

# The War on Books: Educator and Parent Perspectives

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*With the nation's attention toward the misguided attacks of nonexistent Critical Race Theory (CRT) in K-12 schools, books have become a target for removal. Recently, Katy ISD, an affluent suburban district in the Greater Houston area, canceled an upcoming author visit featuring Jerry Craft and his graphic novel *New Kid* after parents raised concerns regarding the book and what they deemed to be the promotion of CRT. This article explores the book banning controversy at Katy ISD as well as recommendations from the perspectives of a Katy ISD parent as well as a literacy scholar and veteran English teacher.*

With the nation's attention toward attacks of nonexistent Critical Race Theory (CRT) in K-12 schools, books have become a target for politicians and community members across all states, especially in the Lone Star State. For some, these discussions may seem like harmless conversations where parents, teachers, and community members advocate for what they think is in the best interest of children; however, the divide that is being created among these groups is one that is hindering young readers from accessing literature that is crucial in building empathic and active citizens.

As we worked through the formation of this piece together as co-writers, our varying experiences as a teacher/teacher educator and a former educator/parent helped us contextualize this moment from differing perspectives. Aimee, a former educator and parent living in Katy, Texas and her son, a 5<sup>th</sup> grader at the time this manuscript was written, share their experience of reading *New Kid* in Katy, ISD and the impact it had on them. Aimee's experiences are followed by a reflection and consideration on the book bans that are taking place across the nation.

## PARENT PERSPECTIVE AND APPROACHES

Last October, I learned of the news about the petition created and signed by parents of Katy ISD to remove Jerry Craft's book *New Kid* from library shelves, as well as cancel his scheduled virtual appearance. It was argued that Craft's middle school novel was inappropriate due to its promotion of CRT. To be perfectly honest, while I had vaguely heard the term, I was not familiar with what CRT entailed. Between reading news articles from differing sources, listening to experts in the field, and hearing pundits from both sides of the topic argue their points, I was able to confidently come to my own conclusion. I firmly believe that CRT isn't being taught to our students, and the benefits of diverse texts, such as Craft's *New Kid*, are invaluable to our students, including my own child.

Circling back to what began this rabbit hole of research, I purchased *New Kid* by Jerry Craft. I was immediately impressed, and after first reading the novel on my own, I was able to read it again with my 5th grade son. This book provided a beautifully illustrated springboard for conversations. For example, towards the beginning of the book, Jordan is being shown around the school and introduced to new people. Jordan witnesses another BIPOC student get purposefully called the wrong name because it rhymed with "oreo". I instantly connected with this, having grown up being called "coconut" numerous times in my life. At the time, I knew it did not feel good to be called this, but I didn't have the vocabulary or understanding of why. My son and I discussed this at length: what this type of aggression was, how it can make people feel, and how impact is always more important than intent.

There is another part of the book where Jordan is talking with Drew, one of the other few BIPOC students at their school. They are confiding in one another about various struggles they are having in school, such as continually being called the wrong names by fellow teachers and students. They are able to share their frustrations with how when the topics of Civil Rights, slavery, and financial aid are brought up, eyes immediately turn their way. Even the mention of the word "minority" draws unwanted stares in their direction. It is as if these topics and words must only apply to BIPOC students. After being able to safely vent to one another, they exchange friendly goodbyes which are overheard by an overzealous teacher. She reprimands Drew for calling Jordan "dawg" and demands an apology be issued to Jordan, while ignoring their attempts to clarify the situation. Her unwelcome saviorism frustrates Drew, who responds angrily, thus reinforcing the aggressive narrative this teacher has of him.

This again provided an opportunity for another powerful conversation with my son, who is developing his sense of understanding of the people in the world around him. When we talked, we particularly focused on the teacher, and how we have even sometimes played the same unwelcoming role. We have all at some point in our lives been the person with good intentions, who thought we were helping or saving someone, only to ignore what they say. Our seemingly heroic actions are based on our own experiences, instead of listening, valuing, and following the direction from the people being saved.

Throughout the novel, Jordan is plagued by various aggressions that are only building his frustrations, but he is mostly too nervous to speak up, a truth we know is all too often the reality for Black youth (Yosoo et al., 2009; Sue 2010; Forrest-Bank & Jenson, 2015). A volatile cafeteria interaction takes place, in which Andy, the book's main antagonist, lies about Drew hurting him with the hopes of getting Drew in serious trouble. In an explosion of determination, Jordan speaks to the teacher, proclaiming Drew's innocence. His bravery leads other students to also make the choice to speak up and defend Drew and Jordan. Another student, in a burst of boldness, yells, "And for the last time, Andy, I'm not Mexican, I'm Nicaraguan! I've been telling you that since Kindergarten!" (Craft, 207). This was a powerful example of how to use your voice when you see harm being done to a person, and the ripple effect it can cause, yet again, another great lesson and talking point for my son and me.

These impactful conversations we were able to subsequently have regarding the conflicts and themes in this book have me very grateful that *New Kid* and Craft's visit were reinstated. My belief and hope is that this book can provide an important opportunity for students and families to become more understanding and empathetic members of our community, in order to work towards a more equitable society, such as it did for me and my family.

Thankfully, the petition to cancel Craft's visit was dismissed and students were once again given the opportunity to attend the virtual appearance. This event occurred during the school day, and while students were able to opt out of attending, the vast majority of students did attend, and my son came home brimming with excitement for having virtually met the author who penned such an engaging novel. My son said that it was like getting to meet the grown-up version of Jordan, which he thought was incredibly cool. Isn't this a huge goal that parents and educators strive to accomplish? To have our kids connect with a book, see themselves in characters, engage in the story's events, and

learn valuable life lessons? In our experience, this was a tremendous success, and I'm thrilled for others to be given the same opportunity.

Ultimately, *New Kid* is a book about a 12-year-old boy trying to figure out who he is and what is his place in the world. His experiences are uniquely his own yet quite universal. No matter our age, most of us have memories of being the new kid in a new school, awkwardly trying to make friends, not feeling like we fit in, and what it feels like to have pointedly ugly words thrown our way. There is no nefarious scheme embedded in this novel. We know that with any societal change, there will be a loud minority of parents who will rage. But we also know that representation matters. I believe this is a huge part of the beauty of reading. We get the opportunity to connect to stories that feel like our own and learn from people who walk through and experience life differently than we do. We have the chance to examine our own behaviors and beliefs and decide if they best serve ourselves and those around us. I believe Katy ISD said it well in their Instructional Resources, which state, "The District shall provide a wide range of instructional resources for students and faculty that present varying levels of difficulty, diversity of appeal, and a variety of points of view." (Instructional Materials Review, 2021). Jerry Craft is an award-winning author whose graphic novel fits that description beautifully, and I'm thankful that Katy ISD ultimately agreed on its value.

The nuanced discussion of race and privilege can be a challenging and abstract conversation to navigate, often leaving parents feeling unprepared to engage in these meaningful discussions. While reading this book with my son, I was able to talk about my own childhood experiences of being a Latinx member in a predominantly white school. My son, who is white presenting, was able to examine his own privileges with a new lens as well as reflect on the experiences of others. Reading about Jordan's school experiences gave concrete examples for understanding abstract ideas, such as witnessing through the eyes of the protagonist what microaggressions are and what they feel like (Sims Bishop, 1990).

It has been several months since we read this book together, but our discussions provided us with a new vocabulary and lens to examine events my children see on TV or witness in real life. As a parent, this awareness is a vital part of what I hope to be instilling in my children. I want them to understand that kindness and understanding extends to all, but maybe most especially to those who experience the world differently than they do. Novels have the ability to help us see outside of ourselves and learn from others.

## BACKGROUND

Aimee's story of the power texts such as Craft's *New Kid* can have on students and families is a conversation that is becoming more common among parents, students, teachers, and librarians in today's K-12 school districts. This justification for the inclusion of many contemporary YA novels to be retained in public school libraries has become a common occurrence in school districts across the nation. From July 2021 to June of 2022, 1,648 different books were banned across the nation, 40% (659) of which featured protagonists or prominent secondary characters of color. Books such as *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie were all books where the main character's race plays a role in their story, and in turn, all received a spot on the list of top ten books banned across the nation during the 2021-2022 school year (Banned in the USA, 2022).

Of the 1,648 different titles being banned, Texas led the way with 713 bans for the year with Pennsylvania coming in second with 456 bans and Florida taking the third spot with 204 bans (Banned in the USA, 2022). Knowing this trend is occurring nationwide, we focus our perspectives on one hot bed of book banning activity - Texas. Texas governor, Greg Abbott, requested that the Texas Education Agency, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, and State Board of Education work together to create state-wide standards to prevent what he called "pornography" and "other obscene content" from being present and available for students to access in school libraries. In reality, it seems as though the anti-CRT path in public schools is largely misunderstood by parents and politicians pushing for books to be banned. Many districts, including Katy ISD and Carroll ISD, have banned books on the basis that mentioning race implies a component of CRT, only to have the books be reinstated after further review (Lopez, 2021a). This misunderstanding of what CRT truly entails by parents and politicians has led to an unnecessary rush of book challenges.

## CRT IN K-12 CLASSROOMS

While race and racism have been the justification for challenges on many books across the nation, very few, if any, serve a role in actually promoting CRT. The lens through which CRT asks individuals to view our nation's systems and structures examines the existence of racism and how that embedded racism perpetuates inequalities and disparities for those who are not white (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Despite the intentions for CRT to be used by scholars to deeply examine and

interrogate the nation's systems, there is no evidence that CRT is being taught, or exists at all, in K-12 school curriculum (Collins & Horne, 2022). Conservative politicians and legislatures are twisting the traditional notion of CRT to justify a total ban of any discussion of race in K-12 classrooms. According to Deborah Caldwell-Stone, Director of the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom:

It's a maligned campaign to create a moral panic around information young people want and need. It's resulted in really tragic consequences, not only for young people being denied access to information, but also for people who are made to understand they don't belong in their communities, at least in the eyes of the individuals who raise these claims. (Dellinger & Serrano, 2022)

Unfortunately, those opposing the nonexistent CRT in K-12 classrooms are doing nothing but preventing students from accessing information, and more importantly, representation that reflects what so many of them may see and experience in their own lives. As educators and former educators, underscoring the understanding of our experiences with teaching and reading diverse texts such as *New Kid* is the idea that adolescence is a socially constructed notion which is manifested through social, cultural, political, and historical influences that surround students (Lesko, 2012). As demonstrated in *New Kid*, the experience of middle grade adolescents can vary greatly from person to person; therefore, we should avoid promoting a singular experience of what depicts the adolescent journey (Botzakis & Lewis, 2021). Aimee's conversations with her son about Jordan's experiences in *New Kid* promote this concept. Avoiding conceptions that lead to stereotypes of middle grade youth can best be done through the inclusion and reading of diverse stories and narratives.

### IN THE NEWS: KATY ISD SPOTLIGHT

Much of the concern around CRT in books in Texas classrooms started in October of 2021 when Katy ISD, an affluent suburban district in the Greater Houston area, made the local, and eventually nation-wide, news. As former educators of a nearby school district in the greater Houston area, this particular book challenge caught our interest. Additionally, Aimee's son was a 5th grader in the district when the controversy began. At the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year, the school district advertised a virtual visit with Jerry Craft, award-winning author of *New Kid*, that was scheduled to take place on October 4th, 2021, with 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> graders in the district.

Unexpectedly, a revised flier was sent out to school district parents, allowing them to opt their children out of the virtual visit if they choose. The timing of the amended flier aligned with a petition from Katy ISD parents on Change.org aimed at the removal of Craft's *New Kid*, which

accrued around 500 signatures before being removed for violating community guidelines. Bonnie Anderson, a parent and former candidate for Katy ISD school board, stated that *New Kid* was “inappropriate instructional material” and “the books don’t come out and say, ‘we want white children to feel like oppressors’, but that is absolutely what they will do” (Rhodes, 2021).

Despite Anderson’s opposition to the book, many district parents, including Aimee, voiced their support for the book. Omerly Sanchez, the mother of two bi-racial Katy ISD students, stated that her children were anticipating Craft’s virtual visit as they enjoyed reading *New Kid* and seeing characters who “look like them,” a notion that we can see echoed in Aimee’s conversations around *New Kid* with her son. Sanchez also emphasized her disappointment in Katy ISD’s handling of the situation: “They want to live in this bubble. They’re uncomfortable with touching the subject. They’re uncomfortable knowing that they’re part of the problem” (Rhodes, 2021). In fact, a counter petition to reinstate *New Kid* and reschedule Craft’s author visit gained over 2,000 signatures on Change.org, 1,000 of which were received within the first couple of days of the counter-petition being posted on the site. The counter petition stated that “Most of Mr. Craft's writings seem to be about misunderstandings and stereotypes. Those who object to Mr. Craft either don't understand what they are reading or are superimposing CRT as an issue. It is not" (Change.org, 2022).

In reality, *New Kid* is the heartfelt story of one kid who finds himself in a new school, having to navigate new paths and make new friends, a story that such a positive impact on Aimee’s son and their relationship. Jerry Craft’s graphic novel focuses on the experiences of Jordan Banks, a seventh grader who has recently started attending a private arts school where he happens to be one of the only few kids who isn’t white. The novel follows Jordan’s experiences navigating teachers, peers, and making friends at his new school, the reality of which is his experiences dealing with racialized microaggressions from some of his peers and his teacher, experiences with which many students of color will likely be able to relate.

Jordan’s reality is more than relatable for many BIPOC students in America. BIPOC students are much more likely to experience microaggressions, and not mention the incidents to anyone (Yosoo et al., 2009; Sue 2010; Forrest-Bank & Jenson, 2015). To make matters worse, preservice teacher preparation programs rarely promote the teaching of cultural studies and CRP practices (Chang & Viesca, 2022). Teachers, whether or not they have been formally trained to do so, must recognize that their own pedagogical practices can uphold anti-Black racism if not explicitly addressed via classroom approaches that support and affirm Black culture and language (Baker-Bell,

2017). The intended audience for those reading *New Kid* should be able to find a mirror of their own experiences through Jordan's story or a window into an experience that students should be aware of in order to help eliminate the occurrence of racism and microaggressions targeted at BIPOC students. Teachers and parents play pivotal roles in promoting diverse Black texts to share stories and language with students to help avoid stereotypes and build empathy in readers and students.

Much to the relief of parents such as Aimee, after Katy ISD reviewed the book for alleged promotion of CRT, they deemed the book appropriate and reinstated the book in libraries as well as Craft's author visit. In October of 2021, Katy ISD stated:

Earlier this week, the review committee met and determined the appropriateness of the book, 'New Kid.' The reading material is already back on District library shelves and the virtual author visit is scheduled to take place on October 25 as part of the instructional day.

Houston news station, KHOU, spoke with Dr. Vida Roberston, who is the Director of the Center for Critical Race Studies at the University of Houston-Downtown, regarding the presence of CRT in Craft's *New Kid*. He stated:

Critical Race Theory is interested in structures of society, it's interested in the way that we are organized as a nation, interested in the way that systems and institutions engage in oppression. It would not necessarily be characterized by an individual's life story (Katy ISD, 2021).

This emphasis on an individual's experience, a notion that discredits CRT, is exactly what *New Kid* tells. The story and experiences of Jordan Banks, a new kid surrounded by other students, who he feels do not see him for who he really is or appreciate the perspectives and insights he brings to the school where he is one of the few students of color. This is the reality for many students across the nation, and for students who may be in a similar situation to have access to read about Jordan's experiences could make all the difference in one student's life.

## CONCLUSION

We hope that the insights and information provided can allow for teachers and parents to continue to expose their students and children to diverse narratives in children's and young adult books. As displayed through Aimee's perspective as a parent, it is clear that diverse texts serve a vital role in the lives and libraries of students. Middle grade students ideally should be part of schools that promote responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging instruction (Bishop & Harrison, 2020), and book can be the avenue to accomplishing this. Wendy Woodland, the Texas



Library Association's Director of Advocacy and Communication stated in response to the recent book challenges: "No book is right for everyone, but one book can make a big difference in one person's life." No student should be denied access to a text with the potential to change their life.

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