

The Censorship Continues to Sail: The Relationship Between Political Ideology and Book Challenging

Ure Nwokoji¹ and Melissa Sullivan[#]

¹First Colonial High School, Virginia Beach, VA, USA

[#]Advisor

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore the extent to which political ideology affects the quality of the book challenge process, with a special focus on the motivations for a challenge and push in political agenda. The approach will be a qualitative one, involving the use of open-ended questions and interviews to extract subjective responses. This approach was taken to encourage authentic answers and data. It concludes with an analysis of the data that reveals that there is a conservative attitude in recent initiation of book challenges.

Keywords: *book banning, book challenging, high school, libraries, literary merit, political ideology.*

Introduction

The role of education is to develop intellect, raise the next member of the working class, and bring character to its students; so they can productively thrive in a democratic society (*What Is the Purpose*, 2012). However, this raises many questions. For example, how can students grow in a world if the books that highlight social issues are censored? Education will always be a political talking point when it comes to elections and funding, but to what degree should it affect the workplace?

Problem Statement

As more literature is produced, challenges arise due to books that contain graphic violence, express disrespect for parents and family, is sexually explicit, exalts evil, lacks literary merit, is unsuitable for a particular age group, or includes offensive language (Webb, 2009). Numerous book challenges are contested through opinions and not scholarly merit; therefore, the topic of censorship is subjective. School boards across the country have faced adversity because of the partiality of decisions such as an undiverse school board, heavy presence of a uniform political ideology, and the inconsideration of other age groups (McMorris-Santoro, 2021). Due to the flexible interpretation of the First Amendment, incorrect legislative channeling, and political contamination, book banning and challenging continues to plague students and school libraries (VBSchools, 2021). However, this study will focus on the political contamination factor.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research was to investigate the effect political ideology has on different parts of the book challenge process. Furthermore, the goal of the research is to examine the political climate of censorship and its effect on members of the community.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The main research questions that were answered in this study, along with their corresponding hypotheses, are as follows:

1. How does political ideology motivate people to challenge books in the [southeastern school system]?
Hypothesis: Political ideologies motivate people to challenge books.
2. How has the idea of challenging books based on literary merit changed to pushing a political agenda in the [southeastern school system]?
Hypothesis: In recent years, the basis of book challenging has progressed from objective literary analysis to a push in political agenda or collective ideology.

Definition of Key Terms

Nomenclature was used throughout this study as I briefed participants on what they were required to do and through the interview process. The important words to this study are defined below:

Book challenge- Attempt to remove or restrict materials or services based on content.

Book ban- Removal of materials or cancellation of services based on content.

Classic- Books that are high in artistic quality and noteworthy. Books of literary significance that have withstood the test of time and remained popular years after their publication.

English Literature Canon- The group of authors or works that a consensus of academics, historians and teachers recognize as worthy of study: these are the texts that are regularly in print, are studied for school examinations and in universities, which have 'status'. Also referred to as the western canon, literary canon, and for quotidian use: the canon.

Literary merit- Books that are considered to be valued as art. The definition derives from literary fiction, which relates to books with the following characteristics: requires thinking and understanding, yields insight into some significant aspect of life, serves the goal to broaden readers' awareness of life with serious artistic intention, displays emotional complexity, and often has unsatisfying or unsettling ending (Literary merit, n.d.).

Political ideology- A certain set of ethical ideals, principles, doctrines, myths or symbols of a social movement, institution, class or large group that explains how society should work and offers some political and cultural blueprint for a certain social order.

Research Aim and Approach

The goal of this study is to explore the influence of political ideology on book challenges in school libraries serving a large southeastern school system and to determine if politically influenced censorship has an effect on members of a community. The approach will be a qualitative one, involving the use of open-ended questions to extract subjective feedback. This approach is taken to encourage forthright responses about the political atmosphere of book challenging. This research helps us understand the motivations people have to challenge books and the role of political ideology in censorship.

Historical Contextualization

According to "The Story Behind," a podcast hosted by Emily Prokop, the first recording of censorship dates back to over 1,000,000 years ago. In 210 B.C., Chinese emperor Quin Shi Huang burned down all of the books

in the kingdom. Despite burying the soldiers from war, he ordered the killing of thousands of scholars so they would not produce any knowledgeable work. He wanted people to remember that history started with him. Book banning cases barely make it to federal courts, but it is not something unknown historically (Prokop, 2018). The first banned book was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was banned by the Confederacy for its pro-abolitionist discourse (Brady, 2016). In 1933, *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses* engendered a new era of legal interpretation of the First Amendment. Judge John M. Woosly ruled that sex, even if unsettling, should be allowed in serious literature (Brady, 2016). His decision overturned the federal ban on *Ulysses* as it was regarded as "work of a disordered mind," according to the judge ruling over the previous case (Brady, 2016). Today, Banned Books Week is celebrated from the end of September to the beginning of October. Throughout the years, it has gained recognition and sponsors including the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund and Wordier Than Thou. Despite the controversial topics that arise, these organizations are fighting to keep books in public and school libraries as new book challenges rise across the country (Brady, 2016).

Application of the First Amendment

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution states: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. (U.S. Const., n.d.)

Constitutional interpretation consists of two contrasting ideas, strict interpretation of written words or loose contraction of the meaning behind them which is why there are different court decisions and precedents (Webb, 2009). In relation to the topic of book. Loose interpretation has permitted flexibility in the court system throughout history, banning and challenging, the First Amendment is applied differently in schools. The Supreme Court ruled that students do not "shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 1969), but whether or not this applies to what students read at school has been controversial as well (Webb, 2009). There is a realm of uncertainty for the guidelines of what is right or wrong depending on who and where the book is challenged. Prokop (2018) says, "As long as free speech remains, so will challenges to [books]."

The Psychology Behind Challenging Books

"Do these books have any substance?" "Are these scenes appropriate for minors?" "Do these concepts go against a moral standard?" These are questions challengers ask themselves when they come across a distinct book (Stetson University, 2014). The psychology behind the potential censorship of books is a mix of educational psychology and social psychology (Stetson University, 2014). The two fields influence the decision to initiate a challenge.

Educational psychology is the study of human learning. This includes teaching methods, instructional purposes, and differences in learning (Cherry, 2022). It is not limited to the learning processes of adolescence, but the social, emotional, and cognitive processes throughout life (Cherry, 2022). Board administrators and parents ponder if these young adult books are needed in the school's curriculum or library (Snyder, 2020). Social psychology is the study of how people think, believe, and feel; it is about understanding how an individual's behavior is affected by the environment (Cherry, 2020). Similarly, the reasons for book challenges and the books challenged change due to a change in the climate of an environment or setting.

According to the American Library Association (ALA), patrons and parents initiated 74% of the book challenges in school libraries in 2017 (ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, n.d.). In 2018, parents made 33% of book challenges, while patrons made 32% (ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, n.d.). In 2019, patrons made 45% of book challenges and parents made 18%--both initiating more than half of the book challenges

documented that year (ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, n.d.). Over the course of the three years, the two groups nearly evenly split more than half of the initiations (ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, n.d.). A main reason that parents challenge books in school is that they fear losing control of their child (Snyder, 2020). They fear that their child will stray away from their teachings and beliefs; therefore, parents want to grapple with whatever negatively affects their child's mindset (Snyder, 2020).

Although a parent's concerns are not deplorable in nature, their beliefs on the relationship between banned books and readers are contradictory to the actual effects (Stetson University, 2014). Chris Ferguson, Ph.D. and chair of the psychology department at Stetson University, conducted a study on banned books and their effects on readers. His findings showed that banned books are associated with an increase in civic duty (Stetson University, 2014). The most banned or challenged books are the ones that challenge the status quo.

Linus Chan's article, "Social Justice Research" (2018), reviews Lee Jussims edited book, *The Politics of Social Psychology* (2017), and states that political ideology should not influence or take place in scientific investigation and research. She also argues that headstrong liberals, while conservatives are guilty too, paired with political discrimination disrupts the movement of scientific discovery and discredits the field (Chan, 2018). Chan's concept of constructing perspectives applies to literature. As an example, "The Lottery," by Shirley Jackson, is banned in many countries. The story was controversial because it critiqued blind conformity to tradition. It was written when American nationalism was rising in response to growing fears of communism. Numerous people were upset with Jackson's negative portrayal of conformity (Hannah Arendt Center, 2014). When looking at themes from this story currently, readers have a more positive attitude towards questioning traditions. This shows that diverse perspectives create discussions that are beneficial to classrooms (Western Governors University, 2020).

Book Controversy Across High Schools

In a large southeastern school system six books have been challenged by two school board members. The books being challenged are *Lawn Boy*, by Johnathan Evison; *Gender Queer*, by Maia Kobabe; *A Lesson Before Dying*, by Ernest Gaines; *The Bluest Eye*, by Toni Morrison; *Beyond Magenta*, by Susan Kuklin; and *Good Trouble*, by Christopher Noxon. All novels are claimed to have pornographic material, such as instances of pedophilia and masturbation (Jenkins & Morano, 2021). During a fall 2021 school board meeting, 19 students advocated for the preservation of the six books. Many students made remarks on how minority groups are disproportionately represented in literature, and the removal of the novels is to further political agenda (VBSchools, 2021).

Solutions

Child development and learning exists within a cultural, political, and historical context (National Association for the Education of Young Children, n.d.). The reasons for a book challenge are destined to change due to a shift in cultural climate. The complexity of the current climate allows for a flexible interpretation of the First Amendment with other laws needing to adjust. (Webb, 2009). While this could be seen as a positive effect, it has tormented the peace of students and school libraries (McMorris-Santoro, 2021). Furthermore, political contamination and shortened legislative processes have affected this concept as well (Chan, 2018). The banning and challenging of books featuring marginalized groups has been seen as a push for a political agenda, whether it is intentional or not (VBSchools, 2021). Parental concerns are unavoidable, but the ability for one parent to restrict a book for all students grants a copious amount of power (J. Clements, personal communication, October 29, 2021). This qualitative study investigates the opinions of six individuals who have been affected by the school board's discussion to ban certain books. It is the intention of the researcher to take note of the commonalities found within the statements of the subjects.

Data Collection

The participants selected were either involved in reading or knew about the book controversy. Respondents, members of the educational community (high school students, college students, teachers, etc), were asked to respond to open-ended questions. They were asked about the political climate of censorship, literary merit of books, and their opinions about the recent book challenges in a southeastern school system. The questions are as follows: 1) Please state your name and occupation. 2) What are your political beliefs? 3) Share your thoughts on the book controversy that is happening in [a southeastern school system] currently. 4) Based on what you heard in the school board meeting, what information or conclusion did you draw about the books being challenged? 5) Why do you think these books are controversial? 6) What don't you like about the books? How do some subjects align with your political beliefs? 7) Would the fact that the book(s) did or didn't align with your political beliefs motivate you to challenge a book? Why or why not? 8) From the books that have been challenged in [a southeastern school system], do you see a commonality in a push in political ideology when it comes to challenging books? If so, which ideology or viewpoint? 9) Literary merit relates to books that are considered to be valued as *art*. The definition derives from literary fiction, which relates to books with the following characteristics: requires thinking and understanding, yields insight into some significant aspect of life, serves the goal to broaden reader's awareness of life with serious artistic intention, displays emotional complexity, and often has unsatisfying or unsettling ending. Do you think any of these books have literary merit? Why? Or Why not? 10) Based on your experiences and knowledge about the increase in challenged books, not only in [the southeastern system], but across the country, do you see censorship as a political issue? Why or why not? 11) Do you have anything to add concerning my topic?

The first and second questions are demographic questions. The intent was to gain background information on the participants and to better analyze the answers provided. Their political beliefs are incorporated to answer questions six and seven, which is used to prove one of my hypotheses: political ideology motivates people to challenge books. Questions three, four, and five were asked to gain insight on the participants' views of the issue, as it was the event that engendered the research. The eighth question specifically targets my second hypothesis, which is as follows: In recent years, the basis of book challenging has progressed from objective literary analysis to a push in political agenda or collective ideology. As part of the book challenging process, books are judged by their literary merit; question nine was asked for the participants' opinions on the books and if they understood why the six books challenged in a southeastern school district were on the list. Question ten was posed for respondents to assess censorship as a politically nationwide issue. The concluding question was raised for any additional thoughts participants may have.

Study Design

The study followed a qualitative grounded theory element. Qualitative data collection occurred during one-on-one interviews to determine two theories: 1) Political ideologies obfuscates objective reasoning and motivates people to challenge books. 2) There has been a recent push in a political agenda for book challenges, instead of the objective literary analysis.

Population and Sample

In order to work with participants, an Informed Consent Document was obtained. The research was conducted with six respondents, which consisted of various members of the community (librarians, teachers, parents, and students at different levels) that are affected by the potential book ban. Participants in the qualitative component

of the study were given pseudonyms and were asked to watch the school board meeting regarding the challenged books and to research the topic in the news for preliminary action.

Qualitative Research Design

Qualitative data were organized systematically in order to report findings from the interviews in a logical manner. The design, procedures, traditions, paradigm, researcher's role, data collection, data analysis, and ethics of the study will be discussed following this paragraph.

The qualitative component was designed as a grounded theory study. In order for this to be considered a grounded theory case, hypotheses are tested, data is collected and analyzed, and a theory is developed, which is *grounded* in the data (Chun Tie, Y., Birks, M., & Francis, K., 2019). Data collection consists of observations and interviews, and the data is recorded through handwritten notes and tape recordings (Chun Tie, Y., Birks, M., & Francis, K., 2019). Constant comparison, also known as coding, is used to group the participants' answers into themes to allow new adjustments and interpretations to the theory (Chun Tie, Y., Birks, M., & Francis, K., 2019).

Qualitative Research Paradigm

The research paradigm is the way in which the researcher will conceptualize the philosophy of the research question to be addressed in the study (Hays & Sing, 2012). It was the goal to use empirical research in order to make sense of how political ideology/affiliation influences the objectivity of book challenges (Patton, 2002). For this to happen, boundaries were set between the researcher and participants, avoiding outside discussion, and using statistical procedures to control variables as much as possible (Galuzzo, Hilldurp, Hayes, & Erford, 2008).

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is an African American, middle class female who is a student at a southeastern school where the majority of the participants are located. The participants and the researcher have interacted at the school through meetings and classes throughout the researcher's years of schooling.

Qualitative Data Collection

Since the interview is grounded theory's most important source (Yin, 2004), it was important to make sure the interviews occurred in a non-threatening environment. Before participants were interviewed, the researcher had to 1) identify a time for participants to be scheduled for their interviews; 2) make sure every interviewee was comfortable and willing to share their political beliefs for the purpose of this study; 3) have permission to use the site; 4) plan how the interview would occur; 4) decide the length of time each participant would be at the site; 5) predict what may go wrong at the site (Hays & Singh, 2014). Participants were asked to watch the school board meeting regarding the challenged books and to research the topic in the news for preliminary action. Participants met with the researcher in the library flex room, which was secluded from other students. Before the interview began, the researcher greeted each participant and made sure they were comfortable with sharing political beliefs. The recorded interviews were informal to make the participants comfortable and in a questions

answer format. An audit trail with all the notes, codes, interviews, etc. has been created in order to keep the necessary records for the research that was conducted (Singh & Hays, 2012).

Qualitative Instruments

Qualitative data was collected through the interviews that took place with the participants. Interviews were conducted and transcribed after each session. After each transcription, the researcher cut the responses into strips, which were grouped in order to create categories and were rearranged as necessary. This began the process of pattern matching, which was used for the coding process. Pattern matching is one of the most alluring techniques that is used to code data (Yin, 2014). Coding began at the sentence level. Based on the patterns that were formed, a codebook was created to serve as a framework for coding. As Hays & Singh also point out (2013), “An important component of developing a strong codebook is constant comparison” (pg. 303).

Qualitative Data Cleaning

Qualitative data needed to be addressed in order to have data that could be easily understood. According to Yin (2014), questions for case studies need to remind the researcher of the information that needs to be collected. Each interview question was created in order to collect the necessary information to address the research question. The researcher analyzed answers in order to address qualitative inquiry.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data was collected during the six individual interviews. During these sessions, the researcher gave participants a sheet with terms and summaries of the six books that were challenged in a southeastern school system. The sheet was used as reference when the researcher asked participants about the school board meeting, books, etc. The questions from the interview were used to gather data to address two research questions: 1) How does political ideology motivate people to challenge books in [a southeastern school system]? 2) How has the idea of challenging books based on literary merit changed to pushing a political agenda in the [southeastern school system]? As participants shared their feelings, values, and concerns about the political climate of censorship in school libraries, a digital recorder was used to capture the responses. Each interview was approximately 10-20 minutes long. After the interviews were conducted and transcriptions were completed, patterns were examined to create a code book themes and subthemes. This process was repeated until all ideas, themes, and large constructs were identified.

The overarching theme in this study was to distinguish the political climate or shift in book challenges and its effect on members of the school community. All participants detected a dominating political presence in the education system. Through the responses, three themes emerged: 1) the controversy between books and the school board, 2) literary merit of books, 3) the presence of political ideology in the interpretation of literature.

In the following sections, each theme will be shared with concurrent sub themes that emerged from the data. The narrative will start with the first theme, which was the controversy between books and the school board. From this theme, four sub themes were discovered: 1) causes of controversy, 2) relationship between parents and book challenges, 3) the “culture war,” 4) The use of books from the student perspective. The next theme developed from the data was the literary merit of books. Two sub themes emerged from this theme: 1) AP English 12 curriculum and 2) the influence of literary books. The final section will discuss the presence of political ideology in the interpretation of literature. The four sub themes that emerged from this theme were 1) conservatism, 2) people in power, 3) political climate of censorship.

Theme 1: The Controversy Between Books and the School Board

Emergent from this theme were the sub themes of causes of controversy, relationship between parents and book challenges, the “culture war,” and the use of books from the student perspective. In late October of 2021, six books were challenged by two school board members in a southeastern school system. The books were *Lawn Boy*, by Johnathan Evison; *Gender Queer*, by Maia Kobabe; *A Lesson Before Dying*, by Ernest Gaines; *The Bluest Eye*, by Toni Morrison; *Beyond Magenta*, by Susan Kuklin; and *Good Trouble*, by Christopher Noxon (Jenkins & Morano, 2021). During the meeting, students from different schools in the system argued for the books and spoke about the consequences of removing these books from the library. What made these books controversial was highlighted throughout the meeting, but the controversy was not always presented from a negative perspective. The researcher used this scenario as a foundation for the interview questions.

Subtheme 1: Causes of controversy

Participants discussed what currently makes books controversial and what causes controversy. A prevalent viewpoint amongst the participants was the different views people have. The topics such as critical race theory, sexual orientation, and sexual content causes a divide in opinion. Dev, an optometrist, said, “I think it is also controversial, mostly because of how people have their views. I feel like if this was a more, um, let’s say society approved type of like...book, that they wouldn’t be facing controversy.” Participants also noticed a pattern in the books being challenged; the majority of challenged books featured marginalized groups or characters such as minorities or the LGBTQ+ community. For example, Nick, a high school senior, used *Gender Queer* as an example. The graphic novel was put under review again for the presence of sexual images.

Subtheme 2: Relationship between parents and book challenges

Jem, a library media specialist, opened with the genres parents challenge such as religion and fantasy. Mae, a teacher, said, “Books like these tap into insecurities and those in power like to ‘ban’ them in the name of ‘protecting’ kids.” Mae asserted that the parents challenging books have a fear of their children knowing the truth or what lies in society.

Nelly, a library media specialist, gave a solution to the problems of worrying parents. Her job requires her to “support the community as a whole—the school community as a whole. [She] knows [her] students. [She] knows what they need and what they want to see.” To serve the whole student body, if a parent wants a book to be removed for their student, they honor the wishes on an individual basis.

Subtheme 3: The use of books from the student perspective

All participants agreed that students benefit from the books in the library. The library media specialist utilized the quote, “A book can be a window or a mirror.” Students see themselves in the characters they read about, supporting them in their development. The books allow students “to live vicariously through characters to be more comfortable with their own decisions and lives,” as stated by Jem. The complexity of the books and characters resembles the complexity of the people and world. They emphasized that libraries should not be about political beliefs, but about the students’ right to read.

Subtheme 4: The “culture war”

A culture war is a cultural conflict between social groups and the struggle for dominance of their values, beliefs, and practices. The idea of the culture war was introduced by Nick. He explained, “So, you have the people who want to ban the books—who are trying to enforce moral ideas on everyone else, which everything about that is flawed. it goes down getting rid of—it breaks down freedom of speech, which strips what students can read and

what they have access to. And it breaks it down even further, by restricting that based on a select few people's personal moral ideas, which is not how you should run society”.

He continued to elaborate on how these individuals use the state as an avenue to “push the culture, rather than let it grow organically from literary art dialogues.” Dev also mentioned the divide the culture war is causing: “It’s so divided in the world that people don’t want it to be divided in the public school system. So they want to keep it cohesive, but in the end, people are gonna have those divisions in opinion and thoughts.”

Part of the culture war included the political party lines. As the participants assessed how everyone reacts to the social unrest, the researcher asked them how they would react to social unrest currently. Would their political ideologies sway them to challenge a book? Mae said, “Being in a marginalized group makes it hard for me to keep others from being represented in literature. I would never deny representation to others, especially those who rarely have it or have never had it. My liberal beliefs align with allowing all people to have a voice and to be seen”.

Ray, a high school senior, called attention to the many books she did not agree with, but would not challenge because she believes she does not have the right to remove the book for an entire school. She uses Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* as an example. “Do I agree with it? Not whatsoever, but it’s just, there’s some books that are just sort of academic and historical that are typically held in libraries.”

Theme 2: Literary Merit of Books

Two sub themes stem from this theme: AP English 12 curriculum and the influence of literary books. Literary merit refers to books that are considered to be valued as art. The definition derives from literary fiction, which relates to books with the following characteristics: requires thinking and understanding, yields insight into some significant aspect of life, serves the goal to broaden reader’s awareness of life with serious artistic intention, displays emotional complexity, and often has unsatisfying or unsettling ending (Literary merit, n.d.). The participants decided whether or not the books had literary merit and why.

Subtheme 1: AP English 12 curriculum

AP English Literature and Composition focuses on reading, analyzing, and writing about imaginative literature (poetry, fiction, drama) from various time periods. For this subtheme, two participants are utilized for the analysis because of the duties of their job. Jem and Nelly are library media specialists and are tasked with book selection for their school’s library. In their interviews, they describe the process of book selection. Nelly pointed out: “There tends to be a criteria we go by, you know, whether something’s won awards, whether it has starred reviews, you know, if the main publication that review books—library publications if they give it a really good review, then we are more likely to purchase it and stuff like that. Um, but certainly, I mean if it is on the AP 12 English curriculum, then it certainly has met the criteria for having literary merit”.

She established the qualifications for books in libraries, which may not appeal to everyone in the community. However, books on the AP English 12 curriculum such as *A Lesson Before Dying* and *The Bluest Eye* have been professionally selected, yet are still challenged habitually. Jem shared a quote from the National Council of Teachers of English and gave her own analysis: ‘Any text is potentially open to attack by someone, somewhere, sometimes, for some reason.’ Clearly at least two of them on the list are actually considered to be classics if you will, by literary standards. So the fact that people disagree with the content, does not erase their literary merit.

Even though not all books on the list are classified as classics, all participants agreed that each book carries merit.

Subtheme 2: The influence of literary books

The researcher asked questions about literary merit because it was a pattern topic in school censorship. The debate on whether or not this classification should matter is prevalent in school board meetings across the

country. Mae, said: “I think the majority of books have literary merit. That’s their job. That is why people write them. People use literature to share their experiences. Words on a page should not hold so much weight as to keep those who want to read them from being able to do so”.

Others said that the books allow understanding for the marginalized groups in society such as people of color and the LGBTQ+ community. They said that the books offer insight and a different perspective. Nelly used *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, a classic novel and work under the literary canon, as her example. She said, “It’s a wonderful, like coming of age [book]. But it’s from the era where this book was like... for white people to learn about, you know, civil rights issues and it’s super important in that perspective.” Dev said: “For me, as a person who identifies as female and straight, let’s say I happen to read [*Gender Queer*], it will give me a better understanding of people who identify as non-binary, queer, or some other sexuality. As a person who has friends who are non-binary, it would like help me and grab a further understanding of like, what they have had to experience in their life”.

The last example incorporates *Beyond Magenta*, which differs from the rest of the books because it is non-fiction. The book contains stories from transgender teens about their transitioning. Nelly said: “There are kids in this building who request that kind of book because it’s speaking to their own perspective. So it’s not literature, but it has merit because it’s answering a need that exists. So you know, for that reason, I think it belongs here”.

The participants have claimed that the books can positively impact the students and should be kept in the libraries despite the difference in views. Jem stated, “I absolutely think they need to be included in collections as they represent some of our population [the student body], and they represent the ideals of...um yeah access to information.”

Theme 3: The Presence of Political Ideology in the Interpretation of Literature

Emergent from this theme were the following subthemes: conservatism, people in power, and political climate of censorship. The researcher asked questions to investigate how political ideology influences the objectivity of the book challenge process. The process first starts with the challenge, then hearing, and finally the review with a diverse board featuring all members of the community.

Subtheme 1: Conservatism

Conservatism is associated with the alignment of traditional values or ideas. All participants said that there has been a conservative push in book challenges. Jem stated, “Books that are being challenged from a conservative perspective. You know, and so—and nationally, and statewide, and locally, it is a conservative movement to ban books from libraries in general, and school libraries, and curriculum.” She also highlighted put it into the perspective of the current social atmosphere: “I think that there is social unrest right now for a lot of reasons, and that unrest is translating into...political conflict and one of the symptoms of that, is this um, focus on banning books—to make a point, really”.

One student dived into the specifics of the political affiliation/party. Nick said: “I wouldn’t just say conservatives or the right, but it’s social conservatives. And that type of people who want to use the state as a avenue to enforce their own moral ideals in everyone; those are the kind of people who try to ban the books kids all these books, because all of these books sort of have similar commonalities for those ideas—attacks on racism, uh attacks of homophobia, like the message of the books overall and what you would gain from them. Those all completely clash with the whole idea of the cultural conservatives’ agenda. So, that’s really the commonality”.

While everyone agreed on the conservative push in political agenda, others took into account that it is not only one side of the political spectrum initiating all of the challenges. Nelly used *To Kill A Mockingbird* as an example to advocate for both sides: “But it’s from an era where this book was like. for white people to learn

about you know, civil rights issues and it's super important in that perspective. But now people are saying like, "Hey, what about the guy who was accused of rape? Where's his voice? What about the housekeeper?" Who you know, lives with the lawyer. "The black housekeeper, why aren't we hearing her perspective?" So it's being challenged from both directions. Yea like I don't think it's fair to say one ideology or another is always doing the challenges".

The novel has been challenged by people of color and liberals for the racial slurs and a "white savior" character. The book has circulated for more than 60 years and is still being challenged. This shows that over time the cultural context changes, which is why there are challenges from both sides of the spectrum with this book.

Subtheme 2: People in power

Two participants said that the recent challenges from the right-wing are from positions of authority; they utilized the democratic process to push a political agenda. Ray believed that this has caused strife in the educational workplace. Ray said: "The banning of literature isn't aimed at the protection of children, but rather people in positions of authority using selective passages from books out of context to further a local political agenda. In a district that already has issues with staffing, suggesting criminal charges against librarians demonstrates that the school board has established an oppositional relationship between administrators and VBCPS employees".

Subtheme 3: Political climate of censorship

The political climate parallels the change in society. Nelly said, "We're listening to people's voices that we didn't listen to so much in the past and that's threatening to people who think they know one way. It tends to make people uncomfortable, and sometimes they want to reject what they see and not expose their kids to it".

Originally, all respondents said that censorship is an issue; however, it is being *made* into a political issue. Participants said that it is important to protect the students' right to read the constitutional rights of speech and information. Jem said: "It is so much bigger than just about the books, it really is. It's more about political ideologies and, and, and value systems. And um, but respect for other people's perspectives and values is a national concern. And um, so the more conversations we can have where we talk about the need for tolerance and the need for exposure to varying ideas, the better for our children—for those who are going to be running this country fifty–thirty years from now".

Nelly stressed the consequences of the way the system is handling the multiple book challenges across the country—on every level and jurisdiction. She applied a quote from the American Library Association's Freedom to Read Statement: 'Every silencing of a heresy, every enforcement of an orthodoxy, diminishes the toughness and resilience of our society and leaves it the less able to deal with controversy and difference'. So right now, you know, if we suppress—we oppress, and we, you know, we refused to allow our youth to read books that can open their minds and allow them to see multiple perspectives and viewpoints, we are at contributing more to the social tension and not allowing the change to occur because we are stagnating our thinking in our critical, you know, view of, of different issues.

Discussion

The objective of this grounded theory study was to analyze the effect political ideology has on the different parts of the book challenge process. Furthermore, the goal of the research is to examine the political climate of censorship and its effect or strain on members of the community.

Research Question One: How does political ideology motivate people to challenge books in the [southeastern school system]? The hypothesis was: Political ideologies motivate people to challenge books. The researcher found that political ideology does not motivate book challenges. All participants collectively said that they would not challenge a book. Although the selected participants were spread across the political spectrum,

it would be better to have a wider age range and assess personalities. For instance, all participants were open minded. If the opportunity to redo the study presents itself, the participant pool should include people that are outspoken or have stern morals for increased complexity in analysis. Research Question Two: How has the idea of challenging books based on literary merit changed to pushing a political agenda in the [southeastern school system]? The hypothesis was: In recent years, the basis of book challenging has progressed from objective literary analysis to a push in political agenda or collective ideology. The researcher found that the hypothesis was correct; book challenges have come from a conservative view and obfuscate the book challenge process. Participants that identified themselves as conservative acknowledged the change in motive for book challenges. Political ideologies are not only affecting the libraries, but are permeating through levels of education as well. Through the data, the reasons for censorship are becoming more complex as the cultural context shifts. The responses display that the answer to solving this problem is to uphold the rights of the First Amendment.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my Legal Research and Senior Project teacher, Mrs. Van Schenck, for her guidance, suggestions, and support through the process. She was patient and her smile lifted my spirits during the stressful times. I'd also like to thank my Senior Project advisor, Dr. Sullivan. Her expertise and candidness paved a way for this article, and she pushed me to achieve what I thought I could not do. I would like to send acknowledgments to my family members and friends who listened as I incessantly talked or complained about the article writing process, even if they did not understand the minute details of qualitative analysis.

Lastly, I would like to thank God. None of this would be possible without him. The all-nighters when it felt like I was at a dead end, and he was always a listening ear. I thank him for his fulfillment in my life.

References

ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom. (n.d.). *Infographics*. American Library Association. Retrieved October 21, 2021, from <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/statistics>

All, S. (2021, April 11). *Books that touched on race were among the most challenged as inappropriate for libraries in 2020*. CNN. Retrieved September 21, 2021, from <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/11/us/challenges-to-books-about-racism-trnd/index.html>

The Associated Press. (2021, September 24). *Fairfax County schools pulls 2 books with graphic sex from libraries*. Wtop News. Retrieved October 5, 2021, from <https://wtop.com/fairfax-county/2021/09/fairfax-county-schools-pulls-2-books-with-graphic-sex-from-libraries/>

Bill Ray Counts v. Cedarville School District, 996 F. Supp. 2d ____ (Apr. 22, 2003). https://scholar.google.com/scholar_case?case=4899935302137642081&q=Censorship+of+books+in+school&hl=en&as_sdt=6,47&as_ylo=2000&as_yhi=2021

Blair, E. (2021, September 30). *During Banned Books Week, readers explore what it means to challenge texts*. NPR. Retrieved October 5, 2021, from <https://www.npr.org/2021/09/30/1041610286/during-banned-books-week-readers-explore-what-it-means-to-challenge-texts>

Board of Education, Island Trees Union Free School District No. 26 v. Pico by Pico. (n.d.). *Oyez*. Retrieved November 18, 2021, from <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1981/80-2043>

- Brady, A. (2016, September 22). *The history (and present) of banning books in America*. Literary Hub. Retrieved September 23, 2021, from <https://lithub.com/the-history-and-present-of-banning-books-in-america/>
- Chan, L. (2018). Political contamination of social psychology: A review of Crawford and Jussim's (2017) edited book on the politics of social psychology. *Social Justice Research, 31*(3), 323-333.
- Chavez, N. (2021, September 1). *Confusion reigns in Texas as new law aims to restrict how race and history are taught in schools*. CNN. Retrieved October 5, 2021, from <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/01/us/texas-critical-race-theory-social-studies-law/index.html>
- Cherry, K. (2020, July 5). *An overview of social psychology*. Very Well Mind. Retrieved March 23, 2022, from <https://www.verywellmind.com/social-psychology-4157177>
- Cherry, K. (2022, February 8). *What is education psychology?* Very Well Mind. Retrieved March 23, 2022, from <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-educational-psychology-2795157#:~:text=Educational%20psychology%20involves%20the%20study,learn%20and%20retain%20new%20information.>
- Chun Tie, Y., Birks, M., & Francis, K. (2019). Grounded theory research: A design framework for novice researchers. *SAGE Open Medicine*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2050312118822927>
- Clements, J. (2021, October 29). [Personal interview by the author].
- Galuzzo, G. R., Hilldrup, J., Hayes, D.G., & Erford, B. T. (2008). The nature of research and inquiry. In B.T. Erford (Ed.), *Research and evaluation in counseling* (p. 2-24). Boston: Lahaska Press.
- Hannah Arendt Center. (2014, June 28). *The banality of evil and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery."* Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities. Retrieved April 3, 2022, from <https://hac.bard.edu/amor-mundi/the-banality-of-evil-and-shirley-jacksons-the-lottery-2014-06-28>
- Hays, D. G., & Singh, A. A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. New York, NY: Guilford Publications
- Ifeduba, E. (2018). *Book censorship in Nigeria: A study of origin, methods and motivations, 1805-2018. Library Philosophy and Practice*.
- Jenkins, S., & Morano, J. (2021, October 17). Book banning: The latest battleground in Virginia Beach schools — and beyond. *Virginian-Pilot*. <https://www.pilotonline.com/news/education/vp-nw-virginia-beach-challenged-books-20211017-zoekyvyfcvgnjdfedgp2tib4iy-story.html>
- LITERARY MERIT. (n.d.). *Definitions.net*. Retrieved April 7, 2022, from <https://www.definitions.net/definition/LITERARY+MERIT.>
- McLeod, S. (2007). *Social psychology*. Simply Psychology. Retrieved March 23, 2022, from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/social->

psychology.html#:~:text=Social%20psychology%20is%20the%20scientific,or%20imagined%20interactions%20with%20others.

- McMorris-Santoro, E. (2021, September 16). *Students fight back against a book ban that has a Pennsylvania community divided*. CNN. Retrieved September 21, 2021, from <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/15/us/book-ban-controversy-pennsylvania/index.html>
- Myatt, F. (n.d.). *Best quotes on banning and censoring books*. The Guardian. Retrieved October 28, 2021, from <https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2015/aug/29/banned-books-quotes-dangerous-books>
- National Association for the Education of Young Children. (n.d.). *The social-cultural context of child development and learning*. Naeyc. Retrieved March 23, 2022, from <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity/social-cultural-context>
- Noxon, C. (2021, November 2). Op-Ed: Book banning in 2021? Why my book has been removed from school shelves. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-11-02/virginia-beach-schools-book-banning>
- Nwokoji, U. (2021, December 9). *School board meeting notes* [PDF]. <file:///media/fuse/drivefs-6875d56ea18bb3c386ffd8d84a1737a1/root/School%20Board%20Meeting%20Notes.pdf>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Prokop, E. (Host). (2018, September 27). Banned books | A history of putting books on blast [Audio podcast episode]. In *The story behind*. The Story Behind. <https://thestorybehindpodcast.com/banned-books-a-history-of-putting-books-on-blast-tsb126>
- Request for reconsideration of instructional materials* [Google Docs]. (n.d.). <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xwrTQ8EXZgDnamP7K6lbtBdGCtbwS6wLfbpetUjLuA/edit?usp=sharing>
- Ruhl, C. (2020, July 1). *Implicit bias or unconscious bias*. Simply Psychology. Retrieved November 3, 2021, from <https://www.simplypsychology.org/implicit-bias.html#author>
- Snyder, N. (2020, June 25). *Parental fear and cultural erasure: The logic behind banning books*. Book Riot. Retrieved October 25, 2021, from <https://bookriot.com/logic-behind-banning-books/>
- Stetson University. (2014, March 6). *"Banned" books study has surprising results*. Stetson Today. Retrieved November 3, 2021, from <https://www.stetson.edu/today/2014/03/banned-books-study-has-surprising-results/>
- Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District. (n.d.). *Oyez*. Retrieved November 18, 2021, from <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1968/21>
- U.S. Const. amend. I. https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/United_States_of_America_1992

- VBSchools. (2021, October 29). *School board meeting - 10/26/2021* [Video]. Youtube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPN5kHhU1pM>
- Virginia Beach City Public Schools. (n.d.). *Review and challenge of instructional materials 6-61.2*. Virginia Beach City Public Schools. Retrieved December 21, 2021, from
https://www.vbschools.com/about_us/our_leadership/school_board/policies_and_regulations/section_6/6-61_2
- Waller, A. (2021, April 16). Books about Racism and police violence fill out list of 'Most Challenged' titles. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/16/books/american-library-association-banned-books.html>
- Webb, S. L. (2009). *Book banning*. The First Amendment Encyclopedia. Retrieved October 27, 2021, from
<https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/986/book-banning#:~:text=ideas%2C%20or%20themes,-,Those%20advocating%20a%20ban%20complain%20typically%20that%20the%20book%20in,group%2C%20or%20includes%20offensive%20language>
- Western Governors University. (2020, May 4). *Improving diversity in the classroom*. Western Governors University. Retrieved March 23, 2022, from <https://www.wgu.edu/blog/improving-diversity-classroom2005.html#close>
- What is the purpose of education?* [PDF]. (2012).
https://files.ascd.org/staticfiles/ascd/pdf/journals/ed_update/eu201207_infographic.pdf
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Case study research: Design and methods* (3rd ed.). Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage.