

Making a Case for Using Challenged and Banned Young Adult Novels in the High School
Classroom: Why it Matters and How to Begin

by

Madison Caroline Howell

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Approved by:

Elaine O'Quinn, Ph.D., Thesis Director

Gayle Turner, Ph.D., Second Reader

Jefford Vahlbusch, Ph.D., Dean, The Honors College

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Abstract

Censorship is an ever-prevalent issue found within the modern school system. It affects students, teachers, parents, other faculty members, and the curriculum as a whole. The English classroom specifically is most frequently targeted by would-be censors due to its close relationship with both canonical and more modern texts. In their attempt to prevent themselves from being the recipients of such backlash, many teachers opt-out of the use of certain texts altogether. This deprives the students of both engaging content and lessons to which they could personally relate. When content is altered or excised from the curriculum, students are not even aware that they are missing out on important knowledge regarding underrepresented cultures and perspectives on societal issues. This thesis serves as an exploration of the reasons why novels are challenged and banned and a defense of their usage in the classroom. Three specific young adult novels that have been frequently challenged are analyzed through the specific reasons they have been challenged. Additionally, these analyses include lesson plans which relate to students' interests, concerns, and developmental situations and justify the texts' usage in the classroom.

Introduction

Controversial topics, especially in the times in which we live, are almost unavoidable in conversation. In an age where information is widely spread and readily available, we are able to learn about almost anything with the click of a button. This is partially why so many people seem much more aware of the issues going on around us. With this knowledge, and often only partial or biased knowledge, however, comes inevitable conflict, especially when it comes to literary texts for younger readers. Literature is a medium that is heavily consumed by the public and is essentially limitless in the possibilities it offers readers. Diverse literature is currently encouraged in many schools, bringing more stories that teenagers might enjoy into the curriculum as opposed to relying solely on the plots of canonical texts. However, many of these more contemporary stories contain or discuss controversial topics and come under fire when they are used or referenced in the classroom. Many adults who don't agree with the instruction of contemporary literature written for adolescents simply ask that their child have an alternative in the class, but some attempt to have the texts in question banned altogether.

The reality is that teachers can be faced with the issue of discussing controversial topics in the classroom whether it's through the books students read or through other mediums, such as current events, an excerpt that is used to make a point, or simply in light of an issue brought up during an in-class discussion. Due to the nature of an English Language Arts classroom, controversial topics are especially prevalent. Books, especially young adult books, address numerous issues and controversial topics on a frequent basis, sometimes covering a multitude of things which concern young readers. Teachers must decide whether they want to address these issues and topics and, if so, how they will go about doing so. The issue of censorship over controversial topics is nothing new, as the English classroom has

always been a point of tension with works such as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Catcher in the Rye*, and *The Scarlet Letter* to name a few. Many teachers agonize over how to address the topics of race, sex, and religion found in these texts while others simply shy away from discussing them in depth or even at all. This can be due to of a lack of understanding of the issue, especially in situations pertaining to homosexuality, gender identity, race relations, or political arguments, and some teachers simply do not want to focus on certain topics in canonical literature, such as alcoholism in *The Great Gatsby*, adultery in *The Scarlet Letter*, or suicide in *Romeo and Juliet*.

However, the most prominent fear that teachers have of addressing controversial topics is the backlash that may come from doing so. In some cases, parents, other teachers, community members, and sometimes outside groups will condemn material deemed by them to be inappropriate in the classroom and may even blame the teacher for facilitating the distribution of the material which they found offensive. This fear, combined with the fear that the teacher may be chastised by the administration as well as the parents, can be seriously restricting. Though some teachers do not fear the possible consequences of presenting and discussing controversial information, many seem to view it as too severe of a risk to make the attempt in the first place. The kinds of texts in question can extend from class reading assignments and novels integrated into the curriculum to novels that simply exist in the classroom library or are suggested by the teacher for independent reading.

The act of challenging and then attempting to ban books restricts the information that teenagers have access to and only serves to silence important stories, especially those of minority groups and those of individual life experiences. Many books that are challenged tell stories from the perspectives of different races, sexualities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and

other walks of life. Restricting information in this way does not, however, prevent students from learning about the subjects which interest them, as they will most likely try to explore it through other channels. Classroom censoring simply prevents discussion of a topic in a controlled and safe environment where they are already expected to ask questions and broaden their understanding of the world in which they live. The decision to keep certain books out of the hands of young readers ultimately deprives them of important and accurate information that could improve their knowledge of other cultures and life experiences. Preventing students from accessing this kind of knowledge ultimately stifles both their intellectual and cultural growth as members of society, prevents them from becoming critical thinkers, and silences and stifles members of certain communities and lifestyles who are affected by the questioning of the validity of the use of controversial material.

Overall, the idea of withholding and forbidding knowledge that a single individual or organization deems “inappropriate” in an environment that is specifically designed to teach others to think critically and develop empathy seems counterintuitive at best and brazenly destructive at worst. Though educators teach based on a set of predetermined standards that define what each grade level should be learning, these standards should not make the content of controversial texts any less important or inappropriate. Banning books in schools goes against everything for which a democratic education system is meant to stand. Specifically, the NC State Board of Education’s mission statement states that “every public school student will graduate ready for post-secondary education and work, prepared to be a globally engaged and productive citizen through access to needed resources and rigor” (NC State Board of Education). If this is the case, how can it be expected that students be “globally engaged” and “productive” if schools continuously censor and hide information that

addresses global, which by nature of the term must include local, and societal issues? The classroom, a moderated environment with a professional who can help explore the student's probing questions, would arguably be the best suited location for students to discuss a variety of relevant issues and topics.

Though some subjects, such as prejudice, violence, or diverse lifestyles, may be difficult to discuss with a class, preparing discussion topics, not shying away from student questions, and having confidence in oneself as a facilitator while paying active attention to the topic of conversation at hand can make for a beneficial learning experience and discussion for all parties involved. Again, canonical texts have always addressed many of the contemporary topics of concern. *Night* contains many instances of violence, *To Kill A Mockingbird* struggles with prejudices, and Shakespeare's works studied in school frequently contain sex, violence, and suicide. Books are meant to be read and to foster discussion, whether it be about the positive or negative responses to the material. Even if the reader thinks a book misrepresents a topic or presents a view that is generally disagreed with, it allows for discussion on the topic in general and a determination of how that topic might be better addressed in future works that tackle the same subject. The challengers of controversial texts often tend to be misinformed, taking excerpts of material that support their argument out of context without considering its connection to the rest of the text. Many of these challenges are voiced without reading the text in its entirety. Given how valuable a resource some contemporary works of young adult literature can be, especially to students trying to make sense of the world, it is disheartening to have those who simply do not understand a text, are not willing to work to understand it, or openly disagree with the material want to keep it from others simply because they deem it offensive in one way or another.

Though people do have the right to read or refuse to read whatever they want, this should not extend to making a decision for others. Everyone should be given the chance to come to their own conclusions about stories that deal with more difficult topics without being told what they are and are not allowed to consume. Many of these stories in question can be important in educating others and giving voices to those who don't typically have a platform. They can also be used as effective educational tools that can engage students by relating to their personal lives and views. Through challenged texts, educators can create valuable learning experiences that educate students on current issues that are relevant to their daily lives. In what follows, I intend to focus on three books that have been frequently challenged or banned the most for the common reasons listed by the American Library Association. These novels are *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, and *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. I will explain certain instances in which these three texts have been challenged or banned, the reasoning behind the challenge, and why the perceived "inappropriate" aspects of these novels remain important not only to the themes, messages, and overall plots of the stories but also to the students to read them. Additionally, I will create a lesson plan for each novel that addresses how the texts can be used to teach students effectively by relating the text to the beliefs and life experiences of the students. Through an exploration of the themes of each the novel and corresponding lesson plans, I will outline the importance of potentially controversial topics in literature and the effect these stories might have on those who read them.

Chapter 1: Challenged and Banned Books

Censorship is not a recent development. Ever since humans were first able to transcribe thoughts, ideas, and stories into a written format there have been those who deem certain works to be unfit for others to read and have looked to have them banned or destroyed. According to First Amendment advocate Robert P. Doyle,

“Censorship is nothing new; it has always been with us. The urge to censor is primordial. The instinct isn’t limited just to those in positions of power who are driven to control access to information. The truth is, almost everyone wants to censor something at some point in time. Adults often censor to protect children, and children sometimes to protect their parents. If you believe something to be true, you may have the impulse to suppress or censor expression to the contrary, finding it to be inaccurate or harmful.” (Doyle 17).

Censorship, as a general definition, is the suppression of ideas, opinions, and information by an outside source that finds such things objectionable or dangerous in some manner, especially when used in schools. These outside sources can be religious organizations, parents, community members, members of a school board, governments, and many others. Generally, most people who do not agree with schools reading certain texts will only restrict their own children from viewing them, but some want to ensure that they are not available to anyone, or at least to those under the age of 18. According to the American Library Association, in 2018 alone there were 347 challenges of materials in libraries, schools, and universities (americanlibrariesmagazine.org). This number excludes the many works and instances of challenges that are not advertised through the press or other means. A challenge is an attempt to remove objectionable material from a certain space or to restrict it in some way. Once a challenge is made, the text in question becomes a challenged book. A

book is banned when the materials themselves are removed after a decision has been made so the materials are no longer available in a certain space.

There is a lengthy process for banning a book in schools. Firstly, once a text is targeted as being somehow objectionable, it becomes a challenged book. Restrictions can range from requiring a written note from a parent to barring children under a certain age from gaining access. Challenged texts are those that have been objected to and are in the process of being reviewed but have not been banned yet. During this process, each side of the argument has a chance to argue for or against the books and give their reasoning for it being sustained or banned. This is then turned over to a higher authority, such as a school board or, in some cases, a judge, to pass down a final verdict. If this challenge is won by the challenger, the work would then be banned in the school.

In most instances, books are challenged in schools because a parent or guardian or an outside group sees the content as objectionable in some manner. However, rather than restricting a particular child or children from reading the material, these parents sometimes object to the material being available to anyone.

“Censors try to use the power of the state to impose their view of what is truthful and appropriate, or offensive and objectionable, on everyone else. They pressure public institutions, like schools and public libraries, to suppress and remove from access information they judge inappropriate or dangerous, especially for children, so that no one else has the chance to read or view the material and make up his or her own mind about it. The censor sometimes wants to prejudge materials for everyone, particularly everyone else’s children as well as their own.” (Kravitz 1).

There is a distinct difference, however, between parents and guardians who object to children

under their care reading certain material, which they are entitled to do as guardians, and those who decide that the material that they personally object to should not be available to anyone under any circumstances. Parents typically only care about their children, saving their objections for one-on-one conversations with teachers where the parent or guardian may request an alternate text. It is most commonly outside groups that want to restrict everyone from reading a certain text as a part of a larger agenda rather than just personal values.

Most censors who seek to ban certain materials in schools do so because of the perceived belief that they are protecting children from harm in some way, mainly by forbidding them from accessing certain objectionable or “dangerous” materials. Others, mostly those from outside groups and organizations, have an agenda that includes banning materials deemed objectionable in schools. An example can be noted in how some parents see J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series as indoctrination to witchcraft and, therefore, dangerous. This mentality can extend even into canonical texts by parents who have issues with books such as *To Kill A Mockingbird* due to the profanity and racial slurs throughout the text. Nancy Kravitz describes the personality of most censors in *Censorship and the School Library Media Center*:

All censors have several traits in common. They usually have a strong desire to control what others read, see, and think. They have a firm belief that only they have the right values and mores. Many censors do not read the entire book – they take selected words or passages out of context. Then they judge the book as bad or good based on the tone, general theme, overall effect, and implied ideas, or by these few specific passages rather than the book as a whole. They rarely listen to others, especially students, nor do they seem to respect other opinions or listen to what others

think and feel about a particular book. They cannot imagine those whose tastes and ideas may be different from their own. They believe it is their duty to protect young people who might not recognize dangerous messages in books. Censors want to give blueprints to writers to follow that include designs for writing that is safe and secure. They do not always think that their own morals need protection, but they do feel compelled to save others, especially young people, from corrupting and harmful influences. Censors try to stop what they consider is not in the public interest and proclaim or maintain what they consider *is* in the public interest (Kravitz 5-6).

In most cases regarding challenged books, both sides of the argument believe that they are in the right. Both believe they are upholding rights as outlined in the Constitution through free speech and, therefore, by law. In the cases of parents who bring up concerns over certain texts, they also are not always trying to restrict the learning of students, but rather trying to protect them from harm.

Many families have strict beliefs and values to which they adhere, and these texts can sometimes directly challenge or contradict them. Whether they be religious, moral, or political, some may believe the offensive material is actively harming children in some way. This is most commonly seen in texts which are challenged due to the fact that they contain cursing, violence, sexual references, or offensive behavior. Censors may believe these aspects will negatively impact those who read them. Children can be exceptionally impressionable, especially those attempting to discover their sense of self and place in the world. They look to outside sources in order to determine who they are as people and, in some cases, can find parts of themselves in these texts. Whether or not this is positive can be debated and is strong reasoning for why some censors attempt to ban material. Another, seen

frequently with canonical texts, is the inclusion of insensitive material which is deemed politically incorrect in our current day and age. Many of these texts include material which was commonly accepted in the time in which it was published but is now considered offensive and unsavory for young readers to see. In many cases, texts are banned due to the material seeming too advanced, disturbing, or confusing to certain ages and should be held off until students are older and better able to comprehend them. This largely extends to material deemed controversial or serious in nature. Some texts do require a more advanced level of thinking in order to truly absorb and understand the situations and all sides of an issue presented to them. Though these are sound arguments, this does not excuse banning material for all students in a school or school district, as this both encompasses a large age range as well as prevents students from learning about certain topics and issues relevant to their lives. Individuals can determine what they can and cannot read but should not have any say in the choices of a group solely based on their personal opinion.

Given the fact that educators are bringing more and more non-canonical texts into the classroom and these texts tend to be more diverse in their characters and situations, the texts tend to be much more susceptible to critique. Much canonical literature centers around middle or upper-class heterosexual white men, which is not representative of the majority of most classrooms. Many contemporary books are more representative of what students find enjoyable and relatable in literature: diverse stories that they can relate to and understand with relative ease. Though many canonical texts are challenged in the school system, texts outside of the mold canonical texts tend to fit in engage students more often with content and language that they find more engrossing and relatable than canonical literature. They typically contain more digestible prose and issues that directly relate to what they may be

experiencing both in and out of the classroom.

Though some books, both canonical and contemporary, may have content that some parties may deem objectionable, banning or censoring is not the answer. Intellectual freedom of all people, including minors, is important in order to establish a well-rounded view of the world. The intellectual freedom of an individual is dependent on the right to have access to information from multiple sources from multiple different points of view and opinions. A more effective route is allowing choices and being clear on the age-appropriateness of each text. The American Library Association (ALA American Library Association) is one of the most well-known organizations that tracks banned books across America. ALA's most recognized event is the annual Banned Books Week every September, which works to shed light on the issues of banning books in libraries and the school system. The organization provides infographics, statistical data, and resources for teachers, librarians, students, and other people and organizations to raise awareness of censorship issues. Additionally, they provide Top 10 lists every year of the ten most frequently challenged books of that year. The three represented books that I will discuss in the following chapters have been on the top ten list or the list of the top 100 banned books from 2000-2009 and some having been highlighted multiple times. One of these novels, *The Hate U Give*, has additionally been listed on the most recent banned books list from 2018 (ALA American Library Association). According to ALA,

“The Top Ten lists are only a snapshot of book challenges. Surveys indicate that 82-97% of book challenges – documented requests to remove materials from schools or libraries – remain unreported and receive no media. Sometimes OIF (Office of Intellectual Freedom) receives information as the challenge is happening; other times

OIF receives an online report years later. This affects the total number of challenges reported in any given year” (ALA American Library Association).

At this point, it’s almost impossible to gauge the total number of challenges, either for a specific book or in any given year, due to underreporting.

Many books that are challenged center around stories written for, by, or about minority groups, such as non-white races, those who are disabled or neurodivergent, people who are part of the LGBT+ community, those of a poorer economic background, or those of a non-Christian religion. These texts can also contain a combination of any or all of these minorities. According to the ALA, 80% of 2017’s most commonly challenged books tell the stories of protagonists from marginalized groups as noted above (ALA American Library Association). This number only scratches the surface, however, of the number of books that have been challenged and how many times each of them has been a target. Reading material for all groups of people is highly important and should always include marginalized people, as, in some cases, they are some of the only pieces of real representation they can receive that are free from stereotypes and prejudices. Additionally, it is unethical for a book to be challenged simply because it contains positive representation of marginalized groups. From 2000-2009, there were 361 documented cases of books being challenged simply because they contained references to homosexuality (ALA American Library Association). Books in this group have ranged from full-length novels with characters who are experimenting with and discovering their sexuality, like in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, to children’s picture books that simply contain homosexual characters as in *And Tango Makes Three*. These types of works are banned simply due to the inclusion of the diverse groups they represent, which some parties feel should not have a voice or a presence.

Though some of the topics presented in challenged material, such as violence, sexuality, or mental illness, are more difficult to discuss than others in a large group setting, the classroom is arguably one of the best places to discuss sensitive topics. During class discussion, the teacher acts as a moderator for discussion and can also provide supplementary information on the subject. Though students can very easily learn about this material outside of the classroom, being in a safe environment that engages students in a positive way and encourages them to ask questions will help them more than a simple search on Google. Controversial topics engender a wide range of opinions that can be overwhelming for someone who is newly aware of or expressing interest in a topic for the first time. In her novel, *“Unsuitable” Books: Young Adult Fiction and Censorship*, written in 2014, Caren J. Town expressed that,

“Certainly, the authors discussed here raise these issues through their frank and open treatment of subjects that are often painful and upsetting, and they do so in a language that is sometimes irreverent and frequently profane. They challenge teachers, librarians, and students to look closely at difficult issues, to confront racism, sexism, and homophobia, to face up to religious fanaticism, to accept the realities of adolescent sexuality and profanity, and, most importantly, to consider the consequences of *not* taking up such issues” (Town 7).

Texts that are commonly challenged tend to be blatantly realistic in their depictions of sensitive topics and blunt in their depictions of reality that exist as a result of these issues. Students need a safe place in which to digest and unpack such topics.

For example, Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* addresses the high-schooler Junior’s struggle between the two communities he finds himself

torn between: the Spokane Indian Reservation where he has lived his entire life and the primarily white high school he attends, Reardan. Much of the novel centers around his realization of how truly run-down and hopeless the reservation appears once he is able to view it from the same lens as the students at the school to which he transferred. Junior faces just how poverty-stricken the reservation is and how hopeless its residents have become, many turning to alcohol to drown their sorrows and dying as a result. The novel is unflinching in its depiction and narration of these events, showcasing the tragedy of those who find themselves living on a reservation. A similar plight is depicted in Lois Lowry's *The Giver*, as the main character, Jonas, struggles to find personal identity in the face of an oppressive regime. He lives in a community that doesn't experience true emotion, art, or even color, finding himself increasingly alienated from his community as he gains aspects of life that they simply cannot comprehend through memories of the past shared with him by another character, the Giver. *The Giver* introduces the subject of free will and what people are willing to sacrifice for a safe, easy life. Both of these novels are highly relevant to high school-aged teenagers, as they concern the discovery of identity in the face of other groups which expect conformity and can be difficult to teach in some respects. However, by reading these books, students have a starting point from which they can familiarize themselves with the topics presented and discover resources that can assist them in becoming conversant in the issues. The teacher may act as a resource for further information or the student may become curious about the topic and research independently. If a teacher had students read *The Diary of a Young Girl*, along with information on the Holocaust that the teacher would most likely provide, students may be led to further research the effect that the Holocaust had on those who were part of oppressed minorities.

Additionally, difficult topics can ultimately assist in developing critical thought and higher levels of thinking. Students can learn about real-world issues while developing these essential techniques. This will help them develop a greater understanding of the world around them and lead to them being able to gain a critical stance on real-world issues. *The Hate U Give*, a critically acclaimed novel by Angie Thomas, discusses racism, police brutality, and the Black Lives Matter movement through the eyes of a young girl who witnesses her friend being shot by a police officer. The main issues of the novel are some that are current hot-button issues in society which many students may be able to relate to personally. Through reading this novel, students will gain a better understanding of current issues while also being able to assess and analyze each position of the problem.

Through challenged and banned texts, students will be able to understand contemporary issues in a much better light, while also developing their own critical thinking skills and view of the world that is more well-rounded. I plan to explore the frequently challenged books *The Giver* by Lois Lowry, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, and *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas to show how students can be guided to engage in a wide range of issues and topics while additionally relating to students on a personal level. Each of these books will be represented through lesson plans that showcase the individual themes of the novels in a manner that is relevant to the students reading them as well as including some of the elements which caused their controversy. Through these lesson plans, teachers can begin to gain higher confidence in teaching and justifying socially challenging texts and the social issues they define.

Chapter 2: *The Giver* by Lois Lowry

Lois Lowry's novel, *The Giver*, is the first in a series of four books. This classic young adult novel published in 1993 mainly addresses the impact caused by erasing humankind's memory and emotions and the effect of doing so on humanity. It does this through the lens of a dystopian society. The loss of memory in this novel was greatly inspired by a visit that Lowry had with her father when he was in a nursing home. By the time of this particular visit, her father had steadily lost the majority of his memory, therefore, losing not only much of his pain and suffering associated with the past but the joy and happiness as well (Scott). This is what led to the creation of the society that *The Giver* is set in.

Lowry wanted to portray a dystopia in which memory of the past is gone and emotions are suppressed.

“And because it's in the future, it's very different from our contemporary way of life — but not in a sense of technology. I didn't deal with any of that — just in the way it's evolved into a place with a complicated set of rules, all of which are designed to make the world in which he lives very safe and very comfortable. And then I tried in writing it to make it seductive so that for the first third of the book, I hope, readers will feel as though this is a good place to live. There's no crime. There's no inequality. There's no discrimination. And then gradually you realize that the reason there are none of these things, no discrimination for example, is because everybody is the same color. There is no crime because there's no money. Everybody has all their wants taken care of. And then there are hints along the way, and I won't go into each detail, that make you become aware, in an uncomfortable way, that maybe it isn't such a great place” (“Transcript from an interview”).

Due to these and other aspects of Lowry's dystopia, many parents and community members

have strongly disapproved of this novel, citing its violence, brief scenes depicting sexual content, drug use, and suicide as unsuitable for emerging young adult readers. Never mind that numerous canonical texts used in high school classrooms do the same.

The plot of the novel centers around Jonas, a young boy in this seemingly utopian society sometime in the future. He is nearly old enough to begin training for his future job, which is chosen for him by the elders of the society. However, rather than any job that he has heard of, he is chosen to be the new Receiver, the only person who retains any memories of humanity's past. Jonas is slated to receive these memories over a long period of time from a man called the Giver, who acts as a mentor to him. The reader soon learns that the society that Jonas lives in does not experience pain, grief, sadness, or any other extreme negative emotion. Jobs, spouses, children, and general lifestyles are all chosen for the citizens of this community. However, by being forced to give up negative emotion, the members of this society have also had to give up any positive emotion. There is no publicly available art, music, or literature in this dystopian life, and most citizens cannot even see color. Jonas soon becomes increasingly alienated from the people around him. The more memories he gains as he lives among his family and friends who do not experience true emotions like he does, the more he begins to see the imperfections of a society he once perceived as perfect. Eventually, he develops a plan with the Giver to escape the world he inhabits, which will ultimately force the citizens to remember their past and experience the world the same way he does. Jonas also decides to take along an infant slated for death who had been staying at his home temporarily, hoping to save the infant from his fate. Jonas ultimately escapes with the child and sets off to an unknown life where he hopes he can truly experience the world.

In the author's own words, *The Giver* and all the other books she has written center

around a single idea: “the vital need of people to be aware of their interdependence, not only with each other, but with the world and its environment” (Lowry, “Lois Lowry”). Lowry writes about the theme of the importance of human connection, which is evident in *The Giver* in how the connections Jonas makes to others largely impact his life and his views of the world. One of the questions in the FAQ section of Lowry’s website asks: “A parent from my school wants to ban *The Giver*. What do you think about that?” To this question, Lowry responded:

“I think banning books is a very, very dangerous thing. It takes away an important freedom. Any time there is an attempt to ban a book, you should fight it as hard as you can. It's okay for a parent to say, "I don't want my child to read this book." But it is not okay for anyone to try to make that decision for other people. The world portrayed in *The Giver* is a world where choice has been taken away. It is a frightening world. Let's work hard to keep it from truly happening” (Lowry, “Lois Lowry”).

Lowry vehemently disagrees with the banning of books, which is one aspect of the society she created that makes it a dystopia. Art, music, and literature which illicit emotion have disappeared in all forms except for the two government approved texts: the dictionary and the *Book of Rules*, which outlines all rules and regulations upheld by the society. The government has even managed to erase the memories of the citizens and strip them of their ability to see color. Seeing these parts of humanity denied and what it does to people are in part what makes Jonas decide that a “perfect” society is not worth living in.

There have been multiple instances where *The Giver* has been challenged in schools and libraries. It is currently listed as number 23 on the Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books

list for 2000-2009 and was ranked number 11 from 1990-1999 (ALA American Library Association). This list is ranked based on a total accumulation of publicized challenges that the ALA is able to find through schools, libraries, and media. It will be interesting to see if *The Giver* is still ranked in the 2010-2019 list. Though the society Jonas lives in has some truly horrifying elements, such as the culling through euthanasia of the weaker members of society who are seen as “damaged,” it serves an important reminder of how dangerous a society can become when forced to conform to ideological notions of right and wrong. The society portrayed in this novel is clearly painted as a dystopia rather than the utopia it appears to be through the inclusion of these more strikingly discomfoting aspects Lowry presents. “*The Giver* presents complicated issues – euthanasia, conformity, and the suppression of personal liberty, among others. By identifying with Jonas, however, readers are clearly aware of the problems of this society. Lowry may not provide readers with a happy ending, but neither does she give us the answers” (Becker and Stan 26). This novel truly makes readers think about their own role in society, their personal freedoms, and the importance of all memory, good and bad. Readers are expected to know that this society is broken, which makes them reevaluate their own lives.

In an interview, Lowry commented on *The Giver* being challenged and banned in some places:

“At the same time, almost simultaneously, other people became very frightened by this book. And ever since 1993 it has been on the list of most challenged books in the United States. That doesn't mean banned or censored. It hovers close to it though. What it means is that somebody has gone forward with this book and demanded that it be removed from the school or the library. And then it generally goes through a set

of procedures. Usually there's a meeting of the school board. Often there are lots of newspaper articles, letters to the editor, sometimes public meetings, and people shouting at each other — all over this book. It's never, to be honest, been completely clear to me what it is they're objecting to and why they feel so frightened by it” (“Transcript from an interview”).

The process in which a book is banned in schools is long and tedious, which shows the level to which some parties want material like *The Giver* kept away from the eyes of their children and, sometimes, all children.

Parents seem to be especially disturbed by the subtle depictions of violence and suicide in the book, namely the society's process called “release.” In the society pictured in *The Giver*, natural death is generally unheard of outside of accidents. Instead, people are “released.” In this society, being “released” is simply being euthanized by injection. However, as shown through the characters' reactions and responses to “release,” they have been led to believe that it is a release into a place called “Elsewhere,” which is a paradise that lies outside the limits of the society. “Release” is designated for the elderly, those born with flaws and deformities, citizens who break rules, those who request release, and whoever is considered to be the weaker of a pair of twins born in the community. This keeps the members of society relatively unaware of death as a concept outside of the few accidents that occur within the community. This process is one of the primary objections of one instance of a call to censor. “Appalled by descriptions of “adolescent pill-popping, suicide, and lethal injections given to babies and the elderly,” two parents demanded that the Mt. Diablo Unified School District in Concord, California, eliminate the book from the school reading lists and libraries” (Scales 91). However, in *The Giver*, the reader is meant to be disturbed by the

process of release. The way this society functions, as a dystopia, is ultimately meant to seem like a pleasant utopia on the surface as it hides a more disturbing reality underneath that causes societal “problems.” In order to protect people from the grief of loss, the expense of taking care of the elderly, and the hardship of responsibility for those with physical and mental disabilities, the society creates the process of “release” and veils it under the guise of a journey to a better place.

Some also have cited *The Giver* as inappropriate due to references to sexual content. The only true sexual content referenced in the novel is when Jonas starts to have dreams about a former classmate of his that are very vaguely sexual in nature. These thoughts and feelings are referred to as “stirrings” in the universe of *The Giver* and are combated with drugs that all the members of the society take to keep the “stirrings” at bay. As in any other work of literature, this aspect of the novel is important to both establish the setting of the society that Jonas lives in, one that represses any form of sexual desire, and to explain how doing so takes away from the “messiness” of human experience. Remember, this is a dystopian society in which most emotions and memories have been stripped from its people – to retain sexual desire would negate this aspect of the society that Lowry creates. “One might imagine that would-be censors would approve of such a world, where all teenage sexuality is chemically repressed and discussed only in the blandest terms. Perhaps what rankles them about this novel, though, is that Lowry hints that this repression of sexuality might be a bad thing” (Town 119). The citizens of this society have sacrificed a fundamental aspect of the human experience in order to maintain a tranquil, controlled society, but at the same time have lost many of the things that make life enjoyable. The repression of even the basest of feelings is so severe that, when the previous Receiver, the role Jonas is to inherit, is

“released,” the memories that are set free upon her death are too much for the public to deal with. They have learned to live without having to truly come to terms with and deal with the pain that comes with life. As the new Receiver, Jonas will cause the same thing to happen when he decides to leave the boundaries of the town in which he lives.

When challenges to *The Giver* reference suicide, it is in relation to the fate of the last Receiver before Jonas. When Jonas learns he has become the new Receiver, he also learns that something happened to the receiver before him. He is told by the Giver that the previous Receiver, Rosemary, had become so overwhelmed by the memories she received that she requested to be released. In doing so, all the memories she held within her are released upon her death and create a severe, negative effect on the rest of the society. This phenomena is so severe that the name “Rosemary” is banned from being used for any other children in the foreseeable future. Rosemary requesting release is similar to a member of society requesting to be euthanized by an outside party. This act of assisted suicide is too much for some parents, who claim it to be inappropriate. However, this act shows how difficult it is for someone to reexperience true emotion after locking it away. It shows how dire a situation the society has found itself in. However, bad memories and negative experiences are all a part of the human experience and should not be blocked out because of fear of pain.

Stories about utopias and dystopias show readers that, in order to gain what are perceived as advantages to living, such as never feeling more than physical pain and having a predetermined path in life, there are certain aspects of life that have to be given up. In this case, citizens of this society have to give up feeling true emotion and memories of their past. They exist in what is called “sameness.” Late in the book, it is determined that even love does not exist in this world. After feeling that emotion upon receiving a memory of a family

together during Christmas, Jonas goes to his parents to ask if they love him. Instead of reassuring him, they tell him that his question is inappropriate and irrelevant in their society. This is a turning point that further alienates Jonas from the rest of his community.

As a whole, *The Giver* shows that one can only truly have joyful emotions when able to also experience painful emotions. These opposites cannot exist without each other, as one is only truly felt when the other has been experienced. “Of course Lowry is saying here that one cannot have one without the other; hunger and cold are matched by birds and wind, and pain by happiness. This passage has much to say to would-be-censors: while we might like to keep our children’s world free of pain and fear, we are also depriving them of the “exquisite happiness” that comes with a fuller experience of life” (Town 123). As mentioned in this quotation, the society in *The Giver* highly mirrors those who believe certain aspects of the human experience should be censored. There are aspects of life that simply cannot be avoided, and it is ultimately better to address these aspects in a healthy manner and allow for exploration and curiosity rather than locking away what makes people human.

The following lesson plan addresses the importance of memory as evidenced by the memories that Jonas gains over the course of the novel. It is one way of approaching the concerns of those worried about the impact of *The Giver* on readers. “Whatever concerns parents and community members might have about the troubling aspects of her dystopian novel, the author intended the book, which has been the winner of the Newbery Award and numerous other honors, to celebrate the power of memory and the need for self-determination” (Town 115). Through this lesson plan regarding memory and its effect on identity, students can discover the importance of their own memories, whether they are positive or negative and gain a better understanding of the society that *The Giver* presents.

The lesson is intended as a pre-reading assignment. Students will revisit this lesson after they read the novel, which should highlight the impact that the novel has on their perceptions of memories and the importance to the human experience.

Lesson Plan

What Do You Want to Remember?

Unit: *The Giver*

Topic: Memory and Identity

Aim: The events in *The Giver* largely address the importance of memory in our society.

Through this lesson, students' connections with their own memories will help them gain a better understanding of the importance of memory to the human experience.

Objectives:

- Students will recall memories from their past and determine the importance of them on their lives.
- Students will discuss in small groups whether it would be worth it to forget certain experiences in life and analyze the effect that would have on their perceptions, experiences, and who they are as people.
- Students will gain a higher understanding of the importance of the theme of the novel prior to reading it through personal experiences which will result in them having deeper empathy for the characters they encounter in the text.

NC Standards:

SL.11-12.1 – Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

Materials:

- Pencil
- Journal
- Whiteboard

Learning Plan:

This activity will have students evaluate the importance of memory on their lives, one of the main themes present in *The Giver*, and how these memories may have impacted who they are as people. This is meant as a prereading activity.

Split the class into small groups of 3-5. Explain that students will write in their journals down 3-5 specific memories from their past that have left a strong impact on them. Emphasize that students are to recall multiple different types of memories that correspond with different emotions. These can be memories that make them feel happy, sad, embarrassed, angry, or any other emotion or combination thereof. They can also be from any period in the students' lives, from their first memories to something that happened within the last month, as long as they left a powerful impact on the student. Explain that students do not have to share anything that makes them uncomfortable or is particularly painful.

After giving students roughly 10-15 minutes to brainstorm, have students answer the following questions written on the whiteboard in their journals: "If you chose to forget the memories you wrote about, how do you think that would affect you? Would it have changed any other events in your life or who you are as a person?" Give students 10-15 minutes to answer the questions.

Once students have answered the questions about their memories, they will discuss their answers with their small groups for 10-15 minutes before the class comes back together. Students will then be asked to discuss the following questions as a group: "Do you believe that our memories effect our identities? If someone forgot everything about themselves, would they be the same person afterwards? If someone were to forget all of the bad experiences in their life, would that change them as a person?" Give students ample time for discussion.

After the time is up, bring the class back together and have each group share what they

discussed. This may take roughly 20 minutes depending on class size and the length of the discussion. Afterwards, have students write an exit ticket to be turned in before they leave the classroom: “Based on our discussions, would you still choose to forget one of the memories you wrote about? Why or why not?”

Students will revisit this activity again after reading *The Giver* as a post-reading activity. It can be used as either another discussion, journal entry, or essay. Revisiting the activity will be done through asking students whether or not their viewpoints or decisions before reading have changed at all. This will show how the novel has affected the students’ and their perceptions of the theme of the importance of memory.

Chapter 3: *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian has been critically acclaimed since its publication in 2007. The author of the novel, Sherman Alexie, originally wrote it as an amalgam between a memoir and an autobiography. Though the novel is a work of fiction, he included some aspects of his childhood from when he and his family lived on the Spokane Indian Reservation. As of 2019, Alexie has written 26 books across multiple genres, including short stories, YA fiction, a picture book, and, most recently, a memoir. He has won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the Dos Passos Prize, the American Book Award, and many others. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* has also won multiple awards on its own, including the National Book Award in Young People's Literature and the California Young Reader Medal (Alexie, "Sherman Alexie").

The novel focuses on Arnold Spirit Jr. ("Junior") who lives with his parents and older sister on the Spokane Indian reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. The reservation itself is impoverished and most of its residents dwell there for their entire lives. Junior is born with excess spinal fluid in his brain, leading him to have a stutter and a lisp, which he is teased mercilessly for throughout his life. He is relentlessly bullied by both his peers and adults on the reservation. His only friend, Rowdy, is the sole person on the reservation who stands up for him. Both his parents are alcoholics while his older sister, Mary, spends the majority of her time in her parents' basement. During his first year at the local high school, Junior is suspended after breaking his teacher's nose with a textbook. The teacher convinces him to go to a better school outside of the reservation, Reardan High, so he can find hope for himself. After some deliberation, Junior agrees to transfer schools but is subsequently shunned by everyone on the reservation, including Rowdy, as they believe he has betrayed them. Junior initially has a rough time at Reardan. He attempts to come to terms with the sudden divide

between himself and the residents of the reservation while the students at Reardan torment him with racist remarks. Soon enough, however, Junior earns the respect of his classmates, makes a few friends, and even starts dating a girl at Reardan. Throughout the novel, he attempts to prove himself to both the people at Reardan as well as those on the reservation who view him as a traitor while he grapples with the difficult consequences of living two different lives.

The primary dilemma of this novel is Junior's struggle with his identity, an aspect of life that many young adults can relate to. By making the decision to attend Reardan High School, Junior ultimately cuts ties with the rest of the people he knows on the reservation, excluding his family. The residents of the reservation view his decision to change schools as an act of betrayal and treat him even more harshly than they used to. In one instance, they give him a concussion during a basketball game. The reservation, as described in the novel, is a relatively close-knit community, so the rejection is made even more devastating to Junior. This is before he makes any friends at Reardan, so Junior is effectively alienated from both groups and finds himself completely alone. Alienation and not knowing where one fits in can very easily resonate with young adults for many reasons and can be difficult for those who have moved or transferred schools.

The novel additionally addresses the lack of non-stereotypical representation for Native Americans. On his website, Sherman Alexie details how most Native Americans were depicted while he was growing up: "When I was a child, my late father read any novel with an Indian on the cover. He was so hungry to see pop culture Indians that he accepted any and all portrayals of us. He accepted frauds like Iron Eyes Cody even after they were revealed to be frauds. O, how the lonely choose fallacy over reason" (Alexie, "Sherman Alexie"). This

act of consuming any media which contains minority characters is not unusual with those who do not tend to receive sufficient representation in media. If they are represented, however, it can often be stereotypical, offensive, depicts its only minorities as antagonists, or some combination of the three. However, due to the lack of positive representation, many minorities may take whatever they can get, such as in the case of Alexie's father. This is the reason why, Alexie notes, it is so important that he addresses the issue. Everyone deserves to see themselves in media but that representation, at the very least, should be something past a simple stereotype or demonization.

Since its publication, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* has been on the American Library Association's Top Ten Most Challenged Books list for seven years. It ranked 2nd in 2010, 5th in 2011, 2nd again in 2012, 3rd in 2013, 1st in 2014, 2nd in 2017, and 9th in 2018 (ALA American Library Association). It has been challenged for multiple different reasons, including sexual references, profanity, violence, gambling, racism, underage drinking, and acknowledging issues such as poverty and alcoholism. Sherman Alexie is extremely outspoken on the topic of the banning of his novel and books in general. In an interview with *Guernica*, he stated: "I always find it sad and amusing: Sad to think that such archaic and potentially dangerous censorious beliefs still exist, and amused because these censors only make a book more powerful and seductive when trying to ban it" (Winstead). This is an aspect of book banning that many censors do not seem to consider. Many young adults tend to gravitate towards material that is challenged, mainly because there is a certain allure to consuming or partaking in something that an authority has deemed "inappropriate." More than anything, they are spurred on by curiosity of what was bad enough to cause adults to challenge and attempt to ban a book. This curiosity is also cited in Alexie's interview:

“If a parent doesn’t want his/her child to read a book then there is always an alternative text to read. But the book banners want to control what every child reads. I believe in any kid’s ability to read any book and form their own judgements. It’s the job of a parent to guide his/her child through the reading of every book imaginable. Censorship of any form punishes curiosity” (Winstead).

One notable instance of this novel being challenged occurred at Antioch High School in Illinois. In 2009, seven parents complained about the content of the novel after it was assigned as summer reading, demanding that it be removed from the curriculum entirely due to the references to sexual acts, alcoholism, and racist language. One of these seven parents had already begun crossing out sections of the book that she did not want her son to read before she decided that it needed to be banned altogether. The chairman of the English department explained that there was both an alternate title available for those who did not want to read this text and that it was chosen specifically in order to entice reluctant male readers, as they would relate to Junior as a main character. In this case, measures had already been taken to ensure that the use of the novel in the classroom was both justified and one of two options. Giving options as well as rationalization is a necessity when teaching possibly controversial texts and assists heavily if the novel would ever be challenged. Still, some censors are not satisfied until their demand of total removal is addressed.

Many of the challenges for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* stem from sexual content or references, most of which do not even occur in the novel in the first place. In his interview with *Guernica*, Alexie notes:

“The banning is always the work of conservative Christians who often demonstrate they haven’t actually read the book by citing imaginary sex scenes. A woman in

Georgia insisted that my YA novel contained blowjob lessons and a woman in Missouri claimed that my book's two lead male characters sexually assaulted women by grabbing their breasts. Those scenes were not in my book. Why would a supposedly moral person invent such aggressively and/or felonious sex scenes out of a book whose main sexual content is that of a teenage boy expressing how much he enjoys masturbation without any masturbation scenes?" (Winstead).

This quote exemplifies the issues of would-be censors tending to find or hear about something objectionable in a piece of literature and immediately pursuing a ban without understanding the context of the material, misinterpreting the context, or, in this case, citing something not even present in the source material. Additionally, the inclusion of sexual content, whatever form it may be in, is always more likely to raise outrage and a call for a challenge to a text, especially texts meant for children and young adult readers. Even an accusation of the inclusion of sexual content itself, whether accurate or not, is enough to garner outrage by censoring groups. The inclusion of this content in Alexie's book, however, only serves to characterize Junior and relate him to the intended audience of the novel.

Racism is also cited as a reason for one of the challenges against *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. Opponents of this aspect of the novel seem to confuse perpetuating negative stereotypes and language with the grim realities of racial relations. One notable challenge was at Skyview High School in Billings in Montana in 2013 which states that the book is "shockingly written by a Native American who reinforces all the negative stereotypes of his people and does it from the crude, obscene, and unfiltered viewpoint of a ninth-grader growing up on the reservation" (Doyle 92). However, Alexie primarily uses racist remarks in the novel, such as the casual and direct instances present when Junior first

attends Reardan, as social commentary on racism towards Native Americans. He states about censors:

“They also use depictions of the awfulness of racism to accuse a book of racism.

In *True Diary*, the teller of a vile, racist joke gets punched in the face by our hero. I think that’s a pretty clear anti-racist message. And the so-called anti-Christian tone of the book is based on one cartoon that depicts Jesus farting and burping. Since Jesus was human then he most assuredly farted and burped. And if God did create us in God’s image then God must fart and burp as well. Book banners are terrified of the human body” (Winstead).

Here, Alexie makes a point that many of the complaints about *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* are either taken out of context or misinterpreted. Those who would have a novel banned need to understand these aspects’ context in the story as well as their importance to the novel as a whole. While some of these remarks may be shocking for the reader; however, they only serve to further illustrate the setting Junior finds himself in as well as the characters he interacts with.

One of the most striking issues tackled in Alexie’s novel is alcoholism. Though it is not referenced quite as frequently, the issue of alcoholism is heavily present throughout the novel and has raised concern, notably in the Antioch case. However, censors who deem the instances of alcoholism and drinking as inappropriate do not understand the sheer importance of the issue to the novel. On the reservation, most residents are poverty-stricken and turn to alcohol to drown their sorrows, much to the dismay of Junior. With the exception of a few people, such as Junior’s grandmother who has never touched alcohol in her life, everyone is

constantly turning to alcohol to get by. The harsh effects of alcoholism are heavily present throughout the novel, such as in Junior's family. They aren't able to afford Christmas presents because Junior's father takes all the family's money and disappears for days at a time to drink away his sorrows. Additionally, Junior loses several loved ones to the effects of alcohol. His grandmother is struck and killed by a drunk driver, his father's friend Eugene is killed in a drunken brawl over the last mouthful of a bottle of wine, and his older sister burns to death inside her trailer because she is too drunk to wake up and escape. Though Junior is already aware that alcoholism is a constant killer of Native Americans, that does not help him handle the deaths of three loved ones. Though harsh, Alexie's depictions of alcoholism highlight the issues present on most reservations – issues he saw during his own time living on the Spokane Indian Reservation and that have been widely documented in other places. Based on a 2008 study, published a year after the publication of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, 11.7 percent of Native American and Alaskan Native deaths are alcohol-related, compared to the national percentage of 3.3 (“1 in 10 Native American deaths”).

When he was asked if he would ban any books if he was given a chance to do so, Alexie responded by saying “We can all learn from every text. Reading the work that disgusts you can only strengthen your core beliefs. I could teach a semester-long course based only on reading the local telephone book. All stories can be taught in valuable ways” (Winstead). This is the aspect of media that censors do not seem to comprehend. Even if a work is truly offensive in some way, banning it does not somehow erase it from existence. More than anything, it ends up asserting the idea that the offensive material never existed in the first place, which is extremely harmful long-term. By censoring material or banning it altogether, it works to hide the fact that these views and beliefs were held in the first place,

sometimes even by authors that have been highly decorated and celebrated. By keeping the material in its original form without censoring, it serves as a reminder of what the culture of the world was like during the time it was written. These are discussions that could bring much to the classroom when the teacher leading the discussion properly facilitates.

In the lesson plan paired with this novel, students use the format of Junior's different "tribes" that he cites at the end of the novel to write a poem about what "tribes" they belong to. This activity is meant as a post-reading assignment. It will be completed soon after students finish reading the novel, which will allow them the full context of this excerpt while they are writing these poems. Additionally, this activity utilizes peer-review, allowing students to receive additional feedback outside of the teacher's perspective. This activity connects students to the main character of the text as well as to each other and themselves, serving both as a way for students to determine what aspects of their identity mean the most to them and as a connection to the theme of identity present throughout the novel.

Lesson Plan

What Tribes Do You Belong To?

Unit: *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

Topic: Identity

Aim: Students will distinguish what “tribes” they belong to and create a poem expressing these tribes based on the list of tribes provided in Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

Objectives:

- Students will be able to connect the text to their own life experiences.
- Students will create a “tribe” poem that connects to their personal identity.
- Students will connect these life experiences with those of the main character, Junior.

NC Standards:

CCR Anchor Standard W.3 – Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

RL.11-12.10 – By the end of grade 11, read and understand literature within the 11-12 text complexity band proficiently and independently for sustained periods of time. Connect prior knowledge and experiences to text. By the end of grade 12, read and understand literature at the high end of the 11-12 text complexity band proficiently and independently for sustained periods of time. Connect prior knowledge and experiences to text.

Materials:

- “Tribe” Poem Handout
- Paper and pencils

Learning Plan:

Introduce the lesson by asking students what they believe the definition of a “tribe” is. After

a couple minutes of discussion, pass out the handouts and read the passage out loud to the class or have a volunteer read. Describe to the class how, though they are not technically tribes, these groups of people are what make up a large part of Junior's identity.

Pass out the handout to the class and explain that students will be writing a short poem in the same form that Junior uses in the novel, detailing their own "tribes" that they are a part of. Students will brainstorm by themselves for 20 minutes during the first class, the teacher walking around the room and providing assistance when necessary.

The next day, students will discuss their initial rough drafts in small groups of 3-5 students in a peer-review for 30 minutes. During the peer review, students will be instructed to pass around their rough drafts in a circle, writing comments underneath each of the poems that are given to them. Each student must write one aspect of the poem that was done well and one element that could be improved. In this manner, students will receive both positive comments as well as constructive criticism in order to elevate their own writing.

Students will submit a final draft as homework the next day, allowing them to incorporate the feedback they received into the final product.

“Tribe” Poems

Using this excerpt from *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* as a guide, write a poem about the different “tribes” that you belong to. This can include hobbies, interests, beliefs, who you are as a person, or anything you believe defines your identity. We will write a rough draft in class, peer edit them tomorrow, and submit the final draft the following day.

I realized that, sure, I was a Spokane Indian. I belonged to that tribe. But I also belonged to the tribe of American immigrants. And to the tribe of basketball players. And to the tribe of bookworms.

And to the tribe of cartoonists.

And to the tribe of chronic masturbators.

And the tribe of teenage boys.

And the tribe of small-town kids.

And the tribe of Pacific Northwesterners.

And the tribe of tortilla chips-and-salsa lovers.

And the tribe of poverty.

And the tribe of funeral goers.

And the tribe of beloved sons.

And the tribe of boys who really missed their best friends.

It was a huge realization.

And that's when I knew that I was going to be okay.

- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* Chapter 28, page 217

Chapter 4: *The Hate U Give*

The Hate U Give is Angie Thomas's debut novel which jumpstarted her career as an author with its massive success. The novel received the William C. Morris Award, the Coretta Scott King Honor, and the Michael L. Printz Honor. The movie adaptation of the novel released by Fox 2000 in 2018 was also a critical success, receiving a 97% on Rotten Tomatoes and a 7.4 on IMDB. Angie Thomas's inspiration for the novel came from her frustration over the unjust murder of African-Americans at the hands of police, especially when the people around her at the predominately-white university she attended seemed to think the actions of the officers were just. "Disappointed and frustrated, I did the only thing I knew how to do: I expressed my feelings through story, in hopes that I would give a voice to the kids in my neighborhood and neighborhoods like it who felt the same way I did" (Thomas, "Real Talk"). She started *The Hate U Give* as a short story during her senior year. Then, when the violence around her seemed to escalate, she decided that the story was not completed and expanded it into a novel.

The plot of *The Hate U Give* centers around Starr Carter, who grows up in the poor, tightly-knit neighborhood of Garden Heights, which consists mainly of people of color, much like Junior in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*. However, she begins to feel out of place where she lives due to the fact that she now attends Williamson Prep, a high school in a richer, predominately white area nearby. When she attends a party in Garden Heights, she reconnects with a childhood friend of hers, Khalil, who offers to drive her home. However, when the two are pulled over by a police officer, referred to as Officer 115 based on his badge number, Khalil is shot and killed by the officer with Starr as the sole witness. At first, the police do not pursue any legal action against Officer 115 and Starr agonizes over whether or not she wants to testify. However, when Starr ultimately decides to testify, she

faces the consequences in her relationships with her friends, family, and the community. Protests soon become commonplace and a trial is ultimately set. Officer 115 is, ultimately, not convicted, which leads to a riot in Garden Heights that destroys many parts of the neighborhood. Though the trial did not end in justice for a wrongly killed friend, Starr pledges to speak up against that injustice in the name of Khalil and other real-live cases of African-Americans who have been murdered in similar fashions. The novel tackles many difficult subjects, including racism, the disparity between different social classes, police brutality, interracial relationships, gang violence, and civil rights.

Much of Thomas' hope for the novel is that it will show people both that there are others who feel similar outrage regarding these acts of violence and to give them reassurance that they are not alone in these thoughts. Additionally, she hopes to shed light on the issue at large, especially for those unfamiliar with it.

“As we witness injustice, prejudice, and racism rear their ugly heads even higher both in the US and abroad, I think it’s important to let readers know that they aren’t alone in their frustration, fear, anger, and sadness. But it’s also important to provide glimmers of light in the darkness. I hope that “The Hate U Give” provides some of that light. But my ultimate hope is that every single person who reads it walks away from it understanding those feelings and sharing them in some way. And then, maybe then, Emmett Louise Till can truly become history” (Thomas, “Real Talk”).

One real-life occurrence of violence against African-Americans cited frequently in *The Hate U Give* is the murder of Emmett Till, a young man who was tortured and hanged for allegedly whistling at a white woman. He was beaten so badly that he was near-unrecognizable. The story of Emmett Till as seen in the poems written by Marilyn Nelson in

A Wreath for Emmett Till and previously studied by the students will be a part of an assignment connected to *The Hate U Give*. Specifically, *The Hate U Give* addresses what it means to be African-American in America in our current time period, which students of color can highly relate to. These issues are explored both through the events which unfold around the shooting as well as Starr's internal struggle regarding how she believes she should act and present herself to certain parties.

Much like in the cases of the other two novels discussed, *The Hate U Give* includes a prevalent theme of the discovery of identity. In the case of Starr Carter, she attempts to determine how she wants to present herself both in the community she grew up in and is a part of and at the school she attends which is in a very different community. Similar to the plight of Junior in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Starr finds herself in the middle of two different worlds: the impoverished neighborhood where nearly every resident is a person of color and/or impoverished and her suburban prep school where she is one of a small minority of people of color. She constantly makes active decisions on how she wants to present herself in these two separate worlds. She feels that she cannot act as though she is anything close to the stereotypical African-American girl her suburban friends imagine and simultaneously cannot act too "white" while at Garden Heights. Each of these communities hold different expectations for her which she struggles to navigate.

Even though *The Hate U Give* is a relatively recent novel, it has been relentlessly targeted by both parents and community members alike due to its unflinching depiction of racial bias and police brutality. Additionally, it has been argued that *The Hate U Give* incites a fear and hatred of the police in those who read it, portraying an unrealistic portrayal of the police force. Other cited reasons for banning the novel include violence and sexual

references. Though the novel was only published in 2017, *The Hate U Give* has already found its place on the American Library Association's Top Ten Most Challenged Books list since its publication. It was listed as 8th in 2017 and 9th in 2018 (ALA American Library Association).

It can be argued that the reason certain parties do not approve of this novel is due to the realistic portrayals of the scenarios it contains. This novel has a high level of cultural relevance, especially in light of recent events and situations involving young African-American men and police that have escalated over the past few years. There are an increasing number of documented interactions between minorities and police officers now that smartphones are highly commonplace. These instances are videotaped, recorded, and documented, allowing the public to become increasingly aware of the sheer scale of these interactions. Angie Thomas does not shy away from the reality of both the inciting encounter between Starr and Khalil and the officer who pulls them over as well as the fallout that ensues after Khalil's death. The novel delves into the resulting trial, protests, and eventual riot after the offending officer is found to be not guilty. The novel does not shy away from the violence, profanity, and citing the use of drugs and alcohol that one would expect in a true-to-life story. The effects of Khalil's death on the community at large are thoroughly explored, from direct effects on those in Garden Heights who knew Khalil to the students at Williamson Prep who use protests regarding Khalil's death to get out of class. There is additionally frequent discussion over what the "correct" way to protest is and what one should do when all one's nonviolent methods of protest have failed.

One of the most well-known instances of the novel being protested was by the Fraternal Order of Police chapter, Tri-County Lodge #3 in South Carolina. They protested

the book being on shelves and in the curriculum at Wando High School in Mount Pleasant, SC. They cited as their reason for challenge that the novel incited hatred of police officers and demanded that it be taken out of the curriculum. Though the book does contain a police force who, in part, deny that the perpetrating officer did anything wrong, it also includes the viewpoint of Carlos, Starr's uncle, who is another member of this police force. At the beginning of the novel, right after the shooting, he takes the side of the offending officer. Officer 115 is someone he knows and works with and Carlos doesn't want to believe that he would have done anything unprovoked. However, after discovering that the offending officer turned his gun on the unarmed Starr after shooting Khalil, Carlos reevaluates his view and openly takes Starr's side in the conflict, accepting the possible negative outcomes this could cause for him while he still worked at the police station. Though the book largely focuses on the repercussions of police violence, Thomas takes the time to examine the viewpoint of someone who the reader is supposed to trust who also is an officer. If the novel was attempting to shine a negative light on all police officers, Carlos either would not have been a member of the police force or would have been painted as a villain instead. By taking time to examine both sides of the conflict, Angie Thomas shows the reader how complex these situations really are and encourages them to evaluate both arguments fairly.

Another notable ban of the book was in the Katy Independent School District in Texas. In this instance, the source of outrage was the discussion of drugs and drug use in the novel as well as explicit language. Angie Thomas, the author of *The Hate U Give* responded to the banning of her novel in Texas: "I'm saddened to hear that a school district in Texas banned #TheHateUGive, but I'm also empowered - you're basically telling the kids of the Garden Heights of the world that their stories shouldn't be told. Well, I'm going to tell them

even louder. Thanks for igniting the fire” (@angiethomas). This is the retort that many authors have given upon hearing that their works have been banned. The message Thomas mentioned in her tweet is largely what is being conveyed to these students, especially minorities, when books about them and their culture are challenged and banned. It conveys the message that their experiences and viewpoints are somehow objectionable and creates a negative viewpoint of oneself.

Again, the general response to banning books from young readers is largely to have a sudden increase in interest for that text, as evidenced again by Angie Thomas:

“The ignorance...Here's something I don't think adults understand - when you tell teens or kids that they can't read a book, it makes them want to read it even more.

Every single time this happens, my sales go up in those areas. Kids want to read...When it happened in Texas, so many kids suddenly wanted the book. The ones who could afford copies lent them out. They made their own library system. I was just in that area recently. One of my biggest signings yet, and so many kids only knew about the book because of the ban...Anyway, I'm going to keep writing "banned" books. Because the kids I write about deserve to see themselves whether their stories make YOU comfortable or not” (Angie Thomas Twitter).

The mentioned drug use and use of profanity have been commonly cited but are largely important to the novel as a whole. In a book centered around teenagers, they can, for the most part, be expected to swear. Additionally, the aforementioned drug use demonstrates how a person’s character can change whether or not the general public believe they deserved to be granted justice. After Khalil’s death, Starr discovered that he was part of one of the most notorious gangs in Garden Heights and sold drugs so he could support his mother, who was

unable to work. This largely changes the public opinion of him, especially regarding the protests and whether or not his murder was deserved. It also played a role in the outcome of the trial as well. Though these are aspects of life that people would prefer to ignore, especially concerning children, they are necessary in their own rights to the story and help the narrative become more well-rounded and realistic. They also help us understand how people use stereotypes and make assumptions about them with limited information about their circumstances.

In order to prompt discussion of the Civil Rights Movement and the need for its ongoing advocacy, which *The Hate U Give* centers around, in the following connected lesson plan students will be comparing *The Hate U Give* with another text, *A Wreath for Emmett Till*. This is a collection of sonnets which all concern the murder of Emmett Till. The Till murder was specifically cited by Starr throughout *The Hate U Give*. This is due to the fact that his death was one of the inciting incidents which sparked the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-1900s. Students are encouraged to discuss their thoughts on the impact of violence on civil rights and whether or not they believe, based on the depictions both in *The Hate U Give* and from what they have witnessed in their lives, that the public opinion on these movements have changed much if at all. This lesson plan is set to be taught after both of these texts have already been read and students have already learned about Civil Rights movements, including the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement, associated with people of color. Many have cited the violence in *The Hate U Give* as being inappropriate, but the reality is the characters of this story live in violent and complex neighborhoods, are often subject to police brutality, and must constantly be on high alert for various reasons lest their lives be in jeopardy. By discussing it openly in a classroom, students will gain a better

understanding of the reasoning behind these movements and their importance, giving them a more well-rounded view of the world around them and the issues it still faces.

Lesson Plan**How Will You Respond?**

Unit: *The Hate U Give*

Topic: Racial violence in *A Wrath for Emmett Till* and *The Hate U Give*

Aim: Both *A Wrath for Emmett Till* and *The Hate U Give* discuss the murder of Emmett Till and the Civil Rights Movement. Through small group discussion, students will think more critically on the violence depicted in both of these works and the message that they are attempting to convey to the audience.

Objectives:

- Students will compare and contrast the portrayal and effects of racial violence in *A Wrath for Emmett Till* and *The Hate U Give*.
- Students will discuss discussion questions in a group in order to analyze the deeper messages of both texts as well as the issue of racial violence.
- Students will share their findings with the class and understand the different opinions of their classmates regarding the topic.

NC Standards:

SL.11-12.1 – Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

RL.11-12.9 – Analyze how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics and compare the approaches the authors take.

Materials:

- Copies of *A Wreath for Emmett Till* and *The Hate U Give*
- Discussion questions handout
- Notebooks and pencil

Learning Plan:

At this point in the unit, students have already read *A Wreath for Emmett Till* and *The Hate U Give* and have discussed both individually. They have also learned about Emmett Till and the Civil Rights Movement. Now, they will be analyzing the portrayal and effects of racial violence as shown in each novel.

Pass out copies of both texts to each student. Instruct students to get into small groups, roughly 3-5 students each, depending on class size. Pass out the Small Group Discussion Questions and inform students that they will have 30 minutes to answer these questions in their small groups before they will discuss them with the entire class. Emphasize that this discussion is not meant to be a debate and encourage students to share their views on the questions based on what they gathered from both texts.

After the 30 minutes are over, bring the class together to discuss and explain their answers. Make sure every group answers all of the prompts. Ensure that the discussion doesn't turn into a debate or argument and reemphasize that fact before classroom discussion and throughout when necessary.

When discussion has ended, have students write an exit ticket answering this prompt: "Based on what you have read in *A Wreath for Emmett Till* and *The Hate U Give* and the discussion

today, what do you believe is the best response/method to end racial violence?

Small Group Discussion Questions

What are the similarities and differences in the depiction of racial violence that you can determine between *The Hate U Give* and *A Wrath for Emmett Till*?

Do you believe the killings of Emmett Till and Khalil are ultimately similar even though they are decades apart? Why or why not?

Do you believe that public opinion on these civil rights issues has changed or has remained the same? Why or why not?

Both of these written works depict an act of violence as the inciting incident that brings these civil rights issues to light. Do you believe violence is the only method that ultimately brings attention to these issues? Why or why not?

Conclusion

It requires discussion and careful reflection by all concerned to come to a conclusion on what is or is not “appropriate” for certain age groups. This opinion can change depending on various factors, such as age, development, the context in which it is used, and personal beliefs. Many teachers struggle with planning their lessons because they are uncertain of what kind of backlash they might get from parents, community members, or other outside organizations, making it difficult to explore options for curriculums. This is both stressful for the teachers as well as potentially damaging to the students, as many of these texts are those which connect students to the material by relating to them in some way.

As shown through the ALA’s research, there are a plethora of reasons why texts can be banned. These can range from the text containing material which is openly racist to the text simply containing characters who are part of the LGBT+ community. In most cases, censors don’t have the context of the offending material and lack knowledge about the text as a whole. In many cases, when parents express their objections to texts, they aren’t fully aware of how they will be used in the classroom and how the objectionable content even fits in to the text. Though parents and guardians do have a say in what their children consume, they need to understand the reasons certain content is included and its purpose to the overall course and that certainly while their rights extend to their own children they do not extend to the children of others.

Canonical texts, as demonstrated through their multiple challenges and bans, are not immune to censorship. Many of them contain what might be considered inappropriate material, such as specific language, references to sex and suicide, or depictions of characters from different backgrounds. The inclusion of this material is what leads to these texts being challenged as well. However, all of these texts are an important part of cultural history, even

though their content may be viewed as offensive or inappropriate. Censoring material that may depict situations that are offensive to some only serves to erase the evidence that these issues and situations exist in the first place.

In most cases, people will passionately protect their freedom of expression under the First Amendment, but when young readers become involved, people tend to change their views. Children are often viewed as members of society who need to be protected from the more difficult issues of the world. However, young adults are the ones who need to know about these topics more than anyone. They have not had the chance to truly learn about the world yet, so they need to be given the chance to learn about its intricacies and how it works from an unbiased source. Children need the ability to form their own views and make their own decisions about who they want to be in life. Adolescence as a whole is largely comprised of discovering one's own identity and figuring out one's place in life, as evidenced by the themes found throughout the referenced texts.

By working with banned and challenged books, educators have the ability to challenge students' perceptions and broaden their understanding of the issues in the world around them. Working with these books is more likely to pique student interest given the fact that because they address real-life concerns and engage topics that lead to interesting lessons that promote critical thinking, as evidenced by the sample lessons that have been referenced. Through the utilization of these texts, though they have been challenged for multiple reasons by many different people, they give students a broader view of the world that they live in and allow them to make their own decisions on important issues. Awareness is the first step to becoming an active citizen and it is important that these adolescents be aware of the issues that affect their communities.

Though the subject material in some of these texts may be harder for some to think about and discuss, censoring and banning sensitive topics and issues only serve to silence certain communities and life experiences while also depriving others of the valuable perspectives that they contain. By presenting these issues in a context that not only engages students but also helps them to participate in discussion of them, students will gain a more complete understanding of societal issues and possible resolutions through the empathy they feel towards the characters in these texts. While there are other means of learning about these issues, discussing them in the classroom helps to facilitate constructive discussion while providing a safe and enriching environment in which students are free to ask questions. With these specific books and the sample lessons that go along with them, students have the chance to learn about issues such as racism, police brutality, freedom of choice, self-expression, personal identity, alcoholism, and intersectionality. Even though these lessons address different yet equally important issues, they still only scratch the surface of the topics that are addressed in the three novels examined.

As evidenced through the specific novels referenced, almost any text can be challenged for a multitude of reasons, especially those which point their focus on topics that are perceived to be more difficult to discuss in a classroom environment. These texts illustrate specific characters, viewpoints, and situations which can relate to students and their personal lives. People need to be able to see themselves in the literature that they read in order to become truly invested and immersed. Many banned and challenged texts include diverse characters, lifestyles, and narratives which cater to these needs. This is especially helpful in classrooms given the diverse population of students who are all expected to read the same texts.

Through the novels *The Giver*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, and *The Hate U Give*, educators can reach a large number of students with just one text. Most students won't be expected to struggle with escaping an oppressive society as Jonas does in *The Giver* but have most likely grappled with the conflict between the need to conform to societal standards and to embrace their individuality. It can't be said that all students have deal with being the only member of a minority group in a predominately white school as does Junior in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* but it's very likely that many have struggled with their identity and how it relates to their family and community. Not every student will relate to Starr's struggle against the police force in *The Hate U Give*, but many of them will relate to her struggle with when to speak up for herself. These texts, while fictional, encourage students to discover more about themselves and the world around them. By utilizing these novels in the classroom, teachers can expect to elevate classroom engagement while also assisting in helping young adults develop as people.

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