joined the protest, recalling several instances in which her students found their experiences reflected by the

texts that had been removed from the library (Mejia). After the push to censor books in her library, Knust made the difficult decision to resign in May of 2023. Knust told Flatwater Free Press's Evelyn Mejia, "I think Plattsmouth has the potential to be an amazing district, and it was when I first got here … I loved what I've gotten to do here, it's tearing me apart leaving my kids." Former youth services coordinator Vicki Wood from Lincoln City Libraries in Nebraska also commented on how the climate has changed, telling Mejia, "We've had more requests [to remove books] in the last two years than what we've had probably combined in the last 10 years."

Kathy Lester, the president of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), writes in the article "Bravely Supporting AASL Core Values" about the impact that book bans have on librarians. Lester writes, "the AASL core values of learning; innovation; equity, diversity, inclusion; intellectual freedom; and collaboration" is what is at stake with book bans (4). AASL is a community of librarians committed to these values and maintaining the ability for librarians to continue doing their jobs. Barring their capability to protect "learning; innovation; equity, diversity, inclusion; intellectual freedom; and collaboration" makes this job impossible. Libraries are intended to promote education and exploration across many different experiences and stories. When Knust and Wood talk about their past experiences they have had in libraries and the climate they are experiencing now, what they are referring to is a calculated effort to strip librarians of the ability to do their jobs, despite their many years of education, experience, and expertise. This essential part of their job description is then taken up by local organizations and school boards, deciding that the expertise of librarians is working against what they dictate as "best" for children and adolescents.

Plattsmouth community members made their frustrations known by attending the school board meeting on May 8, 2023 and voicing their objections. The minutes from the school board meeting that night do not specifically detail everything said by community members, but an impressive list of names under those who participated in the "Public Forum" shows the breadth of support for students and for access to diverse materials. Notable from this list are Samantha McKnight, Ciara Basch, and Christine Knust who were vocal from the beginning, as well as D'Shaun Cunningham, the son of Terri Cunningham-Swanson. After the school board meeting, Cunningham explicitly stated his objections to his mother's agenda in an interview: "She's made statements about being against critical race theory, which can be interpreted as also Black history. She has four Black children, myself included. What these bans encourage is a lack of civility. So even within my family, there's been breakdowns in communication but that's what the nation is going through" (MacKinnon). The direct impact of Cunningham-Swanson's effort to exclude conversations on race and racism in high schools is evident through the protests of Plattsmouth High Schoolers and even more closely through the frustrations of her son.

Cunningham-Swanson's attempt at banning books is what makes it impossible for students like her own children to feel represented and welcomed in the classroom. Additionally, disregarding and banning stories and books that talk about racism ultimately eliminates the possibility of educating students on the reality of racism and providing them the necessary structures to better understand what it means to work against racism. Authors Carlin Borsheim-Black and Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides and their book *Letting Go of Literary Whiteness* talks about the importance of educating students,

especially white students, on racism. The need that they saw from their shared experience as educators is

> An approach [aimed] at disrupting traditional curriculum and instruction for White students. Teaching White students about race, racism, and Whiteness requires direct instruction, scaffolding, and continued support in order to teach students to acknowledge their own racial identity, to name ways that racism works, and to apply new understandings to the world around them. (4)

Education on racism in its most overt and covert forms is necessary in reaching a point that students are able to identify these behaviors and to act as more informed citizens, the often-stated goal of educators, schools, and communities. Plattsmouth High School is a predominantly white school. The need to intervene and provide assistance for students as they encounter racism is present in all schools, but especially for ones in which they are often experiencing these realities or aren't receiving multiple perspectives in their day-to-day lives.

Community members led the charge to get Cunningham-Swanson's position recalled from the school board. October of 2023, a new Facebook group titled "Stand Up for Plattsmouth Schools" was able to gain steam with around 380 members who were able to petition for the recall election (*Associated Press*). Jayden Speed, a student and advocate in the community, told Associated Press, "This has been a grassroots campaign, and it looks like Plattsmouth voters have rejected book-banning[sic] and the extremism that Terri and people like her have been pushing." The community ultimately voted to have Terri Cunningham-Swanson removed from office. The recall attempt was passed with 1,649 votes for the removal of Cunningham-Swanson, and only 1,000 votes against

out of 6,861 total registered voters. (WOWT News Team 6). What is significant about this removal is that it shows a majority of community members in Plattsmouth were invested in having diverse experiences represented within their school library.

Plattsmouth is just one example of a national trend toward censorship and illustrates a growing effort to attempt to control the texts and information that young people have access to. According to PBS, "more than 2,500 unique titles were targeted in 2022, the highest number of attempted book bans and restrictions since the association's Office for Intellectual Freedom began keeping track of this data more than 20 years ago." According to Pen American, the 2022-23 school year saw these themes being challenged in large ways, reporting that, of the texts that were banned,

> 48 percent include themes or instances of violence and abuse… 42 percent cover topics on health and wellbeing for students… 33 percent detail sexual experiences between characters… 30 percent include characters of color or discuss race and racism… 30 percent LGBTQ+ characters or themes… 29 percent include instances or themes of grief and death.

Like Plattsmouth Nebraska, there is a pattern among the texts that make challenged and banned lists and the stories that are excluded in the process. Also similar to Plattsmouth, book bans are a hotly contested issue across the states, in which voters lean against the favor of those attempting to censor literature. According to NPR, "polling found that 64% of Americans oppose book bans by school boards, and 69% oppose book bans by state lawmakers." So then where are the impetus for book bans coming from?

As seen in the Plattsmouth Nebraska case, book bans are happening at a local level in school board meetings, and they are typically coming from community members that have made it their mission to limit representation and access to the right to read. What is notable is that those who come forward are frequently related to an organization that antagonizes local school districts and makes an effort to increase censorship in communities. According to Pen America,

> Eighty-seven percent of all book bans were recorded in school districts with a nearby chapter or local affiliate of a national advocacy group known to advocate for book censorship. Sixty-three percent of all book bans occurred in eight states with legislation that has either directly facilitated book bans or created the conditions for local groups to pressure and intimidate educators and librarians into removing books.

This kind of political pressure from organizations and local chapters is frequently the driving force behind passing policies to restrict access to literature in school. Cunningham-Swanson, for instance, is herself affiliated with the conservative group Moms for Liberty. These organizations have been especially impactful and detrimental in primarily conservative states, with the most banned books coming from "Florida... followed by Texas, which had 625 book bans across 12 districts; Missouri, which had 333 book bans across 14 districts; Utah, which had 281 book bans across 10 districts; and Pennsylvania, which had 186 book bans across 7 districts" (*Pen America*). While Plattsmouth was able to rally together to push back against bans and make change by recalling a board member, not every state has seen the same kinds of success. 2024 is also

seeing a long list of challenged texts, and it is likely that this trend will continue in the United States for the foreseeable future.

In an effort to illustrate the harm created by book bans and to showcase the kinds of alternative approaches to understanding children and adolescents, I will be exploring what it means to see children and adolescents more ethically and what this might look like from the lens of Childhood Studies. In particular I am interested in Gabrielle Owen's concept of "unknowning" and how this offers the ability to see children as whole, capable, and complex. Along with this, I will be looking at research from developmental psychology, and educational studies to back my findings and to illustrate the consensus of many academic disciplines: censorship is harmful.

In section two of this piece, I will be looking at educational studies both in academia and in practice. Here, I will be asking what common practices and modes of thinking in the educational space are taught and used, especially as it relates to the building of curriculum and the selecting of texts that are "appropriate" for children to read and for educators to teach. From this, I will build off arguments made in childhood studies and continue a critique of censorship as seen in Plattsmouth. My goal here is to stress that teachers are not at fault when discussing book bans and even the objectifying of children, but instead that teachers do really important work in terms of thinking of children as whole beings and in defending their rights in the classroom. With this, I will be working through different texts that were once or are currently highly regarded within the educational space to better understand what is prioritized in this area and how children are more broadly discussed and thought of by educators. With this, I recognize that teaching styles and values vary greatly among communities, grades, subjects, etc.

Given this, I will be looking at both what is taught to educators and what actual educators in the space are saying about book bans and the autonomy we associate with children. From this I want to show that academics in education want to offer a wide variety of experiences to the children within the system.

In the conclusion, I return to my second guide quote from Adrienne Rich in which she makes the argument that “if it doesn't smell of the earth, it isn't good for the earth.” The way I interpret this is that if your theory or writing does not consider the beings that it discusses and does not work to discuss ethical outcomes for those involved, then it is not good for those involved.

As an educator, I am dedicated to thinking about the ways I can practice unknowing with my students and give them the kind of credit that they might not have been afforded in other contexts. As part of this work I will be returning to my elementary report cards as a way of reflecting on how narratives of what a child should be have impacted my own education and the way that I was assessed. I will also be ending this piece with a syllabus for a high school course on banned books. My reason for doing so is that I believe the kind of work that high school, middle school, and elementary school teachers are doing is so important and crucial to the reframing of literature and of children and adolescents as readers. With this, and in my goal to offer some strategies against book bans and for the greater autonomy of students, I wanted to spend some time thinking through the process of building a syllabus that thinks of teaching students as outside of bestowing knowledge and that gives them the ability to think about how they interact with texts. In addition to this, it was also important to me to work through the

efforts and lengths that educators have to go through to justify their teaching practices and the access to academic freedom they give to the students they teach.

| Quarter<br>**Work Habits** | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Is able to make independent choices | I | S | S | S |
| Begins and completes work appropriately | S | S | S | S |
| Works without disturbing others | S | S | S | S |
| Stays on task | S | S | S | S |
| Organizes and cares for equipment and materials | S | S | S | S |
| Practices independent problem solving | I | S | S | S |
| Takes pride in work | S | S | S | S |
| **Personal & Social Development** | | | | |
| Follows school and classroom routines | S | S | S | S |
| Cooperates with adults and peers | S | S | S | S |
| Appropriately deals with peer conflicts | S | S | S | S |
| Accepts other's opinions, feelings, and ideas | S | S | S | S |
| Practices self-control | S | S | S | S |
| Is kind and courteous toward others | S | S | S | S |

**Fig. 1**: My first-grade report card. What strikes me about this report card is its suggested prioritization of independence through categories like “can make independent choices” and “practices independent problem solving,” while simultaneously advocating for following school rules and routines. Why this strikes me is that I was a very insecure child who followed rules simply out of fear that I would get in trouble or make someone upset, something that I am not sure would be considered “sufficient” in personal and social development. Where I land on interpreting this piece then is that there is a kind of independence and a kind of social sufficiency that is valued. While it is clear to me that some of these qualities are simply part of being a good human being, I wonder to what extent some of the others were necessary to my growth or rather are useful or helpful tools for others.

# Children in Childhood Studies

Coming from my own background in English and Childhood Studies, what has consistently stuck out to me is the concept of "unknowing," as described by Gabrielle Owen. In the text *A Queer History of Adolescence*, Owen presents her concept of relationality as one that "takes as a given the unknowability of ourselves and others while establishing relational encounters as the place in which a contingent, contextual knowing might take place" (211). In establishing this idea, what Owen is able to present the reader with is a process through which we do not go into interactions with others with preconceived notions, but instead that we work to understand how they are in that moment through individual encounters. Owen works with this idea by arguing that we often come to interactions with children with preconceived notions on what it means to be a "child." I am interested in the ways unknowing might be practiced in the context of grade school book bans and conversations around censorship.

While we can acknowledge that we should not come to a conversation with assumptions, every educator knows that it is part of the work to understand where students may be at based on different milestones related to their age. Furthermore, when looking at how humans operate on a daily basis, it is clear that there is a level of assumption that makes it easier to consume the world around us and that often comes naturally. Unknowing does not necessitate disregarding what we know about human development or even reading levels. For instance, one study conducted by Catherine I. Phillips and Penny M. Pexman studied the age at which children are able to understand the concept of "opposite." This research question developed as a result of wanting to

better understand the lexical development of children. In asking children to identify opposites in pictures of animals, Phillips and Pexman concluded that “the majority of children under the age of 4 years do not yet have a metalinguistic concept of opposite or demonstrate sensitivity to the concept in their processing” (1,243). Bringing this kind of developmental knowledge that is rooted in research to our understanding of children is different than the kinds of assumptions that drive many bouts of book bans and challenges. Reflecting on the researchers’ intent here, there is an effort to empirically investigate the cognitive processing of children so as to create more space for their learning. What is not happening in this research is a narrativization of the capabilities of children based on values and beliefs about religion, politics, race, gender, or sexuality in an effort to control their learning. Of course, to some degree, we cannot escape our assumptions. Practicing unknowing means being open to all realities that individual people might face, not abandoning what we know about childhood development. When it comes to book bans, it is inappropriate to assume that each student is ready to handle or even needs the same topics as their peers, but that does not mean we cannot pull from childhood development studies to understand areas such as reading levels.

We can see how this works in Cunningham-Swanson's own arguments against topics such as race, violence, sexuality, and others in Plattsmouth, Nebraska. As reported by *Flatwatter Free Press*, Terri Cunningham-Swanson, a former school board member, was one of the most vocal supporters of pulling texts from the Plattsmouth High School library. In her reasoning shared through email for creating a large list of texts that should be removed, Cunningham-Swanson cited that the texts were “extremely problematic and inappropriate for school libraries” (Mejia). While the previous example of researchers

deciding what is developmentally appropriate for students is coming from a place of wanting to improve their education, Cunningham-Swanson is pulling from her own interpretations of what is decidedly "problematic" or "inappropriate" for children. What is notable about the list of challenged texts sourced by Cunningham-Swanson is that she never points to the specific reasons in which these texts are "inappropriate" for children, but instead uses these catch all statements as a way to push her own ideologies into the classroom. The way that these terms then frame adolescents is that they create a clearly defined line of what they can and cannot handle. Further, the texts on the list of suggested book challenges share themes of race, sexuality, gender, religious doubt, and more, all of which correlates to Cunningham-Swanson's commitment she proposes on her website:

> Our schools need to return to their original intent, to educate our children. We need Reading, Writing, STEM, Civics, American and World History to be the curriculum of our schools. And the text books for these subjects need to be free of CRT, CSE, SEL, and other forms of indoctrination. The time has come to return to basic academic standards that once kept American students at the top of the world's academic performers.

By CRT, CSE, and SEL, Cunningham-Swanson means Critical Race Theory, Comprehensive Sex Education, and Social Emotional learning. This is where it becomes important how we define "unknowing." The process of "contingent, contextual knowing" is not asking community members, educators, and parents to ignore physical and cognitive capabilities of children, but it instead is suggesting that we leave narratives about children behind, ones like those that decide that high schoolers are not mature enough to handle conversations on race, sexuality, self-awareness, and self-determination

(Owen, 211). These are the exact areas that Cunningham-Swanson is targeting on her website which illustrates motives that are entirely different than those of researchers like Phillips and Pexman. What Cunningham-Swanson effectively establishes on her website is that the above listed topics are dangerous to children. As an alternative to these kinds of homophobic and racist gestures, we must consider how we can reframe our understanding of children.

While we consider what practicing unknowing might look like in context with our interactions with children, it must be made very clear that this is something that educators practice on a regular basis. When educators adjust their practice and get to know their students as a mode of pedagogy, they are practicing unknowing. When teachers fill their libraries with a wide variety of materials that their students may have interest in, they are practicing unknowing. When Plattsmouth High School librarian Christine Knust created a literary-rich environment with the capacity to reach students at different areas in their lives and experiences, she was practicing unknowing. This is the purpose of libraries. One must come to interactions with students with intentions that are grounded in seeing that person as a whole being. If the assumption is, for instance, picking literature for a classroom that is at their determined reading level, the assumption is not creating harm and is not coming from a place of belittling or ideologically guarding the classroom. If the assumption is that high schoolers are not capable of handling conversations on racism, the assumption is not based in research, it isolates and erases whole conversations on injustices, and takes away from the ability to see adolescents past this very limited and belittling narrative. In this way, banning books that are reading level appropriate, but discuss topics deemed too “woke” and “inappropriate” creates a narrative of innocence,

making it impossible for the kind of unknowing that opens a more whole or complete perception of children. Furthermore, it also cements these identities and stories as "taboo" or, simply put, bad.

To better put into context what kinds of stories made Cunningham-Swanson's lists of problematic books, I will investigate Casey McQuiston's *Red, White, and Royal Blue*. This novel depicts Alex Claremont, a high schooler and the son of the president of the United States, as he navigates his sexuality and falls in love with Prince Henry. Although Cunningham-Swanson did not point to the specific reasons for why each text made the list of proposed banned books, schools that have also decided to challenge *Red, White, and Royal Blue* have cited both sexual themes and conversations surrounding the LGBTQ+ characters. There are some brief, explicit references to the fact that the characters did have sex, but a majority of the conversations around sex within the book are typically alluded to or ignored, at one point literally avoiding detailed description by opting for "and then everything goes very hazy, very quickly" (140). Many parents will balk at the idea of their children reading about sex, but what this concern is rooted in is a romanticized and particularly innocent narrative of what adolescents experience. What must be asked is why there is uncomfortability around adolescents having access to this kind of information and where the commitment to innocence is rooted. Pediatrician and pediatric endocrinology expert Asma J. Chattha discusses with the Mayo Clinic both the nature of discomfort around this conversation as well as how we can judge whether or not adolescents are ready to learn about sexuality. In the article "When to start talking about sexual health with your child: Earlier than you think," Chattha explains that

> The discussion on body basics and consent should start at 5. The discussion on pubertal changes can start between 7 to 9 years of age, tailored to their emotional maturity and also signs that they might be early bloomers. And from there, you keep building knowledge until it meets experience.

This conclusion on pairing conversation with emotional maturity and experience mirrors in many ways the prior conversation on children developing an understanding of "opposite." While adults often work from a framework or understanding that teenagers are innocent and should remain pure, what Chattha identifies here is a growing capacity to understand sexuality. So where then do these notions of children being incapable of handling these topics come from, if not from research from an expert in the area. Chattha provides a variety of reasons as to which parents may feel like their own children should not be exposed to conversations on sex, one the primary conclusions being "a discomfort with imagining one's child as a future sexual being." Despite this discomfort and commitment to withholding information about sex from children, Chattha also pulls from her own experience as a pediatrician when discussing sexual health with adolescents:

> To date, every teenager has wanted to talk to me. We cover sexual activity, sexuality, gender, whether they have any gender dysphoria and consensual versus nonconsensual actions and sometimes I don't think a child is sexually active but in the interview, I find out they are. All of this information is so important to know.

With the remainder of the article, Chattha pushes on exactly why meeting children where they are at and understanding that they are experiencing their own sexuality is important. This piece of "meeting experience" becomes increasingly crucial

to her argument as she informs readers that without the kind of conversations around sexual health that children need from their parents or guardians, they are alone in something that comes with the development they are experiencing every day.

Reflecting on this conversation, the process of unknowing becomes relevant in that there is no hard and fast answer to whether or not a child is "ready" to read and interpret certain kinds of content, but instead that we can only draw conclusions based on what they have communicated to us and what we know about the development of children. This means moving away from models of absolute innocence associated with childhood and instead tuning into the human beings that are in front of us as their needs and experiences change. Having said this, I propose that you have to know the kid(s) in your classroom, home, or community before you can make decisions for their education. Since we cannot know every child's needs or experiences, we need to create libraries that will speak to the largest number of experiences possible, so children can find their own connections within their school. This is incompatible with mindsets from that of Terri Cunningham-Swanson who seeks to rob children of those experiences of self-discovery. We cannot create a library that meets the diverse sets of needs of all children with narrow-minded logics, bigotry, and adult projections based in a desire to control what children and adolescents consume.

Alongside considering how we might meet students where they're at in their own experiences with literature, it is also worth considering, through the lens of childhood studies and unknowing, how allowing children choice over the texts they read, and a wide breadth of literature, might be beneficial. When reading another text, Cory Silverberg's *Sex is a Funny Word*, through a similar lens, Owen writes that what this text

> Enact[s] is a relationality that redefines the concept of agency through imagining the child or adolescent reader as not as a passive recipient of information or a fully independent agent but rather an embodied person with an ethical obligation to oneself and others, enmeshed in discourse and capable of moving in and through it in creative, unpredictable, and unknown ways. (210)

What this means is that by understanding the access to literature for children as neither indoctrination or as removed from the capability of impacting readers, we can more wholistically understand how children interact with texts and the benefit of allowing them to do so. Furthermore, Marah Gubar makes the point in her text *Artful Dodgers* that the assumption that texts and the adults that write them are capable of indoctrinating children "characteriz[es] them," them being children, "as innocent naïfs whose literacy skills are too primitive to enable them to cope with aggressive textual overtures of adults" (31). Additionally, this kind of characterization makes the censorship and banning of texts seem justified because children are imagined to be incapable of critically examining arguments and more "difficult" topics, thus they should be at the whim of adult decision making. This is not true and is the kind of rhetoric that further instills the adult-child power dynamic.

In discussing the impact of challenged literature at Plattsmouth High School, librarian Christine Knust talked about how she saw the impact of allowing students to read texts that felt similar to the things they were currently going through. In particular, she pulled out an experience one of her students had with *Red, White, and Royal Blue* prior to its challenging, stating that, "One of my students shared how it was the best book he had read and the first romance novel he was ever able to relate to." While it is

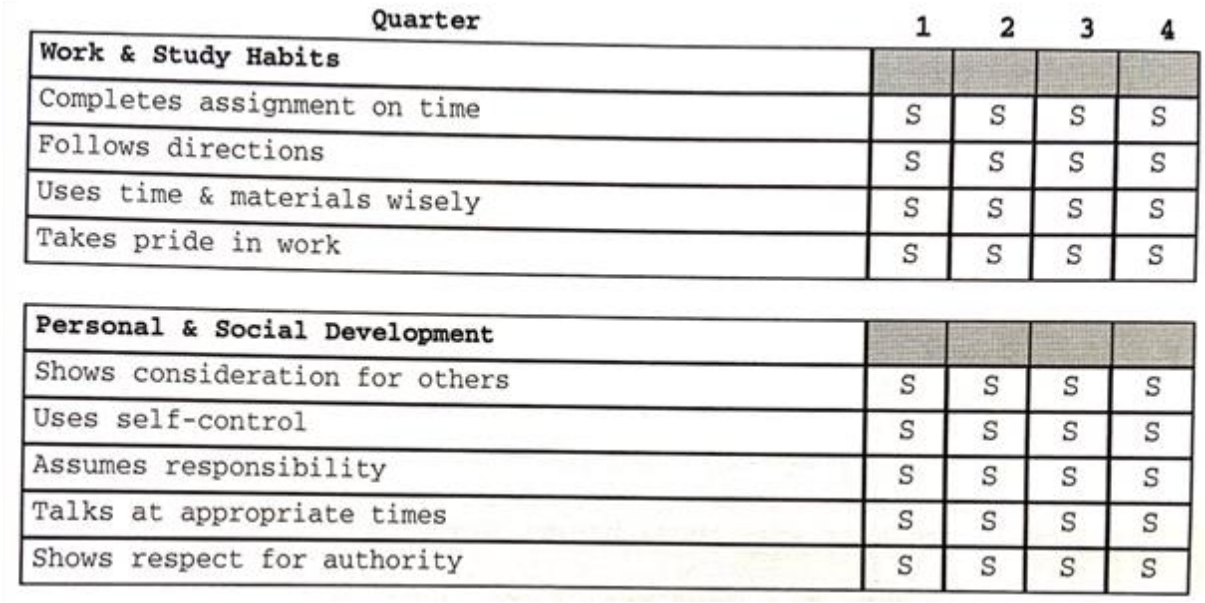
impossible to know exactly what one student needs from a book, this interaction and connection to a text was made possible because of a wide variety of literature being offered in the school library. It feels redundant to keep returning to the idea that this is not the same as indoctrination, but it is necessary because this is ultimately where many organizations and pro-censorship leaders base their argument for book bans. The student did not tell Knust that after reading this book I am now gay, what they are telling Knust is that while reading this book I felt a sense of welcoming and a recognition of part of my identity within the text. What *Red, White, and Royal Blue* offers students is an opportunity to view their own experiences and identities represented as valued, important, and real.

When children are framed as being innocent, pure, and on this seemingly fragile scale of whether or not they will be able to reach the ideal potential that is framed for them by adults, their personhood becomes boiled down to whether or not they are on their way to a "successful" adulthood. This ideal track or end goal is specifically framed in a way where the end points of "success" or "adulthood" or "self-sufficiency" are abstract enough that children and adolescents are locked into this constant push toward a future that is inherently not obtainable. There is no marker that is the definition of success, there is no definition of when you have reached adulthood, and there is no one end point for the moment someone has reached complete self-sufficiency. Adding to this, what makes someone successful or living the ideal adult life is subjective in nature, thus how children must be or act is constantly at the whim of the adults who are making these decisions for them. Pairing this with the framing of children as pure, innocent, and ultimately incapable of making choices for themselves, the concept of unknowing becomes increasingly

crucial in working against book bans and censorship in schools. If we can question or push back against monolithic narratives or depictions of children, then we are able to see them as whole beings that go beyond the definition of a child or adolescent. If we can see children and adolescents as whole beings, then we are shifting the focus to who they are in the moment, as opposed to the potential for who they one day might become.

When thinking about this practice of unknowing and what it offers children in the process, I return to thinking about the students who protested in Plattsmouth Nebraska. While a variety of arguments were made by the students who stepped up to speak out for themselves, some of the most salient and repeated arguments focused on the students right to select what they read and to make decisions on the content that they consume. If school board members and organizations in the area had come to the table without holding tightly to the image of the perfect, innocent child, then it is worth wondering how this might shift their ability to see the need to recognize children as competent human beings. One passage from Marah Gubar's "Risky Business" both frames how we can rethink narratives about children through her "kinship-model" as well as how this kind of thinking does the work of affording children a humanness that is not afforded to them with the lack of authority described in previous passages. This section reads, "The concept of kinship indicates relatedness, connection, and similarity without implying homogeneity, uniformity, and equality. Regarding similarity, kinship-model theories emphasize that children, like adults, are human beings" (453). Here, Gubar illustrates the ways in which children are not outside of human experience while also reinforcing that there are physical and cognitive differences between adults and children. Additionally, what the kinship-model is also establishing is the "connectedness" between each human

being, establishing that there is a responsibility to consider the treatment of children and adolescents and how the actions of adults impact this. By considering how children are complete beings, she is working through the logic of unknowing. In the practice of crediting children with context, experience, and complexity through unknowing, we must then give them the credit that they deserve to read and interpret texts given these backgrounds.



| Quarter | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Work & Study Habits** | | | | |
| Completes assignment on time | S | S | S | S |
| Follows directions | S | S | S | S |
| Uses time & materials wisely | S | S | S | S |
| Takes pride in work | S | S | S | S |
| **Personal & Social Development** | | | | |
| Shows consideration for others | S | S | S | S |
| Uses self-control | S | S | S | S |
| Assumes responsibility | S | S | S | S |
| Talks at appropriate times | S | S | S | S |
| Shows respect for authority | S | S | S | S |

**Fig. 2**: My second-grade report card. Here, I am showing a great respect for authority, but there is no mention of how I treated myself. While much of the written passages on my report card said that I had never spoken a negative word, I wonder what they would have thought about my "personal and social development" had it been known how I spoke to myself to get to a place where I was able to "use self-control." As discussed throughout several passages of this text, I think that the narratives associated with ideal development for children can be seen in areas like report cards. This is not to say that the individual teachers are the ones that are upholding these narratives, but that there is a lot of capital put into these kinds of stories of student success. What does the prioritization of following directions and showing respect for authority over showing signs of individuation or confidence do?

## Children in Education and Developmental Psychology

"I do not see the need for scholars to agree on a method or to participate equally in the various ways we might approach the study of categories of age. Our project, on the contrary, might be to embrace the interdisciplinarity of our field and to value methods that depart from our own, cultivating the kind of cross-disciplinary collaboration Gubar hopes for in the future of childhood studies."

-*A Queer History of Adolescence*, Brie Owen

In the space of education, Deborah Appleman is one thinker that often arises when talking about censorship. Appleman is invested in educational studies and has authored texts such as *Critical Encounters in Secondary English, Teaching Literature to Adolescents,* and *Literature and the New Culture Wars*. What Appleman does well, especially in her earlier texts, is thinking about the way we rob children of self-determination and limit their access to knowledge and literature. As Appleman sees it, children are whole beings who deserve to be treated as such. *Critical Encounters*, for instance, stresses frequently that students should be allowed to decide what they read and to explore multiple topics and perspectives under the consideration of education experts. This idea is widely accepted in educational spaces, but Appleman makes an effort to complicate the book ban conversation, especially in her more recent text, *Literature and the Culture Wars*.

Through each of her pieces, Appleman is consistently against censorship and the banning of books. In these arguments, Appleman identifies a clear stance that all banning and censorship should be heavily scrutinized, including those of which she attributes to cancel culture. As she begins to illustrate in *Literature and the Culture Wars* examples of how cancel culture has limited the reading potential of students, she lands on the example of the discourse surrounding Dr. Seuss books. A large reason for the push against Dr. Seuss books in schools was to do with racist depictions in his books including *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry* Street and *If I Ran the Zoo*. In doing so, Appleman puts into question what she deems as "seemingly arbitrary cancellation," and instead challenges educators to think about the texts included in their library and classrooms through a process of "intentional curricular design grounded in sound pedagogical theory as well as understanding of the changing literary and social landscapes" (101). What Appleman is doing in passages such as the above is reminding the cultural consciousness that book bans are coming from both the political left and right, of which is a fair distinction. This being said, not all book bans are the same. We can judge book bans appropriately by deciding what . In the case of the Dr. Seuss books in question, the purpose of the banning of these texts is because they present hurtful and stereotypical representations of people with a casualness that naturalizes the continued representation of people in this way. In the case of book bans such as that of *The Hate U Give*, the purpose of these bans is to bar children from what has been called critical race theory and from a text that discusses police violence and that narrates the experience of a black teenager. All of this is to say that while we should take all motions to censor or ban a text seriously, the repeated line of parents in school board meetings who are supporting book

bans does seem to ring true, where is the line? I am proposing the answer to this question as one in which we consider if the books are promoting hateful images and ideas or if they are places where students can see different perspectives as subjective and make their own decisions through the process of reading and understanding.

When thinking then about which texts we do select for libraries and especially curriculum, E.D. Hirsch is someone that is often cited. Hirsch stands out in the field of education as a proponent of standardized curriculum. Where much of his infamy has originated, however, is in a strong criticism in what thinkers have considered to be an advocation for the "classics." However, he does often qualify his arguments by stressing that the impact that certain kinds of texts or information will have does vary by the community in question. While Hirsch's ideas about ensuring that students are receiving similar educations and are taking away important and consistent knowledge away from school has been widely accepted, where he has been heavily critiqued is the interpretation of his writing as saying that there is a specific set of texts that students must be reading over others, of which is pulled from his frequent stressing of the cultural values of what we consider to be "classical" texts. However, when looking more closely at the arguments Hirsch is making, and through his eventual clarifications, his argument reads more as a push for a collective curriculum with the knowledge and information that students need based on their geographical location to succeed based on the projected career paths and interests of the area. The reading of Hirsch as deciding a set group of ideals or specific texts as important for all students to read, however, is an understandable interpretation. Hirsch's text *Cultural Literacy* often does lend itself to this misinterpretation, and the argument for a canon of literature that is structured off of very

white, male, Western ideologies is a very real and present argument. In addition to this, the argument that Hirsch is actually making here of selecting texts based on their factual relevance and how they will aid in the future of a student is oftentimes a sort of backing for movements like book bans. A passage from his text *Why Knowledge Matters*, for instance that demonstrates this commitment succinctly reads,

> Only by systematically imparting to all children the knowledge that is commonly possessed by successful citizens can all children gain the possibility of success—"success" understood as becoming a person with autonomy, who commands respect, has a communal voice that can write and speak effectively to strangers, can earn a good living, and can contribute to the wider community.

While Hirsch is not directly advocating for book bans, he is not considerate of the reason outside of factual and cultural currency that reading is important. Author Patrick Scott also mulls over *Cultural Literacy* and what it misses, and he comes to the conclusion that

> there is now dominant within our teaching organizations an epistemic idea of meaning as highly-individualized, created or constituted by the reader/writer… Beyond simple functional competence, then, the primary goal of reading becomes inner-directed, as self-discovery of self-fulfillment. (338).

It is through self-determination and exploration of one's thoughts and beliefs then that reading is increasingly impactful, beyond the cultural resource it can provide for understanding future texts. When looking at banned or challenged texts then, they are often critiqued because students do not need this information to succeed in school. That

being said, what plenty of these texts do offer is another approach for students to create meaning and participate in a practice of seeing themselves and others.

Despite Hirsch's lack of conversation on the meaning making made possible by literature, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors" written by Rudine Sims Bishop advocates for thinking about the ways in which including diverse topics and ideas in children's literature can be impactful for individual students. Because of this, Bishop's text is one that is heavily cited throughout the discipline of education. The thesis of Bishop's texts reads,

> Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers only have to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers of ten seek their mirrors in books. (1)

What is impactful about this argument is that it shows that books and other forms of media can be influential in the ways that children are able to conceive of their own being and feel heard in the texts they consume. What this argument isn't doing, as will become important to keep in mind in future passages, is stating that children are capable of being brainwashed by reading the books that are being contested and that they are not simply accepting everything they come across and taking it at face value. Instead, what Bishop proposes is the power that books can have in introducing ideas and making individuals feel seen. Under this understanding of children and literature, a possibility for students to

interpret, think about, and reflect on what they read is made possible. Unlike authors like Hirsch, Bishop is not concerned about presenting specific ideas or values to students to be accepted. Instead, she is invested in providing students with a wide array of literature with the interest of each child in mind. This is paramount in practicing unknowing and leaving space for the many ways a book can be useful to a wide variety of students.

Developmental psychology also interacts closely with how we frame and interpret children, although this is a space that is frequently critiqued within childhood studies. While there are ways to discuss and study the development of children over time, usually where the critique comes from the narrativization in the process. Where individuals find issues is when narratives about what is normal or abnormal development are naturalized through psychological studies. The problem arises when a goal is set for the process of development. What is problematic about this is that it is not considerate of different paces or kinds of development, that it erases any outside factors that impact development, and that it oversimplifies what it means to develop well, which often results in the labeling of individuals as "deficient" or "less developed."

While there is still plenty of work that exists that operates from these narratives and works to further support these narratives, there are many in the field of psychology that are conducting studies differently and actively pointing out the issues that are caused by these kinds of studies. For instance, psychologist Valerie Walkerdine is one that makes an effort to point out the issues in childhood psychology and developmental psychology. In her piece "Beyond Developmentalism?", Walkerdine writes,

> What is important here is the kind of story which developmental psychology claims to be: a grand, totalizing story, *the* story of children's development, a

> scientific story testable within limits, in relation to the methodological guarantees given about the treatment of scientific data, science's claim to truth. (452)

This is to say that developmental psychology sets up a story of how children should develop and how they should "be," while simultaneously using the credibility and authority that research and science is granted to further back the legitimacy of these stories. Walkerdine also points out the totalizing nature of these kinds of narratives that does not leave room for any divergence within what might be considered "normal" or "proper" development.

What is interesting about this piece from Walkerdine is that it is consistent with many of the arguments made by those in childhood studies. As mentioned previously, a common argument against the idea of developmentalism within childhood studies is that it creates a sort of goal-oriented narrative and a linear path in which one must follow to be successful, to be considered an accomplished, well-rounded adult. What is also crucial about this argument is that the goal or set of ideals is unreachable, implying that there is an end point to development, an abstract idea. Walkerdine backs this up, stating,

> Development as progressive evolution is not an object but a central trope in modern narratives of the individual. Development is presented as towards a goal, indeed a goal that not all reach, but which is surely the logocentric pinnacle of advanced, recreational abstract thought… The goal is a rationally ordered social order, one in which democracy can function on the basis of a citizenry who obey the moral and political order of their own free will because of their advanced stage of development. (455-456)

In addition to further resonating with the criticisms of many within childhood studies, Walkerdine discusses why these kinds of narratives within developmental psychology exist. By positioning complete development as a goal reached by obeying moral standards that are upheld and privileged, those who are not able to meet these standards are seen as incapable, deficient, or not succeeding as an adult. This then positions children and adolescents at the whim of those who decide what exactly is beneficial for their development, which makes book bans a particularly volatile tool in controlling what kinds of stories they have access to.

In addition to the work of Walkerdine, another writer within the field of psychology that pushes against ideas like book bans is author Elisabeth Young-Bruehl. In Young-Bruehl's text *Childism*, she argues against a concept she calls "childism." Childism in Young-Bruehl's work is defined as the various enactments of prejudice toward young people in which children, similarly to childhood studies, are made out to be figures that are developmentally less-than adults and that can be used as analogies for marginalized communities as a form of objectification. In one passage, Young-Bruehl writes, "children have been fantasized and set in belief systems that require them to serve the needs and fantasies served by allegedly inferior women, allegedly inferior 'races,' or alleged infiltrator groups" (36), meaning that children are infantilized or romanticized in a way that serves the needs of others and as a tool to legitimize the infantilization, romanticization, and objectification of marginalized groups by way of applying "childish" characteristics to individuals of these identity categories. The results of this construction, as Young-Bruehl points out is that

> The prevailing images or stereotypes of children that individual adults and societies use to rationalize their feelings toward them are, taken together, their childism… they construct children as wild animals that should be physically controlled—they must be broken or they will not be obedient, useful possessions. (20)

Like Walkerdine, Young-Bruehl stands out as a scholar in psychology that thinks about the construction of children as incomplete and incapable as a detrimental logic that puts children at the whims of adults and that can be applied to children and other individuals as a way of justifying actions against them. Finally, Young-Bruehl also echoes many arguments made by those in childhood studies, stating, "it is a crucial part of childism's distinctiveness as a prejudice that children are in reality, not just in guilty adult projections, developmentally immature; they have not yet become their future selves" (42), or that beyond these forms of justification that there is also this idea that children are in a state of potentiality where every action, decision, or path that they take is in direct correlation to the future adult they will become, one that should be shaped by the adults in their lives. This then further creates the divide between adults and children and inscribes the kinds of power dynamics that have justified dangerous movements such as book bans.

The reason I think that it is important to point out both sides of the coin that are implemented within developmental psychology is that the field is diverse in nature, but also that there is no one consensus that comes from psychology on what it means to develop properly, and proper development is an idea that is contested within the field itself. Additionally, this back and forth on psychological studies further highlights the

importance of what these studies actually do. Walkerdine is not asking for the end of studying the development of childhood psychology or how children develop. Instead, she is insisting that the norm to include narratives and assumed goals within psychology is what needs to be reflected on and to be excluded in further studies. These kinds of arguments do not mean that individual psychologists or counselors who work in the field are necessarily all doing it wrong or are working through a method of malintent, but instead it really matters what specifically they are doing and how it impacts the individual child in front of them. Given the consensus between childhood studies, education, and developmental psychology that censorship is harmful and demeaning, we must investigate the real motivations behind book bans to put a stop to them and interrogate the assumptions we have about children.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I take care of equipment and materials. | S | S | S | S |
| I can make independent choices. | S | S | S | S |
| I can solve my own problems. | S | S | S | S |
| I seek only my fair share of teacher's attention. | S | S | S | S |

| **Personal & Social Development** | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I observe class and school rules. | S | S | S | S |
| I accept and respond to teacher's direction. | S | S | S | S |
| I work, play, and share well with others. | S | S | S | S |
| I accept other's opinions, feelings, and ideas. | S | S | S | S |
| I can deal with peer conflict. | S | S | S | S |
| I have appropriate control over my feelings. | S | S | S | S |
| I am kind and courteous toward others. | S | S | S | S |

**Fig. 3:** Reading through these categories on my elementary report card after having done some work with E.D. Hirsch's texts, I am wondering how these factors are associated with the kinds of academic and career successes he was advocating for students. Fields here that stand out in particular to me are "I can solve my own problems," "I seek only my fair share of teacher's attention," and "I have appropriate control over my feelings." Just like some of the kinds of information and proficiencies that Hirsch values, there is a level of importance to qualities such as these, but what I feel is missing, especially from a section titled "Personal & Social Development" is a consideration beyond qualities that are ideal for a career space, ones that get into qualities that make life more livable for the students in question.

## Conclusion

The history of book bans and censorship has its roots long before the contemporary conversations happening today. That being said, it is in this political moment that we have seen an uproar in demands for certain topics and stories to be left out of classroom libraries and expunged from curriculum. According to a report conducted by the American Library Association in March of 2023, "More than 1,200 challenges were compiled by the association in 2022" and "more than 2,500 different books were objected to, compared to 1,858 in 2021" (Italie). In the background of these book bans, have been outraged parents who claim that it is well within their "parental rights" to decide what kinds of texts their children have access to. Academic disciplines that focus on children (like childhood studies, education, and developmental psychology) almost entirely agree that censorship and framing children as less than is extremely harmful. Attempts to gesture toward reasoning for censorship are often drawing from either the fringes of these disciplines or from no research at all.

In arguing their point, book ban supporters undermine the expertise of teachers and librarians who have actually spent time researching literacy and education. While supporters are not often pulling from actual research, what they are often pointing to is how certain books are too advanced for children developmentally or would be psychologically detrimental. What stands out in these conversations is that there is a certain kind of trust or credibility placed in the sciences that is not afforded to education. Teaching is frequently made out to be a "women's job" and often downplayed with phrases like "just a schoolteacher." Alternatively, it also is objectified through the

romanticization of teaching as being a “work of heart” or a field for “angels.” This infantilization and romanticization of teaching and of women is steeped in misogyny and is how the distrust and belittling of teachers and the arguments they make occurs. By diminishing the intellect and experience of teachers and assigning childlike characteristics, organizations like Moms for Liberty make headway by both propping up their expertise and shoehorning in arguments for the psychology of children and adolescents. Whether based on actual research or not, the signaling toward hard sciences as opposed to the expertise of educators is exemplary to the gendered reaction toward educators.

Knowing that the experience and expertise of educators is often downplayed to justify the censorship of books and several different topics, there is a necessity to consider the voices of educators. Like the story in Plattsmouth Nebraska, there is fear for both teachers and librarians of losing decision-making in the classroom and the library, and rightfully so. Beyond book bans, parents and individuals in political spaces are campaigning for the right of parents to be able to see and essentially commandeer class curriculums long before the start of the semester. Similar to the concerns of educators, the concerns and arguments made by students against book bans also heavily touch on their ability to make decisions as well as their right to educate themselves on real-world topics. Carlee Petereit from Plattsmouth tells Ron Johnson, for instance, that amongst the books in question at their high school “there were a lot of things that students in our building had experienced themselves, and so taking them out was kind of just like pushing what they have experienced themselves under the rug… we didn’t understand why that was not going to be talked about anymore.” Sam McKnight also states, “I was very willing to

protest this because it's not within their rights to take away our books or our perspectives… it just infuriated all of us." While oftentimes in the book ban conversations students are made out to be incapable of handling complex information or not ready to take on certain topics, the students at Plattsmouth High School, alongside their dedicated teachers and librarians, are well aware what lies behind the promise to protect students: an overwhelming desire to restrict knowledge of students, despite their varied and experienced lives.

The primary focus of book bans has directly targeted books about race, gender, sexuality, and politics more broadly. In a piece titled "The Most Powerful Moms in America Are the New Face of the Republican Party," writer Kiera Butler talks about how groups like Moms for Liberty make arguments for curriculum and library censorship and how the Republican party plays a larger role in sustaining this argument. In doing so, Butler recalls a Mom's for Liberty conference where Republican politicians were heavily celebrated for "pro-parental rights" campaigns. Butler then ties this back to the kind of arguments politicians in this space make and how they interact and correlate with the desires of organizations like Moms for Liberty, writing specifically about Ron Desantis and how he praises and further flames this audience by talking about parental rights and the need to allow "kids go to school, watch cartoons, just be kids without having an agenda shoved down their throats" (Butler). Poignant in this passage is Desantis' interpretation of what it means to "just be kids." Desantis, on surface level, is using fearmongering and buzzwords to retain a voting base, but he is also working to protect a set of ideologies and beliefs about children. The goal of doing this is to retain the kinds of structures that are beneficial for him and others that also currently benefit from the

governmental structure of the United States. Part of this effort means insinuating that children and adolescents are nothing but vessels that will easily be indoctrinated and assumed into political "agendas." Further, this argument also gives Desantis the ability to decide which topics are "political," thus creating a framework for what should be erased from the classroom.

Ultimately, the proposition that supporters of book bans are only interested in protecting children is a falsehood. While there are many parents and community members out there who believe that this is the way to go about protecting their kids, when looking at what these kinds of arguments do and ultimately support, it is evident that the overall good or well-being of children was never at the center of these arguments. If children really were the main concern, it would be about the individual needs of their child, not an abstract group or category that does not exist with overarching psychological needs or beliefs. Or, at the very least, it would pertain to actual tangible needs that can be measurably traced across all children.

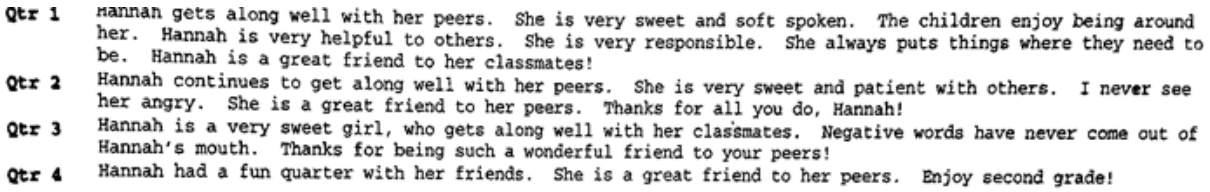
In the conversation on book bans, there is immediate work that can be done. While the level of pushback against books and curriculum varies greatly by city, much less state, a lot can happen in a school board meeting or at the local level of politics. While the argument for staying invested in local politics can sometimes feel like beating a dead horse, in this context, and to be fair in many, many other contexts, it is crucial to stay informed on what is happening in your community. Without the students, community members, and school board members of Plattsmouth Nebraska, Cunningham-Swanson could very well still be on the local school board pushing her list of challenged books to banned books. No one book is banned by law across the United States. Instead,

it is through individual interactions between school boards or teachers and community members that whole communities and experiences are left out of classrooms and excluded from libraries. Adding to this, supporting teachers in your area and staying active in advocacy for the expertise of educators in the classroom is incredibly important as more and more effort is put into stripping away the rights that they have in conducting their classrooms.

There are very real consequences associated with diminishing teachers and students happening daily. While you may not interact with children daily, it is important to remember how the concepts that are established through a logic of objectifying children impact the lives of children but also the lives of marginalized individuals. What I propose for action is an effort to practice a form of unknowing that avoids generalization and centers real children and allows educators to make decisions based on the human being in front of them. While these ideas might not feel as concrete as going to school board meetings or attending protests, this kind of theoretical work can manifest in the day-to-day in an impactful way.

Across contemporary conversations about book bans, childhood studies, developmental psychology, and education, there are many advocates against book bans and censorship in public schools. Despite this, the wave of endorsement for censorship is on the rise and has taken shape through the persistent and unfortunate degradation of teachers and children. While often done under the guise of protecting children, what movements like book banning actually do is further cement the idea that children are not capable of handling everyday topics and their own determination and that teachers should not have a say in this space either. There is an ever-growing stress for parental rights in

the United States, but in the interest of adolescent and childhood rights, wholeness and respect, not innocence, must be the forefront desire.



| | |
|---|---|
| **Qtr 1** | Hannah gets along well with her peers. She is very sweet and soft spoken. The children enjoy being around her. Hannah is very helpful to others. She is very responsible. She always puts things where they need to be. Hannah is a great friend to her classmates! |
| **Qtr 2** | Hannah continues to get along well with her peers. She is very sweet and patient with others. I never see her angry. She is a great friend to her peers. Thanks for all you do, Hannah! |
| **Qtr 3** | Hannah is a very sweet girl, who gets along well with her classmates. Negative words have never come out of Hannah's mouth. Thanks for being such a wonderful friend to your peers! |
| **Qtr 4** | Hannah had a fun quarter with her friends. She is a great friend to her peers. Enjoy second grade! |

**Fig. 5:** Among each of my report cards, this section listed under "Social Skills" is one that stands out to me the most. Anger and negativity are emotions I currently struggle to allow myself to feel now, and much of this came from what I thought was appropriate for a young girl in my family when I was a young girl myself. I remember being celebrated for being a quiet and positive student, and I remember just about all of the books I read about little girls possessing the same qualities. Even from my secret love of Junie B. Jones books, I remember learning that what Junie was doing was mischievous and not ladylike. While I would not say that I was brainwashed by the very polished version of girlhood I read about in books, I do wonder what it would have been like to see more diverse depictions and to have characters like Junie B. Jones be presented as kids, not as images of rebellion against what I should be.

Appendix: Possible Banned Book Syllabus

# Banned Stories

A High School Literature Course

## COURSE OVERVIEW

Young adult literature has been and will continue to be an ever-evolving body of texts, with both the parameters of the canon and the topics deemed "appropriate" always in question. In this course, we will examine books that have made banned book lists across the United States and explore why they have been banned, the implications of that banning, and what student voices are capable of when defending their right to read.

## REQUIRED TEXTS

Samira Ahmed's *Internment*
Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X*
Christina Hammonds Reed's *The Black Kids*
Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki's *This One Summer*

Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret*

Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*
Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer*
Ashley Hope Pérez's *Out of Darkness*

## GUIDE QUOTES

"There's been access cut for all the young people who might need these books and where they might only get them in schools. You can't take for granted that there might not be a library or bookstore in everybody's community or that there may not be a $20 bill to go buy that book that they no longer have access to because of these bannings" – Jason Reynolds

“[Banning] struck me as a purist yet elementary kind of censorship designed to appease adults rather than educate children. Amputate the problem, band-aid the solution” – Toni Morrison

“The best interest of young people is to be seen in literature, to be seen in stories, to be invited in, to learn about people who are different from themselves” - Maia Kobabe

## CLASS STRUCTURE

Because this is a dual credit course, Tuesdays and Thursdays, like college courses, will be reserved for study time. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays will be used to participate in activities and discuss the assigned readings. Toward the end of both semesters, we will continue to discuss assigned readings, but there will also be assigned reading and workshop time that will be used to work on your semester finals.

## CLASSROOM DISCUSSION ETHOS

Much of the work you will be asked to participate in this year will be focused on discussion and collaboration with your classmates and myself. This might look like small group work, answering and asking questions during lecture time, or participating in workshops. In this classroom, your voice is greatly appreciated, and I hope that you feel encouraged and supported in engaging in this classroom. That being said, I know that discussion in the classroom space looks different for everyone. If you feel uncomfortable speaking in class, feel free to email me a 4-5 sentence response before class. I will also be offering online participation during class where you will be able to submit your thoughts anonymously. Finally, my expectation of this class and myself is that we respect everyone’s voices throughout the year and are conscious of and compassionate toward every student or person in this course.

## MAJOR ASSIGMENTS

**Fall Final:**

Select a banned book outside of the assigned texts (visit the "useful resources" below to help search for a text). From here, you will read said text and use it to produce a book report. This book report could take many different forms, including visual art, video reports, or a 5–8-page essay. Check with me if you are interested in another form for your final. Here are some questions that should guide your report:

- What are the major themes of your text?
- What stories or identities does your text speak to?
- What is the importance/significance of your banned book?
- Do you resonate with this piece? If so, how does it feel to connect with the characters/images of the text?
- What is the significance of the author's identity? How are they sharing their own voice through YA literature?

**Spring Final:**

Select between the following options:

A. Select a banned book (either one we have read or one from the list below). In addition to this, you will also select a text that is considered a "classic" or taught frequently in the classroom (visit the "useful resources," this also may be a book you have read already in your high school career). Make an argument for your banned book taking the place of the classic text. What themes do they share? What lessons or morals do they both convey? What might the banned book add to the conversations being had in high school English classes? What conversations might the classic be missing? This essay should be 6-8 pages long.

B. Write a contextual and rhetorical analysis of a banned book outside of the assigned texts (either one we have read or one from the list below). For this project, you will be conducting research on when the text was written, what time it takes place, and the political discourses happening in these spaces. When was it banned? Why was it banned? What does it say about our society

in this moment that it was banned? In addition to this, you will be thinking about the author's identities and how they might shape their piece. It will be important to ask how your text is speaking back to moments in politics (and where this specifically happens in the text itself), the importance or goal of this author's text in its context, and the importance of reading the piece. This essay should be 6-8 pages long.

**Both of these projects will be accompanied with a 3–5-minute presentation that will be shared with the class.**

## COURSE SCHEDULE

| Dates | In Class Activities | Readings and Assignments Due |
|---|---|---|
| 08/10 – 08/11 | **TH:** Course and syllabus and introduction<br>**F:** Group discussion on NY Times article | **F:** Attempts to Ban Books Doubled in 2022 |
| 08/14 – 08/18 | Group discussions on ***Internment*** | **Reading *Internment***<br>**M:** Chapters 1-2<br>**W:** Chapters 3-4<br>**F:** Chapters 5-6 |
| 08/21 – 08/25 | Group discussions on ***Internment*** | **Reading *Internment***<br>**M:** Chapters 7-9<br>**W:** Chapters 10-12<br>**F:** Chapters 13-14 |
| 08/28 – 09/01 | Group discussions on ***Internment*** | **Reading *Internment***<br>**M:** Chapters 15-17<br>**W:** Chapters 18-19<br>**F:** Chapters 20-21 |
| 09/04 – 09/05 | **LABOR DAY AND IN-SERVICE, NO CLASS** | |
| 09/06 – 09/08 | Group discussions on ***Internment*** | **Reading *Internment***<br>**W:** Chapters 22-24<br>**F:** Chapters 25-27 |
| 09/11 – 09/15 | Group discussions on ***Internment*** | **Reading *Internment***<br>**M:** Chapters 28-30 |

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| | | **W:** Chapters 31-33<br>**F:** Chapters 34-36 |
| 09/18 – 09/22 | Group discussions on ***The Black Kids*** | **Reading *The Black Kids***<br>**M:** Chapter 1<br>**W:** Chapter 2<br>**F:** Chapters 3-4 |
| 09/25 – 09/29 | Group discussions on ***The Black Kids*** | **Reading *The Black Kids***<br>**M:** Chapter 5<br>**W:** Chapters 6-7<br>**F:** Chapters 8-9 |
| 10/02 – 10/06 | Group discussions on ***The Black Kids*** | **Reading *The Black Kids***<br>**M:** Chapters 10-12<br>**W:** Chapters 13-14<br>**F:** Chapters 15-16 |
| 10/09 – 10/12 | Group discussions on ***The Black Kids*** | **Reading *The Black Kids***<br>**M:** Chapters 17-19<br>**W:** Chapters 20-21 |
| 10/13 | **IN-SERVICE NO CLASS** | |
| 10/16 – 10/20 | Group discussions on ***The Black Kids*** | **Reading *The Black Kids***<br>**M:** Chapters 22-23<br>**W:** Chapter 24<br>**F:** Chapters 25-26 |
| 10/23 – 10/26 | Group discussions on ***The Poet X*** | **Reading *The Poet X***<br>**M:** Through Page 72<br>**W:** Through Page 145 |
| 10/27 | **IN-SERVICE, NO CLASS** | |
| 10/30 – 11/03 | Group discussions on ***The Poet X*** | **Reading *The Poet X***<br>**M:** Through Page 216<br>**W:** Through Page 288<br>**F:** Through Page 355 |
| 11/06 – 11/10 | Group discussions on ***This One Summer*** | **Reading *This One Summer***<br>**M:** Through Page 55<br>**W:** Through Page 105<br>**F:** Through Page 159 |
| 11/13 – 11/17 | Group discussions on ***This One Summer*** | **Reading *This One Summer***<br>**M:** Through Page 221<br>**W:** Through Page 261<br>**F:** Through Page 320 |
| 11/20 – 11/22 | **M:** Discuss Readings<br>**W:** Introduce Semester Final<br>**F:** Group Brainstorming/Workshopping Session- What themes have stuck out to you this semester? | **Be working on semester final**<br>**M:** Samira Ahmed Tweets Jason Reynolds on Steven Colbert |

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| 11/23 – 11/24 | **THANKSGIVING BREAK, NO CLASS** | |
| 11/27 – 12/01 | **M:** Discuss Readings<br>**W:** Lecture and conversation on gaps in YA lit taught in schools and the cannon of "classics"<br>**F:** Reading Time | **Be working on semester final**<br>**M:** Windows, Mirrors, and Sliding Glass Doors Beyond Mirrors and Windows |
| 12/04 – 12/08 | **M:** Discuss Readings, Lecture and conversation on history of book burnings and censorship<br>**W:** Reading/Writing Time<br>**F:** Workshop Time | **Be working on semester final**<br>**M:** Burning Issues and Banning Books |
| 12/11 – 12/15 | **M:** Book Report Presentations<br>**W:** Book Report Presentations<br>**F:** Book Report Presentations | **Be working on semester final**<br>**F:** Final Project Due |
| 12/18 – 12/20 | **M:** Book Report Presentations<br>**W:** Last Day of Semester Final Thoughts Groupwork | **Be working on semester final** |
| 12/21 – 01/03: Winter Break | | |
| 01/04 – 01/05 | **TH:** Introduction to Semester projects and Texts. Lecture on the canon of "classics." What do these classics have in common? What stories are they missing?<br>**F:** Group discussion on article | **F:** Book Banning and Mental Health 21 Classic Books that You Read in High School |
| 01/08 – 01/12 | Group discussions on ***Are You There God? It's Me Margaret*** | **Reading *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret***<br>**M:** Chapters 1-3<br>**W:** Chapters 4-6<br>**F:** Chapters 7-8 |
| 01/15 | **MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY, NO CLASS** | |
| 01/16 – 01/19 | Group discussions on ***Are You There God? It's Me Margaret*** | **Reading *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret***<br>**W:** Chapters 9-13<br>**F:** Chapters 14-16 |

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| 01/22 – 01/26 | Group discussions on ***Are You There God? It's Me Margaret*** | **Reading *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret***<br>**M:** Chapters 17-19<br>**W:** Chapters 20-22<br>**F:** Chapters 23-25 |
| 01/29 – 02/02 | Group discussions on ***The House on Mango Street*** | **Reading *The House on Mango Street***<br>**M:** Through Page 18<br>**W:** Through Page 38<br>**F:** Through Page 55 |
| 02/05 – 02/09 | Group discussions on ***The House on Mango Street*** | **Reading *The House on Mango Street***<br>**M:** Through Page 73<br>**W:** Through Page 93<br>**F:** Through Page 110 |
| 02/12 – 02/15 | Group discussions on ***Out of Darkness*** | **Reading *Out of Darkness***<br>**M:** Through Page 28<br>**W:** Through Page 57<br>**F:** Through Page 85 |
| 02/19 | **PRESIDENT'S DAY, NO CLASS** | |
| 02/20 – 02/23 | Group discussions on ***Out of Darkness*** | **Reading *Out of Darkness***<br>**W:** Through Page 128<br>**F:** Through Page 168 |
| 02/26 – 03/01 | Group discussions on ***Out of Darkness*** | **Reading *Out of Darkness***<br>**M:** Through Page 197<br>**W:** Through Page 228<br>**F:** Through Page 258 |
| 03/04 – 03/07 | Group discussions on ***Out of Darkness*** | **Reading *Out of Darkness***<br>**M:** Through Page 296<br>**W:** Through Page 335 |
| 03/08 | **IN-SERVICE, NO CLASS** | |
| 03/11 | **IN-SERVICE, NO CLASS** | |
| 03/12 – 03/15 | Group discussions on ***Out of Darkness*** | **Reading *Out of Darkness***<br>**W:** Through Page 374<br>**F:** Through Page 412 |
| 03/18 – 03/22 | Group discussions on ***Gender Queer*** | **Reading *Gender Queer***<br>**M:** Through Page 41<br>**W:** Through Page 82<br>**F:** Through Page 120 |
| 03/25 – 03/29 | **SPRING BREAK, NO CLASS** | |
| 04/01 – 04/05 | Group discussions on ***Gender Queer*** | **Reading *Gender Queer***<br>**M:** Through Page 158<br>**W:** Through Page 199<br>**F:** Through Page 240 |

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| 04/08 – 04/12 | **M:** Discuss Readings<br>**W:** Introduce Semester Final<br>**F:** Group Brainstorming/Workshopping Session- What themes have stuck out to you this semester? | **Be working on semester final**<br>**M:** Hispanic Representation in Literature |
| 04/15 – 04/19 | **M:** Discuss Readings<br>**W:** Lecture and conversation on student voices- What rhetorical moves do you see being made in Monday's readings? What arguments might you make for the literature you read?<br>**F:** Reading Time | **Be working on semester final**<br>**M:** Reading as Resistance Student Protests |
| 04/22 – 04/25 | **M:** Discuss Readings, Lecture on what stories we have read thus far and which ones we haven't gotten to- Covering different banned books.<br>**W:** Reading/Writing Time | **Be working on semester final**<br>**M:** Embracing Intercultural Diversification |
| 04/26 | **IN-SERVICE, NO CLASS** | |
| 04/29 – 05/03 | **M:** Workshop Time<br>**W:** Workshop Time<br>**F:** Final Presentations | **Be working on semester final** |
| 05/06 – 05/10 | **M:** Final Presentations<br>**W:** Final Presentations<br>**F:** Final Presentations | **Be working on semester final**<br>**F:** Final Project Due |
| 05/13 – 05/17 | **M:** Final Presentations<br>**W:** Last Day, Sharing final impressions and thoughts on banned literature | **Be working on semester final** |

## USEFUL RESOURCES

- The 50 Most Banned Books in America
- Banned YA Books by Black Authors
- Banned & Challenged Classics
- Banned Books & Challenged Books List
- High School Classics Books

## MORE ABOUT OUR REQUIRED TEXTS

My approach to this syllabus would be to assign banned books that offer a wide variety of experiences and identities, as well as many different rhetorical forms I decided to assign all female or nonbinary authored texts because female and nonbinary authors and starkly underrepresented in high school classrooms. In addition to this, I made an effort to include authors of different ethnicities, races, or nationalities, given that diversity in this area is also severely overlooked within the classroom space and withing the canon of "classic literature." Below, you will see that I also decided to include blurbs that justify the "validity" of the themes presented. I decided to include these as a sort of homage to the work that teachers across the United States have to do to defend the texts they teach or even display in their classroom. Every book below has been banned in the context of United States classrooms.

Samira Ahmed's *Internment*

This text focuses on a girl living in an internment camp and her journey toward saving herself, her family, and her community in the internment camp. From this, students can expect to learn about leadership and communication as it is expressed through the main character's efforts. In addition to this, Ahmed's piece also has strong themes of hope and self-determination, of which are important for high schoolers as they develop their own opinions and come into adulthood.

Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X*

*The Poet X* is a text that is written in prose and that encourages students to learn about different forms of writing and inspire creativity in how they approach their own writing practice. In addition to this, this piece in many ways is a quintessential coming-of-age stories that shows the main character grappling with the challenges that students will inevitably face every day, with all consequences and benefits laid out clearly.

Christina Hammonds Reed's *The Black Kids*

*The Black Kids* is a novel that touches on themes of both institutionalized racism and classicism as well as themes of mental health. While these themes are very present and real in the lives of many students, Reed's text offers, in many ways, a supporting hand or representation of what many students are experiencing. Adding to this, it is also a great "window" for students who have not experienced stories like the ones depicted in *The Black Kids* to widen their perspectives and get a greater sense of what others are going through.

Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki's *This One Summer*

*This One Summer* is a coming-of-age story that tackles stories on family structures and strife as well as sexuality and peer pressure. While these are all very tangible experiences for students, it can be important to that students have access to stories like these as they navigate their own coming-of-age. In addition to this, this piece is a graphic novel, meaning that it uses both language and drawings, of which may inspire students to think outside of the box with reading as well as see depictions of characters, as well as reading about them.

Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me Margaret*

This novel discusses themes such as friendship, family, religion, and community, as well as details and stories of the lives of young women, that all students typically do not have access to. As Margaret moves throughout her young life, she encounters the many challenges and changes that students face, and she speaks about them openly. Like all of the texts we will be reading in this course, this text could be very useful for students to see themselves and others represented.

Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*

*The House on Mango Street* is a text written in prose that focuses on themes of family, poverty, language barriers, friendship, and sexuality. With this, Cisneros encounters the

many dangers and obstacles that high school-aged children face as they begin to create their sense of self. While this piece depicts many hardships and sad realities, it does not read as a cautionary tale. Instead, in many ways, it reads as a beautiful illustration of how young women come into their own, despite and through their daily adaptions.

Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer*

This graphic novel reads as a memoir and a retelling of Kobabe's experience with gender and sexuality. As discussed with many of the previous pieces, this novel offers a form of representation for students that they themselves can relate to or that offers a different experience from their own in a way that is well articulated and beautifully illustrated.

Ashley Hope Pérez's *Out of Darkness*

*Out of Darkness* elegantly addresses a story of race and interracial love. This piece also touches on poverty as well as familial loss. Pérez's piece is structured in historical events and is both informative in what the relations of the time were like, as well as useful for students to see depictions of racism, sexuality, and abuse that may not be present in the other pieces they have access to and is important for them to intercept in a way that is both accurate and compassionate.

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