

THE STATE OF LITERATURE USE IN US SECONDARY ENGLISH CLASSROOMS

A PUBLIC REPORT

RESEARCHERS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

National conversation and policy about literature use and censorship in schools have prominently featured voices of organizations and public figures who often lack professional training in education. This report is designed to amplify teacher voices in the public conversation. The study is the first of its kind to survey a large population of current US secondary (grades 6–12) English language arts (ELA) public school teachers (N=4,096) on their literature use, curricular autonomy, diverse book inclusion, and censorship perspectives. The most recent large-scale national study of literature use in secondary English classrooms was published by Applebee in 1989. And although non-profit advocacy groups like PEN America and the American Library Association have been tracking the increase in book censorship from data gathered via crowd-sourced information such as online forms to report censorship, news sources, and direct legislation, teachers' voices have been largely absent from public discourse (Friedman & Tager, 2021, Goncalves, et al., 2024; Lopez, 2016; PEN, 2024; and Young & Friedman, 2022). The study findings echo existing scholarship and non-profit reports on book censorship but also provide new perspectives from teachers, which allow for a more nuanced analysis of literature instruction and book censorship from those who are working closest with US students.

KEY FINDINGS WITHIN THE REPORT

- **Most Frequently Used Texts:** Much of the literature used most frequently in US secondary English classrooms has not changed in decades and mirrors Applebee's (1989) widely cited study of the most common book-length works. The teacher-reported top 10 books within this study were written by white authors (8 men/2 women) and were published more than 60 years ago. None of these titles feature openly LGBTQIA+ characters. There was a greater difference between the texts on the 1964 and 1989 top 10 lists (only 3 duplicate titles over 25 years) than between the 1989 list and the 2024 list of this study (6 duplicate titles over 35 years).
- **Freedom in Text Selection:** Teacher autonomy in text selection ranged greatly. More than a third of teachers noted using a scripted curriculum. About 1 in 5 teachers said that all of their texts were teacher choice, yet also 1 in 5 teachers said that none of their texts were teacher choice. This means that about 4 in 5 teachers have some level of teacher choice in the texts they use, and 2 in 5 teachers reported they didn't have any readings they were required to include.
- **Most Frequently Censored Titles:** The top 10 most censored titles that teachers shared were similar to those reported by PEN America and the American Library Association. *To Kill a Mockingbird* was one of the most banned and also one of the most frequently taught. As a whole, however, 1,164 teachers noted teaching one of the books that were in the top 10 censored titles compared to 6,129 (about 5 times as many) teachers who used just the top 10 frequently used texts. *Gender Queer* was the most frequently mentioned banned book, yet only one of 4,096 teachers reported using it in the classroom.
- **Most Commonly Censored Topics:** The top reasons for censorship were content attached to sex (including hand-holding), LGBTQIA+ representation, and topics of race and/or racism in a text.
- **Most Common Censors:** Teachers reported that the top three groups most often involved in the chain of censorship were parents, school boards, and state legislators.
- **Diverse Literature Inclusion:** When asked about diverse literature, most teachers agree that it is important, express interest in using it more, and do use it in their classrooms. Yet a majority of teachers reported that less than half of their curricula includes diverse texts.
- **Diverse Literature Topics:** Teachers were most interested in teaching literature about people of color and least interested in teaching literature about the LGBTQIA+ community. They were the most comfortable teaching literature that addresses historical events, such as the Holocaust, and least comfortable, again, teaching literature about the LGBTQIA+ community.

INTRODUCTION

Literature is an essential component of public education, particularly in English language arts classrooms, where it can be used to cultivate critically thinking, empathetic global citizens. With an unprecedented number of diverse texts available, educators have more opportunities than ever to enrich curricula by engaging students with a wide variety of voices and perspectives (CCBC, 2024). Within this study and to our study participants, we defined “diverse literature” using the non-profit, We Need Diverse Books’ definition: “We recognize all diverse experiences, including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA+, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities.” Their definition further defines “disability” broadly.

Proponents of diverse literature and free speech recognize the need for students, especially marginalized youth, to see themselves in stories they read and use literature to learn about the experiences of others. Organizations like We Need Diverse Books have taken this call for using texts that are mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors for students (Bishop, 1990) and worked to diversify the publishing industry and support diverse publications featuring our nation’s multicultural tapestry of histories and stories.

Scholarship has demonstrated that sophisticated reading instruction is much more expansive than the ways it is currently defined by censors. It extends beyond “safe” stories and basic literacy skills like decoding words. In a content analysis of all empirical research (96 articles), which studied diverse young adult literature in classrooms in the last twenty years, Glenn & Ginsberg (in press, 2026) found that researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that diverse literature supports gains in skill development, increases reading motivation, supports students as creators, invites connection and empathy, fosters complex classroom discussions, and engages students in sociopolitical inquiry. It is well-established that diverse young adult literature is particularly good at developing and strengthening readers’ identities, increasing reading engagement, and fostering literacy skill development (Glenn & Ginsberg, 2016; Ivey & Johnston, 2013; Lewis, 2014; Moore, 2023; Schey, 2019). Stories from a century ago are important, but fostering critically thinking, knowledgeable, innovative, and empowered citizens in our current pluralistic nation requires exposure to diverse stories and voices.

Nonprofit First Book (2023b) further confirmed these outcomes in a study that funded an average of 48 diverse classroom library books for 437 early childhood to high school educators working in Title I or Title I-eligible schools to understand the potential value of diverse classroom libraries. The two-phase survey and follow-up interviews found that access to diverse books in classroom libraries increased students’ independent reading and positively impacted reading scores in higher than the anticipated yearly gains. For every bilingual book added to classroom libraries, student reading scores improved an average of 7 points. For every book with LGBTQIA+ representation, the reading scores improved an average of 4.5 points. Furthermore, student reading time increased an average of 4 hours per week after educators added the diverse books to their classroom libraries. Teachers in interviews shared that students who had formerly been “fake reading” began genuinely reading when given the opportunity to choose from the new diverse books in their classroom libraries, especially with mirror books representing their own cultures.

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In addition to academic gains, researchers have evidenced that diverse young adult literature supports students' ability to develop critical thinking skills and engage in creative inquiry (Blackburn & Schey, 2019a, 2019b; Boerman-Cornell, 2020; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2020; Hines & Penn, 2023; Hsieh, 2012; Meixner & Scupp, 2020; Park, 2016). In Moore's (2023) inquiry work with youth in recovery from addictions, students' personal and social engagement in the texts allowed for profound affective connections between their lived experiences and the texts. And Greene's (2016) work with an adolescent girl collective allowed for rich examinations of literacy, digital practices, language, and Black girlhood. These studies, among dozens of others, demonstrate that students can use diverse young adult literature to cultivate critical analyses of the world around them.

Further, scholarship has evidenced that diverse young adult literature fosters students' social and empathetic development, perspective-taking skills, and understandings of self (Choi & Tinker Sachs, 2017; Coffey & Fulton, 2024; Dias, 2023; Freeman & Guarisco, 2015; Rubin, 2021). In Ivey and Johnston's (2013) study, four eighth-grade English teachers at a public middle school shifted their entire pedagogical practice to abandon whole-class classic texts to support student autonomy in self-paced, high-interest reading materials (150–200 texts), which included diverse young adult literature. Assessments and interactions focused on stimulating student inquiry, rather than traditional pedagogical practices. Findings revealed a transformative experience in which students expressed a sense of agency for their own development as readers and as people. They built dialogical relationships with characters which supported stronger dialogical relationships with others and themselves. The findings demonstrated the value and importance of student choice, relevant reading materials, and prioritizing reader engagement.

Though empirical work has established the benefits of integrating diverse literature in classrooms, book censorship has most recently surged to alarming heights (PEN, 2024) and has disproportionately targeted diverse texts (ALA, 2024; Gonçalves, et al., 2024). School and public libraries are facing pressure from parents' rights groups, politicians, and some extremists who are organizing to influence school boards and legislation at the local, state, and, most recently, federal levels. Their messaging strategically invokes exaggerated rhetoric like "pornography" and "anti-American," which causes confusion and misunderstanding among the public. Banning efforts focus on books with diverse representation, such as the experiences of LGBTQIA+; Black, Indigenous, and People of Color; and disabled youth (WNDB, 2022), which leads to a dearth of these texts in US classrooms.

The rise of censorship is being met with a counterwave of research and teacher voices (Borsheim-Black, 2024; Miller, Colantonio-Yurko, & Svrcek, 2024; Smith & Banack, 2024). Schdeva et al. recently conducted a (2023) case study of teacher and school librarian reports of censorship and found that teachers had varied experiences, such as social media attacks and preemptive self-censorship. Focusing on an area with record levels of censorship, Pollock et al (2024) investigated the limitation effect (i.e., collective harm to learners by limiting access) of Florida restrictions across K–12 systems. They surveyed 76 individuals (48 educators and 28 community members) and conducted 13 semi-structured interviews with educators, parents, and students residing in Florida. The top three topics that participants shared were limited or prohibited due to state regulations were sexual orientation, gender identity, and race and racism. Very few teachers mentioned district leaders as initiators of censorship; rather, districts complied swiftly, often

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in excess, to state mandates out of fear. Teachers reported that books were removed from shelves by district administrators, school administrators, and teachers to be vetted for compliance with sometimes overlapping state policies for permanent removal. Educators also preemptively self-censored as a way to avoid potential punishment—even going as far as eliminating entire classroom libraries. Other teachers no longer used books connected with specific populations or topics, such as books with LGBTQIA+ characters, and limited student access to independent reading material.

On a national level within early childhood and elementary education, Koss and Paciga (2023) surveyed 503 Pre-K to 8th-grade teachers and found that teachers' geographic location influenced their concerns about censorship. Teachers in the Northeast and West were most concerned with national censorship issues, whereas teachers in the Southeast and Southwest were focused on individual, local, and state issues. On a larger scale, First Book surveyed 1,501 participants from across its network of teachers who work in classrooms and programs that serve at least 70% children who come from low-income families (2023a). They found that 31% of educators said they experienced book bans, challenges, or restrictions in their school and/or district. Though a majority of educators noted not having experienced censorship, 46% reported that the conversation around banned books already does or might influence the books they use in their classrooms. Structural topic modeling of open-ended answers showed that 77% of responses demonstrated that teachers engaged in self-censorship by buying fewer books, controlling distribution, and selecting texts more carefully. Yet in response to censorship, 48% of responses showed teachers actively purchased banned books for classroom use and 44% began teaching about the freedom to read.

Understanding the benefit of integrating diverse literature into classrooms and the current backlash teachers are facing, this study was designed to research secondary English language arts teachers' experiences and opinions about diverse literature and censorship to act as a springboard for further research and discussion into how educators, the publishing industry, and larger agents, such as non-profit organizations, can better support teachers in using diverse books in schools.

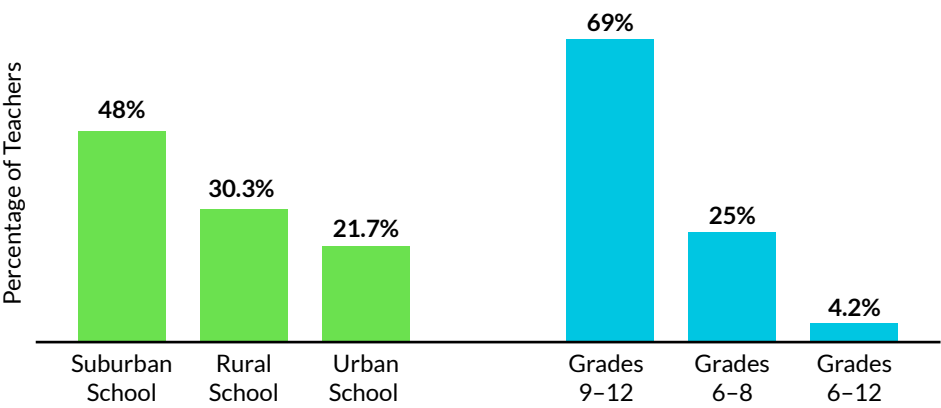
STUDY METHODOLOGY

This study used the National Center for Education Statistics’ (NCES) database to contact all US secondary English language arts teachers whose emails were publicly available on their school websites. These teachers (N=107,605) were emailed a 25-minute survey between January 2023 and June 2024. We received 6,173 responses. After removing incomplete responses and those from individuals who did not consent to the study, we were left with 4,096 complete survey responses from teachers across all 50 states. The survey combined 32 original open-ended, multiple-selection, and Likert-scale questions about teacher perspectives and experiences with literature instruction, diverse literature, and censorship. We also collected teachers’ demographic information along with their schools’ demographic details (Tables 1–2). To protect teachers and schools, no identifiable data, such as school names, were collected. Survey links were individualized to avoid repeat responses.

As researchers, we believe that survey research can be an entry point for beginning to study a phenomenon. We wanted to develop a more current, overarching understanding of the state of literature instruction and censorship to support future research. As former secondary English teachers, we know that teachers’ voices are not typically invited in media portrayals and legislative decisions. Therefore, it was important to us that we attempt to invite every US secondary English teacher to participate in the survey—rather than use sampling techniques—to allow their voices to be heard and to maximize participant numbers. Not all schools share teacher emails, and district servers sometimes block external email addresses, but we made a conscious effort to reach every secondary English teacher in the United States.

Quantitative data were analyzed using simple logistic and simple linear regression. The school-level variables selected for this report were economic status and student racial demographics. In addition, due to the increasingly polarizing cultural climate, we included geographic regions and political orientation that both proved to be significant to the study. We acknowledge that there are likely interactions between independent variables, but did not conduct multilevel modeling, as it was outside of the scope of this report. Not all survey questions were required for participants. The missing responses were minimal from .15–1.8% of total completed responses. Open-ended responses were analyzed using general inductive coding (Thomas, 2006) to report frequencies. Within other publications (currently in peer review and in press), we report more extensive qualitative findings in greater depth beyond frequencies.

Fig. 1 | Demographics of Teachers Surveyed for This Report



In the US teacher workforce, full-time teachers are approximately 68% white women, 8% white men, and 23% women and men of color (EEOC, 2022). Participants in this study closely represented US teacher demographics: 66% white women, 17% white men, 13% women and men of color, and 4% selecting other genders (e.g., nonbinary or genderqueer) as options. A majority of teachers worked in suburban schools (48%), followed by rural (30.3%) and urban (21.7%). Approximately 69% of participants taught grades 9–12, 25% grades 6–8, and 4.2% grades 6–12. (See appendix for more detailed demographic information.)

We hope the findings within this report serve as an initial step in identifying patterns and trends across a large number of teachers. As a sign of teachers' eagerness to be heard, it is noteworthy that more than 2,000 teachers who participated in the study expressed a willingness to engage in further follow-up research. It is our hope that this report will serve as an invitation to fellow researchers to conduct robust qualitative research to better understand teacher experiences in greater depth.

1 | LITERATURE USE IN SECONDARY ELA CLASSROOMS

Although more diverse young adult literature is being published than ever before (CCBC, 2024), previous studies have found that US secondary ELA curricula have continued to promote the same classic texts for decades. In 1963, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) surveyed US secondary schools to compile a list of major works of literature taught in English classes grades 7–12 (Anderson, 1964). Among the 222 public schools, the following list represents the top texts used in a minimum of 30% of the schools. Twenty-five years later, Applebee’s (1989) oft-cited study of book-length works used in 322 high school courses also included classic texts, with three texts, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *The Scarlet Letter*, remaining on the top 10 list of classics. The authors on Anderson’s list from 1964 were all white, all men, with the exception of one woman, Mary Ann Evans, who used the pen name George Eliot to disguise her gender. Applebee’s list of books were also written by white authors, with one white woman, Harper Lee.

Thirty-four years later, we sought to update this list and compile a more recent understanding of the top 10 most frequently used texts in public schools across the nation. In an open-ended response, we asked all of the teacher participants to list the top 10 most frequently used texts in their classrooms. We framed the question in such a way to avoid assumptions of what other teachers were using and allow the participants to self-report their own text use. We defined the term “text” to include books along with shorter works, such as poems and short stories.

Teachers mentioned 5,108 unique titles. The texts encompassed a range of literature including book-length works, anthologies, plays, short stories, and poems, but the top 10 most frequently named texts nearly replicated Applebee’s (1989) study. Six of the texts were the same as in Applebee’s (1989) study and 60 years later, *Macbeth* continued to remain on the top 10 list as in Anderson’s findings. The texts teachers listed most often were predominantly older classic texts published more than 60 years ago. All are authored by white authors, eight men and two women (Harper Lee and Mary Shelley), and no LGBTQIA+ texts appear on the list.

Fig. 2 | Top 10 Texts

Frequency	Top 10 Texts Used in Class
923	<i>Romeo And Juliet</i> ²
879	<i>The Great Gatsby</i> ²
706	<i>The Crucible</i>
650	<i>Macbeth</i> ^{1,2}
558	<i>Of Mice And Men</i> ²
546	<i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i> ²
529	<i>Night</i>
503	<i>Hamlet</i> ²
438	<i>Fahrenheit 451</i>
397	<i>Frankenstein</i>

¹ appeared on Anderson’s (1964) top 10 list

² appeared on Applebee’s (1989) top 10 list

ANDERSON (1964)

1. *Macbeth*
2. *Julius Caesar*
3. *Silas Marner*
4. *Our Town*
5. *Great Expectations*
6. *Hamlet*
7. *The Red Badge of Courage*
8. *A Tale of Two Cities*
9. *The Scarlet Letter*

APPLEBEE (1989)

1. *Romeo and Juliet*
2. *Macbeth**
3. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*
4. *Julius Caesar**
5. *To Kill a Mockingbird*
6. *The Scarlet Letter**
7. *Of Mice and Men*
8. *Hamlet*
9. *The Great Gatsby*
10. *Lord of the Flies*

* Appeared on Anderson’s top 10 list from 1964

Various factors could contribute to the enduring prominence of classic texts in secondary ELA classrooms. Teachers are utilizing diverse, contemporary literature (as depicted in Section 3); however, there are many recent contemporary and diverse text choices available for teachers and because of the sheer range of titles and options, those titles appear on the list less frequently. However, the frequency numbers listed above demonstrate that of the 4,096 respondents, almost one in four teachers is using *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Great Gatsby* in their classrooms. Classic texts remain prominently in use in US classrooms, and there is a greater difference in the texts on the top 10 list from 1964 to 1989 (25 years) compared to the difference between 1989 and 2024 (35 years).

*I like to balance contemporary pieces with classical pieces. I also like to balance culturally diverse authors with classical authors, but I am teaching American literature, so there are certain pieces in the canon that cannot be left out. I would like to have time for more diverse literature, but I would not incorporate that at the expense of a work like *The Great Gatsby*.*

— 11th Grade Teacher,
Rural Tennessee

Curricular Restrictions and Flexibility

At a time when book censorship and scripted curriculum are on the rise, we sought to understand the level of autonomy that teachers have in determining which texts they use in their classrooms. We asked teachers to share what percentages of their curricula were required readings, approved lists, and teacher choice through a constant sum item totalling 100%. Overall, teachers shared that they had more autonomy than restrictions in text selection. Many did not have to subscribe to required readings or approved lists, or if they did, these requirements did not make up the majority of their curricula.

Many of my colleagues are committed to keeping the “classics,” even though they only portray POC in negative or degrading ways. And yet when we do introduce more diverse texts, we do occasionally get push back from parents/ community.

— 11th and 12th Grade Teacher,
Rural New York

SCRIPTED CURRICULUM

We asked teachers if they were required to use a scripted curriculum (yes/no), which we defined as “purchased program(s) with pre-packaged materials such as teacher scripts, texts, activities, and or/assessments.” Findings revealed that 35% of teachers said that they used a scripted curriculum. When analyzed against demographics, we found that the teacher-reported percentages of white students in their schools and school economic status were significant factors of whether teachers used scripted curricula. For every 10% increase in the percentage of white students in the schools, there was a 10.8% decrease in the likelihood of a teacher using a scripted curriculum. The more white students a teacher taught, the less likely their school used a scripted curriculum (Table 3).

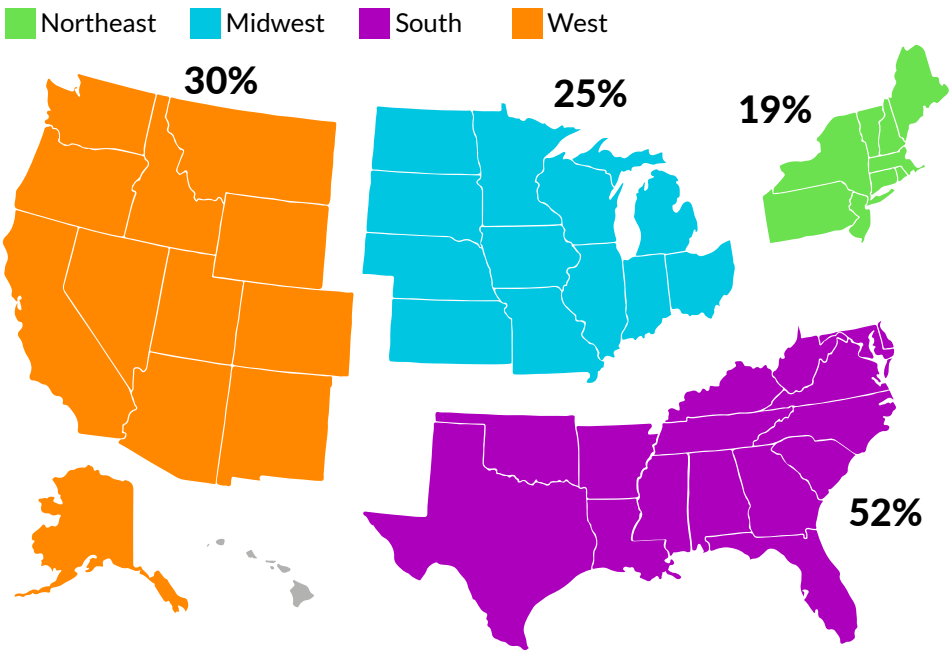
School economic status was also correlated with whether a teacher used a scripted curriculum. The wealthier a school was, the less likely they used a scripted curriculum (Table 4). Those in upper-class schools were 75% less likely to use a scripted curriculum in comparison to teachers in lower-class schools. This shows that teachers in more affluent schools likely have fewer restrictions and more flexibility in the curriculum they use in their classrooms. Schools with a greater proportion of white students and those with higher socioeconomic statuses were less likely to restrict teachers with scripted curricula.

Geographic region was a significant factor in whether a teacher had a scripted curriculum (Table 5). Teachers were least likely to use a scripted curriculum in the Northeast with a 16% probability (95% CI [13.1%–19.4%]). Compared to the Northeast, the odds for teachers in the Midwest were 32.6% more likely (1.326 higher), the South 170.3% more likely (2.7 times higher), and the West 57.6% more likely (1.576 higher) to have a scripted curriculum.

Our students see very little diverse literature in their required texts or in texts that are built into our bottled curriculum. However, by weaving in pieces of literature (poems, novels, stories, etc.) that reinforce the same themes as classic novels but with a more modern background, students are more likely to connect with the lessons in both the modern text and make connections to the classic text that they may not have without a more diverse text. I like to read the classic text and supplement with a parallel or similar modern text for students to more easily make personal connections.

— 9th–12th Grade Teacher,
Urban Nebraska

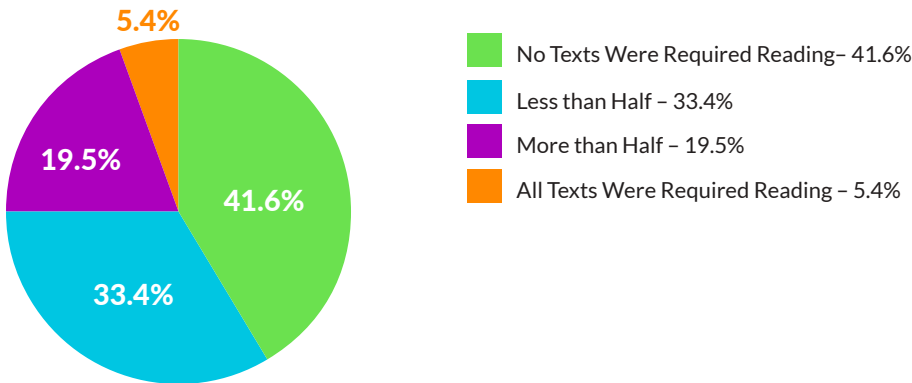
Fig. 3 | Teachers with Scripted Curriculum by Geographic Region



REQUIRED READING

Regarding mandatory curriculum, 41.6% of teachers said none of their texts were required reading, 33.4% of teachers said less than half of their curriculum was required reading, 19.5% of teachers said more than half were required reading, and only 5.4% of teachers said that all of their texts were required reading.

Fig. 4 | Percentage of Teachers with Required Reading



These findings suggest that teachers have flexibility in text selection. Four in 10 teachers have absolutely no required texts within their curricula, which offers teachers flexibility and opportunity to explore texts and topics that meet each class's academic needs and interests whether through approved lists or teacher choice. Although a third of the country's secondary English teachers report that their schools are using scripted curricula, only one in 20 is facing curricula so rigid that they have absolutely no choice within the texts that they use in their classrooms. Thus the curriculum alone does not serve as an impenetrable barrier for infusing diverse texts within curricula.

I feel very lucky to teach in a building where I am given free reign over my curriculum and classroom texts. I am able to choose the texts that I think are most important for my students, I am able to adapt to the kids that are in front of me (rather than using a scripted curriculum), and I am able to use diverse texts to teach important skills. In my teacher education program, we had a very strong attitude of "If I need to teach something like metaphor, I can do that with ANY text. Why would I not make the text diverse or representative of my students?" I have carried that into my classroom, and it is one of my most important teaching philosophies.

— 8th Grade Teacher, Suburban Washington

The school wide curriculum in a box has killed teacher autonomy.

— 12th Grade Teacher, Rural Rhode Island

We have moved away from prescribed texts to a choice novel system. These novels change with the class and the year.

— 12th Grade Teacher, Suburban Colorado

Honestly, I would like more ability to control my curriculum. I think some classical literature has value, but I also notice that it's not connecting with students. I think it's more important to promote an interest in reading than trying to stuff old books down the throats of students who don't care.

— 12th Grade Teacher, Rural Texas

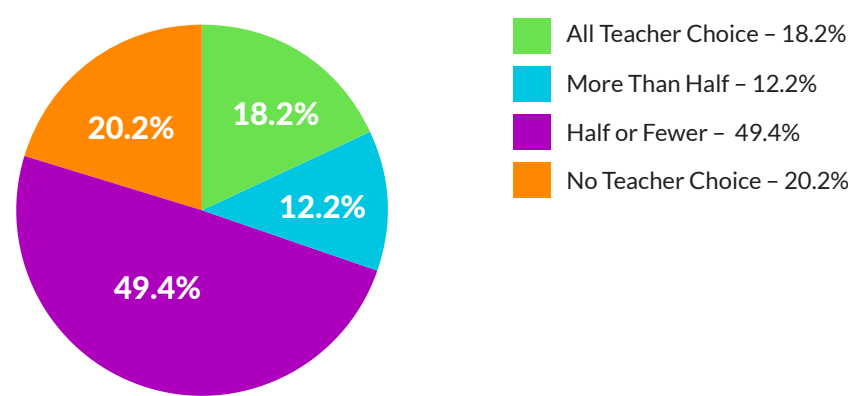
APPROVED LISTS

Most teachers did not have to select texts from approved lists. Unlike required readings, approved lists provide some flexibility for teachers to select texts rather than limiting them to one required option. However, they can be limiting for teachers whose choices are exclusively restricted to these approved lists. One in three teachers (34.9%) said none of the texts they chose were from approved lists and about half of the teachers (46.9%) said up to half of their texts were from approved lists. One in 10 teachers (11.9%) said more than half of the texts were from approved lists. Only one in 20 (5.9%) teachers said all of their texts came from approved lists. Similar to the required reading results, these numbers reveal that 17.8% of teachers are not restricted to approved lists for half to all of the texts they choose, although based on the finding in the previous section about required texts, we know that a small portion of these teachers are not given an approved list and are instead limited to one single required text for more than half of their text choices. Though controlling half or more of the texts used in a class may seem low, in a traditional classroom that uses whole-class novels, this can amount to half of the books teachers use in class, or months of instruction. We found this freedom from approved lists to be encouraging in that teachers may have scripted curricula, but, currently, they are able to engage in some autonomous decisions to respond to the interests and needs of their students. In the following sections, we explore how censorship may affect these decisions for text selection.

TEACHER CHOICE

The amount of choice that teachers had ranged widely.

Fig. 5 | Percentage of Books Chosen by Teacher



To put this into perspective, about one in five teachers had no teacher autonomy in their text selection, but about one in five teachers had complete autonomy in their text selection. About half of teachers were able to choose between none and half of their texts, and about one in 10 teachers was able to choose most but not all of their texts. With the increase in scripted curriculum and district mandates for teachers, it is promising that the vast majority of teachers do have some choice in text selection and the ability to adapt curricula through text selection to meet their students' needs and interests.

The school board has a very strict control because of their conservative views. The district is in obedience. Teachers cannot teach outside of the approved list. Consequence for doing so is to be fired.

— 9th and 10th Grade Teacher,
Rural Arizona

My county has (at least in the past) taken the position that there are no required specific texts and that teachers have the freedom to choose appropriate texts for their classes.

— 9th and 11th Grade Teacher,
Rural North Carolina

My district has already fired a teacher for reading a book discussing gender with elementary students. We have been told specifically that we are responsible for the content of any book in our classroom, regardless of whether it is assigned or not, but have been given no lists of approved books. Most of us emptied our bookshelves to avoid disciplinary action.

— 9th and 12th Grade Teacher,
Rural Georgia

We have quite a bit of freedom to choose our texts—with the understanding that our principal will support us, but that we are possibly opening ourselves up to public comment.

— 10th and 11th Grade Teacher,
Rural Colorado

2 | CENSORSHIP

Book challenges and censorship have exponentially increased in the past 10 years, a spillover from a hostile cultural climate that is encouraging politicians, parents, and political organizations to attack books and schools (PEN, 2024). While studies have shown that the majority of book challenges and bannings are initiated from a small subset of far-right political organizations (Blum & Harris, 2023), the effects are pervasive and consequential as states have begun passing censorship legislation (EO, 2025). We asked teachers if their school, district, or library has censored specific titles or topics (Yes/No). Participants who selected that there was censorship (1,793 of 4,096 teachers, or 43.8%) were then asked “Which title(s) or topic(s)? Who censored the title(s) or topic(s)? What was the reason provided?” Data provided in this section reflect their responses to these three questions, in order.

Top 10 Censored Titles Named by Teachers

Findings revealed that censorship is impacting a large number of different texts in schools. Teachers mentioned a total of 1,359 unique titles that their schools, districts, or libraries have censored. The top 10 books that they shared in an open-ended response ranged greatly in their years of publication and marketed audience (adult and young adult literature). They included diverse and not diverse texts, as well.

In the second column, to offer further insight into the top censored books, we share how many of the 4,096 teachers mentioned that each book was one of the top 10 books that they use in their own classrooms.

Fig. 6 | Top 10 Censored Books

Top 10 Censored Books Listed by Teachers	# Teachers Who Listed This Book in The Top 10 Books They Use (n=4,096)
<i>The Bluest Eye</i>	40
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	546
<i>The Hate U Give</i>	118
<i>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</i>	121
<i>Gender Queer</i>	1
<i>The Handmaid's Tale</i>	80
<i>Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>	77
<i>The Perks of Being a Wallflower</i>	26
<i>The Kite Runner</i>	151
<i>Looking for Alaska</i>	4

Many of the top 10 books teachers noted as specifically censored in their schools, districts, or libraries align with national statistics on censorship. Three of the books mentioned by teachers (*Gender Queer*, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and *The Bluest Eye*) align with the American Library Association's top 10 most challenged books of 2023 (ALA, 2023). Four of the books in the list matched PEN America's top 11 most

Our county is tightening up on the literature we can and cannot teach. I'm too nervous right now to teach anything other than the classics.

— 9th, 10th, and 12th Grade Teacher,
Urban Virginia

We do not experience censorship in my district, but the required texts are primarily Anglo classics.

— 11th and 12th Grade Teacher,
Suburban Texas

banned books of the 2022–2023 school year (Tolin, 2023): *The Bluest Eye*, *Looking for Alaska*, *Gender Queer*, and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. The remaining listed books mentioned by ALA and PEN were also noted frequently by teachers, even though they are not ranked in the top 10. A text that has not been widely mentioned as censored across outlets but that teachers mentioned often is *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which is considered a “classic” and frequently taught in schools.

To Kill a Mockingbird was the only book that appeared on both the top 10 censored and top 10 used books reported by teachers. It was the second most censored book but also the sixth most taught in schools. Eight of the remaining nine books on the top 10 most frequently taught list also appeared in the censored booklist. The only title that was not mentioned as being censored by teachers was *Hamlet*. Thus, while national reports have indicated that book censorship is targeting stories that address racism, gender identity, sexuality, and sexual violence, the findings show that virtually all books are indiscriminately being targeted, including commonly taught classics.

Another factor to consider is how rarely the top 10 censored books are actually taught in schools. The most frequently mentioned censored book, *The Bluest Eye*, was only noted as being among the top 10 books used by 40 out of 4,096 teachers; that is one in 102 teachers. The second most popular censored book used after *To Kill a Mockingbird* was *The Kite Runner*, which was used by 151 out of 4,096 teachers. Therefore, though censors have campaigned around banning specific books, in reality, they are not frequently being taught across the US, particularly in comparison to the older, all-white, almost all male-authored texts used in classrooms. For example, 118 teachers said they used the third most censored book, *The Hate U Give*, compared to 923 teachers who use *Romeo and Juliet*. To examine this on a broader scale, a total of 1,164 teachers reported using books in the top 10 censored list compared to the 6,129 teachers (about five times as many) who used the top 10 titles on the frequently used texts list, which is comprised of texts by all white authors, eight men and two women. The exponential increase of book banning and censorship in recent years, then, feels exceptionally pronounced as the core texts used in ELA classrooms have not changed in decades.

We have elected not to release the full list of 1,374 unique titles because it gives fodder to censors, but we further analyzed the 93 texts that teachers mentioned most often. (Rank 94 was a 32-way tie.) About half (46) were published within the last 15 years, which suggests that recently published books are disproportionately targeted by censors. Yet more than 20% (19) were published over 50 years ago, which suggests that older, more established texts are not immune from censors’ efforts and are also frequently censored in classrooms. More than half (51) are diverse texts (see definition on page 3), which aligns with other censored book lists, which report that diverse texts are disproportionately attacked by censors. About half (47) of the censored texts were marketed for young adults and about half (46) were marketed for adults.

The Censors

Teachers were asked an open-ended question on who censored the specific titles that they listed (see sidebar on right). The top four most mentioned groups did not represent individuals working in the school and included parent(s), the school board, state laws, and the school district.

The curriculum has been whitewashed. We must teach the “classical” canon or risk losing our jobs and possible arrest. I have been effectively muzzled.

— 10th and 12th Grade Teacher,
Suburban Florida

Censorship keeps the world from learning about real-world issues and topics... People are not censoring for any other reason, but to keep students from reading topics that make their parents uncomfortable. These topics are what life entails and are necessary beyond the classroom.

— 9th Grade Teacher,
Rural Nevada



THE CENSORS

Parent(s)
School Board
State
School District
Library or Librarian
School Administration
Community Member(s)
Teacher (Self or Colleague)

In many instances, participants mentioned multiple individuals or groups as involved in the chain of censorship. For instance, although a school board or school administrator may have ultimately banned a book, it was sometimes initiated by a parent request. For this section, we chose to count frequencies for all of the people the participants mentioned, even if they mentioned multiple individuals' involvement in the censorship of one title. In other cases, some of the groups unwillingly removed a text. For instance, even though a librarian was described as ultimately removing a book from the library, this censorship was sometimes due to a parent or administrator demand. Because participants mentioned more than one person in the chain of the censorship decision-making, we don't include frequency numbers, but instead share a ranking based on the number of times each of these groups were mentioned as being a part of the chain of who censored a title.

Parents were mentioned more than twice the number of times of each group, with the exception of the school board. This suggests that parents are an influential part of the censorship process, and one parent's desire to censor a book can affect all of the students within a school building or district.

The high frequency at which the school board and state are mentioned suggests that school boards and state representatives, who are elected by the community and may have no professional experience in the field of education, are, along with parents, the groups most often directing the decisions of what texts are taught in schools.

Reasons Provided for Specific Book Censorship

We asked teachers to share the reasons that were provided for censorship of specific titles in their schools, districts, or libraries through an open-ended response. In some cases, teachers shared that they were not allowed to teach any books that included a specific topic. The chart below indicates the topics most often censored and the number of teachers who mentioned each topic.

Fig. 7 | Topics Most Often Censored

Topics Most Often Censored	Number of Teachers who Mentioned Topic
LGBTQIA+ Representation	405
Sexual Content (from holding hands to actual sex)	405
Race and/or Racism	199
Unsure/No Reason Was Given	178
Age Appropriateness	175
Language (profanity and racial/religious slurs)	126
Inappropriate	75
Politics and/or Current Events	72
Violence	66
Too Graphic/Explicit/Pornographic	63
Too Controversial	62
Religion	58
Sexual Assault	51
Images/Graphic Novel	41

*A teacher was told not to lead an after school book club with the book *With the Fire on High* by Elizabeth Acevedo because a parent found its subject matter (teen pregnancy) to be inappropriate.*

— 8th Grade Teacher,
Urban Nebraska

My administration censors books in hopes to limit parental and community pushback. It is very scary the “fear” level that weak “leaders” possess.

— 11th Grade Teacher,
Rural Missouri

Our AP Language and Composition textbook was, without a school board hearing, “disappeared” because a single parent complained that the book had a liberal agenda. No actual reasoning was provided as the books were never officially pulled; they just disappeared from classrooms and were retrieved from students.

— 10th–12th Grade Teacher,
Rural Arkansas

Overall, the reasons teachers provided included a range of belief systems, as if no book could be immune from censorship. These topics also often overlap. For instance, although we categorized racial and religious slurs in the language category, they could also be recategorized under race and religion. The politics category refers to participants who named politics as an explicit factor in the censorship or referenced political events (e.g., “speeches by presidents” —Rural California). Further, we saw complexity in the often very different reasons provided for censorship of the same book. For instance, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was described as censored in rural Wisconsin, among other states, because “Parents complained that it was demeaning towards Black people and promoted a white savior complex.” This aligns with scholarship that critiques the authorship and white savior perspective within the text. Alternatively, in rural Louisiana, *To Kill a Mockingbird* was censored “because white people’s feelings matter more than Black lives...apparently.” In this instance, among others, the book was censored simply because it features racism.

Religious reasons for censoring texts impacted all religions and opposing perspectives of these religions. Teachers wrote about books being censored because they were anti- or pro-Christianity. For instance, in rural Louisiana, a teacher wrote, “Our school library contains NO Christian fiction,” and in urban Alabama: “Students will not find books involving religions other than Christianity in our libraries.” Although some teachers were concerned with the lack of Christian texts in their schools, the vast majority of censorship related to Christianity was connected to censorship used to “align with Christian values” (e.g., rural Colorado). Similarly, texts that simply included Jewish characters or narrators (e.g., Anne Frank or Elie Wiesel) were censored while other texts were censored because they were deemed to be antisemitic. Books were removed because they “were sympathetic to Muslims” in rural Texas or because they “maligned Islam” in rural California.

The most common overlap in topics was with books that contained sexual content and LGBTQIA+ characters. In many cases, we were unclear if teachers were describing that a book was censored because it had sexual content or because it simply included LGBTQIA+ representation (without any reference to sex). A long-standing social script which equivocates LGBTQIA+ identities with sex likely influences this conflation. This messaging has been leveraged to attack both LGBTQIA+ educators and LGBTQIA+ material.

In our scholarly article (Ginsberg & Chae, 2025), we share our qualitative coding process and deeply explore all of the themes in this section to describe the intricacies in the reasons provided for censorship. This includes a deeper analysis of the conflation of “sexual content” with hand-holding and LGBTQIA+ identities.

Our school board and parents are the reason books are challenged. They also are trying to put specific language in the curriculum about not teaching current events, certain historical events, or sharing our opinions about anything political, religious, or views on history. We’re not even allowed to call our historical fiction unit “historical fiction.” It has to be “exploring other cultures.” Anything regarding gender/sexuality can’t be explicitly taught either.

— 7th Grade Teacher,
Rural Missouri

Holocaust novels [are censored], specifically The Diary of Anne Frank, because “students should be able to choose their perspective on the Holocaust and write about Hitler’s positive influence if they want.”

— 8th–12th Grade Teacher,
Urban New Hampshire

Too many to list. For example, the school district pulled Shakespeare plays from all high school grade levels this year. They were afraid the public might use new state laws regarding sex in schools.

— 9th and 12th Grade Teacher,
Rural Florida

SECTION 3: DIVERSE LITERATURE

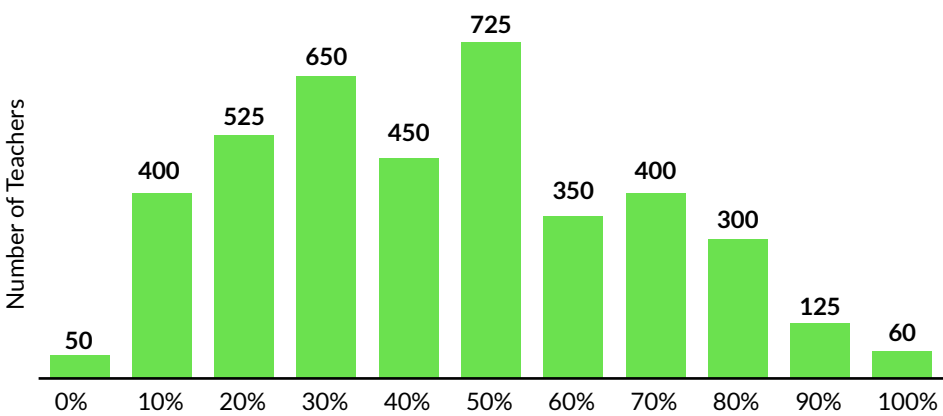
Diverse Literature Inclusion

Most teachers (91%) said they wanted to use more diverse literature (Yes/No), and a majority of teachers (93%) reported using diverse literature in their classrooms (Yes/No). Teachers in suburban and urban areas were the most likely to use diverse literature. Rural teachers were 47% less likely to use diverse literature compared to suburban teachers and 43% less likely compared to urban teachers (Tables 6–7). There was a 9.4% decrease in the usage of diverse literature for every 10% increase in the percentage of white students in a school (Table 8). Therefore, the more white students in a school, the less likely they used diverse literature in their classrooms.

Though a majority of teachers reported using diverse literature in their classrooms, 69.7% of teachers reported that diverse literature made up 50% or less of their course curriculum (response selection was increments of 10%). This demonstrates that teachers want to use diverse literature and are doing so, but other factors are limiting how much diverse literature they use. This might, for instance, be due to required readings and approved reading lists that do not include diverse texts. It might be due to political tensions that are limiting teachers' willingness to engage in literature they may deem risky, such as texts that feature LGBTQIA+ characters. This is a major finding in the study that is discussed in the teacher interest and comfort section below.

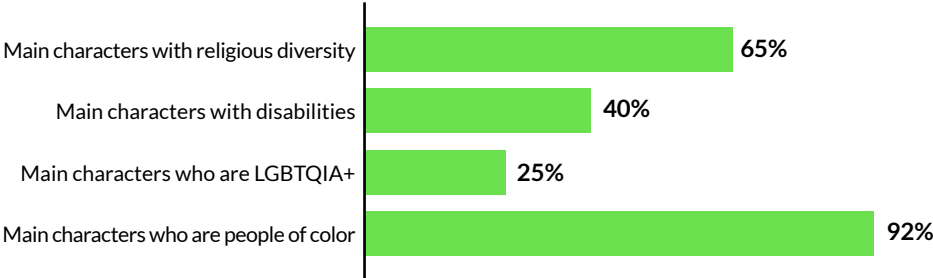
Teachers want to use diverse literature, and are doing so, but other factors limit how much diverse literature they use.

Fig. 8 | Percentage of Diverse Literature in Overall Curriculum



Among the types of diverse representation in literature used among teachers (multiple selection option), racial diversity (92.3%) was most often used, followed by religious diversity (65.4%). Only 24.9% of teachers said they use texts that feature LGBTQIA+ characters, and 40% of teachers noted that they use texts that include characters with disabilities.

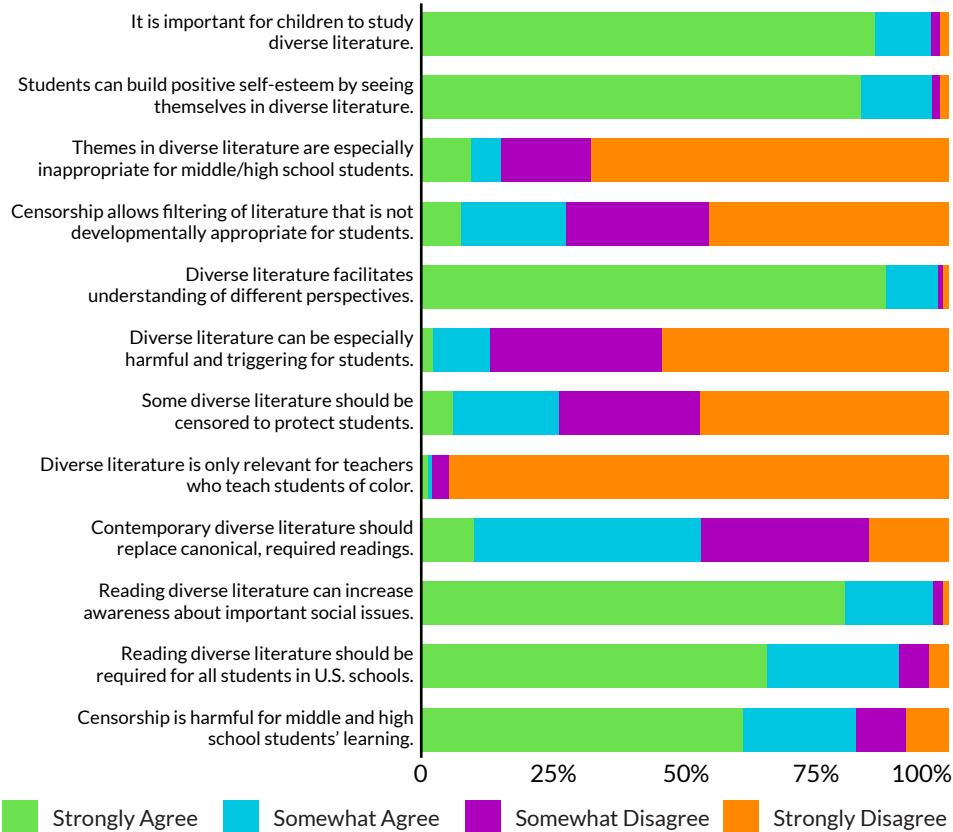
Fig. 9 | Percentage of Diverse Literature Representation Among Categories



Teacher Opinions on Diverse Literature and Censorship

Teachers were asked a range of questions to better understand their perspectives of diverse literature and censorship through a 4-point Likert scale. More than 95% of teachers strongly or somewhat agreed that it is important for children to study diverse literature, that students can build positive self-esteem by seeing themselves in diverse literature, and that reading diverse literature facilitates understanding of diverse perspectives and can increase awareness about important social issues. Findings revealed that 90% somewhat or strongly agreed that diverse literature should be required for all students in US schools. Almost all (98.2%) of the teachers disagreed that diverse literature is only relevant for teachers who teach students of color, implying that diverse literature is for all students, including white students. These numbers seem to suggest that teachers overwhelmingly support diverse literature use in schools, though their perspectives on book censorship were not as in aligned.

Fig. 10 | Teacher Opinions on Diverse Literature and Censorship



An examination of the findings within the chart reveal that the vast majority of teachers do not find diverse literature to be inappropriate, harmful, or triggering for students. Further, four in five teachers feel censorship is harmful to student learning and three in four teachers don't think some diverse literature should be censored to protect students. This does reveal, however, that a quarter of teachers do support some level of censorship of diverse literature. We offered a bold statement of whether contemporary diverse literature should replace classic, required readings, knowing that teachers would likely be opposed to outright replacement of classics, and slightly more than half somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement, while slightly less than half somewhat or strongly disagreed. The vast majority of teachers believed diverse literature should be required for all students in US schools, and about half of teachers felt that diverse, contemporary texts should replace canonical, required readings. Therefore, teachers understand diverse literature has value, but there is a reluctance to replace classic texts in order to infuse diverse, contemporary literature into classrooms. This was reflected in open-ended responses in the data, in which teachers overwhelmingly described how they infused diverse texts in *supplemental* ways and mentioned the ways they added shorter diverse texts to existing units or integrated independent reading to help students access diverse texts that they recognized held value.

Teacher Interest and Comfort in Diverse Literature and Related Topics

Teachers were asked to rate their interest (Cronbach's $\alpha=.913$.) and comfort in diverse literature (Cronbach's $\alpha=.89$.) and related topics on a Likert scale. A mean score was calculated for each category and topic, from 1 (strongly not interested) to 4 (very interested), with a total possible range of 9–36 across the nine topics. Teachers were most interested in teaching literature about people of color and least interested in teaching literature about the LGBTQIA+ community. They were the most comfortable teaching literature that addresses historical events, such as the Holocaust, and least comfortable, again, teaching literature about the LGBTQIA+ community. The numbers, which follow, further detail these interest and comfort levels.

TEACHER INTEREST IN DIVERSE LITERATURE AND RELATED TOPICS

A majority of teachers were very interested (over 90% of participants with an average mean above 3.49) in using literature among all of the categories of books. They were most interested in literature about people of color ($M=3.68$) and literature that addresses racism ($M=3.61$), which is notable, given that the four most mentioned censored texts (Section 2) include the topic of racism. Their interest may be due to an understanding that texts featuring the topic of racism have historically been included in curricula. This logic is also affirmed by the high level of interest that teachers expressed toward literature addressing historical events. It may be easier to ground these texts in traditions of school curricula.

The only notable exception in interest level, as depicted in the figure, was literature about the LGBTQIA+ community ($M=3.2$). One in five teachers was not or strongly not interested in using literature about the LGBTQIA+ community. This lack of interest was expressed in open-ended responses. In suburban Colorado, a

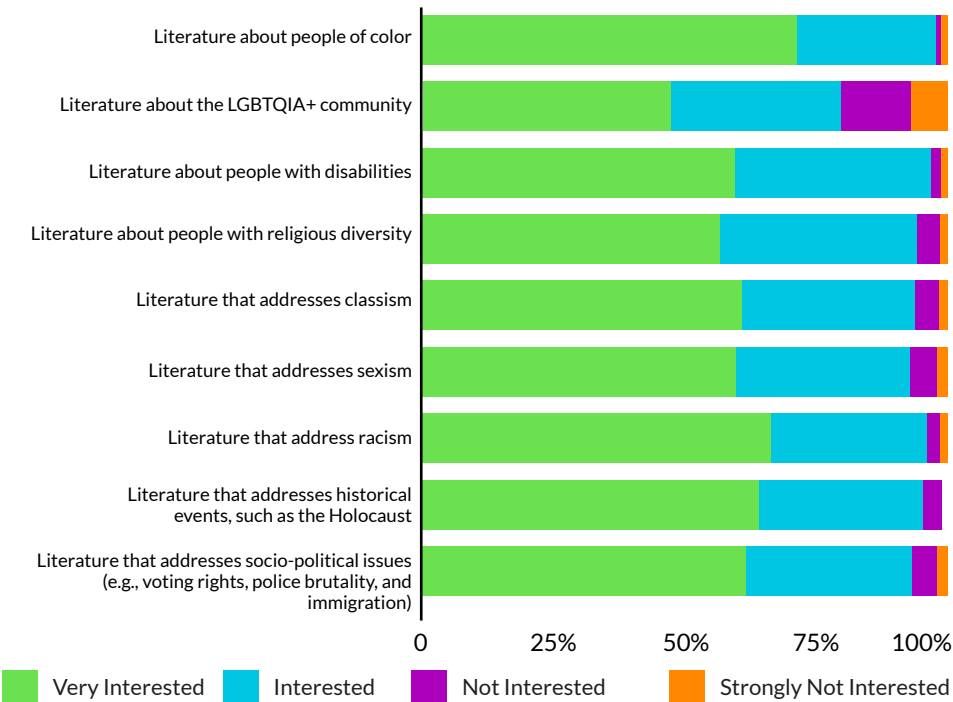
I've been teaching middle and high school for several years, and I've seen a lot of heartache through those years in students who feel unseen or lost. Representation matters. Not feeling alone in the world matters. If we only read literature about the same kinds of people written by the same kinds of people (white men), it furthers the notion that every other kind of person is of less importance. I've worked in districts and schools where children who felt lost and alone chose to take their own lives. Nothing is more painful than a child feeling like there's nothing out there in the world for them, and that they do not belong in this world. Many people out there don't see that side of it. They only see the "evil" that diverse literature is spreading. I think hurting so badly that you want to die is pretty evil...I hate to admit it, but I am nervous about teaching any LGBTQIA+ literature in my classroom. I'll gladly include some in my classroom library, but I am terrified of explicitly teaching a text with a character who identifies as LGBTQIA+. I teach plenty of texts about people of varying races, religion, etc. That one scares me. I'm a fierce ally, but I'm afraid of the community I live in coming completely undone if I taught a text with LGBTQIA+ characters or themes.

— 10th Grade Teacher,
Suburban North Carolina

teacher wrote “I’m not interested in diversifying into the LGBTQIA+ realm due to our population and parent pushback in these areas.” And in rural Texas, a teacher stated, “I am not interested in using the type of diverse literature you are describing in my classroom because the political agenda of the LGBTQ community is harmful and dangerous for children and teenagers.” In rural Wisconsin: “I am a teacher in a small, rural, conservative school district. I am not interested in being a lightning rod for controversy when there is plenty of literature to choose from to teach our students the state standards/requirements.”

This is particularly noteworthy because some of the most censored texts are authored by people of color and/or include the topic of racism—and these categories matched the highest level of interest among the teachers. Although we know that censorship concerns and recent legislation likely play some sort of a role in this lack of interest of LGBTQIA+ texts, we would expect to see a similar lack of interest in texts about people of color or racism, given similar legislation and levels of censorship. Perhaps teachers simply feel more comfortable with their ability to offer a rationale for censorship directed at texts by people of color or about racism. Alternatively, it might be due to the fact that LGBTQIA+ literature has not historically been included in schools, and thus teachers may find it more difficult to consider how to teach these texts or embed them in existing curricula.

Fig. 11 | Teacher Interest in Using Diverse Literature and Related Topics



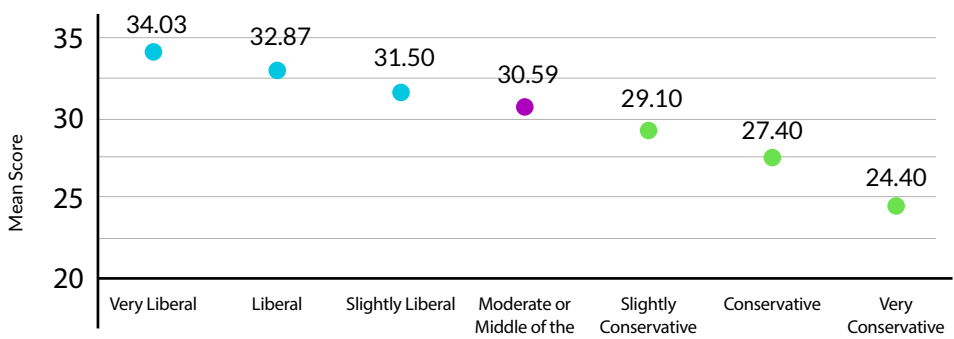
Among teacher-level factors of years teaching, teacher race, teacher age, and teacher political orientation, self-reported teacher political orientation was the only variable that meaningfully impacted teacher interest in diverse literature and topics ($\beta = -.434$, $p < 0.001$). Teachers who reported being more liberal were more likely to be interested in diverse literature and topics. The opposite was true for teachers who reported being more conservative (Figure 5). Teacher political orientation had a moderate effect on the variable of the total score of teacher interest in diverse literature and topics. For every category from left to right toward the

I am originally from Texas, where I was educated in the public school system. I went to undergrad in the state of Washington, where I quickly recognized that my public school education was very different from that of my peers in college. I wish that I had a broader education that didn't pigeonhole my understanding of the world by forcing me to rely on student-led research. I don't understand why we have such different expectations state-to-state when it comes to our learning, and I wish that all students had the same access to diverse stories that allow them to explore the world and stay curious. Teaching "classics" further supports a white, Euro-centric understanding of history and the present, but we're discounting most of the world and the lives of most of our students, which is unfair. If teachers had access to diverse stories, physical books for students, and support from the teaching community, I think it would be a lot less daunting to suggest diverse texts in Language Arts/English classes.

— 7th, 9th, and 11th Grade Teacher,
Rural Oregon

very conservative in political orientation, the predicted diverse literature mean decreased 1.3 points (Table 9). Out of a maximum of 36, the average was 34.03 for very liberal teachers and 24.41 for very conservative teachers. This is not surprising given that teachers have their own individual values and belief systems that inevitably influence the texts they choose. However, the current state of exceptionally partisan politics may also be impacting teachers. Though political orientation was a major variable affecting teacher interest, 91% of teachers as reported above still wanted to use more diverse literature and over 95% of teachers agreed that it is important for children to study diverse literature.

Fig. 12 | Teacher Interest in Diverse Literature and Related Topics Mean Score Among Political Orientation

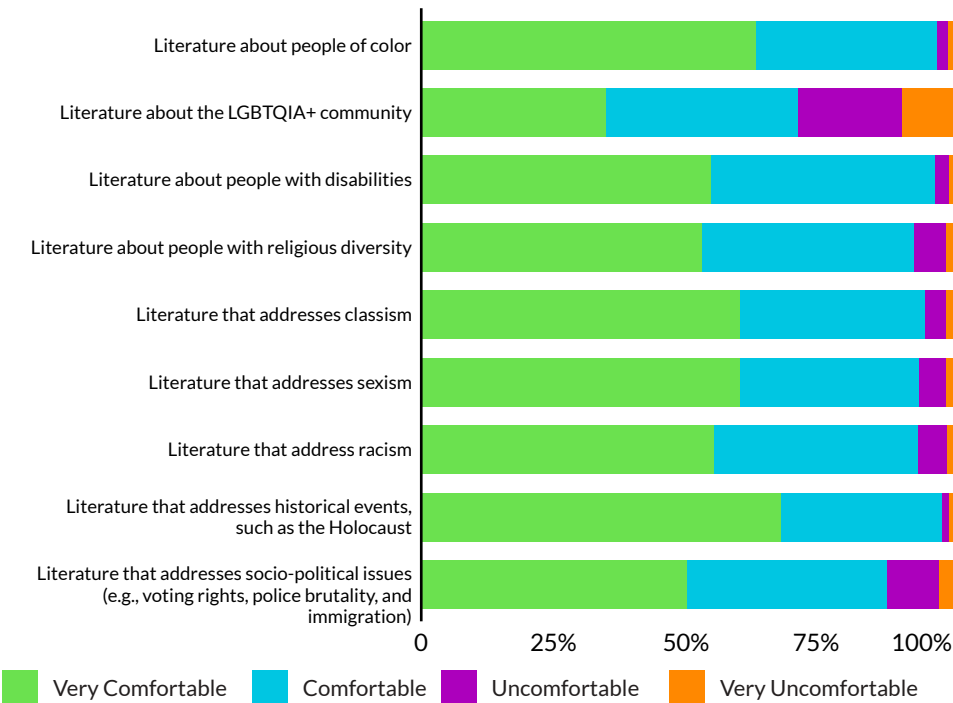


TEACHER COMFORT WITH DIVERSE LITERATURE AND TOPICS

Similarly to the topics of interest, teachers expressed comfort in teaching literature across all categories with the notable exception of literature about the LGBTQIA+ community (M=2.96). 29.05% of teachers said they were very uncomfortable or uncomfortable using literature about the LGBTQIA+ community. A teacher in suburban Kentucky discussed how being a parent influenced their decisions: “It will be obvious from my answers that the one category in which I am not comfortable with is LGBTQIA+. For me, it is 100% a matter of my faith I have to step back and think about what I want my child exposed to when it comes to sexuality and gender when reading.” And a teacher from suburban Texas wrote, “I’m actually not comfortable talking about LGBTQIA+ books in my classroom because that would be too much of stirring the pot.” These quotes reflect the many factors that teachers described as influencing their comfort levels, which included their identities and perspectives of schooling.

The next category with the most discomfort was literature that addresses socio-political issues (e.g., voting rights, police brutality, and immigration) (M=3.35), where 12.43% of teachers were very uncomfortable or uncomfortable. State-sponsored legislation like Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill and growing anti-diversity laws that promote “parents’ rights” and restrict “divisive concepts” such as gender and race may help explain why teachers are uncomfortable teaching literature about the LGBTQIA+ community and literature that addresses socio-political issues. It is notable that only 2.1% of teachers expressed discomfort with teaching historical events, which are more common in existing curricula. More contemporary socio-political issues were of greater concern.

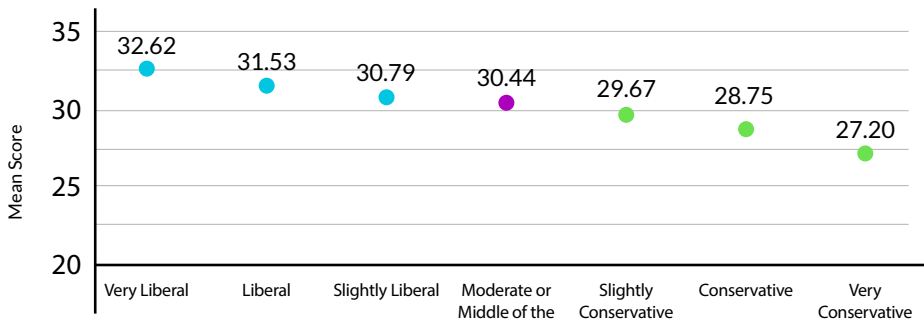
Fig. 13 | Teacher Comfort in Using Diverse Literature and Related Topics



Teachers were the most comfortable with literature that addresses historical events, such as the Holocaust ($M=3.65$), and literature about people of color ($M=3.59$). Many classics such as *Night* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are staples in English classrooms that address historical events and/or revolve around people of color. Therefore, teachers may be most comfortable in these two categories because it is what they are familiar with.

We also calculated a total score for teacher comfort. Among teacher-level factors of years teaching, teacher race, teacher age, and teacher self-reported political orientation, teacher political orientation was the only variable that meaningfully impacted teacher comfort in teaching diverse literature and topics ($\beta=-.253$, $p<0.001$). The more liberal a teacher, the higher their comfort in teaching diverse literature and topics, and the more conservative, the lower their interest. Teacher political orientation had a small effect on the total score variable of teacher diverse literature and topics comfort. For every category from left to right toward a more conservative political orientation, the predicted overall comfort in diverse literature mean decreased .73 points (Table 10). Out of a maximum of 36, the average for very liberal teachers was 32.62 and for very conservative teachers was 27.2.

Fig. 14 | Teacher Comfort in Diverse Literature and Related Topics Mean Score Among Political Orientation



Although I am comfortable fighting for the right to teach books which address racism and classism, because of the community I teach in, I truly fear parents will try to take my job from me if I teach anything related to LGBTQIA+ issues. I absolutely want to teach books that represent our LGBTQIA+ children, but I can't afford to lose my job.

— 8th and 9th Grade Teacher,
Rural Utah

It's sad to see school districts around the nation acquiescing to the demands of groups/movements that are claiming "indoctrination" is occurring in our classrooms.

— 10th and 11th Grade Teacher,
Rural Illinois

DISCUSSION

With an unprecedented range of diverse literature now available, this study reveals that the majority of educators express a strong interest in incorporating diverse texts similar to those listed in the 50 most frequently used titles: *Long Way Down*, *The Hate U Give*, *Persepolis*, and *Born a Crime*. Yet overall, classic texts by white authors have endured and still represent the vast majority of texts most frequently used across the country; teachers are using the same texts that they themselves read as students. This is not unexpected, as research has shown that text selection is highly influenced by teachers' comfort with, familiarity with, and knowledge of the texts (Darragh & Boyd, 2019; Rush & Scherff, 2013). Schools revised and updated course lists more substantially in the 25 years between 1964 and 1989 than they did in the last 35 years, and yet still, these revised lists featured texts by white authors that were published more than 60 years prior. Scholars argue that stagnant curriculum serves to perpetuate and maintain white cultural hegemony (Borshiem-Black & Sarigianides, 2019; Glaws, 2021; Toliver & Hadley, 2021) amidst an exponential increase in students of color in classrooms (NCES, 2024). Recent attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives work to maintain whiteness and curb multiculturalism, and in the case of this literature, these actions silence diverse voices and perspectives (WNDB, 2022).

Classic texts by white authors have endured and still represent the vast majority of texts most frequently used across the country; teachers are using the same texts that they themselves read as students.

Nonetheless, the widespread interest and enthusiasm for using more diverse literature is profound. In a future publication, we will explore open-ended survey responses in which teachers offer suggestions for increasing text access and building support for teaching this literature. Teachers overwhelmingly supported and valued increasing the number of diverse texts in their classrooms, and most had teacher choice in curricular flexibility. This suggests that a deeper and more intentional focus on the pedagogical strategies for using diverse texts would empower teachers to infuse more diversity within their courses. Further, as many have reported previously, access to and funding for more diverse texts is imperative to ensure that students have relevant, updated curricula (Watkins & Ostenson, 2015).

A third of the teachers used scripted curricula in their schools, and although scripted curricula can serve as a form of structure, it is generated by individuals outside of different school contexts who lack understanding of the specific needs and interests of each unique class of students or community context. As teacher educators, it is important for us to note that this type of curricula is not responsive, and pre-packaged curricula can serve to undermine teacher expertise, limit learning connections to community and context, restrain critical thinking, and prioritize compliance and consistency over innovation and authentic learning (Ginsberg, 2022; Smith & Banack, 2024). Based on the findings related to required readings, approved lists, and teacher choice, however, we know that most teachers are not required to strictly adhere to scripts and fixed course lists.

Despite this, teachers with curricular flexibility may be situated in environments where they are facing very real censorship concerns. In an increasingly charged and divisive political climate characterized by rising anti-LGBTQIA+ legislative action and public vitriol, it is not surprising that teachers noted the lowest level of interest and comfort using literature inclusive of the LGBTQIA+ community. With roughly 21% of Generation Z ages 18–24 identifying as LGBTQIA+ and more Americans than ever identifying as LGBTQIA+, many teachers are placed in

impossible positions where it is a crime to use literature that affirms the identities and experiences of so many of their students (GLAAD). Teachers shared examples of bills that carried punishments of third-degree felonies and discussed the training they received to “err on the side of caution” (rural Florida). Vague legislation that is subjective creates a suppressive effect on teacher text selection of stories that match the identities and interests of those in their classrooms.

This legislation has influenced the positioning and actions of teachers outside of these more restrictive contexts. Although there was no state legislation related to text selection, the New York teachers within Miller et al.’s (2024) study shared considerable concerns with censorship. As their political awareness of book bannings increased, they developed plans to avoid pushback. Borsheim-Black’s (2023) study of 15 teachers from different US regions found that teachers were using strategies like codifying curriculum, increasing transparency, formalizing review processes, and strengthening their resolve to resist pushback and clarify their pedagogical values as they defended their professional choices.

Finally, in our data analysis, the sheer number of unique titles that were censored was staggering. PEN America found even more unique titles (4,231) in their research. Most of the texts that teachers would attach to their vision of the canon are located within this list. Participants described the elimination of their school libraries, voluntary and forced removal of their classroom libraries, and directives to stop teaching *all* book-length texts. This is a direct assault on the freedom to read in a country that touts itself as a beacon of freedom in the world. Removing opportunities for adolescents to explore school and classroom libraries and learn more about the world and themselves evokes a sense of darkness, depriving students of the joy of learning.

Participants described the elimination of their school libraries, voluntary and forced removal of their classroom libraries, and directives to stop teaching *all* book-length texts. This is a direct assault on the freedom to read in a country that touts itself as a beacon of freedom in the world.

Recommendations for Supporting Teachers and Communities

- 1. Community Efforts:** Though book bans and censorship are on the rise, this study shows that teachers are still interested in teaching diverse literature to varying degrees, and they have the autonomy to do so. It is more important than ever for schools to work with communities to combat the infringement on students’ rights to read and to support increased access to and funding for diverse texts. Some state bills and laws support the censorship of books, while others resist book bannings, like in California (AB1078), Illinois (HB2789), Minnesota (Access to Library Materials and Rights Protection), and Maryland and New Jersey (Freedom to Read Act).
- 2. Forming Active, Supportive Team Partnerships:** The top four initiators of book censorship reported by teachers were parents, school boards, states, and school districts—all of which often lack teacher training or expertise. We recommend engaging parents and guardians in schools as active participants instead of as reactive individuals influenced by public discourse. When caregivers are invested in the success of students and schools, they can work in collaboration with teachers to be supportive of student needs. When parents work as a collaborative team with teachers, they can hold school boards accountable to the needs of their constituents rather than allowing school board members to be swayed by partisan politics. As a grassroots team, teachers, parents, school boards, and districts along with local and national organizations, can mobilize and lead legislators toward democracy and a commitment to support students and teachers. Parents across the nation have spoken at board meetings about intellectual freedom and the right to read.

- 3. Public Education for School Boards, Legislators, and Community Members:** Some censorship is fueled by common misunderstandings. From inaccurate definitions of pornography to anecdotes of a first-grader being given an adult text—rhetoric is wielded in ways that are unnecessarily divisive and partisan. Nineteen out of 20 teachers supported the inclusion of diverse literature. Educators hold professional expertise about the developmental appropriateness of texts for children. Parents legally have the right to choose which texts their own children read, but this can be done in partnership with teachers, as a united team to meet the developmental readiness for that child.

Parents legally have the right to choose which texts their own children read, but this can be done in partnership with teachers, as a united team to meet the developmental readiness for that child.

Recommendations for Research

- 1. Literature Perceptions:** We found that teachers' perceptions of literature varied considerably according to their personal beliefs, values, and politics. Researchers might explore how teachers are defining quality literature and their visions and goals for including diverse literature in their classrooms.
- 2. Curricular Inclusion and Access:** Findings revealed that teachers value diverse texts, and previous research has repeatedly demonstrated how diverse texts can be centered in curricula in educationally valuable ways. Although teachers overwhelmingly indicated they value diverse texts, findings also confirm that the most frequently taught texts continue to be the same older books by white authors that have been used for decades. Further research might explore how we can address teacher reluctance to position diverse texts more centrally on their top 10 lists. It might also explore whether funding, access, and/or training has limited this inclusion.
- 3. Teacher Comfort:** Because we know that familiarity and knowledge play a critical role in text selection, research might explore how different methods and approaches might increase preservice and in-service teachers' comfort levels with using diverse texts—recognizing that other variables may impede curricular inclusion.
- 4. Teachers' Political Affiliation:** As political orientation was a significant factor for many variables in this study, researchers may want to conduct further studies examining political orientation and its impact on teachers and the teaching of diverse literature and specifically seek out conservative-leaning teachers for inclusion in study design.
- 5. Legislative and Policy Research:** Despite their strong interest in using diverse texts, teachers repeatedly referenced legislation and policy that hindered text selection. Researchers might investigate ways that schools might work with legislators and policy writers to improve their knowledge of schooling and adolescents.
- 6. Supportive Educational Frameworks:** Although many teachers expressed fear, doubt, and discomfort, others felt very empowered to include diverse literature in their curricula. Researchers might study the role of diverse literature in classrooms and related action within more supportive educational frameworks to offer educational models for more responsive environments.

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Appendix

Table 1 | Teacher Geographic Region

Geographic Region	N	Percentage
Northeast	532	13.0%
Midwest	955	23.3%
South	1570	38.3%
West	1039	25.4%
Total	4096	100%

Table 2 | School Economic Status

School Economic Status	N	Percentage
Lower Class	953	23.3%
Lower Middle Class	1265	30.9%
Middle Class	1093	26.7%
Upper Middle Class	653	16.0%
Upper Class	126	3.1%
Total	4090	100%

Table 3 | Results of Simple Logistic Regression for Percentage of White Students and Scripted Curriculum

	Coefficient	S.E.	Sig.	Exp (Coefficient)	95% C.I. for Exp (Coefficient)	
					Lower	Upper
Percentage of White Students (one unit measured as 10%)	-0.115	0.013	<.001***	0.892 ^(D)	0.869	0.915
Intercept	-0.489	0.075	<.001***	0.613		

Significance codes: $p < 0.1$, $p < 0.05^*$, $p < 0.01^{**}$, $p < 0.001^{***}$

Exp (Coefficient) or Odds Ratio (OR) interpretation relative to the intercept: I=Odds increase ($OR > 1$), D=Odds decrease ($OR < 1$), N=No effect ($OR=1$)

Table 4 | Results of Simple Logistic Regression for School Economic Status and Scripted Curriculum

	Coefficient	S.E.	Sig.	Exp (Coefficient)	95% C.I. for Exp (Coefficient)	
					Lower	Upper
Lower (intercept)	-0.599	0.068	<.001***	0.55	0.48	0.628
Lower Middle	-0.445	0.094	<.001***	0.641 ^(D)	0.533	0.77
Middle	-0.54	0.099	<.001***	0.583 ^(D)	0.48	0.707
Upper Middle	-1.056	0.127	<.001***	0.348 ^(D)	0.271	0.446
Upper	-1.385	0.284	<.001***	0.25 ^(D)	0.144	0.437

Significance codes: $p < 0.1$, $p < 0.05^*$, $p < 0.01^{**}$, $p < 0.001^{***}$

Exp (Coefficient) or Odds Ratio (OR) interpretation relative to the intercept: I=Odds increase ($OR > 1$), D=Odds decrease ($OR < 1$), N=No effect ($OR=1$)

Table 5 | Results of Simple Logistic Regression for Geographic Region and Scripted Curriculum

	Coefficient	S.E.	Sig.	Exp (Coefficient)	95% C.I. for Exp (Coefficient)	
					Lower	Upper
Northeast (intercept)	-1.654	0.119	<.001***	0.191	0.151	0.24
Midwest	0.282	0.144	0.051*	1.326 ^(I)	0.999	1.759
South	0.994	0.131	<.001***	2.703 ^(I)	2.092	3.492
West	0.455	0.14	0.001**	1.576 ^(I)	1.197	2.074

Significance codes: $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Exp (Coefficient) or Odds Ratio (OR) interpretation relative to the intercept: I=Odds increase ($OR > 1$), D=Odds decrease ($OR < 1$), N=No effect ($OR=1$)

Table 6 | Results of Simple Logistic Regression for School Setting and Diverse Literature Use

	Coefficient	S.E.	Sig.	Exp (Coefficient)	95% C.I. for Exp (Coefficient)	
					Lower	Upper
Suburban (intercept)	2.770	.096	<.001***	15.966	13.22	19.26
Urban	-.074	.168	.658	.928 ^(D)	.668	1.290
Rural	-.643	.133	<.001***	.530 ^(D)	.409	.688

Significance codes: $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Exp (Coefficient) or Odds Ratio (OR) interpretation relative to the intercept: I=Odds increase ($OR > 1$), D=Odds decrease ($OR < 1$), N=No effect ($OR=1$)

Table 7 | Results of Simple Logistic Regression for School Setting and Diverse Literature Use

	Coefficient	S.E.	Sig.	Exp (Coefficient)	95% C.I. for Exp (Coefficient)	
					Lower	Upper
Urban (intercept)	2.696	.138	<.001***	14.821	11.31	19.42
Suburban	.074	.168	.658	1.077 ^(I)	0.775	1.497
Rural	-.056	.166	<.001***	.571 ^(D)	.412	.791

Significance codes: $p < 0.1$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Exp (Coefficient) or Odds Ratio (OR) interpretation relative to the intercept: I=Odds increase ($OR > 1$), D=Odds decrease ($OR < 1$), N=No effect ($OR=1$)

Table 8 | Results of Simple Logistic Regression for Percentage of White Students and Diverse Literature Use

	Coefficient	S.E.	Sig.	Exp (Coefficient)	95% C.I. for Exp (Coefficient)	
					Lower	Upper
Percentage of White Students (one unit measured as 10%)	-0.098	0.022	<.001***	0.906 ^(D)	0.868	0.946
Intercept	3.088	0.145	<.001***	21.933		

Significance codes: $p < 0.1$, $p < 0.05^*$, $p < 0.01^{**}$, $p < 0.001^{***}$

Exp (Coefficient) or Odds Ratio (OR) interpretation relative to the intercept: I=Odds increase ($OR > 1$), D=Odds decrease ($OR < 1$), N=No effect ($OR=1$)

Table 9 | Results of Simple Linear Regression for Teacher Political Orientation and Teacher Diverse Literature and Topics Interest Total Score

	Unstandardized Coefficient	Coefficient Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	95% C.I. for Exp (Coefficient)	
Political Orientation	-1.306	.042	-.434 ^(M)	-30.822	<.001***	-1.389	-1.223
Intercept	35.483	.140		254.055	<.001***	35.209	35.757

Significance codes: $p < 0.1$, $p < 0.05^*$, $p < 0.01^{**}$, $p < 0.001^{***}$

Standardized beta coefficient interpretation: N=minimal or no effect ($|\beta| < 0.1$), S=small ($0.1 \leq |\beta| < 0.3$), M=moderate ($0.3 \leq |\beta| < 0.5$), L=large ($|\beta| \geq 0.5$)

Table 10 | Results of Simple Linear Regression for Teacher Political Orientation and Teacher Diverse Literature Comfort Total Score

	Unstandardized Coefficient	Coefficient Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.	95% C.I. for Exp (Coefficient)	
Political Orientation	-0.731	.044	-.253 ^(S)	-16.74	<.001***	-.0817	-0.646
Intercept	35.162	.144		230.214	<.001***	32.88	33.444

Significance codes: $p < 0.1$, $p < 0.05^*$, $p < 0.01^{**}$, $p < 0.001^{***}$

Standardized beta coefficient interpretation: N=minimal or no effect ($|\beta| < 0.1$), S=small ($0.1 \leq |\beta| < 0.3$), M=moderate ($0.3 \leq |\beta| < 0.5$), L=large ($|\beta| \geq 0.5$)