

Banish the Bans: The Teacher Educators' Role in Promoting Book Access and Choice

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* It should be noted that the authors of the article used alphabetical order as authors and wish to recognize all contributions as equal.

As the restriction of books in schools continues to rise in the U.S., the authors of this piece argue that teacher educators have an important and powerful role to play as they empower preservice and inservice teachers to advocate for book access and choice. Four actions for teacher educators to consider are recommended: 1) building background knowledge 2) modeling effective strategies 3) introducing pathways of advocacy 4) providing a community of support.

BOOK BANS ON THE RISE

With campaigns to ban and challenge books continuing to rise (Pen America, 2022), teacher educators must equip preservice teachers to navigate the consequences rippling through schools, affecting both teachers and students from PK-12 to higher education. Having long recognized that students are better served when their in-school and out-of-school communities work together, teachers are increasingly frustrated about the potential fallout and implications of book banning for their students and for classroom instruction (Stone, 2022).

Challenges from parents, educators, administrators, school board members, and/or responses to laws passed by legislatures have caused the removal of books from school and classroom libraries. Among the “most frequently targeted books are those intended for ‘young adult’ audiences, e.g., readers who are 13 to 17 years old. 47% of the book titles banned fall in this grade

level” (Pen America, 2022, Who Are the Intended Readers of the Books Being Banned, para 2). Research supports adolescents’ and young adults’ motivation to learn is impacted by what they find interesting and useful (Bishop et al., 2019; Powell, 2014; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012) as well as by how the materials represent their intersecting identities (Busey & Gainer, 2021). Having access to books and resources reflecting and celebrating the full range of human experiences and identities is necessary to be able to engage these learners. Teachers recognize the importance of educating students to be knowledgeable citizens of a pluralistic and diverse society yet often are hampered when the impacts of book banning influence their classroom practice.

With these factors in mind, it is imperative for teacher educators to prepare preservice teachers for what is ahead as they enter the classroom and to also support teachers and schools during these challenging times. As experienced teacher educators we offer four actions we have found to be effective in preparing preservice and inservice teachers for navigating the complexities of book banning while creating an inclusive, culturally relevant environment to meet the needs of all readers. The actions include 1) building background knowledge 2) modeling effective strategies 3) introducing pathways of advocacy 4) providing a community of support.

HOW TEACHER EDUCATORS CAN HELP

Teacher educators often acknowledge the ripple effect of their work as they prepare generations of teachers who will touch the lives of generations of PK-12 students. In the case of book challenges, teacher educators who employ culturally responsive teaching strategies advocating for book access and student choice have an opportunity to create a ripple effect by influencing the classroom practices of those they teach who will in turn teach generations of readers. When implemented, the four actions described below intertwine and overlap creating a foundation to prepare and support preservice and inservice teachers as they face “the complexities of balancing the realities of politics, policies, and practice with what is best for their students” (Faulconer, in review).

BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Book banning is not new nor is the importance of diverse literature. Using information from scholarly sources, as well as from professional organizations and grass roots advocacy groups, teacher educators should situate the history of book banning in context while ensuring the impact on students and communities when these books are missing is clear. Preservice and inservice teachers also should read and analyze diverse texts, especially those which are regularly on the most banned lists.

Once awareness is raised to the prevalence of book challenges and bans and the potential harm censorship may cause for their future students, teacher educators can model tools to facilitate respectful and thoughtful discussions (i.e., fishbowl, Socratic circles, paideia seminar, concentric circles) around issues of censorship, giving teachers practice navigating potential tensions with family and community members and school administrators and officials. For example, recently in one of the author's classes students engaged in a paideia discussion around the topic of banned picture books. Prior to the start of the discussion norms for talk were established using *Let's Talk: Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students, Second Edition* (Learning for Justice, 2022).

Actionable Steps Teacher Educators Can Take with Preservice and Inservice Teachers:

- Provide an opportunity to explore website such as [Pen America](#) and [Freedom to Read](#), which offer resources to build background knowledge and understanding of the history of book bans and censorship.
- Model how to have critical conversations using resources such as *Let's Talk: Facilitating Critical Conversations with Students, Second Edition* (Learning for Justice, 2022) and *Start Here, Start Now: A Guide to Antibias and Antiracist Work in Your School Community, Chapter 3: Holding Space for Critical Conversations* (Kleinrock, 2020)
- Provide opportunities to practice facilitating critical conversations in a safe space.

MODELING EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES

Teacher educators operate in a dual capacity, teaching students pedagogical concepts while serving as role models for best practice (Gomez, 1990; Korthagen et al., 2005; Morrison et al., 2022; Murray et al., 2009; Smith, 2005). By using banned books as a way to teach literacy skills and explore societal issues, teacher educators model pedagogical practices as well as how to appropriately facilitate learning and discourse with a text that may be potentially controversial. Moreover, how teacher educators approach controversial topics has the potential for creating a culture of advocacy and action (Magill et al., 2019). Several of the authors of this paper have required the reading of banned or challenged books in their children's and young adult literature courses. One author designed a course assignment where students first read *Ban This Book* by Alan Gratz, where the fifth-grade protagonist fights back against censorship, and then selected a book of their choice from the American Library Association list of banned and challenged books (ALA, 2020). After reading the texts, students reflected on the ways the books challenged their knowledge and beliefs around the subject of banned and challenged books as well as critically considered the reasons their choice book

was banned or challenged. Students also explored the way the author, Alan Grantz, had himself shifted his perspective about banned books.

Actionable Steps Teacher Educators Can Take with Preservice and Inservice Teachers:

- Use the American Library Association's Top Ten Most Banned List (curated by year) to find banned, challenged or censored books to include in course curriculum. Model how to purposefully include these texts as choices for reading assignments and class discussions.
- Incorporate children's and young adult literature that feature children and teen protagonist advocating against book bans (e.g. Ban This Book by Alan Gratz; Attack of the Black Rectangles by A.S. King)

INTRODUCING PATHWAYS OF ADVOCACY

Teacher educators should provide pathways that empower preservice and inservice teachers to be literacy advocates that create change within their schools, communities as well as the broader world. In the school setting, preservice and inservice teachers can work as advocates to develop administrators', colleagues', students', and families' understanding of the impact of book bans, as well as assisting in gaining access to books and resources. Within the wider community, they can work to bring attention to the value of local libraries and library programs, engage in anti-banning conversations on social media, attend various meetings to speak on behalf of diverse texts, and join other professionals in book access efforts. One author works with her students on how to partner with community organizations to provide book access to underserved populations through placing little libraries in underserved communities and stocking those libraries with books reflecting those population-books often challenged because of diverse characters.

Actionable Steps Teacher Educators Can Encourage Preservice and Inservice Teachers to Take:

- Finding opportunities for action through advocacy groups. Everylibrary.org posts current petitions, ways to contact state representatives, and fundraising opportunities on their website. Banned Book Busters suggests actions such as buying banned books, hosting a read-in, trainings, and joining a banned book club. For more ideas, see resource list included at the end of the article.
- Participation in Banned Book Week, held annually in the fall.

- Staying up to date on information by subscribing to newsletters, follow educational and grassroots organizations on social media, and reading blog posts. For suggested organizations to follow for information, see resource list at the end of the article.

PROVIDING A COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT

For preservice and inservice teachers to be successful leaders and advocates, they must be provided with a community of support. Advocacy is not easy, educators who are successful advocates rely on networks of colleagues and mentors to support this demanding work (Collay, 2010). Encouraging active participation within professional and grass roots organizations, offers preservice and inservice teachers opportunities to learn and grow as literacy advocates and may provide access to innovative resources. For example, one of the authors of this paper used departmental equipment funds to pay for membership and conference fees for preservice teachers to attend the NCTE conference in 2018, where they served as roundtable moderators for research presentations. The exposure to the conference changed the way that the preservice teachers viewed membership in professional organizations, and of the eight students who attended, six have kept their membership current for the last four years.

Actionable Steps Teacher Educators Can Encourage Preservice and Inservice Teachers to Take:

- Join educational organizations such as the American Library Association, National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN).
- Join or support grassroots organizations or advocacy groups such as #Disrupttexts, Freedom to Read Foundation, National Coalition Against Censorship.
- Attend conferences and events of educational organizations.

CONCLUSION

Book banning is not new, but empowering preservice and inservice teachers to become advocates for using high quality literature in their teaching is more important than ever as the rise in challenged books surges. Teacher educators have a unique opportunity and responsibility to equip preservice and inservice teachers with the knowledge and confidence to be powerful advocates for their students' right to book access and choice and for their students' literacy growth as they engage in self-selected, engaging, and thought-provoking texts. As educators, we have found the following list of resources to be a good start for exploring the complex topic of book access but want to acknowledge this list is not comprehensive and should always be evolving as we learn more.

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RESOURCES

EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS			
ORGANIZATION	WEBSITE	SOCIAL MEDIA TO FOLLOW	NOTES
American Library Association	www.ala.org	Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/AmericanLibraryAssociation Twitter: @ALALibrary YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/americanlibraryassociation	Membership: https://www.ala.org/membership/ Advocacy Info: https://www.ala.org/advocacy/fight-censorship?utm_source=ala&utm_medium=topbanner&utm_campaign=redesign#state-resources
Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE (ALAN)	https://alan-va.org	Twitter: @ALANorg Instagram: @thealanorg Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/alanorganization	Can subscribe to news and events through their website https://alan-va.org/
Association of Teacher Educators (ATE) Literacy SIG	https://www.ate1.org/literacy-sig	Twitter: @assocteachered	
International Literacy Association (ILA)	https://www.literacyworldwide.org	Twitter: @ILAToday Instagram: @ILAToday	
National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)	www.ncte.org	Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/ncte.org Twitter: @ncte Instagram: @nctegram	Membership https://ncte.org/membership/ Blog https://ncte.org/blog/

GRASSROOTS AND ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS			
ORGANIZATION	WEBSITE	SOCIAL MEDIA TO FOLLOW	NOTES
#Disrupttexts	https://disrupttexts.org/	Twitter: @DisruptTexts	https://aupresses.org
American Booksellers for Free Expression	https://www.bookweb.org	Instagram: @americanbooksellers	Advocacy resources: https://www.bookweb.org/advocacy
Amnesty International USA	https://www.amnestyusa.org/	Twitter: @amnestyusa Instagram: @amnestyusa	Ways to take action: https://www.amnestyusa.org/take-action/
Association of University Presses	https://aupresses.org	Twitter: @aupresses	
Book Ban Busters	https://redwineblueusa.org/	Twitter: @RedWineBlueUSA Instagram: @redwineblueusa	Sign-up for updates at bottom of website

		YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPeMtw7q5rXxz067VYJjackg	Podcast: https://redwine.blue/the-suburban-women-problem/
Comic Book Legal Defense Fund	http://cblfd.org/	Twitter: @CBLDF	Report censorship: https://cblfd.org/report-censorship/
EveryLibrary	https://www.everylibrary.org/	Twitter: @EveryLibrary	Under News and Updates: Ways to contact state representative Petitions to sign Fundraising opportunities Map of current bans
Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE)	www.thefire.org	Twitter: @TheFIREorg Instagram: @thefireorg	
Freedom to Read Foundation	www.ftrf.org	Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/freedomtoread/ Twitter: @FTRF	News: https://www.ftrf.org/news/
National Book Foundation	https://www.nationalbook.org/	Twitter: @nationalbook	Can subscribe to monthly newsletter on their website homepage
National Coalition Against Censorship	www.ncac.org	Twitter: @ncacensorship Instagram: @ncacensorship YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/user/ncacorg	Report censorship: https://ncac.org/report-censorship
PEN America	https://pen.org/	Twitter: @PENAmerica Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/PENamerica/ Instagram: @penamerica	Events Calendar https://pen.org/events-calendar/ Blog: https://pen.org/blog/ Become a Member: https://pen.org/membership/
People for the American Way Foundation	www.pfaw.org	Twitter: @peoplefor	Ways to take action: https://www.pfaw.org/action-center/?
We Need Diverse Books	https://diversebooks.org	Twitter: @diversebooks Instagram: @weneeddiversebooks Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/diversebooks/	Blog: https://diversebooks.org/blog/

NOTABLE EVENTS AND WEBSITES			
ORGANIZATION	WEBSITE	SOCIAL MEDIA TO FOLLOW	NOTES
Banned Books Online	http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/banned-books.html		Digital access to books through UPenn
Banned Books Week	www.bannedbooksweek.org	Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/bannedbooksweek/ Twitter: @BannedBooksWeek	Updates: https://bannedbooksweek.org/updates/
First Amendment and Censorship	https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/censorship		
Free Expression Educator's Handbook	https://ncac.org/resource/educator-handbook		
NCTE Intellectual Freedom Center	https://ncte.org/resources/ncte-intellectual-freedom-center/		
New York Public Library	https://www.nypl.org/spotlight/books-for-all		Digital access to banned book

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GINA M. DOEPKER is an Associate Professor in the School of Education at The University of Texas at Tyler. Her research interests include using alternative texts (e.g., comic books & graphic novels) during literacy instruction to increase children's reading/writing skills and motivation. Her favorite banned book is *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

JOHNA LEE FAULCONER is an Associate Professor in the Department of Literacy Studies, English Education, & History Education in the College of Education at East Carolina University. Her favorite challenged and often banned books are the *Harry Potter series* and *Al Capone Does My Shirts*. Her scholarly interests include teacher education, disciplinary literacy, and book access for underserved communities. Twitter: @drjlf

LINDA D. GREEN is an Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Department Developmental and Special Education in the School of Education at CUNY-Medgar Evers College. Her favorite banned books are *Speak*, *The Skin I'm In*, and *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. Her scholarly interests include teacher education, urban education, literacy/communication development and school leadership.

LAURA E. JACOBS completed her doctoral work at North Carolina State University and recently transitioned to her new role of Assistant Professor of English Education in the Department of Secondary and Middle Grades Education in the College of Education at Towson University. Her favorite banned books are the *Harry Potter Series*, *Drama*, and *Prince and Knight*. Her scholarly interests include teacher education, scripted English Language Arts curricular programs, and increasing student exposure to diverse literature. Twitter/Instagram: @Drjacobs_reads

JESS SMITH is an affiliate clinical assistant professor for the Online Doctorate of Education in Leadership and Organizational Change in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Baylor University. She researches the intersection of mentorship and teaching reading and writing. Her favorite banned books are *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *Looking for Alaska*, and *The Lorax*.