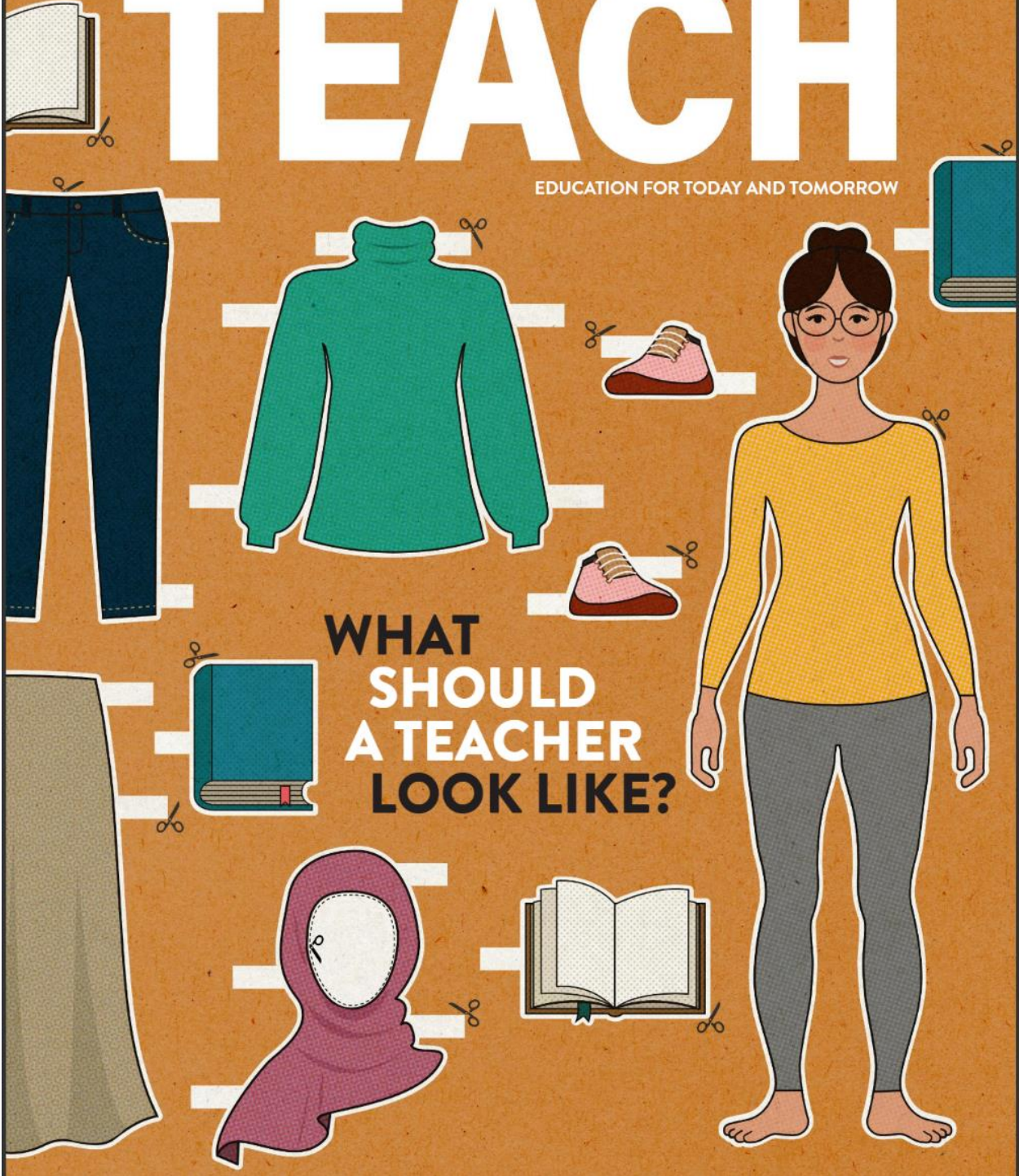


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# TEACH

EDUCATION FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW



**WHAT  
SHOULD  
A TEACHER  
LOOK LIKE?**

# FOSTERING INCLUSIVITY AND EMPATHY: THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF

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BY FIONA TAPP

**L**iterary and educational communities are grappling with the challenge of recent book bans across the United States. In 2022 alone there were 137 gag order bills introduced in 36 state legislatures that sought to limit what materials could be taught or made available in public schools and libraries. Like so many American trends, this one is unfortunately migrating up to Canada too, with recent stories such as a [ban on books containing LGBTQ+ themes](#) by the Waterloo Catholic District School Board.

John Chrastka, executive director of [EveryLibrary](#) (a national political action committee dedicated to libraries), says that the current moves toward censorship highlight a dark legacy. “Limiting access to information, curtailing exposure to ideas, and diminishing opportunities to discover have never been best practices in education—or in civil society,” he notes. “The political regimes that practice censorship find themselves on the wrong side of history.”



Kenneth Kunz, past president and current active board member of the [International Literacy Association](#), says that attempts to remove certain books from schools prevent children from learning essential skills. “We are a globally connected community with diverse cultures, experiences, and worldviews,” he explains. “Being able to respectfully, collaboratively, and empathetically participate in such communities requires background knowledge, as well as an ability to tolerate the discomfort of different ideas or difficult history.”

### BOOK CLUBS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Amidst these rising concerns, how can educators ensure that their students have access to a rich tapestry of stories that reflect the diversity of the world around them? Book clubs emerge as a beacon of hope, offering a platform for open dialogue, critical thinking, and the celebration of varied perspectives, along with the chance to become part of a community of book lovers.

Educators also recognize the potential of book clubs to serve as catalysts for social change. From book clubs tailored for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour) students to those championing the voices of young girls, these literary gatherings go beyond the conventional, opening doors to narratives that resonate with the unique experiences of each participant. By curating reading lists that spotlight diverse authors and characters, book clubs become a force for promoting understanding, empathy, and a sense of belonging.

Tanya Marie Lee is leading the charge with her book club (and soon-to-be-launched podcast) *A Room of Your Own*, which caters to high-risk teen girls who may not be able to afford to buy their own books.

Lee holds monthly book club meetings with authors in attendance to answer questions and lead discussions. Meeting the author is an integral part of Lee’s book club. As she says, “Having the author present is always part of the mandate. The students are going to meet the author, get a sense of who the author is, and have fun, talk, and ask all sorts of crazy questions.”

The experience is reciprocal, Lee explains: “The authors love it too because they get the feedback from their intended audiences. The answers that these young women come up with, they’re just sheer brilliance. They have blown the authors away.”

At the book club’s first meeting almost seven years ago, a group of girls between the ages of 13 and 18 met the author Kelley Armstrong and discussed her YA thriller *The Masked Truth*. The young adult action thriller novel dealt with issues around mental health, which would become an important touchstone for future club meetings.

Those first book club attendees are adults now, and at a recent reunion Lee was delighted to find that reading remains a passion for them. “They’re all grown now and they’re still reading!” she exclaims. “It was really nice to hear how reading impacted their lives and how they still love reading.”

### SAFE SPACES

Beyond nurturing an appreciation for literature, Lee’s book club is creating something intangible and priceless; a safe space these girls can call their own. “Young women are taught to shrivel up and close up as much as possible,” Lee says. She explains how she instructs students before a meeting to take a deep breath and expand, claiming their space. “This is where you learn how to do it in a girl-positive space,” she says, “and if you can learn how to do it here in a safe environment, then you’ll learn to keep that knowledge and that feeling and take it to other environments. So, I always say: claim your space.”

This opportunity for vulnerability within a caring environment is vital for young people, but can mean that teens reveal sensitive information or disclose concerns about their mental health. That’s why, along with the visiting authors, Lee invites mental health care professionals to attend as well, to share advice and give information about local support services.

“The book club always addresses mental health and we do it through reading,” she says. The act of reading is self-care and can positively impact mental well-being. As Lee explains, “Literacy is a determinant of health. If you’ve had a really, really bad, tough day, the best thing possible would just be to pick up a book and start reading for at least 20 minutes and your stress levels will go down.”

### CONFIDENCE BUILDING

Signing up is the first step, but to get the most out of book clubs, students need to fully participate. This means not just reading the book, but being





confident enough to share with the group and talk about their thoughts and feelings.

Lee helps young women to grow in confidence and feel comfortable, while keeping in mind that none of us read in a vacuum and that books may affect different people in different ways. “When we read a book, we bring our lived experiences into that novel,” she notes. “We see it through our lived experiences.”

Lee herself is a bibliophile and gets just as excited as the young women in her book club when a particularly good novel comes her way. The group has recently read *Crave* by Tracy Wolff, and Lee’s enthusiasm for the book and the character of Jaxon Vega is compelling. “It just brought me back to a special moment in time when I was a teenager and reading Judy Blume’s *Forever*,” she says.

On top of that, her energy and enthusiasm for building a girl-positive community is remarkable. It’s easy to see why young women would consider her an inspirational role model for learning and reading.

### EMPOWERING STUDENTS

Any school across Canada can join the *Room of Your Own* book club virtually and soon, interviews with the authors will be available on a special *A Room of Your Own* podcast on Spotify.

As anyone working in education knows, successful learning initiatives are a team effort and Lee is quick to honour the teachers that she has collaborated with from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). “The book club teachers from the TDSB take time out [to] meet with the students and nurture them in their reading,” she says. “These are exceptional teachers and they really get to learn more about their students through the book club.”

In the face of challenges to literary freedom, book clubs stand as champions of the transformative power of storytelling. By delving into narratives that challenge preconceptions, question societal norms, and celebrate individual identities, educators can empower students to think critically and compassionately. The discussions sparked within book club settings often transcend the pages, shaping young minds and fostering a generation of readers who are not only empathetic but also equipped to navigate a complex world.

### JOIN THE CONVERSATION

From confronting censorship challenges to championing representation, book clubs can open worlds of knowledge. Check out these resources to find or create a book club for your students:

- Teachers can learn more about *A Room of Your Own* from Tanya Marie Lee at [aroomofyourownbookclub@gmail.com](mailto:aroomofyourownbookclub@gmail.com) or through its [Facebook](#) page.
- The [Love of Literature Book Club](#) is Canada’s only non-profit book club for Black youth ages 7-18.
- Apply for a grant from the [Book Love Foundation](#) to expand your classroom library. Grants of \$1,000 are available for full-time preK-12 classroom teachers in Canada or the United States.
- Visit your local library to see if they offer Book Club Kits. These come with multiple copies of the same title and sometimes include starter questions and discussion topics.
- Consider joining an educator’s book club to discuss the latest pedagogical research with other teachers, like those available at the [BCcampus Online Book Club](#) or through the [Ontario Principals’ Council](#).

**FIONA TAPP** is a former teacher and school administrator of 13 years. She writes about education, parenting, and travel for a variety of publications including *National Geographic*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Star*, the *Sunday Times*, and many more.

