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editorial: censorship & education: a brief introduction

On Education

When and why is censorship harmful? When and why is censorship perhaps necessary? By what authority ought materials to be censored? Does censorship have a legitimate place in education? Or finally, given the contested nature of democratic decision-making and curricular selection, is censorship simply inevitable?
In this issue of On_Education, a number of scholars will grapple with these topics and questions, and provide a diversity of opinions and perspectives on censorship in education in all its forms. With these essays, the editors hope to foster a lively discussion, while also encouraging a number of counter-intuitive perspectives that challenge dominant narratives about censorship in education.

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From the Latin, meaning *to evaluate or judge*, censorship denotes the disapproval, suppression or prohibition of (some aspects of) literature, art, or media that is considered offensive or obscene to local sensibilities, politically unacceptable to a ruling authority, inappropriate for a particular audience, or even is perceived as a threat to national security (Berkowitz, 2022). In most cases censorship involves deleting or erasing a single word, reference or scene, and most likely everyone has consumed censored material unawares. Censorship is sometimes confusingly conflated with banning, which is a harsher type of control prohibiting the sale or availability of an item. Material may be partially or locally censored but not banned; conversely, material may be banned in one setting (e.g., a local municipality or school), but not another, or else is widely available for purchase despite the local ban. Both occur around the world in a wide variety of settings.

Recent examples of censorship include the Chinese government censoring what its citizens are able to read about the Covid-19 pandemic; Myanmar's military leaders restricting what its citizens are able to learn about the governmental response to a recent earthquake; the European Union's efforts to censor social media in order to "protect democracy" from foreign interference, or its efforts – most recently in France and Romania – to ban several populist political parties from participating in democratic elections; Vietnam's banning of *The Hunger Games* for its glorification of violence, or the Disney film, *Lightyear*, being banned across the Muslim world because of a brief kiss between two animated characters; in Scotland, a law was passed (and then subsequently repealed) that had censored citizens from saying things that the governing elite deemed 'hateful'; in Latin America—from Mexico to El Salvador to Venezuela—journalists self-censor for fear of imprisonment and even murder by their own governments for daring to report corruption or collusion with drug cartels; like China, Russia has long had a censorship infrastructure in place that blocks access to information the Kremlin finds problematic; on many Western university campuses, attempts are made to censor hate speech; across Germany stringent measures are enforced banning

most pro-Palestinian demonstrations; and in more than a dozen countries either blasphemy or Holocaust denial (and sometimes both) are illegal.

The arts have always been susceptible to censorship. Literally thousands of musical compositions[1], films[2] and works of art—from Michelangelo to Mapplethorpe—have been either censored or banned. Book censorship in particular has a very long history,[3] including a number of philosophical texts, such as Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Russell's *Marriage and Morals*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Rousseau's *The Social Contract* and Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*. Children's books, too, have not been spared from the censors, and not always for the reasons that people think.[4] Indeed, in the mid-twentieth century anarchist social critic Paul Goodman noted that "eccentric classical children's literature is discouraged by librarians because it does not fit educator's word-lists and is probably unhygienic. The approved books are concocted according to the official world-view" (Goodman, 1962, p. 66).

But censorship arguably excites the most outrage when it occurs in the educational domain, and for good reason when children are compelled by state authority to attend school, where they are subject to a mandated (and often contested) curriculum (Delfattore, 1992; Noll, 1994; Patterson, 2010; Petress, 2005; Ravitch, 2003). Accordingly, debates concerning what it is appropriate for the state to require children to learn in school is a perennial affair. For instance, removing prayer from the public school was a crusade fought for many decades by atheists, but also Catholics and Jews, in the United States. More recently, and equally motivated to protect the interests of young people, both conservative Florida Governor DeSantis and liberal educators in Toronto's Peel Region—containing 257 schools—sought to restrict school library holdings deemed inappropriate or 'harmful' to young people (Wells, 2025). In many schools, teachers continuously censor themselves during classroom instruction as it concerns sensitive or controversial material (Merry, in press).

But of course, censorship in education has a very long history. Plato famously defended censorship of many stories, poems and music as necessary for the harmony of the Good City and the virtue of its citizens. Rousseau's educational philosophy was also one involving restricted exposure to books, or indeed to any *corrupting* ideas emanating from society. All state systems of education in the modern era continue to engage in censorship in one form or another, whether it is in the form of (historical and civic) narratives favorable to both majorities and the ruling elite, or else by way of omission, for example dissident and minority perspectives that challenge the favored narrative. Indeed, around the world state systems of education mandate a curriculum that censors certain artists, authors, and perspectives.

Much of the time, the concerns raised by parents and school board members are not with the material per se, but rather with whether or not it is deemed age appropriate—a notoriously elusive standard—and on this point there inevitably will be disagreement. At the same time, however, few will disagree with the need to censor some kinds of social media in order to protect the mental health of young people; nor are they likely to disagree that parents should have the right to set controls on home computers concerning what their own children should be permitted to view. Moreover, and irrespective of one's political leanings, virtually no one wishes for the school library to carry book titles that contain graphically violent or sexually explicit material.[5]

It is also worth noting, however, that censorship rarely works for very long. For example, many banned books have become best sellers, as banning is a guaranteed formula for inciting widespread interest. Indeed, a large number of once banned books are now *mandatory* reading in Western high

schools6, and in scores of bookstores across the United States—both in large cities and small towns—one will find a section proudly featuring *banned books*.

Thus while recent instances of outrage about censorship in education tend to focus on specific *illiberal* forms of censorship (e.g., concerning the teaching of evolution or sex education), an historical look across cultures invites a wider and more nuanced perspective, including that censorship (a) is both an ancient and modern phenomenon; (b) is weaponized by both the Right and the Left (Loury, 2026; Lukianoff, 2025; Steinfeld, 2025); and (c) within educational institutions is likely unavoidable, if not also justifiable.

These and other observations allow us to define a broader range of questions and topics, among them: when and why is censorship harmful? When and why is censorship perhaps necessary? By what authority ought materials to be censored? Does censorship have a legitimate place in education? Or finally, given the contested nature of democratic decision-making and curricular selection, is censorship simply inevitable?

In this issue of *On_Education*, a number of scholars will grapple with these topics and questions, and provide a diversity of opinions and perspectives on censorship in education in all its forms. With these essays, the editors hope to foster a lively discussion, while also encouraging a number of counter-intuitive perspectives that challenge dominant narratives about censorship in education.

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1. Countless operas and songs have either been censored or banned for offending ruling elites, corporate advertisers or local sensibilities. Artists include The Who, Prince, Eminem, Rage Against the Machine, and Ice-T, but also Mozart, Billie Holiday, Elvis Presley, Loretta Lynn, and even Motown favorite, The Shirelles, for their song, "Will you still love me tomorrow." The BBC has a long history of banning songs for radio play, including ABBA's "Waterloo," Phil Collins' "In the Air Tonight," Queen's "Killer Queen," and even The Boomtown Rats' "I don't like Mondays," and on numerous other occasions the BBC censored other music—*inter alia* Rod Stewart and the Sex Pistols—deemed to be critical of either the royal family or British foreign policy.
2. Even if we exclude inarguably pornographic or gratuitously violent films, the list certainly will include D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*, Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*, Pasolini's *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (banned in eleven local English and Welsh town councils for thirty years), Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and Frederick Wiseman's jarring documentary, *Titicut Follies*, which exposed the inhumane conditions in the Massachusetts Hospital for the Criminally Insane.
3. Christian texts were ceremonially burned by several Roman Emperors; subsequently, the Catholic Church demanded that the writings of Protestant Reformers be burned. Both Emperor Qin and Chairman Mao engaged in mass censorship and book burning in China—not to mention mass killing of artists and intellectuals—as, of course, did the Soviets, the Nazis and the Khmer Rouge. As for literature, there are too many books to mention, ranging from Aristophanes to Shakespeare to Balzac to Salman Rushdie, whose *Satanic Verses* was banned outright in India, South Africa and more than a dozen other—predominantly Muslim—countries. *The Anarchist Cookbook* continues to be banned almost everywhere.
4. The list includes Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* and both *In the Night Kitchen* and *Where the Wild Things Are* from Maurice Sendak. Numerous Roald Dahl and Dr. Seuss books have also been found objectionable—and hence heavily censored—for a variety of reasons, not least of which their politically incorrect choice of labels for people now considered by many to be stigmatizing or offensive.
5. No parent will likely approve of their school-aged child being assigned to read Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, or Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.

6. For example, one can expect to find Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, George Orwell's *1984*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*.