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# Book Censorship and Its Threat to Critical Inquiry in Social Studies Education

## Abstract

This article argues that recent advances in book censorship in the United States point to a threat to critical inquiry pedagogy in social studies education— a content area aiming to prepare learners for active and engaged citizenship in a pluralistic, democratic society. To support this argument, the article offers a description of critical inquiry pedagogy and explains how critical inquiry is connected to social studies education. It provides examples of two recently censored children’s literature books listed on Pen America’s (2022) Index of School Book Bans and it explains what these books may offer social studies education. It then suggests that the censorship of these books stifles critical inquiry in social studies classrooms. The article explores possible next steps that social studies educators, and advocates of social studies education, could take to address the uptick in book censorship, and it closes with a brief conclusion.

## Keywords

book censorship, book bans, civic education, critical inquiry, social studies education

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## Cover Page Footnote

The author wishes to express appreciation to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback.

In recent months, news outlets have reported that increased efforts to censor children’s literature in schools and libraries across the United States are underway. For example, in April 2022, *The Washington Post* reported that, according to PEN America, 1,586 school book bans had taken place in the previous nine months. The report stated,

The bans targeted 1,145 unique books by more than 800 authors, and a plurality of the books—41 percent—featured prominent characters who are people of color. Thirty-three percent of the banned books, meanwhile, included LGBTQ themes, protagonists or strong secondary characters, and 22 percent “directly address issues of race or racism” (Natanson, 2022, para. 2).

*The Washington Post* article also reported a finding by the American Library Association (ALA) that “1,597 book challenges or removals” (Natanson, 2022, para. 3) occurred in 2021. It stated that in the ALA’s two decades of tracking the statistic, this finding was the highest number the organization had reported. “Most titles targeted in 2021 were written by or about LGBTQ or Black individuals” (Natanson, 2022, para. 3).

The increase in book censorship in the United States poses serious challenges for student learning in schools around the country and across grade levels and content areas. However, in a unique way, the degree to which book censorship is occurring could also affect the quality of social studies education, including civic education, that students receive in school. Social studies education is a vital part of teaching young people how to understand the world and to live as members of a diverse democracy. The knowledge, skills, and dispositions students develop in and through social studies education are crucial in advancing civic values that will guide young people in navigating complex problems and issues they will encounter throughout their lives. Because children’s literature is a resource that educators regularly have drawn on to teach students about civic values and to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, the censorship of children’s literature in schools and libraries is distressing.

This article argues that recent advances in book censorship in the United States point to a threat to critical inquiry pedagogy in social studies education—a content area aiming to prepare learners for active and engaged citizenship in a pluralistic, democratic society. To support this argument, first, this article offers a description of critical inquiry pedagogy and explains how critical inquiry is connected to social studies education. Next, the article provides two examples of children’s literature books that, according to PEN America’s (2022) Index of School Book Bans, have recently been censored in the United States. It explains what the books offer social studies education and suggests that censoring these books stifles critical inquiry in social studies classrooms. Third, the article explores possible next steps that social studies teachers, and advocates of social studies education, could take to address this issue. Finally, the article closes with a brief conclusion.

### **What Is Critical Inquiry? How Is Critical Inquiry Connected to Social Studies Education?**

Fecho (2000) explained that critical inquiry pedagogy incorporates social, political, and critical aspects of learning to promote the exploration of different points of view. It pushes students and teachers to conduct rich, inquiry-based investigations that encourage deep reflection and the examination of various perspectives, including perspectives that challenge students’ existing ways of thinking and knowing. Critical inquiry pedagogy “enables students and teachers, both

individually and collectively, to make sense of text as the world and the world as text (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Teachers and students enter into a process of social construction of knowledge that encourages critique, diversity, rigor, and meaning making” (Fecho, 2000, p. 195).

In a unique way, critical inquiry plays an important role in social studies education, including civic education. Heafner (2020) pointed out that critical inquiry lies “at the heart of social studies” (p. 11) as it offers educators opportunities to prepare young people for civic agency and activism in communities. Incorporating critical inquiry pedagogy in social studies learning can present students with questions and issues for discussion and deliberation that are central to advancing democratic values and promoting critical thinking skills that support students’ development as informed, reasoned citizens.

Over time, children’s literature has served as an important pedagogical resource for classroom teachers as they incorporate critical inquiry in the social studies. Children’s literature is a doorway through which teachers can introduce new ideas, expand and deepen students’ thinking, and affirm students’ identities. For example, in a recent study, Rodríguez (2018) explained how three Asian American elementary schoolteachers’ use of children’s literature in the curriculum, combined with the teachers’ own understandings of citizenship, played an important role in how the teachers taught their students about civic agency. “Asian American children’s literature can be an important site through which children can merge their existing understandings of the world around them with the new ideas, situations, and stories that they encounter to think critically about the multiple meanings of citizen in U.S. society” (pp. 555-556). In citing Kunzman (2006), Torres (2019) suggested that children’s literature could be used to support citizenship education through imaginative engagement, an approach that helps students “conceive of the world beyond ourselves and our own viewpoints, widen our appreciation for ways of living that are different from those we know, and gain insight into what gives meaning to others” (p. 162). Tschida, Ryan, and Swenson Ticknor (2014) emphasized the value of using children’s literature to help young learners explore different perspectives and to move away from ethnocentric views. The authors urged teacher educators to help pre-service teachers avoid the narrative of a single story (Adichie, 2009) by looking at children’s literature through windows and mirrors (Bishop, 1990).

There are many benefits to using children’s literature in social studies classrooms, but increased efforts to limit the use of children’s books in U.S. schools and libraries present a threat to critical inquiry in social studies education, and education more generally. Furthermore, the censorship of children’s literature could be especially stifling for social studies instruction in school, for as researchers (Heafner & Fitchett, 2012) have already observed, social studies, in comparison to other content areas, has received less instructional time in schools in recent years largely due to policy mandates, such as No Child Left Behind, that have led to an increased emphasis on standardized testing. Reducing students’ access to books in schools and libraries could further decrease children’s opportunities to “...celebrate both our differences and our similarities, because together they are what make us all human” (Bishop, 1990, p. xi). Reduced access to books in schools and libraries also could pose challenges for teachers who aim to create powerful pedagogy in social studies education.

## **Examples of Book Censorship and Its Stifling of Critical Inquiry in Social Studies Education**

Here, two examples of recently censored children's books in the United States are provided. The books were accessed from PEN America's (2022) Index of School Book Bans. According to PEN America, a school book ban is described as:

any action taken against a book based on its content and as a result of parent or community challenges, administrative decisions, or in response to direct or threatened action by lawmakers or other government officials, that leads to a previously accessible book being either completely removed from availability to students, or where access to a book is restricted or diminished (para. 12).

Specifically, the two books highlighted in this article are *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family's Fight for Desegregation* written by Duncan Tonatiuh and published by Abrams Books for Young Readers in 2014; and *Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag* written by Rob Sanders and illustrated by Steven Salerno. *Pride* was published by Random House in 2018.

These two books were selected as examples because they address themes that appear in elementary social studies, namely, how U.S. citizens have made history by becoming active civic participants who identify problems in society and work to advance democracy. The books describe how Sylvia Mendez, Harvey Milk, and others showed responsible and engaged citizenship by applying knowledge of U.S. civic institutions and the law to advocate for democratic values such as equality, liberty, and justice. The books support critical inquiry pedagogy because they offer young learners with opportunities to examine different perspectives, take part in the social construction of knowledge, and make meaning of notable events in U.S. history. In the sections below, brief summaries of the books are provided, followed by discussions of what the books offer social studies education. An explanation for how the censorship of these books could stifle critical inquiry in social studies classrooms is also offered.

### ***Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez & Her Family's Fight for Desegregation (2014)* Book Summary**

Written for an elementary school audience, *Separate Is Never Equal* is a biographical picture book published in 2014. It is a Robert F. Siebert Honor Book, a Pura Belpré Honor Book, and a 2019 Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People. As of August 10, 2022, PEN America's (2022) Index of School Book Bans listed the book as "Banned from Classrooms" in the Central York District in Pennsylvania (in September 2021); "Banned Pending Investigation" in North East District in Texas (in December 2021); and "Banned Pending Investigation" in Grandbury Independent School in Texas (in January 2022).

*Separate Is Never Equal* was written by Duncan Tonatiuh and it traces the story of Sylvia Mendez and her family's fight to end school segregation in California in the 1940s. In 1944, Sylvia's family moved to the community of Westminster, California. When Sylvia and her two brothers, who were of Mexican and Puerto Rican descent, tried to enroll at their local public school on 17<sup>th</sup> Street, they were denied admission. However, the children's cousins, who had lighter skin and the last name of Vidaurri, were allowed to enroll. School officials told Sylvia and her brothers to attend another school in the area, Hoover Elementary, that was described as

“the Mexican school.” Nevertheless, Mr. and Mrs. Mendez wanted their children to attend the 17<sup>th</sup> Street school, so in March 1945, David Marcus, an attorney representing the Mendez family (and several other Orange County families who had experienced similar challenges) filed a lawsuit. When the case *Mendez v. Westminster School District* went to trial in Los Angeles, the trial included testimony from individuals including school officials, students, and parents, including Sylvia’s mother and father.

The book explains that Judge Paul McCormick ruled in favor of the Mendez family, but the school district appealed the ruling. In April 1947, the Court of Appeals in San Francisco, California ruled in favor of Sylvia’s family as well, so Sylvia and her brothers could attend the 17<sup>th</sup> Street public school. In June 1947, California Governor Earl Warren, who later became the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, signed a bill into law desegregating schools across the state. Notably, Thurgood Marshall, a lawyer who wrote friend-of-the-court briefs for the *Mendez* case in the 1940s (and who later became the first African American justice on the U.S. Supreme Court) also was a lawyer for the U.S. Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* that, in 1954, led to a ruling that racial segregation in U.S. public schools was unconstitutional. *Separate Is Never Equal* concludes with an Author’s Note providing additional biographical and historical information, photographs (including one of Sylvia Mendez after she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011), a glossary, bibliography, and an index.

### ***What Separate Is Never Equal Offers Social Studies Education***

The story of Sylvia Mendez and her family’s fight to end segregation in California public schools offers social studies learners an opportunity to examine U.S. history narratives that are often neglected or overlooked in the school curriculum. As Santiago (2017) pointed out, recent demographic shifts in the United States have indicated an increase in the population of Latino/a children but teaching about Latino/a history has remained an underexplored area of the school curriculum. However, Santiago also stated that, in recent years, the *Mendez* case “has become a new vehicle for including a Mexican American presence into the U.S. history narrative” (p. 44).

At the elementary level specifically, using the book *Separate Is Never Equal* can help students understand the role that civic and political institutions play in society, and the ways in which people in history have challenged unjust systems and structures to make society more equitable. *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework* states that, by the end of grade five, students should be able to “Explain how a democracy relies on people’s responsible participation, and draw implications for how individuals should participate” (NCSS, 2013, p. 32). It also states that students should “Identify core civic virtues and democratic principles that guide government, society, and communities” (p. 33). Therefore, teaching the Mendez family’s story through a reading of *Separate Is Never Equal* offers social studies educators a rich resource to teach students how Sylvia and her family’s civic participation was guided by democratic virtues and principles that led to greater educational equality for themselves and others in their community. Furthermore, with recent reports suggesting that there is a decreased emphasis in teaching history and civics in schools across the United States (Educating for American Democracy, 2021), using the book as a curricular resource in elementary social studies classes could enhance young learners’ knowledge of history and civics. It also could assist teachers in preparing their students for active and engaged citizenship and provide students with a credible source of information to promote historical thinking skills such as contextualization and the corroboration of evidence. In this way, the book may open the door to further historical inquiry

and push students to think more critically. As education scholar Wineburg (1999) explained, “mature historical knowing...teaches us to go beyond our own image, to go beyond our brief life, and to go beyond the fleeting moment in human history into which we’ve been born” (p. 93). *Separate Is Never Equal* can help young learners achieve these goals to become reflective, critical, and thoughtful learners of history.

***Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag (2018)***  
***Book Summary***

*Pride: The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag* was published in 2018. The children’s book was written by Rob Sanders, illustrated by Steven Salerno, and designated a Junior Library Guild Selection book. As of August 10, 2022, PEN America’s (2022) Index of School Book Bans listed the book as “Banned from Classrooms” in the Central York District in Pennsylvania (in September 2021); “Banned Pending Investigation” in the North East District in Texas (in December 2021); and “Banned from Libraries” in the School District of Cadott in Wisconsin (in March 2022).

*Pride* explains how the Rainbow Flag, also called the Pride Flag, was created. The book traces the story of Harvey Milk, a native New Yorker, who was a gay civil rights activist in San Francisco, California in the 1970s. After moving to San Francisco in 1972, Milk opened a small camera shop and began organizing gay rights marches. Later, he decided to pursue a career in politics. In 1977, he was elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors as one of the first openly gay people in the United States to hold an elected office.

The book explains that, in the late 1970s, Milk contacted a friend of his, artist Gilbert Baker, to ask for help in creating a symbol that people could carry with them as they marched. Baker and other volunteers eventually created the Rainbow Flag which was first adopted in 1978. However, sadly, Harvey Milk was assassinated at San Francisco City Hall on November 27, 1978. George Moscone, the mayor of San Francisco, also was killed. In the coming years, the Rainbow Flag would endure, and its use as a symbol of equality and solidarity would spread throughout the United States and the world. The book concludes with additional biographical notes, timelines of Milk’s life and the Rainbow Flag, primary source photographs of people and places described in the book, and recommendations for further reading.

***What Pride Offers Social Studies Education***

The exclusion of LGBTQ history in the school curriculum has been noted in recent decades by education scholars. Thornton (2003) stated, “...few social studies materials appear to have substantive treatment of gay history and issues. Indeed, many of these materials fail to even mention such words as homosexual, straight, or gay” (p. 226). Thornton further observed that although the “censorship of gay material is commonplace” (p. 228), teachers have opportunities to teach with and about it in different social studies disciplines, including history and geography.

Schmidt (2010) revealed a gap that existed in social studies research and practice regarding the teaching of LGBTQ issues. She explained that there was an “undeveloped opportunity for the field [of social studies education] to address LGBTQ issues as part of social understanding, civic efficacy, and the common good” (p. 331), and claimed that the field did not “seek to redress the injustices perpetrated on LGBTQ persons or address the status claims that might grant more equal access in a democratic society” (p. 331). Other social studies education

researchers have revealed preservice teachers' reluctance to teach LGBTQ topics in school. For example, Buchanan, Tschida, Bellows, and Shear's (2020) study found that although elementary preservice teachers reported having personal experiences with LGBTQ people in their own lives, they nonetheless expressed uncertainty about using LGBTQ children's books due to religious views, concerns over possible conflicts, and questions about the appropriateness of the books for elementary-grade children.

From a critical inquiry perspective, however, using LGBTQ children's literature, such as Sander's (2018) book, *Pride*, offers several benefits to social studies education. First, the book could help center LGBTQ issues in the school curriculum—issues that, typically, have been ignored or silenced. LGBTQ history *is* U.S. history, so omitting this area of study prevents young learners from developing a more complete picture of the past, including an understanding of the contributions, struggles, and experiences of LGBTQ people, and their advocates, who have worked diligently to strengthen communities and promote a more inclusive society over time. Using the book *Pride* in the social studies classroom, therefore, could help introduce students to new ideas and perspectives in history that could further push their thinking, promote inquiry, and encourage them to examine history from a different point of view.

In addition to drawing more attention to an underexplored area of history, incorporating the book *Pride* into the curriculum also could support teachers' work in creating inclusive classroom communities. Brophy, Alleman, and Halvorsen (2018) pointed out that creating affirming and inclusive classrooms is central to the work of social studies educators, and forming learning communities where students feel valued and respected supports democratic citizenship education by teaching students how to work together as members of diverse societies. Drawing on children's literature, then, can be a valuable resource for social studies educators to achieve these goals and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. As the *College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework* states, civics education “teaches the virtues—such as honesty, mutual respect, cooperation, and attentiveness to multiple perspectives—that citizens should use when they interact with each other on public matters” (NCSS, 2013, p. 33). Incorporating *Pride* into the social studies curriculum could help teachers reinforce these virtues for their students and facilitate discussions about how people in the past have used these virtues to make important contributions to society.

### **How Censoring *Separate Is Never Equal* and *Pride* Stifles Critical Inquiry in Social Studies Education**

In different ways, the children's books *Separate Is Never Equal* and *Pride* provide historical examples of people in the past—both children and adults—who have identified and addressed public problems and have served as agents of change to help make society more democratic and equitable. Sylvia Mendez and her brothers' denial of admission to a Westminster, California public school in the 1940s eventually led to the desegregation of schools in California because Sylvia and her family spoke up about the injustices they experienced in their community. They used their knowledge of civic institutions and the U.S. legal system to create change. *Pride* tells the story of Harvey Milk, Gilbert Blake, and the creation of the Rainbow Flag, and it demonstrates how LGBTQ people in history have become active members of their communities who have worked to advance democratic values and spoken out against inequality. As a result, since the 1970s, LGBTQ rights have expanded throughout the United States and the world. The work of Milk, Blake, and others significantly influenced the expansion of these rights.



Overall, the two children’s books show how engaged and informed citizens in history have demonstrated the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that are crucial for reasoned, democratic citizenship. The books serve as examples for how historical figures have shown socially responsible citizenship, and they guide young learners in exploring how to become active, engaged citizens themselves. However, censoring these books stifles critical inquiry pedagogy in social studies education because it reduces educators’ access to curricular resources that could help prepare students for informed and reasoned citizenship. It presents fewer opportunities for students to think critically about the past, conduct inquiries to develop historical knowledge, and examine different points of view. It raises concerns over the free expression of ideas, limits teachers’ autonomy to develop meaningful curriculum that is connected to students’ lives, and could, perhaps, open the door to curriculum epistemicide (Paraskeva, 2016) in social studies education. Dewey (1936) wrote, “Since freedom of mind and freedom of expression are the root of all freedom, to deny freedom in education is a crime against democracy” (p. 165). Restricting the freedom of students and teachers in school to access books that will help young people grow into responsible, informed, and participative members of a democratic society poses a stark danger to civic education across the country. Given this context, what can social studies educators, and advocates of social studies education, do? How might concerned individuals respond to the uptick in book censorship in the United States and its threats to critical inquiry and civics education?

### **Next Steps for Social Studies Educators and Advocates of Social Studies Education**

In recent months, news outlets have reported different ways that people around the country have responded to increased book censorship. For example, earlier this year, *NBC News* reported that, in a school district near Austin, Texas, the Round Rock Black Parents Association led efforts to challenge school book bans in their community. The Association created groups “such as ACT, Anti-racists Coming Together, to speak out in support of diverse literature at a local school board meeting” (Bellamy-Walker, 2022, para. 4). A petition in the school district also was circulated and signed by “thousands of parents, teachers and community members” (Bellamy-Walker, 2022, para. 2). This petition aimed to keep the book *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi in the school curriculum. Community members also contacted Texas state senators to share their concerns over state legislation that would regulate U.S. history content and the teaching of race in classrooms.

Elsewhere, people have resisted book censorship in other ways. *NPR* reported that, in Idaho, a bookstore near Boise raised money to purchase books that were recently banned at public schools and libraries in a suburban community. After purchasing the books, they were given away for free (Dawson, 2022). In New York City, the New York Public Library, in Spring 2022, offered banned books for free to online users. “The initiative is called Books for All and allows any reader aged 13 and older to access commonly banned books through the library’s app until the end of May” (Shivaram, 2022, para. 2).

These and other efforts across the United States reveal some of the ways concerned residents have come together to take a stand. These examples might also serve as guidance for social studies educators, and advocates of social studies education, who wish to respond to current threats to children’s literature, critical inquiry, and social studies education in the U.S. Furthermore, a recent column in *The Washington Post* described how book bans in the U.S. are posing a threat to democracy and suggested that concerned residents could “show up at school

board meetings to express dissent publicly, get in touch directly with school administrators to insist that established procedures be followed before summarily removing books from shelves, and let state and local legislators know of their opposition” (Sullivan, 2022, para. 16). The column offered other ideas such as writing newspaper op-eds, letters to the editor, and utilizing social media, as well. By staying informed and taking an active role in communities, concerned individuals may speak out against book censorship to support freedom of thought and expression in schools and libraries across the country.

### Conclusion

This article argued that increased book censorship in the United States in recent months has presented a threat to critical inquiry pedagogy in social studies education. Children’s literature is a valuable resource many teachers use to teach social studies topics, as well as topics appearing in many other content areas. However, restricting the access of children’s literature books in schools and libraries across the country poses a unique threat to critical inquiry pedagogy in social studies education because it presents teachers and students with fewer resources and opportunities to think critically about the past, examine different points of view, and consider ways that people in history have challenged unjust systems and structures to advance democracy and promote greater inclusivity. For young learners to prepare for active and engaged democratic citizenship in a pluralistic society, students need curricular resources, such as children’s literature books, to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for reasoned and informed citizenship.

There are steps that concerned social studies educators and advocates of social studies education can take to respond to book censorship. As recent news reports have revealed, community residents around the country have formed civic groups, reached out to elected representatives, and contacted local school boards and administrators. These and other actions may help address this pressing public issue and support individuals’ freedom of mind and expression—“the root of all freedom,” as Dewey (1936) put it. These actions also could very well support the work of students in school as they become thoughtful, reflective, and critical learners of history who are prepared to take on the responsibilities of civic life.

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