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Academic gains, new ideas and empathy: What's at stake when the books students can read are restricted



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As politics move from school board meetings into classrooms, what students are taught and what they are reading has become more controversial.

Partisan battle lines were drawn in a Virginia governor's race over Toni Morrison's classic novel about a family of former slaves, "Beloved."

A Chattanooga school board member [sought to remove bestselling young adult novels like "The Hate U Give" from school library shelves](#), mirroring efforts by a Texas lawmaker to investigate more than 800 titles.

A [curriculum featuring nonfiction books](#) about seahorses, sharks and school segregation — among other topics — is being challenged in at least one Tennessee school district and in several more across the country.

Whether a child has access to a certain book at school or a school board member loses their seat in the next election aren't the only potential consequences of these literacy wars though.

Students' academic achievement is at stake when schools ban books or limit diverse literature, experts say, which can be especially troubling in a state like Tennessee, where only [about 29% of students are reading on grade level](#).

When students aren't engaged with what they are reading, [it affects their ability to learn to read](#), develop stronger language skills and grow to love reading, according to educators and academic experts.

Even whether kids learn to be empathetic or to think critically about their own lives, society and others could be threatened.

Stephanie Fine, a third-grade teacher at Norman Binkley Elementary School in Nashville, believes students can "build understanding and empathy for others through literature."

They also should have the opportunity to see both themselves and others in books.

"They are seeing that there are different family structures, seeing that through a book or a character that there are circumstances outside or different from [their] own," Fine said.

Teaching English language learners to read: [How afterschool reading clubs help English learners grow to love reading in Nashville schools](#)

"I think the elementary school classroom is a great place for that to start. To know, 'I am loved and supported and cared for exactly who I am and my ideas matter and my voice matters, and if my voice matters, your voice matters too.'"

But without being able to engage students with the books they're reading and the lessons they're learning, without exposing them to a range of ideas and perspectives that can become more challenging, educators say.

Cultivating a love for reading

Carter Adell sits on his knees on his chair, leaning over his desk in Fine's classroom at Norman Binkley Elementary.

Adell's classmate, Montrice Battle, stands beside him, bouncing from foot to foot.

"Tell me about some of the inventions that let people explore the ocean and learn more about sharks," Fine asks, pointing to a page in the book, "Shark Attack" by Cathy East Dubowski, that the class has been reading.

"How is the chain mail suit similar to another invention we've read about before?"

The boys burst with answers and observations. "Ooh ooh!" they exclaim, remembering reading about the heavy metal contraptions early divers tried to use.

"Jacques' was heavier! It was harder to move around in," Montrice explains as Fine's eyes brighten.

The class has been studying the ocean, reading various books about sea animals and underwater exploration. Many of the books have been nonfiction, like "The Fantastic Undersea Life of Jacques Cousteau" that Montrice referenced.

This is an English language arts class, not a science class. Fine's goal is for her students to learn the content, but even more so she wants them to be engaged in what they are reading, to draw connections to what they are learning. Most of all, she wants them be excited about it.

"If a child is not drawn into reading at a young age, it tends to be harder to engage them over time if they haven't had successful and engaging experiences with literacy over the years," said Laura Kelly, an assistant professor of elementary literacy at Rhodes College in Memphis. "We want kids to read a lot and they will usually do that only when they want to."

That means providing engaging books about topics that kids want to learn about or can relate to. Research shows students who can see themselves in books are often more engaged.

Research also shows the consequences of not learning to read well can be dire. Third graders who are not learning at grade level are among the most likely to never graduate high school at all, leading to a lifetime of ramifications.

A long-term study by the American Educational Research Association and released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in 2010, found that students who were not proficient in reading by the end of third grade were four times more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers.

The books the students have read so far in Norman Binley's ocean unit aren't controversial, though a Tennessee parent did question whether third-graders were too young to learn about shark attacks during a Williamson County school board meeting this fall.

Learning to read amid COVID-19: [Students are struggling to read behind masks and screens during COVID-19, but 'expectations are no different'](#)

But the books are part of a larger curriculum, rolled out this year in Metro Nashville Public Schools, that has faced criticism in Tennessee and beyond.

Most of these books don't tackle hard topics or feature diverse perspectives or a wide array of human identities. But many of the books Fine hopes her students read do. She [carefully cultivates her classroom library](#) to include everything from books about cars and science to books about being caring and kind or a book about a little girl of color learning to love her hair.

Other books in the curriculum, like "Ruby Bridges Goes to School" and a book about Latino efforts to integrate Los Angeles public schools in the 1970s, have drawn the ire of parents across Tennessee. In neighboring Williamson County, [the school district is considering removing some of these books from their classrooms altogether](#).

It's part of the ongoing national culture war taking place in classrooms and school libraries, as conservative lawmakers capitalize on parent concerns that schools are indoctrinating their children.

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"I worry a little bit about this movement to restrict and to censor and constrain because I think what happens is when we get these limited representations and we continue to try and sanitize what's available in school, that limits the opportunity for us to grow as people," said Susan L. Groenke, professor of English education and director of the Center for Children's and Young Adult Literature at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville.

Censoring literature doesn't align with Fine's own goals as a teacher.

Books can build empathy, open-mindedness in addition to knowledge

When her students leave her classroom, Fine hopes they will know that their ideas and voice matters — and so do their classmates.

"It's a real gift that at a younger age, kids can cultivate that personal identity and be proud of who they are and see themselves in the [books] and then they can also know there are people that are different and that's not something to be scared about but that's something really cool," she said. "Because we are all global citizens and we all learn and work together."

"You can build understanding and empathy for others through literature," Fine said.

Books that feature diverse characters or unique family structures can serve as both mirrors and windows for students, either reflecting their own lives or helping them learn that "there are circumstances outside or different from their own," she said.

Academic experts agree.

"Books might actually be one of the few places left where young people might be able to meet people unlike themselves, where they might be able to live vicariously in someone else's experience and see how they are unlike in a lot of ways as well as what they have in common," Groenke said.

White students often have plenty of "mirrors," or [books featuring or written by someone like them](#), Groenke said. Only about 13% of young adult literature published annually features predominantly characters of color or are written by writers of color.

So all students need to be able to see themselves in literature first to be engaged, she said.

A 2013 study, "[Engagement With Young Adult Literature: Outcomes and Processes](#)," by University of Wisconsin–Madison professor Gay Ivey looked at the impact reading had on students, especially when they were able to choose what they wanted to read.

The research showed that students are often more engaged when they have a choice and that that students who are engaged, voracious readers often report a stronger sense of moral and social agency and the belief that they can make a difference.

"Reading fiction cultivates empathy, that is a thing that we know and being able to explore a wide variety of ideas from fiction is really engaging for kids," Kelly said.

Beyond building empathy, literature can offer differing viewpoints or even challenge your ideas about the world, Kelly said.

She said he believes that has always been the function of public schools.

"It has never been the role of public school to reinforce everything you already think. The role of public school is to teach you a wide berth of ideas and authors and develop your own thinking capacity," she said.

"Because students need to know the truth about things that have happened and are happening. They need to be able to engage diverse ideas, including ideas that differ from their own and their parents' ideas."

But Groenke counters that the efforts to exclude certain topics or perspectives from the classroom aren't new to public education, either.

"Public education in this country has always been about maintaining, to some extent, white supremacy," she said.

'American exceptionalism': Gov. Bill Lee calls for teaching 'unapologetic American exceptionalism,' draws backlash

Critical race theory ban: TN schools chief faces pressure over curriculum as group files first complaint under new critical race theory law

Tackling uncomfortable topics through literature

Conservative parents, Republican lawmakers and others say they aren't afraid of diverse perspectives though. Instead, they insist that books and instructional materials must be age-appropriate. Some point to the violence in stories about the civil rights movement or the language and adult themes in some children's literature as the problem.

In a complaint filed over the curriculum used in Williamson County, Moms for Liberty, a conservative parent group, raised concerns about how second-grade students learned about American history, especially the civil rights movement.

The complaint, filed with the Tennessee Department of Education, objected to "high level of manipulation being inflicted upon the young minds of impressionable second graders who do not yet have the level of maturity or capacity to think critically."

Parents have gone to state lawmakers with their worries, too. "Materials used in our schools must be age-appropriate & historically accurate," state Senate Majority Leader Jack Johnson, R-Franklin, said in a June tweet thanking parents for engaging on the topic.

A concerned parent in Texas [told the Los Angeles Times](#) that her efforts to restrict books in school libraries were not censorship but the same as keeping kids away from inappropriate material on the internet.

Lawmakers in Tennessee and across the nation have [made it more difficult for teachers to teach about race or racism](#). Tennessee, like Texas and other states, [passed a law this spring banning certain topics from the classroom](#), like the idea that an individual might be "inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive" because of their race or sex or that might cause a person "discomfort or other psychological distress" because of their race or sex.

Books like those about the civil rights movement or Ruby Bridges might cause some discomfort for some students for myriad reasons, but Kelly said some topics should make everyone feel uncomfortable.

"We've been teaching about Jim Crow, about slavery, about civil rights for some time...it should make everyone uncomfortable," she said. "This is an effort at censorship to restrict students' access to knowledge about things that did happen and things that are still happening and a lot of things that are still happening appears [to be an attempt to whitewash history and whitewash current events](#)."

Teaching American history: [Tennesseans tackle tough subjects like slavery, segregation in the classroom using local context, living history](#)

Tennessee lawmakers also tried to [restrict curriculum or materials surrounding LGBTQ ideas from the classroom this year](#), eventually passing a law that requires school districts to notify parents in advance of any instruction related to sexual orientation and/or gender identity [so parents have the choice to opt their children out of the lesson](#).

But Groenke said students are going to learn about controversial topics anyway.

"These things are in our media — racism, sexism, gender identity, all of these things aren't not around us not because we aren't reading about them," she said.

Young people are going to figure it out on their own, so it might as well happen in a safe environment with age-appropriate materials and adults "who care about them and want the best for them," she said.

Instead of the first instinct being that a child shouldn't read a book, Kelly and Groenke agree educators and parents can use these opportunities to engage with kids, talk about what they're reading and learn together.

Kelly said most teachers and parents have a common goal — for their children to read.

"We want the child to learn to read, we want the child to want to read, we want the child to learn what other kids are learning across the country," Kelly said.

And one of the first steps to that is getting the student to open the book.

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