To Kill a Mocking…Book?

Corinne Synder and Ann Ellsworth

For decades, the public has scrutinized books children read. Currently, we are living in a time when more people are educated than ever before and have immediate access to information. Thanks to social media, people have an expanded platform and global audience to share ideologies and personal beliefs. Ironically, as instant access to and dissemination of information has expanded, so has the restriction of ideas, and at an alarming rate. Books are banned for reasons that span from sexual content to themes that deal with race relations and LGBTQ+ identity. In this paper, the narrator's voice is that of the first author, a soon-to-be licensed teacher who worked collaboratively with the second author, a teacher educator, to tease out what is at stake in restricting access to books. The paper begins with a personal account of a powerful high school reading experience with *To Kill a Mockingbird* and then transitions to a discussion of banned books with specific examples that have irritated certain groups. In the conclusion, the authors recognize that banning books affects free speech. They point out that parents can choose what books their own children may or may not read, but that is a within-the-family decision. The authors also suggest that educators can leverage potentially divisive book censure circumstances to think more critically about the pivotal role literature serves in teaching lessons about respect and dignity, human rights, and other topics critical for an educated populace. Freire (1970) referred to this positionality as a "critical" or problem-posing" approach to teaching and learning that provides opportunities to "see the world not as a static reality, but as reality in the process of transformation" (p.84). When individuals seek collaboration, dialogue, co-inquiry and informed action, new understandings can emerge. When teachers contribute to the discussion, they are powerful agents of change.

My Childhood

Growing up in the early 2000s, I moved frequently to live near my extended family. Travel brought me to West Virginia and Indiana, two places with vastly different demographics. My experiences there shaped my understanding of right and wrong and my emerging worldviews.

Dunbar, West Virginia is a small, working-class town, nestled right outside of the capital, Charleston. According to 2020 Census data, Black, or African Americans, make up 13.7% of Dunbar's total population. They also make up 54% of West Dunbar, considered to be part of a different census tract but still very much a part of the Dunbar community (US Census, 2020). As a light-haired girl growing up in a town with a proportionally high number of African Americans, I became aware early on of racial tensions and the disparities between the races.

One of my first memories was getting in trouble in kindergarten for playing too rough with an African American boy. I remember my mother talking with my grandmother, or "MaMaw," about the incident. MaMaw said something along the lines of "Now, why did you let her play with that little Black boy in the first place?" Luckily, my mother, who had grown up with her father in a larger, more diverse city, was quick to offer a rebuttal along the lines that kids, no matter their skin color, will rough-house and sometimes get too physical.

While living in West Virginia, racist comments, such as those espoused by my grandmother, were made regularly by extended family and community members. I began to wonder if being Black was something that made you different in a negative way. As a child, I could not really understand it because many of my friends in school were Black; furthermore, in church I was taught to love everybody the same way. Once, my best friend Brittney was coming over for a birthday party. MaMaw lived with us at the time, and my mom had to sit her down to

let her know that a "little Black girl" was coming over. Mom also mentioned that Brittney's mother was white and to not make any comments or a scene. That night, MaMaw just stayed in her room, probably agitated at the goings-on in her house.

I love my grandmother and sought to understand why a woman who gave such fierce hugs could harbor such burning animosity toward my ebony-colored friends. My grandmother grew up in the Jim Crow era and did not want her family to be associated with anyone who did not look like her family. A country girl from rural West Virginia who did not make it past the eighth grade, MaMaw had her first child at 15 and her final baby at 36, with no time in between to be anything more than a mother and wife. She never even left the "holler" she was born in. Raised in a place and time when white supremacy was the norm, I suspect she never had meaningful interactions with people of color. Living "separate but equal" must have shaped her thinking into believing that African Americans were fundamentally different, and less. I believe that when you live in such an isolated area and are surrounded by people who look and think the same way you do, you become afraid. You cannot understand other people without trying to view the world from a different point of view. And, straying from what is safe presents risks. With these beliefs, I came to understand my grandmother but not mimic her racist attitudes.

When I was nine years old, my mother relocated our family to southeastern Indiana. My world changed from having friends who looked and did not like me to a nearly all-white peer group. Ripley County, Indiana has a Black population of less than 0.4% (US Census, 2020). In my graduating class of about 100 students, there were only two who were not white. It was as if racial issues disappeared for me while in middle and high school. Since most of my peers were white, I did not think about race in the same way that I did when in West Virginia. That is until sophomore English when our teacher assigned *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Reflections About *To Kill a Mockingbird*

While a competent reader when I could choose my own books and read on my own time, I dreaded reading school assignments because I usually found them uninteresting. However, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was different. Harper Lee's compelling plot and finely drawn characters encouraged me to think about racial issues, framed by my West Virginia childhood recollections. Scout Finch, the narrator and my mirrored self, was a tomboy who spent her days following her brother. I, too, worshiped my older brother—my best friend and hero. Probably due to our dysfunctional childhood, he provided emotional support for his little sister. The story's adult themes, narrated by a child much like my younger self, clicked with me. Scout's innocence and empathetic character reminded me of how I observed and questioned MaMaw's harsh judgments of others.

Before we read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, my teacher, Mrs. C, explained that some schools banned the book for its mature content. Of course, that statement alone intrigued adolescents, now curious about what "mature content" might mean. Salacious sex scenes? References to drugs? Other taboo topics? Our all-white class learned that the N-word was used often in the book; however, by foregrounding this language usage, Mrs. C educated her teenage audience, providing important context to Jim Crow times.

To Kill a Mockingbird is one of the most enduring literary works found in high school English classes. Applebee (1993) reported results of a national survey that sought to determine which book-length texts were being used in public, parochial, and independent secondary schools, grades 7-12. Although there was considerable diversity with grade level titles, *To Kill a Mockingbird* appeared as one of the top 10 titles for public and parochial schools along with the works of John Steinbeck, Mark Twain, William Shakespeare, and Charles Dickens. A survey of Alabama schools (Stallworth et al., 2006, as cited in Mackey et al., 2012), identified *To Kill a Mockingbird, The Scarlet Letter*, and *the Great*

Gatsby as the top three most frequently mentioned book-length required reading for adolescents during 2002-2004. A 2006 survey of texts used in grade 10 English classes tracked the post popular titles for the previous decade and found very little change in survey data since 1996 (Mackey, 2012). The investigators reported that "*To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Romeo and Juliet* continue to be the most widely taught texts by a considerable margin" (Mackey et al., 2012, p. 26). It is easy to understand why. Set in 1930s rural Jim Crow Alabama, the narrative draws the reader in from the onset. The book's popularity and "immediate appeal can be explained by its sensitive and insightful portrayal of race and relations in Alabama at a time when the battle for integration and equal rights was at its height in America…" (Durst Johnson, 1994, p. 4). Readers find the sensitive, insightful portrayal told from the point of view of a young girl convincing. Scout, who lives with her brother Jem and father Atticus, appeals to readers, for they learn about her honest portrayal of coming to terms with her racist Southern community. Scout's attorney father defends Tom Robinson, a Black man wrongly accused of sexually assaulting a white woman. Many readers are drawn to Atticus's character, an upstanding moral individual, willing to legally represent and defend a man of color against an all-white patriarchal justice system. According to Osborn (1996), students are drawn to heroes who hold a set of values, and "Atticus Finch embodies those values…is certain of what he believes, and that kind certainty" is uncommon (p. 5). As a teenager, I was enamored with Atticus. I found this man with a moral bearing and resolute demeanor highly attractive. Atticus was, in fact, what I aspired to be when I grew up; he also epitomized what I hoped my future husband would be: loving and trustworthy, wise and compassionate, hardworking and loyal.

Cause for Concern

Even though adolescent readers find Lee's novel emotionally compelling and can relate to the narrative that juxtaposes moral behavior in an unjust world, its controversial history distinguishes it from other popular high school texts. Hoover (2018) notes that "due to strong language, discussions of sex and rape, and the use of the N-word, it has become one of the most frequently challenged books in the US" (n.p.). Critics point to the text's problematic language and situations—in particular, the accusation by a white woman of a rape that did not happen. Those supporting banning the book believe that topics like sexual assault are far too complicated for an average English teacher to cover. Yet, sexual assault and other issues are the stuff of contemporary concerns that teenagers confront. Malo-Juvera (2014) observes that while "grand claims have been made for the power of literature, there is a dearth of experimental research" that examines the effects of how reading young adult literature impacts students' attitudes and moral development (p. 407). Racist ideas have a long, complicated history. Kendi (2016) posits that racist ideas did not arise from ignorance or hatred; instead, they were created to justify and rationalize deeply entrenched racist policies and maintain racial inequities. Skirting difficult topics does not erode their extant nature. For this reason, knowledgeable teachers can be a conduit to guide students through weighty issues with frank conversations that frame discussions with insight and sensitivity.

Another objection to the inclusion of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in the English Language Arts curriculum centers on racial injustice. Naa Baako Ako-Adjei (2017), an educator who has studied Jim Crow literature, believes that the story, "...gives voice to the collective and peculiar American delusion that racism in the United States was not really about the systematic use of terror, or the threat of terror, on Black people in order to maintain white supremacy, but that racism and racist violence were perpetrated by a negligible number of Americans…" (n.p.). For

some, *To Kill a Mockingbird* inadequately addresses the complexities of white supremacy and underplays what should be a more penetrating look at our country's troubled racial history. Readers are introduced to Jim Crow realities in Maycomb, Alabama in the 1930s, but the deeper issues of racist institutions across much of the country in the aftermath of the Civil War are skirted. While one book certainly cannot and should not be expected to address social justice education, honesty demands that a fair assessment tackle what the novel does and does not accomplish. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (2023) in a Face the Nation news broadcast stated that "Prejudice and bigotry are brought down by the sheer force of determination of individuals to succeed and the refusal of a human being to let prejudice define the parameters of the possible" (n.p.). Books, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird,* when paired with other accounts can deepen readers' understandings of racism and how it manifests in ugly ways. Certainly, individuals can and must hold others accountable, just as Atticus attempted to do in Macomb and as my mother attempted to do in response to MaMaw's racist comments.

Sidestepping troubling topics perpetuates their existence. In contrast, conversations are needed that peel back the layers and seek to understand the socio-political contexts and institutions, which perpetuated a system of exploitation of continents, nations, and people of color by white individuals and nations of the European continent—all to maintain and defend a system of wealth, power, and privilege (Martinez, n.d.). Understanding white supremacy as part of a complex, fraught system—not just as personal beliefs—changes the reader's perspective (Lucke & Lucey, 2018). In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the author's diverse cast of characters are bounded by the Southern societal structure that, no matter what the individual does independently, benefits white people overall.

It can be simple to read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and characterize it as an historical text with terrible events that could not take place in the 21st century. Further, it is grim not to compare the ending of the book, where Tom Robinson is found guilty of a crime he did not commit, to the thousands of Black men who sit in prison today for the same reason (Stevenson, 2014). It is also hard to ignore the parallels when Tom, trying to escape prison, is shot in the back multiple times with today's current news stories of black men shot while in questionable police situations. The disproportionate rates of Black incarcerated males reflect the biased methods that contribute to their arrests and convictions (Morgan, 2021). Stevenson (2014) references Bureau of Justice statistics that show the mass incarceration of Black men in this country is nearly six times that of white men housed in prisons. According to Equal Justice Initiative (2022) data, one in every three black youth will experience jail or prison. These staggering statistics result from ideologies rooted in the belief that white people are superior to people of color and have shaped contemporary structural barriers to justice. After re-evaluating *To Kill a Mockingbird* through the lens of my adult rather than teenage self, I can now understand what this text can accomplish and what its limitations are.

As a teenager, I really did love *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Unlike most assigned school reading that I dreaded, I eagerly opened my well-worn copy to see how the story would unfold. As I read Scout's childlike reactions to familial and societal issues, her honest responses resonated with me. Now, with my adult understanding of social justice issues, Harper Lee's story represents more complex layers. As Atticus Finch said, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view…until you climb into his skin and walk around in it" (Lee, 1960, p. 89). My memories of growing up in two distinct regions of the United

States, my vast reading experiences, and my conversations with other educators have helped me appreciate Atticus' wisdom.

A Snapshot of Today's Banned Books

To Kill a Mockingbird is just one of many books that has been put on the chopping block. According to the American Library Association (2023), the number of book challenges has soared, doubling between 2021 and 2022. In January 2022, The New York Times reported "Parents, activists, school board officials and lawmakers around the country are challenging books at a pace not seen in decades" (Harris & Alter, 2022). Bellamy-Walker (2022) found that a major news source reported "book bans in schools are catching fire" (n.p.) The PBS NewsHour dedicated several reports to book controversies reports during their 2021-2022 broadcast season that highlighted a "cultural schism" (Brown et al., 2022). With the increased frequency and intensity of public debate, book bans are more abundant now than in recent history.

Kathy Lester (2022), a Michigan school librarian and president of the American Association of School Libraries, observed that "Most of the books being challenged are books about marginalized communities or written by people from those marginalized communities" and most of the "books targeted for censorship were written by or about people of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community" (p. 12). Since the ALA first started tracking book bans two decades ago, over half of the 1,200-plus challenges in 2022 alone specifically targeted school and classroom libraries (Lester, 2022.) In their data, PEN America's (2023) data shows that in a one-year period from July 2021 to June 2022, there were 2,532 instances of individual books being banned. Approximately 41% of the books banned were because of "LGBTQ+ themes, protagonists, or prominent secondary character," an additional 40% were banned because there were "protagonists or prominent secondary characters of color," 22% were banned because of "sexual content," and 21% were banned due to "titles with issues of race and racism" (PEN

America, 2023, n.p.). Who are the vocal individuals advocating for restricting books in public schools and what motivates them?

Books on the Chopping Block

A brief look at the history of reading material points to the early focus on using texts to offer moral lessons or influence children's values and behavior. Nowadays, groups that push for books to be banned from schools tend to have strong Christian Nationalist political views, and "there is a tendency to fear that 'political propaganda' will taint" a child or student's innocence (Mickenberg & Philip, 2008, p. 2). Across the country, these parent and community groups are "swarming school board meetings, demanding newfangled rating systems for libraries, using inflammatory language about 'grooming' and 'pornography' and even filing criminal complaints against school officials, teachers, and librarians" (PEN America, 2023, n.p.).

However, in a democracy, everyone's opinions can be expressed; book-banning groups have as much of a right to argue for books to be banned as the authors have to write and publish them. Often the motivations of parents are genuine, for they truly believe certain texts will harm their children. Nonetheless, even though one parent wants a book banned for a topic they deem inappropriate, that does not mean another parent would agree.

Supporters of controversial texts offer robust rationales for their inclusion, including exposure to understanding different worldviews and cultures. By reading about diverse topics and experiences, readers' curiosity and knowledge grow (Short, 2018). In a global society where co-dependence matters, it is crucial to learn about other perspectives and ways of knowing. Moreover, banned books often address realistic, timely topics that result in a powerful reading experience and help the reader sort out thorny issues like grief, divorce, sexual assault, bullying, and prejudice (American Library Association, 2023.)

This Book is Gay by Juno Dawson (2014) has been banned in schools and libraries in Florida, Idaho, Kansas, Missouri, Tennessee, Texas, and Wisconsin (PEN America, 2023). In memoir form, Dawson describes a young girl going through the challenges of coming out and coming to terms with her sexuality. The author describes what it is like to grow up as an LGBTQ+ youth. When young adults read stories with characters they can relate to, they can feel understood and valued (Bushman, 1997). Not surprisingly, these reading experiences can contribute to finding joy in reading. Rudine Sims Bishop observed that "Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience (The Ohio State University, 2019). It follows that teachers should consider if "*Romeo and Juliet, Great Expectations, Julius Caesar*…*The Old Man and the Sea* and many others found in the English curriculum meet the needs, interests, and abilities" of adolescent readers (Bushman, 1997, p. 35). Indeed, a central issue worth considering is if these traditional texts help the emotional and social development of the students who are required to read them.

Jonathan Evison's (2018) *Lawn Boy* has been banned in Florida, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, and Virginia schools (PEN America, 2023). Critics of *Lawn Boy* note that its LGBTQ+ sexual content, descriptions of abuse, and profanity are inappropriate for the target audience—young adults. Nevertheless, adults need to come to terms with the reality that teenagers go through hardships and seek stories that mirror their lived experiences. An honest look at their own adolescent experiences would reveal emotional ups and downs, tumultuous relationships with peers and elders, and other challenges. *Lawn Boy* and other similar texts can convey the message to young people that their experiences are not unique or only theirs; the turmoil they are experiencing is shared by others.

According to Rudine Sims Bishop (1990), “One of the reasons literature exists is to transform human experience, and reflect it back to us so that we can better understand it. Through the mirror of literature, we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience” (p. 3). When reading becomes a way to help students reconcile or reaffirm their place in the world and society, it is a gateway to new understandings. Furthermore, children’s books should be grounded in the user’s social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Bishop, 2015; Skerrett, 2020). Reflecting on my own childhood in West Virginia and Indiana, I thought that my dysfunctional home was just my issue. Perhaps if I would have had access to more stories like *Lawn Boy,* I would not have felt so alone and powerless.

Yet a third example of a book that has stirred up controversy is *My Two Dads and Me* by Michael Joosten (2023). Written for elementary school-aged readers, the picture book follows busy dads and their kids throughout their day as they wake up, eat breakfast, get dressed, head to the park, and return home for an evening bubble bath and good-night lullaby. Nonetheless, the loving parent-child relationships in *My Two Dads and Me* did not prevent it from being banned by Florida’s Duval County Public Schools last year (PEN America, 2023). Protesters argued that grade school children were too young to understand the complexities of LGBTQ+ families and relationships. Yet, a counter argument centers on honestly portraying different family structures that mirror contemporary times. Books become valuable to students when their personal experiences are connected to the stories (Curiel & Duran, 2021).

These selections are but a few examples that illustrate the concerns raised by particular groups, whose declared mission is to keep “dangerous books” from students. Makaiau, Halagao, and Thao (2023) assert that “equitable relationship building, collaboration, dialogue, co-inquiry, critical analysis, reflection,” mediated by an ethic of respect, shapes the process and outcomes

that can transform school-community issues (p. 53). Concerns about literature that is accessible to and read by students can be the catalyst for change, especially when coupled with a leavening of common sense and genuine motivations for honest discourse. The discussion of deep ideas occurs when readers think critically and transfer knowledge, applying “old knowledge to a new problem” (Willingham, 2009, p. 997). Transfer falters when individuals read or listen to someone talk, then interpret what is written or said based on weak or insufficient existing knowledge. Weak understanding means shallow structure whereas substantive, complex thinking involves deep structure. Willingham (2009) asserts that readers remember what they think about. If texts which invite deeper thinking are squashed because of topics that might be offensive, students are denied the chance to explore those ideas. Literature empowers the user because it offers exposure to ideas and novel situations, which can contribute to deep thinking (Reed, 2003).

Conclusion

The reasons behind banning books will likely continue to evolve as culture is an ever-changing set of norms and expectations wherein individuals are in a continual state of negotiation of what is suitable, tempered by the values of free speech and what is best for individuals and the community. In the past, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was controversial—namely, because of profanity, racial slurs, and its focus on racism. Today, stories of LGBTQ+ characters incite controversy, heated discussion, and even protests. While parents have a right to speak their truth, public schools ought not to be coerced into banning books from classrooms or libraries. Homeschooling, an option for the adamant parent who wants to keep their child sheltered from literature they find offensive, offers a choice for concerned families. Parents can choose to have their own children read or not read a particular book. Likewise, if teachers use books—

controversial or not—as mandatory reading material, then they need to be prepared to lead helpful conversations that illuminate compassion and understanding and call out negative biases and stereotypes. Substituting another book that helps students meet the same or similar objectives is also an option. Being proactive and anticipating possible concerns from parents can minimize conflict; further, it is in the best interest of students. Schools need courageous leaders to champion justice in all its forms. Teachers are those standard bearers.

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