

MONTANA EDUCATION:
BOOK CHALLENGES AND EDUCATIONAL CENSORSHIP

by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this three-article dissertation to my beloved husband, Jacque, and our current woof pack: Badger, Watson, Blue, and Sylvie. For the past few years, we've experienced heart ache as we've grieved the loss of our previous woofs. Not only has Jacque endlessly supported me during my career change, coaching career, and doctoral journey, he's also uplifted me during times of sorrow. We will always hold a special place in our hearts for them: Kodda, Jasper, Mage, Sherlock, Annie, Nala, and Jazzi.

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ABSTRACT

This three-article dissertation examines the current sociopolitical phenomenon of book bans, challenges, and educational censorship within Montana's public education system. This research fills a gap within the current body of research by examining the phenomenon in a rural, Republican community. The three articles that encompass this dissertation examine the phenomenon from different perspectives.

The first article examines the perspectives of five current high school teachers. Through interviews and novel analysis, this study illuminates the value clash between pedagogical choices and parental rights. Each participant also shared a novel they felt needed to belong within their curriculum despite facing book bans and challenges in other districts.

The second article articulates the views of administrators, in-classroom ELA teachers, and librarians to determine if there were similar perspectives on how their individual district handles formal and in-formal book challenges. Despite not reaching a clear consensus between the three groups, this research illuminated the district's need to make choices to help support all employees during the sociopolitical phenomenon.

The third article tracked two pieces of legislation through the last Montana legislative session. While one failed, one passed. After a key word analysis on the legislation, the research looked at potential effects and outcomes on public education.

Collectively these pieces synthesize the research on educators, administrators, and public education to provide a comprehensive understanding on how book bans and challenges impact public education. It concludes by offering an insight into future policy changes necessary to help educator those working within public education.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION OF UNIFYING TOPIC

The 2021 Montana Legislative Session passed Senate Bill (SB) 99. Known as 20-7-120, Excused Absences from Curriculum Requirements—Notice—Prohibited Activities, this legislation drastically redefined the term “human sexuality” within Montana’s educational system. The law set parameters for required parental notification of any “human sexuality instruction” at least 48 hours in advanced and provided a broad definition to “human sexuality instruction.” Since the enforcement of 20-7-120 began, previous book challenges across Montana school districts—*Lawn Boy*, *Gender Queer*, *The Marrow Thieves*, and *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*—have quoted the law and articulated that all four novels contain sexually explicit material. In 2025, the law changed to an expanded definition of human sexuality, added identity instruction, a shorter time frame for parental notification, and the ability for parents to file written complaints on teachers who teach “human sexuality” and “identity instruction” without parental notification. The challenging and banning of books, a form of censorship, restricts students’ access to information, limits curriculum choices, and hinders intellectual growth and skills including critical thinking. Nationwide, the implementation of laws similar to 20-7-120 further promote book challenges and bans.

This chapter aims to provide context for the current sociopolitical phenomenon concerning book challenges and bans. Even though educational censorship is not new, it has seen a recent surge within conservative communities and legislative bodies. With historical, legal, and social contexts behind this phenomenon, the promotion of this censorship limits the Freedom to

Read for students in both libraries and classrooms. This phenomenon limits and impacts an educator's curriculum and pedagogical choices, what librarians purchase for their schools, and what students have access to. Three different studies will unpack those choices, educator's and in-building administrator's perspectives, and attempt to uncover what the future might hold from recent legislative changes.

Historical Background on Book Bans

Dr. Judith F. Krug served as the Director of the American Library Association's (ALA) Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) beginning in 1967 and helped found the Freedom to Read Foundation in 1969 (American Library Association, 2025). The OIF and Freedom to Read Foundation both strive to help fight against the growing educational censorship challenges known as book bans through education, support, and training. Pen America (2025), a non-profit organization that upholds the Freedom to Read and Write, defines a book ban as an "action taken against a book based on its content...[from] parent or community challenges, administrative decisions, or in response to...lawmakers or other governmental officials, that leads to a previously accessible book being either completely removed...or where access...is restricted or diminished." In essence, a book ban limits a student's reading choices because of other individuals' personal beliefs or opinions on a text. Many book bans begin because the content is considered controversial or inappropriate.

Historically, book banning spans across multiple decades and countries. In 1982, Dr. Krug established Banned Book Week; her goal was to highlight books that faced bans across districts and libraries to support the author's work (Lee, 2023). Over 40 years later, schools and

libraries across the United States celebrate Banned Book Week by highlighting classic and contemporary novels that have faced book bans including *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Hunger Games*, and even *Captain Underpants* (American Library Association, 2020). Dr. Krug's mission of upholding students' freedom to read and choice reading continues to face challenges even in 2025.

The history of book banning has been traced back to the eras of early colonialism, the Civil War, and even the early 1920s. One of the most famous incidents of book banning took place in Nazi Germany during World War II. Adolf Hitler censored any and all material that did not align with Nazi Party values and opinions. On May 10, 1933, Nazi student groups burned over "25,000 volumes of 'un-German' books" (United States Holocaust Museum, 2025). The Nazi groups targeted works that tainted German language, literature, and nationalism. This included pieces written by Karl Marx, Ernest Hemingway, Jack London, and Helen Keller (United States Holocaust Museum, 2025). The fear of knowledge and ideas from books did not remain isolated to Nazi Germany. From the 1940s to the mid-1950s, the scare of communism sparked an uproar in the United States. In September 1940, Dr. Harold Ordway Rugg, a Columbia University professor and author, found his textbook on U.S. history called "communistic." Soon, several school districts banned Rugg's books, and in Binghamton, N.Y., Superintendent Daniel J. Kelly demanded the book's removal from the library after board members proposed a public book burning (Book Burning, 1940). Written work continued to become challenged across several libraries. New York City's public school board voted to non-renew a subscription to *The Nation* because of articles published by Paul Blanshard who criticized Catholicism (The Press: The Bans, 1948).

Then, in July 1953, the American Library Association announced their stance on “the freedom to read” (The Freedom to Read, 1953). Within their statement, they spoke on the dangers of censorship and affirmed that the role of publishers and librarians is to “make available the widest diversity of views and expressions....No group has the right to...impose its own concepts of politics or morality upon other members of a democratic society” (The Freedom to Read, 1953, p. 63-64). The same year, Ray Bradbury published *Fahrenheit 451*: a dystopian novel in which firemen start fires to remove books. The protagonist, Guy Montag, a traditional dystopian protagonist, changes throughout the novel becoming disturbed about the restriction of books and free thinking within his society. Bradbury, a critic of technology, said, “Leaders in various countries are scared of books because books teach things they don’t want have taught. Well, if you know how to read, you have a complete education about life” (National Endowment for the Arts, 2010). Despite its publication 72 years ago, the symbolism in *Fahrenheit 451* rings true in 2025. In fact, *Fahrenheit 451* may be more of a reality today than ever before.

In 1982, the Supreme Court gave its first decision concerning banned books. In 1976, a group of students sued the Island Trees School District (Long Island, NY) after the school board removed a collection of novels from the library. Originally, the board appointed a book review committee to determine if a collection of novels should remain; their final report claimed that five novels should be retained (*The Fixer*, *Laughing Boy*, *Black Boy*, *Go Ask Alice*, and *Best Short Stories* by Negro Writers), two removed (*The Naked Ape* and *Down these Mean Streets*), could not come to a decision on two (*Soul on Ice* and *A Hero Ain’t Nothing but a Sandwich*), took no position on *A Reader for Writers* and recommended that *Slaughter House Five* be allowed with parental consent (*Board of Education v. Pico*, 1982). Despite the committee’s

recommendation, the board ended up removing all 11 texts. A group of students, led by Steven Pico, decided to sue based on an infringement of their First Amendment rights. After making its way to the Supreme Court, the decision came down to a 5-4 vote in favor of Pico.

From *Brown v. Louisiana*, a school library is known as ““a place dedicated to quiet, to knowledge, and to beauty”” (*Board of Education v. Pico*, 1982). *Keyishian v. Board of Regents* decided that ““students must always remain free to inquire, to study and to evaluate, to gain new maturity and understanding”” (*Board of Education v. Pico*, 1982). The ruling in favor of Pico ultimately landed on the premise that these specific novels were found only in the library; students were given a choice on reading these novels. Since the ruling, school districts have continued to face challenges brought forth by students, parents, and stakeholders, but for 43 years, nothing escalated to the Supreme Court until *Mahmoud v. Taylor* (2025). The Supreme Court decided it will rule if a group of “Maryland parents can opt to have their children exempted from LGBTQ-themed storybooks” (Howe, 2025). On June 27, 2025, the court ruled 6-3 in favor of the parents. Justice Alito wrote the court’s opinion: “parents seek here is not the right to micromanage the public school curriculum, but rather to have their children opt out of a particular education requirement” (*Mahmoud v. Taylor*, 2025, p. 40). Therefore, parents and guardians have the right to opt children out of curriculum that infringes upon their religious beliefs.

The 2023-2024 school year historically had the highest recorded number of books banned and challenged year with over 10,000 books removed from public schools. These bans stemmed from legislative changes, stakeholders addressing school boards advocating for removals of specific books, and even through soft censorship or the removal of material out of fear (Pen

America, 2025). Yet the question remains, where did it all begin? When did these changes within the status quo start?

The Latin term *in loco parentis* means “in place of a parent” and has a rather long historical prevalence within K-12 education (Rumel, 2013). Many interpretations of *in loco parentis* have focused on the legal, power rights of schools and teachers: “One of the most sacred duties of parents, is to train up and qualify their children, for becoming...virtuous members of society...The teacher is the substitute of the parent” (*State v. Pendergrass* cited in Rumel, 2013). Many court cases have used *in loco parentis* to support the actions done by the school: *New Jersey v. T. L. O.* (1985), *Vernonia School District 47J v. Acton* (1995), and *Garcia v. City of New York* (1996). Despite the trust in school personnel to act on behalf of the parents, parental rights groups advocate for their fundamental right to raise their own child as they see fit (Parental Rights Foundation, 2018). In 2000, *Troxel v. Granville* changed how the courts determined parental rights. The US Supreme Court ruled that under the Fourteenth Amendment (which grants power to the states) parents have the right to make decisions about the “care, custody, and control of their children” (*Troxel v. Granville*, 2000). This meant there was no federal legislature that ensured parental rights, but instead, opened the door for states to write and mandate their own laws so long as they did not infringe upon federal rights under the Constitution. Fast forward 25 years, 20 states now define and protect parental rights (Parentalrights.org, 2025).

In 2020, schools shut down across the nation to combat and prevent the spread of the Coronavirus (Covid-19). While students engaged in distance learning, parental figures took on a new role: teachers. In April 2020, the Network for Public Education surveyed both teachers and

parents in order to determine how well they were adjusting to the shift of online learning after schools shut down (Strauss, 2020). By and large, most had difficulties adjusting: 50% of teachers said the adjustments was difficult, and 22% of parents articulated that their children were struggling. A commonly reported challenge was parents with multiple children: Khanh-Lien Banko, a mother of four children, explained that she and her husband struggled at “juggling to keep their children on task, while working remotely from home” (Strauss, 2020). Throughout the pandemic, there was a nationwide concern about keeping students academically on track existed. Mifsud’s (2021) research found that parents struggled to take on multiple tasks: a full-time job while home-schooling children. These roles often lead to feelings of failure and parental burnout. Covid-19 transformed parental engagement, both positively and negatively, within education. While some became supportive of their student’s academic journey, others chose to become more restrictive. Upon returning to in-person education, the formation of parental rights groups began as they advocated for specific restrictions. This ultimately led to unfolding changes within school districts’ policies many of which originated from state legislative sessions that were supported by parental rights advocates.

From 2021 to 2025, state by state, legislation proposals have or are taking place to help secure parental rights within education. Many of these changes are driven by the ideological differences between the left and the right. It all started in 2022 with national coverage on Florida House of Representatives’ HB 1557—Parental Rights in Education. The bill, signed by Governor DeSantos, placed restrictions on educators’ ability to contact a parent regarding the “mental, emotional, or physical health of well-being and the school’s ability to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for the student” (Parents Right in Education, 2022). Despite

the good intentions of HB 1557, hidden in Section 1.3 was verbiage concerning sexual orientation, making Florida the first state to enact legislature specifically mentioning “sexual orientation” and “gender identity:”

Classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards (Parents Right in Education, 2022).

HB 1557 became infamously known as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill. Historically, this bill acted as the first of many legislative pieces that would further shape not only parental rights in education but further promote a hidden agenda of educational censorship through the promotion of book banning and challenges. Even though Florida was not the first state to enact similar policies, its vague language and curriculum restrictions ignited a nationwide conversation. This conversation helped in nationally recognizing the parental rights group, Moms For Liberty. Florida currently leads as the state with the highest number of books banned: 4,561 books across 33 districts (Tanwar, 2025).

Iowa’s book ban count continues to rise with 3,671 books banned across 117 districts. Many of the bans from Iowa come after a legal battle over Senate File 496 that prohibits “instruction related to gender identity and sexual orientation...in kindergarten through sixth grade” (An Act Relating to Children and Students, 2023). Despite being a part of two federal lawsuits since 2023, Senate File 496 has finally gained some clarity. The Iowa Board of Education unanimously approved rules concerning school library programs. First, schools must have a list of all books available for students and update at least twice a year. Second, they must only contain “age-appropriate materials, and that supports the student achievement goals of the total school curriculum” (2023). Third, school libraries need to “exercise reasonable physical,

administrative and technological controls to ensure that students have access to age-appropriate materials” (2023). Finally, schools cannot provide curriculum related to “gender identity or sexual orientation to students in kindergarten through grade six” (2023). According to the law, violations for not removing a book could result in a hearing and disciplinary action from the Iowa Board of Educational Examiners (Hernandez & Morris, 2025). Both federal lawsuits, one filed from Penguin Random House publishing and the other on behalf of Iowa Safe Schools, argue that the law is unconstitutional. U.S. District Judge Stephen Locher, who originally blocked portions of the law, said, “12 months ago I agreed with you [the plaintiffs], and the Eighth Circuit said I did it wrong and reversed me, so I’m not sure how sending it back up with similar reasoning will be any more persuasive to them” (Hernandez & Morris, 2025).

In 2024, Utah House of Representatives introduced Sensitive Material Review Amendment (2024) for section 53G-10-103—Sensitive instructional materials. Key pieces of this amendment included the definition for both objective and subjective sensitive material that “constitutes pornographic or indecent material,” and therefore, prohibited within school settings. If an allegation comes forward about specific material, the Local Education Agency (LEA) removes the material until a decision can be made about its accessibility for students. In addition, if three school districts (or two public schools and five charter schools) agree that the same material is inappropriate, the Utah State Board of Education decides to “remove a given material from student access statewide” (Sensitive Material Review Amendments, 2024).

On January 24, 2025, the Office of Communications and Outreach (OCO) gave a press release concerning the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) announcement for a dismissal of 11 complaints concerning the “Biden book ban hoax.” In 2024,

President Biden appointed a book ban coordinator within the OCR to help develop “guidance and training to deter schools from limiting student access to sexually graphic or racially divide books by claiming these efforts may contribute to a hostile environment that may violate students’ civil rights” (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). Now under President Trump, the OCR and attorneys reviewed several book banning cases and ultimately determined that book banning is not taking place. Instead, school districts and stakeholders “have established common sense processes by which to evaluate and remove age-inappropriate materials” (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). In response, several organizations including the ALA, Pen America, and We Need Diverse Books posted their own statements, several through social media. The ALA (2025) said, “Book bans are real.” We Need Diverse Books (2025) responded with “a quarter of school librarians now report experiencing harassment over books or displays in their library” and “there is power in a diverse story, and we all benefit from reading them—because diverse books are for everyone.” Pen America (2025) shared “shocking statistics” of over 16,000 school book bans over the last three years.

Understanding Book Challenges and Book Bans

The ALA (2016) defines a banning as “the removal of those materials” that have been challenged “based upon the objections of a person or group.” The motives behind a challenge vary but often claim the material is “sexually explicit; contained offensive language; was unsuited to any age group” (American Library Association, 2016). Book challenges and bans target both classroom curriculum and libraries. When a book is banned from a library, it is also

banned from curriculum but not always the reverse. However, in today's sociopolitical phenomenon, banned books appear to be removed from both the library and curriculum usage.

Over the last several decades, the ALA tracked the top 100 challenged books for each decade. From 1990-1999, the *Scary Stories* series by Alvin Schwartz ranked number one; 2000-2009, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series was the most challenged; and from 2010-2019, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie topped the list of most challenged books (American Library Association, 2013; 2020). In 2022, the ALA documented the 13 most challenged books which included the graphic novel *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe, and in 2024, it continued as the country's most challenged book for three consecutive years despite earning the Alex Award for best YAL in 2020 and a Stonewall Book award (Italie, 2024). Organization, including Pen America, continue to track the increase in book banning only to find trends that novels written by or featuring LGBTQ+, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color), and depictions of sex continue as a target for book banning rhetoric. During the 2023-2024 school year, 10,046 books were banned across the United States (Pen America, 2025). The most commonly banned novel during the 2023-2024 school year was Jodi Picoult's *Nineteen Minutes*: a retelling of a school shooting through multiple perspectives (Pen America, 2024). Violent content, both in fiction and non-fiction, continues into 2025 as a reason behind book challenges. Even though challenged and banned novels change each year, they continue to encompass those specific themes.

Young adult literature (YAL) consisted of 60% of the most banned titles in 2023-2024 (Pen America, 2024). Amongst these novels, literary themes of grief, sex-related topics, substance use, mental health, and self-esteem were all found. YAL holds a place within

education to engage and motivate young readers through relatable characters and context (Gibbons et al., 2006; Rybakova et al., 2013). A recent study used Andrew Dado's novel *One Step*, about a 15-year old boy who faces mental health struggles, within a 10th grade English classroom to help explore the impacts of bullying to build empathy and understand feelings of humility, sadness, and shame (Shephard & Garrison, 2024). Another, focused on how preservice teachers used YA literature as a tool for students to define individuality, especially students apart of the LGBTQ+ community (Batchelor et al., 2018). Teachers have used YAL to help students in building critical consciousness and to advocate for social justice education (Styslinger et al., 2019). The ability to utilize YAL within education becomes restricted within specific districts that book bans take place; these restrictions impact curriculum and pedagogical choices for both classrooms and libraries.

Book bans happen through several avenues but often begin as a challenge. The most common challenge is done through a student, parent, or stakeholder complaint towards curriculum material or a library book. Depending on the complaint, the concern can be addressed and fixed through an alternative text for the student. These are known as informal challenges and often left undocumented. However, at specific times these complaints become elevated and brought forth to a school board for permanent removal of material from curriculum or the library. These formal book bans and challenges consume the board's time and often force the establishment of smaller committees in order to reach a final decision. These formal bans and challenges are documented through school board agenda minutes and sometimes tracked by local news outlets. The data from the 2023-2024 school year articulates that only 44% of books were banned pending an investigation, meaning that it went through a formal book challenge. 13%

were banned by restriction either by grade or school level. Then, 43% of book bans were completely prohibited from students without a review; someone chose to remove the book (Pen America, 2024).

However, books also become banned through other means. Soft censorship is when individuals decide to censor material out of fear (Pen America, 2016). After administrators, teachers, and librarians notice an increase in complaints on particular materials, they chose to remove them from their own schools, classrooms, and libraries; this is soft censorship. Some of these removals also happen in response to recent legislature changes. Unfortunately, data only provides estimates. Removals from soft censorship are almost impossible to track.

Even though book banning is not new, the exponential growth started in 2021. This phenomenon is driven by politics, political and social groups, and stakeholders, and therefore, is known as a sociopolitical phenomenon: an event with the combination of social and political attributes. The division of social groups based on jobs (those within education versus those not), race (primarily BIPOC), sex (mostly those within LGBTQ+), and even religious beliefs bleed their way into the political divide.

Many of the political moves to further promote the phenomenon stem from Republican Party members upholding parental rights. For example, Matt Krause, a Texas Republican state representative, sent a memorandum to schools asking them to identify specific novels that could be found within libraries or classrooms that contained topics of “human sexuality...or contain material that might make students feel discomfort, guilt, anguish...because of their race or sex” (Krause, 2021). Georgia’s Republican Governor, Brian Kemp, attended an education roundtable to discuss the removal of eight books (including LGBTQ+ novel *All Boys Aren’t Blue* and *The*

Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison's, a Black author, in which he shared that as a parent he was concerned about their sexually explicit content (Simms, 2022). In Iowa, House File 271, introduced by Republican Helena Hayes, would remove exemptions from obscenity laws for both public libraries and schools; many claimed that the bill would help in removing books that contain sexually explicit material or that focused on LGBTQ+ content (Opsahl, 2025). Montana Republican John Fuller introduced SB 299 which would require parents to opt-in their child into any instruction that includes gender roles, identity, expression, or sexual orientation (An Act Generally Revising Laws Regarding Parental Involvement in a Child's Education, 2025).

On the other hand, some states are doing all they can to ensure the phenomenon does not leave lasting impacts. Illinois Democratic Governor, Jay Pritzker, signed HB2789 in 2023. The bill protects libraries from political and legislative attacks that aim to promote censorship; through the adoption of the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights, Illinois libraries shall protect books and resources (Albanese, 2023). California passed AB 1078 which bans book bans in schools and restricts the censorship of material. In California, Democrat Gavin Newsome signed the bill that also prohibits school boards from banning material that provides inclusive and diverse perspectives (2023). Minnesota's Democratic Governor, Tim Walz, also signed a bill prohibiting book bans throughout public, university, and school libraries that attempt to remove pieces based on opinions (Bailey, 2024). The political pendulum swings back and forth as one party attempts to censor while the other prevents.

Despite wins in several states, what ultimately promotes these acts of censorship is the support from sociopolitical groups, primarily Moms for Liberty. Often under the banner of protecting parental rights, Moms for Liberty members find themselves as elected officials to

school boards, advocates within their community, and proponents or opponents of legislation. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center (2025), Moms for Liberty endorsed over 500 school board candidates in 2022. They've advocated and supported Republican nominations including President Trump, Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis, and introduced and passed several state legislative bills aiming to protect parental rights (Swenson et al., 2024). Most infamously was their support in Florida's HB 1557—Parental Rights in Education—and its amendment in 2023 (Florida Phoenix, 2023). As a nonprofit organization, Moms for Liberty articulated that their goal is “dedicated to fighting for the survival of America by unifying, educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights” (Moms for Liberty, 2025). However, members have stated the groups anti-LGBTQ+ stance and activism against anything they consider to be “woke.” On February 26, 2025, Moms for Liberty posted “Can school librarians with radical beliefs harm students? YES.” And on February 17, 2025, they posted “members from all over the country are diligently working to expose the impacts of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies, woke curriculum, and professional development training...The advocacy of ‘Joyful Warriors’ is revolutionizing education, and the future looks bright.” In their opinion, a bright future does not include inclusion for all students despite race, ethnicity, gender, or sex.

The future of educational censorship remains uncertain. As of now, limited research exists from the recent phenomenon. How are teachers, currently working within the field, adapting to the changing power systems of education? What power do stakeholders have over those working within education? How do teachers and administrators perceive these challenges? As more districts face these challenges, more voices are becoming published. However, many of

these voices come from states leading these challenges: Florida, Iowa, Texas. Even though only a few school districts within Montana have faced formal book challenges, it does not mean these challenges do not exist. This research aims to illuminate many different challenges during this sociopolitical time period by illuminating perspectives from both educators and administrators, as well as analyzing potential changes from the Montana legislation.

Overview of The Unifying Topic & Subsidiary Ideas

The broader theme unifying this research is the sociopolitical phenomenon of educational censorship conducted primarily through book bans. In order to better understand the density of the topic, Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory provides a theoretical framework in which the phenomenon can be understood and researched on multiple levels as it directly impacts (or changes) the individual. The complex system consists of five contexts: micro, meso, eco, macro, and chrono. Each of these levels ultimately shape the individual on their daily actions, values, and ideas.

At the microsystem, an individual is directly impacted daily through relationships, family, friendships, career, and community members; the meso system understands how those entities interact with one another. For example, the educator is directly impacted by school relationships and their immediate family. The mesosystem focuses on how those two groups (school relationships and immediate family) interact with one another to further influence the individual (the educator). The ecosystem consists of changes from larger entities that the individual does not engage with on a daily basis. The educator may shape their pedagogical choices from published research and changes from school board policies and procedures. Socio-

political groups, media, and legislation leave educators choosing what topics and ideas they wish to share with their students. Do they address topics concerning social justice? Or avoid them all together? Then, the macrosystem contains cultural and social norms, cultural changes, and political beliefs that trickle down throughout the different systems. The political and societal views of a culture impacts who a community might vote for an election (national, local, school board, etc.) which then changes how policies and bills take shape. Slowly, those changes find their way into classrooms. See Appendix B for a visual representation of the system.

Montana's response to the phenomenon might appear slower than other states, but it is just as important. School districts across the state face book challenges, amend school policies, and address vocal stakeholders from the community. Laurel Public Schools removed six books from their high school library for "graphic sex and violence" (Webb, 2024). In 2024, Bozeman Public Schools denied a challenge against Sherman Alexie's novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* for language, sexual content, and anti-Catholicism (Bouman, 2024). The same individual challenged Charlie Demaline's *The Marrow Thieves* for similar reasons: language, sexual content, and anti-Catholicism. Bozeman Public Schools also denied this challenge (Rosenbaum, 2023). Billings Public Schools faced multiple challenges the past few years against novels including *Lawn Boy*, *Gender Queer*, and *Assassination Classroom* (Ackerman, 2022; Palmer, 2024). Clancy Elementary School Board faced community resentment when it approved to keep the book *Jack, not Jackie* for "not protecting children" from gender identity (Tapia, 2024). Kalispell library policies faced significant changes that would simplify the process of removing books (ACLU, 2022). These challenges create a public

divide: those promoting censorship versus those maintaining freedom of choice. School boards are revisiting their book selection process with the hope of minimizing future challenges.

In many Republican states, including Montana, education legislation has significantly played a role in the phenomenon. Montana passed 20-7-120, Excused Absences from Curriculum Requirements—Notice—Prohibited Activities, giving parents the ability to remove their children from instruction and curriculum that involves human sexuality. This includes addressing “intimate relationships, human sexual anatomy...sexual orientations [or] gender identity” (Excused absences from curriculum requirements, 2021). During the 2023 legislation session, Montana amended 45-8-201, Obscenity, to allow school districts to enact policies to prohibit obscenity. Obscenity is defined as “a representation or description of perverted ultimate sexual acts...normal ultimate sexual acts...description of masturbation, excretory factors, or lewd exhibition of genitals” (Obscenity, 2023). While there is a clause for “artistic, literary, scientific, educational, or other merits,” a loophole regarding who defines those merits remains up for interpretation. Now, school districts are rewriting policies for library and curriculum material to add the definition of obscenity, and stakeholders quote these laws during book challenges. The rise in book challenges, bans, and overall censorship across the nation pushes individuals to pick a side in the debate, to take action, and even publicly run for election.

The three manuscripts proposed all connect to the phenomenon: book challenges, bans, and educational censorship. Each article focuses on a different layer and area within the phenomenon.

The first article, “The Educator’s Pedagogical Dilemma: A Critical Ethnography During a Book Challenging Phenomenon,” illuminates the current perspectives and challenges of five

teachers within a singular school district. With book challenges targeting novels, these teachers decided to keep specific novels within the classroom curriculum despite their controversial nature: *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, *Ready Player One*, and *Kite Runner*. From Montana 20-7-120, the content of all three novels requires these educators to offer their students alternative choices if they choose to opt out. From language, sexually explicit material, and identity, each novel contains a rationale for challenging, and in fact, all three have been challenged or banned in other districts. Despite this, these educators find purpose within these texts and continue to advocate for them within their classrooms.

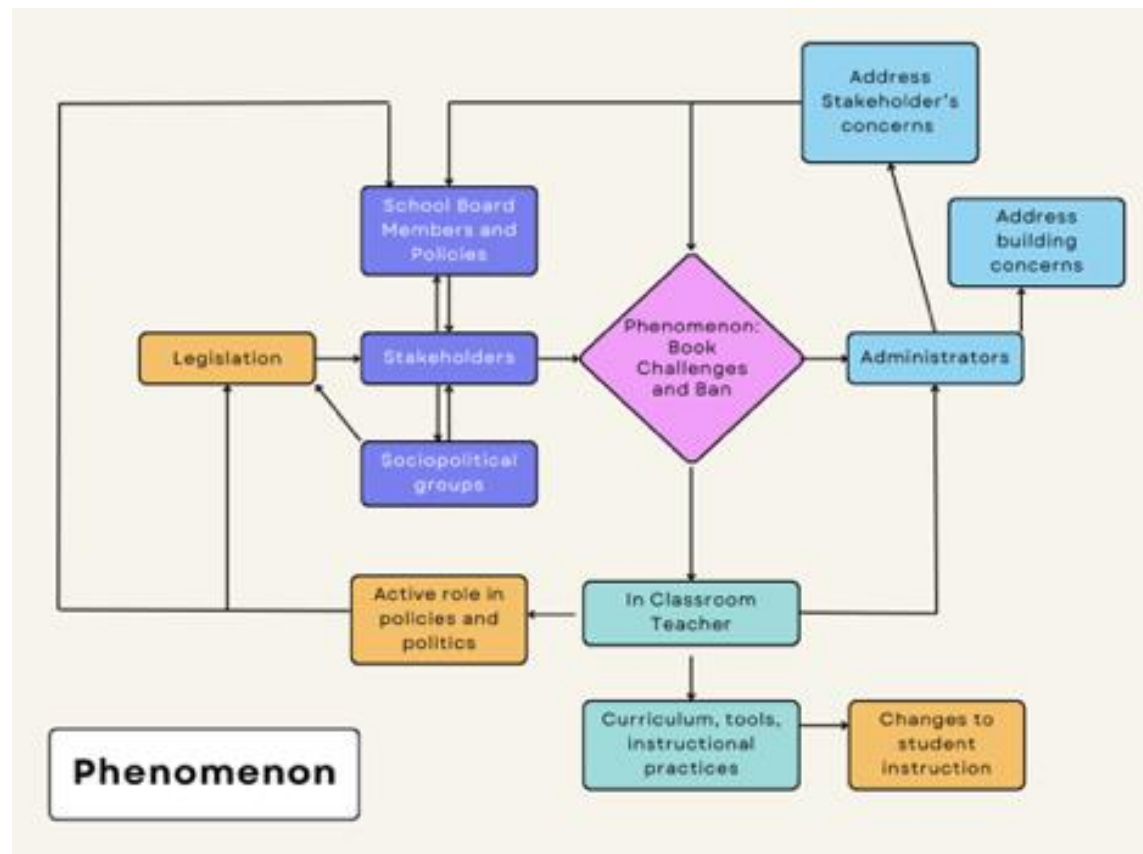
The second article, “An Insight into Educational Censorship: The Perspectives and Responsibilities of Administrators and Educators During Heightened Book Challenges,” investigates the dual perspectives of administrators and educators currently working within a school district that has previously faced book challenges. Drawing from their own experiences, administrators and educators shared their perspective on how their district handles both formal and informal book challenges. Do both groups perceive the phenomenon similarly or differently? By recording their perspectives, this research addresses both job roles and inquires what their district could do to better support them during this sociopolitical phenomenon.

Finally, a policy analysis on the 2025 Montana Legislative Sessions looks at two different pieces of legislation: SB 299, Revise laws related to enhancing transparency in education, and HB 471, Revise education laws related to human sexuality and identity instruction. Each proposal further propels current forms of educational censorship by requiring parents to opt-in to current lessons and curriculums instead of previously adopted policies that require an opt-out. The 2025 legislation session is not the beginning of these changes for

Montana education. With roots back in 2021, the last four years have continued to propel an agenda targeting LGBTQ+ students, terminology, and curriculum but ultimately impact more than simple “human sexuality instruction.”

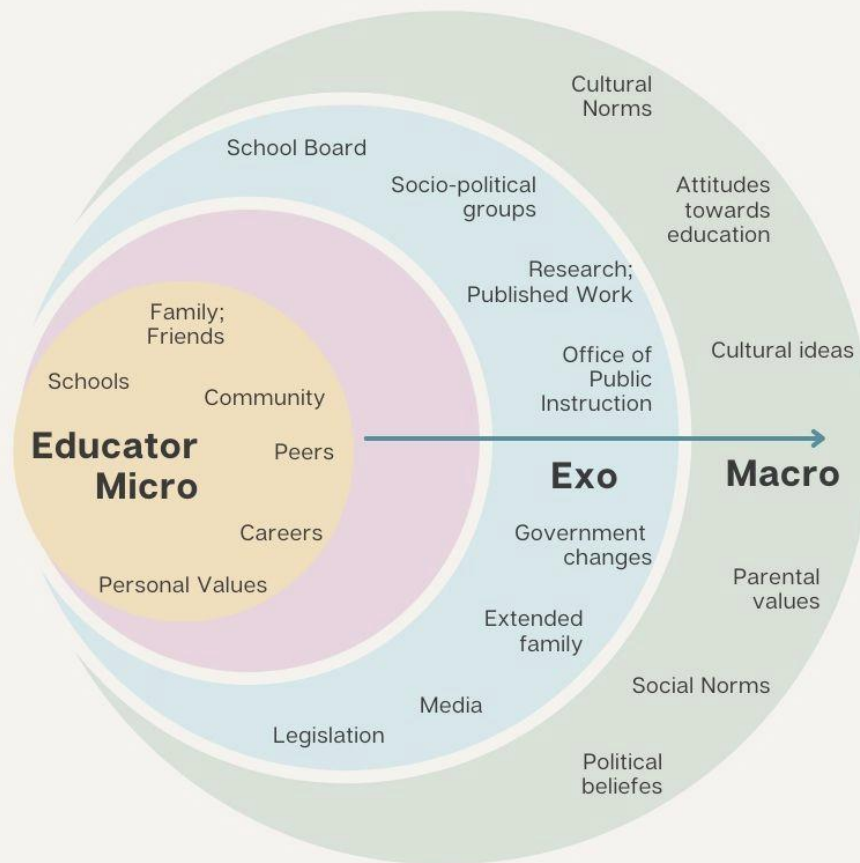
All three of these articles aim to help articulate the current phenomenon of book bans, challenges, and educational censorship within Montana. Completing research during the phenomenon has a distinct limitation of time. Society and its views on education are constantly changing. Legislation is proposed in January, signed by the governor in May, and hopefully, noticed by school districts to implement policy and procedures quickly. However, those impacts are not always noticeable the first few months back to school, and in fact, school districts are not always proactive. Despite the fact this phenomenon is evolving, this research illuminates the concern that censorship that does not appear to be vanishing within the near future.

APPENDIX A:
THE PHENOMENON



APPENDIX B:
ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS THEORY

EDUCATOR'S IMPACT



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CHAPTER TWO

POSITIONALITY

Introduction

Qualitative research addresses “the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 8). Qualitative researchers must first understand their own beliefs and theories before they can begin to write about others’. I choose to center my research within qualitative studies for several reasons. First, I believe that the way in which we construct knowledge is through language. Knowledge, values, and beliefs are crafted from lived experiences, and we use rich language to explain to others these fundamental moments that define our own identities. As a reader, writer, and researcher, I value the power within language and words. These philosophical assumptions—ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology—shape both my identity and lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, qualitative research attempts to discover the many truths within the world. Because each individual lives experiences differently, there is no singular truth. Instead, through qualitative research, the researcher aims to highlight multiple perspectives to change the ways in which we, as a society, think (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Literature attempts to complete a similar task. Through fictional writing, authors creatively explore worlds both known and unknown while also addressing concerns of reality including identity, relationships, and conflicts. In non-fiction autobiographical writing, authors open up about their own lived experiences making those of

celebrity and historical status seem like normal individuals. Authors, like all individuals, share their own truths, and no two are the same.

My own philosophical assumptions shift based on my interpretive lens. Within my own research, I rely on two lenses, postmodernism and poststructuralism, as well as my insider identity. These three aspects shape my positionality, my researcher identity, and impact my analysis and writing. Through reflexivity practices, I aim to not only express my positionality clearly but also transparently. My epistemology remains at the center of my research. Working as a teacher while conducting research has minimized my ability to be objective; I have my own perceived bias. However, as an insider, I've also been able to obtain levels of truth that would otherwise not be shared. Exploring my own positionality has challenged me and helped me become a better researcher, writer, teacher, and lifelong learner.

My grandparents established my love of learning. My grandfather, who also embraced the role of my father, instilled in me the importance of knowledge and the desire to learn. He shared with me the value of reading, politics, history, and physical exploration. If he was curious about a particular topic, he researched it for himself. If he decided to see something in person, he planned his own adventures. He encouraged me to become a self-guided learner and construct my own knowledge and lens on the world. Instead of asking me to share in his ideology, he challenged me to create my own. Early on in life, I discovered my passion for reading. I've learned to explore the world, in both reality and in fiction, through novels. This then led to my initial studies resulting in a Bachelors of Arts in Literature.

After a 10-year career in sales, I said farewell to my love of working with people to obtain a Masters in Curriculum and Instruction with a Reading endorsement. Returning to my

passion for literature provided the opportunity to teach in Park City and Billings, Montana. I still teach today in Billings, Montana while also coaching speech and debate and working alongside other educators on utilizing Indian Education for All within their classrooms. My doctoral journey at Montana State University has provided the opportunity to explore the research regarding sociopolitical events that are impacting education today. Therefore, my research aligns with my own interests in literature and politics and plays an integral role in my positionality.

Postmodernism

The concept of postmodernism extends back to several philosophers. Lyotard, a French postmodernist philosopher, rejected the term “grand narrative” (the idea of an overarching story) and instead, believed in the ability to “tell stories from the perspectives of individuals and plural social groups” (Savin-Baden, 2013, p. 27). Lyotard did not find that a singular perspective dominated a narrative; instead, multiple narratives and language can help answer important questions: “Who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided?” (Woodward, n.d.). Therefore, like many post-modernists, there is no singular version of the truth nor does any one singular entity of power define what is “true.” It no longer would matter how one defines their version of the truth because all perspectives held power. This embracement paved the pathway for other postmodernist ideas including those important within education.

Many educational pedagogies articulate the importance of embracing individual student’s identity. Culturally responsive practices (CRP), introduced by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995; 2014), articulate the importance of bringing forth individual cultural identities and perspectives to shape classroom culture and practices. By inviting every identity into the classroom, Ladson-

Billings (1995; 2014) found this helped students perform better academically while building critical and cultural competence. Instead of teaching facts and asking students to recall them, CRP classrooms ask students to engage, critique, and respond with the world and their communities; there is no singular, correct response. Social justice education (SJE) pedagogy aims to establish “just learning environments for all participants, and by so modeling, to offer hope that equitable relations and social structures can be achieved in the broader society” (Adams, 2016, p. 27). During SJE practices, the voices and stories of those who have been oppressed are explored. Unfortunately, oppression happens to individuals on a daily basis, both inside and outside the educational system. Several principles that inform social justice education include creating and maintaining an inclusive environment, asking participants to draw upon their own experiences, and encouraging active engagement (Adams, 2016). The Learning for Justice (2022) program wrote standards for educators to help implement an anti-bias education. There are four anchors: identity, diversity, justice, and action. When SJE is combined with CRP, it provides a space for all students to share their own truth while learning from a myriad of perspectives.

Specifically within English Literature Arts (ELA) classrooms, postmodernism teaching practices invite students to analyze and connect with literature through multiple lens. “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors” (Bishop, 1990) metaphorically describes the different avenues readers can engage with literature: fiction and non-fiction. Books can act as a reflection of our own lived experiences (mirrors), provide insight into a life different than our own (windows), and invite us to walk into a world (sliding glass door). Multiple interpretations of literature multiply, and one is not necessarily “correct” while the other is “incorrect.” This

provides the pathway for CRP to be used alongside literacy instruction by giving students the opportunity to see themselves reflected in a text or learn, and gain empathy, through the lens of someone else (German, 2021).

As a current English Language Arts (ELA) educator, I challenge both my students and myself to evaluate literature through multiple lens. We discuss literature as a mirror, window, and sliding glass door through the following questions: What connections do I make to my own life? What can I learn from the character's experiences? How is this a reflection of the world and community I live within? The beautiful notion as an ELA teacher is that there is not a single correct answer. What is a mirror for one student might be a window for another. The reflection I see between the novel and our community might differ from my students. My classroom is a safe space in which all students can openly share their own truths and interpretations; instead of focusing on what is right or wrong, they are able to build their own perspectives, opinions, and critical consciousness.

Post-Structuralist

Known for deconstruction, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida redefined the promenade way of understanding literacy and words. Prior to Derrida's deconstructionism, binary thinking remained as the forefront thought in understanding and interpreting literacy. In essence, deconstructive thinking attempts to corrupt dichotomies: right and wrong, reality and fiction, and present and absence. These dichotomies create limit ideas, and Derrida believed that work, especially language and written work, could have multiple meanings (Savin-Baden, 2013). Deconstructionism is now a prominent form of literacy criticism; it attempts to remove that

binary thinking and objective interpretation. Within literature, deconstruction relies on the reader to interpret the text (Long, 2024). This transformed itself into Rosenblatt's (1995) reader response theory that acknowledges multiple interpretations of literature. Readers experience writing differently because of their own unique experiences, and reader response liberates the reader to construct and deconstruct a text based on their own subjectiveness (Meacham & Buendia, 1999).

French philosopher and influential theorist Michael Foucault's philosophical work challenged discourse, power, and knowledge. First, discourse creates power which then shapes the specific types of knowledge one obtains. Discourse is tied to specific sites—schools, church, office, etc.—in which then specific knowledge is created. The knowledge one obtains from a school is vastly different from that at a church. Second, this then changes power dynamics: “power is not held by one particular group, but rather is exercised through a series of every day activities” (Kelly, n.d.). The actions of day-to-day life change who exercises power and then ultimately controls the knowledge. Traditionally in a school, those who hold the power often change the narrative of what is taught. In literature and literacy, this meant that those who had more power “implement their version of literacy than advocates of competing perspectives” (1999). For Foucault and other poststructuralists, the link between power and knowledge is inseparable, and because of this, we, including myself, must question, recognize, and challenge these power dynamics in order to obtain multiple forms of knowledge and use knowledge to obtain power (Kelly, n.d.).

Plugging-in

I embrace multiple identities: wife, daughter, dog-mom, coach, teacher, and researcher. It is challenging to separate my individual bias from my research. Within my professional roles (coach, teacher, and researcher), these passions blur together, and instead of attempting to separate myself from my research, I instead plug-in. “Plugging-in” is a process in which the research makes and unmakes theories, ideas, and even the self to ultimately formulate what is new (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013). The researcher who plugs-in often utilizes their own experiences to help shape method and theory. My professional roles offer the opportunity to plug-in to my own research and reflect on how my self impacts the decisions and lens in which my research takes place.

As an insider, my teaching identity play an instrumental role within my research. My pedagogy centers around culturally responsive practices (CRP) and social justice frameworks. Ladson-Billings’ (1995) research shared that the students already come to a classroom with a cultural identity, and CRP practices allow them to maintain and express those identities. Engaging with identities, both similar and unfamiliar ones, gives students opportunities to create and build a critical consciousness, so they can actively participate within their communities through critical analysis. This requires teachers, like me, to actively create a community, acknowledge all students’ cultures and perspectives, and promote “freedom, equality, and justice for everyone” (Krasnoff, 2016). These practices are the foundation to my own classrooms. As an English Language Arts educator, I often use novel studies as a tool to help students make meaningful connections, understand differing perspectives, and build empathy, critical consciousness, and critical thinking skills.

Within my own curriculum, young adult literature (YAL) provides students with opportunities to engage with award winning literature; understand and conflict with complex topics such as equality, equity, and justice; and help shape their own identity and viewpoints. *The 57 Bus* tells the true story of a crime committed by a young, black male and illuminates systemic racism within the justice system. *Long Way Down*, expressed in free verse, discusses community and individual challenges around gun violence. *Firekeeper's Daughter* introduces students to Ojibwa culture, language, and the societal conflicts concerning blood quantum. In Montana, Indian Education For All (IEFA) is a state teaching requirement in which all students must learn about the unique identities of Indigenous individuals, tribes, cultural practices, and historical perspectives. For some, IEFA is a checklist, a to-do; for me, it is CRP. Novels published with diverse, complex protagonists are some of my favorite not only to read but teach. When authors write in response to conflicts found within their communities, readers take away a deeper, personal meaning. As an active reader, I learn more about our world, my position within it, and reflect on my own identity through the lens of a protagonist facing similar challenges. As I read along side my students, they learn from me, I learn from them, and we learn together from the thematic idea our author wishes to share.

This then directly translates to my philosophical decision to plug into research. Turner (2000) acknowledges that ethnographic fieldwork does not allow the participant to simply observe, but instead must be “an active, situated, participant in the construction of accounts and representations” (p. 51). Because my research takes place within the fields of my microsystem, the classroom, district, and changing political climate, I find myself engaging in reflexive practices in which the information constructed from my research is distinctly removed from my

own experiences. That is not to say that my experiences and perspectives have not driven my passion, questions, and topics; I have indeed plugged-in to my research. Instead, the values and ideas expressed throughout the research are not mine but rather thoughts of those who spoke, and therefore, is qualitative in nature.

Qualitative researchers rely on languages to express the thoughts, opinions, and ideas of participants in order to bring forth an ultimate answer to the research question. Language can be both subjective and objective. Historically, language and law have given voices and have suppressed voices of specific groups of individuals because of civil, gender, and sexual rights. The current sociopolitical phenomenon is an act of censorship driven by both written and verbal language. Macfarlane's (2010) stance says a "courageous researcher is prepared to ask questions that challenge their own previous research findings or assumptions about the world" (p. 23). Despite the controversial nature of this research, I aim to articulate the "truth," despite subjectiveness, and choose to courageously report my findings.

Self in Relation to My Research

My positionality with literature, teaching, and recent politics alters my sociopolitical views, my reading and teaching, political identity, and philosophical assumptions. The political entities attacking curriculum have fueled this research and my passion. Over the course of the last four years, I have witnessed the transformation of Montana's 20-7-120—Excused Curriculum within my own district. In May 2021, my principal shared with us the dangers of simple novel suggestions to students. All classroom libraries would need to be catalogued and accessible for parents; my principal advised against having a classroom library because the

future was ambiguous in terms of 20-7-120. I packed up my classroom library at the end of the school year, moved to a new school, and never started another one. To this day, the only novels in my classroom are the ones I teach. The fall of 2022 started with legal jargon from human resources for our syllabus. This was an attempt to follow the guidelines of 20-7-120 notifying parents of the content, material, and curriculum to be used within each class. All teachers needed to send home a paper copy of the syllabus and ask for a returned signature.

During the spring 2023 semester, I taught the required non-fiction unit choosing to use Dashka Slater's *The 57 Bus: A True Story of Two Teenagers and the Crime that Changes Their Lives*. Slater's writing unfolds the story she started as a journalist of Sasha, an a-gender teen, whose skirt was lit on fire by Richard, a young, poor black male. *The 57 Bus* unfolds the truth of what happens to many young black males in society regarding the justice system. Charged with a hate crime, Richard faces several legal disadvantages because of his race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Despite the realities that Slater's novel addresses, parents oppose her novel because of its LGBTQ+ context. I received instant backlash for this novel and introducing my unit of study through an assignment that asked students to write sentence stems about historical moments of LGBTQ+ rights and hate crimes. As the teacher, I believed it was important for students to understand that hate crimes are relatively new to the legal system during the context of our novel. Instead, my assignment ended up being the highlight of a House Educational Committee meeting. I was questioned by my principal if I understood 20-7-120 and had five students request an alternative novel unit to study. Four of the students never read the alternative text and almost failed the course because of their lack of completed work.

During the course of my six-year teaching career, I've had 7 opt-outs. The five from *The 57 Bus*, one for *Stardust* for religious reasons, and one for *The Marrow Thieves* for violence. The latter two I understood and sympathized with each student. Those two students still showed grit and academic excellence, but I still find myself questioning the true motives behind those that decided against *The 57 Bus*. I have since changed my non-fiction unit to include literature circles featuring student choice between *The 57 Bus* or *Night* by Elie Wiesel. I also avoid direct, whole group instruction on Slater's novel. Instead, I give students a choice: *Night* or *The 57 Bus*. While this allows an easy alternative for students and avoids the mentally harming reflexivity I endure from parental contact, I do not believe my students get as much out of either novel, but I still believe that Slater's novel deserves a space in my classroom.

Now, I challenge my seniors to think critically about the recent phenomenon. In College Writing, I give my students seven novels to select from: *The Marrow Thieves*, *Firekeeper's Daughter*, *The Kite Runner*, *1984*, *The 57 Bus*, *The Things They Carried*, and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Their job is to read the novel and write an argumentative, research-based essay on whether they believe the novel should be banned, not banned, restricted to libraries or specific grade/content levels. Out of 130 some essays, only one student ever said a novel should be banned: *The Things They Carried* for its graphic, violent context.

Over the past few years, I've watched as the political climate has changed my own classroom. I've taught children of active Moms for Liberty participants, read numerous emails arguing against my novel curriculum choices, created alternative lessons for those students, watched my assignment debated during the 2023 Montana Legislative session, and personally struggled with the mental and emotional toil of teacher burnout. I've learned how to manage my

mental health through reading but finding solace, compassion, and a sense of belonging within each novel. These recent changes within the sociopolitical phenomenon and attacks against the freedom to read have challenged me; the attacks feel personal, even if they are not.

As the 2025-2026 school year begins so does a new journey. 20-7-120 has been amended, and as of now, I am one of the few who understand the changes of notifications, expectations, and potential ramification. The fears and concerns of being a current English teacher are not going away. However, I believe students deserve the ability to access any and all types of literature: pieces that are mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. Students can use literature to explore parts of the world they only dream of discovering. Yet, these attacks make it a challenge. These political changes leave educators, including myself, unsure of the ability to teach through postmodernism and post-structuralism pedagogies and theories. However, by choosing to use this level of uncertainty as a researcher instead, gives an opportunity for those I work alongside to express their own thoughts and opinions. There is no singular truth, but as I embrace the role of researcher, I reflect on my own truths while learning more about the truths of others.

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CHAPTER THREE

THE EDUCATOR'S PEDAGOGICAL DILEMMA: A CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY DURING A BOOK CHALLENGING PHENOMENON

Contribution of Authors and Co-Authors

Manuscript in Chapter Three

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Contributions: As the lead investigator, I wrote and revised the manuscript. I prepared and generated all information necessary to obtain the data. I analyzed the data, contributed to all sections of the articles, and edited all writing and references. I submitted this article to one journal and await a response for future publication.

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Introduction

Bishop (1990) poetically articulated the metaphor of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors in terms of literature. Novels allow the reader not only to view other worlds through a window but also provide opportunities to join through the glass door and see themselves reflected in the mirror. The reader connects with a text first based on the concrete concepts (plot, characters, denotation) but ultimately engages the moment they enter the novel's world to explore what actually represents humanity and society through symbolism, theme, and connotation.

Literature offers an opportunity for educators to address difficult, sensitive topics including race, gender, sexuality, socioeconomics, and culture, but without the proper texts, students struggle comprehending how these topics relate to themselves and their communities. This is why in the English Language Arts classroom educators use literature—especially young adult literature (YAL)—to have challenging conversations and discussions as a reflection of students' lives, experiences, and world view (Bishop, 1990). However, in order for this to happen for all of our students, texts need to equitably cover a diverse range of gender, ethnicities, and cultures. If books are truly windows, then they need to reflect those in the classroom, community, and world. They need to be culturally responsive. This, again, is why many turn to YAL as a tool to address these topics. However, this becomes a challenge when YAL is frequently a direct target of book challenges and bans. Equitable curriculum representation is a must, but in today's sociopolitical climate, diversity appears to be a taboo topic (Hooks, 1994). This research aims to understand the perspective of five current educators

working during a heightened time of book challenges. Despite the challenges, these educators choose to teach specific YAL pieces within their curriculum content.

Background

Nationwide, an influx of attacks toward education have taken shape (American Library Association, 2024; Pen America, 2024). Attached to many attacks through legislature and media are taglines such as “parental (parents’) rights.” In the 1990s, conservative parental rights groups formed as a way to limit sexual education taught in schools and to express concerns over the acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals (Schultz, 2022). In 2000, *Troxel v. Granville* changed how the courts determined parental rights. The US Supreme Court ruled that under the Fourteenth Amendment (which grants power to the states) parents have the right to make decisions about the “care, custody, and control of their children” (*Troxel v. Granville*, 2000). This meant there was no federal legislature that ensured parental rights, but instead, opened the door for states to write and mandate their own laws so long as they did not infringe upon federal rights under the Constitution. Now, 24 years after the ruling of *Troxel v. Granville* (2000), 18 different states including Florida, Texas, Utah, Montana, and Wyoming have written and passed legislation that protects parental rights. Recently, many laws have started to include verbiage concerning education.

Beginning in 2022, an influx of legislature from conservative or “red” states began. Many identify Florida’s HB 1557, Parental Rights in Education, as the first of many to change education. HB 1557 enacted policies in which procedures needed to be in place for contacting parents concerning their child’s “mental, emotional, or physical health of well-being and the

school’s ability to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for the student” (Parents Right in Education, 2022). While HB 1557 introduces what many perceive as a positive intent, under Section 1.3 it also includes the following verbiage:

Classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity may not occur in kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards (Parents Right in Education, 2022).

Florida became the first state to enact legislature specifically mentioning “sexual orientation” and “gender identity.” HB 1557 famously became known as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill because of its vague language which left room for interpretation—in particular to the terminology “classroom instruction.” This prohibits educators from using books, addressing history, or simply having conversations within the educational setting. In fact, it prohibits educators from self-identifying as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, gives parents the right to opt out of anything educational (including counseling services), and allows parents to bring actions against schools that violate their parental rights. In 2023, Florida representatives amended the bill to include grades Pre-K through 8th and any instruction given in grades 9 through 12 would be “age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students in accordance with state standards” (General Bill, 2023).

As the slippery slope continued, many other states began passing legislation that targeted educational platforms and material that addresses “human sexuality” including “sexual orientation [and] gender identity” or anything deemed “obscene” that lacks “literary, scientific, artistic, or political value” (Excused absences from curriculum requirements, 2023); Obscenity, 2023). Montana passed and amended two different pieces of legislature: 20-7-120 and 45-8-201. 20-7-120, known as Excused Absences from Curriculum Requirements—Notice—Prohibited

Activities, passed in 2021, gave parents the right to remove their children from instruction and curriculum that involved human sexuality. 45-8-120, Obscenity, was updated in 2023 to allow school districts to enact policies to prohibit obscenity. The problem here is the vague and subjective definition of what is obscene: “a representation or description of perverted...[and] normal sexual acts, actual or simulated” (Obscenity, 2023). Both laws have had a significant impact on education, curriculum, and school libraries in the past two years. In response, challenges of material, primarily books, have been presented to Montana school districts, and some challenges, including Laurel School District, have resulted in educational censorship in the form of book banning (Webb, 2024). The rise in educational attacks through legislature, book challenges, and book bans across the nation has pushed current educators to pick a side in the debate, challenging them to stay informed politically on legislative changes, school board meetings, and community voices. The purpose of teaching is to instill knowledge in students, yet many teachers find themselves no longer teaching. Instead, they are struggling to adapt and coexist with the rapid societal changes occurring nationwide, within their communities, and their schools.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this critical ethnographic study is to discover and describe the struggles and culture of educators during a highly dynamic and changing sociopolitical phenomenon. Critical ethnography focuses on “exploring everyday life and cultural reality” within the scope of power dynamics (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 200). This critical ethnographic study articulates the educator’s culture and the power dynamics that exist as the phenomenon grows

locally and nationwide. At this stage in the research, the phenomenon will be generally defined as book challenges, book bans, and censorship. As an attempt to disrupt the current system, by articulating the voices of educators, this research hopes to inform and highlight how teachers become pawns of a critical system (Madison, 2005). This article fills a gap in the literature by giving a voice to those working in the system that is often ignored.

Guiding research questions

This research is guided by questions focused around three topics: banned books, educational censorship, and sociopolitical agendas. Inquiry on these topics focused on both the national and local level. The first question inquires on what current secondary educators' perspectives are towards book challenges and book banning, focusing on what they see on a national level and within their communities. Through their perspective, the second question asks how legislation changes and sociopolitical groups, both nationally and within the state of Montana, impact the educational system and curriculum. What personal impacts have occurred for the educators? Appendix A displays the research questions used throughout the study.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

In order to understand the educator's culture during a politically evolving time, this research aims to understand their culture using two system theories: ecological system theory and critical systems theory (CST). In its basic form, a system looks at the organization of how an individual interacts with whole entities, and system theories attempt to better understand these interactions.

First studied under psychology, Bronfenbrenner's theory positioned the notion that an individual's development is directly impacted based on a complex system (Guy-Evans, 2024). The system has five components: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (visually represented in Appendix B). While each of these systems impact the individual, the microsystem directly makes contact to the individual: relationships, school, work, etc. Further out in the system, such as politics, government, economics, social norms, and even cultural, the less direct impact of an entity; however, it still trickles its way through the different levels in order to leave an impact on the individual. In the scope of education, Bronfenbrenner's theory places the educator at the center. Within the microsystem, they're impacted by their own personal world (family, friends, biases) but also their career (students, parents, administrators). Yet, the exosystem (school boards, legislature, sociopolitical groups) trickles its way down to the educator, too. Even though not all educators find an impact by the macrosystem (current social and cultural attitudes) or chronosystem (environmental impacts), these two components directly shape larger entities (i.e. government), smaller groups, and, most importantly, the individual.

CST allows social science research to better understand systems of power and conflicts. Like some CST research, this study does not attempt to solve problems set forth, but instead illuminates the disruption of power found between educators and other stakeholders in order to understand an adapting culture. CST allows the researcher to examine different social roles in which not all groups are invited into the decision-making process but are still impacted by system changes (Watson et al., 2013). In this particular research, the educators are those impacted by system changes but remain uninvolved in decision changes.

Limitations and Assumptions

The main limitation is time and space. Given that this study takes place during the current phenomenon in question, the research needed to be suspended. Educational challenges still exist within the status quo and directly influence educators, students, and stakeholders. This study focuses on a specific space given the location of the researcher, but I argue it is not limited to only one space. In fact, having more time would allow the researcher to expand in order to gather a variety of perspectives. Despite these limitations, I assume that there are other educators outside the specific space that share similar thoughts, ideas, and experiences.

Importance or significance of the study

The foundational components of this qualitative research have yet to be explored, researched, and written from the perspective of teachers currently working within the critical system. It hopes to fill gaps found within the literature by examining a cultural group—educators—that resides in a rural, Republican state. This study hopes to be paired with other research that emphasizes the importance of teaching with culturally responsive practices, social justice pedagogies, and inclusive, diverse curriculum. As this research continues to evolve over time, there is hope that more voices will come forth; however, given the limitations in time and space, the voices heard here can begin representing those afraid or not given the opportunity to speak. There is hope that this research will inspire other teachers and administrators working within the field to find their power and purpose to speak out.

Review of Related Literature

Across the nation, book challenges and book banning have become increasingly popular in public schools, curriculums, and libraries. The American Library Association (ALA) and Pen America recorded the 2022-2023 school year as the highest counted year with 3,362 book challenges and bans (Pen America, 2024). The influx of book challenging and banning has become easier due to policy changes, new laws, and a growing desire to censor educational material (Friedman, 2023). The data compiled by the ALA shows that young adult literature (YAL) remains as the number one targeted genre of book bans, and specifically, texts written by or featuring individuals of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), LGBTQ+, and women (Pen America, 2024; Albanese, 2023). For educators and curriculum, this is a growing problem both at the state and school level. Diversifying literature has proven benefits for students both as a personal and academic reader, but embracing diverse literature—through curriculum, libraries, or personal recommendations— becomes increasingly difficult, and dangerous, as sociopolitical agendas target specific books.

Nationwide a conversation continues onward on how education prepares students for future participation within society. Curriculum's purpose is to help teachers teach their students 21st century skills: communication, calculation, and computer competency (Male et al., 2012). Communication goes beyond the ability to speak clearly and listen attentively. In order to communicate, students need to be able to read accurately to help obtain knowledge, build global awareness, improve literacy skills, and apply critical thinking skills. Literacy and language are foundational for academic and personal success. This is why English Language Arts (ELA) curriculums continue to be a part of conversations nationally and locally. In 2010, the Common

Core State Standards were unveiled, and over the next few years, states would adopt their own standards that aligned with Common Core (Rothman, 2012). The biggest change in ELA standards was the separation of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. Reading standards focused on increasing text complexity which directly challenges students on their comprehension skills. However, many of the recommended texts from the Common Core are classics: *Little Women*, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Common Sense* (Rothman, 2012). Literature plays a critical role in education. If education is going to help students find joy in reading, then they need to utilize novels that will interest and engage students. One way for educators to engage students is through more modern, contemporary literature: YAL.

Young adult literature (YAL) offers a myriad of positive benefits for young readers. Because it is intended for young adults, YAL focuses on common experiences almost all individuals face while growing up: personal identity, friendship conflicts, new relationships, and family dynamics (Crowe, 1998; Owen, 2003). Even though YAL's roots stem back to the publication of *The Outsiders*, YAL became a global phenomenon in the 1990s with publications like *Speak*, *Hard Love*, *Harry Potter*, and *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, which was the first winner of the Michael L. Printz Award (created by the ALA) in 2000 (Cart, 2016). The Printz award not only solidified the literary merit of YAL, but it also started a new era in which authors took risk in diversifying this genre with different topics, cultures, identities, and writing styles.

This is why many English Language Arts classrooms use YAL as a core curriculum piece. Its academic success stems from its ability to teach topics including social responsibility, social justice, different perspectives, and utilize culturally responsive practices (Bushman, 1997;

Landt, 2006; Wolk, 2009). These pedagogical choices stem from YAL's diversity: a genre that not only spans across many forms but also embraces different ethnicities, cultures, and challenges that provide all readers the opportunity to see themselves reflected in the text (Cart, 2016). However, several commonly challenged and banned novels are categorized under YAL: *Gender Queer* (LGBTBQ+), *Dear Martin* (Black and race), and *Thirteen Reasons Why* (women and suicide) (Abcarian, 2024). Known as copycat bans, these specific titles, and many more, continue to be targeted across school districts nationwide; once one school district bans a text, many follow in similar pursuit with similar talking points (Pen America, 2024). These patterns have limited the number of diverse books found across libraries and classrooms. Schools have removed particular texts because of successful challenges while others have done so in fear of being targeted: a form of soft censorship (Pen America, 2016). The current censorship trend steadily rises each year with no clear end in sight. Preliminary data from the ALA shows record surges of book challenges (1,915 different titles) in public libraries in Virginia, Tennessee, and Iowa (Garcia, 2023).

However, alarming the number of bans appears to be, literature censorship is not new. In fact, one of the most historically recognized events of censorship occurred during Nazi Germany. In an attempt to remove any written work that did not align with Nazi ideology and policies, the National Socialist German Students' Association, consisting of German University students, united together to purify German literature in hopes of establishing a "pure" nation, language, and culture (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.). On May 10, 1933, over 25,000 books were burned as a symbolic act of censorship; Ernest Hemingway, Karl Marx, Jack London, Helen Keller, and even German authors like Thomas Mann were only a few of the

authors whose written work burned because it did not align with Nazi ideology (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.). Historical book banning also occurred during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, during the Red Scare, post Supreme Court rulings including the Miller Test (the three-prong obscenity test which determines if something is considered obscene), and in a diverse range of countries including Ireland, Russia, and Iraq (Sheehan & Tolin, 2023; U.S. Department of Justice, 2025).

In the United States, book challenges and banning have become more prevalent in education since the early 2000s. The most recent uprise of book banning stems post-Covid. Some suspect a correlation started because of school closures; parents were forced to pay attention to the material brought home either for curriculum or student choice. In 2021, the sociopolitical Florida group Moms for Liberty was established. With over 300 chapters across the nation, Moms for Liberty members have become elected to school boards, won political elections, promoted parental rights laws, engaged on key issues, and promoted their ideology that they “fight for our children” (Liu, 2023; Moms for Liberty, 2024). Their sociopolitical agenda has persuaded school districts and aided in promoting the passage of specific legislation in multiple states like Florida, Texas, and Montana.

As educational censorship escalates into the political system, Texas and Florida lead the current trend of increased censorship legislature. These two states currently have the highest number of book bans; in 2022-2023, Florida recorded 1,406 book bans, and Texas recorded 625 book bans (Pen America, 2024). The increase of these bans directly correlates with recently passed legislature. Texas passed HB900 (READER Act) that forced libraries and book vendors to rate books based on sexually relevant or sexually explicit material. This bill also prevented

school libraries from checking books out to students that contained sexually relevant or explicit material without parental written consent. Florida, known for passing anti-“woke” and “Don’t Say Gay” bills, have stirred their own controversy. Both bills—Individual Freedom and Parental Rights in Education—have been used for supporting book challenges and bans within elementary grades because of taboo topics like critical race theory, gender identity, and sexual orientation (Pendharkar, 2023).

In addition, Florida’s HB1069 expanded these restrictions to all grade levels by placing harsh restrictions on both curriculum and library material. Places like Escambia County, Florida have been cited for banning 1,600 titles, targeting books that center on people of color and LGBTQ+, and even removing classical texts including *The Bluest Eye* and *Slaughterhouse-Five* (Targeted News Service, 2024). Both Texas and Florida have seen legal repercussions for their legislature. The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals blocked the Texas Education Agency from enforcing a portion of HB900 that required book ratings (Albanese, 2024; Melhado, 2024). Pen American, Penguin Random House publishing, a group of authors, and parents have taken legal action against Escambia County, Florida for violating First Amendment Rights (Targeted News Service, 2024). Unless the sociopolitical agendas change, there is no end in sight. Political leaders including Florida Governor DeSantis are backtracking their ideas on the rampant book censorship that have been supported by sociopolitical groups like Moms for Liberty. Whether this is an attempt for future political support or honest regret is unclear, but what remains in 2024 is a very messy legal censorship challenge.

As 2024 continues forward, so does the impact of educational censorship legislature and its direct correlation to an increase of book bans and challenges. Every day, these numbers change.

Methodology

Method

This study aims to illuminate teachers' perspectives and values working in education amongst the political, social, and cultural phenomenon of book challenges. This critical ethnography, which evolves from anthropology, articulates how this group and specific individuals experience and navigate the power dynamic that is occurring on multiple levels through the ecological and critical system (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). By narrowing the focus to specific groups, the researcher obtains in depth knowledge on the daily lifestyles within the group. One aspect of ethnography is the dichotomous idea of the insider and outsider. The insider, those that share characteristics or experiences with the participants, often begin their research already with some insight to the setting versus the outsider who has no knowledge about the daily lives of their participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). This research attempts to understand and articulate the educators' culture and what impacts their careers during the current phenomenon that includes book challenges, book bans, and legislature changes. As an insider, I have my own experiences with these events.

Role of the Researcher (Positionality Statement)

My positionality with literature, teaching, and recent politics alters my sociopolitical views, my reading and teaching, political identity, and philosophical assumptions. The political entities attacking curriculum have fueled this research and my passion. YAL needs to continue as an intricate part of education. Walter Dean Myers (author of over 100 books including *Monster*, *Fallen Angels*, *Slam*) faced decades of struggle in the publishing world because he was black and wrote with black characters (Thomas, 2016). The non-profit #WeNeedDiverseBooks launched in 2014 to help diverse authors—like Myers—publish children’s and young adult literature that featured diverse experiences including ethnicities, cultures, sexual orientation, gender, disabilities, and even religious minorities (Thomas, 2016; We Need Diverse Books, 2023). Novels published with diverse, complex protagonists are some of my favorites: *The Way I Used to Be* (Smith, 2016), *Long Way Down* (Reynolds, 2017), *Firekeeper’s Daughter* (Boulley, 2021). When authors write in response to conflicts in their communities, readers take away not only a deeper meaning but one that is personal. As a reader, I learn more about our world, my position within it, and reflect on my own identity through the lens of a protagonist facing similar challenges. However, many of these novels continued to be attacked through book challenges.

As a reader, teacher, and researcher, I believe in the right to read. Individuals have the ability to select texts for themselves and not for others. Our communities should embrace literature as a reflection of the evolving world, not protest against it. Challenging individuals to read different perspectives provides access to gain knowledge about different values, ideas, and beliefs. Embracing diverse literature offers the reader the opportunity to understand perspectives or experiences that either challenges or supports their own views. Readers give meaning to the

text by making connections but will make more meaningful ones when given reading choices (Rosenblatt, 1995).

My philosophical assumptions impact my teaching; I believe in culturally responsive practices with an underlining social justice framework. Our world remains inequitable, but this remains challenging for young students to comprehend. As an insider, I currently use YAL curriculum to address complex and difficult topics including equity, injustice, racism, and violence; my students have enjoyed texts by Cherie Dimaline (*The Marrow Thieves*, 2017), Dashka Slater (*The 57 Bus*, 2017), and Alicia D. Williams (*Genesis Begins Again*, 2020). I have received a multitude of thanks from my marginalized and minority students for using literature they can connect with; literature that is often ignored. However, I have also been the target of political groups as an example as to why YAL should not be used in the classroom. I stand in firm affirmation that the positive responses from my students far outweigh the voices against. Despite not being a parent, I value the choices that they are allowed to make. However, my personal beliefs and experiences impact my lens, understanding, and fuel my passion for this research. I strongly support using reading and literature to help my students become independent, critical thinkers with a deep awareness of the world and community around them.

Context

Educators and the culture of teaching are impacted by the systems in which they work and the communities within which they reside and engage. Both ecological system theory and critical systems theory (CST) best explain the current power system of education. With the microsystem, educators respond to students, administrators, and stakeholders. These

relationships either hinder or promote the ability to foster healthy classroom interactions. Even though the purpose of education is to prepare students to become productive members of their community through communication, literacy, and critical thinking skills, changes from the macrosystem challenge what educators perceive as “socially acceptable.”

The value of education begins within society and stems from the changes occurring at national, state, and local levels. Nationally, a shift towards educational values changes as educational censorship and book bans continue to rise. The purpose of education and its intended curriculum changes as states increase legislation. Recent state legislation across the United States continues to target specific groups of individuals, curriculum, and how local school boards adopt or change policies. As one school board decides to cater to the voices of censorship, several follow in pursuit (Pen America, 2016).

The factors within this particular study focus on the voices of five current educators within one school district. This district resides within a predominately white, Republican community with rural values: “a close-knit sense of community; strong family support..., neighborly social ties; religious affiliation; pride in self and family;...importance of justice, loyalty, and faith; and a strong work ethic” (116K population reported in 2021; Meit et al., 2018). All participants work within public education at the secondary level; this particular school district is the largest in the state. Within their community, a local Moms for Liberty Charter resides with two school board members politically associated with the organization. Their school board, superintendent, and local representatives have seen recent changes within the last two years; many that have vocally expressed a more conservative lens. The voices of the educators

did not share their own political ideas except for those that aligned with recent changes that appear to target education through censorship and increase of book bans.

Purposeful sampling was done for two reasons. First, each of these participants voiced a desire to be interviewed. Second, each of them strongly disagrees with the growing phenomenon against the freedom to read. Many of these individuals have vocally spoken out to their local school board, representatives, and stakeholders on the importance of keeping books within their community. Each participant has first-hand accounts on how the changes on the macrosystem have filtered their way into their classrooms (microsystem). Their experiences challenged their pedagogical values, relationships with stakeholders, and even their desire to teach. This sample, while small, strongly represents the voices that have yet to gain the confidence to speak out.

Data Collection Tools and Procedure

Data collection consisted of documents and interviews. The documents were compiled and annotated through memoing and content analysis (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Documents included recently passed Montana legislation, news articles, and press releases. These documents primarily reflect the macrosystem in which the phenomenon is researched. Document analysis plays an instrumental role in this research because the phenomenon is centered around how specific documents (legislation) have impacted and increased censorship.

After document analysis, interviews were scheduled and completed in each participant's classroom. All interviews took place within the same high school during the Spring 2024 semester. Each interview was recorded and transcribed using an application called Rev. As the

primary investigator, I was the only one who had access to the transcripts to ensure participant confidentiality. Each participant received a coded name: A, B, C, D, E. The aspect of each semi-structured interview allowed a conversation for each participant to share their perspectives and experiences through open-ended questions. The questions focused on three topics: book banning, educational censorship, and sociopolitical groups (Appendix A). Each topic provided opportunities to respond to aspects of the micro, exo, and macrosystem. In a follow up inquiry, participants were asked to share one or two novels that have been banned according to Pen America, the ALA, or recent news articles but which they still found important in teaching. A final content analysis was done for each novel expressed. This provided a second set of documents to increase crystallization (Flick, 2018).

Data Analysis

Analysis started with two specific documents: Montana Annotated Code 20-7-120 and 45-8-201. Key word analysis identified words and phrases from the two documents that ultimately articulated their purpose. By looking at the documents first, a more in-depth understanding of the verbiage of each code improved the conversation within each interview and the ability to critically evaluate the second documents: novels.

After the legal documents were analyzed, value coding started by revisiting the transcripts of participant's interviews. According to Saldana (2013), value coding is the process of finding data that articulates "participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or world-view" (p. 110). Values align with one's axiological, the study of value, beliefs. Approaching the research from a post-modern and critical lens, it is important to respect

the axiological beliefs that are found within the data and analyzed carefully. Memoing, reflexivity, and critical thinking were constant practices to help ensure the findings accurately articulated participants' values. Value coding allows insight into the participant's worldview and social and cultural systems (Saldana, 2013). In approaching the transcripts, the values used started with individual values, values of others, and political values. A fourth coding was done; this further stemmed the data into parental, pedagogical, and social values. The coding looked for references to how outside entities—cultural, social, or political—impact the participant's ability to conduct and engage with education, primarily their classrooms and students.

Participants were asked about specific novels that have been banned in districts nationwide but felt the novel held literary merit to stay within the classroom. The three novels discussed were Sherman Alexie's (2007) *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Ernest Cline's (2011) *Ready Player One*, and Khaled Hosseini's (2003) *The Kite Runner*. Then, from participants' interviews, key passages were picked out from each novel. Those novels were analyzed twice. First, each specific passage was compared to the key word analysis completed for the Montana Annotated Codes by finding specific word choice that would be considered to address/include obscenity, sexual acts, human sexuality, intimate relationships, gender identity, and other topics of concern. Second, a thematic analysis was completed on the entire novel; in order for a novel to have literary merit, it should provide the reader a deeper insight to a lesson about human life, communities, and perspectives. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to "rely on intuition and sensing" (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Literary scholars are always searching for the deeper meaning of a text, so the purpose of the passage, despite present word choice, was weighed against the denotation.

The approach of a multi-data analysis, or crystallization, allowed for thick descriptions in the written analysis. Given the complexity of the continuous phenomenon, inquiry continued throughout the writing process. The analysis does not attempt to provide a singly, objective narrative but rather an insight into the growing concerns found between educators, their communities, stakeholders, and even societal and cultural attitudes towards education.

Methods of Validity

Authenticity

Authenticity is based upon the belief of being “‘faithful to an original’ or a ‘reliable, accurate representation’” (Varga & Guignon, 2020). Authentic research practices and ethics practices uphold the participants’ perspectives and experiences and report them accurately with valid interpretation. By taking the time to code and analyze, the study is an accurate and authentic reflection on the perspectives and values of the group. In qualitative research, participants’ vulnerability is expressed through language, both verbal and non-verbal. In order to uphold the authenticity of each participant’s voice, I, too, must be authentic in representing and writing findings and results. Because this study attempts to understand the cultural group of educators working with the public education system, specific individuals were selected who had knowledge and opinions about the current phenomenon, sociopolitical tension, and legislature changes. The interpretation focused on ensuring that all participants were polyvocal.

Integrity

According to the Cambridge dictionary, integrity is the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles. Central to ethical research, integrity aids in transcribing the

thoughts and ideas expressed by participants without distorting their voice. Because qualitative research is subjective, I, as the lead researcher, allowed participants to express their voice and co-construct meaning through their responses while upholding individual values, including my own. To uphold integrity through the data collection, when participants initially inquired the purpose behind the study and my role as the lead researcher, I found it important to express the phenomenon that initiated the study: the rise of book bans and challenges and my role as an insider—currently working during this sociopolitical movement. By knowing my positionality and reflexivity, I am able to plug into this research (Hook, 2015). Plugging in—as a method or positionality—allows the researcher to use their own experiences to help guide the research. Upholding my own integrity ensures my own experiences, knowledge and values remained an integral part of the research. It is impossible to separate myself out of the research, but by upholding my integrity as a scholar researcher, I can ensure my participants' voices are not hidden but rather encouraged.

Trustworthiness

The complexity of qualitative research relies on the lead researcher being trustworthy: being honest and truthful. According to Angel (cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018), this means that “open dialogue on the topic” exists between both the researcher and participants (p. 257). Trust is imperative; it directly impacts how participants express their thoughts, and in doing so, then the critical aspects can advocate the power dynamics that currently exist. Trustworthiness runs throughout the research from identifying participants, collecting data, coding, and completing content and value analysis. My role as an insider allows for equal levels of power between myself and participants; by not having a power dynamic, trust is established. It extends beyond

the boundaries of this study to include reflexive practices and an opportunity to promote future insight on this topic that has limited research. I trust my participants, so they trust me to accurately articulate their thoughts.

Findings

In 2024, the value of education has changed. Many parents, community members, and sometimes students hold a misconception that teachers have an agenda: teaching identity instruction, critical race theory, and sexualizing education. What does that specific agenda contain? While accusations of sexual material, gender identity, race, and violence are often tossed out, the specific “agenda” is unknown. In fact, there is no agenda. So, what exactly caused this shift? It is fear: “the fear of something different, fear of change” (Participant B).

English teachers and librarians face multiple challenges when trying to blend their own pedagogical values into their classrooms while also upholding parental values. The sociopolitical tensions continue, and as the fire grows, educators are getting burnt out. They’re tired of talking about politics, sociopolitical groups, book challenges, and school board changes. They’re exhausted reading posts on social media, the news, and reports from national and local unions. Yet, educators must continue to help students become critical thinkers, avid readers, and prepare them to become independent, productive members of society. The findings of this study articulate the voices of five participants that are trying to find the silver lining during this divided time. These ideas keep changing and won’t stop until a societal shift takes place. Educators reside within a value clash, and its impacts are hindering their ability to teach.

Parental Values

For the longest time, parents trusted educators to teach their children what was needed to become a productive member of society. Reading and writing, becoming proficient in math, memorizing history, and lately, utilizing technology productively and safely were once valued. However, a shift has happened since the Covid-19 pandemic, and parents are now voicing strong opinions: “There’s a feeling of mistrust. They don’t want to support public education” (Participant D). However, some believe that this shift started prior to 2020, stretching all the way back to Barak Obama’s election in 2008 and amplifying with Donald Trump in 2018. Obama’s political movements focused primarily on diversity and inclusion, and during his presidency, Obama passed the Every Student Succeeds Act which focused on core subject matters (Layton, 2015). But with the shift in political power, Trump strengthened CTE (career and technical education) in 2018 (Ujifusa, 2018). It might not have made a difference who was elected, but the pendulum swung from Democratic to Republican and with it changed from a focus on diversity and inclusion to a focus on the nation’s labor work force. Both policies serve a purpose, but it is this societal shift that also started the conversation on the purpose of education. Just like how politics is subjective, education is now, too. Since the political pendulum continues to swing with President Joe Biden and an upcoming election in 2024, education swings, too.

Educators want to support parents. In fact, one participant shared that “parents have [and should] the opportunity to get involved with their individual student” (Participant A). A mutually agreed upon idea exists—even if not directly stated—that both educators and parents want their children to succeed, but the pathway to get there is different. The drastic nationwide increase in book challenges continues to impact curriculum and libraries and is a way for parents to control

what students experience. For some, it is a control over topics because of religion, personal beliefs, uncomfortable topics, or bias. However, parents attempting to control books through challenges and banning directly impacts the freedom to read for other students: “Every kid should have the opportunity to read whatever...my goal is to have every student connect to a text” (Participant A). Parents are creating a paradox.

The freedom to choose a novel based upon individual interests, likes, and comprehension not only engages students in reading but also helps them in gaining a deeper understanding of the world: “we have so many different things in our library trying to appeal to so many different students because everybody has different taste” (Participant E). Yet, when parents challenge books because of gender, race, violence, or any other subjective idea, they are only limiting options for other students. Parents have a right to monitor material for their individual students; they do not have a right to do so for others. This paradox multiplies as parents join forces with sociopolitical agendas, voice opinions at school board meetings, and spread propaganda through social media.

In Montana, Moms for Liberty started an increased presence in fall 2020 after students returned to school from the Covid-19 pandemic. Since then, they have advocated for separating LGBTQ+ novels at the public library, vocally spoken at school board meetings for book removals (in Bozeman, Billings, and Laurel, Montana), and have politically supported individuals on school boards (Billings Public Schools) and state representative elections and sessions. They’ve rallied in Helena, Montana for political events including support for legislature like Excused Absences from Curriculum Requirements—Notice—Prohibited Activities (2023). In 2023, Moms for Liberty spoke in favor of changing 20-7-120 from a yearly parental notice to

a minimum 2-10 days in advance. During the legislative season, they targeted a teacher explicitly for teaching a non-fiction novel that included an individual that identified as a-gender; often inaccurately saying the novel was about a transgendered individual. “They are going to take every opportunity they can to create legislation that furthers their cause” (Participant A). While Moms for Liberty claims to be speaking on behalf of all parents, their true goal is censoring education and books. Through social media, they’ve been able to share their agenda, voice opinions, and target their local schools and educators. Moms for Liberty (both nationally and in Montana) continues to advocate for parents’ rights and values. Even though not all parents agree or align with Moms for Liberty, it becomes challenging to divide parental values. Does a parent genuinely have concerns for a particular novel for their own reason or are they simply following the “new” status quo?

The amplifying paradox continues. The loudest ones are heard, and their voices speak more than anyone else. The voices are the leader, leading others with clearly scripted language: “If you go to the main page of Moms for Liberty, they do have a website that you can go to that has a list of all the different books that you should look for in your library and why they're bad” (Participant C). When individuals choose to use printed scripts, does it even count as their own voice and values? These talking points overshadow those presented by other parents. Language influences the world and invites individuals to speak, but it becomes challenging to separate and acknowledge who speaks for one versus those following an agenda. Rhetoric is the new ammunition. Parents fear an imaginary agenda; educators fear who or what will be challenged next.

Pedagogical Values

Teaching is a passion. Those that choose to enter the profession do so because of their own personal interests. For many in ELA and Library Media, reading is that passion, but the flame is quickly dying because of the power dynamic between stakeholders, society, administration, school boards, and their own classrooms. A lack in leadership and community support challenges the daily actions within the classroom to only become exhausting. ELA classrooms, libraries, and the books they contain continue to face challenges from their communities. Despite the tiresome battle, educators continue to engage students with meaningful texts but with caution and sometimes at the risk of engaged learning:

I just feel strongly enough about trying to take care of all of my students. I feel passionate about what I do; that to get bogged down in attacks over a particular book, I've kind of avoided it, and as a result, where I see it is my students' low scores on the AP exam for their response to the full length piece of literature (Participant B).

What should educators do? Sacrifice their pedagogical values to avoid scrutiny for their curriculum choices or risk it for the betterment of their students? Many attempt to fight for as long as they can, but the fight is tiresome forcing more librarians and educators toward retirement sooner than expected.

For those that choose to continue to teach tend to focus on finding novels in which their students connect to; a strong pedagogical framework and theory presented by Rosenblatt (1995) articulates that students find text meaningful if they are able to see themselves reflected within it. Reading also opens students to new worlds, experiences, perspectives, societal challenges, and builds empathy and understanding. When educators engage students with meaningful classroom experiences through reading, they're more likely to inquire about other pieces, which ultimately

increase reading for pleasure. One participant challenges her students to read *The Martian*, and afterwards, student inquire about other novels by Andy Weir, but after she teaches *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Romeo and Juliet*, students do not ask for other Shakespearean plays or classics. These pieces do not encourage students to actively read beyond the required curriculum: “We need to keep students reading, how do we do that? They need to have books that they’re interested in, things that they like to read” (Participant D).

In order to build students’ reading comprehension, critical thinking, and inquiry on the world, English teachers strategically select novels for their classrooms. From their interviews, participants shared several novels in which they enjoyed teaching and their students enjoyed reading, but yet continued to be challenged across the nation. These participants find literary merit and value within the novels despite the challenges they face from stakeholders locally or nationwide attempts to ban the novel. The three novels *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time-Indian*, *Ready Player One*, and *The Kite Runner* offer students unique opportunities to either see themselves reflected through the protagonist or learn through the lens of someone different. What is most interesting about these three novels is that they all fall within the genre YAL and all have been banned within at least one district across America (Pen America, 2023). Participants shared their experiences in teaching these novels and why they find them important aspects of their ELA curriculum.

Novel Analysis

Each participant shared examples of YAL novels they currently use within their classroom curriculum. Despite the challenges each novel presents, teachers found them to still provide meaningful context.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

Sherman Alexie's (2007) novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* continues to be one of the most challenged and banned novel. Three different participants identified this novel as a current piece within their classrooms because they enjoyed teaching it since even their most reluctant readers would read it: "The value this book gives to students is undeniable" (Participant C). Alexie's novel also helps to fulfill a portion of Indian Education for All (IEFA) curriculum. Montana IEFA came into effect in 1999 when the legislature introduced the idea that "Every Montanan, whether Indian or non-Indian, learn about the distinct and unique heritage of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner" (Recognition of American Indian cultural heritage, 2023).

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian is told through the perspective of 14-year-old Junior (Arnold Spirit Jr.) who lives on the Spokane Indian Reservation. After his teacher tells him that he's too good to stay on the rez, he decides to attend the all-white public high school in Reardan: "the rich, white farm town that sits...exactly twenty-two miles away from the rez" (Alexie, 2007, p. 45). Junior's story is about self-identity, friendship, and family. Throughout the novel, readers connect with Junior as he struggles living in two different worlds—the rez (Indian) and Reardan (white)—, overcomes obstacles with his best friend

Rowdy from the reservation, makes new friends from Reardan, grieves over the loss of his sister, and ultimately, learns how to grow up despite the poverty, alcohol, and inequality challenges the rez gives him.

However, Alexie's novel continues to be one of the most challenged and banned novels. According to Pen America's 2022-2023 data, Alexie's novel was banned in 17 different districts between Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Texas, Utah, and Virginia. Most of these bans started as a formal challenge with a few beginning with administrators and even "informal challenge" (Pen America, 2023). In 2013, Billings Public Schools (BPS) (in Montana) faced a formal challenge presented by an upset parent once the student finished the novel. The board ultimately voted to keep the novel, but it sparked BPS to create an opt-out policy for parents in which they can ask for an alternative novel (Barack, 2013). Now, in 2024, Alexie's novel is once again being targeted in Montana. However, this time, the newly implemented legislation is giving new grounds for book challenges. Bozeman School District faced a challenge for the novel because of "vulgar, sexual, anti-white, and anti-Catholic" ideas (Carroll, 2024). Alexie's novel is full of language, blunt references to body parts, masturbation, and even alcohol and eating disorders. However, there is still a deeper message which young readers can take away. Alexie's novel illuminates the struggle many young Indigenous students encounter. Poverty, alcoholism, and a lack of belonging are real concerns for our Indigenous students, and with this novel, many open up and share their own stories and experiences: "a lot of Native American students, a lot of kids who hadn't historically seen themselves represented in literature who said, this is the only book I've ever read about me" (Participant E).

Alexie's (2007) writing skills shine through his use of humor. In one chapter, Junior and his new friend Gordy have a symbolic conversation about how books give you a boner: "really good books and cartoons give you a boner" (Alexie, 2007, p. 96). He uses this language for humor, but the fact that the word "boner" occurs 13 times in a few pages is not meant to stir up any sexual connotation. In fact, Gordy explicitly says that "When I say boner, I really mean joy....Boner is funnier. And more joyful" (Alexie, 2007, p. 98). Junior and Gordy are 14 years old. Language commonly used by many adolescent males, Alexie (2007) adds this humor to their speech to engage readers, particularly young men, and stir excitement in reading; the irony is that they typically do find joy in reading this particular text because of its realistic language and humor.

Yet, Alexie's novel is clearly a target for both of Montana's annotated code 45-8-201 and 20-7-120. 45-8-201, Obscenity, places several chapters into question in particular moments where sexual body parts and acts of masturbation are mentioned. Yet, the notion of what is obscene is subjective. What one person finds obscene (i.e. a boner) another might find humorous, natural, or like Gordy, symbolic. 20-7-120, Excused Absences from Curriculum Requirements—Notice—Prohibited Activities, challenges educators in two different ways with Alexie's text. First, educators must notify parents of all material that include "human sexuality" prior to its use in the classroom. While that is an inconvenience, it is doable assuming there is a common understanding for interpreting the language of "human sexuality." The reality is that some educators are afraid to even offer it now despite the classroom value: "This book starts conversations in the classroom that most people are afraid to have now due to the government and laws that have been passed to punish educators for having open dialogue about stereotypes

and feelings in general” (Participant C). Alexie’s novel might inflate a few stereotypes, but the vast majority of his novel reflects his own upbringing on the reservation. Now, some teachers fear using specific novels that allow in-depth conversations about real world problems. Native American reservations face poverty, alcoholism, multigenerational trauma, inequities in health care, and poor educational opportunities; Alexie’s (2007) novel provides opportunities to have in-depth discussions on how these aspects continue to be a problem on reservations today.

However, stakeholders voicing opposition against Alexie’s novel, primarily in Montana, only focus on these scenes in which “human sexuality” is a problem and ignore the large symbolic, thematic lessons students can learn. One participant shared, “Seeing a realistic view of the challenges and problems in any society or group helps students connect in a more meaningful way. It is through literature that many get to experience the world - having it be stripped of the things that make it real only diminishes the writing and choices available to students and readers” (Participant A). Given that Montana requires IEFA and publicly teaches Native American students, having stakeholders vocally push against and challenge texts written by and about Native Americans creates another level of challenges for educators working in the system. One that feels like a personal attack on students.

Ready Player One

Ernest Cline’s (2011) dystopian, futuristic novel, *Ready Player One*, follows the story of the teenager Wade Watts as he searches for an Easter egg (a hidden feature) within a virtual reality game contest. After Halliday, the billionaire of OASIS (the virtual reality game), passes, a viral video of his Last Will and Testament goes live explaining the contest: “Before I died...I

created my own Easter egg, and hid it somewhere inside my most popular videogame—the OASIS. The first person to find my Easter egg will inherit my entire fortune” (Cline, 2011, p. 5). As players engage in the contest, time passes with no luck until Wade finds the first clue: “After five long years, the Copper Key had finally been found, by an eighteen-year-old kid living in a trailer park on the outsides of Oklahoma City” (Cline, 2011, p. 9).

In 2012, *Ready Player One* received the Alex Award presented by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA). This award started in 2002 as a platform to recognize texts that might have been written for adults but have an appeal to a younger audience (American Library Association, 2024). Wade Watts is a young, teenage protagonist living with his aunt in a broken-down trailer court after his mom passed away. Throughout Wade’s journey, he encounters several new avatars (players) including a male named Aech, who holds the reputation of being a ruthless arena combatant contested. However, Wade learns Aech’s true identity; Aech is not a male. In fact, he is a she, a young black girl named Helen Harris. Helen’s decision to use a white, male avatar stemmed from her mother, who was also an OASIS player; her mother used a male avatar in the game only to discover not only was she treated differently, more positively, but it also provided new opportunities (Cline, 2011, p. 319-321).

Despite the success of *Ready Player One* in both text and film, it has been challenged and banned. In Florida, it was removed due to its profanity and references to prostitution and drugs. “No Left Turn in Education” and Moms for Liberty also complained that the book attempts to promote critical race theory (CRT) through the character Aech (aka Helen Harris) because she is black (Goni-Lessan & Walker, 2023). Helen might be black, the foundational complaint for CRT, but readers empathize with her. She felt forced to hide her true identity behind a white,

male avatar in order to earn the respect of other players. Cline's (2011) character is not an attempt to teach CRT but rather an opportunity to express challenges of identity: a similar conflict teenager experience in real life. However, Helen is not only targeted for her race but also her sexuality: homosexual or a lesbian. This has been the complaint for many under Montana 20-7-120: "sexual orientation." A character's sexual orientation does not necessarily define the entire novel; in this instance, Helen (Aech) is not the protagonist. The minor plot detail that she has a girlfriend is small in comparison to the entire text; in fact, Helen (Aech) shares this information with Wade in the section of the novel; the novel has 372 pages, and the paragraph that speaks to Helen's girlfriend is on page 321.

Participant J alluded that she's been lucky with stakeholder challenges. She's been able to explain that readers empathize with Helen because she feels the need to hide her true self. The larger thematic concepts surrounding teenager struggles with identity reflect the honest experiences that teenagers develop: a trait found within YAL. Student connections are why educators use YAL in their classrooms to better understand concepts such as code switching: maneuvering between multiple languages, identities, or even cultures.

Code switching is often in response to language. The language used amongst one group or situation is different from another, which is often the idea brought forth from multilingual households. However, it is often applied to identities, too. Individuals within multiple social groups find themselves switching from one identity to another to fit social norms. The idea of the avatar in *Ready Player One* is an excellent example of real-world code switching. Individuals approach specific social groups with a different identity; here, there is the identity of the individual playing the game and the avatar. Aech (Helen) switches back and forth between

herself, a young black girl, and her avatar, a white male. She has to adapt and readapt. Code switching happens every day in education; both students and teachers put on multiple identities. Students code switch between academics, athletics, social groups, and families. Each group has its own language and different social rules. Learning how a character maneuvers through life helps students not only improve understanding for code switching experiences but also apply it to themselves.

The Kite Runner

Set in the backdrop of the Soviet-Afghan war of the 1970s, Hosseini's (2003) novel *The Kite Runner* is told through the lens of a young Pashtun boy, Amir, and his personal journey through the struggles of betrayal and guilt. Amir and closest friend Hassan, who is Hazara and the son of Amir's father's servant, spend their days kite flying while also experiencing the horrific realities many Afghan children faced while growing up in the Middle East during a time of political tension and military conflict. Despite coming from different social and cultural statuses, each boy struggles with the guilt of one traumatizing incident. Assef, an older boy, often mocks Amir for his friendship with Hassan for both his differences. One afternoon, Assef rapes Hassan:

Assef knelt behind Hassan, put his hands on Hassan's hips and lifted his bare buttocks. He kept one hand on Hassan's back and undid his own belt buckle with his free hand. He unzipped his jeans. Dropped his underwear. He positioned himself behind Hassan. Hassan didn't struggle. Didn't even whimper (Hosseini, 2003, p. 73).

Amir watches the rape take place and does not stop it. Instead, it haunts him his entire life. *The Kite Runner's* thematic ideas and Amir's character development stem from this moment, but this seven sentence paragraph is the main rationale behind its recent challenges and bans.

According to Pen America's 2022-2023 data, Hosseini's (2003) novel was banned across 10 districts in Florida alone along with districts in Idaho, Michigan, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, and Wisconsin. The primary challenge centers on the sexual assault of Hassan. In fact, several challenges span back to 2008 citing disapproval of "male-on-male rape, sexual innuendo, and vulgar language" (Marshall Libraries, 2023). However, many challenges prior to 2018 did not end in a ban but rather changes to curriculum lists (it remained in the library) or suggested providing alternative texts for uncomfortable students. Even though it has yet to be challenged in Montana, there is still a risk based on the verbiage of Montana Annotated Code 20-7-120 and 45-8-201. Stakeholders could complain about the "human sexuality" and "obscene" nature of the scene. The main argument centers on the notion that it is not an implied or inferred scene but rather stated explicitly with unzipped, dropped, and positioned. The direct language used to articulate the scene serves a purpose, but under 45-8-201, one could argue that the rape scene is obscene because it is a "description of...sexual acts." However, from this moment, Amir struggles with the everlasting guilt often convincing himself life would be simpler without Hassan. The scene is not meant to be a simple read, but instead is meant to open the door for in-depth, meaningful discussions on real world problems including class wars and oppression. Throughout the rest of the novel, readers create parallels to their own experiences about friendship, betrayal, and guilt through Amir as he learns from his past mistakes.

In an attempt to prevent further banning of *The Kite Runner*, Hosseini wrote a letter to Brevard County School Board in Florida. Within his letter he spoke to important aspects readers had taken away from the novel: "For some, the book is a clarion call to stand up to bullies, to

defy intolerance” (Tolin, 2024). In the letter Hosseini wrote that he understands the notion of protecting children, but through banning books we create more dangers:

But banning books like *The Kite Runner* doesn’t ‘protect’ students at all. It betrays them. It robs them of the chance that we as parents and instructors owe them, the chance to broaden their human community, to let them walk the world in another’s shoes for a while, to foster empathy for others, to be challenged by the experience and perhaps take a small step toward becoming fuller, richer versions of themselves (Tolin, 2024).

Literature provides the opportunity for students to understand history, social and cultural differences, and racial differences. Students gather that information from *The Kite Runner* because of a reader’s ability to easily engage and relate to the thematic struggles of friendships, betrayal, and guilt. One participant uses it within her Senior English class as a way for students to engage with the Afghan culture: “It gives American students a sense of the power vacuum that led to the Taliban taking control of the country and how that development was very tragic for Afghan people” (Participant B). Now teaching it in 2024, she finds her students paying more attention to it since the Taliban is in control again. The ability to teach the cultural differences between American students and the Afghan boys helps students become more worldly and knowledgeable about ongoing societal and cultural justice issues.

The Impact

It feels like a losing battle. No one enters the field of education for money, glory, or fame. Education is a selfless career path, and those that embark in the world of ELA and Library Media do so because of their own personal love for reading and writing. However, there have been changes to their classroom policies. Within their district, all ELA educators must send home a syllabus at the beginning of each semester that has a list of all novels planned to be used

for the semester, a “link” (that only works when done digitally) to the district’s approved curriculum list, a legal policy addressing Montana Annotated Code 20-7-129, and a spot for signatures of both students and guardians. While the process of writing a syllabus is not difficult, the challenge lies in obtaining them back from students. Constant reminders and emails home stand between educators continuing forward with their intended curriculum. One of the main challenges is the actual language within the legislation. Because the language of human sexuality and obscenity are vague—and subjective—it challenges educators on what they should actually teach:

Whereas I used to read probably four, maybe five texts a year, full length texts with my kids. We all read the same thing. We talked about it, we analyzed it. We're now down to two, maybe three.... The problem is that because I feel that I can't choose one of those books for the whole class, they get to read three separate ones. I know all of them. I try to have conversations with the kids, reading each of them, but there is not that shared textual experience (Participant B).

Educators have now restructured their instruction because they are trying to appease the masses. Yet no matter how hard they try, it still feels like a losing battle. This is because what one person finds obscene, inappropriate, or violent does not always align with other others believe.

Yet, despite having a signed document, many parents still voice angst when novel studies begin. This unknown fear and paradox continue as students bring home novels. For years, this particular district has offered an opt-out policy. When parents disagree with a novel study, they file paperwork that opts their student out of the text. The student is provided an alternative text and is removed from classroom discussions. They often complete their novel study independently in the school’s library. Within the past few years, educators have seen an exponential growth of opt outs. Some over the years have made sense: an opt out of *Stardust* by Neil Gaiman or *The Odyssey* for religious reasons. However, some opt out but never say the real

reason why: “I had a student once who opted out [of a novel] because of violence, but parents were willing to have them read *Julius Caesar* and he’s stabbed 33 times” (Participant E). The rationale for each individual challenge does not always make sense. Another participant shared that despite sending home a syllabus and receiving a signature, they still received a “seething letter, demanding that [they] teach *1984* as an alternative” (Participant A). What’s ironic is that *1984* has also been banned amongst many districts for violence, claims of pro-communism, and even the marital affair (Pen America, 2023). However, this parent was adamant that their child would not read the non-fiction novel provided, and they were not the only parent. Another educator also received a similar letter concerning the non-fiction text that asserted that “English classes are for fiction, not non-fiction.” It seems like no matter what educators do in advance, they still experience pushback from parents and community stakeholders creating a larger divide and power struggle.

The value clash continues beyond the classroom though. School libraries and librarians remain under attack, especially in terms of “obscenity.” The purpose of a library is to provide students with choice reading; a place in which they can access both fiction, non-fiction, graphic novels, manga, and engage with texts for pleasure reading and research for academic. However, most book challenges attack texts from the libraries at school board meetings by reading passages they claim to be “pornographic:” a strategic rhetoric move. While no librarian, especially those within this study, are ordering pornographic material, writing is still an art, and authors have a choice to write about our current cultures and society. Not every novel is for every student, but students need options. Librarians are trying their best to provide them: “We

have so many different things in our library trying to appeal to so many different students because everybody has different tastes” (Participant E).

The battle continues. Educators feel powerless within the system. The voices of those against diverse literature and inclusion grow every day—creating a power dynamic that often feels toxic. The power struggle continues as educators express lacking support from administrators and an overall feeling of failure. Their years of education, schooling, and practice now feel minimized and obsolete. Critical responsive practices (Ladson-Billings, 1995), reader response theories (Rosenblatt, 1995), and teaching social responsibilities and justice (Landt, 2006; Wolk, 2009) used to shape how educators approached literature within the classroom. For some, those researched based practices have vanished and replaced with appealing to the masses. But hope remains. Some are still trying to do what is best for their students: by opening them up to diverse literature, improving their critical thinking skills, and hopefully, turning them into avid readers. As a current ELA teacher, I find this battle to be exhausting. On a daily basis, I listen to my cohorts vent about their latest parent email, what they saw on social media, and the complaints they hear from other individuals at neighboring schools. However, I still choose teaching practices and novels that offer my students opportunities to engage, challenge, and promote diversity, but I cannot blame those that choose not to. Do I wish they would join me and these five participants? Absolutely, but there is a fear right now within education, and sometimes, fear controls our actions. This research is only the beginning. Each state, district, and school face their own battles, and what one educator faces in one could be drastically different from another. Nationwide though voices have started to come forth about these challenges.

Educational censorship and book banning need to stop. Reading needs to become valued once again, and trust must slowly rebalance the power dynamics.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions:

Banned Books:

1. The 2022-2023 was the highest recorded number of book bans. 3,362 book bans were recorded; 1,557 titles.

1. What are thoughts behind the national increase seen in book banning?
2. Why do you think book challenge numbers are so high?
3. Have you noticed any trends with book challenges and ban on a national level?

Local level?

2. What are your thoughts on book banning in curriculum versus a school's library?

Educational Censorship:

3. In the past few years, Montana passed several bills that some would claim are censoring education. Montana 45-8-201; 205; 206 (HB 234) which addressed sharing "obscene" materials (defined as book, magazine, print, film, etc.) with minors (individuals convicted can face fines, jail time, and other punishments set forth by a school policy). Montana passed 20-7-120 (SB99) which allows students to be excused from curriculum requirements if it concerns "human sexuality" including "sexual orientation [and] gender identity."

1. What are your thoughts on the legislature that appears to be a direct attack on education and curriculum?
2. How have these bills impacted how you teach?
3. Have these bills impacted how you interact with colleagues? Administration?

Stakeholders?

Sociopolitical Agendas:

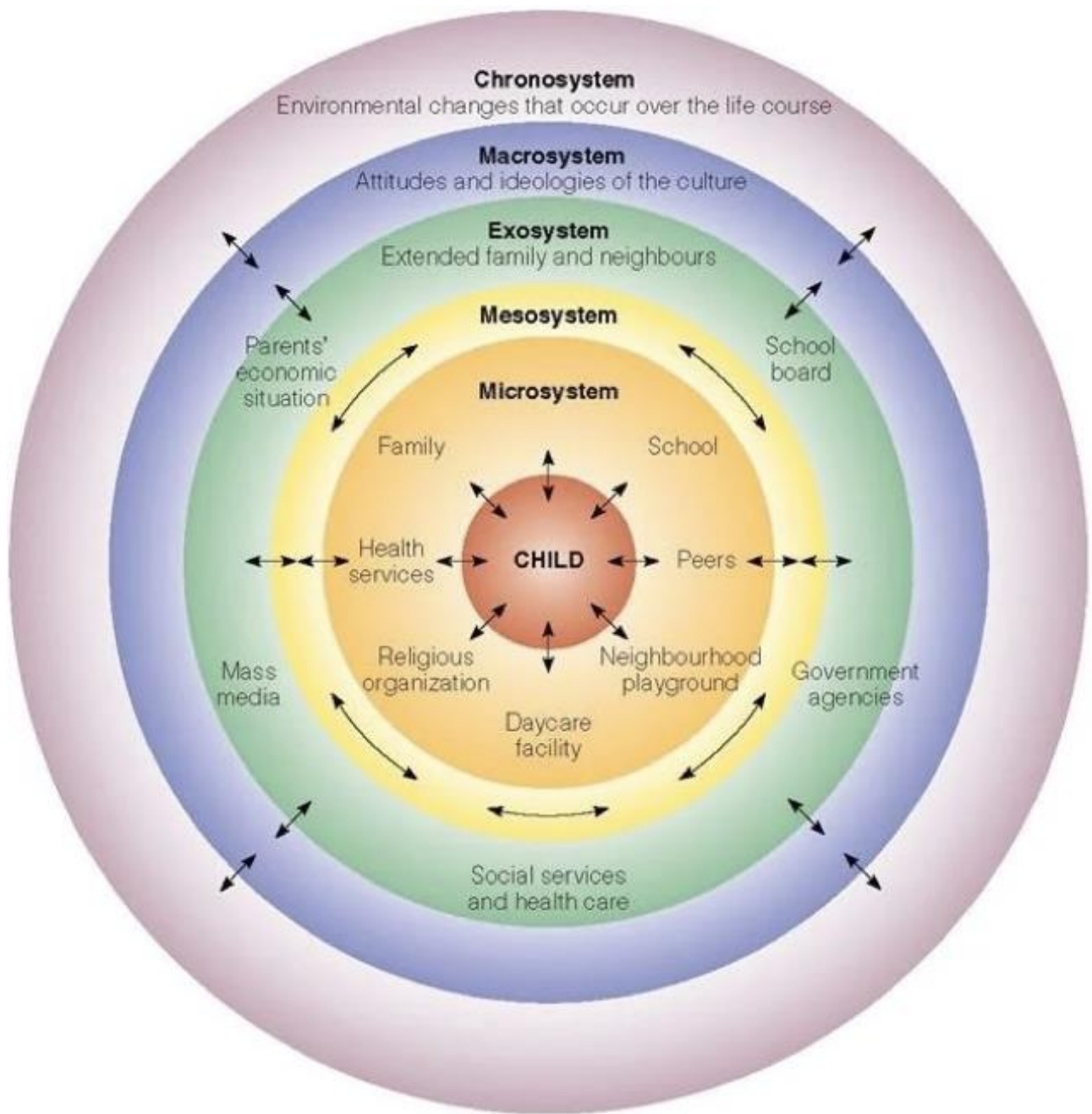
4. There are several politicians and political groups that have voiced concerns within education, curriculum, and instruction.

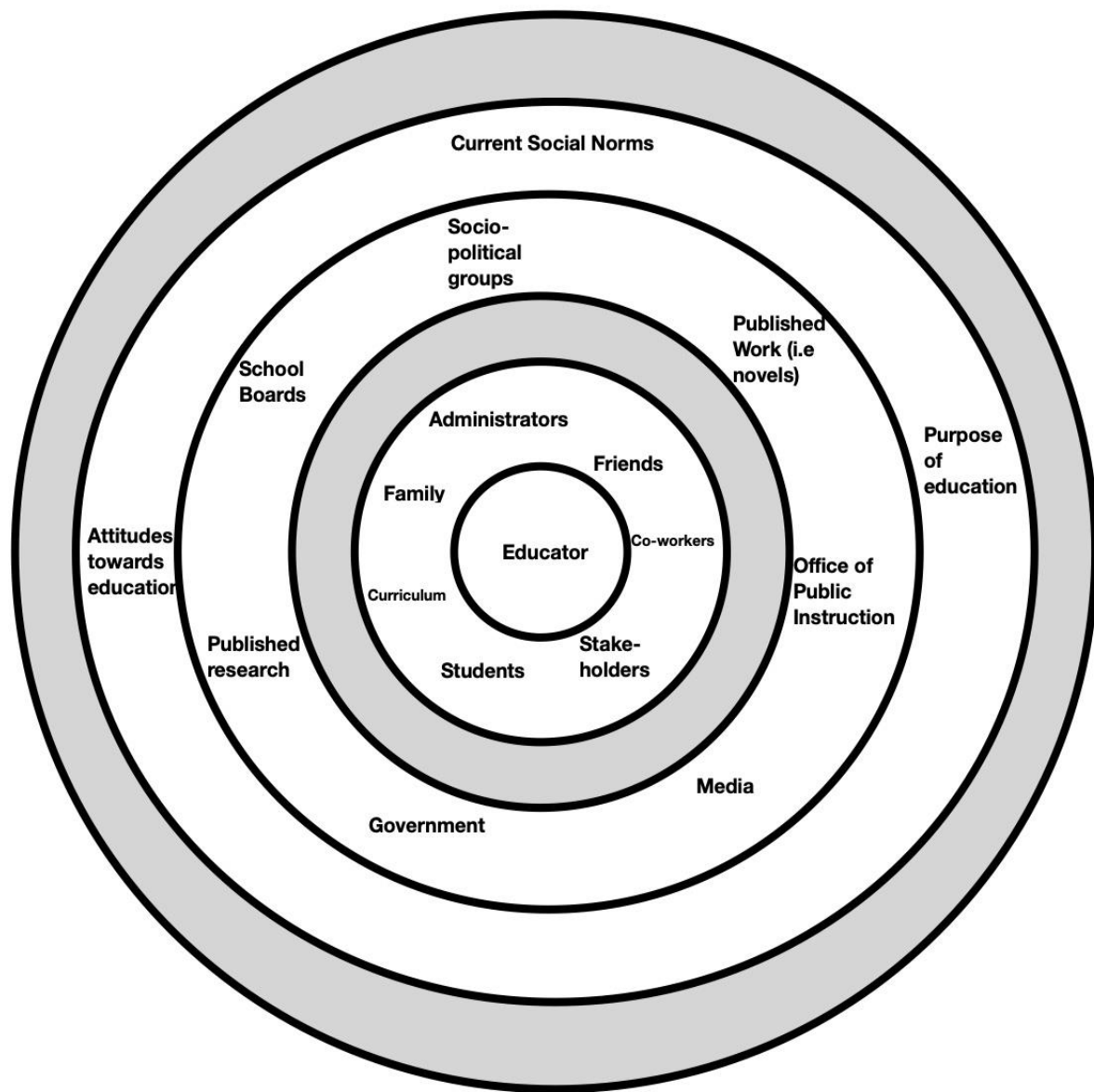
1. What have you noticed on a national or state level addressing education?
2. What have you noticed within your own community concerning topics of education?
3. Do you find any patterns amongst sociopolitical groups that voice opinions?

Personal examples:

5. Can you share with me some worries you have about as an educator, employee, stakeholder given the current context?
6. Do you have any personal stories with book banning, challenges, censorship, or sociopolitical groups you would like to share? How has that impacted you as an educator?

APPENDIX B:
ECOLOGICAL SYSTEM THEORY





CHAPTER FOUR

AN INSIGHT INTO EDUCATIONAL CENSORSHIP: THE PERSPECTIVES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF ADMINISTRATORS AND TEACHERS DURING HEIGHTENED BOOK CHALLENGES

Contribution of Authors and Co-Authors

Manuscript in Chapter Three

Author: Catherine Wetmore

Contributions: As the lead investigator, I wrote and revised the manuscript. I prepared and generated all information necessary to obtain the data. I analyzed the data, contributed to all sections of the articles, and edited all writing and references. I submitted this article to one journal and await a response for future publication.

Co-Author: Dr. Sarah Pennington

Contributions: Mentored the first author throughout the data collection and analysis. Also assisted with writing revisions.

Co-Author: Dr. Carrie B. Myers

Contributions: Mentored the first author through revisions.

Manuscript Information

Catherine Wetmore

Status of Manuscript:

- ☒ Prepared for submission to a peer-reviewed journal
- ☐ Officially submitted to a peer-reviewed journal
- ☐ Accepted by a peer-reviewed journal
- ☐ Published in a peer-reviewed journal

Introduction

The recent surge in book bans and challenges has placed unprecedented demands on administrators and teachers. Teachers actively seek a balance between support, respect, and independence from administrators (Campbell, 2023). Teachers juggle standardized tests, classroom management, and workloads and now face new challenges from parents, school administrators, and stakeholder groups concerning curriculum texts and library novels (National Council of Teachers of English, 2024; Sachdeva et al., 2023). Meanwhile, administrators focus on maintaining a positive school climate while balancing the voices of those challenging books, curriculums, and lessons. Within the past few years, book bans have grown exponentially with over 10,000 bans nationwide during the 2023-2024 school year (Pen America, 2025). In 2025, the Department of Defense Schools banned 596 (Tolin, 2025). The challenges of book bans are not slowing down or disappearing. Instead, teachers and administrators must learn to navigate the ever-evolving climate. This research expresses the voices of administrators, classroom teachers, and librarians working in the same rural school district to illuminate their individual perspectives on how their district handles book challenges.

Background

To understand how book bans and challenges disrupt education, it is important to understand the foundational aspects of a school's vision and leadership. A school's vision has three components: curriculum, literacy, and effective instruction (Schmoker, 2016). School leaders should maintain a focused, simple goal which all staff members strive to achieve. In the

end, curriculum, literacy, and effective instruction improve engagement, achievement, and school culture. Recently, education has been stuck within a political battle. Many states have passed legislation that promotes educational censorship. Florida's HB1557 placed limitations on K-12 classroom curriculum, Montana's 20-7-120 gave parents the ability to opt-out their student from any lesson or curriculum unit, and Utah's HB29 states that if a book is banned in three public school districts, then the Utah State Board of Education votes to either enact or override a statewide ban. With these laws impacting education, particularly ELA classrooms and school libraries, where does this put those working in education? How do administrators support their staff through a political pendulum? Stuck in between promoting best practices, upholding teaching practices, and navigating stakeholders, administrators face a new battle.

The current phenomenon of book challenges and bans impacts ELA curriculum, school and classroom libraries, and the choices educators make for literacy instruction. A book challenge consists of a stakeholder (student, parent, community member) bringing forth a concern about a particular text available within the school; stakeholders often claim the book is inappropriate for school based on content or age. Since 2022, most commonly challenged books contained LGBTQ+ content, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) characters or authors, sexually explicit material, drugs, and profanity (American Library Association, 2024).

Challenges are brought forward to school boards in which the elected members decide if the novel should or should not be removed from schools. If school board members find the novel inappropriate, then the text is banned (removed). However, a book can also become banned because of changes to legislation. For example, Tennessee passed Public Charter 782 which amended the Age-Appropriate Materials Act from 2024. Now, any form of nudity or violence is

not appropriate for students in grades K-12 (ACLU Tennessee, 2024). Now, Tennessee school districts are pulling one book off the shelf after another: Monroe County has removed 574 books, Knox County 150 books, Oak Ridge Schools over 300, and Wilson County over 400 (Connelly, 2025). The 2022-2023 school year had 3,362 books banned, the historically largest recorded number, which spiked to over 10,000 books during the 2023-2024 school year (American Library Association, 2024; Meehan & Baeta, 2024; Pen America, 2025). Data has yet to be released for the 2024-2025 school year. Despite the limited availability of novel choices in some districts, student proficiency in literacy remains a focus. The integration of literacy across multiple disciplines is proven to help students become proficient in skills needed to be career and college ready; helping students master literacy aids in their ability to become engaged citizens (Danielson, 2016). It also helps students in “acquiring knowledge, thinking skills, and verbal facilities” (Schmoker, 2016, p. 39). Students should be offered a variety of literature for both pleasure and academic reading, and student choice remains one of the greatest influences on students becoming readers for life (Aberli, 2019; Cart, 2016; Gallagher, 2009).

At the forefront of the current phenomenon stands two distinct groups: educators fighting censorship and stakeholders promoting it. The dichotomous nature of these two groups on the forefront places educational leaders in the middle attempting to maintain the peace. Building administrators must learn how to support their staff during these challenges while trying to calm parental uproars. Through strong leadership qualities, a clear vision, and a focused goal, principals can continue striving for student engagement and success despite the tough battles. This means they must possess intelligence, confidence, charisma, determination, sociability, and integrity (Northouse, 2021). When educational leaders, especially building principals, possess

these qualities, they're aware of how specific tasks and resolutions require either a task behavior approach or a focus on strong relationships (Northouse, 2021). Both are a necessity for navigating the current phenomenon.

Review of Related Literature

Leadership relationships exist within every career field. Without clearly defined leadership, employees cannot understand a company's vision, identify individual roles, or work in an innovative atmosphere that initiates long term change. Leadership and leadership theories are defined as a trait, ability, skill, behavior, relationship, and influential process (Northouse, 2021). It asks an individual to evaluate each scenario, group, and team member to help determine specific steps needed to implement change. Despite the multifaceted aspects of leadership, one specific trait sits above the rest: trust. Leadership research identifies a myriad of theories including situational theory, participative theory, relationship/transformational theory, and educational leadership (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Educational leadership encompasses several of these theories but placed within the structure of education to focus on school management, framework, multitiered relationships, educational visions and goals while building a climate of trust that ultimately leads towards student success (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). Leadership must provide direction, influence, and uphold trust in order to achieve change.

Administrators play an important role in upholding a positive school climate. While there is not a singular definition for school climate, Cohen et al.'s (2009) meta-analysis of previously conducted research concluded that school climate is composed of four dimensions: safety, teaching and learning, relationships, and environmental structure. Within these dimensions,

elements of leadership, adult-adult relationship between/among teachers, administrators, and staff, and staff enthusiasm all impact positive school climate which then helps promote “student learning, academic achievement, school success, healthy development...and increased teacher retention” (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 183). At the foundation of the school climate is the relationship and trust between administrators and teachers and how teachers perceive their administrators.

Kelley, Thornton, and Daugherty (2005) researched individual elementary teacher perspectives on their principals’ leadership style and abilities. They discovered a positive correlation between a principal’s effectiveness and teacher effectiveness; effective principals, who possessed strong leadership skills, left positive impacts on their teachers and helped positively increase the overall climate of the school. Price (2012) found that the principal-teacher relationship relies on a deep level of trust. These relationships impact both parties to improve satisfaction, cohesion, and commitment. As principals share decision making and expectations with teachers, this also magnifies the positive effects on both individuals and the relationship. Shared leadership allows the teacher to take on an active role during the decision-making processes.

Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) found that faculty trust in the principal, instructional leadership, and school climate were all correlated, which was supported by previous research, and principals who had their faculty's trust also had positive relationships with their community. Sanchez, Paul, and Thornton’s (2022) quantitative study also found significant relationships between teacher perspectives and principal support; also, more experienced teachers viewed their principals’ leadership differently than their new counterparts. Principals can demonstrate a deeper level of trust with veteran teachers by sharing leadership

responsibilities. The idea of shared leadership begins with the administrator's ability to relinquish and entrust teachers to participate within the decision-making process (Barth, 1988; Sanchez, Paul, & Thornton, 2022). Even though administrators lead school communities towards success, shared leadership actually achieves lasting impacts and changes. While each school might have a different mission statement, there are common themes found throughout many school missions: maintaining high quality educators, ensuring students attend, and enjoy, school, and improving student academic success. These lasting impacts can be done through shared leadership. Shared leadership builds trust within education. Leadership behaviors, trust in colleagues, and principals impact an individual teacher's perspective (Babaoglan, 2016). Recognizing the teacher's professional and personal voice in changing or maintaining a school's culture can lead to lasting impacts including classroom performance, teacher morale, commitment to teaching, and relationships with colleagues and students (Barth, 1988). Through shared leadership roles, administrators on multiple levels can help invite teachers into specific leadership roles to help improve school culture and meet specific teaching needs.

Teacher leadership (TL) has quickly become an important and highly utilized role within education. With several definitions of TL, Danielson (2016) articulates that TL consist of a teacher's ability to mobilize and energize other teachers in the hopes of improving a school's performance or achieving school goals. Often given to veteran teachers, these positions offer individuals the opportunity to serve as a guide, mentor, and voice for others. TL has evolved; it started with the creation of department chairs, curriculum leads, roles as transformational classroom leaders, and now, advocates for teachers' needs (Hart, 2021). Principals assign teachers to these positions to take on tasks related to impacting others, increasing individual

responsibility, mastering teaching, and being proactive (Hart, 2021). TLs are critically important for curriculum. Besson's (2024) recent inquiry with principals focused on TCL (teacher curriculum leaders). TCLs were individuals that possessed leadership and management; knowledge acquisition, possession, and dissemination; and modeling and caregiving. TCLs are curriculum decision makers, and since they remain active in the classroom, they can advocate for necessary curriculum changes from their and their colleague's perspectives (Besson, 2024). They also can see those changes take place.

All leaders need to be aware of what happens within a school as well as their community. Teaching during a sociopolitical pendulum presents its own sets of challenges, and those new to education find a leader (TL or administrator) for support when facing obstacles. Those within leadership positions can help teachers navigate phenomena with hopes of improving teacher retention, student achievement, and school climate. But this means that principals are willing to share these leadership roles. Shared leadership becomes challenging when principals and teachers have different political ideologies. These challenges have shifted with the sudden increase of education legislation. Recent legislation, partially from Republican majorities, has created a rift. Several pieces of legislation, often promoted by Parental Rights sociopolitical groups, have targeted areas of "concern" including human sexuality, gender identity, and individual pronoun choices. The most high-profile Parental Rights group, Moms for Liberty (2025), has now expanded with chapters in almost every state. This has empowered them to run for state and city legislative seats, as school board members, and maintain a presence as active, vocal stakeholders. In 2022, 26 different states introduced over 85 bills that focused on parental rights (ParentalRights.org, 2025). 18 different states define and protect parental rights including

Texas (1999), Utah (2000), Wyoming (2017), Florida (2021), Montana (2021), Georgia (2022), Iowa (2023), and Tennessee (2024) (ParentalRights.org, 2025). Texas, Florida, Iowa, Utah, and Tennessee also have some of the highest recorded number of book bans in public schools (Little Free Library, 2025; Pen America 2025). In 2023, the U.S. House of Representatives passed H.R.5—Parental Bill of Rights Act which ensures that local educational agencies make curriculum accessible and available at no cost to the parents. It also requires parental consent for grades 5-8 for any changes to a “child’s gender markers, pronouns, or preferred name” (H.R.5, 2023). Administrators and teachers must face these changes differently. A principal must think about their entire school while a teacher’s perspective might, and often is, more narrowed to their own classroom or content area. The legislative changes have impacted “identity” inclusion and discussions in schools, including the ability to utilize diverse novels as a tool to discuss inclusion. Pollock et al. (2022) found that despite the pushback, teachers had learned to utilize different forms of backup, including principal support, to help advocate for inclusive education.

Achieving school wide goals and maintaining a vision becomes challenging as sociopolitical movements continue to increase book bans and challenges. While research is currently being published on the current book ban phenomenon, there is a lack of work regarding this phenomenon while examining both perspectives of administrators and teachers. Recent research conducted focuses primarily on a singular person’s perspective or nation-wide quantitative data. This topic demands timely research since support, for both administrators and teachers, is needed more now than ever before.

Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study is to equally articulate the perspectives of administrators and teachers working during the current phenomenon of book bans, challenges, and censorship. Often when book challenges are presented to school boards, they target either library material or classroom curriculum (Pen America, 2025). Depending on the challenge, a teacher's response could shift. Often those advocating for Freedom to Read in libraries are librarians; those fighting for curriculum challenges are in-classroom teachers. Yet, both groups frequently advocate together. However, administrators need to approach all challenges equally.

This research aims to highlight the perspectives of two different groups within education: administrators and teachers. Given the current sociopolitical impacts of book challenges, censorship, and both legislation and policy changes, the following questions guided this study. How do administrators and teachers perceive the challenges posed by book bans and curriculum censorship? How do they view their school and district handling of these challenges? How do they define their own role and responsibility in addressing stakeholders who promote censorship? By studying these question, this research aims to add to the newly growing body of research concerning book bans and challenges.

Positionality

I am an insider researcher in which my pedagogy, political identity, and philosophical assumptions impact my perspective. The evolving world pushes me towards an advocate role in which I firmly believe in teacher autonomy. Educators spend years of their lives preparing and expanding on their content and classroom knowledge. They are the leaders in shaping

curriculum, and therefore, need to be a voice within the decision-making process. However, the current political attacks against curriculum challenge teachers, including myself, to engage in a dichotomous debate between teaching what is considered “safe” or challenging students with complex, real-world topics and concerns. As an active reader, I learn about the complexities of our world and the challenges individuals face. By engaging with reading as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, I am then able to reflect on my own identity and those unknown through the lens provided by the author (Bishop, 1990).

As a reader, teacher, and researcher, I believe in the right to read. Individuals have the ability to select texts for themselves and not for others. Our communities should embrace literature as a reflection of the evolving world, not protest against it. Challenging individuals to read different perspectives provides access to knowledge about different values, ideas, and beliefs. Embracing diverse literature offers the reader the opportunity to understand perspectives or experiences that either challenge or support their own views. Readers give meaning to the text by making connections but will make more meaningful ones when given reading choices (Rosenblatt, 1995). There is not a singular version of truth, and reading provides the opportunity to, therefore, explore multiple truths.

My philosophical assumptions impact my teaching; I believe in culturally responsive practices with an underlining social justice framework. Our world remains inequitable, but this remains challenging for young students to comprehend. As an insider, I currently use YAL in my curriculum to address complex and difficult topics including equity, injustice, racism, and violence. I have received a multitude of thanks from my marginalized and minority students for using literature they can connect with; literature that is often ignored. My students have become

engrossed by novels such as *Firekeeper's Daughter*, *Apple in the Middle*, *The 57 Bus*, and *Long Way Down*. However, I have also been the target of political groups as examples as to why YAL should not be used in the classroom. I do not find my students wanting to read another Shakespeare play after finishing *Macbeth*, but they do seek out other novels by Jason Reynolds (*Long Way Down*) or Angeline Boulley (*Firekeeper's Daughter*) once our classroom novel is complete. My personal beliefs and experiences impact my lens, understanding, and fuel my passion for this research. While my personal convictions fuel this inquiry, I am committed to bracketing my own experiences during data analysis to ensure the perspective of the participants are accurate and authentic; those voices expressed within the findings of this research reflect those that were brave enough to participate. I applaud those willing to speak out.

Theoretical Framework

This research uses Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system theory (EST) and critical system theory (CST) for its theoretical framework. Schools function within the public sphere that are impacted by changes made from the different systems: micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono. Even though the administrator and teacher stand at the center of the EST, the lens of each group varies because of their specific role and duties within the educational system. For example, the administrator's daily choices come from those they directly interact with at the microsystem: teachers, parents, students, community members, family, and friends. The system allows the teacher to be substituted within that same placement. However, the impacts on the administrator versus the teacher changes because of the outer layers including the exosystem (local governments including school boards) and the macrosystem (political systems, social norms,

culture). As new laws are introduced, depending on their specific verbiage, they may have a larger impact on a teacher's microsystem than an administrator's. For example, laws that specifically speak to the context of a school's library interact with an educator who directly engages with those materials (i.e a librarian) more so than an administrator.

Critical system theory (CST) within qualitative studies allows multiple perspectives, especially those within different power roles, the ability to express power struggles (Watson & Watson, 2013). An administrator holds the most power within the structure of a school. Teachers, subordinates to administrators, do not have the same decision-making abilities that administrators hold. Knowing that each individuals has a different role and level of power, their perception, experiences, and insights into the phenomenon are different. It is important to understand how each level of power perceives the phenomenon from their own lens and not infer what the other group believes. Through CST, this research gives an equal opportunity to voices from different power levels. The lived experiences of both administrators and educators are equally important within this research.

Data Collection Tools, Procedure, and Analysis

This phenomenological study took place within a single school district located in Montana. The district, which I will refer to as Ridge School District, consist of multiple elementary (K-5), middle (6-8), and high schools (9-12), a career and technical school, and several public charter schools. As one of the larger districts in Montana, Ridge School District educates over 17,000 students and employs over 2,000 individuals in certified, non-certified, and administration positions. Throughout the last few years, Ridge School District's school board has

changed several curriculum and instructional policies after book challenges and legislative changes. Pen America (2025) recorded over 10,000 book bans during the 2023-2024 school year across 29 states and 220 public school districts. Districts, primarily in Red states, have had to adapt to recent legislation changes that have made clear attacks towards inclusive curriculum and materials. Ridge School District, however, has not banned any books while neighboring public school districts have.

During Spring 2025, ELA teachers (6-12), administration (K-12), and a select few librarians were interviewed concerning their perception on how their school district, Ridge School District, handles book challenges. This phenomenology focused on both formal and informal book challenges. Formal book challenges are those that escalate to the school board; documentation for these challenges come from school board minutes and news reports. Informal book challenges do not move beyond an individual school. These scenarios consist of a parental concern over in classroom curriculum material or one specific novel found within the library. If it is handled at the school and does not progress into a formal challenge, documentation is not publicly available. A district wide email searched for participants who would be willing to participate through semi-structured interviews. Thirteen in-classroom teachers, six librarians, and five administrators responded. Table A and Table B provide information on each administrator's and educator's experience. Identifiers have been removed or changed from the findings; names have been replaced with a pseudonym based on a current banned author from other districts.

Individual interviews took place at a location of choice for each participant. Interviews were recorded utilizing Rev or Otter, translated through the app's artificial intelligence (AI) software, and journaled by the lead investigator. Each transcript went through two rounds of

thematic coding to discover similar themes within the two groups: administrators and teachers (classroom teachers and librarian). All interview questions are found in Appendix A.

Findings

The Perception of Administrators

The administrative sample consisted of three principals from elementary and two from high school. Unfortunately, this sample does not represent the district equitably but still provides valuable insight. This small sample was established after three rounds of emails sent to recruit participants. The minimal participation does not have a rationale but can be speculated. First, this could have been a very busy season for administrators who, therefore, did not perceive they would have the time needed to participate. Second, as an insider, there could have been concern regarding speaking to a teacher about the current phenomena for a variety of reasons. Third, administrators could have felt as if they had zero experience with the phenomena, and thus, did not respond. Regardless, I believe their perceptions are still valuable to this research.

Table 1: Administrators

Administrator Name	School Levels	Years in Education	Years in Admin
Principal Asher	High School (9-12)	19	10
Principal Hopkins	High School (9-12)	26	1
Principal Rowling	Elementary (K-5)	36	18
Principal Blume	Elementary (K-5)	30	14
Principal Green	Elementary (K-5)	25	14

Book Challenges: No clear consensus

For either formal or informal book challenges, it was clear that administrators either knew a process or did not. Only four out of the five had an opinion on the process and knew of their district's policy. Principal Asher and Principal Rowling knew what to do if a challenge occurred within their schools, and only Principal Asher had gone through an entire formal challenge; he expressed that the current policy allowed the individual to "leapfrogs the initial step (talking to the school)...and goes straight to the assistant superintendent or just the school board." In his situation, it was eventually sent back to their school. Principal Hopkins and Principal Rowling both perceived that, while they disagreed fundamentally with book challenges, a process existed that was objective in which everyone, including stakeholders, could express their own opinions. Hopkins, Green, and Blume articulated a plan they would follow if faced with a book challenge. Hopkins would "default to my English department to help guide me in how we should move forward." Green would "reach out to the parents and say, 'Hey, they (the teacher) came to me with your concern' ...and just kind of listen." Blume would call the Elementary Director. While not necessarily poor plans, administrators should always know the exact steps to the policy, and all three expressed that they did not know it. So, how could administrators help ELA teachers and librarians navigate the muddy waters of book challenges if they themselves are not aware of their district's policies?

From their longevity in education, four administrators would be considered veterans; despite that, there was an overwhelming consensus of district support still needed: "There really isn't much training, formal training per se, whether that's book challenges or anything else. It's just alright, we've hired you (as an admin) be a problem solver and then navigate it" (Principal

Asher). The absence of district guidelines on how to address parents, students, and stakeholders then has shifted these administrators to “problem solve” as communicators: “I mean, often, clear communication, transparent communication, lots of communication” (Principal Rowling); “I think you have to hear them (Principal Hopkins); “Just trying to ask good clarifying questions and then just listening” (Principal Asher). But for these administrators, a district list, guide, flowchart, etc. as to what questions to ask or specific talking points to say does not exist. In fact, beyond the Elementary Director, no specific individual from higher up administrative offices was mentioned as a place for support: “I feel like you need to bring in some people that are really knowledgeable...that would engage with administration, that would stick with us and help....with policy or procedures” (Principal Rowling). Rowling’s statement is a clear reflection of how quickly this sociopolitical phenomenon is changing. From the time of her interview, March 28, 2025, to now, one legislative change (the passing of HB 471 that defines human sexuality instruction) has impacted current curriculum policy within her district. Only one interviewee spoke of the current legislative session, but no specific bills were said. For K-5 principals, they are often the only administrator within the building; 6-8, two administrators; and 9-12, five to six administrators. Despite the size of the building and number of supportive individuals, even veteran administrators struggle keeping up with the latest policy changes.

These five feel the weight of the current sociopolitical climate, but those within Elementary have vastly different concerns. Principal Green shared that his teachers worry about picture books such as *The Kissing Hand* or novels like *Hatchet*. While there is not anything “explicit,” recent legislation adaptations have now made teachers nervous about utilizing them. Principal Rowling shared similar concerns about her staff and the added element of social media

dragging someone through the mud. When book challenges first started within the district, Principal Blume's staff had concerns, but now, with no direct challenges at their school, she has not heard of any. In High School though, where a wider range of topics do exist, there are now limits to literacy, reading, exploring, and a need to constantly "being hyper vigilant...what people are going to think about" (Principal Asher). Principal Hopkins, a prior science teacher, shared that she use to teach *Genetic Dilemma*, which discusses a child's right to an open future. To her knowledge, the book is not on the approved curriculum list: "As a classroom teacher, I would not have known what to do if a parent came to me and said, 'I'm going to challenge whether this book should be used.'...I would guess our teachers probably are not armed with the necessary knowledge to know how to proceed." So, how can administrators guide teachers when they are unaware? These administrators, while a small sample, demonstrate a wide range of concern for their teachers. They articulated on the stress and anxiety that teaching currently brings, but for now, felt that their district could do more to help everyone, including administrators, navigate the current climate.

The Perception of Teachers

Thirteen ELA teachers elected to participate in interviews: 10 currently teach at a high school (including a Public Charter school) and three at a middle school. All 13 have had some experience with either a formal and/or informal book challenge. These thirteen ELA teachers represent a variety of experiences within education. Along with them, 6 librarians participated: one elementary, two middle schools, and three high schools. These librarians all shared vast knowledge on the formal book challenge process and their daily interactions with informal

challenges. These educators expressed interest in participating in this research. The analysis of these groups is combined because of their position with the system of education; they both fall under the direct supervision of in building administrators, and within this district, their job statuses are considered equal. The district's published policy and procedures helped in understanding the perspective of these individuals.

Table 2: Teachers

Teacher's Name	School Level	Years in Education
Atwood	High School (9-12)	23
Spiegelman	High School (9-12)	15
Thomas	High School (9-12)	20
Hosseini	High School (9-12)	20
Stone	High School (9-12)	14
Silvera	High School (9-12)	20
Reynolds	High School (9-12)	11
Milton	High School (9-12)	32
Halse Anderson	High School (9-12)	28
Alexie	High School (9-12)	27
Collins	Middle School (9-12)	14
Orwell	Middle School (9-12)	20
Fitzgerald	Middle School (9-12)	11
Slater	Librarian	14
Picoult	Librarian	9
Walker	Librarian	13
Hinton	Librarian	29
Watterson	Librarian	16
Silverstein	Librarian	15

Policy and Procedure: A clearer consensus

Most teachers and all librarians were able to articulate some version of their district's policy and procedure concerning a book challenge. The current policy for formal book challenges starts at the home school (where the challenge begins) with the stakeholder submitting a written complaint (often articulating the removal of material). It is given to the home school's principal who submits it to district administration where it is sent to the appropriate committee: K-8 or 9-12. The committee consists of one administrator, one librarian, one teacher, and one parent who does not come from the school where the challenge originated from: "Traditionally we have people (administrators, parents, and teachers) that we (librarians) will go to and say, 'Would you sit on this committee?'" (Walker). Then, the committee reviews the novel, makes a decision, and writes their decision addressed to the school board and superintendent. The procedure takes 10 days: "It's really, like, stressful for the parties involved. But at the same time, it also makes it so that...it's not like a quick, split-second decision that's being made about the book" (Picoult). There was a clear consensus that when the policy is followed it is "established and rigorous" (Atwood). However, if the stakeholder would like to appeal the committee's decision, then a new written complaint is sent directly to the School Board Trustees. The decision of the Board concerning the challenged material is final. This policy was established in 2005 and as of August 2025 has not changed.

Many participants reference the district's prior formal challenges as the foundation for their perspective: "during the last challenge, (district administration) made a few changes to the

normal procedure...(District administration) decided that they didn't want to go with the list of people. They kind of choose people on their own" (Hinton); "I'm not even totally sure that they (district administration) determined what the process totally was because it was in front of the board over and over and over again" (Silvera). According to the group of librarians, the district administration selected two individuals who were not found on the committee list: the parent and teacher. Previously when the policy was followed, participants believed it worked because it had in the past. Some expressed concerns over the book's content factoring into how the challenge is handled. They believed the district handled previous book challenges concerning violence and language much better than those including LGBTQ+ content. As of summer 2025, the school district has yet to ban a book, but while formal book challenges and bans make the news, informal challenges are these educator's primary concern.

An informal book challenge takes place in the classroom or library. In these scenarios, stakeholders bring forth their concern either to the teacher, librarian, or principal and often express a desire to not have their child (or themselves if the child begins the challenge) engage with that material for a specific reason. Informal challenges, isolated to individual experiences, play a larger role in curriculum and material choices. The librarians shared that these informal challenges happen more often than not from both parents and students. One shared about her experience during Open House where a parent vocally complained about a selection of novels available on display. After the evening concluded, there was a concern about it becoming a formal challenge; thankfully, it did not. One school shared about an incident in which a parent held novels "hostage" because they felt they did not belong; the librarians eventually replaced them with their budget. Another received a parental complaint after a new book presentation;

they asked for a list of books shared during the presentation but because the books were already re-shelved, they couldn't remember which specific titles were used. Instead, they printed off a list of all the new books purchased for that school year: 400 titles. Yet, the most frequent informal challenges are with students as they question certain books: "The role of a librarian is answering the question why this book is in our collection. That is our job, and we will have an answer" (Slater). For these few librarians, their informal book challenge procedure is simple: don't check out that book if you do not want to. However, they all felt it was their responsibility to offer all students a wide variety of books and other printed material for them to select from.

The district's curriculum currently does not have specific required readings but instead a list of texts, approved by a committee, for instructional use. Spiegelman shared that her students and parents also know about their district's opt-out policy within the classroom: "We do not need to challenge that book. You have the choice...to get an alternate material." Spiegelman explained that the district created an opt-out policy after a challenge was brought regarding Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*. The policy explains that all material (novels, short stories, etc.) can be opted out and a singular alternative can be provided. However, there is no clarification as to what happens if the alternative text provided is challenged. All participants have had at least one experience of an informal book challenge and find them to be more common than a formal challenge.

Informal challenges differ for the classroom. Collins, when teaching seventh grade, had a student opt-out of *The Giver*. Their alternative choices included *The Hunger Games*, *Idea 33*, or *The Giver's* sequel *Gathering Blue*. These options were approved and found on the district's curriculum list. While Collins could not remember the specific novel they chose (she believe it to

be *Idea 33*), the challenge ended with this resolution. Thomas shared about an informal challenge concerning *Fahrenheit 451* (an approved curriculum novel for 9th grade). In Thomas's experience, the complaint on the novel was given after the unit was completed. The parents were concerned about their student's mental health and challenged Thomas's decision to teach a novel where an overdose (with the protagonist's wife) takes place without "telling them." Thomas, who has taught for 20 years, shared, "luckily, as is the case with a lot of parents, I have learned over the years to just listen, and really, they just want to yell at somebody. And if I'm the person they need to yell at, then I'm a person they need to yell at." The conflict went no further.

For teachers that have had to search for an alternative text, those experiences tended to be resolved peacefully. Stone and his teaching partner had a few when assigning *Lord of the Rings* thinking that it was a "safe choice." They then had to search for a new novel that could span the same duration while meeting specific standards and learning objections. Even back in 2006, Hosseini faced a challenge with *Red Sky at Morning* in which several students ended up reading an alternative text to complete their project. Hosseini gave the students an opportunity to select their own novel.

Unfortunately, teachers get placed in complicated situations when there is also a division amongst parents. Orwell taught *The Breadwinner* to his 7th grade students. The mom, who was usually the parent Orwell spoke to, signed off on his syllabus at the beginning of the year that indicated this novel was to be taught. When it came time to watch the movie adaptation, the student was staying with their father. When the student forgot their permission slip for the film, Orwell had to speak to the father over the phone who expressed extreme dissatisfaction on the context of the novel and film: the Taliban. Orwell attempted to explain that the Taliban were not

the protagonist in this situation, but the father remained verbally upset over the material. Even though his daughter already read the novel, she was unable to watch the film. So how do teachers approach lesson planning knowing that there may be students left out? Some approach it head-on while others avoid.

Literature acts as both a mirror, window, and sliding glass door (Bishop, 1990), but that can mean meeting uncomfortable material: “It’s my job to walk them through it” (Stone). Despite offering an alternative novel, Orwell expressed that he’s worked with teachers in the past that explicitly choose not to teach specific texts because of their controversy: “I know there are people who don’t want to teach *Roll of Thunder, Hear my Cry* because it’s got the N word, and it’s like that’s kind of the point.” Option A: Don’t teach the book. There is a desirable avoidance to informal challenges: “the outcome of risk aversion is that...the books that have been on the list for 20 years probably aren’t going to kick up any dust” (Reynolds). Option B: Proactively provide an alternative. Several teachers spoke about the inclusion of literature circles becoming more frequent: “Many of us are preemptively imagining that we will have pushback that we kind of fold into the whole setup this automatic, you get a choice” (Atwood). If there is a problem with book A, the student can pick B. As far as their district assisting them with these options, no participant expressed any clear guidance. Their guidance comes from their own experiences.

Being able to navigate past experiences did not change whether the participant knew the exact policy or not. They all “knew” to have an alternative novel in case of an opt-out, and there was an assumption that they could find ‘someone’ to help out: administration, department chair, another teacher. One participant expressed that the district lacked training and direction for both

new and veteran teachers: “There’s been absolutely no training....What do you do? If you’re teaching a book and a parent flips out...you go to your administrator, and if the administrator says, figure it out, what do you do?” (Milton). As a veteran teacher, Milton felt they could navigate the situation but was unsure of their new colleagues. The lack of training and advice also existed from the administrative perspective. One clear consensus was found: the in-classroom educators and librarians know more than the administrators.

Almost all participants (administrators and educators) expressed some level of nervousness when it came to working during this sociopolitical phenomenon. Even administrators acknowledged a level of nervousness amongst their staff. 10-20 years ago in education, when many participants first started, these concerns did not exist: “The fear 20 years ago was I’m not gonna get tenure...Kids are certainly harder today” (Thomas). Today, education is different. Teachers have taken on an increased level of work with increased stress. Part of that nervousness and stress comes from taking a leadership role during this sociopolitical phenomenon. While it is not their job to tell administrators what their district’s policy and procedures entail, these participants, especially those who know the policy well, felt as if they had to be the leader. Collins, who recently took on a new role, explained that “My current administration was not aware of that procedure...honestly, it seemed like we (the district) were making the process up as we went along. And a lot of that seemed to be kick started by Senate Bill 99 when it was first coming through.” For many participants, Senate Bill 99, implemented in 2020 and now known as Montana Code 20-7-102, and the constant shifts in politics were the beginning of this new level of nervousness.

“Literature allows us to glimpse into the lives of other people that we’d never visit...literature provides a perspective that you may not otherwise get” (Orwell). These participants still believed it was necessary to offer students a wide variety of reading material despite any risks or fear. The alternative, removing books, does more harm than good: “This kind of self-censorship is devastating for students...When we silence voices preemptively, we deny our students the opportunity to see themselves, learn about others, and grow through literature” (Watterson). The district’s policies and procedures have helped these participants navigate some of the muddy waters but still felt guidance and support lacked.

Conclusion

Administrators take on active leadership roles within their schools, but with the recent addition of sociopolitical phenomenon centered around book challenges, it remains unclear why administrators in this context are not perceived as the primary leaders. Instead, classroom teachers and librarians find themselves more knowledgeable concerning book challenges both in terms of their district’s policies and nationally as informed educators. In theory, this shift has taken place for a few reasons. The first consists of the “frontline.” Teachers and librarians work on the frontlines of this sociopolitical phenomenon. These findings, when viewed through the lens of CST, demonstrate the power imbalance. These individuals, as the expert within their content areas, have made it a priority to think logically and ethically about how they approach curriculum. For some, that means avoiding particular topics; for others, that’s having a plan B in place. These proactive actions are in direct response to the stakeholders they’ve either had to address in the past or are attempting to avoid in the future. A second theory is based on their own

experiences; they've been forced to become the expert. Either as a department chair, teacher lead, or a simple veteran educator, all of these participants in some way shape or form have had at least one experience with either a formal or informal challenge. Some of them have experienced both, and the emotional and mental toll it has taken forces them to think twice about their pedagogy, curriculum, and teaching practices. However, within the natural power system of education, it should be the administrator's responsibility to take on the leadership position.

Ridge School District, like many nationwide, has new situations on the horizon. Montana recently passed HB 471 which rewords 20-7-120 of Montana Annotated Code. Originally, 20-7-120 required students the opportunity to opt-out; the same language the district uses. Now, HB 471 amends this verbiage to opt-in. The district's policy is no longer in compliance with the language. As the district moves forward in rewriting their policy and procedures, this opens the opportunity to provide training and guidance district wide. However, this now conflicts with the recent SCOTUS ruling on *Mahmoud v. Taylor* (2025) in which the Supreme Court ruled that parents have the fundamental right to opt their children out of educational lessons, units, and materials. So, how could this specific district move forward? Participants shared what they would do if given the magic wand to make those change.

First, Ridge School District could establish a specific role within the curriculum department to help administrators and educators navigate both formal and informal challenges. This ideal position would be a leader in helping teachers when a student does not opt-in to a specific lesson, material, or unit. For example, if a student does not opt-in, this person could aid in compiling a self-driven unit for those specific students. This would help minimize teacher burnout from extra work and could potentially encourage teachers to use material they would

otherwise avoid. This position could help ensure the same standards, learning objectives, and rigorous learning still take place. While these designs would take more time upfront, having one individual that focuses on this would help ensure these alternative materials would become accessible district wide. This same position could help with professional development concerning book challenges and how to navigate those scenarios. This role could also be broken into several teacher leadership roles. The district could assign specific individuals throughout the district to help new and veteran teachers overcome challenge obstacles. However, these positions should not just be added onto a previously created role. Department chairs and other curriculum leads already do a lot; these assignments should be specifically assigned to individuals who can assist throughout the process.

Second, the district could create clear guidelines for both administrators and teachers. Clearly, the district has a policy, but there are missing components to their policy. By defining the administrator's role, these individuals could take on a leading role during challenges. This takes the burden off teachers to "know it all." Administrators should be knowledgeable of both district policies and state law changes. It is not the responsibility of teachers to inform administrators; this information should come from the superintendent and flow downwards. Given the extensive changes made within their state, administrators need explicit information as to their job duties during a formal and informal book challenge. The same can be said for teachers. Giving teachers clear guidelines (or even a flowchart as stated by several participants) could help clear up "what to do." This is the difference between theory and reality. In theory, many kind of know what to do, but in reality these challenges remain in an area of gray. Clear guidelines could remove the gray. Administrators and teachers want help in navigating these

situations. According to these participants, just offering an alternative text is not enough of a guideline to minimize stress and anxiety. More support is both needed and wanted.

Ridge School District has taken several steps towards ensuring challenges have a clear policy and procedure. However, significant obstacles still exist. Navigating forward, this district should find ways to give clear guidance to both administrators and teachers. It seems to be rarely talked about despite the fact these challenges happen. By speaking district wide about these challenges and assisting through professional development, guidelines, and assigned leadership roles, those working during the sociopolitical phenomenon are able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. As the 2025-2026 school year begins, the future of this sociopolitical phenomenon is unknown. Helping to prepare for the worst, a surge in challenges and bans, can only be accomplished through a proactive, clear plan.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions

1. How long have you worked in education?
2. How long have you worked within your current position?

Perception on how challenges are handled:

1. How do you perceive your current district handles formal book challenges? (Book challenges brought forth to the school board)
2. How do you perceive your current school (or other schools) handle informal book challenges? (Book challenges handled at the school level: classroom, library, and/or by administration)
3. What challenges do administrators and teachers face within your district concerning these challenges?
4. What process, if any, should be changed to help make challenges easier or minimized?

Perception on how teachers/administrators address stakeholders:

1. What do you believe your role or duty is in addressing stakeholders promoting a book challenge? (Formal and informal)
2. What do you believe is not your role or duty in addressing stakeholders promoting a book challenge?
3. Do you find yourself sometimes taking on duties that are not your responsibility?
4. Does your district have distinct guidelines for how you should address stakeholders? If so, do they help or inhibit?
5. Do you have personal experience engaging with stakeholders on a book challenge?

6. Anything else you wish to share?

CHAPTER FIVE

THE 2025 MONTANA LEGISLATIVE SESSION:
A POLICY ANALYSIS ON BILLS PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL CENSORSHIP

Contribution of Authors and Co-Authors

Manuscript in Chapter Three

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Contributions: As the lead investigator, I wrote and revised the manuscript. I prepared and generated all information necessary to obtain the data. I analyzed the data, contributed to all sections of the articles, and edited all writing and references. I presented this article at the 2025 Montana Federation of Public Employee's annual Educator Conference in Missoula, Montana.

Co-Author: Dr. Sarah Pennington

Contributions: Mentored the first author throughout the data collection and analysis. Also assisted with writing revisions.

Co-Author: Dr. Carrie B. Myers

Contributions: Mentored the first author through revisions.

Manuscript Information

Catherine Wetmore

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- ☒ Prepared for submission to a peer-reviewed journal
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- ☐ Accepted by a peer-reviewed journal
- ☐ Published in a peer-reviewed journal

Introduction

The political pendulum swings as the power shifts back and forth between the two primary American political parties: Democrats and Republicans. At the federal, state, and local level, these two parties attempt to uphold their unique morals, values, and ethics by creating and maintaining government responsibilities through new and amended legislation. For the last 25 years, the pendulum began at the top through elected presidents: President George W. Bush (R; 2001-2009), President Barack Obama (D; 2009-2017), President Donald Trump (R; 2017-2021), President Joe Biden (D; 2021-2025), and once again, President Donald Trump (2025-current). Presidents bring forth their own individual and party stances on specific topics including education. The purpose and goal of education in the United States has changed from one sitting president to the next, and with these shifting ideas also comes different legislative proposals on the federal and state level.

To begin, President George W. Bush's impact on public education is most recognizable from the establishment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). NCLB required states to test and report student results in reading and math. After the Bush administration enforced NCLB, all states and districts began administering standardized tests to ensure students hit benchmark proficiency scores in both core content areas. This gave the federal government an increased role in public education (Klein, 2015). Next, President Barack Obama helped reshape NCLB by raising standards and giving flexibility. Through his educational platform Race to the Top, President Obama made \$4 billion available to states that developed rigorous standards, adopted better data systems, and helped teachers and school leaders effectiveness: "19 states (serving 22 million students) received funding...and 48 states worked together to create a voluntary set of

rigorous college- and career- ready standards” (The White House, n.d.). In 2009, Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were launched, and by 2015, 42 states, Washington D.C., and territories including Guam and the Virgin Islands adopted CCSS (Common Core State Standards, 2025).

During President Donald Trump’s first term, technical and vocational education expanded with the signing of the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (*Education – The White House*, n.d.). President Trump’s educational platform also focused on school choice. With an investment of \$1.5 billion in public charter schools, President Trump provided parents with another educational option. Through a tax reform, parents could now use “up to \$10,000 tax-free from 529 education savings plans to cover public, private, religious K-12 school costs” (*President Donald J. Trump Is Expanding Educational Opportunity For America’s Children And Families Impacted By The Pandemic – The White House*, n.d.). Despite educational difficulties from the Covid-19 pandemic, the school choice movement gained nationwide momentum, bolstered by the formation and expansion of new Parental Rights groups such as Moms for Liberty (2025).

President Joe Biden took office as schools across the nation were attempting to return to “normalcy” after the pandemic. President Biden, under the American Rescue Plan, funded \$130 billion to address “academic, mental, and physical health impacts of COVID-19 on children” (AFSA Web Administration, 2024). \$60 billion went to help 27 million high-need students through Title I funding; \$53 billion supported special education students; \$7.6 billion went to career, technical, and adult education, and \$3 billion expanding education for English learners under Title III (AFSA Web Administration, 2024). As the largest-ever federal education investment, President Biden aimed at helping students by providing not only funding but

educators and recruitment. Despite only serving one term in office, President Biden made public education a priority and aimed at creating a future for students from all different backgrounds (AFSA Web Administration, 2024).

Now, in 2025, President Donald Trump's political agenda concerning public education within his first 45 days of presidency has resulted in several policy questions and uncertainties. First, on January 24th, 2025, President Trump and the United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights "rescinded all department guidance issued under the theory that a school district's removal of age-inappropriate books from its libraries may violate civil rights laws" (Department of Education, 2025). The Department of Education (DOE) announced that this was the end of "Biden's Book Ban Hoax" (Department of Education, 2025). Second, President Trump placed an executive order on January 29, 2025 to protect parental rights by ending the "radical indoctrination" done by K-12 schools. This then sparked schools, including the Pentagon schools, to suspend specific library books including current Vice President JD Vance's autobiographical novel *Hillbilly Elegy* (Pilkington, 2025). Finally, President Trump signed the executive order "Improving Education Outcomes by Empowering Parents, States, and Communities" on March 20, 2025 to begin closing the DOE, which was established by Congress in 1979 (Office of Communications and Outreach, 2025; White House, 2025). While Congress established the DOE for several purposes, one purposes centered on "supplementing and complimenting the efforts of States, [and] the local school systems" (Office of Communications and Outreach, 2025).

The political pendulum has swung back and forth from one president to the next. The same has occurred as power shifts within both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S.

Senate. In 2023, Representative Maxwell Frost (D; Florida) introduced H.R. 6592—Fight Book Bans Act. Senator Cory A. Booker (D; New Jersey) introduced an identical one in the Senate (S.5261, 2024). Both bills aimed to authorize grants from the Secretary of Education to local agencies to help offset the cost of local challenges to educational material (i.e. books). However, both of these bills did not progress any further than an introduction and a committee referral. The political swing makes it challenging to progress legislation at the federal level and also the state.

Montana Legislation

The 2024 General Election took place on November 5. In Montana, 76.31% of voters submitted their ballots for the President, U.S. Senate, and State Senate and House. Donald Trump (R) received 58% of votes for President; Tim Sheehy (R) received 53% of votes for U.S. Senate; and Ryan Zinke (R) received 52% and Troy Downing (R) received 66% of votes for the U.S. House (Jacobsen, 2024). Montana solidified itself as a Red State on the Federal level. District votes ended similarly, but there were several Democratic wins. The State Senate secured 18 Democratic seats and 41 seats in the State House; this is a shift from the 2023 with only 16 Senate Democrats and 32 House Democrats (Jacobsen, 2024; Miller, 2024). These wins include the re-election of transgender House Representative from Missoula, MT Zooey Zephyr (Schoenbaum & Beth, 2024). Currently, the Republican Party holds the majority, but Democratic advocates for public education, including Representatives Melissa Romano, Eric Matthews, and Sara Novak, were elected (Montana Federation of Public Employees, 2024). Across many states, State legislative sessions have addressed public education enacting legislation promoting

parental rights and in return censoring education. Montana’s public education saw legislative changes originate during the 2021 Legislative Session.

From the 2021 Legislative Session, SB99, now known as 20-7-120 Excused Absences from Curriculum—Notice—Prohibited Activities, created new language that required educators to provide notice about any instruction concerning human sexuality. 20-7-120 defined human sexuality to include topics on intimate relationships, gender identity, and gender anatomy. At first, 20-7-120 seemed to be placing specific policy guidelines for parent notification on courses involving sexual education. The bill required a minimum of 24 hours noticed and allowed parents to withdraw their student from any instruction that included human sexuality. However, the vague language found within the bill also ended up targeting other courses. This required ELA, Science, and History teachers to send home notices. In ELA, teachers were required to send notice for teaching any and all novels that included intimate relationships; *Romeo and Juliet*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Pride and Prejudice* are all canonical texts often taught in high school curriculums but revolve around intimate relationships. Science and anatomy teachers provided notice when speaking specifically about human anatomy, DNA, and anything related to genetics: core concepts of their coursework. History teachers needed to provide notice for speaking about landmark Supreme Court rulings. In fact, AP College Board removed *Roe v. Wade* from its Government AP test because of the tensions behind it and several states enacting of recent legislation changes: “A Florida state law allows parents to bring a legal complaint against a school district” (Riddle, 2023).

SB99 also affected the inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics in the curriculum (ACLU Montana, 2025). The bill was not asking for notice for teaching *Romeo and Juliet* but rather any and all

material that are inclusive of LGBTQ+. This included non-fiction novel *The 57 Bus* which tells the true story of a hate crime committed against an agender individual (who also has a friend that identifies as transgender). In Human Health, curriculum, lessons, and material that address sexual education and individual identity require notification. History and Government addressing *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) which ruled the fundamental right to marry included same-sex couples or the repealed law known as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” concerning the military service of those who identify as LGBTQ+ (U.S. Department of Defense, n.d.). In these instances, there would need to be at least a 48-hour notice to parents and guardians. It would then be their responsibility to opt-out their children from the lessons, curriculum, or material. The intentions and the reality behind SB 99 (20-7-120) are vastly different. From 2021 till now, amendments and adjustments would continue to only provide more challenges.

The 2023 legislative session brought forth two amendments. Representative Kerri Seekins-Crowe (R; Billings) proposed an amendment aimed at cleaning up the language within 20-7-120. HB 502 placed stipulations on the time frame in which parents needed notification on human sexuality instruction to “no less than 48 hours or more than 10 days” (HB 502, 2023). This ultimately removed the ability for schools to send home annual notifications. The second part added “(7) Violation of this section constitutes “gross neglect of duty” under 20-4-110” (HB 502). This clause allows the State Board of Education to either issue a letter of reprimand, suspend, revoke, or deny a license for those that do not comply with the notification policy. Senator Theresa Manzella (R; Hamilton) proposed another amendment that changed the opt-out language into opt-in: “a parent...shall provide prior written consent if the parent...would like for

the child to attend a course...regarding human sexuality instruction” (SB 337, 2023). These amendments did not pass.

In the spring of 2024, a lawsuit was filed against SB 99 (20-7-120). The plaintiffs include Empower MT, the Montana School Counselors Associations, the Montana Association of School Psychologists, Daniel Johnson, Libby Threadgoode, Student Plaintiffs Eva Stahl, and R.S. In the introduction, the complaint articulates several concerns including SB 99’s intense “effort...to erase 2S-LGBTQIA+ histories, viewpoints, and curricula” and its definition of human sexuality:

‘Human sexuality instructions’...is flagrantly over-broad..[which] includes any discussion of any intimate partner relationships...(for example, *Romeo and Juliet*);... or a discussion in biology class about DNA;... or a discussion in history class about the Nazis’ oppression of gay and lesbian people;...or discussions in government class about Supreme Court decisions touching on gender, sexual orientation, sexual reproduction; or education (3-4).

The concerns with SB 99 (20-7-120) have altered how educators approach their classroom curriculum, discussions, and material. The lawsuit is still pending (ACLU Montana, 2025).

On Montana’s Office of Public Instruction (OPI) website, previous Superintendent Elsie Arntzen listed legislative priorities for the Montana 2025 Legislation Session. Within these priorities is a request to amend 20-7-120 Excused Absences from Curriculum—Notice—Prohibited Activities (2021). The original bill states that parents must receive notification “no less than 48 hours,” and the amendment proposed by Arntzen and OPI changes this language to “no less than 48 hours nor more than 10 days,” an identical amendment from Representative Seekins-Crowe’s 2023 proposal (Office of Public Instruction, n.d.). Arntzen’s proposal also included the same line 7 violation: “gross neglect of duty” under 20-4-110” (Office of Public Instruction, n.d.).

As the 2025 Montana legislative session drew near, the drafting of several bills began. Parental rights concerning curriculum and instructional choices have stayed a focus since 2021. The question remained: Will there be more legislation that promotes this ideology? The answer: yes. Two bills arrived in February: SB 299 and HB 471. Both of these bills redefine parental rights in education and opting students in (rather than out) of classroom instruction.

Framework

This advocacy research provides context for the 2025 legislative session by defining the goals and objectives of tracked legislation: SB 299 and HB 471. Advocacy research comes from action research, particularly those rooted within communities (Janke et al, 2018). Savin-Baden & Major (2013) define action research as a way to “engage in problem solving through...thinking, acting, data gathering, and reflection” (p. 245). In particular, participatory action research examines how an issue or change might impact one specific community (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The specific community within this research is public education. This research focuses on two pieces of legislation: SB 299 and HB 471. SB 299 failed in the House Educational Committee and HB 471 passed both the Senate and House and was signed by Governor Greg Gianforte (R). Despite the “failure” of SB 299, it provides context and analysis on the legislature’s attempts to limit and censor education. Through reflexive and insider practices, I will provide my own theories on how HB 471 will impact public education. My insider perspective as an educator, navigating existing policies like SB 99 (20-7-120), allows for a nuanced understanding of how legislative changes, such as HB 471, translate into public

education realities within classrooms and schools. These realities impact curriculum, material, and lesson changes.

As a policy analysis, Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory explains how multiple societal layers (from the macro to the micro) impact one another (Guy-Evans, 2024). Within the macrosystem, cultural, societal, and political norms shape the changes seen within the exosystem's systems, bodies, and committees from federal, state, and local government. For example, current societal norms impact how legislation becomes proposed at the federal level. Those changes are also noticeable within state and local governmental bodies. In education, the macrosystem's views concerning educational policies and values play an influential role within the exosystem's changes at governmental levels. These changes then filter their way through Bronfenbrenner's system to districts, school boards, classrooms, and curriculum decisions. This analysis, while rooted within the exosystem, also uses the microsystem as a predictor of how these pieces of legislation might impact the individual's (an educator) decisions.

SB 299

Revise laws related to enhancing transparency in education, or SB 299, was sponsored by Senator John Fuller (R; North Kalispell). This proposed amendment adds to 40-6-703, Parental Involvement in Education, a parental rights bill, that was originally established in 2023. While introducing the bill, Senator Fuller shared that from his previous 45 years in education, he never believed such a bill would need to exist. SB 299 provides "transparency" between the school and the parent and gives parents the ability to "have full access to information relating to the children...including gender identity" (2025, p. 5). The bill includes stipulations for parent

notification “at least 5 days in advance and obtain the parent’s consent before...studying, exploring, or informing students about gender roles or stereotypes, gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation” (2025, p. 5).

During the initial hearing (February 14) in the Senate’s Education and Cultural Resources committee, three proponents spoke in reference to protecting parental rights. Derek Oestreicher, chief legal counsel for the Montana Family Foundation, shared about two Montana families whose children were “secretly transitioned” without parental consent. Jordan Carpenter, legal counsel for Alliance Defending Freedom, spoke of the importance of maintaining parental rights.

While three spoke in favor of the bill, 11 spoke in opposition. Kim Popham, the Director of Public Policy and Research for the Montana Federation of Public Employees and once a high school biology teacher, explained that SB 299 opens up the opportunity for parents to sue teachers for not disclosing or contacting a parent concerning gender roles or identity. SB 299 states “Nothing in this section precludes a parent from filing a suit asserting a violation of this section or any other claim” (2025). Siobhan Hathhorn, the current chair of Helena Public School Boards of Trustees, spoke in opposition because “it appears to encourage parents to file suit against school districts and staff” during a time in which schools already struggle financially.

The bill’s language conflicts with Montana Annotated Code 20-7-120 which gives parents an opt-out opportunity to curriculum. Now, SB 299 requires an opt-in. Executive Director at the Board of Public Education, McCall Flynn claimed that this verbiage “makes these requirements seem optional rather than required.” Veteran English Teacher Caitlin Chiller explained that the literature she teaches within her classrooms covers topics including gender roles and stereotypes:

My students are reading *Macbeth*...there is quite the marriage dynamic in the play. And to be able to talk about that dynamic. It sounds like with the passage of this bill, I would have to notify parents in advance and then wait to get their ability to opt-in to learning...I am concerned we are moving towards an era in which Ray Bradbury warned about...I think I have earned the right, and many teachers have earned the right...to have the trust of parents to talk about these topics in a way that is appropriate and relevant to the age group that I'm teaching.

Learning across multiple platforms becomes limited and restricted with SB 299. The bill passed from the committee 8-6.

Beyond the legislative chambers, public opposition to SB 299 gained traction on social media platform Facebook. Montana Queer Defiance and Forward Montana actively campaigned against the bill. Forward Montana, an organization advocating for future youth and democracy in Montana, called Senator Jacinda Morigeau (D; Arlee) the Hero of the Week after speaking out against SB 299. Senator Morigeau advocated for young adults and articulated how the bill undermines individual rights. Their Facebook post celebrating Senator Morigeau received over 60 likes and 54 shares. On February 22, Forward Montana posted how SB 299 “harms educators’ discretion and students access to safe and inclusive sexual education;” the post was shared then by other pages including Bozeman: A City for CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms to Discrimination Again Women), DemCast Montana, and Roots of Unity (a non-profit organization located in the South Side of Billings).

On the Senate floor, March 3, 2025, Sara Novak (D; Deer Lodge), Jacinda Morigeau (D; Arlee), Susan Webber (D; Glacier), and Cora Neumann (D; Bozeman) spoke against the bill for many reasons. Teachers already speak to parents, legislation (20-7-120) already existed that allows parents to remove their child from instruction, and it puts an undue burden on staff. Senator Morigeau articulated that not all homes protect LGBTQ+ youth which therefore can

make a student's home unsafe. Senator Webber supported this by stating schools can be a refuge for those who feel unsafe, and this bill could increase home conflict. Violating a student's personal and private information by forcing educators to reach out to homes and parents can cause more harm than good. Theresa Manzella (R; Hamilton) spoke in favor of the bill because it supported parental rights. The session closed with the bill passing 31-19. On the third reading, the bill passed 30-20. The bill was transmitted to the house and referred to the Education committee.

Senator Fuller introduced the bill to the House Education Committee on April 4, 2025. Many of the same individuals from the Senate's committee spoke again. Derek Oestreicher, chief legal counsel for Montana Family Foundation; and Jordan Carpenter, legal counsel with Alliance Defending Freedom, gave almost identical testimonies. Two individuals representing themselves and Lance Melton, Montana School Boards Association, were new proponents. Within Melton's testimony, he compared SB 299 to HB 471. Melton worked with Senator Fuller on creating an amendment in which parents and guardians need to exhaust all administrative remedies before going to "high stakes litigation with attorney fees." HB 471 offers none of that. Melton also articulated that the intent of the bill is placed within the correct code (40) and consistent with other bills presented. With the amendment and a contingency clause that would void HB 471, if both passed, Melton would therefore be in favor of SB 299.

Five opponents spoke against SB 299. Kim Popham, Director of Public Policy and Research for the Montana Federation of Public Employees; and McCall Flynn, Board of Public Education, spoke again with similar testimonies. Sam Momeyer, representing themselves and a former teacher, and Phoebe Howell, representing herself, spoke in terms of the bill primarily

through their own lens as LGBTQ+. SK. Rossi, Montana Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, explained why their organization was opposed to it. First, an LGBTQ+ individual should be able to make their own decisions on when they choose to tell others, including family, about their identity. Second, it violates privacy rights of students. Third, it potentially places these students within unsafe situations citing that “34% of LGBTQ+ kids have reported physical abuses” from their homes: “a one in three chance of that kid going to get abused at home.”

After testimonies, several questions were asked concerning the content and implications of the legislation. Representative Peter Strand (D; Bozeman), a former teacher, pointed out that the bill is a slippery slope: “it seems like it’s open to a much broader range of subject matter than the kind of subject that we’re talking about in this room.” Representative Strand explain that even within his history classes students should, at some level, be questioning their own identity especially during classroom discussions: “This could get really complicated in terms of reporting to parents.”

MFEA believed that SB 299’s impact would extend beyond targeting young adults. It would create problems including the requirement of a district employee to report every conversation with students on "curricular or extracurricular projects, assignments, or activities; and physical, emotional, or mental health," an opt-in policy for parental consent 5 days in advance for “human sexuality” instruction and makes district employees liable for failure to comply with directives. Through their Rapid Response platform, MFEA urged union members to reach out to senators urging them to vote no. The House Education Committee reconvened on Monday April 7, 2025, and failed to pass any amendments proposed by Lance Melton. The bill was tabled and died in committee.

On April 8, Montana Queer Defiance (2025) celebrated the tabled bill by sharing how it “tried to force schools to out trans students, putting them at risks if their families aren’t supportive.” Clearly from the language of the bill, advocates noticed how this bill critical targets LGBTQ+ youth across Montana. The failure of this bill protected student privacy and prevented educational censorship.

HB 471

Revise education laws related to human sexuality and identity instruction, HB 471, sponsored by Representative Jedediah Hinkle (R; Belgrade), introduced legislation that would ultimately amend 20-7-120, renaming it to Human sexuality instruction—notice to parents—excused absences—prohibited activities. The House Judiciary Committee heard the bill first on February 18, 2025. In Representative Hinkle’s opening sponsorship speech, he shared an anecdote about the Belgrade school district’s sex education course and curriculum that “contained a section dedicated to gender identity and sexual orientation.” A parent complained, and Belgrade removed that portion of the curriculum. Representative Hinkle shared a hand-out titled “Gender Unicorn” and another one titled “Gender-bread Man” in which he claimed as the specific curriculum HB 471 attempts to protect children from. Therefore, HB 471 was drafted to ensure a policy existed for parental guardians opting into a course instead of opting out. Representative Hinkle’s background falls primarily within the wildlife conservation area, as he was a taxidermist for over 20 years, an avid hunter, and business owner. According to his political website, Representative Hinkle has no personal experience working within public education.

During the initial House Judiciary Committee, Katie Bloodgood, Office of Public Instruction; Derek Oestreicher, chief legal counsel for Montana Family Foundation; Dylan Klapmeier, Governor Gianforte's Education Policy Advisor; Jesse Browning, representing themselves and a member of Moms for Liberty; Robin Stargell, Montana's for Life; and an individual representing themselves all spoke in favor of the bill. Most testimonies focused on transparency between schools and parents and the protection of parental rights. Katie Bloodgood claimed that "this legislation does not prevent schools from teaching, rather, it strengthens trust." Dylan Klapmeier's statement included a positive stance on changing the language of 20-7-120. Currently, 20-7-120 defines human sexuality instruction, but Klapmeier claims the language of HB 471 provides "clear definitions of human sexuality versus identity instruction." The bill defines Human Sexuality Instruction is defined as "instruction that has the goal or purpose of studying, exploring, or informing students about any of the following human sexuality topics: [including] intimate relationships" and "'Identity instruction' means instruction that has the goal or purpose of studying, exploring, or informing students about gender identity or gender expression or sexual orientation" (HB 471, 2025, p. 3). Jesse Browning advocated that the bill establishes curriculum transparency; in her opinion, something "missing" from the current status quo.

Similarly, six spoke in opposition. Kim Popham, the Director of Public Policy and Research for the Montana Federation of Public Employees; McCall Flynn, Executive Director at the Board of Public Education; and Rob Watson, President of School Administrators of Montana, all spoke openly in opposition to the proposed legislation primarily in areas of concern to the opt-in policy. 20-7-120 gives parents the ability to opt their children out of curriculum

lessons, units, or school assemblies that include human sexuality instruction. Instead, HB 471 requires an opt-in policy. Popham, Flynn, and Watson all shared concerns about changing that policy language and the challenges it could create. Watson articulated the concern:

You [teachers] could literally have students within the same unit of study, some that have opted out, but then you get to a different section of that same unit, maybe even in the same lesson....list of other students that didn't opt-in....We want to honor parents requests but the problem with managing that...can get [individuals] into a situation where mistakes will be made.

Many school districts already have policies in place for students to opt-out for a plethora of reasons: religious values, parental concerns, and even limitations either physical, mental, or emotional. Since the introduction of 20-7-120, school districts have spent time creating policies and procedures that address opt-out opportunities. With the addition of HB 471 only concerning opt-in for human sexuality or identity instruction, this could create a plethora of complications within specific content areas.

Representative Zoey Zephyr (D; Missoula) began their questions by asking Representative Hinkle what gender expression is. Hinkle responded with, “it would be what gender you express yourself as.” Representative Zephyr’s analysis then made a remark concerning clothing choices (how masculine or feminine one might appear) and established the connection between a history class: “A history instructor is talking about what kinds of clothing they wore in Ancient Rome, or...certain militaries decked themselves out to look more intimidating. That is a form of expression of gender.” Representative Hinkle did not think the bill applied to that scenario. Ultimately, the line of questioning resulted in Representative Zephyr articulating how the bill limits a school’s ability to teach about groups of individuals, including LGBTQ+, in which Representative Hinkle stood firm on his stance that “the bill says is that if

the school is insistent on teaching those topics, doesn't say that they can't....it would just require a parental opt-in.”

Another line of questions specifically asked Rob Watson about opt-out instead of opt-in policies. Currently, schools contact parents through a myriad of ways: email, physical mail, and forms sent home. In most school districts, Watson explained, only school field trips have required an opt-in policy due to their liability. Furthermore, Watson compared the bill to 20-7-120 which does the same thing, and schools have adjusted its requirements: “if there are concerns as to what is being taught, that is why we have these opt-out procedures, so parents can pull themselves [students] out.” The bill passed the committee 12-8.

On March 4, 2025, HB 471 was brought forth to the House Floor for discussion. Representative Melissa Romano (D; Helen) spoke in opposition articulating that “it just creates barriers to learning....This bill assumes that withholding education is the safest option, but in reality, it just creates gaps in knowledge that harms all students” through silence and, for some, shame. Representative Shelly Fyant (D; Arlee) expressed the harm this bill did for LGBTQ+ individuals:

In Native American [culture], we honor people within our tribes that you call LGBTQ+...sometimes referred to as two-spirited, and we consider them sacred....Two-spirited people may use the term to describe their gender identity...and they also use it to highlight their connection with cultural spiritual traditions.

Indian Education for All (IEFA) is a state curriculum requirement in which educators must incorporate learning essential understandings about Native American culture. Representative Peter Strand (D; Bozeman) followed up with the safety concern HB 471 would prevent: “It's about making sure the kids understand what is okay in terms of other people treating them, especially adults....how to navigate through that so that they are safe and that they are not

abused.” Because of the new language requiring an opt-in versus an opt-out, the likelihood of most students learning this valuable information decreases.

Representative Lukas Schubert (R; North Kalispell), the youngest representative, claimed that these controversial conversations and infographics (i.e. The Gender Unicorn) were indeed taking place his last few years in high school. However, Representative Zoey Zephyr (D; Missoula) responded with “that is in high school where these conversations are appropriate to be happening.” Representative Zephyr, who identifies as transgender, was not shy to voice the real intent behind HB 471: “I will call it what it is, it's about shifting that to an opt-in, so that fewer people get the chance to learn about their LGBTQ students.” Despite those who voiced opposition, the bill ultimately passed 56-43. The bill continued forward to the Senate in which it was referred to the Education and Cultural Resources committee.

On March 26, 2025, HB 471 received support from the same individuals including Dylan Klapmeier, Governor Gianforte’s Education Policy Advisor; Katie Bloodgood, Office of Public Instruction; Derek Oestreicher, chief legal counsel for Montana Family Foundation; and Jesse Browning, a member of Yellowstone County’s Mom for Liberty. Testimonies given were almost identical to those given in the House’s committee. There were new testimonies from individuals speaking on behalf of themselves and Jessica Kirkendall, a volunteer health advocate. Similar opponents also spoke. Rob Watson, President of School Administrators of Montana; Kim Popham, the Director of Public Policy and Research for the Montana Federation of Public Employees; and McCall Flynn, Executive Director at the Board of Public Education, were joined by several who spoke out against SB 299. Speaking on behalf of themselves (Phoebe Howell, Evan Fritz, Aubrey Lebarre); Khadijah Davis, representing ACLU of Montana; Kelson Young,

Montana Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence; and Dr. Laura Nicholson, Montana Academy of Pediatrics, spoke in opposition to HB 471 for various reasons. Several spoke about their own individual identities and how the bill hurts those apart of LGBTQ+ while others spoke about the importance of human sexuality instruction. Dr. Laura Nicholson articulated that “this bill makes the curriculum review and notification process more burdensome for school districts and means that fewer children may receive this education.” The committee asked very few follow-up questions concerning the bill.

On April 1, 2025, DemCast Montana used Facebook to urge individuals to “send a message to the Senate Education committee” to vote no on HB 471 (2025). Their post highlighted five reasons to urge a vote against HB 471 including the ability to sue individual teachers, opt-in policy changes that conflict with the opt-out programs, school notification requirements where “this work falls on teachers and parents (mostly) find it annoying, curriculum and materials being publicly available, and “a definition of gender identity” (DemCast Montana, 2025). Montana Queer Defiance also used Facebook to speak against the bill. Despite these organization’s attempts, the bill passed the committee with an 8-6 vote.

On the Senate Floor, April 9, 2025, Senator Daniel Emrich (R; Great Falls) spoke as the bill’s sponsor echoing many points Hinkle used throughout his many testimonies including the anecdote of the sexual orientation course in Belgrade. Senator Jacinda Morigeau (D; Arlee) explained that parents already have opportunities to opt their children out of instruction. Senator Willis Curdy (D; Missoula) rose in opposition to HB 471 claiming that this was not their concern but rather a local one in which school boards need to address. Senator Curdy explained, as a previous Government high school teacher, that this bill would now require his students to opt-in

to discussing current issues. Senator Jeremy Trebas (R; Great Falls) and Senator McGillvray (R; Billings) spoke in favor. The bill ultimately passed 31-19 and passed for its third reading 28-20. Governor Gianforte (R) signed the bill on May 1, 2025, to go into effect July 1, 2025.

Future Concerns

The passing and signing of HB 471 will challenge schools as they adjust from the current language found in 20-7-120. On the surface, HB 471 limits public education's ability to address topics including LGBTQ+, gender identity, pronoun usage, and sexual education (safe sex, contraception, abstinence, reproductive rights, etc). However, the reality of HB 471 encompasses much more. The language remains vague "Instruction that has the goal or purpose of studying, exploring, or informing" is still subjective. A teacher might not believe the main purpose of a lesson, curriculum, or material is to study, explore or inform on topics of human sexuality and gender identity while a parent, guardian, or student does find that to be the intent. When SB 99 was first introduced, it asked teachers to reexamine their lessons, curriculums, and materials. What would potentially require advanced notification? HB 471 continues to challenge teachers on human sexuality and gender identity instruction while remembering the new time restrictions for parental notification and the new opt-in component.

In many Freshman ELA classes, students read Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The language of HB 471 requires parental notification for both intimate relationships and gender stereotypes. Within the context of the play, there is one dominant intimate relationship between Romeo and Juliet. Given the play's setting in Verona, Italy, and potentially referencing the 1300s, students struggle with the concept that Juliet is a mere 13 years old, and her father is

giving her hand away in marriage to Paris, often assumed to be within his mid-20s. Why would a father encourage, and at one point almost force, his young daughter to enter an intimate relationship with an older man? This has to do with the time period; during the 1300s, women wed very young. In Act I scene iii, marriage, often done during this time period at a young age, is discussed between Juliet, her mother (Lady Capulet), and Nurse. To help persuade Juliet to marry Paris, Lady Capulet shares that he is beautiful but lacks a wife; Juliet could be his wife. Both Lady Capulet and Nurse reminisce on how young they were when they first wed and were with child. During the 1300s (and during Shakespeare's own time), a woman's role (gender stereotype) was to conceive children. Teachers need to address these points in order for students to understand the context of the play and comprehend the choices Juliet makes.

Another piece of classical literature often read in Freshman ELA classes includes Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Scout is not your typical girl. In fact, she prefers to roughhouse with the boys instead of engaging in social expectations for girls. At one point, Dill, Scout and Jem's friend, tells Scout, "You're not a boy" (Lee, p. 145). In modern society, many would call Scout a tomboy since she wears overalls and enjoys climbing trees. Scout's character paves the way for teachers to discuss gender stereotypes and identities and their evolution throughout history. How Southern society viewed a tomboy in the 1960s (the setting of the novel) is not necessarily the same as 2025. Individuals do not always follow gender norms—both in literature and reality. The definitions of HB 471 places both *Romeo and Juliet* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* as curriculum material that address human sexuality and identity instruction. Neither of these novels address LGBTQ+, sexual education, or pronoun usage; however, under the definitions

written in HB 471, all students would not require an opt-in for reading and discussing these novels.

In a world history class, exploring gender roles within societies at specific points in time and cultures would qualify for an opt-in procedure. Several Indigenous tribes function off of a matriarchal structure. These cultures are vastly different from patriarchal societies often found within Western countries. In comparing and contrasting different social structures, teachers would need to articulate the different gender roles and identities within each societal structure. Throughout Europe's history, there have been several notable intimate relationships including King Henry VIII and his six wives and other elite royals such as Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Phillip. In European history, several political alliances were formed from the creation of intimate relationships; it was not unknown for prearranged marriages to have an alternative. Studying these gives greater insight into key political moves even dating back to the Roman Empire and the marriage between Mark Anthony and Cleopatra. None of these examples include LGBTQ+, sexual education, or pronoun usage but would still require an opt-in policy.

Government classes will continue to see challenges addressing specific Supreme Court cases. *Roe v. Wade* (1973) decided that the right to privacy applied to the 14th amendment and protected women's health choices including abortion, and *Dobbs v. Jackson* (2022) overturn the original ruling. According to HB 471, all lessons and materials addressing "reproductive rights and responsibilities" must require an opt-in even if they are simply mentioned as influential cases. These requirements become even more challenging with the time restraints of "no fewer than 5 school days or more than 14 school days prior to....first introducing materials." Current news could change the scope of a topic being addressed within the classroom, but the time

requirements could potentially interfere with the ability to discuss timely topics. Government teachers would ultimately not be able to address political or legal changes in real time.

Science teachers (physical, life, and behavioral sciences) will continuously find themselves notifying home based on the introduction of new material. A psychology course typically covers cognitive, developmental and social components including human behavior. Within this classroom, students often learn developmental theories including attachment theory that explores the importance of early childhood relationships and the impacts noticed later on in a child's development. Those relationships, under HB 471, would classify as "intimate relationships," despite the fact they examine a relationship between parent and child. Anatomy courses that spend an entire semester focused on "sexual anatomy" would constantly be sending reminders home, and biology classes that briefly touch on similar topics would also have to be ready to send home notifications for opt-in. Even if the course's main purposes revolves around human identity instruction (i.e. Anatomy), the language of HB 471 no longer gives an opportunity to send home a one-time, singular notice (i.e a syllabus). Instead, it pushes teachers towards sending home more notification than ever before.

Now as of June 27, 2025, these new situations have become even more complicated. The United States Supreme Court ruled 6-3 in *Mahmoud v. Taylor* (2025) which asked the court to decide about parental rights on educational curriculum and freedom of religion. Do parents and guardians have the right to opt their children out of curriculum that conflicts with their religion? The case began in Montgomery County, Maryland where parents were not given a choice to opt their children out of inclusive instruction with LGBTQ+ storybooks. During the 2022-2023 school year, the board started the LGBTQ+ inclusive text including *Prince & Knight, Love*

Violet, and *Uncle Bobby's Wedding* that offered an opt-out. Then, in March 2023, they revoked opt-out options for two reasons: the growing number of opt-outs that started to cause “significant disruptions to the classroom environment” and the exposure of ““social stigma and isolation”” (*Mahmoud v. Taylor*, 2025, p. 9-10). However, the board allowed for opt-outs to occur in Family Life and Human Sexuality instruction; these opt-outs are required under Maryland law. In the majority opinion, Justice Alito wrote “we conclude that the Board’s introduction of the “LGBTQ+-inclusive” storybooks, combined with its no-opt-out policy, burdens the parents’ right to the free exercise of religion” (*Mahmoud v. Taylor*, 2025, p. 35). In fact, Justice Alito agreed with parental claims that “These books carry with them ‘a very real threat of undermining’ the religious beliefs that the parents wish to instill in their children...and the books exert upon children a psychological ‘pressure to conform’ to their specific viewpoints” (*Mahmoud v. Taylor*, 2005, p. 25).

Justice Sotomayor, joined by Justice Karan and Justice Jackson, wrote “The result will be chaos....Requiring schools to provide advance notice and the chance to opt-out of every lesson plan or story time that might implicate a parent’s religious beliefs will impose impossible administrative burdens on schools” (*Mahmoud v. Taylor*, 2005, p. 2). Within the dissenting opinion, references to past cases, including *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* (2022) that involved prayer, claimed that “never...has this Court held that mere exposure to concepts inconsistent with one’s religious beliefs could give rise to a First Amendment claim” (*Mahmoud v. Taylor*, 2005, p. 5).

Moving forward, school districts, principals, and teachers face several challenges. The first challenge is deciphering the conflicting language of *Mahmoud v. Taylor* (2025) to the

language of HB 471 and how those two entities impact the pending lawsuit of SB 99. *Mahmoud v. Taylor* (2025) focused on the lack of parental opt-out policies, and SB 99's lawsuit articulates that the language of the bill is a clear direct attack towards LGBTQ+ inclusivity. However, with the opt-out provision written within it, there remains a chance the plaintiffs still have ground to claim. Now, the verbiage of HB 471 complicates that into an opt-in policy. Does that conflict with the most recent ruling or is it mutually exclusive?

The Montana School Boards Association (MTSBA) provides school districts across Montana with a plethora of policies and procedures. In 2024, MTSBA published a K-12 policy titled "Parent/Family Engagement and Involvement in Education Policy" to help schools adjust to the language of 20-7-120. The policy includes the language that school districts will keep families "informed of the objectives of district educational and activity programs...and methods to opt-out of such programs and instruction" (Montana School Boards Association, 2024).

MTSBA serves over 175 school districts across the state including AA, A, B/C level schools and provides guidance to others as they draft up their own individual policies. Districts that utilize MTSBA's services will more than likely wait until the policy has been revised before adaptation. Other districts though can and should begin revising new policies and procedures with new language. July Agendas for Bozeman Public Schools and Billings Public Schools, the two largest districts in the state, yet to show any policy changes for the adoption of HB 471.

Regardless, HB 471 went into effect on July 1, 2025. Teachers will need to determine what pieces of their curriculum, lessons, and materials require an opt-in. Parents will very likely become overwhelmed with opt-in notifications. From English to Health, opt-ins will now need to be timed 5 to 14 school days in advanced, and this will challenge teachers to become proactive in

their lesson planning. While there are obvious pieces that fall within the guidelines of HB 471, the added stress of parents bringing forth litigation causes undue stress to overly notify.

School districts will need to prepare themselves for parents and guardians who bring forth concerns and litigation. HB 471 states “If, after investigating a violation under this section, the trustees of a district find that an individual has knowingly or repeatedly violated this section, the trustees shall report the findings to the board of public education pursuant to 20-4-110.” 20-4-110 gives the board of education the authority to either issue a letter, suspend, or revoke a license for those that do not comply. Upon returning to the 2025-2026 school year, boards will need to determine if they have a current process in place for complaints. If they do, what changes will need to be made, and if not, how do they go about establishing one.

Nationwide school districts are seeing individual parents bringing forth litigation over curriculum. In Dearborn, Michigan, a group of parents filed a lawsuit on the basis that the school board did not allow “parents to remove their children from instruction on explicit topics, and violated parent’s rights” (Strack, 2022). The suit came after the approval to keep *Flamer* by Mike Curato and *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold, restriction of *Eleanor & Park* by Rainbow Rowell, and removal of two books, *Red, White, and Royal Blue* by Casey McQuiston and *Push* by Sapphire. The district then created a formal opt-out form (Dearborn Schools, 2025). In Mountain Lake, New Jersey, a parent filed a suit claiming that the school was teaching a curriculum that “promotes ‘anti-racism’ and discriminates against white students” (Reese, 2022). Despite the foundation for the lawsuit, anything within the legal world costs both time and money. Most recently, *Mahmoud v. Taylor* (2025), in which parents sued on the basis of a violation of Freedom of Religion, took the span of three years as it navigated its way through

district and appeals courts prior to the Supreme Court. Escambia County School Board has spent money in two different lawsuits (\$107,000 and \$255,000) for defending itself and removing books from their district (Soule, 2024). It is not only individual school districts facing these legal challenges. Penguin Random House, LLC is also engaging in legal battles against Florida's Boards of Education and the state of Iowa for upholding strict bans and progressing acts of censorship (Anderson, 2024; Penguin Random House, n.d.). Legal claims hurt both the financial and time aspect for districts.

HB 471 specifically allows parents to file claims towards individual districts, but over time, there could be a shift towards Montana's Office of Public Instruction (OPI). In fact, Montana just recently came to a settlement concerning curriculum in another area: Indian Education for All. The lawsuit, filed against OPI and the Montana Board of Public Education, claimed that "despite over a decade...the Indian Education Provisions' goals and requirements remain largely unmet in many Montana public schools" (*Yellow Kidney, et al., v. Montana Office of Public Instruction, et al.*, 2021). Filed in July 2021, the class action lawsuit, which would include parents, students, the Assiniboine, Sioux, Salish, Kootenai, Fort Belknap, Little Shell, and the Northern Cheyenne, would finally come to a settlement in May 2025, four years later. As of now, the total cost of lawsuit has not been published. The settlement agreement document does specify the actions that the Montana Board of Public Education will follow including assessment & accountability measures, creation of content standards, tribal cooperation and parent committees, teacher training, document production and monitoring, and a time enforcement of the 2025-2026 school year. With the pending SB 99 lawsuit, a large likelihood remains that 20-7-120 and HB 471 will be also be brought forth to the Montana Board of Public

Education. It is unclear as to when this might happen and what that cost (both time and financially) will be.

As of July 2025, very little can be said about the future of HB 471. How school districts will change policies remains a mystery. The number of informed educators on the new opt-in language is unclear. Parents will need to adapt and stay up to date with these frequent notifications. Teachers, administrators, superintendents, and school board trustees must move forward. Montana's shift in public education started in 2021 and continues into 2025. It is unclear if and when legislation similar to SB 299 and HB 471 will stop, but for now, educators must learn to navigate the new landscape and be ready to face the societal and potential legal challenges, including litigation, that may arise.

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CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

“Authors often get most of the attention when it comes to issues around book banning and intellectual freedom, but those who really deserve the plaudits and attention are the teachers and librarians and community members doing the work every day to keep books available.” –John Green

Chapter Six of my three-article dissertation provides a synthesis of the research studies completed in Chapters Three through Five. While I conducted this research, I continued to teach within the classroom and make pedagogical choices that include incorporating novels featuring diverse protagonists that reflect my students and their communities. I taught books that have been banned in other districts and books my colleagues were afraid to utilize. I’ve lived as an insider and have plugged-in to my own research. As I reflect upon the past year in which these articles were conducted, the data and facts presented within each article differ, but they also act as a reflection of the voices of those participants during a snapshot of time. As of now, my district has not changed in terms of policies and procedures. However, that is only because my district has yet to embrace the legislative changes that will ultimately change the way classroom procedures are done.

In my three studies, I utilized qualitative research methods to help empower the voices of those working within education. By plugging into my research, I was able to gain trust in which stories of honesty, confusion, fear, and resilience were shared. Placing this research within Bronfenbrenner’s ecological system theory provided insight into multiple system levels: micro, exo, and macrosystem (Guy-Evans, 2024). As the sociopolitical phenomenon continues to

remove books from classroom and libraries, educators and administrators view these events primarily within the microsystem; however, it stems from political and societal changes at the macrosystem. While political changes can be tracked within the macrosystem, the impact of those changes can only be measured within the microsystem. Therefore, these articles work together to illustrate the experiences and perspectives of both educators and administrators during this heightened phenomenon.

Summary Across Publications

Throughout the three studies, the common thread centered around the recent sociopolitical phenomenon in Montana. The first two articles focused on gathering the voices of those currently working with education. The third article was a policy analysis on the recent changes set forth by the latest Montana legislative session. Each article captures different levels of Bronfenbrenner's ecological system within the critical system structure of education (Guy-Evans, 2024). Individually, they fill a gap within the research; collectively, they showcase the challenges between public education, literature, and pedagogical choices.

In the first article, "The Educator's Culture: A Critical Ethnography During the Sociopolitical Phenomenon of Book Challenges," I interviewed five current English Language Arts educators in order to gain insight to their classroom curriculum choices. After the initial passing of SB 99 known as 20-7-120, teachers made explicit curriculum and pedagogical choices in order to avoid confrontation with parents. 20-7-120 enforced notifications of curriculum, lessons, and units that include human sexuality instruction which includes intimate relationship. The teachers also shared novels that contain "human sexuality instruction:" *The Absolutely True*

Diary of a Part Time Indian, The Kite Runner, and Ready Player One. My research explains how each one of these novels classifies under 20-7-120 and, therefore, require parental/guardian notification. Despite the controversial nature of these novels, these teachers still find them to be a valuable component to their classroom curriculum. In other districts, these novels have been challenged and/or removed. In their current district, these educators are still able to teach them. However, they are prepared for parental pushback given some of the controversy they've stirred.

The second article, "An Insight into Educational Censorship: The Perspectives and Responsibilities of Administrators and Teachers During Heightened Book Challenges," took place almost one full year after the first article. During that span of time, Montana saw several formal book challenges take place. The research question focused on the perspectives of both educators and administrators regarding how their district handles formal and informal (classroom level) challenges. By evaluating the phenomenon from multiple levels of power dynamics within education, this research aimed to see if they noticed similar attributes. Despite having a smaller administrative sample, the voices of those who spoke articulated that those within the district who knew these policies and procedures the best were English classroom teachers and librarians. Putting an extra burden on their shoulders has left them wanting more support from their district. This article identifies a few ways their district could implement small changes to help support these educators.

In the final article, "The 2025 Montana Legislative Session: A Policy Analysis on Bills Promoting Educational Censorship," I tracked two pieces of legislation. This article reports the timeline of SB 299 and HB 471. Both bills expressed similar goals: transparency between schools and parents concerning human sexuality and gender identity topics. This then brought

forward similar proponents and opponents. By the end, SB 299 failed in a House Committee while HB 471 passed and signed by Governor Gianforte. I concluded with several hypothetical scenarios on how HB 471 might change education across multiple disciplines including English, science, and social studies. As of October 1, 2025, the Montana School Board Association (2025) has yet to provide guidance on this bill or an example policy for districts across the state.

Future Research

On October 1, 2025, Pen America (2025) released updated data which included the 2024-2025 school year: “6,870 instances of book bans across 23 states and 87 public school districts.” Tracking over 3,700 different titles, frequently banned novels included *Clockwork Orange*, *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*, *Crank*, and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. Over the past four years, book bans have been tracked amongst 45 states, 451 public school districts, and have impacted over 2,000 different authors. Steven King, Ellen Hopkins, and Jodi Picoult are only a few who have watched their books removed from library shelves and school curriculum and limited the ability for educators to make reading recommendations. With the total reaching over 22,000 banned books, it appears that this phenomenon is not slowing down. Now that the 2025-2026 school year started, districts across the nation are adapting to changes from their local legislation. What does this mean for classroom teachers, librarians, and administrators? The answer is complex; it depends on their state, district, policies, and procedures. A simple answer does not exist.

Book bans continue to come from multiple avenues. Within the last year, several states have passed legislation that enforces state-wide bans. Utah’s HB 29 “Sensitive Materials

Review Amendments” expanded 53G-10-103—Sensitive instructional material—to include steps to enact a state-wide banned book. Utah currently has 18 banned titles (2024; Pen America, 2025). The state’s banned list includes authors like Ellen Hopkins, Jodi Picoult, Judy Blume, Sarah J. Mass, and Margaret Atwood (Markham & LaFrance, 2024). South Carolina passed Regulation 43-170 which gives authority to the State Board of Education to ban books, and as of May 2025, 22 books were removed statewide (Bowers, 2025; Pen America, 2025). Removed novels included those by Ellen Hopkins and Sarah J. Mass, but also those by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Malinda Lo, and specifically, George M. Johnson’s *All Boys Aren’t Blue*, which continues as a highly targeted novel for its LGBTQ+ content (Trimel, 2025).

Tennessee’s legislation changes started back in 2022 with the “Age-Appropriate Materials Act.” *The Tennessean* recently reported that their state ranks third in the US: 1,623 books banned (Latham, 2025). Even classics such as *The Bluest Eyes*, and children’s picture books, *Wacky Wednesday*, find their way to being removed. Florida and Texas continue as the nation’s leaders in the high count of book bans (Pen America, 2025). Moral of the story: books continued to be banned. The action of educational censorship impacts all of those within the sphere of education. The implications of banning books leave different impressions on each group. As the body of research grows, multiple perspectives from these groups continues to be voiced. The research remains dismal for rural locations.

Utilizing a key word search from 2024-October 1, 2025, the terminology “book bans;” “book challenges;” and “educational censorship” alongside “Montana” resulted in minimal results. One search concluded with 28 scholarly journal results found, and the results did not actually speak to research completed within Montana concerning the sociopolitical phenomenon.

What did appear were references to SB 99 (20-7-120) and book challenges in Billings and Bozeman, Montana. The articles I have presented fill a gap. Rural mid-west states (Montana, Wyoming, North and South Dakota) do not appear to be an area of focus for this newly discovered research phenomenon. That is not to say that these states are not of importance; that simply means the research being conducted does not place emphasis on them. I cannot answer as to why this might be except to provide my own reflection: this research is exhausting. This journey became physically exhausting as I attempted to keep up on breaking news and published articles. There are several challenges for one single individual to continuously keep up to date on the growing database of information. After completing a section of writing, a news alert would appear and change the information completed. I begin this section with the most recent information which is different from the data articulated in Chapter 1 and each article. However, it also became mentally and emotionally exhausting as I read stories about educators fighting for the freedom to read. I felt emotionally conflicted as I wanted to voice my own opinion during the Montana legislative session but did not want to skew any data. Throughout this journey, I often experienced feeling of isolation and regret. When looking at these three articles together, it supports the notion that this is a long-term phenomenon, and I would argue that the phenomenon is not close to being considered “over.”

Since January 2025, Montana proposed two bills, passed one, and implemented new rules and regulations on instruction that inform, explore, and explain human sexuality and gender identity. With schools returning in August, districts across the state were left unsure about how to rewrite district policies because of a lack of clear guidance. Entities like Montana School Board Association (2025) write school board policies for districts across the state to implement

and adapt. From B/C to AA districts, MTSBA has written several policies, but as of October 2025, MTSBA has yet to publish a draft for policy changes concerning HB 471 and the updated language of 20-7-120. Without clear language, school districts do not know how to navigate particular components. Only recently did I learn one AA school adopted an interpretation of HB 471: Great Falls Public Schools. However, their policy places the responsibility on the school district to notify parents and guardians on curriculum that encompasses human sexuality and gender identity. I question though at what point can the school district know when each specific teacher will approach specific aspects of their curriculum to ensure timely notifications that fit within the time frame: 5-14 school days.

As an insider, I wrote how my school district failed to implement the changes of HB471 prior to the beginning of the school year. In fact, it was not until the end of September that we (educators in the district) finally received some guidance, yet an updated policy still remains unavailable. What is next for educators in Montana? Are current teachers and administrators aware of HB 471? Are they aware of the differences it has created for curriculum? Do they know their individual responsibility to notify home 5-14 days before beginning any sort of instruction? If district level administrators do not inform in-building administrators and teachers of their responsibilities, how are they supposed to uphold levels of the law?

Policy and Curriculum Suggestions

In this section, I would like to summarize how administrators and teachers can move forward in navigating this sociopolitical phenomenon. First, there needs to be clear leadership. School leadership begins with the principal by focusing on the school's mission and goals,

support instruction, collaboration, and build trust within the building. Teacher leadership can help in influencing decisions especially in terms of curriculum (Danielson, 2016; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2013). Each individual needs to know their roles and duties in order to have effective leadership (Barth, 1988).

1. Districts should implement professional developments that speak to their district and state policies on curriculum. These professional developments should be done annually to ensure staff in all roles are aware of any changes that come from recent legislative changes.
2. Districts should assign specific roles or create new ones with the sole purpose of helping teachers when they face curriculum challenges from parents and students. When new adaptations of curriculum are created from an opt-out, they should be stored through an easily accessible database for all employees of the district to access.
3. Teachers should know their individual responsibilities for contacting parents and guardians. They also need to be informed of specific guidelines in approaching parents and guardians who opt their children out of specific curriculum. Districts should provide those guidelines.
4. Teachers should continue to engage in best practices. Despite the pressure of working in the midst of a political pendulum, best practices should always lead instruction to help students grow academically, mentally, and emotionally.
5. In building administrators need to take on an active leadership role during the sociopolitical phenomenon. It is not the job or responsibility of teacher to know more

than their administrators. Therefore, districts need to ensure they provide guidelines for administrators to follow.

6. Clear policy and proceeds must also be followed. Even if they are created, in order to maintain transparency and trust, they need to be implemented correctly.

Concluding Remarks

I started this chapter with a quote from John Green, the author of several notable Young Adult literature pieces: *The Fault in our Stars*, *Paper Towns*, *Looking for Alaska*, and *Turtles All the Way Down*. I've read all four of those novels; several of them have been banned in other districts. When *Turtles All the Way Down* first came out, I taught at a middle school. The school's librarian at the time often bought several novels that some would categorize as "too mature" for 8th graders. Her solution was to place these novels behind her desk and only check them out to select students; many of these students were also enrolled in my 8th grade honors class. *Turtles All the Way Down* has been banned for profanity, mentions of sex, and its depiction of mental health, obsessive compulsive disorder (Beauregard, 2024). After grading years of independent book projects, I can confirm that there is a large selection of my students (primarily females) that have read Green's work. My students and I have enjoyed his writing and the authentic characters he's crafted.

The other day, I spoke with a previous colleague who has now moved to Colorado; she shared that her school implemented *Paper Towns* into their curriculum. However, her district has received numerous complaints on the novel, and she's found herself facing similar challenges

that she faced in Montana with opt-outs. For many of her colleagues, this is their first opt-out, informal book challenge experience. She is unsure if parents will escalate it to the school board. Education, and literature in particular, challenges students to explore the world, their identity, lens, values, beliefs, and also learn from other perspectives that contradict, challenge, and conflict with their own. The world is comprised of multiple truths, but unfortunately when we censor voices from the conversation, we refuse to accept that notion. Those fighting to remove novels and censor education are ultimately saying those voices are not allowed to be heard. As an educator, I believe everyone deserves to hear their voice. There are too many times in history education has attempted to remove the voices of “others:” racial segregation, Indian Boarding schools, school to prison pipelines, and language barriers. Despite those incidents, both past and present, there are educators who attempt to uplift those voices. I do not know how to not teach certain novels: *The 57 Bus*, *Firekeeper’s Daughter*, *Long Way Down*, and *The Marrow Thieves*. I’m not sure how to silence the voices of my LGBTQ+, Indigenous, Black, and Hispanic students. I’m not sure how to support my speech and debate students who choose to bring forth the flaws in the world by openly discussing topics such as anxiety, grief, school shootings, women’s rights, equity, and justice. However, I am certain that there are students who want to have these conversations.

There are students who want to think critically, express their identities, and engage in controversial topics. Yet, I currently live and teach within this sociopolitical phenomenon must accept the challenges it brings forth. I do not have quantifiable data on how many of my current students’ parents do not approve of these topics within the classroom. I do not know how many of them will eventually opt their child out (or into with current legislation changes) of my

lessons and units. Working in the “unknown” evokes fear, but because of my pedagogy and beliefs, I choose to find ways to overcome those fears and teach using best practices: Young Adult literature curriculum, social justice frameworks, and culturally responsive practices. The freedom to read is important to me, my coworkers, and my students. Within this three-article dissertation research, I hope my readers understand the challenges of working during this sociopolitical phenomenon and applaud those that choose to face these battles despite the pushback they receive.

John Green (2023) is absolutely correct: “those who really deserve the plaudits and attention are the teachers and librarians and community members doing the work every day to keep books available.” The last line of Green’s (2023) post says: “So the next time you see a teacher or librarian, please thank them on behalf of authors, readers, and the communities they serve.” Thank you, teachers, librarians, and all educators fighting for the freedom to read. I, as a fellow educator, thank you.

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