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Composition II

Warning, Explicit Content: Censorship of Books in Schools

J.K Rowling's magical world of Harry Potter has soared in popularity over the years. The book series has captivated individuals of all ages, from "*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*" to "*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*." The series has become a necessity in the school libraries of today, sparking the imaginations of students from elementary school to high school. As with most popular young adult literature, the saga of Harry Potter has critics. Some of these critics take their opinions to the extreme. According to The Associated Press, a global news network, one particular case occurred in October of 2006, when a concerned mother, Laura Mallory, of Atlanta, Georgia, declared that the Harry Potter series deliberately taught children to practice Wicca. She also stated, according to the article from The Associated Press, that these are the kind of books that "promote evil," which leads to violent acts such as school shootings. Mallory demanded that these books be removed from the shelves of all school libraries in the state of Georgia. An attorney, Victoria Sweeny, who defended the opposite perspective on the issue, replied "that if schools were to remove all books and stories containing references to witches and magic, they would have to ban mainstays like *Macbeth* and *Cinderella*" (The Associated Press). As a result, the popular book series was not removed from the shelves or from the hands of students who crave stories of adventure, magic, and friendship (The Associated Press). Almost all educators deal with the issue described in this particular fiasco. Censorship of books is a major, rising topic in the schools of yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

The authors of the textbook, *“Introduction to Teaching: Becoming a Professional,”* Donald P. Kauchak, senior faculty member in the School of Education at the University of Utah, and Paul D. Eggen, a professor at the University of North Florida, define the word censorship as, “The practice of prohibiting the use of objectionable materials, such as certain books used in libraries or in academic classes” (Kauchak and Eggen, 334). The type of censorship that is most common in schools is book censorship. Young adult literature and even literature used in classrooms can contain controversial topics and language which can cause critics to challenge the material.

Censorship did not, however, begin in the libraries and classrooms of today’s schools. According to *“Banned in the U.S.A: A Reference Guide to Book Censorship in Schools and Public Libraries,”* during the year 1455, the invention of the printing press not only allowed one to reach a larger audience, but it also created a new method of expressing facts or one’s ideas (Foerstel, xi). It was only the beginning of the growing dispute between the perspectives of the critics and the anti-censorship believers. Foerstel goes on to say that by the early 1500s, Protestants and Catholics started to censor books containing ideas that were dangerous and rebellious. The issues of language and “unduly explicit or realistic portrayals of life” began to appear in the topic of book censorship during the 1830s (Foerstel, xi-xii). All of these topics concerning book censorship are still present in today’s school libraries and classrooms. As decades passed, the issue of book censorship continued to change. Donald G. Davis Jr., a professor at the University of Texas Austin and editor of the journal, *“Libraries & Culture”*, reviewed Paul S. Boyer’s book, *“Purity in Print: Book Censorship in America from the Gilded Age to the Computer Age.”* According to Davis’s review, Boyer described how controversial issues of the past, especially sexual topics, were tolerated more between the years of 1945 and

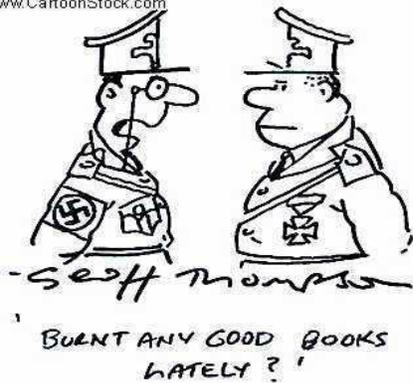
1975. Davis goes on to say that the decade of the 1960s sparked a generation of increasing freedom of expression, which caused others to become less tolerant of certain reading materials. This period of time may have marked the beginning of censorship of books in schools as well. Individuals of the time became bolder in various forms of expression, which included the topics of certain works in books.

Not only has the content of various literary and young adult works changed throughout time, but different types of censorship have developed as well. One of these types is self-censorship. According to Rebecca Hill, writer of the magazine, "*School Library Monthly*," written by school library professionals, self-censorship is, "the most complicated, but least understood form of censorship" (Hill, 9). This category of censorship may very well be one of the top reasons as to why some books do not reach the hands, and eyes, of students today. Hill goes on to say that self-censorship is a fear that something may happen if librarians allow certain books on the shelves or if teachers read controversial material as it is written, aloud (Hill, 9). For example, a teacher may alter or completely exclude certain words or sections in class material. Another example is if librarians move debatable books to the restricted section in the library.

The National Council of Teachers of English, an organization for professionals in Education of English, lists several other forms of censorship on its website. According to the NCTE website, subtle censorship of "selection" is a type of censorship that occurs when one or more individuals select only certain reading materials based on their own personal opinions on specific books' content, authors, or illustrators (National Council of Teaching of English). Another category of censorship, according to the NCTE, is a required book list. The NCTE states that required book lists expect students to read every literary work on the list. They mostly take place in high schools and colleges. Required books lists are usually not even thought of, by most

individuals, as book censorship. Most individuals, usually students, view required books lists as what they are compelled to accomplish in a class or other situation. Suppression of materials as a result of community pressure, according to the NCTE, involves the members of a community having conflicting opinions on certain children's books. The NCTE goes on to say that these individuals may argue against their tax money being used to purchase controversial or

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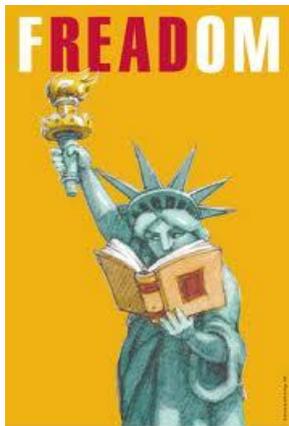
inappropriate reading materials for their children and act on this issue by demanding that the book be banned from schools and libraries. Other acts from these critics, according to the NCTE, may include violence and book burning. The comic, shown on the left, was created by Geoff Thompson, an international cartoonist and

Figure 1: Humorous representation of censorship

illustrator who works for a large variety of clients. His comical interpretation of book censorship captures an extreme action that has occurred in the history of censorship. Another kind of censorship, according to the NCTE website, is direct edict, which is essentially when an individual in a position of power bans certain reading materials without proper reason. Direct edict may be the most unreasonable form of book censorship. Banning books from readers without any explanation would likely cause many objections. The next category of censorship is deliberate omission, according to the NCTE. The NCTE states that deliberate omission occurs when students are given limited examples of various viewpoints on the issue, which is most usually, "stereotypical" (National Council of Teachers of Education). When children are only given certain viewpoints on material, students may develop a narrow perspective throughout their life. The final form of censorship listed on the NCTE website is curtailment of funds, which is when funds are restricted from purchasing

books that contain supposed inappropriate material. Book censorship occurs in a variety of ways, and has evolved since its origin. All forms of book censorship cause controversy for teachers, parents, and community members as to what their children should and should not read.

Book censorship, as with most controversial issues, includes multiple perspectives. Individuals with an anti-censorship viewpoint believe book censorship restricts students from open mindedness, and from furthering their education. To them, book censorship violates the First Amendment of the Constitution, which implies the freedom to read what one wishes to



read. The image on the left was published by Karen Caputo of the Ohio State University website. The cleverly displayed message in the image appears to spell the word freedom, but is spelled “Freadom,” to portray U.S. citizens’ right to read. The National Council of Teachers of Education website states that censorship is usually “arbitrary and

Figure 2: Representation of pro-censorship

irrational” (National Council of Teachers of Education). The NCTE goes on to say that its members believe critics are wrong to deny other individuals the freedom to read what they choose. They claim that these critics attempt to force their own viewpoint of the material on others. When one’s viewpoint is forced upon others, it may force one to become what they are not by believing another’s ideas. The concept of individuality is sacrificed when this occurs. Maxine Swanson is a professor from Dakota State University in South Dakota. She experienced many cases involving censorship as a librarian. Swanson argues that students today are leaning more towards books of controversy due to the trends changing throughout the years from influences like television, the Internet, and social situations. These influences, according to Swanson, present the exact “explicit content”, if not worse, that books contain. Swanson goes on to say that “censorship is the forbidden fruit; the more critics say no, the more the students will

want to read it” (Swanson). Anti-censorship believers view book censorship as a violation of their rights, as well as an unreasonable effort to protect the eyes and minds of students today.

Controversial books, in the eyes of the critics, pose as an influential threat to students. According to Pamela Burress Cole, author of the book “*Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century*,” pro-censorship believers include individuals of “religious groups, governments, businesses, and the media” (Cole, 65). These individuals feel that students should be sheltered from controversial material in order to shield them from potentially dangerous influences. One of these influences is offensive language. “*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*” by Mark Twain is probably one of the most banned books of today. Julie Bosman, journalist of *The New York Times*, described how Twain’s classic novel became an issue in today’s society. According to Bosman, a man named Alan Gribben, who was a professor of English at Auburn University at Montgomery, presented a publisher with the idea to substitute the nineteenth-century term for African American, with the word slave. Bosman goes on to say Gribben argued that many educators were afraid to use the book in their teaching, and it was becoming scarce on reading lists. The new edition of the novel, according to Bosman, was published in February of 2011. There are other reasons as to why critics want to ban certain books. According to the author of the book “*Young Adult Literature in the 21st Century*,” Pamela Burress Cole, there are several reasons as to why books are challenged, offensive language being number one in the number of eight hundred and eleven challenges, and according to Cole, sexually explicit content came in second at seven hundred and fourteen (Cole, 73). Cole reports that in recent years, foul language has been on the rise (Cole, 72). Critics argue that these sorts of issues will influence readers of offensive language into engaging in “evil” activities or corrupting their young minds. Cole presents other reasons for challenging books, such as violence, racism, homosexuality, religious

and political viewpoints, drugs, and suicide (Cole, 73). Some books have even been challenged for their suggestive or offensive cover art. In these situations, critics are literally judging a book only by its cover.

The issue of book censorship is unavoidable for educators and librarians. Because “controversial” books will continue to be published, there will always be parents who will complain about a certain book their child is reading. Not only do critics judge what their child reads independently, but they may also protest works of literature found in the curriculum in the classroom. Jane Agee is an assistant professor of Language in Education at the University of Albany, New York. Agee’s article on the university’s website discusses how book censorship affects the educators of today. According to Agee, self-censorship is quite common among teachers in today’s schools. Agee goes on to say that this occurs by teachers modifying material they read aloud to their students or simply not even purchasing books that may cause some controversy. These teachers use self-censorship to prevent confrontations from angry parents or community members. What they do not realize is that almost, if not all, teachers deal with censorship in one way or another. Teachers that do take the risk of exposing their students to these types of literature do so with the best intentions. They believe that these books, rather than television or the Internet, provide not only a different perspective from their own, but also educate the students on these controversial issues. When the occasion of a complaining parent arises, educators must, according to the National Council of Teachers of English, review the sections of the material that the parent is uncomfortable with. The NCTE goes on to say that teachers should not discuss the subject immediately, but schedule a time to review and discuss the material with the parent. Some complaints may progress further and turn into a formal complaint, which involves filling out a specific form to request the book be removed from the

shelves of the school. According to the National Council of Teachers of English, a formal complaint is a way for parents to write down the details as to why they think the book is offensive. More often than not, these formal complaints do not have any effect.

Educators are not the only ones affected by the issue of book censorship. Students, who enjoy reading, for class or leisure time, perceive books as gateways to another world. Books are a way for children, adolescents, and adults alike to explore what is unknown to them in a harmless manner. Others view certain books as a portal to influences that will only corrupt their young minds and encourage deceitful and profane actions. According to Maxine Swanson, a professor at Dakota State University in South Dakota, students should not be “cocooned by this. What better way to be exposed?” (Swanson). Swanson continues saying that by reading so called debatable material, students will consider more discussion topics, teaching them how to interpret literature. Reluctant readers, according to Swanson, lean more towards the edgy topics, so these types of books encourage them to read. There are still critics, however, who argue that these controversial books will influence students to participate in the actions the material contains. They believe that students can still be educated equally well with “clean” material.

Book censorship will continue to be an issue to educators and librarians for years to come. In today’s society, students crave edgy and dark topics in their reading material. Classic literature will also remain a subject of controversy in the classroom. The American Library Association’s Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) lists several quite popular books that have been challenged in the year of 2009. The OIF’s lists includes "*To Kill a Mockingbird*" by Harper Lee, "*The Catcher in the Rye*" by J.D. Salinger, "*The Color Purple*" by Alice Walker, "*My Sister’s Keeper*" by Jodi Picoult, and the infamous, "*Twilight*" by Stephanie Meyer. All of these novels have been challenged for its inappropriate content for its intended age group. Do these

books and others like it contain insidious material for the future of society? On the other hand, does censoring books truly limit students' perspective on life and hinder their education? The battle between anti-censorship and pro-censorship viewpoints will continue its combat in the schools of today and tomorrow.

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