



Censoring LGBTQIA+ Books Censors Our LGBTQIA+ Students

By Educator Barnes – September 25, 2020

As a former English teacher, literacy coach, and elementary librarian, one of my favorite weeks of school has always been Banned Books Week. In all of my former roles, I was tasked with getting students to read. What is a better way to get students to read than to tell them a book was banned? That knowledge alone strikes curiosity in the hearts of students and makes them want to read the book. I have always enjoyed reading along with them.

The Office for Intellectual Freedom compiled a list of the top ten challenged books in 2019:

1. "George" by Alex Gino
2. "Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out" by Susan Kuklin
3. "A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo" by Jill Twiss, illustrated by EG Keller
4. "Sex is a Funny Word" by Cory Silverberg, illustrated by Fiona Smyth
5. "Prince & Knight" by Daniel Haack, illustrated by Stevie Lewis
6. "I Am Jazz" by Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings, illustrated by Shelagh McNicholas

7. "The Handmaid's Tale" by Margaret Atwood
8. "Drama" written and illustrated by Raina Telgemeier
9. "Harry Potter" series by J. K. Rowling
10. "And Tango Makes Three" by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson illustrated by Henry Cole

Eight of ten books on the list were challenged because of LGBTQIA+ content. Over the years, I have taught students who had publicly identified as part of the LGBTQIA+ community or privately told me. Two students asked me to help them find books with LGBTQIA+ characters. Luckily, I worked in schools where books rarely were banned, but what about students who attend schools where these books are removed from the shelves? Banning these books is like banning part of who these students are.

There has been increased attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) recently due to the attention to Black Lives Matter and social justice. DEI work includes more than racial equity. It also means all students, regardless of race, background, beliefs, sexual orientation, or social-economic status get what they need and are seen and heard in school. Banning books that allow students to have a mirror of who they are denies those students the opportunity to have their entire being valued and recognized at school.

It also prevents other students from seeing into the world and lived experiences of others. If we are getting real, that is exactly what censorship is about. It is about preventing people from being exposed to content and typically this content involves topics that are different than the lived experiences of the person or people requesting the censorship.

I am glad this year's Banned Books Week theme is Censorship is a Dead End. Find Your Freedom to Read. Part of the reason why some students do not want to read is that educators and community members want to control what is available to students. The more educators

and community members try to exert control, the more students want to read those restricted books. The best way to stop students from reading a book is not to draw attention to it.

The two books with LGBTQIA+ content, although this is not the only focus of these books, I have enjoyed and have recommended to students are "The House You Pass on the Way" by Jacqueline Woodson and "Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe" by Benjamin Alire Sáenz.

It is better to offer an alternative book for students to read when their parents demand a book be banned than to remove the book from everyone. It is hard to know what parents will dislike. During my second year in the classroom, a parent requested that the principal make me use a different novel. My sixth graders were reading "The Giver" by Lois Lowry. One of the reasons the parent was in a rage was because the youth that worked in the house of old in the book gave the elderly a bath. The parent said it was inappropriate and sexualized the elderly. My principal had me give the student a different novel to read. The parent was still mad the book was being used, but I was glad my principal supported my novel selection.

What books would be left if books were removed every time there was a complaint? The ALA reported that there were "566 books that were challenged or banned" in 2019. How can we get to know one another if we are not even willing to read about other people's experiences? Each year, during Banned Books Week, I read a book that was challenged or banned either from the previous year or any of the previous years.

Here are some previously banned books that I have read and that I recommend. This list is in no particular order:

1. "Fallen Angels" by Walter Dean Meyers
2. "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" by Maya Angelou
3. "The Perks of Being a Wallflower" by Stephen Chbosky
4. "The Kite Runner" by Khaled Hosseini
5. "Crank" by Ellen Hopkins
6. "The Hunger Games" trilogy by Suzanne Collins

7. "Thirteen Reasons Why" by Jay Asher

I have not yet read "The Hate U Give" by Angie Thomas. That is at least one of the books I plan to read this year. Let's fight back against censorship and read a banned book!

Now, my sons are in 4th grade. From preschool through third grade, they have been suspended, wrongly accused, thought to be older than they actually are, and yelled at by white strangers in public for being playful. Those are just a few incidents I care to bring up. As an educator, I also know they are being subjected to different curriculum across multiple subjects that is not for them. Educator Sharif El-Mekki shared in the film:

One of the things we talk about is this windows and mirrors. A Black child in a typical school in America, they get windows, from the literature that's put in front of them, from the teacher, from all the messages, they get windows to other people's world. This other world, these other people are better than you, not a shared humanity but a separate level of humanity. White children typically get the mirror, who's in front of them, the literature they're read, the posters on the wall, everything reinforces their whiteness and their superiority.

As a Black parent, I can expose my children to resources and additional literature, but white parents don't have this burden to teach more at home to affirm their children. Despite all of the struggle, despite the fear I have of my sons one day becoming a hashtag because their lives were unjustly taken, there is nothing else I rather be than a mother of two Black sons.

Despite the achievement gap between Black and white children that is talked about so much, I know that if Black children are given the opportunities, the same opportunities as white children, they would achieve, too. My sons haven't been reading above grade level for years because they are any more special than someone's else Black son. The difference is my Black sons had access to a good school and to a mother who happens to be an educator. What would this world look like if all Black children had access to what they needed? Black boys aren't broken. The film "Black Boys" reminds us that Black boys don't need a savior; they need opportunity. The Black boys in the film give their viewpoints on what they need, but you'll have to watch the film to learn more about that.

When I see another Black boy, I see excellence. I see potential. I see the same greatness I see in my sons. I know they are all young, gifted, and Black despite what some people in this

world might believe. I will continue to fight to change the narrative, to get access to opportunity, to get them to a place where they are not feared but are unconditionally loved.