

Courage: In Books and Classroom Teachers

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Starting a career can be an intimidating prospect for any new teacher. The dynamic landscape of building relationships with students, families, and colleagues; planning for and delivering instruction; using assessment data to inform instruction; attending to state and national content standards; and adapting to the ever-changing demands of school environments require a toolbox of complex skills. Additionally, nowadays teachers must understand school policies and procedures, including those that deal with controversies about books (Masso, 2023). Often, these are the skills not yet honed when teacher candidates go through teacher training, taking coursework and completing practicum experiences. More often than not, responding to concerns about books happens when teachers are in the classroom.

In this article, the authors profile *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Lord of the Flies*, and *The Great Gatsby*, a trio that is often the staple in high school English classes across the country and yet comes under attack by censors. The authors offer reasons for each book's controversial content, and conversely, their inclusion as part of the English curriculum. Finally, they discuss courage as a cross-sectional theme and suggest that teachers who teach challenging texts are courageous.

Introduction

With the ubiquity of remote learning and hybrid models of instruction due to the COVID-19, many parents became more involved in their children's education (DeWitt, 2020). Educators applaud parent involvement; however, increased oversight by zealous parents can cross the line and open a Pandora's Box to a reality that impacts teachers, students, and instruction in profound ways. Book censorship is nothing new, and the classics of literature have not been immune to

these charges (Masso, 2023). Storied authors and their works—including Mark Twain, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and William Shakespeare—have been the subject of disagreement because of their supposed controversial, vulgar, or otherwise objectionable language or subject matter (Clark, 2006). In fact, Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, first published in 1885 and banned that same year, remains one of the most challenged books in book banning history (Harvard University Sources, n.d.).

Often parents expect teachers and schools to make accommodations and remove the identified text(s) from libraries, the curriculum, or the classroom. Research (Clark, 2006; Schifferin et al., 2014; Tabatsky & Glass, 2014) chronicles ways that parents monitor their children’s experiences and problems, particularly at educational institutions, and micromanage their children’s learning, becomingly overly involved in school matters, which can result in unnecessary stress and anxiety for students and increase teacher workloads. When parents dispute a text, the teacher might have to provide an alternative reading and modify planned lessons, which still meet curricular goals and are suitable for the learner. A teacher’s invisible labor increases, which drains time—a finite resource—that could, arguably be spent attending to other tasks.

While it is important for parents to participate in the educational process, it is also important to balance allowing children to learn and grow independently. According to Schifferin et al. (2014), parental involvement contributes to many positive child outcomes, but if extreme or not developmentally appropriate, it is also associated with higher levels of child anxiety and depression. This is not meant to slight parents, who are their child’s first and most important educator. When questions or disagreements arise between parents and schools, temperance, sound judgment, common sense, facts, and respectful communication are the hallmarks of

negotiations needed to navigate through these encounters. According to journalist John Morrow, “If you ask professional educators in a public forum whether they view parents as assets or liabilities,” they’ll insist that parents are invaluable partners (Hess, 2015, p. 119). Viewing parents with a sense of possibility and knowing that they can be powerful force multipliers is worth remembering (Gunning, 2010). More student benefits accrue when parents and educators work collaboratively, not at cross-purposes (Safiye, 2023). Identifying opportunities, illuminating barriers, and solving problems are situational, and solutions that work one place may not work somewhere else (Hess, 2015, p. 118). Thus, creating spaces for dialogue, not shouting matches, is in the best interest of students and all stakeholders. Teachers need allies.

Unlike mathematics, the third “R” of what has long been hallowed as school fundamentals—Reading, ‘Riting, and ‘Ritmetic—literature tends to be scrutinized by parents with more intensity and frequency (Clark, 2006). Typical concerns center on content or themes that conflict with family values or beliefs, rendering them unsuitable for children or teenagers. Rather than a closed-door approach, when a book becomes the focus of a dispute, parents, community members, and other stakeholders ought to be engaged in critical thinking and open discussions of divergent perspectives.

Book Controversy Momentum

Throughout history, books have been banned or restricted for several reasons. From religious or moral objections to political censorship, the printed word has been censored by governments and other authorities. In school contexts, material has been challenged by individuals or groups who disagree with content (Allington, 1975; Lycke & Lucey, 2018). When trouble brews in schools, parents often point to explicit, offensive content or controversial themes

while ignoring the overall merit of the targeted text. While such intentions may be legitimate, limiting student access to information and censorship impacts intellectual freedom.

Notwithstanding educators' rationales and professional organizations' position statements, as the banned book movement gathers momentum, the banned books list continues to grow. According to PEN America (2023), over the last few decades 1,648 books have been added. What qualifies as a banned book? What are challenged books? What reasons explain why a book is banned or challenged?

A *banned book* is one that has been removed from circulation or restricted from access by a government, library, or other authority. The American Library Association (2023) defines a banned book as "a book that has been removed from a library, classroom, or curriculum because of its content" (n.p.). A form of censorship, banning occurs because the content is thought to be offensive, inappropriate, or dangerous. In particular, the most controversy rests with political, religious, or moral objections.

A *challenged book* is one that has been the subject of a formal complaint or challenge by an individual or group that seeks to have the text removed from curriculum or restricted from access. According to the American Library Association (2023), a book challenge is "an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group" (n.p.).

Challenged books frequently involve heated discussions and debates that go beyond the school context, spilling over into the community. A serious matter, banning or challenging books raises important questions about the freedom of expression and the rights of individuals to access information and ideas. The American Library Association (2023) states "the freedom to read is essential to our democracy" (n.p.). Reading broadly and exposure to ideas has long been the hallmark of a well-educated individual. In contrast, growing up in a bubble with limited access to

ideas restricts learning and an individual's potential. For English Language Arts (ELA) teachers, knowing about banned and challenged books is an added, but necessary, dimension to their work responsibilities. Educators are expected to engage in thoughtful exchanges with their critics about the quality of different literary works. When temperatures rise and tempers flare, teachers gather strength from their convictions and draw on their inner courage to face disagreeable detractors with composure and professionalism.

Just as math teachers understand numeracy, ELA teachers understand literacy. Reading books exposes children and adolescents to “more facts and a broader vocabulary than virtually any other activity” (Willingham, 2009, p. 49). Knowledge contributes to being able to think effectively, applying critical thinking to novel problems or fresh contexts. The bigger payout occurs when knowledge is conceptual and meaningful to the learner (Willingham, 2009). Providing instructional scaffolding, or the guidance students need to understand a text, leads to greater understanding as they make connections with their lives (Gallagher, 2004; Rogoff, 1990). Background knowledge contributes to being able “to analyze, synthesize, and critique ideas” presented in texts (Willingham, 2009, p. 166). Teachers are skilled conduits who facilitate and support student learning. When students read widely, their view of themselves and others is impacted. Indeed, a literate citizenry is a necessary ingredient in a complex, every-changing society.

Besides ELA classics, such as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and William Shakespeare's “Romeo and Juliet” (and several other of his plays), books published within the last hundred years also endure attack: Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, and F. Scott

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (PEN America, 2023). A call for censorship seems to transcend generations, geographic location, socio-political realities, and literary merit.

Why the Controversy

Popularity does not preclude a book's presence on the banned books list. Since it was first published in 1960, *To Kill a Mockingbird* is widely read *and* criticized. Critics assert that Harper Lee's use of racial slurs and description of sensitive subjects—including rape and violence—are not suitable for teenage readers (Admin, 2021; Ako-Adjei, 2017). Yet defenders of the book argue that it addresses complicated subjects, for example, racism and prejudice, in an honest way. They point to the description of Tom Robinson's unjust trial and attorney Atticus Finch's relentless efforts to vindicate his Black client as a model of moral courage and integrity. Text supporters also argue that the use of racial slurs is necessary to accurately represent the language and attitudes of the Jim Crow South in 1930s rural Alabama (Admin, 2021). School districts include Lee's book as a part of the ELA curriculum because of its historical significance and ability to spark important discussions about race, justice, and morality (Hoover, 2018). When students read, discuss, and analyze narrative features and story elements, they become adept at critical thinking (Ako-Adjei, 2017; Gallagher, 2004). They also become more empathetic individuals.

Another popular book enjoyed by teen readers is William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. Since 1954, when first published, Golding's novel about a group of teenage boys stranded on an island has been a source of controversy (PEN America, 2023). Because the novel contains scenes of torture and murder, censors claim the text glorifies bullying and violence, contributing to an adolescent culture of aggression. However, proponents argue that the text's merit rests with this necessary plot aspect, which serves as a critical commentary on the nature of violence and

the human condition (American Library Association, 2023). Arguing for the book's inclusion, supporters note that topics relevant to students' lives—including morality, power, and the nature of human behavior—deserve class time and a place in the curriculum as they support the broader objectives of preparing an educated citizenry (Al-Hassani, 2020). Additionally, the characters of Ralph, Piggy, Jack, and the other boys resonate with students. Even though Golding presents the darker aspects of human nature, he illustrates how ordinary good individuals are capable of cruelty and violence (Al-Hassani, 2020). No one is immune to corruption. Studying human nature should not be avoided because of uncomfortable truths; the realization that environments shape people and their decisions is weighty, layered, and necessary as it shows readers the dangers of groupthink and the importance of individualism (Allington, 1975).

Yet another book that rises to the top of lists of banned books is F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Some naysayers have argued that the book contains too much profanity and sexual content, while others have taken issue with its depiction of characters engaging in illegal activities like bootlegging and gambling. Still others have criticized the work for its portrayal of the wealthy, arguing that it glamorizes a lifestyle out of reach for most people (Admin, 2021). However, teachers include *The Great Gatsby* as part of their core reading list because it explores important themes: the American Dream, social class, and the corruption of wealth and power. Addressing universal emotions of love, loss, and the search for meaning extend beyond the Roaring Twenties setting and have merit for today's adolescents. Furthermore, the novel's characters are complex and connect with situations that are just as relevant today as they were when the book was first published (Lycke & Lucey, 2018). Exposed to dilemmas ubiquitous to all individuals, students can develop critical thinking skills, gain a deeper understanding of the

human experience, and learn about the complexities of human nature, the dangers of greed, and the importance of empathy and compassion.

To Kill a Mockingbird, *Lord of the Flies*, and *The Great Gatsby*, all classic works of literature, remain influential, continue to be widely read, and are celebrated for their insights into the human experience. While each text deals with themes and issues framed by particular social contexts, their enduring popularity reflects their impact on generations of readers.

Common Denominator

Courage is a theme that resonates in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *The Great Gatsby*. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch stands up for what is right, defending his Black client in racist, rural Alabama. His unflinching convictions anger his community and trouble his own sister, who believe him to be a misguided fool. In *The Lord of the Flies*, Ralph emerges as the courageous leader who attempts to keep the other lads focused on their goal to be rescued. Amidst challenges to survive with a rambunctious rebel group, Ralph tries to do what is right, even in seemingly impossible circumstances. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway's character exhibits courage by his honesty and integrity, thus making him an unlikely hero. Whether it is standing up for what is right, taking a stand, or pursuing dreams, these diverse characters exhibit courage in their own way.

Courage in the Teaching Profession

Courage, a common theme in books, also manifests in classrooms across the country. Courage describes teachers who are willing to stand up for what is right and to do so with honesty, conviction, a clear-eyed vision, and integrity. Every day, educators walk into classrooms full of students from different backgrounds and with diverse, urgent needs. They face the challenge of trying to engage and inspire learners (Lawrence & Snow, 2011). Teachers are

also on the front lines, advocating for students and standing up for what they know to be sound pedagogy and curricular choices. When teachers take risks and try fresh approaches, even when they are unsure of the outcomes, they are courageous. When teachers defend a text's overall merit and explain their teaching objectives, they are courageous. When teachers champion controversial books and maintain their equanimity, they are courageous. Believing in students' rights to read may not be a popular position. Nonetheless, by standing up against banned books initiatives, teachers and others can help shape a world where knowledge and understanding are valued above all else. In commenting on doing hard work in the face of, at times, seemingly insurmountable challenges, journalist Donna Brazille observed that the "struggle took a movement, and this movement took not only faith, but leaders" (O'Neill, 2022, p. 43). Teachers are those leaders.

Will books continue to be challenged and banned? Likely so. In fact, educators should expect opposition and be prepared to stand for truth. As new issues surface that cause concern to certain individuals or groups, there will continue to be educators who champion the rights of students to read, think, and learn. Having the freedom to read motivates teachers who believe in the power of literacy and dedicate themselves each day to students having access to information to become critical, participatory members of a democratic society. A quote from Maryland Congressman Jamie Raskin spotlights a core principle: "In democracy, healing comes from truth" (O'Neill, 2022, p. 43). Educators have long been and will continue to be the standard bearers for truth.

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