

Why should children read banned books?

By Sigy George

Snapshot

Sigy George, a high school librarian from India, explores some of the complex history, and reasoning, behind book banning and outlines her views as to why diverse books should be read by young people. George considers many examples and her own experiences and outlines various reasons for providing access to problematic texts.

Introduction

The power of the written word is evident. It is suppressed whenever it threatens the status quo or diverts from the accepted norm. Banning books, censorship of the written word, and burning books are a part of our history. If we turn back pages of history, books have been banned or censored whenever they are considered inappropriate or different from the norms of society. These can range from sexual, religious, racial, immoral, violent, or political themes. Governments and school authorities can pull them out from public and school libraries; sometimes, they prohibit printing.

The history of book burning dates to the Huang dynasty in China (Chan,1972). The emperor burned all the books of the past that questioned or compared his reign with the past rulers. He wanted to erase history, but his act became part of Chinese history. The history of book burning continues from Julius Caesar in Egypt burning down the great Library of Alexandria to Bhaktiyar Khilji destroying the Nalanda University and its library in India He was angry that an Indian scholar and teacher could cure illness which his scholar failed to do. So, he destroyed the roots of Buddhism and Ayurveda. Khilji set fire to the great library of Nalanda and burned around 9 million manuscripts of valuable information and knowledge (Mukherjee, 2023). Books that challenge or make people uncomfortable might be labeled and banned for several reasons. Books that tend to be on topics considered taboo or forbidden are often banned sooner than other books.

What is surprising is that even today, in the 21st century, books are banned. Man has made colossal progress in science and technology. Nevertheless, the government and school authorities ban books when they do not conform to conventional thoughts. The question arises why do people ban books? There is no fixed answer as it varies from country to country. Most often, it is because of religious, moral, or political reasons. A book ban can be for even a single scene, character, or chapter that offends the religious, moral, or political view.

At the same time, parents and government authorities ban books in school libraries in countries like China, U.S, Bangladesh, Egypt, India, among others to allow censorship of thoughts and curtail education. For example: After Covid, schools in China started to remove books that were deemed incorrect according to the political ideology of the Chinese President Xi Jinping. This

move was done to instill patriotism in the students (Wu, Huizhong, 2020). In these countries the role of librarians is often restricted to a mere gatekeeper with little or no role in collection development. This is because the people in power feel the need to guard the children. They wish to protect them from content or themes which are sexual, provocative, include cursing, violence, talk about mental disorders, display morally offensive behavior, or contain racially insensitive language. It needs to be noted here though that such content is readily available and ever present in the lives of children through the different forms of media they are exposed to. It is thus crucial to raise well-informed young people.

When young people, under the thoughtful guidance of adults, are given a chance to choose for themselves what to read, something good happens. They become better and better at making their own wise decisions and choices. (Dell, Pamela. 2010)

Banning books from schools and libraries does not render them out of business. Instead, it fuels the curiosity among students and a burning desire to read the forbidden. As parents and educators, we often wrestle with thoughts about the corrupting effects of books. We want to protect children from the harsh realities of life. So, we attempt to create a utopia away from the complicated web of real life. This can lead to censoring of their critical thinking skills due to our unexplained fears. This fear generates an atmosphere of intolerance, prejudice, fanaticism, narrow-mindedness, discrimination, and lack of sympathy among children.

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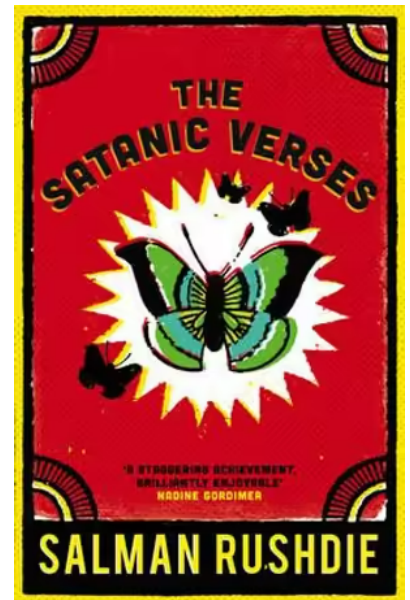
Banning books from the library hinders the child's holistic growth and development. It leads to a sheltered growth that lacks space for understanding and acceptance of anything beyond the standard norms. Books cultivate a growth mindset and offer a glimpse of the world far beyond their everyday lives. Banning books creates a void in experiences that cannot be met by daily life. (George, 2022)

What is the difference between a challenge and ban?

The difference between a banned book and a challenged book might miss the eyes of people in general. Yet a discerning reader will see the threat and danger looming in the difference between the two. A *challenged* book has been restricted in libraries due to opposition from a person or group of people citing reasons like profanity, sexual innuendo, violence, etc. The challenged book remains in circulation unless banned.

A *banned book* is a book that has been removed from public and school libraries due to a challenge or united protest. When a book is banned, it does not mean it is not available in bookshops or

online. It just means the book is not accessible in the public or school library. Banning books from public and school libraries makes it difficult for young children and teenagers to access these books since many do not have the financial resources to support buying their books. Thus, a book ban also censors freedom of speech and thoughts. A ban sometimes stays so long that the book goes out of print rendering it inaccessible to readers forever. For example: *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie. The book has been banned for so long that it's no longer printed in India, neither is its import allowed to date. The book claims to hurt Islam through its depiction of the religion and the people. Bans on books marginalize children and reduces their exposure and understanding of the diverse issues of gender identity, gender sensitivity, sexual orientation, mental disorders, disabilities, etc.



Why should children read banned books?

The question then arises, why should children banned books ? Here is why:

- **Conversation Starter:** Reading a banned or challenged book is often a learning experience for students. These books give rise to questions, thoughts, and opinions, which start a conversation when they think about the content, its relevance and why the society, or group, saw fit to ban the book. Such books open debates which help clear away the clouds of doubt, bigotry, discrimination, and social stigmas. It creates a conducive atmosphere for discussion and understanding topics that might otherwise brush under the carpet or hushed into silence. For example, ***Speak* by Laurie Halse Andersen (Collegian, 2018)**. The book has been banned and restricted in schools in Florida and Missouri in the U.S. because some thought that it had a particular political viewpoint and seemed to be biased against male students. The novel speaks about rape, trauma, and depression. Rape is a sensitive topic and needs to be dealt with delicately. Keeping children away from such issues makes them insensate or unfeeling toward the trauma. Reading the book exposes students to empathy and creates awareness about the topic. Discussions around the book can help students overcome shame or embarrassment in instances of sexual assault or attack.
- **Banned books have the finest stories:** Most banned books typically bring to light a theme or notion that upsets society, or a group, for being different from theirs. For example: ***Lajja* by Taslima Nasrin** was banned in India and Bangladesh (Marshall libraries). The book tells the story of struggle of a patriotic Bangladeshi

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Hindu family in a Muslim community. The book faced much hate and wrath, and a fatwa was issued against Taslima banishing her from Bangladesh. Such books have the courage to show to society the real colors of the societal fabric which people in power try to hide. It makes the book a fantastic read. These books can spellbind readers not just with their language and words but also with the treatment of the content. The author employs devices that capture the topic's essence, leaving the reader wanting more. These books present deep analysis of an issue through a fictional story, making reading accessible and detailed. Such texts offer reality without adding layers to the actual content.

- **Banned books present true stories:** Many times, books are banned because they contain real-life stories of survivors of war, sexual abuse, trauma, drug abuse, child trafficking, etc. Thus, keeping children away from such books hinders their understanding and perception to only their immediate experiences. Not everyone experiences events mentioned in books. These books allow knowledge of the hardships and struggles of the characters. At the same time, they stand as excellent examples of survival and guts in the face of adversity. Reading such true stories develops emotional maturity and emotional intelligence in children. Examples: ***Broken* by Shy Keenan, *Cry Silent Tears* by Joe Peters and *A Stolen Life* by Jaycee Duggard.** These books are trauma survival memoirs that deal with a dysfunctional family, pedophile step-father, childhood abuse, drugs, alcohol, smoking, offensive language, sexual assault, rape, etc. Trying to protect children from such harsh realities of life creates a void in them when faced with such a situation for real. They are caught unaware with no survival skills. As much as we want to shelter our children from such things, we cannot deny reality. These are real-life incidences of assault and survival. The strength of the story can help inspire children, build empathy and bring a change in society.
- **Highlights the sensitive issues:** It has been observed in some schools in India that even though we have advanced as a society, we still fear social stigmas and still shun societal taboos. Due to this, parents dread that their children might read books about marginalized groups like LGBTQI and transgender people. This anxiety and embarrassment is due to lack of exposure, which breeds small-mindedness and rigid thinking. So instead of breaking barriers, this limited mindset causes a lack of empathy, discrimination, insensitivity, and prejudices that weaken society's fabric. Examples: ***I am Jazz* by Jessica Herthel, *Melissa* by Alex Gino.**



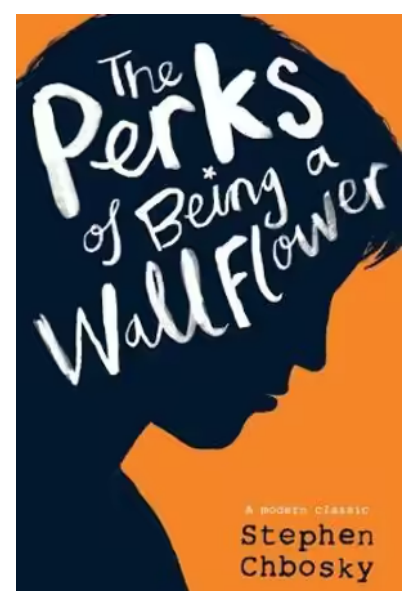
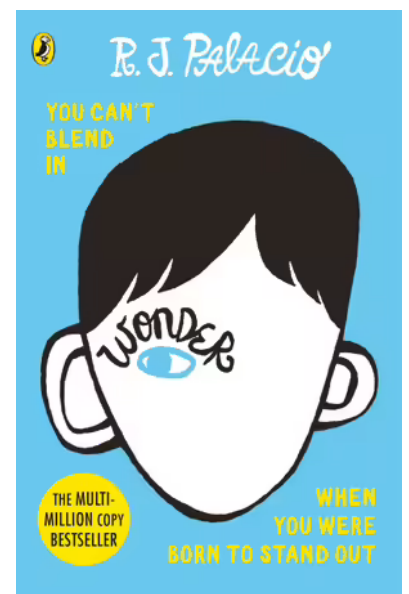
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- Helps readers understand different cultures:** Many banned books contain content that offers an understanding of different cultures. At the same time, it also provides diverse thoughts politically, socially, culturally, economically, ideologically, etc. Reading such a book unlocks a child's mind to understanding diversity, thereby developing empathy, compassion, and kindness. Banning books like *Persepolis* by **Marjane Satrapi** and *Maus* by **Art Spiegelman** limits a child's perception and deep understanding of world tragedies like the Holocaust or what it means to experience the Islamic Revolution in Iran. *The Diary of Anne Frank* is part of the curriculum in many countries, so such books should also be allowed in libraries, *The Diary of Anne Frank* is used as a supplementary text in several schools across India. At the same time *Persepolis* and *Maus* are banned for being too graphic in representation of violence and torture. Genocide is an unavoidable part of world history. Educating and informing children about it would help create a society that can prevent such horrors from repeating.

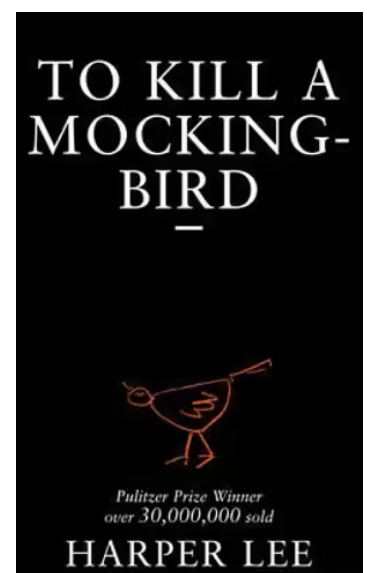
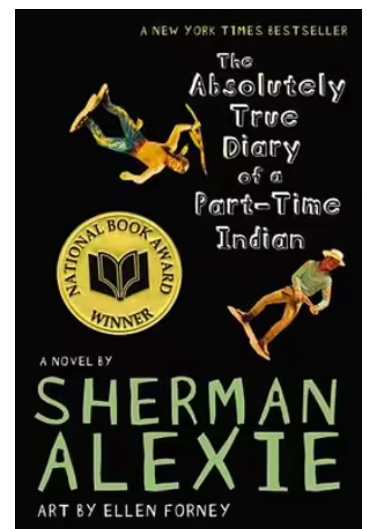
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- Banned books are mirrors and windows to the world:** Banned books act as windows to the world as they offer perspectives and experiences different from our own. Books act as a mirror for the students when he/she shares similar experience as that of the characters of the book (Bishop, 2015). For example: A student of mine was grieving after the death of her father. I gave her *Tuesdays with Morrie* to read. She handled the grief better after reading the book and felt better equipped to deal with the pain. Books act as a mirror as children find glimpses of themselves and can relate to persons or situations. We see children with disabilities and special needs in schools and our society. While growing up, children grow through a myriad of emotions they cannot explain or share while growing up. Books help them get talking as often they find answers to their questions or, at best, a friend who has experienced the same situation. These books help develop emotional intelligence making the children sensitive, considerate, and accepting of those different than them (though they are not that different from us). Shielding children from reality makes them insensitive and disrespectful regarding real-life situations—Eg: *Wonder* by **R J Palacio** and *The Perks of being a Wallflower* by **Stephen Chbosky**. These books have been banned across several schools in the U.S., Egypt, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India for containing



texts detailing sexual abuse, teenage sex, rape, abortion, drugs, etc. Parents felt alarmed by the content where mention of teenage sex, rape, masturbation is present. Removing such books and trying to protect young minds from the harsh realities only hampers the critical thinking and decision making of children and young adults. Throughout history there is evidence of literature being banned for controversial reasons. But it is often these banned books that make us think and ponder.

- **Shared Experiences:** Banning books means that the experiences and situations mentioned in the books are singular and hence void. The banned books contain a theme, a scene, or dialogues that trigger society's monitors to call for a ban. Parents, school authorities, religious groups may ban a book in order to assert and impose their political, religious, or generational ideologies. One needs to look closer and see that concealed under the pretext of a concerned parent is the perpetuation of old-world values. (Palmer, Meghan. 2015). For example: ***Eleanor and Park* by Rainbow Rowell.** ***Eleanor & Park*** is a book about the lives of two sixteen-year-olds–Eleanor and Park–living in Omaha, Nebraska, in the 1980s. Even though a best seller, this book has been banned in some schools for being 'dangerously obscene' (Grafton, Emme., 2013). Even though the book addresses topics like bullying, and abusive parent-child relationships, the book is being pushed to be removed from bookshelves in school in Oregon, Minnesota in the US and in some schools in India as well. What is surprising is to see names like ***The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, *Looking for Alaska* by John Green, and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.** These books reflect society and its evils which, even though hidden, do exist. Banning these books for containing offensive language, sexually explicit material, and homosexuality seems like a means to erase reality and push such truth into isolation. Kite Runner is banned in Afghanistan fearing that it can incite violence. Similar reason have been cited by school libraries in Pakistan and Bangladesh as well. Not all schools are able to present a world to readers where such hatred and angst can be understood.
- **Banned books teach us about history:** One of the most shocking book bans is the book ***To Kill A Mocking Bird* by Harper Lee** (Marshall Libraries). It has been challenged and banned in some schools in the United States and mainland China for 'offensive language' and 'racism'(scmp,2012). This ignores the fact that it depicts life in Alabama around 1936. It represents an attitude that still plagues humanity even after so many years. Unfortunately, the narrow outlook that those who are different are lesser than us is still around. Children



need these books to read and understand that it is wrong. Similarly, books by Toni Morrison have been voted to be removed due to mention of rape, sexual assault, black slavery, and apartheid. Removing these books means restricting freedom of speech and taking away parts of history because it offends some people. It hampers the critical and creative thinking of children. Books challenge thoughts and opinions while educating about the unknown.

- **Increases Emotional Quotient:** Books that are challenged or banned most often have the power to create emotionally aware and sensitive children. For example: ***Charlotte's Web* by E.B White** was banned in Kansas (US) and in West Yorkshire (England). It was banned as talking animals was seen as sinful, and the pig was seen as an insult to Muslim students, and the death of the spider was an event too harsh for children. What parents missed were the beautiful lessons of humility, friendship, loyalty, and how the power of words can change lives. Similarly, popular young adult books like ***Eleven Minutes* by Paulo Coelho, *All the bright places* by Jennifer Niven, *13 Reasons why* by Jay Asher & *Looking for Alaska* by John Green** have been banned in several schools in India, Pakistan, and United States for sexual content, homosexuality, teenage suicide, profanity, mental illness, etc. Children might buy them from bookshops or borrow from friends, but their presence in a school library is offensive and odious to the parents. These books show the reality of young lives around the world and the issues they suffer from. Banning books is detrimental, one must consider the the effect on the lives and consciousness of the students. The books commonly banned are labeled 'obscene' or 'inappropriate' by the parents in reputed schools in India, US, Pakistan, etc. Nevertheless, these very books truthfully and honestly depict the teenage life experience as it is today.

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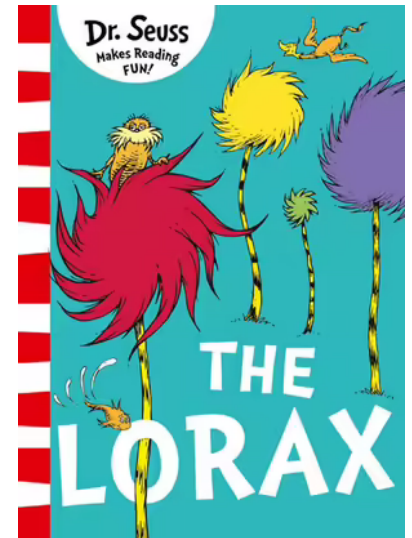
A substantial generational divide creates a gap in discernment regarding students' daily issues and realities. Today's generation is growing up with unique problems arising from advancement and exposure. They face issues like gender identity, sexuality, relationship problems, drugs, violence, family problems, etc. Therefore, we must not shove these issues aside and give them due attention to help the students. Grafton states:

By acknowledging the problems, [we're] also acknowledging the kids dealing with them. These parents think that they are protecting their precious children. It turns out they are doing precisely the opposite. Ignoring a kid's reality does not make it go away. It just means the kid gets to suffer alone." (2013)

Teenagers are misunderstood and frowned upon for speaking up or even having a voice. They find solace in these books as they are the only ones affirming that, yes, you are okay (Green, 2007). Banning them does not mean that the truth can hide. Reading such books helps the students become alert and emotionally aware of triggers that can affect one's psyche and observe their friends who might need help. It increases their social & emotional quotient helping them develop

into emotionally mature and conscious citizens. They become self-aware and responsible for decision-making.

- **Banned books represent society: *Lorax* by Dr. Seuss** was banned in schools in California in 1989 for showing the logging industry in a bad light and for being anti-capitalist. The powerful message of this book is to respect nature and our natural resources. The book teaches us to fight for mother nature and to protect her, not destroy her. Acclaimed books like *To Kill a Mocking Bird* and *The Catcher in the Rye* were banned and labeled controversial for their depiction of racial inequality and injustice, sexuality and teenage angst. Similarly, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker was banned in China, Pakistan, Bangladesh and some schools in India for 'religious objections, homosexuality, violence, African history, rape, incest, drug abuse, explicit language, and sexual scenes' (Joyce, I. 2019). An accurate representation of black history, banning this book is an attempt to silence or conceal the evils that once plagued society and may still exist in certain pockets of society.



Personal perspective

It is not uncommon for books to be banned or challenged in schools and libraries in India, as well as in other countries around the world. This happens for a variety of reasons, including concerns about inappropriate content, cultural sensitivity, or the promotion of controversial ideas. In India, The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) is responsible for developing the curriculum and educational materials used in schools. The NCERT has a list of recommended books for schools, but it is up to individual schools to decide which books to include in their libraries. As a result, there are variations in the books that are available at different schools.

Challenges to books can come from various sources, including parents, community members, or school officials. When a book is challenged, it is reviewed by a committee or other group to determine whether it should be banned or allowed to remain in the library. Factors that may be considered in this review process include the age appropriateness of the content, the educational value of the book, and any potential negative effects the book may have on students.

It is important for school libraries to have policies in place for handling challenges to books, and to ensure that decisions about what books are included in the collection are based on sound educational and intellectual freedom principles.

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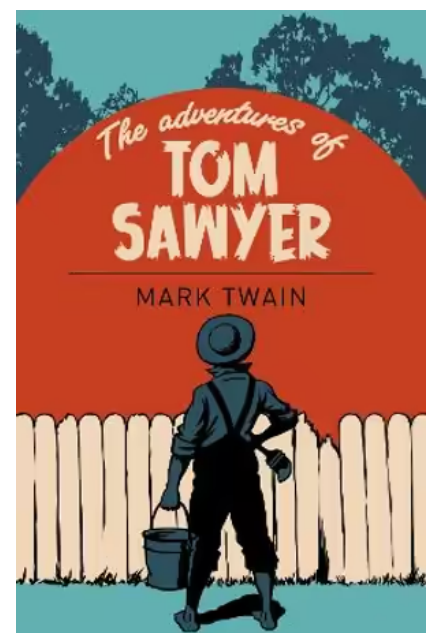
While the freedom to read is an important principle, it is also important to recognize that schools and libraries have the right to make decisions about what materials they make available to students.

There are several reasons why books may be banned in Indian school libraries, including but not limited to:

1. **Obscene or inappropriate content:** Books that contain explicit sexual or violent content may be banned in schools due to their inappropriate nature for a younger audience.
2. **Religious or cultural sensitivity:** Books that portray certain religions or cultures in a negative light, or that may be considered offensive to certain groups, may be banned in schools to avoid causing offense or conflict.
3. **Political sensitivity:** Books that discuss sensitive political issues or that may be considered critical of the government or certain political figures may be banned in schools to avoid controversy or conflict.
4. **Quality or accuracy:** Books that are poorly written or that contain factual errors may be banned in schools to ensure that students have access to accurate and reliable information.

It is important to note that book bans are not always permanent and may be challenged or overturned by individuals or organizations who believe that the ban is unjustified. Additionally, schools and libraries may have processes in place for reviewing and reconsidering banned books.

I have worked as a librarian in schools in Delhi across Education Boards for more than ten years. I have had my share of book challenges and the removal of books from the bookshelves. Even though in Indian schools book bans are not imposed, there are several instances of books being challenged and eventually removed from the library. My first experience of a parent challenging a book was ***Adventures of Tom Sawyer***. During the Open House, a parent of grade eight approached me and said I needed to be better at my job. Taken aback, I asked her the reason behind her words. She was displeased with her son reading Tom Sawyer. The reason cited seemed not only inane but also funny. She claimed that the book was inappropriate for the age since it inspires children to run away from home, mentions girlfriend-boyfriend relationships in teenage, violence, murder, and so on. Exasperated, I tried to reason with the parent that it is a classic and should be read in the context of when it was written and not in tune with the present times. I could not convince the parent, and the student did not borrow books from the library as the parent restricted him. After that, I have faced other similar parents asking to remove books they found unsuitable. These included, ***Not without my daughter* by Betty Mahmoody**,



***The Bluest Eye & Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, and books by Chetan Bhagat.**

Due to a lack of a proper book selection procedure and a book selection committee to support acquisition choices, I have had to self-censor books and restrict reading choices. Schools in India lack policies or manuals that clearly list out the challenged book process. There are no forms or measures in place to tackle these sticky situations. Librarians are on their own to deal with them and often face apathy at the hands of the authorities as they lack any understanding of the issue. It is mainly for fear of controversy and eventual confrontation with parents and higher authorities that librarians remove the books (Freedman & Johnson, 2000, p. 357). Students should have the freedom to read and discuss different aspects of books. It will broaden their knowledge. While attempting to make decisions that will improve the pupils' capacity to learn, my professional judgment as a librarian is called into doubt. Many of the choices are questioned by how others (parents) feel about an unpopular or contentious notion or their desire to hold fast to preconceived notions. Unfortunately, censoring based on personal sensitivities and worries limits the knowledge given to pupils far too often. Our school curriculum would only include the least controversial subjects if we strictly adhered to these desires while censoring materials. It would likely be the least pertinent information. It would result in students' worries scarcely being addressed, their curiosity unsatisfied, and they would not be adequately prepared for adult life.

Conclusion

Book bans need to be considered as concealing vital information which is critical to developing a conscientious citizen and a well-rounded worldview. (Agee, 1994; Church, 1997; Marriott, 2013; Noll, 1999). There is no evidence that shows that reading banned books has any unwanted effect on the behavior or psychological and emotional well-being of students (Ferguson, C. J. 2014).

Restricting/limiting books limits children to creating a very closed personality due to the sheltered life they lead. They may not be able to survive or maintain a balance when faced with difficult real-life situations. The world we live in today is not a trouble-free place. It is a potpourri of thoughts, ideas, viewpoints, ideologies, religious practices, and beliefs. These banned books reflect the world we live in. It is distressing that some do not want children to be exposed to the diversity in

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society. So, they challenge and ban books that do not fit into what they see as acceptable. Instead, it should be the need of the hour to accept diversity. For children to grow and develop holistically, intellectually, and democratically, they must read books discussing the truth some adults want to keep hidden. Erasing these reading experiences and isolating student choices could create a generation lost without examples to learn from, or a history to know, or to be avoided.

[Common Sense Media has a good list of books on this topic.](#)

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