

THE PERCEPTIONS OF PRESERVICE ENGLISH EDUCATION CANDIDATES ON CENSORSHIP OF  
LITERATURE

by

Rachel Brown

A Senior Honors Project Presented to the

Honors College

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for

Graduation with Honors

by

Rachel Brown

Greenville, NC

December, 2022

Approved by:

Todd Finley

College of Education

## **Abstract**

“The Perceptions of Preservice English Education Candidates on Censorship of Literature” is a pilot study that explores the thoughts, fears, and hopes of preservice English Education candidates regarding censorship of literature, both as a whole and within their future classrooms. Surveys and in-person interviews were conducted with seven preservice English Education candidates and explored questions surrounding the motivations for book banning, how to approach difficult topics, alternative readings, the pros and cons of incorporating contemporary works, student engagement, among other topics. Discourse analysis revealed that concerns about censorship place significant pressure on secondary English teachers to be. Other takeaways included teacher candidates’ worries that they are inheriting a fossilized canon of literature. With the volume and quality of contemporary literature expanding quickly, preservice teachers provide their thoughts on how the canon could be revised to enhance literary and student engagement.

## **Literature Review**

Many studies surrounding literature usage in the classroom reveal the same thing: books written by white male authors dominate high school reading lists (Applebee, 1992). One study, which coded 11,579 book-length works used in English classrooms, found that “81% were by male authors, 98% by white (non-Hispanic) authors, and 99% were written within the United States” (Applebee, 1992, pp. 27-28). The literature canon needs expanding. Although efforts have been made, studies show that only minute increases in selections written by women and authors of different cultural traditions have been made during recent years (Applebee, 1992, p. 28).

The canon has remained relatively unchanged, and this is likely because of teachers' fear of censorship and their concerns for upholding literary merit (Applebee, 1992, p. 31). Censorship has both directly and indirectly affected the selection of texts being used in the classroom. Many debates have been made on what is considered "safe" literature and what is "potentially offensive" (Bruder, 1992). As a result, teachers are hesitant to incorporate more diverse or contemporary works because of fear of backlash or controversy. There is also the question of whether more contemporary works can uphold the same level of rigor as traditional works. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) uses a three-part model to measure a text's complexity. The model includes qualitative and quantitative assessments as well as reader and task considerations. With this model, the CCSS emphasizes the need for student-centered texts and for students to engage with a range of works that "span many genres, cultures, and eras" (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012). In other words, drawing an understanding from culturally diverse works is just as important as critical thinking and literacy (Li, 2015, p. 4).

The literature used in each classroom should reflect the students (Greenbaum, 1994, p. 36). Students who feel removed from the texts are less likely to engage with them. A great way to combat this issue is by incorporating multicultural literature into the curriculum (Barrios & Kohler, 2020). In order to create motivated and engaged learners, an environment must be established that allows students freedom to "express themselves... explore their own culture and learn more about the diverse backgrounds of their peers" (eric, p. 20) Incorporating multicultural literature will also help to foster a more inclusive reading list that is both gender-balanced and culturally diverse (Greenbaum, 1994, p. 39).

## **Methodology**

This case study utilized qualitative research methods. The qualitative methods include a survey of five preservice English teachers and an interview with seven preservice English teachers at a public university in North Carolina in the first semester of their internship. The online Likert survey (see Appendix A) was based with the following answer selections: *strongly disagree*, *disagree*, *neutral*, *agree*, and *strongly agree*. A script was created for the interview in which the participants were interviewed together in a small group along with the courses methods professor who also served as an advisor for this study. In some cases, follow up questions were asked by the professor and the interviewer. After the interview and surveys were completed, I utilized discourse analysis to identify major themes and patterns and to draw conclusions on the discussions and information presented.

The combination of the literature review, the surveys, and interview resulted in both primary and scholarly secondary sources being used in this study, thus furthering its accuracy and reliability.

## **Results**

An in-person interview was conducted with seven preservice English teachers concerning the censorship of literature within the high school English classroom. Throughout the discussion, we explored questions surrounding the motivations for book banning, how to approach difficult or controversial topics, alternative readings, the pros and cons of incorporating contemporary works into the curriculum, and how to enhance student engagement.

A reoccurring theme throughout the discussion was parents' lack of understanding, both on the books they were trying to ban and the inner workings of the classroom. The word “parent” was used 37 times throughout the interview. One participant said, “I feel like a lot of parents that

have problems with the books haven't read the books themselves and they're going off of descriptions and things that they've heard about the books." In light of this, many of the participants agreed that, although it may be difficult, educating parents would be a good place to start to prevent censorship within the classroom. When asked if they thought it was possible to educate parents about the value of the selected books, one participant said, "You can try," while another said, "It just depends on how willing they are to learn about what their students are reading." A few suggestions on ways to educate parents included putting book descriptions in a packet, sending an email home, having parents sign a slip, and connecting the book to the curriculum standards through a rationale. The participants agreed that introducing the texts to students and parents before they are taught would be beneficial.

The participants also spent time exploring the roles of parents and their motivations to ban. One participant said, "A lot of it just seems like parents trying to shelter their kids from books with real-world experiences." Another participant expanded on this saying, "I think that books that are banned usually generate a lot of difficult conversations and there are parents that don't want their kids to participate in those kinds of conversations in the classroom, or they might be scared of how the teacher is going to approach those types of things."

When asked about the "appropriateness" of a text, the participants agreed that age-appropriate texts are subjective and finding one for everyone would be "tricky because everyone is growing at different levels and maturing at different levels." Upon further discussion, it became evident that it should be up to either the teacher or the student to determine whether or not a text is appropriate. One participant said, "There are times when the student should be able to say, 'I'm not comfortable participating in this lesson' especially if it's something that is triggering." Instead of banning books, the participants agreed that there were other alternatives

that would work better. The most popular one was to supply an alternative reading. One participant said, “I know students get exempt from gym a lot for physical reasons so why would you not let students be exempt for mental reasons in classes like English.”

Many of the preservice teachers also agreed that one of the main reasons why teachers refrain from using more contemporary works is because of a lack of resources. One participant said, “From a teacher’s perspective, it’s a lot easier to find resources and activities on books that are traditionally used than if they were to introduce a new book from a different perspective.” Another participant took this conversation a step further saying, “I think not just for the teachers but for the students also. We’re working on an essay right now for Ethnic American literature and we were talking about this yesterday; because when we were looking at our essay, we could hardly find any resources online to help us with it, so for students also who are struggling to understand and they are looking stuff up to help them, they won’t always find a lot.”

## **Discussion**

The participant preservice teachers were one semester away from starting their in-classroom internships where they would acquire first-hand experience constructing lesson plans, choosing texts, and leading the classroom. Their main concerns around censorship had less to do with their texts being challenged, and more so with defending said texts.

## **Roles**

The participant preservice teachers noticed that oftentimes, the roles for teachers, parents, and students do not align. Acknowledging that each of these groups have a role and finding a way to help those roles work together is an essential step towards preventing book bans. Participants viewed the overarching role of the parent as both child protector and preserver of

traditional ways of thinking and upbringing. They have seen this when parents aim to ban books that address controversial topics, or topics that do not align with their personal beliefs. Parents believe that by sheltering their children from such topics, they are protecting them from the harsh realities that the real world brings. This can oftentimes directly clash with the role of the teacher who aims to expand and challenge the way their students think, especially in a literature class in which different points of view, experiences, and backgrounds are constantly analyzed and explored. One of the standard requirements include, “Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience (*NCTE / IRA standards for the English Language Arts*). From the participants’ perspective, it is the teacher’s job to foster a curious mind that is equipped to understand and address topics that are unfamiliar, challenging, and at times, controversial. The role of the student is to learn and grow. The high school English curriculum is designed so that students acquire a specific set of skills that include, but are not limited to building cross-cultural connections, posing and solving problems, and analyzing multimedia texts (*NCTE framework for 21st Century curriculum and assessment*).

### **Appropriateness**

While it is beneficial to allow parents insight on the inner workings of the classroom, it is ultimately up to the teacher and student to determine what is appropriate. Having specified criteria that definitively states the level of appropriateness a text should uphold is impossible. Each student is growing and maturing at various levels. It is up to the teacher to look at the class as a whole and craft a curriculum that will best accommodate the interests and needs of the class. It is up to the students personally to determine what they are and are not comfortable reading or discussing. To ensure that students are mentally and emotionally prepared to work with texts that

are potentially controversial or triggering, teachers should address any trigger warnings or sensitive areas with students prior to engaging with the text. This gives the students the freedom to determine whether or not they are comfortable participating, and accommodations can be made. Even if a certain text does not align with the student and the parent, other measures can be taken that exclude censorship of the text. Alternative readings are something that should be encouraged. What works for one student may not work for another, and having an alternative reading that still meets the required standards may be just the solution so that no one gets hurt. A student may also be excused from certain discussions or assignments that are triggering or uncomfortable for them. In any instance, the well-being of the student is taken into consideration to ensure they are learning in a secure, inclusive, and healthy environment.

### **Student Engagement**

It is important for high school students to be active members in determining text selections because students are most engaged with texts that they choose and identify with. This requires a diverse selection of texts to accommodate a diverse classroom of students.

Incorporating activities that add a “real life” aspect to the text is a great way to engage students with something they may have an easier time connecting with and understanding. One preservice teacher said, “If I was going to teach the *Handmaid’s Tale* right now, I would make connections to women around the world right now who are being censored online for not wearing hijabs or having their hair in ponytails.” This is the perfect example to illustrate bringing a text to life in a way that students can physically grasp. Students will retain more if they believe that what they learn will benefit them in life beyond the classroom. It also helps to have activities that are more hands-on, such as simulations of events within the text. Such simulations can include acting out the dialogue and recreating scenes. Other text-specific examples included, “A court case for *To*



*Kill a Mockingbird*” or for Shakespeare, “...a simulation on class dynamics between royals.”

These activities would make learning more engaging and fun for the students.

### **Contemporary Texts**

Incorporating more contemporary works is also a great way to engage students; however, many high school English courses have instead recycle the same types of books. (Applebee, 1992). One reason for this is due to teachers’ fear of censorship and desire to select texts from an approved selection. However, another reason is because of a lack of resources to support them. A preservice teacher said, “From a teacher’s perspective, it’s a lot easier to find resources and activities on books that are traditionally used.” Introducing new texts requires a lot more work from the teacher as they will have to create the resources themselves from scratch. Traditional texts have a wide array of resources available which automatically makes them more accessible. This is a limiting factor to not only teachers, but students as well. There are many online resources available that are designed to aid students in their understanding and comprehension of a text. Sometimes, students require extra help identifying certain themes, patterns, or ideas. When those resources are unavailable, especially in time for a paper, students are left struggling to find sources or evidence to support their claims. There is also an issue of funding if a school is unable, or unwilling, to pay for a new set of books.

### **Conclusion**

The perceptions of several preservice teachers reveal that censorship, or the fear of censorship, plays a large role in affecting teachers’ use of texts in the classroom. Based on the information gathered through the literature review, survey, and interview, it is safe to conclude that it is a lack of understanding that drives most parents to ban books. Many parents are not

educated on the books they are advocating to ban, and instead, have been swayed by the influences of other bans across the state and country. Furthermore, there is a disconnect between parental expectations and the reality of what is happening within the classroom. Keeping parents updated on the inner workings of the classroom is helpful with alleviating any suspicions or concerns.

In response to the question concerning how to protect teachers against attempts to censor, the participants determined that the best way to foster understanding is by presenting the rationale upfront before parents are given a chance to gather misinformation regarding its usage in the classroom from outside sources. The rationale should advocate the text's rigor and merit whilst also demonstrating all the ways it adheres to the standards. This can be achieved in several ways; sending emails or information packets home, having the parents and students sign a slip, creating a PowerPoint presentation, etc. To protect teachers, it is best to present any new or potentially controversial texts with the principal and chair prior to adding them to the curriculum, thus also securing a level of protection against backlash and censorship and alleviating any personal liability.

In preparing students for difficult or controversial topics and discussions, giving students the freedom to opt for an alternative reading is a safe way to go. To ensure that students are mentally and emotionally prepared to work with texts that are potentially controversial or triggering, teachers should address any trigger warnings or sensitive areas with students prior to engaging with the text. This gives the students the freedom to determine whether or not they are comfortable participating, and accommodations can be made. Instead of censoring a text, offering an alternative reading should be encouraged. And while it may be easier to stick with previously used books, branching out into more contemporary works is a great way to increase

student engagement. Students are more likely to engage with texts they choose and identify with.

This requires a diverse selection of texts to accommodate a diverse classroom of students.

## References

- Applebee, A. N. (1992). *Stability and Change in the High-School Canon*. *The English Journal*, 81(5), 27–32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/819891>
- Barrios, A., & Kohler, K. (2020). *Unpacking Cultural Barriers in the Secondary Classroom Using Multicultural Literature*. Texas Association for Literacy Education. Retrieved January 4, 2022, from <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1286843.pdf>
- Bruder, C. R. (1994). *The Trickle-Up Effect of Censorship in the High School Classroom and Library*. *CEA Critic*, 56(2), 1–7. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44377116>
- Coleman, D., & Pimentel, S. (2012, April 12). *Revised Publishers Criteria for the Common Core State Standards in English Language Arts and Literacy, Grades 3-12*. Retrieved January 4, 2022, from [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Publishers\\_Criteria\\_for\\_3-12.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Publishers_Criteria_for_3-12.pdf)
- Common Core State Standards. (n.d.). *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*. Retrieved January 4, 2022, from [http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix\\_A.pdf](http://www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_A.pdf)
- Greenbaum, V. (1994). *Expanding the Canon: Shaping Inclusive Reading Lists*. *The English Journal*, 83(8), 36–39. <https://doi.org/10.2307/820331>
- Li, S. C. (2015). *Advancing Multicultural Education: New Historicism in the High School English Classroom*. *The High School Journal*, 99(1), 4–26. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44075330>
- NCTE / IRA standards for the English Language Arts. NCTE. (2017, October 17). Retrieved November 22, 2022, from <https://ncte.org/resources/standards/ncte-ira-standards-for-the-english-language-arts/>

*NCTE framework for 21st Century curriculum and assessment.* (2013, February). Retrieved

November 22, 2022, from

[https://cdn.ncte.org/nctefiles/resources/positions/framework\\_21stcent\\_curr\\_assessment.pdf](https://cdn.ncte.org/nctefiles/resources/positions/framework_21stcent_curr_assessment.pdf)

# Appendix A

## Preservice Teacher Likert Survey

### Employee Censorship Survey

Select the answer choice that best applies.

[Sign in to Google](#) to save your progress.  
[Learn more](#)

Parents should be allowed to determine which books schools can use.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

The fear of having books challenged by parents has affected my classroom text selections.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

I am prepared to justify my classroom text selections.

- Strongly Disagree

I am prepared to justify my classroom text selections.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

My classroom text selection reflects the diversity of students in my classroom.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

I have incorporated multicultural and culturally responsive texts into my curriculum.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

The high school English canon should be revised.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

I am comfortable addressing controversial topics with students.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Submit

Clear form