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An Education in Democracy: Understanding and Subverting Censorship in the English Classroom

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**AN EDUCATION IN DEMOCRACY: UNDERSTANDING AND SUBVERTING
CENSORSHIP IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM**

A Master's Thesis

Presented to

The Graduate College of
Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts, English

By

Hannah Rose Woolsey

May 2023

AN EDUCATION IN DEMOCRACY: UNDERSTANDING AND SUBVERTING CENSORSHIP IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

English

Missouri State University, May 2023

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The politicization of education has presented a challenge to offering students diverse English Language Arts instruction. Across the country, lawmakers have proposed legislation that limits discussion about race and sex or allows parents to restrict their child's exposure to materials that violate their moral or religious beliefs. In this tug-of-war, teachers will be forced to decide between avoiding controversial topics or risking dismissal. Increasing censorship, now codified by law in many states, is rooted in our polarized political landscape, divided along cultural and geographic lines. The challenge facing educators, then, is how to create space for inclusive, social justice-oriented instruction without "violating" the rights of parents. In rural schools where teachers have fewer resources and less support, this task can be especially precarious. These issues are exacerbating the already worsening teacher shortage nationwide. The success of censorship in the classroom relies on the idea that educators are the bestowers of knowledge. Paulo Freire's answer to the banking model of education is the empowerment of students as independent, critical thinkers. In the tradition of liberatory pedagogy, Giroux argues that educators have a responsibility to create an environment in which students can develop the skills necessary to engage in and uphold democracy. Contextualizing the debate over censorship as a crisis of democracy provides a framework through which educators can provide meaningful, inclusive instruction despite efforts to stifle discussion in the classroom. As Nadia Behizadeh suggests, Freire's concept of problem-posing education is in alignment with project-based learning and other student-led instructional strategies. In this thesis, I will explore the potential of problem-posing education as a tool for including diverse perspectives in classrooms under threat of censorship. Woven throughout are narrative "excursions" that illustrate the challenges of teaching today and the consequences of censorship for students. Despite policies that seek to censor instruction, the English classroom can maintain a focus on social justice by providing a safe, open space for discussion and empowering students to engage meaningfully with diverse perspectives.

KEYWORDS: censorship legislation, censorship in schools, ELA education, project-based learning, democratic pedagogy, teaching under censorship

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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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EXCURSION 1: ON GOING TO JAIL FOR KURT VONNEGUT

“Perhaps you will learn from this that books are sacred to free men for very good reasons, and that wars have been fought against nations which hate books and burn them. If you are an American, you must allow all ideas to circulate freely in your community, not merely your own.”
-Kurt Vonnegut to the president of the Drake High School Board in 1973, on the burning of *Slaughterhouse 5* in the school furnace

Listen. I have illegal books in my classroom library.

In Missouri, providing contraband books to students can now be punished with up to a year in prison. The state legislature recently passed a bill criminalizing the act of providing “sexually explicit” material to minors.¹ Across the state, libraries and schools scratched their heads and consulted counsel to decipher exactly what the law includes. While the bill specifically named visual obscenity as illegal in schools, what other material could be contested under the law? Gratuitous sex scenes? Suggestive exchanges? Physical contact between members of the opposite sex? Or worse, gay romance?

The closest thing to actual pornography in a book is pictures, right? To be safe, then, the graphic novels must go, along with any other book that could bring on the ire of an angry mob. In my district, compliance includes a purge of illustrated novels and the requirement that every single library book must be examined before it is available to students. Disturbed by this development, I asked our librarian, *What criteria did the administration give you to judge if you need to remove a book?*

They just said to check if it’s inappropriate, she replied.

Poo-tee-weet?

¹ See Missouri Senate Bill 775 (51).

In other local districts, teachers have been told they are no longer allowed to buy books for personal libraries in classrooms—for their own legal protection. I have not been asked to go through my classroom library, and I have not volunteered. My collection is an assortment that reflects my childhood and my university studies, plus any discount book I could find that might appeal to my students. The most obvious violation of Missouri Senate bill 775 in my library is a childish sketch of Montana Wildhack’s breasts, depicted in the pages of *Slaughterhouse 5*. Would I go to jail for two concentric circles drawn on a page sixty years ago? I’m not sure. Since the law passed, I haven’t taken the book off my shelf—but I also haven’t given it to a student.

A proponent of laws like this might suggest that I am being overly dramatic, and they might support their argument by citing the provision of the law that protects books and art of “academic” value from censure. However, I would ask, *Who gets to decide what is more prurient than artistic?* If politicians trusted my opinion, this law wouldn’t exist in the first place. The frailty of this defense is illustrated in recent challenges to Spiegelman’s *Maus*, a graphic novel depicting the horrors of the Holocaust as experienced by the author’s parents, who are illustrated as mice. This text, which also sits on my bookshelf, has been banned in a Tennessee school district for “unnecessary use of profanity and nudity and its depiction of violence and suicide.”² The one instance of nudity is a depiction of Spiegelman’s dead mother, whose nipple is a single dot on the page. In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, Spiegelman calls out the objection for using the excuse of obscenity to censor uncomfortable topics: “It’s just misguided and ignorant. But there must be something far more malevolent to this agenda, because this sounds insane.”³

² See Pitzke.

³ See above citation.

Even before the Missouri legislation in question came to be, my school administration instructed our librarian to look through our books to make sure there was no gay porn on the shelves, an impulse inspired by a *Daily Wire* article that claimed homoerotic fiction was finding its way onto the bookshelves of unsuspecting children.⁴ Although state legislators claim that the “explicit” book ban is necessary, I would ask, *Who? Who is supposedly sneaking porn onto library shelves and peddling it like drugs from behind the school dumpster?* Despite claims to the contrary, I understand the implication. It’s me. The liberal teacher boogey-man who wants to corrupt the youth and turn the frogs gay. The indignity of being an English educator today can be summarized by Vonnegut’s final line in his letter to the school board president who burned his books in 1973: “you have insulted me, and I am a good citizen, and I am very real.”⁵

I teach Vonnegut’s letter to McCarthy as a supplemental text in a unit on *Fahrenheit 451*, which has a heavy focus on censorship. Teaching this unit and being transparent about issues around censorship is becoming increasingly treacherous for teachers. An English teacher in Oklahoma resigned last year after parents complained about a “political display” in her classroom: she had provided a QR code linking students to information about how to access books banned in schools by the state. Even after her resignation, state politicians became directly involved by publicly seeking the revocation of her teaching license.⁶

If we are no longer allowed to teach students about the dangers of censorship, about the threat of corruption and hatred, about the trials and pain of being a human—what is our job? To teach students how to use commas? If that were so, certainly a car manual would do the trick. Why is it that we teach Maya Angelou instead of online user agreements?

⁴ See Rosiak.

⁵ See Vonnegut.

⁶ See Hernandez.

In an article responding to the burning of *Slaughterhouse 5*, Donald Veix lamented that censorship reduces the classroom to a place of silly fantasy where students are limited to reading books on “pets and mountains”: “[A student] can walk into a class on physics or math and expect to learn something real. But in English and social studies he encounters a never-never land in which the books have little relationship to life at the corner or life behind the barn.”⁷ It has been 48 years since Veix wrote those words and 50 years since the teacher who assigned Vonnegut to his class at Drake High School was fired, saying in response to his termination, “I’m really fed up with trying to do my job and getting shafted.”⁸ If anyone asked me to sum up the state of teaching today, I would say it’s like becoming unstuck in time.

The passing of legislation banning books and controversial topics in the classroom is insulting and infuriating for the well-trained and compassionate professionals who make up our education system. When I began my research on recent censorship and its effect on education, recording my analysis of the organized effort to discredit educators like me and to prevent social justice-oriented instruction, maintaining appropriate academic rhetoric (and a healthy blood pressure) proved a challenge. I realized that, to produce a work on censorship, I had to censor myself—and that irony was not lost on me.

To incorporate my lived perspective, I have included as separate excursions the related experiences of myself and fellow educators. As I analyze the gulfs between competing definitions of education, I hope that my experience of teaching in a classroom today will illuminate the real challenges educators are facing and communicate the urgency of addressing these problems as a united academic community committed to the preservation of democracy.

⁷ See Veix (25).

⁸ See above citation.

INTRODUCTION

At the top of my district’s curriculum webpage, the reader is greeted with the declaration: “Our school will NOT be teaching CRT!” When I began teaching high school in rural southwest Missouri, I was excited about the opportunity to give my students a connection to the wider world through reading and research. However, the politicization of education has presented a challenge to offering students diverse and relevant English Language Arts instruction. In Missouri, legislators are considering bills that would inhibit discussions of race and sexuality in the classroom. While a law proposing a ban of CRT failed in 2022, lawmakers are proposing a sweeping bill with even larger implications called the “Parents Bill of Rights” that would require schools to make all curricular materials available to parents immediately upon request, ban certain instruction on race, and allow parents to have their student opt out of any instruction deemed “inappropriate” for their child (Kellogg; Hanshaw). Individual districts, like my own, have already adopted similar policies, prohibiting the use of terms like “privilege” when discussing social issues (Ray and Gibbons). Missouri has also recently introduced a bill that would prohibit any teacher K-12 from discussing issues of sex and gender in the classroom (Silva). In this tug-of-war, teachers are forced to decide between avoiding controversial topics or risking dismissal.

The national crisis over censorship in education is exemplified by the fight over the classroom in the state of Florida. Governor Ron DeSantis has been making headlines for his aggressive action on education since 2020. Florida led the way in codifying at the state level a ban on the discussion of sexuality and gender in the classroom with the passage of HB1557, which critics quickly dubbed the “Don’t Say Gay” law or, alternatively, what proponents termed

the “Parental Rights’ in Education” bill. Legislators have also implemented bills limiting the discussion of race, as in HB7. In alignment with this legislation, the Florida Department of Education rejected over 40% of math textbook purchases submitted for state funding in 2021 on the charge of attempted indoctrination through alignment with social emotional learning standards and culturally responsive teaching (Goldstein). In defense of this fastidiousness, DeSantis made his educational philosophy clear: “Math is about getting the right answer...And we want kids to learn to think so they get the right answer. It’s not about how you feel about the problem” (Goldstein). More recently, the state has gone so far as to ban AP African American Literature courses in high schools, stating that they “lack educational value” (Atterbury). State officials have stated that the ruling is not a total ban, provided the Advanced Placement course, which before implementation already undergoes years of development and field testing by education professionals, is adapted to reflect “accurate” and “lawful” history (Atterbury).

While Florida lawmakers have been very clear about what they believe education should *not* accomplish, what remains of the job, in their view, does not seem to require trained and qualified personnel to accomplish. To address a shortage of education professionals, Florida approved legislation allowing veterans with no degree to teach, allotting them a 5-year teaching certificate with no previous college experience required (Trotta and Cardona). Florida is not alone in addressing the teacher shortage in this way; last year, twelve states lowered requirements for teachers to fill vacant positions (Will). Meanwhile, legislation inspired by the Florida laws that criminalizes teachers for discussion of race or sexuality in the classroom continues to spread. The correlation between the rising teacher shortage and the increased antipathy toward education cannot be ignored: “According to a [2022] survey of 2,379 American

Federation of Teachers union members...79% were very dissatisfied or somewhat dissatisfied with their overall conditions” (Trotta and Cardona).

The current struggle for control over the classroom suggests widespread disagreement over the role of education in our society. Henry Giroux posits the question, *What should education accomplish in a democracy?* (Giroux “Jim Crow”). In response to recent censorship of diverse texts and topics, I have been asking myself: What should *English* education accomplish in a democracy? Considering these questions reveals the schism separating the goals of educators and the goals of politicians, especially in the English classroom, which is disproportionately targeted by censorship legislation. In this introduction, I seek to define the roots of this dissonance and analyze the barriers preventing understanding.

Currently and historically, conflicts over education reflect the larger disputes playing out in national politics. Students become stand-ins for the future of our country, and the fight over curricular control mirrors the fight to define our national values. In a nation reckoning with a post-pandemic world, racial injustice, the fallout of a contested election that led to an armed insurrection, and the increasing threat of global conflict, the classroom becomes the site of a political proxy war. Disagreement over the role of education is a conflict that dates back to the inception of public education, and the scars of this history are crucial to understanding the political divisions at play today.

The disagreement over what constitutes a state in the first place underlies competing views of what education the state should require. According to Paul Theobald in his overview of U.S. rural education policy, public perception of education is directly connected to the conception of statehood in relation to individuals. If individualism prevails and the purpose of the state is to ensure “economic freedom,” then citizens individually determine how to or even if

to educate their children. However, a more communitarian view of statehood presents complications regarding the role of education: “if the state is perceived to be a collection of mutually interested communities, and the primary political concern is widely distributing a voice in the decisions that affect citizens, the question of educating the nation’s youth is not so easily settled” (Theobald 21-22). Theobald goes as far back as the debate over federalism to situate modern conflicts over education. Those favoring a strong federal government also tended to prioritize the economic welfare of the nation as a whole, often at the expense of rural agriculture and small communities (23).

Although public education in the United States was created during a period of communitarian spirit, the rise of individualism quickly undermined the original goals of the free school system. In the mid-19th century, the main goal of public education was to “outfit citizens for the burden of self-government” (Theobald 24). However, the defeat of William Jennings Bryan in favor of McKinley (and corporate interests) in the presidential election of 1896, coupled with the rise of Social Darwinism, shifted the public perception of statehood and, as a result, education. Rather than preparing students for life as citizens of a democracy, the goal of education became focused instead on preparing young people “for economic struggle, for the economic roles they would play as adults” (25).

The legacy of these conflicts is entrenched in our education system today, from school administration practices to the division in public discourse over the purpose of education. Industrial productivity was brought into the classroom in the early twentieth century, after Joseph Mayer Rice applied Frederick Winslow Taylor’s principles of money-saving, assembly line style practices to education through *Scientific Management in Education* (1913). Students would be moved logically and mechanically through school, prompted by a factory bell to keep them on

schedule. An adherence to these principles and the theory of Social Darwinism is clear in the philosophy of Ellwood Cubberly, who wrote the first curriculum for school administration studies in the early 20th century (Theobald 25). Cubberly, whose administrator preparation program at Stanford was adopted widely throughout the nation, viewed education in the terms of supply and demand:

Our schools are, in a sense, factories, in which the raw products (children) are to be shaped and fashioned into products to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands of twentieth-century civilization, and it is the business of the school to build its pupils according to the specifications laid down. (Cubberly qtd. in Theobald 26)

The father of education administration also espoused racist beliefs, expressing worry about non-Anglo immigrants corrupting American society (27). This anxiety prompted Cubberly's interest in rural education as predominantly white rural populations moved to cities and "mixed" with more diverse populations, and the idea of school consolidation and urbanization became central to his preparation of future school administrators (28).

Before analyzing the current ideological divisions that cause conflict over the role of education, it is crucial to understand the historical origins of the dramatic political polarization between rural and urban areas today; it is along this political fault line that the fight over censorship is being waged. We have already established that, since the foundation of the country, a strong federal government has been opposed by rural citizens, who believed that a centralized government would not prioritize their interests. The struggles of rural people over the last 200 years have led to the fomentation of what Katherine Cramer terms a "politics of resentment" (Cramer 5). Seeking to understand the rise of Scott Walker and the Tea Party among low-income rural residents of Wisconsin, Cramer spent five years, from 2007-2012, interviewing rural people

about their perspective on government (5). What she discovered was a pervasive feeling of injustice that included a resentment toward leaders for neglecting rural people and the perception that rural people “have fundamentally distinct values and lifestyles, which are misunderstood and disrespected by city folks” (12). Cramer’s 2016 analysis identifies a rural group consciousness steeped in resentment toward “others” was a prescient analysis of the political conditions that led to the election of Donald Trump (12). Understanding the political turmoil of the last 20 years is crucial to interpreting the education policy being generated by far-right Republican lawmakers. Cramer points out that, like the promotion of censorship, a politics of resentment based on geographic identity may be “criticized as ignorance, [but] these understandings are complex, many layered, and grounded in fundamental identities” (5).

As Cramer establishes, individual race, class, and religious identity often coincide to form a place-based identity, and in our system of representation based on geography, this identification results in widespread disagreement on the role of government, including public education. John Sipple, Peter Fiduccia, and Kristie LeBeau identify four “frames” through which to interpret the role of schools in a community. Although their research focuses on data analysis in rural education, the lenses they identify provide an avenue for interpreting competing visions of education that lead to disagreements over appropriate curricular content.

The first two lenses focus on schools and their function in the larger community. First, they identify the function of “schools as an economic force” (Sipple et al. 74). Through this lens, schools are analyzed according to their economic role in the community as a whole, as they provide employment, encourage business development, and attract families with children from outside the district. Secondly, framing “schools as a social force” accounts for their role as “a source of community information, norms, and entertainment” (74). In this function, schools

provide socialization for students and parents alike, as well as common spaces for community activities and health services (75).

The final two lenses that Sipple, Fiduccia, and LeBeau identify consider the role of schools in the educational capacity. The third lens is “schools as preparers of democratic citizens” (75). This function encompasses a school’s role in encouraging community engagement at the local and global level. Finally, the fourth lens, “schools as preparers of workers,” analyzes schools as means of building the skills necessary to find employment or to move on to higher education after graduation. The authors note that the aims of “schools as preparers of democratic citizens” and “schools as preparers” often coincide, and that “the preparation of students as citizens and workers can be strengthened if the two are taught as complements of each other” (75); however, it is in part the perceived mutual exclusivity of these roles that underlines the conflict between competing views of the role of education today.

EXCURSION 2: SAVE THE CHILDREN, BAN THE BOOKS

Every morning when I enter the school, I check the back door twice to make sure that it's locked. When I open my classroom door, I turn the key again and then jiggle the handle to make sure I am locking myself and my students in. I refuse to keep a baseball bat in the corner like the teacher next door, but I've been drilled in the art of transforming classroom materials into weapons. A chair or trash can become a battering ram. A pair of scissors is a dagger to the eyes or jugular. Heavy books become projectiles to buy precious time. Pillows from the reading nook are nice and soft to cushion the climb through a shattered window.

I experienced my first active shooter training during an in-service meeting before my first teaching job in a rural school district. The entire school staff sat in the gym waiting for the training to begin when the lights went down, and a video began playing on the projector. A SWAT team in an armored vehicle pursued an armed man on the run. As he tears off into the forest, the officers exit the vehicle and chase after him, leaping and somersaulting over downed trees. The assailant takes a shot at one of his pursuers and enters a derelict building. The team, one man down, climbs their way to the top floor using daring acrobatics, where they find their target barricaded in the back of a room with a shotgun. Three of the officers walk impressively and nonchalantly forward, before one takes aim and shoots the man, blood splattering the POV camera angle.

I'm not sure exactly what this video was supposed to accomplish. The rest of the training was at least applicable to emergency situations at school, a mix of procedures to follow and self-defense techniques. But the messaging was disturbing nonetheless—protect the students at all costs, except for the one that is carrying the gun. We were told if we could wrest the gun away,

we should use whatever means necessary to incapacitate the shooter—and if we didn’t, we could be held accountable. I’m not saying I wouldn’t sacrifice myself for my students—but I shouldn’t have to. And I shouldn’t have to imagine shooting one, either.

Although it seems extreme, my experience is not unique. A friend who teaches at a significantly larger school went through safety training from an outside organization. They showed grizzly footage of real-life shootings, including the Uvalde massacre of elementary school children. The teacher was deeply disturbed and considering walking out of the training when shots rang out from the hallway. The group panicked and began running toward the exits when the organizer called for them to sit back down—it was all part of the training, just some blank rounds. The justification later was that it was meant to show teachers what real gunshots sounded like, but the training leaders had given the teachers no warning whatsoever of what was about to happen.

At the end of 2022, administrators at a school district in Arkansas decided to make a fake memorial video that depicted supposed “victims” of a shooting in their school. They included teachers and real students as listed casualties, using pictures sourced from social media accounts to add realism to the experience. The intention of the video was to “hammer home the need to practice school safety” to teachers.⁹ There seems to be this perceived need to shock educators into compliance, as if school shootings are caused by teachers accidentally leaving doors open. But teacher vigilance is not enough to prevent tragedy, as in one recent shooting when three separate teachers alerted administration that a student had a gun. Not believing a child so young was capable of bringing a gun to school, administrators ignored teacher concerns. The six-year-old then shot his teacher in the chest. She still got all her students out of the classroom before

⁹ See Roberts and Murphy.

receiving medical care herself, as I'm sure she's been trained to do. The elementary school plans to install metal detectors.¹⁰

My school was put under partial lockdown this year after a supposed threat, months old, resurfaced in gossip and was reported to administration. Parents and board members were outraged and insisted on a police presence the following day. As multiple deputies paced the building and we taught with the blinds drawn tight, our students went about business as usual while the foreign exchange student cried. I tried to comfort her, but really, she was right that this experience shouldn't feel normal. *It is not okay*, she said. I was interviewed as part of the incident review process. I was asked if I had ever noticed any aggression or had any issues with the student who supposedly made the threat. He was always polite in class, and the only act of aggression I remembered from him wasn't directed at me. One afternoon the principal had sat him in my empty classroom after getting into a fight. He had a black eye, and he cried. I offered him a tissue. New school, foster kid, prior transgressions. *It's really hard*, he said. He was expelled to prevent a tragedy. In reality, there hasn't been a credible threat to student safety in years. The only lockdown that has occurred during my tenure spurred from decency rather than safety: a parent, high and disoriented, had wandered pants-less into the parking lot in full view of the west hallway windows. Her child, thankfully, was too young to understand.

¹⁰ See B. Brooks.

**EXCURSION 3: AN INVITATION TO INTERVIEW (*A HOSTILE
NEGOTIATION*)**

“How will you encourage parents to support their children’s education?”

(How persistent will you be in contacting uninvolved parents so we aren’t liable when their child fails?)

“I will regularly contact parents to update them on our class activities and their child’s progress. I will provide a class syllabus with our goals and texts for the semester, and if any student is struggling, I will reach out to parents to create an action plan for their improvement.”

(I will keep written documentation of parents’ approval on course texts so they can’t cause a commotion later, and I will make a paper trail of regular communication to notify parents that their child is struggling so they can’t claim that they didn’t know, even though we already send home progress reports, write newsletters, and post weekly grades on an online portal. Ultimately, though, I will still go above and beyond to help the student pass, because I feel responsible for their education, even if their parents don’t.)

“How would you handle a parent challenging your teaching methods, curriculum, or classroom management?”

(Are you able to swallow your anger and be civil when parents question your graduate-level training or multicultural curriculum?)

“I would calm the situation if needed and make sure the parent knows that we are united in our goals of educating their child. After understanding their concern, I will provide research and sources that support my methods and curriculum along with standards alignment and district

compliance. If they still have concerns, I will provide alternative instruction and materials and offer to have a meeting with them and my administrator.”

(I am aware that parents expect to be treated like customers, so I will take the beating humbly. When they are calmed by my submission, I will justify my decisions in a way that no other professional would be expected to tolerate. But since the parent probably distrusts education anyway, it is doubtful they will take my word and the word of education researchers, so I will offer to set up a meeting with a male authority figure instead, who will assure them that the customer is always right.)

“Describe a troubling student you’ve taught. What did you do to get through to them?”
(Are you able to serve as an unqualified counselor and surrogate parent to make traumatized kids behave?)

“I’ve had students who have been very resistant and hostile in the classroom. I try to de-escalate any conflict and connect with them on a personal level and show them that I am consistently there to help them.”

(As many of my students grow up in houses with drugs and abuse, I know that I, as the English teacher, am the resident school empathizer, filling the gaps where counselors and parents should be. They will probably like my class because I don’t send them to the office for being angry and I help them write and read about hard things. We will make progress until they are suspended for swearing too much or smoking in the bathroom.)

“Do you have social media accounts? Would you be willing to show us your profile right now?”

(Do you appear sexually and politically neutral online? Are you at risk of publicly revealing any identity other than “teacher”?)

“Oh, I don’t have any social media accounts! I just find them to be a waste of time.”

(I have an Instagram account under a fake name because I don’t want to live in fear of being fired over a political meme or a picture of me drinking a glass of wine.)

“What extracurricular activities are you interested in sponsoring?”

(How much free labor are you willing to give to responsibilities outside your job description?)

“I am happy to tutor after hours, and I love sponsoring service and civic organizations to help students learn about helping their community.”

(I am already not being paid enough, so I will evade extra responsibilities once I’m hired...unless a student is really struggling...or unless I’m the only one willing to sponsor a club the students would really enjoy.)

“Define loyalty.”

(Give us an idea of how difficult it will be to guilt trip you when you don’t put the “school family” first.)

“Loyalty is the act of being there for those who are there for you. It’s when you stick to your commitments and support your community, even when it gets tough.”

(I will try to resist manipulation, but my loyalty is to my students above all else, so I will probably fold if you weaponize my care for children.)

A NATION DIVIDED: ANALYZING THE LANGUAGE OF CENSORSHIP

Florida’s legislation limiting content and discussions of controversial subjects in the classroom has stood as the model for a host of legislation across the country. Laws seeking to restrict the discussion of race in the classroom have been introduced in at least 29 states (Ray and Gibbons). Additionally, 17 states have considered laws that regulate how gender and sexuality are discussed in the classroom through policies specifically targeting sex education or, more widely, through laws that expand “parents’ rights” to ensure their children are educated according to their beliefs (Jones and Franklin; Migdon). Analyzing the language of this legislation makes clear the larger threat to providing a relevant and comprehensive English Language Arts education for students. An analysis of the legislators’ language also highlights the underlying identity politics fueling the debate over censorship.

Florida HB1157 and HB7 were both signed into law in 2022, setting a precedent for censorship in schools nationwide. Both laws are cloaked in language suggesting a commitment to freedom from discrimination, although they achieve the opposite in reality. HB1157, for example, claims to “reinforce the fundamental right of parents to make decisions regarding the upbringing and control of their children in a specified manner” (Florida House “Parental” 1). The law restricts instruction on gender and sexuality completely in grades kindergarten through fourth grade and in all other grades in a non-age appropriate way. It also establishes a protocol for parents to submit complaints about violations of the bill. The law specifically states that school employees must “encourage a student to discuss issues relating to his or her well-being with his or her parent or facilitate discussion of the issue with the parent” (3-4). The legislation

requires schools to seek consent from parents for all health services and to notify parents of any “change” in a student’s well-being (3).

The language used in this bill may seem innocuous at times, but the potential for manipulation of vague language opens the door for the creation of hostile environments for gay students, families, and staff. In their statement to educators on the bill, the NEA outlined the issues with the language of the law, including the “poorly defined” terms that leave educators open to liability. Because the terms of the bill are so vague, it is unclear what constitutes “instruction” on gender and sexuality. As a result, the legislation could lead to teachers avoiding any discussion of gender or relationships, as mentioned by students or in literature. It could also require gay teachers to hide their personal lives completely in a manner not required of their straight counterparts (“What You Need to Know”). While proponents of the bill say that it is common sense legislation, they are ignoring the potential repercussions for educators caught in the crossfire. Furthermore, there is no evidence offered in support of why these laws are necessary in the first place. DeSantis suggests that this legislation combats intentional indoctrination from schools: “Parents have every right to be informed about services offered to their child at school and should be protected from schools using classroom instruction to sexualize their kids as young as 5 years old” (“Governor Ron DeSantis Signs Historic”). The inflammatory and anxiety-inducing rhetoric from politicians backing this legislation pits parents against educators without providing any concrete evidence of inappropriate instruction taking place.

The text of HB7 follows the same pattern of fear mongering and vague, problematic language. Again, under the guise of protecting individuals from discrimination, this bill places limitations on instruction regarding race and values. Possibly the most fraught and problematic

element of the Florida Stop Woke Act is the section “prohibiting classroom instruction and curriculum from being used to indoctrinate or persuade students in a manner inconsistent with certain principles or state academic standards” (Florida House “Stop” 1-2). Legislators’ definition of discriminatory behavior includes instruction that “compels such student or employee to believe” concepts including the idea that a person is intrinsically bigoted, that individuals of a certain race or sex “[bear] responsibility for and must feel guilt, anguish, or other forms of psychological distress” because of past events, and that the promotion of values like “merit, excellence, hard work, fairness, neutrality, objectivity, and racial colorblindness are racist or sexist” (10-11). The bill includes a disclaimer that these restrictions should not prevent discussion of race issues, as long as the instruction is objective; however, the bill fails to define how objectivity can be proven.

Other notable characteristics of the bill include revisions of the previously used term “gender” to “sex” and the striking of “ethnicity” in favor of “color” (5). The bill also includes the striking of character development curriculum from required instruction and the addition of “civic and character education” that includes the “responsibilities of patriotism” and “respect for authority, life, liberty, and personal property” (19). To the character and civic education section, the requirement of instruction on “the nature and importance of free enterprise to the United States economy” was also added (19). Repeatedly, the legislation complicates its own claim of objectivity in the sections outlining the requirements for the teaching of civics, history, social sciences. For example, the law specifically states that “American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed, shall be viewed as knowable, teachable, and testable...” (14). The law also contains specifications on the teaching of both Holocaust history and African American

history. Comparing the language between these two sections reveals the truly discriminatory nature of the law.

First, while the Holocaust is defined as “systematic” and the perpetrators are clearly identified as the German Nazis, the perpetration of slavery is defined less clearly (14). Before discussing slavery, the law requires instruction on “the history of African peoples before the political conflicts that led to the development of slavery,” which seems to suggest that the slave trade originated from internal conflict rather than colonization led by white Europeans (15). While both require the promotion of the “understanding of the ramifications of prejudice, racism, and stereotyping, and...encouraging tolerance” (15), only the Holocaust education section requires the material “to be taught in a manner that leads to an investigation of human behavior” (14). It also requires teachers to provide examples of antisemitism, past and present, to encourage the prevention of antisemitism in the future (14).

In contrast, in an African American history class in the state of Florida, students are to be taught about “how the individual freedoms of persons have been infringed by slavery, racial oppression, racial segregation, and racial discrimination, as well as topics relating to the enactment and enforcement of laws resulting in racial oppression, racial segregation, and racial discrimination,” but rather than discussing current examples of racism in society, the law states that classes should cover “how recognition of [individual] freedoms has overturned these unjust laws” (15). Far from stating that African American history classes should work toward preventing racism, the section ends with a disclaimer that materials and instruction in this course should not be used to indoctrinate or discriminate against students. The section also includes instructions to focus on the successful innovators in the African American community that

contributed to the nation's success, as a way of "celebrat[ing] the inspirational stories of African Americans who prospered, even in the most difficult circumstances" (15).

Again, Florida leaders' comments on the bill reveal the true intention of the legislation. On the Florida government website, a news release titled "Governor Ron DeSantis Signs Legislation to Protect Floridians from Discrimination and Woke Indoctrination" proudly states that this bill is the first nationwide to combat CRT. Quotes from legislators and government officials praise DeSantis for his action on education. Bizarrely, the responses tout the bill's protection of students and employees against discrimination. There is also an emphasis in the bill and in officials' responses to it on *individual* rights. For example, the House Speaker Chris Prowls stated that the bill prevented instruction from "losing sight that we are first and foremost individuals" ("Governor Ron DeSantis Signs Legislation"). In the relatively brief article, the word *individual* is used 13 times as well as 23 times in the bill itself. This focus on the individual aligns this kind of legislation with individualistic, competition-based ideology that reduces collective responsibility and aligns more closely with capitalist values than community values.

Remarks on the bill also reveal the perceived need for the legislation without providing instances of discrimination in the classroom. DeSantis claims the law fights against the takeover of a "far-left woke agenda" in Florida. Even more strangely, Lieutenant Governor Jeannette Nunez stated that the state's goal in passing this kind of legislation was to "protect our children and parents from this Marxist-inspired curriculum" ("Governor Ron DeSantis Signs Legislation").

The Florida legislation on race and gender has inspired other states to draft similar laws, some even going further in restricting instruction and classroom materials. Missouri, for example, has passed legislation criminalizing providing sexually explicit material to minors.

While the bill specifically bars school employees from providing “explicit sexual material” to students, which is defined as “pictorial, three dimensional, or visual,” other materials more broadly termed as “pornographic for minors” are defined in the same section less clearly (Missouri Senate SB775). According to the legislation, this term could be applied to material if “[t]he average person, applying contemporary community standards, would find that the material...has a tendency to cater or appeal to a prurient interest of minors; and [t]he material or performance depicts or describes nudity, [and] sexual conduct...” (Missouri Senate SB775). Although school employees are not named specifically in regard to distributing this kind of material, it is nevertheless prohibited under section 573.040.

Additional proposed legislation in Missouri includes a hefty law modeled after Florida’s Parental Bill of Rights in Education and an even more extreme bill banning the discussion of gender and sexuality in all grades: “Missouri’s bill would only allow licensed mental health care providers to talk to students about gender identity and LGBTQ issues in K-12 public schools, and only if guardians first give permission” (Silva). After a bill proposing a CRT ban expired in the Senate at the end of 2022, Missouri’s Parents’ Bill of Rights Act has been crafted to more broadly establish parents’ authority to examine and reject curriculum and instruction “based on the parent's beliefs that such materials are inappropriate for whatever reason and to be assured that such objectionable materials are not taught to the parent's child” (Missouri Senate Parents’).

Even federally, several bills have been proposed that aim to control classroom instruction involving controversial topics (Jones and Franklin; Migdon). For example, the “Protecting Students from Racial Hostility Act” was introduced to the Senate in July 2021, and it seeks to revise the definition of “discrimination” under the Civil Rights Act to encompass “the use of a curriculum, or teaching or counseling, that *promotes a divisive concept* relating to elementary,

secondary, or postsecondary education and that results in a racially hostile environment” (“S.2574,” emphasis added). The bill would also require institutions to report related complaints to the state Attorney General (“S.2574”).

The Discord Between Teachers and the Public

Judging by this wave of legislation seeking to control the materials and conversation in a classroom, one might assume that schools have been overrun by bigoted teachers who use class time to shame students yet simultaneously indoctrinate them with radical ideas. The most generous interpretation of events communicates that parents are very nervous about teachers’ role in influencing the opinions of young people and would prefer if they avoid uncomfortable topics altogether. This combination of suspicion and hostility, however, seems to be the final straw for many teachers, who are already overworked and underpaid.

The current teacher shortage is enough to illustrate the fact there is another ideological division at play in the fight over censorship: what parents and politicians believe education should accomplish and what teachers believe their role is in a student’s development. This school year, districts struggled to staff their classrooms, especially in rural and already underserved areas. In addition to financial struggle and the stress of pandemic teaching, educators cite a “sense that politicians and parents — and sometimes their own school board members — have little respect for their profession amid an escalating educational culture war that has seen many districts and states pass policies and laws restricting what teachers can say about U.S. history, race, racism, gender and sexual orientation, as well as LGBTQ issues” (Natanson and Rozsa). While these issues are widely recognized, they are not being addressed in an attempt to attract teachers back to the profession. Although well intended, the incentives being offered to recruit

teachers are insultingly flimsy. One superintendent, who was forced to use substitute teachers to cover 269 unfilled positions, discussed incentives like “some immediate supplies. Every teacher likes their calendar, right? So we’re providing calendars, little things for them” (Natanson and Rozsa). Meanwhile, some of the most conservative states lamenting the nefarious influences teachers have in the classroom are nevertheless filling open teaching positions with unqualified candidates. As noted earlier in this thesis, Florida is allowing veterans without education experience to teach, and many other states are waiving the 60-hour substitute requirement, allowing individuals with no higher education to enter the classroom (Natanson). The idea that veterans with no pedagogical training could better serve students than other sectors of the population suggests that what politicians prioritize is a perceived ideological bent instead of educational qualifications.

For the Midwestern English educator, the challenge of creating space for inclusive, social justice-oriented instruction without “violating” the rights of parents is increasingly complex. Bans on discussions of sexuality and race disproportionately target the English classroom, where students read literature that reflects the range of human experience and learn how to express their opinions about real-world issues in writing. Withholding diverse narratives will only perpetuate ideological echo chambers and further polarize communities already divided along cultural and political lines. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, while U.S. student populations reflect the national trend of growing diversity, “more than a third of students (about 18.5 million) attended schools where 75% or more students were of a single race or ethnicity” (“K-12 Education” 1). Midwestern states have the most homogeneous classrooms, where 59% of students attend schools in which their classmates are predominantly the same race, with over 51% of midwestern schools being predominantly white (“K-12 Education” 16-17). Even in more

ethnically diverse classrooms, educators in states with legislation that limits discussion of race may be prevented from teaching diverse texts that represent their students' lived experience.

In rural schools, the task of providing relevant and diverse ELA instruction is especially precarious. In the United States, 20% of students are educated in rural schools (Bailey). The experiences and expectations these 9.3 million students bring into the classroom can be vastly different from those of their peers from urban areas. For students from impoverished rural communities, limited state funding at school and financial strain at home can already limit exposure to diverse reading material (Bailey). Using indicators including the number of rural students and the amount of state funding allocated to rural districts, the Rural School and Community Trust measured the importance of rural education to the health of the overall education system of each state. Among Midwestern states, the importance of rural education was measured at the highest level for Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Iowa. Of the 12 Midwestern states (as defined by the U.S. census), rural education is crucial or very important to seven (Showalter et al. 17). Midwestern states with large rural student populations also rank lowest in teacher salary, making up 4 of the 10 lowest average teacher salaries in the country (24).

The challenges rural educators face under normal circumstances combined with the increased threat of censorship present a barrier to providing rural students with instruction that prepares them for citizenship in a diverse democracy. Rural teachers are often members of small or even one-person departments. They also lack the professional support and resources needed to address the issues present in rural education (Petroni and Wynhoff Olsen). Combined with the prospect of low pay, the challenge of addressing these problems in the classroom is enough to cause qualified teachers to look elsewhere for employment (Azano and Stewart 108). Rural

schools' inability to attract and retain experienced teachers negatively affects the quality of education that rural students receive, limiting availability of high-level courses that help prepare students for college (Bailey). With a larger workload, fewer resources, and the growing threat of backlash for discussing controversial subjects, rural teachers may be more susceptible to the chilling effect caused by recent censorship laws.

Based on the increasing teacher shortage, it is clear that educators and the public are not in agreement about the challenges and goals of education. To home in on this ideological division, it is useful to compare educators' responses to censorship in their own words to the policies they are opposing. In 2022, NCTE established a book rationale database, which houses arguments written by teachers that justify the educational value of nearly 2000 (and counting) commonly challenged titles. The rationales vary slightly but generally include a text summary, recommended age level, possible sources of challenges, recommended teaching strategies, standard alignment and supplemental teaching materials, and a justification of educational relevance. An analysis of these materials supports the idea that merely finding facts and achieving technical proficiency in reading and writing is not the primary objective English teachers have for their students. Rather, the English educators view the classroom as a space crucial to the cultivation of critical thinking, information analysis, and emotional literacy.

According to the American Library Association, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas was the 5th most challenged and banned book of 2021 and the 10th in 2020. The text tells the story of an African American teenage girl caught between her school community, a mostly white prep school, and her childhood friends and family. When one of her friends is shot by police, she is forced to come to terms with her own identities, and she learns to use her voice to fight for her community (Covino-Poutasse and Hall). The book was frequently “[b]anned and challenged for

profanity, violence, and because it was thought to promote an anti-police message and indoctrination of a social agenda” (“Top 10 Most Challenged Books”). In the NCTE rationale for the text, written by Katy Covino-Poutasse and Drew Hall, the value of having this book in the classroom, either for use in the curriculum or availability in the library, lies in its portrayal of relevant issues: “the diversity of characters in the novel ensures that different experiences and perspectives help readers understand both the central event and also its charged aftermath” (4). The main character speaks up for her views and tries to reconcile the divided parts of her community that exist within her own life. The educators who wrote this rationale suggest that the author’s portrayal of a young person advocating for themselves and trying to understand the complications of identity is beneficial for teenage students (Covino-Poutasse and Hall).

George by Alex Gino was the most banned book in the country for three years, from 2018-2020. According to the American Library Association, the text was “[c]hallenged, banned, and restricted for LGBTQIA+ content, conflicting with a religious viewpoint, and not reflecting “the values of our community” (“Top 10 Most Challenged Books”). The text tells the story of a young transgender girl, who struggles with her true inner identity of “Melissa.” NCTE’s rationale, written by Sara Stanton, focuses on the book’s representation of the trans perspective and the clear themes of “courage, acceptance, and friendship” (Stanton 7). In her defense of the text, Stanton adds that the text is timely and offers multiple characters with different perspectives with which readers can engage (1). The importance of texts like *George* lies in their ability to help students interpret the world around them and solve problems in their own lives (16).

Not only new books about current events and issues have become the focus of censors. *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, published in 1970, has made the top ten most banned books list for two years running, 8th in 2021 and 9th in 2020. The reasons most cited for challenges are

compelling: “it was considered sexually explicit and depicts child sexual abuse” (“Top 10 Most Challenged Books”). The main character, a young girl named Pecola Breedlove, comes of age in a family wracked with conflict and in a society that discriminates against her for skin color. The book culminates with Pecola being sexually assaulted by her father. While race and class are not mentioned in challenges to the novel, the text is notable for its depiction of racism and generational trauma (Foreman).

Robert Foreman writes an eloquent rationale for the protection of *The Bluest Eye* from censorship. Citing Piaget, Foreman argues that adolescents are developmentally mature enough to think critically about the world around them, even when that involves considering uncomfortable topics: “Morrison presents an ugly picture of the world, but there is ugliness in the world. Violence, death, destruction and yes, even rape, are things that happen in society” (3). Foreman argues that Morrison’s writing, lauded by critics for its beauty, relevance, and persistent hope, can help students understand the society in which they live and help them make sense of their own experiences. Depriving students of this is to deprive students of the emotional and intellectual development that reading challenging literature provides: “the real victims are the students, denied the freedom to explore ideas and pursue truth wherever and however they wish” (8). He also supports this view by explicitly stating that the purpose of education is “the students’ right to know and become educated citizens” (8).

Understanding and Combating Rhetorical Deadlock

Like the struggle over education as a whole, the debate over censorship in the classroom is also not new. During the Reagan administration, when American society was pushing back against the social movements of the sixties, James Moffett and his collaborators launched a

revolutionary new textbook series to reflect the diverse voices of the nation, including multiple perspectives from non-traditional genres along with canonical literature (Moffett 190). His motivation was the same as many teachers have expressed in their defenses of banned books: to help students learn how to analyze multiple perspectives, including those who are different from them, and ultimately learn how to function as a citizen in our democracy. However, the citizens of a school district in Kanawha County, West Virginia felt very differently. The absolute fallout over the adoption of Moffett's work in the rural mining community is recorded in his book, *Storm in the Mountains*, and excerpts from the challenges to the texts in the series could be taken from current discourse on censorship.

The rhetoric of book objectors from Kanawha County echoes the complaints against texts today. The citizens of the school district objected to discussions of race and sex, (and what they considered to be) vulgarity, anti-American ideas, and general indoctrination. Alice Moore, one of the board members who instigated the response to the adoption of Moffett's *Interaction* series, called the selections "filthy, trashy, disgusting, one sidedly in favor of Blacks, and unpatriotic" (14). In response to the crises, the new guidelines the school district established for future textbook selection highlight the main objections raised during the dispute:

Textbooks must not intrude into the privacy of students' homes by asking personal questions about inner feelings or behavior of themselves or parents...must recognize the sanctity of the home and emphasize its importance as the basic unit of American society...must not contain offensive language...must teach the true history and heritage of the United States...shall teach that traditional rules of grammar are a worthwhile subject for academic pursuit and are essential for effective communication...shall encourage loyalty to the United States...and emphasize the responsibilities of citizenship and the obligation to redress grievances through legal processes...must not encourage sedition or revolution against our government or teach or imply that an alien form of government is superior. (23)

The resemblance between this list of requirements for classroom materials and the legislation analyzed previously is striking. Like the bills discussed in previous sections, Moffett points out that these subtly pointed but ambiguous requirements could be relatively harmless or authoritarian in practice depending on interpretation (23). The prevalence of misinformation in fueling the hysteria around supposed indoctrination in the classroom provides another interesting connection to current censorship debates. Shortly after the adoption of the series, fliers appeared around the district showing sexually explicit passages and images that were supposedly excerpts from the texts. However, the selections quoted “had nothing to do with the language arts textbooks adopted in Kanawha County, [and] served to fuel the flames of the controversy” (Catherine Candor-Chandler qtd. in Moffett 17).

Moffett’s analysis of this controversy, which took place alongside a national surge in censorship, provides some interesting insight we can apply to today’s fight over the classroom (190). Primarily, Moffett defines the core issue as one of fear. Prevalent anxiety results in a breakdown in agreement on both values expressed through texts and interpretations of those texts (160): “Fear cripples, and any upbringing that relies on it for control will brutalize and stupefy. But anxiety induced in adulthood by hard times will also feed the bigoted, dogmatic, censorial potentiality of personality that everyone bears within” (202). This fear-based impulse to censor information is due to what Moffett defines as “agnosis” (185). The phenomenon, which he describes as a self-imposed “avoidance of knowing,” is a kind of self-preservation instinct born of hardship and projected onto students in the form of censorship (185).

Agnosis can manifest in a fear of “others” and any information potentially threatening to the status quo. As Moffett notes, and as is apparent in political rhetoric today, “[t]he link between sexual and racial identities is white male supremacy” (218). Opposition to the inclusion

of voices in English Language Arts classes that represent the female, gay, and Black experience reflect a broader and darker fear of challenge: “Women’s equality and racial integration challenge white males in economic competition at the same time they deal a blow to psychological security by blurring identity boundaries” (219). Quotes from the written objections to the texts in *Interactions* illustrate this dynamic.

Several texts with themes and content that were meant to illustrate suffering caused by racism and the resulting generational trauma elicited claims of “racism” from text objectors. Moffett calls out this objection as intentionally vague: “I think ambiguity is a convenient dodge; objecting to racism looks like a virtuous–liberal–way of dispensing with a selection aimed at illuminating racism” (143). This contradictory grievance is reminiscent of current legislation that prohibits “discrimination” by banning the very texts which are meant to combat prejudice (usually texts written by Black authors). As Moffett states, “All Black writing that alludes to the oppression of its people is of course called racism in reverse by the censors” (140).

Multiple strategies were used to censor diverse perspectives in *Interactions* aside from claiming racism. A literal interpretation of the texts enabled objectors to complain about violence, vulgarity, and general immoral behavior, as if the authors were endorsing bad behavior (Moffett 161). This rejection of nuanced meaning led opponents of Moffett’s series to point to issues other than race and sex to nevertheless censor diverse literature, like issues of profanity or vulgarity. Moffett explains how complaints about inappropriate language and content can be weaponized to nevertheless target literature with uncomfortable content: “Since profane or coarse language often fills the speech of people living in dehumanized environments–battlefields, ghettos, assembly lines–the practical effect of banning such speech is to cut off the voices of soldiers, workers, minorities, or others whose plight tells us things we don’t want to

hear” (110). Claims that texts were too depressing or that they attempted to violate a students’ privacy by requiring students to consider their personal lives and thoughts were also used as objections. This extended to stories about injustice. In a complaint that could be heard in a sound bite from a Republican senator, one objector asked “...why this type of literature is important for students unless it is to make them feel guilt and shame” (Moffett 157). This function of literature as being emotionally compelling can be linked to censors’ complaints against social-emotional learning today.

The effect that censorship had on education during this period is again parallel to the experience of educators today. According to research by Brown University, the state of Florida had the most unfilled teaching positions in the 2021-2022 school year, more than doubling the number of unfilled jobs in the second and third place states (Nguyen 15). The teachers of Kanawha County, feeling scapegoated and intimidated, also chose to leave the profession (Moffett 27). Those who stayed were scared enough to self-censor, avoiding any remotely controversial topic in favor of black and white, rote topics like grammar: “Literature is dangerous and grammar safe” (228). But why is it that teachers are generally against censorship, even when their communities are for it? Why do parents and politicians prefer grammar instruction while teachers prioritize more nuanced learning? Moffett considers the breakdown between the perspective of teachers and the reactions of censors:

...people committed to learning—teachers—or to fact-finding—the media corps—or to dissemination of learning and information—editors and librarians—naturally favor textbooks that most further growth, information, and learning. These are all relatively well educated people as well. It is in the nature of conservatism to hold back more on growth, information, and learning (to conserve). In other words, what may be felt by some conservatives as a deliberate collaboration to brainwash children—a conspiracy—results logically from the nature of certain professions. (106-107)

From a perspective of fear, growth can be interpreted as indoctrination. If community members believe schools should function as individualized reinforcement of individual family beliefs and culture, it is no wonder that “they must construe our less selective offering as betrayal and alien indoctrination” (106).

James Moffett’s work analyzing censorship continues to be relevant. In 2010, John Mayher wrote in celebration of *Storm in the Mountains*, identifying the same patterns of fear and contradictory complaints in modern American politics. Mayher draws parallels between Tea Party activists and Moffett’s book objectors, including how perceived political threats are projected onto the classroom. From the red scare to the space race to the 1980s recession, conflict over education continues to correlate with larger national anxiety: “This perceived crisis has persisted and produced a steady stream of ‘reform’ efforts, including the standards movement, the passage of the No Child Left Behind legislation of the Bush administration, and the even more active federal role in education being seized by the Obama administration” (Mayher 312-313).

While Moffett’s work is still widely lauded, some scholars find fault with his method of engaging with the local community involved in the controversy. Kim Donehower, who herself grew up in rural Appalachia, challenges Moffett’s representation of local people as “emotion-driven” as well as his prioritization of a “melting-pot” style of pluralism (Donehower 268-269). While Donehower does not disagree with the basis of Moffett’s challenge to censorship, she clarifies her belief that literacy should function as an acquisition of additional “literate and linguistic skills in multiple social systems” rather than a replacement of one’s native discourse (269).

While I would challenge Donehower's assertion that Moffett's identification of "agnosis" in the censors' response equates to his belief in their irrationality, her invocation of Alasdair MacIntyre's "tradition-bound rationalities" theory is compelling, especially when applied to the current rhetoric surrounding education and censorship. A tradition-bound rationality is a "distinct set of practices, justificatory narratives, and notion of *telos* that [drives] conflict with the other" (271). When two opposing sides build an argument rooted within their own traditions, their conclusions are incompatible because their arguments are based on completely different premises. What results is a rhetorical deadlock, when "we possess no rational way of weighing the claims of one as against another" (MacIntyre qtd. in Donehower 271). To move past this impasse requires an act of empathy, communicating across tradition-bound rationalities "to criticize one's rival with the rival's own terms, within the rival's own system" (Donehower 272).

Henry Giroux argues that the empowerment of students is critical to the survival of democracy (Giroux "Education"). In our current national state of rhetorical deadlock, learning to communicate across traditions and cultures will be crucial to preserving our common democratic tradition. The English classroom is the ideal environment in which to provide students with diverse viewpoints and encourage them to become active voices in the issues involving their local and national communities. Withholding diverse narratives in the English classroom has a range of consequences, including failing to prepare young people for success as students on diverse campuses and citizens of a diverse nation. Censoring classroom discussions about real world issues also threatens to diminish our students' abilities to engage meaningfully in civil discourse. As a secondary English educator in rural Missouri, I fear that I am not adequately preparing my students to think critically about their own and others' views. The free flow of ideas in the secondary classroom is continuously being curbed by legislation that attempts to

shield students from the emotional discomfort of cognitive dissonance. As rural student enrollment in higher education continues to decline, K-12 teachers cannot rely on a college education to fill the gaps left by censorship (Moody). Analyzing recent trends in censorship reveal the critical yet undervalued objectives of English education: to help students develop cultural, emotional, and information literacy.

EXCURSION 4: PLAYING POSSUM

My students are incredibly resourceful. Anything that has broken in my classroom has been taken by a surly country boy into the mystical Ag. Shop and emerged like new. I have full faith that many of them could survive off the land if needed. A couple of my students were persistently late to first hour because they spent their time before school in the woods checking traps. After a successful morning, they asked me, “Woolsey, you wanna help us skin a ‘coon in the Ag. Shop?” I did not want to help skin a ‘coon in the Ag. Shop. Class was brought to a standstill one afternoon when two seniors walked by with a possum on a pink dog leash and then tried to drop it into the classroom through my open window. They were mostly good natured when I made them set the poor thing loose on threat of calling their parents.

Many of my students are also troubled. They have learned to survive out of necessity; some have been abused, others have lived with drug addicts, and almost all of them live under the poverty line. They bring the burden of their experiences into class with them every day. Having grown up in a similar world, I am not shocked by their stories, but I continue to be inspired by their perseverance and willingness to confront their vulnerabilities in my classroom. I hope that my class offers an outlet to their hurt. I try to make them feel safe about sharing their experiences through writing in a way that will serve them.

My students are not backward. They are not bigoted or stupid. They are the sum of their experiences and their families and their community, for good and ill, like all of us. Many have not made it far from their homes, and if travel is fatal to prejudice, then what is isolation? Outdated language survives in this little rural pocket as a result, and many would interpret my students’ faux pas as intolerance. Once, I got on to a boy for using the word “injun” to refer to

native people, which is an insult I don't think has been used since the Civil War. He was surprised to learn that it was a slur. Of course, veins of true prejudice run through a country town like anywhere else, and high school students are old enough to take responsibility for their beliefs. But someone has to take them seriously first.

How do you challenge students to see beyond their biases and their distrust of the outside world while respecting their culture and agency? As Moffett stated in his famous analysis of censorship in rural West Virginia, "Stigma is trauma, but fear of being outcast or miscaste must not be allowed to dictate negative school practices."¹¹ It is wrong to claim that rural communities are dens of racism and ignorance—but it is naive and incorrect to deny the pitfalls of a political system that exploits fear of the "other" and encourages cultural division along geographical lines.

As one might expect in a school that beat the state legislature in banning "Critical Race Theory," encouraging discussions and critical thinking about social issues is a challenge. Suggestions of imbalances in power are denied and ignored, but reminders are everywhere. For example, there are many flags around school. In the history classroom, there is only an Israeli flag and a "Don't Tread on Me" flag to accompany the American one. There is also a Trump 2020 ceiling tile painted in the art room. But last semester, a student asked if she could put a pride flag in my room. I told her that I would if I could, but it would be immediately an issue. Just weeks beforehand, some inspirational quotes were painted over in the girls' bathroom by school staff because one referenced being "a rainbow in someone else's cloud." I feel at all times like I'm walking a tightrope, trying to balance between maintaining my professional integrity while still maintaining the trust of the community. I try to communicate to my students that they belong and are celebrated in my classroom. Sometimes, I feel like a fraud for not fighting for

¹¹ See Moffett (229).

them more directly, but I fear that my choice is either to stay and support them in my limited capacity or take a short-lived stand and leave.

But after three years, I am leaving. My new position is at a significantly larger high school where I will have one prep, a department of support, and a \$10,000 raise. My students are sad but not surprised. One told me, *It's like you're breaking up with us. But it's sad for us, because it's actually better for you.* During parent teacher conferences, a parent popped in to say that her son had told her I was leaving. She told me that he said, *"But she's bettering herself, mom."* I haven't told my students about my new job perks or expressed that I feel like I'm trading up—they just feel in themselves already that their community and their school is not good enough for teachers to stay.

EVADING THE CENSOR: EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO ENGAGE IN CRITICAL INQUIRY THROUGH PROBLEM-POSING EDUCATION

As an English educator in southwest Missouri, the tightrope-walk of discussing topics like race and sexuality in the classroom is frustratingly familiar. State and district policies limit the texts and terms we can use to prompt critical thinking about current issues facing our country. In my rural school, critical analysis of racism especially is not likely to be prompted by my students' surroundings. Their classmates look like them, talk like them, and share the same cultural background. For many of my students, exposure to culturally diverse narratives only occurs in the English classroom. Withholding these voices will only perpetuate ideological echo chambers and further polarize communities already divided along cultural lines.

The success of censorship in the classroom relies on the idea that educators are the bestowers of knowledge. Paulo Freire's answer to the banking model of education is the empowerment of students as independent, critical thinkers. In the tradition of liberatory pedagogy, Giroux argues that educators have a responsibility to create an environment in which students can develop the skills necessary to engage in and uphold a democracy under threat. Contextualizing the debate over censorship as a "crisis of democracy" provides a framework through which educators can provide meaningful, inclusive instruction despite efforts to stifle discussions of race in the classroom. Problem-posing education has the potential to serve as a crucial tool for including diverse perspectives in classrooms under threat of censorship by empowering student voices.

Freedom of Speech in the Classroom

The National Council of the Teachers of English drafted their first resolution on “Students’ Right to Read” in 1962 (“NCTE Intellectual Freedom Center”). In reaction to the student protest movements of the sixties, the Republican Party sought a return to discipline and conservative values; as a result, censorship swept the country in the decades that followed, especially targeting schools (Ross 26; 36). While waves of censorship and anti-intellectualism have ebbed and flowed with the political tides of the last 50 years, students' rights to access diverse texts are arguably under greater threat now in 2022 than ever before (Harris and Alter). In a blow to educators and librarians seeking to cultivate culturally inclusive spaces, book challenges are increasingly focused on texts that critics say have “woke” agendas. According to the American Library Association, nine of the ten most challenged books of 2021 were banned because of “sexually explicit” content; half of the most contested books were challenged specifically because of LGBTQ themes (“Top 10 Most Challenged Books”).

Legislation seeking to limit discussions of race and sexuality in the classroom will only encourage challenges against books including themes that could be interpreted as politically fraught. With the vague catch-all of laws that prohibit “Critical Race Theory,” any text that addresses issues of race and inequality could be subject to censorship. Additionally, some states are going as far as banning any text that contains sexual content. In Missouri, a new law will hold liable anyone who provides sexually explicit material to minors: “Teachers, librarians or other school officials could face up to a year in jail or a fine if they give a student the book or other material” (Grumke). Missouri districts fearing liability have already begun to censor texts in their school libraries and limit teachers' classroom library texts, specifically graphic or illustrated novels (Grumke).

In addition to schools' and libraries' preemptive purge of texts in response to threatening legislation, students' free access to diverse materials is being seriously curbed by parental oversight. Hoping to avoid public conflict, many schools are utilizing library systems that allow parents to dictate specific texts that their children are not allowed to access, and some schools have implemented notification systems that send messages to parents every time their child checks out a book with information on the text they chose. One Pennsylvania school is going so far as to seek parental approval for every new text purchased by the district librarians (Natanson and Rozsa). This level of surveillance illustrates the tension that exists between parents and educators, as the public seeks to exercise control over decisions that used to be trusted to highly qualified education professionals.

If materials with diverse and relevant perspectives are increasingly unavailable to students, then teachers hold the primary responsibility of giving their students instruction that helps them think critically about injustice in their world. However, teachers are restricted from sharing ideas that could be interpreted as personal political views. This double standard affects humanities courses especially where the curriculum explores big picture themes pertaining to the human experience; it also ignores the fact that education is inherently political. This paradox is illustrated in Catherine Ross's *Lessons in Censorship*, in which she describes *Meyer vs. Monroe County Community School Board*, a case that upheld a teacher's dismissal for sharing an anecdote with her upper elementary class that was perceived by parents and administrators as an "anti-war" statement.

When teaching state-approved curriculum on current events, Meyer and her class read about the anti-Iraq war protests occurring at the time of instruction. When asked by a student if she had ever been involved in a similar protest, she shared that she would generally "[honk] her

car horn to show support” when she passed such demonstrations (144). Meyer did not attempt to convince her students that they, too, should protest the Iraq war; rather, she made a connection between the protests they had discussed and the importance of resolving conflict peacefully. This lesson may have achieved the objective of state curriculum, but her contract was not renewed when parents complained that she promoted a political agenda in class (144).

As Ross points out, the question posed by Meyer’s student was an impossible one to answer without exposing herself to liability. By denying support of the Iraq war, she would have also expressed a stance. By answering the student’s question, Meyer at least avoided creating an atmosphere in her classroom that chilled healthy, productive discourse about active citizenship (155).

The Seventh Circuit Court’s decision to uphold the school district’s dismissal of Meyer was disturbingly decisive. As mouthpieces of school sponsored speech, K-12 teachers are not protected by the first amendment in their own classrooms, a concept made clear in Judge Easterbrook’s unanimous majority opinion: “The school system does not ‘regulate’ teachers’ speech as much as it ‘hires’ that speech. Expression...is a teacher’s stock in trade, the commodity she sells to her employer in exchange for a salary” (Easterbrook qtd. in Ross 115). The court opinion’s definition of a teacher’s job underlines the point of breakdown between what an educator knows to be their role in the classroom, to prompt critical thinking, and the “product” that the state and society has come to expect, delivery of a pre-packaged message.

Considering recent legislation curbing the discussion of race and sexuality in the classroom, Judge Easterbrook’s pointed words from the *Meyer vs. Monroe County Community School Board* opinion are even more alarming for educators who must now choose between the most basic tenets of their personal educational philosophies and retaining their jobs. There is no

legal recourse for educators seeking to challenge these laws or state curriculum. From the district to the state level, even partisan curriculum and resources are protected by the constitution as the speech of the state: “The state has virtually free rein to decide what subject matter public schools will cover, how the subjects will be defined and treated, and what textbooks teachers will use” (Ross 111). In other court rulings, judges have concurred with the majority opinion of *Meyer vs. Monroe*, arguing that a teacher’s unique position in shaping young peoples’ education justifies micromanaging instruction in the classroom. Rather, the legal basis asserts, the decision of what to teach our children should lie with elected officials like school board officials and state representatives, who can be held responsible by the voting public (115).

This complicated situation faced by educators is problematic on multiple fronts. First, even if a teacher succeeds in disguising their own political and moral identity in favor of the institution-approved viewpoint, students are political and social beings who respond meaningfully to texts and current events in the classroom. Fear of being seen as favoring one viewpoint over another in class discussion is enough to give a teacher pause before allowing students to openly explore even vaguely controversial topics. Secondly, state and district policies are sometimes so vague that they give little guidance for teachers on how to approach restricted subjects in class.

The onslaught of bans on Critical Race Theory, for example, failed to clearly establish an accurate definition to guide teachers from violating the law (or rather to protect them from the public equation of discussing race issues with teaching CRT). One Greenfield, Missouri teacher lost her job this year as a result of the misconceptions surrounding her district’s CRT policy. After using a “racial privilege” inventory as an anticipatory activity for the novel *Dear Martin*, a 2017 novel about a young Black man who experiences police brutality, parents complained to

Greenfield’s administration that Kim Morrison was teaching Critical Race Theory in her English class. One student told their parents that Morrison assigned an activity “trying to make me feel guilty for being white” (qtd. in Riley). When approached by her principal over the complaints, Morrison refuted the idea that she was teaching CRT, a theory she has never even studied herself. Despite Morrison’s insistence that “discussing racism is not CRT,” her principal’s main concern was the public perception that CRT was being taught in her classroom (Riley). The fact that Morrison had sought administrative approval for the text before teaching it (which was granted) did not protect her from backlash. The Greenfield school board voted not to renew Morrison’s contract, citing her “decision to incorporate the worksheet associated with the novel 'Dear Martin,' due to the content and subject matter” (Riley).

Educators seeking to provide an education that challenges discrimination and explores other social justice issues face open hostility even from their own school districts. A teacher’s speech is not only unprotected—it becomes the scapegoat for public outrage over the perceived threat of culture war. How, then, can we as educators continue to foster democratic values and tolerance in our students? While the protection of student speech has been greatly diminished since *Tinker vs. Des Moines Independent Community School District* set the precedent in 1969, “pure” student speech remains protected by law (Ross 294). Although the *Hazelwood* ruling in 1988 established justification for schools to censor speech that could be interpreted as “school sponsored,” such as teacher speech or school publications, individual student speech cannot be restricted except in cases where the speech is vulgar, causes “material disruption...or collides with the legal rights of others” (294). The continued protection of individual student speech enables educators to provide relevant language arts instruction that empowers students to use their voices and prepares them to participate meaningfully in democracy. To adequately prepare

our students for the responsibility of citizenship in a diverse democracy, educators must commit to empowering student voices in a system that seeks to infantilize them.

The Role of Liberatory Pedagogy in the Fight Against Censorship

With the rise of standardized testing and the Common Core, many educators lament the narrowing of American education to rote learning and “teaching to the test.” This system of instruction mirrors Freire’s decried “banking model,” in which students are the passive receivers of knowledge deposited by the teacher (72). While Freire focuses on the oppression of students within this dynamic, the model is appealing to those wishing to restrict teachers’ influence in the classroom. Knowledge within a banking model can be controlled through a scripted curriculum and assessed by a one-size-fits-all state assessment.

The recent increase in legislation seeking to control the flow of ideas in the classroom fuels the politicization of education by limiting student access to diverse viewpoints. A curriculum that fails to reflect the diversity of our society also fails to prepare students for active, critical involvement in democracy:

It is not surprising that the banking model of education regards men as adaptable, manageable beings. The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them. (Freire 73)

The antidote to censorship in the classroom lies in rejecting a fear of our own students—instead, educators must “trust in people and their creative power” (Freire 75). This act requires imbuing our students with the assurance of their own personhood and their power to understand and

change the world around them, a process Freire refers to as “mutual humanization” (75). To accomplish this, he advocates for a rejection of the banking model of education in favor of pedagogy that explores real world problems (79). Problem-posing education reimagines the role of students as “critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher” as they think critically to examine issues that are authentic and relevant (81).

Dialogue as an instructional tool is critical to Freire’s vision of problem-posing education: “problem-posing education regards dialogue as indispensable to the act of cognition which unveils reality” (Freire 83). Teaching students to engage in meaningful dialogue about real-world issues also prepares students for responsible democratic citizenship. Justice Holmes, one of the earliest Supreme Court Justices who defended the freedom of speech in his review of Espionage Act convictions in the 1920s, saw open discussion as critical to the success of democracy. He argued to uphold the “marketplace of ideas” in one of his dissenting opinions: “The best response to ‘bad’ speech is more and better speech, and so ‘we should be eternally vigilant against attempts to check the expression of opinions that we loathe and believe to be fraught with death’” (Holmes qtd. in Ross 14-15).

While, in theory, the U.S. education system is modeled on our wider democratic system, it fails to prepare students for the responsibility of participation in real world citizenship. It is a system vulnerable to the influence of partisan politics at the expense of students’ development. In their research, Michael Glassman and Min Ju Kang analyze the models of democracy implemented in U.S. K-12 education. On the district scale, they argue that, while school districts are overseen by democratically elected board members, the kind of governance that prevails is “elitist” (Glassman and Kang 365).

To illustrate their point, Glassman and Kang consider a hypothetical issue—developing a dress code—and how the issue may be resolved through implementing different models of democracy in the education system. From the perspective of an elitist, self-action model of education, the school board dictates the dress code without student input, as “[i]t is assumed that, left to their own devices, students will dress any way they choose, some in a highly provocative and suggestive manner” (375). In the middle of the spectrum, a more pluralist system would allow the students to construct their own dress code after exploring the tendency of self-expression to cause conflict between groups. This system would either prompt each group within the school community to determine their definition of inappropriate attire to construct one comprehensive dress code (in a self-action system) or it would invite all students to reach a consensus (in an interactive system). The opposite of the elite model is a pluralist system that is participatory and transactive. As this model accepts the premise that a school is a microcosm of the larger society, it “would never demand a dress code from the students” (376). Rather, students and staff would address issues related to provocative dress on a case-by-case basis with a nuanced approach that considers the underlying issues of the community. In this model, students are considered to be capable and desirous of solving problems that directly affect them (376).

As Glassman and Kang argue, the elitist model of democracy is predominant in our current education system. The lesson this system of governance teaches students about citizenship is problematic, failing to meaningfully include students in democracy and, therefore, failing to impart citizenship as “social knowledge” (378). When considering the recent movements by policy makers to restrict discussion of issues related to sexuality and race, it is clear that those in power are utilizing elitist democratic practices to dictate a specific perspective

rather than empowering students to come to their own conclusions in dialogue with their peers: “There is a belief that it is not realistic to trust student populations, and social populations in general, with the development of their own instruments in solving problems” (Glassman and Kang 377-378). The path to combatting the issues projected onto our education system through inequitable policy making, then, is through fostering problem-solving skills in our students and teaching them to view finding solutions to relevant issues as a process in a “transactive” model of education (377).

According to Giroux, the inadequacies of our education system have been exacerbated by the strain of the pandemic and the ongoing political “degradation” of education (“Education” 6). The commodification of education has only increased as educators struggle to regain lost ground resulting from tumultuous years of virtual learning. The focus on preparing students for citizenship has lost priority for many over preparing students to compete in the marketplace alone. Nevertheless, Giroux argues that education is central to combatting the current threats to democracy: “It is a crucial bulwark of producing students as engaged and critical citizens while constructing a deeper and expansive understanding of democracy” (9). Despite efforts to inhibit the free exchange of ideas in the classroom, Giroux calls for educators to form a new democratic philosophy that supports “education as empowerment” (8).

The English classroom is the ideal environment in which to expose students to diverse viewpoints and encourage them to become active voices in the issues involving their local and national communities: “A significant goal of the English language arts classroom is to prepare students to make meaningful contributions as members of an informed electorate” (Heller 12). Analyzing informational texts, especially formative political documents and current political rhetoric, can help students deconstruct flawed arguments and emotionally charged propaganda

while building an awareness of current and historical events of significance (Shafer). Rhetorical analysis of diverse perspectives can also be achieved through the study of meaningful literature (Heller).

Practical Applications of Problem-Posing Education in the High School English Classroom

The prospect of implementing liberatory pedagogy under heavy scrutiny by administration and parents while operating under the threat of dismissal or even litigation seems daunting at the least. However, educators can utilize celebrated student-led instructional strategies that are proven to foster critical thinking and social awareness in students while also giving them the skills necessary to perform well on state assessments. Maintaining a focus on empowering student voices exposes students to diverse perspectives without violating strict school policies or state legislation that seeks to limit instruction on divisive topics.

Project based learning (PBL) builds on the student-led pedagogical theory of researchers like John Dewey, who advocated for the need of “purposeful project activities” (Larmer et al. 28). In the last twenty years, PBL has gained popularity as a method of engaging students meaningfully and preparing them for civic, college, and career readiness while also aligning instruction with common core standards and preparing students for success on state assessments (5-12). The key design elements of a PBL project include the problem or question and sustained inquiry to seek solutions to the problem (38). The topic of the question and the process of inquiry should be authentic to the students’ experience, allowing them to explore meaningful issues using their own “voice and choice” (42). Reflection should be prompted by self-assessment and instructor critique, resulting in ongoing revision. The final element is the publication or presentation of student work (44).

As Nadia Behizadeh suggests, Freire's concept of problem-posing education is in alignment with project-based learning and other student-led instructional strategies. In her Oakland, California humanities classroom, Behizadeh describes an example of a PBL-based assignment with a community focus. Based on their unit of study theme, the essential question posed to the class invited students to apply what they learned in recent history lessons to their lives: "How can we use history to improve the present?" (Behizadeh 100). With this question as a guide, Behizadeh took her students for a walk around their school neighborhood as they noted "positive and negative" artifacts" (99). Students were not given criteria to interpret their surroundings, making their own judgments.

Upon returning to the classroom, the students identified community issues from their "negative" findings and voted to focus on one topic as a class: gang violence. Students used unit texts and internet research to apply topics they had studied in class to a possible solution for their community problem. One group, for example, "decided we needed to implement an honor code in Oakland similar to Bushido used by samurai warriors in ancient Japan" (99). Using conference-style dialogue, Behizadeh learned what her students had discovered from their research and in turn used questioning to help them identify areas needed for more research and revision (100). For example, Behizadeh asked one of her students in this group, "...why does Oakland need Bushido?" (99). When the student and her group mates responded that there needed to be a solution to the gang violence in their neighborhood, Behizadeh again pushed them to develop their idea without leading them to a "correct" solution. She replied, "...You've piqued my interest, but I want to know more...Why would there be less killing?" (100). By facilitating her students' learning in this way, Behizadeh empowers her students to become independent

learners and critical thinkers without inserting her own ideas: “The point as not to get the students to arrive at a ‘right answer,’ but to grapple with this complex construct” (102).

Another application of PBL strategies is illustrated by the work of educators like David Sobel and Sarah K. Anderson. Sobel and his colleagues were among the pioneers of Place Based Education (PBE), which connects students through project-based learning to their local communities. While the curriculum was first designed for a rural school to teach students about their “natural and cultural heritage,” it has been applied in cities like Portland by Anderson to help students learn about their community, from the local flora to the city’s homelessness problem (Sobel x-xi).

Like PBL, Place Based Education seeks to prepare students for citizenship, but it also emphasizes the connections between “environment, culture, economics, and governance” (Anderson 1). Along with PBL, PBE incorporates the elements of environmental education, experiential learning, community-based learning, and youth voice (2-3). Anderson describes the types of projects her students undertake in Portland, from studying banana slugs in Tryon Creek State Park to presenting their research on the danger of secondhand smoke in parks to the city council (xiv). By utilizing this type of curriculum, Anderson hopes to prepare students to become active citizens who are knowledgeable about and connected to their communities: “It is our responsibility as educators to balance the scales and ensure that our children will have a say in the future” (5).

Implementing Problem-Posing Education Under the Threat of Censorship

Project-based learning provides ELA educators with an avenue through which to facilitate Freire’s vision of problem-posing education. However, English classrooms are also

under attack by policies that seek to dampen the discussion of issues related to race and sexuality. In my own school district, the teaching of Critical Race Theory is banned; the faculty has also been warned not to discuss “privilege” with our students. Nevertheless, by maintaining a focus on creating an empowering and open atmosphere in my ELA classroom, my students have continued to complete research and projects concerning social justice issues such as police brutality, prison reform, education laws targeting LGBT youth—even CRT bans—without protest from parents or staff. Utilizing the elements of “gold standard” project-based learning established by John Larmer, John Mergendoller, and Suzie Boss, I will illustrate the potential for project-based learning design to subvert censorship through student empowerment.

The first component of project-based learning is the central question or problem which the students seek to solve. PBL questions can range in complexity, although they should always be open to interpretation (Larmer, Mergendoller, and Boss 37). The guiding question should be complex enough to support “sustained inquiry” over time; however, teachers must carefully scaffold their students’ inquiry to avoid unproductive exploration (39). To align these PBL elements with problem-posing education, a teacher can provide an overarching question which students then use to pose their own more specific question, as Nadia Behizadeh illustrates in her research.

While some educators may interpret liberatory pedagogy to be too idealistic in regard to its breakdown of the traditional role of the teacher in guiding student learning, Drew Chambers argues that Freire clarifies his stance on directive teaching in *A Pedagogy for Liberation*: “...the correct response to eschewing manipulation and banking is *not* the abdication of directiveness, as well, but rather the ownership of directiveness and a careful consideration of how directiveness can be liberatory” (Chambers 26). Rather than denying the existence of unbalanced power

dynamics in the classroom, it is the teacher's responsibility to be aware of their authority and to use that authority to empower rather than dominate.

Linda Shamon and Deborah Burns explore the tension between liberatory directiveness and oppressive directiveness. In "A Critique of Pure Tutoring", the authors criticize a dogmatic adherence to the tenets of minimalist tutoring. The authors cite the social constructionist characterization of writing as "displaced conversation" to challenge the prevailing conception of writing as a purely personal, egalitarian practice (177). Especially when speaking with colleagues who learned to write in their field, Shamon and Burns found that more directive tutoring methods, when utilized to guide structure and style, were critical to their development as scholars (179). This interpretation of the teacher as a guide who "demystifies the institutional structure of knowledge," rather than as an oppressor who dictates knowledge, is compatible with the teacher's role in project-based learning as someone who provides scaffolding as needed to support students critical thinking (Shamon and Burns 177; Larmer et al. 38).

In the English classroom, the texts we read, both literary and informational, raise large thematic questions that can then serve as catalysts for students to launch their own investigations about issues that matter to their communities. While one of the biggest challenges facing the ELA educator is censorship of diverse texts, teachers can still use the texts they have to prompt relevant inquiry. In an argumentative unit focusing on "justice," my students who read the *Texas vs. Johnson* majority opinion and King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" consider the guiding question: "How can we uphold justice in a diverse society?" Similarly, after reading an excerpt from *Persepolis* and the "Gettysburg Address" in a unit on "freedom," my students explore the question: "What responsibilities come with freedom?"

In classrooms with heavily censored or limited reading collections, current event research is another way to provide even more exposure to diverse perspectives. Requiring an objective summary of each side of a disagreement is a practice protected by ELA state standards requiring that students successfully analyze opposing points of view in media—it also helps expose students to multiple viewpoints. In my classes, we also have frequent, open dialogue about media bias and how to determine author perspectives through rhetorical devices, from social media posts to major news sources.

Even our students’ experiences can prompt relevant, productive discourse. Jennifer Clifton and Justin Sigoloff utilize the concept of the “critical incident” to foster student inquiry about social issues in their own lives. Students study related conflicts depicted in a variety of media, both literary and informational. Then, they identify the points of “stasis” or “the perspectives of multiple stakeholders,” determining how each participant views the core problem of the conflicts (Clifton and Sigoloff 77). Students then produce a narrative of a conflict they have experienced that represents a larger social issue. This kind of objective analysis that asks students to accurately represent opposing viewpoints is critical to helping students suspend their personal bias in favor of developing an awareness of nuance. Respect for the interests of multiple stakeholders is the foundation of civil discourse, preparing students to engage with diverse opinions.

Authenticity and student choice are the most important components of project-based learning because they engage students and help them apply their knowledge to the real world (41). These elements are also crucial to supporting diverse perspectives and freedom of expression in the classroom. Authenticity can be achieved through a project’s “tasks, real-world standards, social and personal impact” (41). By allowing students to generate their own lines of

inquiry and giving them the freedom to explore ideas that they care about, educators can ensure their classrooms are spaces of open expression without exposing themselves to liability. A well-designed PBL unit that is in alignment with state standards becomes a vehicle through which students, whose speech is protected by law, can freely learn and speak about issues that their teachers may be prevented from discussing.

In the English classroom, the PBL elements of reflection and revision are regularly implemented. Self-reflection throughout a project provides opportunities for metacognition, as students evaluate and adjust their process (Larmer et al. 43). Throughout the process, instructor feedback in the form of conference-style questioning can help guide students in their attempts to deepen their inquiry beyond initial impressions and to conduct thorough, ethical research. Conferencing in the style of Jeff Brooks' minimalist tutoring, using questioning to help students clarify and strengthen their own ideas, allows teachers to encourage the free flow of ideas in the classroom while maintaining a focus on the student's speech. For example, instead of merely pointing out errors, instructors can use questioning to prompt the students' self-evaluation: "When something is unclear, don't say, 'This is unclear'; rather, say, 'What do you mean by this?'" (J. Brooks 4). Reserving more direct guidance for objective issues of form and style also protects teachers from allegations of indoctrination. Peer review and project presentations can further disseminate different ideas within the classroom, exposing students to new topics and opinions.

Critique and revision have been the components of PBL most useful for my students in practicing democratic values. I see project topics that represent perspectives from across the political spectrum. Regardless of whether I find a point of view problematic, all students are treated with the same respect, but they are each held to a high standard of ethical research

communicated through appropriate academic rhetoric. Academic discourse requires language that is balanced and well-supported by reliable evidence. Attention to quality research and rhetoric allows educators to challenge potentially problematic arguments from the basis of logical error or lack of sufficient evidence. Teaching students to utilize academic rhetoric also means teaching students how to avoid logical fallacies and how to evaluate sources. When applied to real world issues, these practices combat misinformation and promote active citizenship in a way that is protected from parent or institutional censorship. Similarly, my students complete peer review and frequently give constructive feedback on arguments that they greatly disagree with—rather than shying away from this conflict, we meet it head on and discuss this internal conflict openly.

When preparing my students to give feedback to peers, we discuss the diversity of opinions in the room as a positive force. I preface with the warning they may hear an opinion they disagree with, but they are not obligated to change their own minds—disagreement is good and offers abundant opportunities for growth as we consider opposing viewpoints. However, I emphasize that just as my job is not to teach them to make the *right* argument but rather a *strong* argument, they should strive to do the same for each other. Before starting peer review, we also complete a workshop that models productive peer review practices, including how to objectively analyze an argument based on its clarity, structure, and support. Students utilize a questionnaire to give peer feedback that is based on the assignment rubric and written using the same language that I use when conferencing with them. By modeling and establishing this expectation of civic discourse, I have not yet been disappointed in my students' professionalism and citizenship.

Presenting student work as a public product may seem like the most intimidating aspect of PBL in the current volatile political atmosphere, but involving the school and local

community in student presentations could work towards healing some of the public fear around what is being taught in the classroom. The expectation alone of a public presentation can help motivate students to complete their work to a high standard (Larmer et al. 44). Encouraging students to think about a public audience that could be impacted by their work serves to emphasize a project's authenticity while encouraging them to think about their role in the wider community.

Conclusion

If a teacher has no freedom of speech in the classroom, the only way they can model civic responsibility is by advocating for their students and encouraging them to use their voices. The English classroom is one of the primary spaces in which students exercise their freedom of speech within the school system. Therefore, it is vital for teachers to understand the importance of their role in protecting students' agency. By empowering students and posing questions about issues that affect national communities, educators can ensure that diverse narratives are represented in the English classroom. Of course, while these practices can help combat in a small way the harm being caused by the censorship of diverse perspectives in the classroom, they are no replacement for multicultural curriculum and unfiltered dialogue that students and teachers can benefit from without fear of legal repercussions. In response to the concept of democracy as an "unfinished project," Heather Hurst notes Dewey's insistence on the importance of active citizenship: "...a successful democracy requires *daily* participation from *all* its citizens" (qtd. In Hurst 72). As educators, we can only continue to advocate for culturally competent legislation and instill in our students their potential to take responsibility for and transform their communities for the better.

EXCURSION 5: IMPORTANT LESSONS

Beginning our research unit is always one of my favorite parts of the year. I love helping my students choose a topic they're interested in, encouraging them to take on current issues and engage with real world problems that affect them. Brainstorming local topics, we read through the local NBC affiliate news site and came across an article on Missouri's recent legalization of marijuana. *This might spur some interesting research*, I told them. And then one of them said, *Isn't there something hidden in that law?* Another answered, *Oh yeah, isn't there CRT in the bill?* Their current events teacher had told them that "critical race theory" was hidden in the marijuana legalization bill.

Trying to maintain professionalism, I bit back the response I would have liked to give. *You know what*, I said instead, *let's just have a look. Did you all know that you can actually look up the bill online to see what's in it?* We learned how to access the Missouri government website and how to look up legislation. After a search of "CRT" and "race" in the bill text, it became abundantly clear that the liberal conspiracy to spread critical race theory had not infiltrated the law. *The word "black" is in the bill!* One student interjected. *Oh...it's actually just talking about the black market.* An important lesson was learned in English class: look for yourself.

Before a trip to the state capitol, I set my students the assignment of writing a letter to one of their representatives. They were free to write about any current issue that they cared about. At the time, Roe v. Wade had just been overturned and Missouri had just passed one of the strictest abortion laws in the country. One of my students decided to write a letter on the topic of abortion. What was unusual about the situation was that the student in question was a mother and a sexual assault survivor. When one of my colleagues heard the topic on which she

was writing, he privately commented on the power of her testimony in defending the new restrictions on abortion. But he assumed wrong—she wrote in defense of choice. I was reminded: never speak for but instead empower speech.

EXCURSION 6: WRITING CRIMES (THE STUDENTS I’M SENDING YOU)

As the only high school English teacher in my school district, I have to fight misconceptions about English and writing unaided. This year, in an attempt to boost test scores, my administration decided to implement “writing crimes” to enforce building wide—their perception was that we needed to focus on correcting students’ spelling and punctuation, but I fought hard to shift the focus to idea development and organization. I didn’t win the battle over branding errors a “crime,” though. What resulted was a long list of infractions that mostly covered grammar and punctuation mistakes, and the intention of the policy was for teachers to hand back assignments that did not meet those standards. The implication is that these errors are the result of laziness or lack of attention to detail.

Other literacy crimes are policed, although not explicitly. One of the biggest barriers to my students’ information literacy instruction is the restriction of their internet activity. While the debate over filtering web content in schools isn’t new, the current trend of censorship in education makes equal access to digital information even more crucial. Federal legislation requires schools to utilize web filters to receive internet funding. Most states also have laws that require the use of filtering software to block obscene or harmful content in schools and public libraries.¹² However, there is currently no federal protocol for schools to determine what exactly “harmful” content encompasses. With limited oversight, there is potential for the personal biases of programmers and administrators to determine what content is deemed appropriate for students to access online. Even accidental filtering of appropriate online content can limit diverse perspectives and frustrate attempts to teach students how to utilize and evaluate internet sources.

¹² See “Children's Internet Protection Act”.

Last year, we started using a new student monitoring software that restricts websites flagged as inappropriate. It has made research nearly impossible, especially on current events. My students who are taking online classes through the local community college have to ask for alternative assignments from their professors because they can't access many of the videos and attachments on their school devices. Even reputable news sites like NPR and Reuters are censored, and all of YouTube is off limits. Frustrated for my students trying to complete research, I started having them send me the links they needed to access so I could send back the text as a PDF.

Students are perceptive, and overall, they don't want to cause trouble. They see the blocked sites, they see the CRT ban statement on our school website, and they see the back room of the library where the books that haven't been screened yet live in purgatory—and they self-censor as a result. I have to encourage them to take on even mildly controversial research topics because they worry they will get in trouble. I have had two separate students in different classes ask if they would get written up for googling “Hitler,” and another student asked if it was okay to read a historical fiction book about the Holocaust, which she got from the school library (when I asked why it wouldn't be okay, she said, *I don't know, I just saw Hitler's name on the back*). Often, when looking for research topics, they will ask, *Is this too...edgy?* More broadly, students regularly ask if they will be punished for including things like violence or death in their narrative writing. My usual response is, *Does it happen in real life? Does it serve your narrative? It's fine.* One student wanted to write his research paper on critical race theory bans in schools and worried that he would be punished for it because of our school policy. I assured him that he could research whatever interested him, and that I would take any blame if it came to an issue. It

didn't—but I had to download nearly all his research for him, because (surprise, surprise) the sites were blocked.

My students see censorship as a normal part of academic life. Thinking about their lives as citizens and students in higher education, I worry about the consequences of teaching them to self-censor and the ramifications of communicating that critical thinking is off limits. As Moffett observed in *Storm in the Mountains*, “The ‘rule of the majority’ does not hold when personal values and child-rearing are at stake. That in fact is a point about which the Kanawha protesters were certainly correct. Which means that when they win, others suffer a loss as great as the one they fear.”¹³

¹³ See Moffett (31).

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