

The Values of a Prospective Teacher

Years after graduating high school, there are teachers that people remember much longer than others. While some are remembered in a negative light, others are remembered for their passion to teach their subject, their lessons, or their supportive nature. As an aspiring high school English teacher, I want my students to remember me as the latter. If teachers are to have a positive impact on their students, it is important to hold values that promote engagement, critical discussions about controversial subject matter, a passion for learning, and the life skills that students will use throughout their lives. Over the past eight weeks, I have researched areas of psychology and the education system that I value and that I will incorporate into my classroom. Three main aspects that I value are developmental psychology, reading, and social and emotional learning.

In the [developmental psychology](#) section, I discuss the four different teaching styles, Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, and the developmental period of adolescence. If teachers are to engage and educate adolescents, it is important that they understand what developmental changes their students are currently going through. For example, adolescents experience changes in their brain functioning that might lead to more seemingly impulsive, risky decisions. Instead of understanding that to be a vital part of adolescence, some teachers are quick to reprimand and punish their students' actions in a way that kills their drive to become life-long learners. However, more knowledgeable teachers can redirect an adolescent's energy to promote engagement in the subject matter and reduce unwanted behaviors in a positive manner. As development occurs over time, teachers need to keep in mind that students might be reacting to negative experiences they had in the past. To change their current and future behavior, teachers need to give their students positive experiences associated with school and learning.

In the [reading](#) section, I discuss how to improve students' reading comprehension, the importance of reading for pleasure, and the debate over banning books. Overwhelmingly, the majority of the nation's students are not reading at their grade level. Instead of combating the root cause of the issue, states continue to lower the passing mark on their standardized exams. To help students actually improve their reading comprehension, teachers need to implement explicit reading strategies into their classrooms. Another important aspect of reading is encouraging students to read for pleasure. Too often, students only read the assigned work because they will be graded on it. Not only will pleasure reading help with reading comprehension, but it will also help students realize that reading is an enjoyable pastime that they can engage in outside of school. To keep students motivated to improve their reading comprehension and read for pleasure, some of the books they read need to deal with controversial issues that are characteristic of banned books.

The last section, [social and emotional learning](#), outlines what social and emotional learning is, the different political reactions to it, and how teachers and students can practice it. It is important for teachers to teach social and emotional skills because they are the key to improving emotional regulation and facilitating positive interactions with others. As these students age and attend college or enter the workforce, they will face situations where they need these life skills. Teaching these skills at a young age will benefit them for years to come. Some students might not have the resources at home to learn these skills. Therefore, it is especially important that teachers serve as role models to help students become well mannered, collaborative, and resilient people. Thankfully, both republicans and democrats support the implementation of social and emotional learning in the classroom. To encourage this continued

bipartisan support, teachers need to keep in mind which terms and which instruction type both parties seem to prefer when teaching social and emotional skills.

Teaching can be a challenging endeavor; on top of the daily problems that they need to solve, teachers also have to deal with the emergence of new policies and standards that administrators require them to implement into their classes. Given these stressors, it is not surprising that many teachers become overwhelmed, lose their passion for teaching, or quit the profession altogether. Although not a catch-all solution, entering the field with a clear sense of one's values can give teachers the motivation and encouragement they need to deal with the stress of teaching while also focusing on what is important to them. Of course, more work needs to be done if the education system is to help its teachers regain their passion for teaching. But in the meantime, teachers need to continually remind themselves why they became teachers and the values they wish to impart on their students.

Developmental Psychology

Developmental psychology is the study of human development, both growth, decline, and stability, over the lifespan. While there are many different factors that affect a person's development, the ones I will be focusing on are teaching styles, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, and the developmental period of adolescence. These are the factors I believe have the most impact on students, especially those in high school. By understanding these factors, I will be able to help my students grow as readers and writers, as well as help them integrate their brains.

Teaching Styles

Drawing on Diana Baumrind's parenting styles, educational psychologists have created four teaching styles. The four teaching styles are evaluated by how supportive and involved a teacher is, and by how demanding and strict they are. The four teaching styles are permissive-neglectful, permissive-indulgent, authoritarian, and authoritative. Over the years, I have had experience with each type of teaching style.

Permissive-neglectful teachers have both low degrees of support and discipline (Bernstein, 2021). These teachers "come to class, deliver the same lectures year after year, discourage questions, and make their escape with as little student contact as possible" (Bernstein, 2021, p. 368). They also "make no serious effort to establish discipline or maintain discipline" (Bernstein, 2021, p. 368). My ninth-grade English teacher fits the bill for this type of teaching style. Unlike my other English teachers, he did not seem interested in fostering our interests as learners. When we finished our unit on *Romeo and Juliet*, we had to write a paper arguing about who was to blame for the tragedies in the play. Instead of releasing us to work on crummy first drafts and revise our theses, we were given an outline of the paper he wanted us to write, with

blanks to fill in information. What if a student wanted to make the argument that it wasn't a tragedy, as someone in my class wanted to? Their interest and their opinion were stifled.

Another experience I will never forget from this class happened one day when our teacher stepped out of the classroom to talk to the principal. A student, who was known to cause trouble, was eating yogurt. He got some on his hands, loudly exclaimed that he didn't have anything to wipe them on and proceeded to grab one of the books from the bookshelf and wipe his hands on the pages. As a booklover, this made me so angry that I yelled at him to stop. Hearing our argument, our teacher came back into the classroom and told us to stop yelling. That student was never disciplined, even after ruining the book.

Permissive-indulgent teachers have a high degree of support but a low degree of discipline (Bernstein, 2021). These teachers are “devoted to teaching but may worry about doing it in ways that will create too much stress for students, stifle their personal growth, harm their self-esteem, or trigger anxiety or depression” (Bernstein, 2021, p. 369). Another characteristic of these teachers is that they “establish course requirements and deadlines, but tend to be flexible in enforcing them, and sometimes make special arrangements and allowances on a case-by-case basis” (Bernstein, 2021, p. 369). Another one of my English teachers could be classified as this teaching style. My senior year English teacher, who taught the college level English class, was the sweetest person ever and she was so supportive of our interests. For all our units, she let us choose whatever topic to write about so long as we were staying on theme. When I was having a particularly rough day, she could just see it on my face, listened to me as I vented my frustrations, and offered a hug. She was one of the teachers I asked to write my letter of recommendation for college.

For as much as she supported her students, she was lax on discipline. Generally, our class did not have many behavioral problems, as this was a college level class that we all worked hard to get into. What my teacher struggled in was discipline assignment due dates. Some students seemed to abuse this, as they would ask for extensions on many assignments. Due to the number of people that asked, she would extend the date for everyone. Although, as Bernstein (2021) writes, these teachers have the best intentions, I feel some people didn't take the class that seriously. Even though it was supposed to be a college-in-the-high-school class, the rigor felt like that of a regular English class.

Authoritarian teachers have a low degree of support but a high degree of discipline (Bernstein, 2021). According to Bernstein, "[t]hese teachers expect high achievement and reward it with good grades, but they don't nurture it through personal attention or encouragement" (2021, p. 368-369). They also believe that "[r]ules are rules, deadlines are deadlines, and there are no exceptions" (Bernstein, 2021, p. 368) My eleventh-grade physics teacher illustrates this teaching style. One day in study hall, I was struggling with the homework my physics teacher assigned. I asked my study hall teacher if I could go get help for my homework. When I entered my physics teacher's classroom, she was eating lunch with a coworker. I apologized for interrupting and explained that I was having trouble with some of the examples. She said, "The answer key is on my desk." Even with the answers right in front of me, I still couldn't muddle through the problems. I understand she was having lunch with her friend, but it was a little shocking how indifferent she was to a student that needed help.

This teacher was also known for being a stickler for rules. At the end of each school year, the seniors choose a day in which they all skip class, known as "Senior Skip Day." My physics teacher loathed senior skip day. So, when she found out the date of senior skip day the year I was

in her class, she demanded all the seniors be in class. To be sure of their attendance, she assigned a quiz for that day. My physics teacher was so strict on rules and attendance that she took away a much-anticipated tradition from the senior class. In addition, she didn't accept any late work and always made a stink when the students in band had to leave her class once a month to go to lessons, even though it was an excused absence.

Authoritative teachers have high degrees of both support and discipline (Bernstein, 2021). These teachers “reward academic success with praise as well as high grades, they encourage students to try harder when they need to, and they grant requests for special consideration only when justified” (Bernstein, 2021, p. 369). They also, “think carefully about their rules and standards, announce them in advance, explain why they are necessary, and enforce them consistently” (Bernstein, 2021, p. 369). When I think of an authoritative teacher, my eleventh grade AP English teacher comes to mind. During our preparation for the AP test, we were completing multiple choice practice in groups. The multiple-choice questions were extremely hard to comprehend. However, my teacher made us struggle through and would only tell us if our answer was correct or not. She would give us suggestions to guide our thinking, but we had to get to the end on our own before we went over it as a class.

Before the school year even began, my teacher let us know the importance of completing all the work she assigned. Every assignment was preparation for the AP test, from the independent novels we read to the poems and short stories read in class. The enforcement of the expectation that we complete all this work, although a lot at some points, was apparent during the week that we affectionately dubbed “Hell Week.” During this week, we were tasked with writing a three-page essay based on a prompt in forty-five minutes each night, as that is the time we would have on the AP test. This week occurred during winter break. The fact that we all

completed our essays speaks to how well our teacher enforced her standards and expressed their importance.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Another concept that should be considered by educators is Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. This model of development consists of five systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. At the center of all these systems is the developing child. Whether directly or indirectly, all systems influence a child's development. Below I describe each of the systems, with a focus on how teachers and schools influence the developing child.

The microsystem consists of "things that have direct contact with the child in their immediate environment, such as parents, siblings, teachers and school peers" (Guy-Evans, 2020). As these have the most contact with the child, they have a significant impact on the child's development. Teachers see these developing students every day. Outside of the classroom, these teachers might also be coaches or club advisors. Since there is a high level of interaction, the quality of that interaction will greatly affect the developing child. A teacher who learns about the child's academic and non-academic interests, and who is approachable will have a much more positive relationship than a teacher who does not view the student as an individual with their own interests and needs.

Next is the mesosystem, which "encompasses the interactions between the child's microsystems, such as the interactions between the child's parents and teachers, or between school peers and siblings" (Guy-Evans, 2020). The mesosystem is the communication between different forces in the microsystem. Although the child is not a part of these interactions, they will feel the effects in the microsystem when they interact directly with a parent, teacher, sibling,

or peer. Interactions with a parent can help a teacher learn more about any stressors a child might be facing in their home life and can try to accommodate for that in the classroom. Similarly, interactions with other teachers can help a teacher discern any patterns in a child's learning, if they need more help in a certain area, or any behavioral management techniques that have worked well in other classes.

The exosystem “incorporates other formal and informal social structures, which do not themselves contain the child, but indirectly influence them as they affect one of the microsystems” (Guy-Evans, 2020). In this system would be the Board of Education, which makes decisions for school districts regarding curriculum, budget, and much more. All these decisions eventually trickle down to the student. One example that everyone is familiar with is standardized tests. Every state is required to track student proficiency through these tests and hold schools who don't meet the proficiency mark accountable. I don't think any teacher, if given the choice, would choose to have standardized tests. These decisions, made by people who don't even know the individual child, have a direct impact on their schooling. Students nationwide spend weeks preparing for standardized tests every year, cutting into the regular course content. These students also spend hours worrying about whether they will pass, as their test grade determines if they pass the class and sometimes if they are able to graduate high school.

The macrosystem focuses on how cultural elements affect a child's development, such as socioeconomic status, wealth, poverty, and ethnicity” (Guy-Evans, 2020). Most socioeconomically disadvantaged schools, as well as schools with higher populations of students of color, often do not have the same educational opportunities as their counterparts in wealthier and whiter schools. One striking example of this is how certain questions for standardized tests

are eliminated based on who answers them correctly. When discussing field-testing standardized test questions, Meier and Knoester, authors of *Beyond Testing: Seven Assessments of Students and Schools More Effective than Standardized Tests* (2017) write, “Any item, for whatever reason, that Black kids outperformed Whites on was not used” (p. 7). In this example, students of color are being set up to fail as compared to white students. When test makers remove these questions, and only show questions that might pertain to someone in an advantageous subgroup, white students are receiving an advantage for no other reason than their skin color.

Lastly, the chronosystem “consists of all of the environmental changes that occur over the lifetime which influence development, including major life transitions, and historical events” (Guy-Evans, 2020). Development is not just what is happening currently in a child’s life; their past experiences, whether positive or negative, influence ongoing development. Depending on the past experiences a student has had in the education system, a child can either be excited and eager to learn or dread the moment they step foot in the classroom. One experience I will always remember is the time my eighth-grade English teacher taught a unit on dystopian novels. Walking into class that first day, unaware of what my teacher had planned, it felt like we were transported into a dystopian society: our grades would be determined by our peers, we couldn’t stand unless we raised our hand and asked, and the like. When she finally told us about the purpose behind the charade, I was invested in the topic. Dystopian novels are now some of my favorites to read.

The Developmental Period of Adolescence

In his book, *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain*, Daniel Siegel describes the importance of the adolescent period and how everyone—adolescents, parents, teachers, and more—can benefit from understanding and nurturing this transformative time in life.

Throughout his book, Siegel describes some of the changes that are characteristic of adolescence, namely the ESSENCE of adolescence, the causes for their reward drive, and the attachments to peers and family members.

Siegel uses the acronym ESSENCE to describe the four qualities that are characteristic of the adolescent mind: emotional spark, social engagement, novelty, and creative explorations (Siegel, 2013, p. 11). Adolescence is a period of intense emotions, both positive and negative. While these increased emotions might lead to “impulsivity, moodiness, and extreme, sometimes unhelpful, reactivity,” these emotions also lead adolescent to live life “filled with energy and a sense of vital drive that give an exuberance and zest for being alive on the planet” (8).

Social engagement refers to the different relationships in an adolescent’s life. Although adolescents tend to drift away from adults and connect more with peers, which might lead to increasingly risky behaviors, “[t]he drive for social connection leads to the creation of supportive relationships that are the research-proven best indicators of well-being, longevity, and happiness throughout the life-span” (8).

According to Siegel, novelty seeking “emerges from an increased drive for rewards...that creates the inner motivation to try something new and feel life more fully, creating more engagement in life” (7-8). Adults might be alarmed that this novelty seeking can lead to more risky behaviors with downplayed or no rational thought considered. However, this drive for novelty also allows adolescents to be “open to change,” to have a “fascination for life and a drive to design new ways of doing things” (8).

Lastly, creative exploration refers to the “expanded sense of consciousness” that people gain in adolescence. Moreover, “an adolescent’s new conceptual thinking and abstract reasoning allows questioning of the status quo, approaching problems with ‘out of the box’ strategies, the

creation of new ideas, and the emergence of innovation” (8-9). Although this creative exploration “can lead to a crisis of identity, vulnerability to peer pressure, and a lack of direction and purpose,” it can also, if cultivated and nurtured, can prevent “the sense of being in a rut that can sometimes pervade adult life” (9).

Adolescence is also the time when our brains have an increased reward drive. According to Siegel, “During adolescence there is an increase in the activity of the neural circuits utilizing dopamine, a neurotransmitter central in creating our drive for reward,” which can “[cause] adolescents to gravitate toward thrilling experiences and exhilarating sensations” without fully evaluating the risks of these actions (2013, p. 67). This relates back to the novelty seeking that is part of the essence of adolescence. The increase in dopamine levels can be seen in an increase in impulsive actions, addiction to substances, and hyperrationality (p. 67). Unlike impulsivity, hyperrationality occurs when an adolescent *does* consider the negative consequences of the risky behavior; however, the brain overemphasizes the positive outcomes of the behavior while the negative consequences are minimized (Siegel, 2013, p. 69). It is not that adolescents are making irrational decisions for the fun of it; rather, the inner workings of the brain during adolescence make it hard for them to see beyond the present thrill of experience. Thankfully, though, that ability to parse through future consequences also emerges during adolescence.

Alongside the increased dopamine affecting adolescents’ decision making, the adolescent brain is also working on integrating itself, which means that “the prefrontal region links cortex, limbic area, brainstem, body, and even the social world into one coordinated and balanced whole” (Siegel, 2013, p. 147). Two processes help the brain to become more integrated: pruning and myelination. During pruning, the brain “*reduces* the number of the brain’s basic cells, the neurons, and their connections, the synapses” (Siegel, 2013, p. 81). During myelination, the brain

“lays down ‘myelin,’ a sheath covering the membranes among interlined neurons” (Siegel, 2013, p. 81). Moreover, “this myelin sheath enables the passage of the electrical flow...to allow faster and more synchronized information to flow” (Siegel, 2013, p. 82). From this integration, there is “growth of fibers of cognitive control that ultimately decrease impulsivity” and well as “sharpened gist thinking, whereby the adolescent is able to rely more and more on intuition to see the larger picture of a situation and therefore make wiser decisions” (Siegel, 2013, p. 77). Integration and gist thinking help an adolescent pause consider the potential benefits and consequences to make an informed choice before doing something too risky.

While the prefrontal region works on integration, the lower limbic system is also highly active in adolescents’ brains, specifically the amygdala. According to Siegel, “[t]here are two routes that send information to the amygdala” (2013, p. 107). The slow route is when “the higher cortex sifts through information, reasons, reflects, and then informs the amygdala in a calm and rational way” (Siegel, 2013, p. 107). Contrastingly, in the fast route, information goes right to the amygdala without being processed in the higher cortex (Siegel, 2013, p. 107). Siegel writes, “Studies of adolescents reveal that even under calm conditions, the fast route to amygdala activation occurs more readily in teens than in adults” (2013, p. 107). This means that teens may “have a more immediate emotional response that is not filtered by cortical reasoning” (Siegel, 2013, p. 107). When Siegel writes that emotional spark is part of the essence of adolescence, it does not mean that teens are moody and act out for no reason; their brains are functioning in a way that makes them prone to intense emotions.

Developmental Psychology as it Relates to My Teaching Philosophy

Regarding the different teaching styles, I plan on adopting a teaching style that is mostly authoritative, but with some permissive-indulgent elements. Bernstein praises the authoritative

teaching style for its ability to prevent behavioral problems in students that might be enabled by the permissive-indulgent style of teaching, as well as its ability to encourage students to meet and surpass their academic potential (Bernstein, 2021). However, I believe some elements that Bernstein characterizes as permissive-indulgent should be used in the classrooms. Most notably, permissive-indulgent teachers provide “samples of high-quality papers” and “[make] case-by-case decisions about the consequences of missed exams or assignment deadlines” (2021, p. 371). In the case of the former, it is wrong for teachers to ask students to complete assignments without knowing the standards they are supposed to meet. The samples of high-quality papers do not coddle students; rather, it gives them reassurance of what the teacher is looking for, and allows them to focus solely on the work at hand. In the case of the latter, teachers should have flexibility with assignments, when it is within reason. Unless a student opens up to them, teachers have no clue what happens to that student when they leave the classroom. Teachers don’t know if the student works an afterschool job, or if they have to watch over younger siblings, or had a recent death in the family. There is no telling what a student is dealing with. A little empathy from a teacher in the form of an extended deadline could be the difference of whether that student succeeds or burns out.

Based on the knowledge from Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory of development, it is especially important for me, as a teacher, to keep in mind how I interact with my students, their other teachers, and the students’ caregivers, as these interactions have the most direct impact on the students’ development. When directly interacting with students, an authoritative teaching style, with some permissive indulgent elements, will create mutual respect between the student and myself. This will help ensure that they respect my standards and expectations of them for that class year. It is also important that the student understands that I am

available to help them so that they feel comfortable to try on their own without becoming frustrated and quitting for fear of failure. Additionally, every student who enters my class will be offered a clean slate at the start of the school year. Therefore, unless comments clarify any learning problems a student might have, any interaction I have with a teacher, sibling, or caregiver of my student will be taken with a grain of salt. Those relationships are independent of my relationship with a student and should not affect how I perceive my student.

Another helpful insight from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is that some of the policies created by people or organizations above me will have a direct impact on my class. As a teacher, I have no control over policies that are passed down to me by the principal, school board, superintendent, or Board of Education. Given this, it is important to keep a positive mindset; if I go into class with a negative attitude about a policy, my students will have a negative attitude about it, as well. One policy that I know I will have to deal with as a teacher is common core standards. Long term lesson planning could be the key to hitting standards while also making topics engaging and meaningful for my students (Tovani, 2021). Planning lessons in advance will help me keep track of which standards I intend on hitting, while making sure that each lesson relates to the overall theme of the unit. To keep students engaged, a unit's theme could be centered around a current event that students have experienced during their life, such as the covid pandemic. Long term lesson planning will also allow me to gather new material based on a student's specific interest related to the theme.

Lastly, it is also important to understand that development happens over time, and experiences in the past affect the students that are in my class. Some students will enter my classroom with better reading and writing skills than others. That is perfectly okay. It does not mean that a student who is at a lower reading or writing level is a failure or "behind" compared

to their peers. Everybody develops at their own pace. As the teacher, it is my responsibility to give all my students the necessary experiences to further their development. For reading skills, this means giving students reading material that is compatible with their current reading level (Atwell, 2007). If a student cannot understand the material, then they will never be able to comprehend it to improve their reading skills. Improving writing skills is equally important. To improve writing skills, I will give my students many opportunities to write. This could be in the form of daily thinksheets (Tovani, 2021), or a larger writing assignment at the end of a unit. In addition to just writing, I will make sure to give my students feedback on their writing, pointing to structural and grammatical mistakes for them to work on.

As Siegel mentions throughout his book, I believe it is especially important to consider the psychological developments that occur during adolescence for several reasons. First, it is paramount for teachers to nurture the ESSENCE (emotional spark, social engagement, novelty, creative explorations) of adolescence. When we encourage these defining characteristics of adolescence, we are gifted with students who are passionate about life, who are not afraid to try new things even if they might fail, who have significant connections with their peers, and who can form their own opinions and think abstractly about complex ideas. Not only will this benefit them in the present moment, but this essence will also follow them into college and later when they are fully-fledged adults. Second, understanding the changes that occur in adolescents' brains (i.e., dopamine reward drive, integration, reactivity of the limbic system) will help teachers understand the behaviors of adolescents. Instead of defining the child by the behaviors created from these brain changes, teachers should instead realize that these sometimes-disruptive behaviors are a part of adolescence. Telling a student to act differently won't help the situation.

Instead, teachers should guide students toward integration to help mitigate the reward drive and limbic system.

One way to nurture the essence of adolescence, reduce the dopamine-driven reward drive and reactivity of the limbic system, and build integration is by focusing on engaging, somewhat controversial topics that students have some choice with regarding what they specifically focus on. Regarding the essence of adolescence, students will be passionate about their own opinion on the topic and will want to share their opinion with classmates. They will also appreciate the novelty of a topic for which they probably have little knowledge about. In addition, controversial topics are especially important for nurturing a student's creative exploration, as it will encourage them to think deeply about the issue, the moral questions related to it, and ways to combat the issue. By giving students the choice to choose what they focus on within a topic, hopefully the dopamine-driven reward drive will be satisfied, as some students might be disengaged if they are told what they need to specifically focus on. Disengagement might lead a student to seek novelty through undesirable behaviors, like acting out in class. Lastly, engaging and controversial topics are important in helping integration, which helps reduce the reactivity of the limbic system. As controversial topics have no clear answer as to what is "right," students will have to use their higher-level thinking to understand the argument of the side they do not support, as well as provide rational arguments to support their side.

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Reading

Reading is a skill that people use in their everyday lives. As an English teacher, it is my responsibility to make sure that my students are well-rounded readers. That means that they read with comprehension, that they read for pleasure, and that they are not afraid to read controversial material. Teachers need to address the importance of these three areas, and encourage students to embrace them, if they want their students to become life-long critical and educated readers.

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is an essential component to the reading process, but, unfortunately, many students struggle with it. Reading comprehension is “the purpose of reading” and it “[i]nvolves complex cognitive processes that enable the reader to gain meaning from text and repair misunderstandings when they occur” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 2). The main goal of reading comprehension is to understand the content of a text. To learn and gain knowledge, students must understand what they are reading. The National Assessment of Educational Progress’s reading assessment, a standardized test given to students across the nation, measures “reading comprehension by asking students to read selected grade-appropriate materials and answer questions based on what they have read” (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Having one standardized test that students take throughout the United States, as compared to the widely different state tests, is essential for obtaining an accurate measure of how well students are reading with comprehension, which will help educators create methods to improve this skill. This assessment is given to fourth and eighth graders every two years, and twelfth graders every four years (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

Over the years, high schoolers have continually declined in reading comprehension. In 2019, the most recent assessment year, the average national reading score for twelfth graders was

285, which was significantly lower than the average score in 2015 (The Nation's Report Card, n.d.). Based on this score, the average student is performing at a NAEP Basic level, meaning they have "partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for performance at the NAEP Proficient level" (The Nation's Report Card, n.d.). This number is alarming, as reading is an essential component in our everyday lives. This is especially alarming for those students who want to attend higher education, as they do not have the skills needed for the rigorous college academics. Ideally, students should be performing at the NAEP Proficient level, meaning they "have demonstrated competency over challenging subject matter, including subject-matter knowledge, application of such knowledge to real world situations, and analytical skills appropriate to the subject matter" (The Nation's Report Card, n.d.). However, only thirty one percent of students in the United States are scoring at this level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). This number will continue to decline unless some change occurs in the United States' education system. Although schools should be the breeding ground for success, they are instead setting up their students to fail.

In addition to the general student body, English language learners (ELLs) are a group of students who struggle with comprehension. In the fall of 2019, about 10.4% of students in public schools were ELLs, or 5.1 million students (National Center of Education Statistics, 2022). When reading in English, some of the struggles ELLs face are "an abundance of idioms and figurative language in English texts...density of unfamiliar vocabulary...[the] use of homonyms and synonyms...grammar usage especially the 'exceptions to the rules'...[and] difficult text structure with a topic sentence, supporting details and conclusion" (Haynes, n.d.). Learning a new language is already a difficult endeavor, which is made harder for immigrants as they are trying to adjust to life in a new country. Depending on their circumstances, becoming a

proficient reader in English might not be a top priority for some ELLs. Although these students can enroll in language assistant programs (National Center of Education Statistics, 2022), they are still underperforming in their reading comprehension as compared to students who are not ELLs. In 2019, ELLs scored 53 points lower on the reading assessment than non-ELL students, with an average score of 235 (The Nation's Report Card, n.d.). These students are not even meeting NAEP Basic levels. Based on these statistics, the current aid offered to ELLs is not sufficient in building their reading comprehension.

Students with a learning disability are another subgroup of students who struggle with reading comprehension. According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities, in 2017, one in five children in the United States had “learning and attention issues,” which led to “difficulties in reading, writing, math, organization, focus, listening comprehension, social skills, motor skills or a combination of these” (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). From the start, these students are put at a disadvantage because of how their brain functions. It is easy for these students to feel disheartened when everyone around them is improving their comprehension skills while they are not. Although this is a significant number of students in the United States, only a small percentage of these students have Individualized Education Programs or “receive accommodations for disabilities through a civil rights statute called section 504” (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). This lack of help is evident in their NAEP reading assessment scores. In 2019, students with disabilities scored an average of 252 on the reading assessment, which was 38 points lower than students without a disability (The Nation's Report Card, n.d.). Like ELLs, students with learning disabilities are also not attaining scores at the NAEP Basic level. Across the board, regardless of language or disability status, reading comprehension is not where it should be. Not only does this indicate a lack of understanding

about the unique struggles ELLs and students with learning disabilities have when it comes to reading comprehension, this also indicates a weakness in current teaching of reading comprehension strategies to students.

To help students improve their reading comprehension, teachers need to offer instruction about reading comprehension strategies. Students who are successful at reading comprehension “[u]se a variety of effective reading strategies before, during, and after reading” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 22). These students actively monitor their thinking at all stages of the reading process. In doing so, they remain engaged and focused, make meaningful connections to the text, and can use the correct strategy to fix any confusion that arises during reading. Over time, teachers will be able to “combine several [of these] comprehension strategies into an organizational system, or plan, for reading,” called multi-component comprehension strategy instruction (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 26). The more reading strategies a student can use, the better they will be at reading comprehension. However, getting to this point takes time, as teachers don’t want to overwhelm students who might be new to deliberate reading. Thankfully, these strategies can be used in any discipline, meaning students have multiple opportunities to practice their use of these strategies, and ultimately improve their reading comprehension.

The first strategy that successful readers use is the activation of prior knowledge about a topic (Boardman et al., 2008). This strategy is used before students even begin reading. Instead of jumping right into a text, students are taught to “[preview] headings or key concepts, or [make] a prediction and confirmation chart” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 23). By previewing headings, students are drawing on prior knowledge to give them context to what they are about to read. If a student doesn’t know what they are reading about, they will have a difficult time comprehending the text. Likewise, making predictions also draws on prior knowledge as students

can guess what they are about to read based on what they already know about the topic. When students activate prior knowledge, not only are they in the right frame of mind to comprehend this new knowledge, but they are also making meaningful connections between their past knowledge and this new knowledge.

The second reading comprehension strategy is the use of graphic organizers (Boardman et al., 2008). Graphic organizers, which can be used at any point during the reading process, are “visual representations that help students identify, organize, and remember important ideas from what they read” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 23). For students who are new to reading comprehension, having a visual reminder of what they need to be focusing on in the text can help them monitor their thinking and stay on task. For example, one type of graphic organizer is a story plot diagram (Boardman et al., 2008). Having a piece of paper showing the visual arc of a story (i.e., exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution), with descriptions of each part of the plot, can help students focus on and identify those moments in a story. Graphic organizers are also helpful because they are a tangible document that students can refer to and remind themselves of their earlier thinking, and possibly connect those thoughts to future thoughts.

The third reading comprehension strategy is comprehension monitoring strategies, which are usually used while reading a text (Boardman et al., 2008). Comprehension monitoring strategies “enable students to keep track of their understanding as they read and to implement ‘fix-up’ strategies when understanding breaks down” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 24). Reading comprehension is an active process in which students need to be fully engaged if they are to understand what they are reading. Comprehension monitoring strategies keep students engaged and focused while reading. The first step of monitoring strategies is to teach students how to

identify confusion, such as “noting confusing or difficult words and concepts” and “stopping after each paragraph to summarize” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 24). If students cannot identify when their understanding falters, they will keep blindly reading a text while never comprehending it. Stopping and reflecting while reading allows students to truly ask themselves if they understand the meaning of the text. While it is important to identify confusion, students also need to employ fix up strategies, like “re-reading, re-stating, and using context and decoding skills to figure out unknown words or ideas” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 24). These strategies help refocus a student and work on the part of the text that is confusing them. Building understanding is more important than finishing a reading, even if it means only a handful of pages are read during class.

The fourth reading comprehension strategy is summarization skills, which are used during or after reading a text (Boardman et al., 2008). Summarization is “the ability to consolidate large amounts of information...into only the most important elements” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 24). No matter the size of the text, whether a short article or a novel, summarization is the key to grasping the central meaning of the text. When summarizing, students should “summarize small amounts of text such as a short paragraph before summarizing longer sections” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 25). Not only does this help students keep track of the main idea of each paragraph, but it also gives them more opportunities to practice summarizing. In addition, teachers should teach students summarization rules, like “[s]electing a topic sentence or inventing a topic sentence...[u]sing one word to replace a list of related items; [d]eleting trivial and redundant information; and [r]e-reading to make sure your summary makes sense” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 25). Summarization rules help students be detailed and concise about the main idea of a text. These rules are also helpful when writing in general, as well.

The fifth reading comprehension strategy is asking and answering questions, which can be done before, during, or after reading (Boardman et al., 2008). Although questions can be “used as an assessment strategy, they can also be used as an effective comprehension practice when they teach students how and where to find answers” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 25). Questions are helpful for both teachers and students; for teachers, questions can be used to see if students have done the reading, as well as if they comprehended it. Likewise, questions give students a purpose while reading, which helps students remain focused. When students are focused and engaged, they are more likely to comprehend the text. When using questions, teachers should “[p]rovide students with strategies to evaluate teacher-generated questions,” as well as “[t]each [them] to ask and answer specific types of questions” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 25). The two main types of questions are literal questions, with answers found in the text, and inferential questions, where students use information from the text as well as past experiences to come to a logical conclusion. By providing examples of each type of question and modeling answers to them, students will start to recognize how each type of question is designed, as well as what’s expected for an answer to each type of question.

Although I focused solely on reading comprehension, it should be noted that reading comprehension is only a part of the reading process. The other aspects of the reading process are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, and vocabulary (Boardman et al., 2008). Phonemic awareness is “an auditory process that involves hearing sounds that make up words” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 2). Recognizing significant sounds is an essential first step in learning a language. From there, people engage in phonics, which is “recognizing that sounds link to letters and that those letters are combined to make words” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 2). In order to read, people need to be able to associate the correct sounds to the written words. After becoming proficient in

phonemic awareness and phonics, people work on their fluency, meaning they “[read] effortlessly and automatically, recognizing individual words ‘by sight’” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 2). With fluency, people can read for longer times and read more words per minute. Lastly, vocabulary is “understanding and using words in listening, speaking, reading, and writing” (Boardman et al., 2008, p. 2). As students advance to higher grade levels, the vocabulary used in their schooling becomes more complex and content specific. To understand what they are learning, students need to know the meaning of these complex words. Since all these aspects build on each other to lead to higher levels of reading, poor performance in one of the other areas could affect reading comprehension. Therefore, a comprehensive reading instruction should touch on all parts of the reading process, depending on the reading level of the students in a teacher’s class.

In addition to teaching reading comprehension, as well as the other aspects of the reading process, it is also important that this instruction is explicit. Explicit teaching relies on the use of “explicit explanations, modeling, and guided practice” (Rupley et al., 2009, p. 127). Since many high school students underperform at reading comprehension, it is safe to assume that most students do not know what reading strategies are. By explicitly explaining the different types of reading strategies, teachers can ensure that students will have this knowledge. Once these reading strategies are explicitly explained, it is equally as important for teachers to model how to use these reading strategies, as well as the internal dialogue a person has while reading. A good number of students have probably never used reading strategies before or might be using them incorrectly. By modeling their use, teachers are greatly improving their students’ chances at comprehending a text. To help students correctly use these strategies on their own, teachers need to offer guided practice. While the teacher is still there in case a student is significantly

struggling, students are expected to draw on their knowledge of different reading strategies and use them to understand a brand-new text. By practicing these strategies on their own, students will hopefully be able to master their use and increase their reading comprehension. Not only does explicit teaching of comprehension strategies improve reading comprehension for the general student body, but it has also been shown to help improve reading comprehension for ELLs (Cekiso, 2012) and students with learning disabilities (Antoniou & Souvignier, 2007). Since explicit instruction of comprehension strategies is beneficial for all students, teachers should seriously consider using it in their own classrooms if they want their students to have the best chance at improving their reading comprehension.

Reading for Pleasure: The Reading Zone

One goal that all English teachers should have is to make their students lifelong readers. Although English teachers vary widely in their personality and teaching styles, one common denominator among them is a passion for reading. Given that we all share this love of reading, we should make an effort to encourage our students to love it, as well. One way to encourage a love for reading is to get students into the reading zone. The reading zone is “the place readers [go] when they [leave the] classroom behind and [live] vicariously in their books” (Atwell, 2007, p. 21). As an avid reader, I have experienced the zone myself, and it’s a shame that many people have never entered the zone. In the reading zone, students are reading for pleasure (Atwell, 2007). Pleasure reading is reading for the sake of reading. This is in stark contrast to the typical reading assigned in schools, which are always tied to some lesson or assessment. Some students might not have the time, the resources, or the physical space at home to enter the reading zone and fully immerse themselves in a book. If this is the case, reading will never be pleasurable for them, and they will not enter the reading zone or gain a love for reading. Since teachers don’t

know the individual home lives of each student, it is important for them to create an opportunity to enter the reading zone in class.

To get students into the reading zone, teachers need to give students the freedom to choose what and how they read. Regarding the reading material itself, students should be allowed to choose what book they want to read, if they want to stop reading and pick up a new book, reread books, and so on (Atwell, 2007). If students feel pigeonholed into one choice that they must finish reading, even if they hate it, they will never enter the zone. In terms of a classroom library, teachers should have a wide range of genres and reading levels available for students to choose from. In addition, students need to be free to read how they want, meaning they have a right to skim, to skip pages, to read ahead, and to do whatever is needed for them to enjoy reading (Atwell, 2007). When reading for pleasure, there is no one formula that everyone must follow. If skimming the first couple of pages gets a student to read, then teachers should encourage that. In addition, these actions, skimming, skipping, and reading ahead, might be a way for students to test a book that they are unsure about to see if they like it. Although teachers might not be used to this much freedom, they need to embrace it if they want their students to see reading as an autonomous and enjoyable activity.

In addition to choice, students also need the correct physical environment, frequent opportunities to read, and conversations about books to get into the reading zone. When reading in the classroom, silence and comfortable furniture, such as cushions and pillows, help encourage the reading zone (Atwell, 2007). It is easy to get distracted when reading, especially when one is still new to pleasure reading. By reading in silence and sitting somewhere that is comfortable, students can focus solely on the book in front of them and enter the reading zone. On top of reading in class, teachers need to assign reading for homework so that students are also reading

at home (Atwell, 2007). While it might be harder to enter the zone, it's important to instill habitual reading outside of school in students. Reading should not be something that is only done at school. By reading at home, students will see that reading is an essential part of life and will hopefully continue to read in adulthood. Lastly, booktalks and recommendations are a great way to offer reading-zone-worthy books (Atwell, 2007). While reading a jacket blurb can give readers a sense of what the book is about, classmates and teachers will be the best source for reviews, as they have read the book and connected with the story and the characters. In addition, talking about their books will encourage them to keep reading so that they can share with others about what they read.

If some teachers cannot get behind the idea of pleasure reading in school, it might help motivate them to do this if they know its effect on reading comprehension. In 2012, the average seventeen-year-old who read more than twenty pages in school and for homework had the highest score on the NAEP reading assessment, as compared to those that read fewer than twenty pages (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Likewise, the average seventeen-year-old who read for fun almost every day had the highest score on the NAEP reading assessment, as compared to those who read less frequently (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Reading comprehension is a skill that needs to be practiced in order to master. Frequent reading is how students can practice, and ultimately master, reading comprehension. Although most schoolwork inside and outside the classroom consists of reading, it is what students are reading that turns them away from the act altogether. The only reading material students are exposed to is stuffy textbooks and books that they will be graded on. These students don't have the opportunity to just read and appreciate the stories being told. If students were given that opportunity, they might be more likely to read in general, which increases reading

comprehension. Regardless of the end goal, whether that be creating life-long readers or improving reading comprehension, every student benefits from reading for pleasure.

Reading Banned Books in School

In recent years, the practice of banning books has been rising at an alarming rate. PEN America, an organization that advocates for free expression, defines a book ban as follows:

[A]ny 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 governmental 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. (Friedman & Farid, n.d.)

Most book bans seem to arise from the fear of exposing students to controversial topics. Parents might not think their child is old enough to read about these topics, and they also might not agree with these topics being taught at all to their child. While it is okay for a parent to object to their child reading a certain book, it is not okay for that parent's opinion to influence an entire classroom, school, or district. One's opinion and personal beliefs should not speak for an entire student body, especially when schools might be the only place where students have access to a plethora of reading options. To help prevent the unwarranted banning of books, the National Coalition Against Censorship and the American Library Association created guidelines for schools to follow when investigating a book (Friedman & Farid, n.d.). These guidelines include "the filing of written, formal challenges by parents or local residents; the formation of review committees, generally comprised of librarians, teachers, administrators, and community members; and that books are to remain in circulation during the reconsideration process" (Friedman & Farid, n.d.). Following these guidelines ensures that books are not being removed

from schools for biased and prejudiced reasons. In our highly politicized world today, it seems most complaints for book bans are due to biased reasons, as people object to any content that is in stark contrast to their own beliefs. Given this, it is especially important for investigation committees to follow these guidelines so that books are not taken away from children to further certain people's agendas.

Book bans can take place in different areas of a school, as they can be banned in both the library and the classroom, just the classroom, just the library, and while an investigation is occurring (Friedman & Farid, n.d.). The worst category to have a book banned in is both the classroom and the library because that means that there is nowhere in the school that a student has access to a book. The school might have been the only place a child could read that book, as they might not have the resources to buy the book on their own or borrow from a local public library. Not much thought seems to be given to these students, the ones who are completely deprived of any chance to read these books. Within these categories of where books are banned, books can either be fully removed or just restricted so that only certain people have access to them (Friedman & Farid, n.d.). Restricting a book is just as bad as banning a book, as there will always be someone who is banned from reading it. One shocking example of restriction occurred “[i]n Bristow Public Schools in Oklahoma,” where “five literary classics...were removed from library and classroom circulation, and restricted to AP English classrooms” (Friedman & Farid, n.d.). Not only do students in advanced classes, who are usually white, have a more advantageous education, they are now being privileged with what they are allowed to read. Restricting certain books to advanced classes sends a message to the rest of the school that they are undeserving of the same educational opportunities as these advanced students. This only

further the educational gap between the students in advanced classes and the students in regular classes.

From July 1, 2021, to March 31, 2022, PEN America kept track of book bans that occurred in the United States. During these nine months, there were “1,586 instances of individual books being banned, affecting 1,145 unique book titles” (Friedman & Farid, n.d.). From these bans, there were common themes among the content of these books, such as identities (i.e., LGBTQ+ characters, characters of color, Jewish and Muslim characters), health-related and sexual content, rights, racism, and social justice, history, and death, grief, and suicide (Friedman & Farid, n.d.). Diversity has always been under attack in schools, as some parents and policymakers believe that teaching diverse content will fundamentally change a child in ways that do not align with their personal beliefs. More and more, class curricula and school libraries are reverting to a white, heteronormative narrative. While the challengers of these books might see this as a win, a less diverse curriculum is only hurting the students. When white, heterosexual students are not exposed to diverse content, they are vulnerable to believing negative stereotypes and prejudices of those that are different from them. Students of color and LGBTQ+ students also suffer from a less diverse education. When students are not represented in what they learn and read, it is easy to feel marginalized and that they are fundamentally different from their white and straight counterparts. These students might internalize these feelings of insignificance and difference, which will drastically harm their development and growth.

Another significant finding from PEN America’s Index is that “the vast majority (98%) [of book bans] involved departures of various kinds from best practice guidelines designed to protect students’ First Amendment rights” (Friedman & Farid, n.d.). Of the seventy-six school districts that banned books, thirty-three districts did not have “public or transparent policies

accessible online, or these policies [fell] short of established safeguards, in terms of their emphasis on objectivity or protection from content- or viewpoint-based manipulation” (Friedman & Farid, n.d.). When schools do not follow these guidelines, they are inviting bias and prejudice to influence their decisions regarding whether a book is banned. When this happens, the objective content of the book is disregarded. Instead, people will find any information that fits their views and use it as evidence to ban a book. In addition to using subjectivity to ban books, only four percent of the investigations were a result of an officially filed complaint (Friedman & Farid, n.d.). If the correct procedures were followed, there would have been significantly less book bans over that nine-month period. When a principal or superintendent sees that a certain book is being banned at schools near them, there is so much pressure to conform to the norm of banning that book, even if they have never read the book or have any personal problem with it. However, without any knowledge of the story or specific reasons to ban the book, as there would be with a formal complaint, these committees have no guidance to what they should be reviewing. This makes it easy for reviewers to use their own biases to make judgments on a book’s content, which will only increase the likelihood of that book to be banned.

PEN America also noted an alarming change in who is spearheading the investigations on book bans. Over the nine-month period, forty one percent of the book bans were “tied to directives from state officials or elected lawmakers to investigate or remove books in schools” (Friedman & Farid, n.d.). This is a drastic change from previous years, as mostly complaints came from parents or community members. The political pressure, which mostly comes from the Republican party, to remove books “directly [implicates] the First Amendment concerns...to prevent politicians from exercising their own predilections in book removals or others from imposing ideological orthodoxy in schools” (Friedman & Farid, n.d.). Politicians have much

more power and influence over others than a parent, community member, or school administrator. By giving in to their demands to ban certain books, schools are only feeding into that power and influence. This shift to directives from politicians sets a dangerous precedent for the scope of book bans. While this may only be at the district level for now, it would not be surprising if a politician tried to issue a state-wide ban on certain books. To prevent that possible future from becoming a reality, community members, parents, and school administrators need to educate themselves on the matter of book banning and realize the danger of allowing politics to influence decisions about public education.

Although PEN America targets conservative groups as the main perpetrator of book bans, liberals are not innocent, either. While conservatives are more concerned with banning books that deal with diversity, liberals are concerned with books that deal with the portrayal of race and racism, especially when it is portrayed from a white perspective. In Burbank Unified School Districts, in Burbank, California, four parents challenged five books “for alleged potential harm to the district's roughly 400 Black students” (Lock, 2020). The parents argued that these books set up a Black-victim, white-savior complex, and created an impression ““that racism is something in the past”” (Lock, 2020). While these arguments are legitimate, it is not so much the books that are the problem. Rather, the problem is how they are used in schools. When teachers use these books, which examine race from a white perspective, they are essentially holding up a mirror to the white students and asking them to examine their own thinking. If teachers use these books with this type of discussion in mind, reading about flawed white characters might help white students see the flaws in their own thinking. However, these narratives also need to be accompanied by books that discuss race and racism from a Black perspective. Teaching race and racism from multiple perspectives will give students a fuller picture of the problem, show how it

still affects our society today, and create a classroom that tries to understand and empathize with those around them.

Reading as it Relates to My Teaching Philosophy

Given how low students continue to score on the NAEP reading assessment, one of my priorities as an English teacher will be to help bolster my students' reading comprehension. Research has shown that explicit instruction about reading comprehension strategies helps improve students' reading comprehension. Therefore, I will explicitly explain and model the different reading strategies to my students so that they know what they are and how to use them. For the first few classes or so, while I am still learning about each student and their abilities, every student will receive this instruction. For students who are proficient at reading comprehension, this instruction will serve as a refresher for them. For students who struggle with reading comprehension, explaining and modeling the reading strategies will be crucial in helping develop their reading comprehension skills. Providing this explicit instruction to every student gives them clear guidance to what I expect from them in my class. They will know from the start that I value reading, and that I expect them to complete any reading I assign, to actively monitor their understanding while reading, and to think critically and ask questions about the topic at hand.

Once I understand each student's reading comprehension skills, I can then differentiate my lessons to best serve each student. For those that are proficient at reading comprehension, they will be free to work on their own. For students who are at a basic level in their reading comprehension skills, they might benefit from guided practice. I will expect these students to try on their own first and employ fix up strategies when their understanding breaks down. However, if these students cannot repair their understanding by themselves, I will be there to provide

support and guidance. Lastly, for students who have very minimal or no reading comprehension skills, they will need frequent explicit explanation and modeling of reading comprehension strategies. This means reading a simplistic text with them and focusing on one reading strategy at a time. To meet the needs of every student, I will provide a plethora of reading options, from complex texts to simple ones. In addition, I will check in on each student to make sure they are doing well. This could either be checking on them during class or looking over their work and providing feedback.

While reading comprehension is an important skill for students to master, I believe encouraging students to read for pleasure is equally as important. One of the main reasons why I want to become an English teacher is my love of reading. This is something that I want to instill in my students. In addition to reading for schoolwork, I will set aside time in class for pleasure reading. To balance between schoolwork and pleasure reading, my goal is to give students twenty or so minutes in class to read independently three times a week. During this time, the class will be silent, students can read wherever they want in the classroom, and they can read however they want. In addition to reading in class, the only homework I would assign is reading their independent books for at least half an hour every night. Many students only see reading as something they are forced to do in school. Hopefully by assigning them at-home reading from a book of their choice, students will realize that pleasure reading is something that they can do anywhere when they have the time to read.

Since many students have probably not read for pleasure before, I feel it is also important to encourage conversations around the books they are reading to get each other excited about potential books to read. One way to start these conversions is through booktalks, which are short presentations about a student's favorite book that they recommend others to read. These

booktalks will give information about the genre, plot, main characters, their rating of the book, and the reasons why they recommend this book. Booktalks are a simple assignment that students, if they do the reading, will have no trouble completing. While I don't want to associate pleasure reading with assessment, as that defeats the purpose of reading for pleasure, I would feel comfortable giving students a grading for their booktalk. Since the only real work a booktalk requires is reading the book and reporting about its most basic information, I don't think students would view a grade for it as negative, especially since the majority of booktalks will most likely receive full credit. By encouraging these conversations about books, students will hopefully be more apt to continue reading and having these conversations outside of class.

When discussing reading in school, the topic of banned books joins the conversation. While there has been controversy over allowing students to read banned books, I personally believe students should be given the option to read them. It seems irresponsible to deny students the opportunity to discuss the topics that are usually banned, like race and racism, the LGBTQ+ community, death and suicide, content related to sex, and much more. While some adults want to stop students from learning about these issues, most of them have probably already been exposed to the world's problems because of technology and social media. However, the information that they are seeing online might not be from reputable sources. Instead of letting students succumb to misinformation, it seems much more responsible to have structured, respectful discussions about controversial topics in the classroom. Having these discussions is crucial to integrating an adolescent's brain, which will lead to more reasonable decision making, increased emotional regulation, and a better understanding of others. If adults want students to become educated, respectful, and understanding citizens, they need to have these controversial conversations in the classroom.

Not only does reading banned books help educate students about the problems we face as a society today, but it also helps keep students engaged and view reading as an exciting endeavor. To improve students' reading comprehension, they first need to look forward to reading. Nobody looks forward to reading bland and boring texts. When students are aware that what they are reading is highly debated and relates to real-world problems, they are more willing to work on their reading comprehension so that they can understand the text in front of them. Likewise, reading and discussing controversial topics in the classroom might make students more motivated to read books about similar issues on their own outside of the classroom. Even if they don't have anyone to discuss the book with, reading about these issues in itself will make students much more educated and aware of the issues today. Many students do not continue reading after high school and college. However, if teachers show students that books can be exciting and thought provoking, it would not be surprising if more people read on their own after graduating from high school or college.

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Social and Emotional Learning

While teaching core academic subjects is important, it is also important to teach students the life skills that will help them regulate their own thoughts and feelings, empathize with others, and create healthy relationships. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the avenue through which students learn these skills. Although the term “Social-Emotional Learning” has received criticism, both conservatives and liberals acknowledge the importance of its instruction in schools. To have effective SEL instruction, teachers and students need to practice using social and emotional skills when interacting with each other.

Support for Implementing Life Skills into Schools

To help young students learn the skills that are vital for self-reflection and interactions with others, schools need to incorporate SEL into their curricula. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as follows:

the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. (n.d.)

This type of education is vastly different from the education students usually receive in their classes. Usually, students are taught factual knowledge and then tested on their ability to recall that information. However, a person’s ability to learn, regulate their emotions, and build relationships is all interconnected. If one area is lacking, then the others will be negatively impacted, as well. Therefore, there needs to be some focus on SEL in addition to academics.

Given the importance of SEL, it is fortunate that there seems to be overall support for its implementation in schools. In a survey of over two thousand parents nationwide, “[m]ore than 90

percent [of parents] support schools teaching their children to set goals, approach challenges in an optimistic way, and believe in themselves and their abilities” (Tyner, 2021). These social and emotional skills are tied to a growth mindset, in which students embrace challenges and setbacks as part of the learning process. Currently, the education system does not support the development of growth mindsets; instead, students have fixed mindsets. Since the education system equates success with high grades, many students are not willing to challenge themselves and try new things for fear of failure. If educators are to actually teach students the social and emotional skills that parents most support, there needs to be more emphasis placed on SEL in schools. If there is no shift in the priorities of the education system, students will continue to cheat themselves out of opportunities to push themselves and expand their knowledge.

Although there is much support for SEL, the specific name of the programs can either help or hinder this support. When asked how much they supported certain SEL-related program names, “Social-Emotional Learning” received the second-least amount of support, with many respondents saying they did not support programs with this name (Tyner, 2021). It is shocking that such a seemingly insignificant detail, as compared to the content of the program, would have such a large effect on the parents’ reactions. Most of the negativity around this label comes from parents who identify as republicans (Tyner, 2021). More and more, topics that deviate from a white, heteronormative narrative are targeted by republicans. A part of that narrative is hegemonic masculinity, where men are forbidden from expressing any emotions that may emasculate them. SEL tears down that narrative, as it encourages all students, including young boys, to identify their feelings and learn to express them in healthy, non-violent ways. Some republicans might be wary of these emotional regulation skills and the negative effect it might

have on their young sons' masculinity. Instead of trying to understand the purpose behind these programs, they lead with their assumptions and attack anything that threatens their narrative.

Thankfully, there is one program name that both republicans and democrats strongly agree upon. When asked how much they supported certain SEL-related program names, both parties had the most support for the program name, "Life Skills" (Tyner, 2021). This program name captures the essence of SEL, as these programs give students the skills that they will use for the rest of their lives to overcome emotional turmoil and build strong relationships. As these students age, they will face more intense stressors and meet new people in college and later the workforce. Teaching students how to manage these two inevitable aspects of life at a young age helps set them up for success later in life. When working with controversial issues, as SEL has become one, educators need to choose the course of action that will garner the most support. If both republicans, who are overall more wary of SEL, and democrats support the program name, "Life Skills," this is the term schools should use when implementing SEL into schools.

Another important difference between republican parents and democratic parents is the type of social and emotional instruction that they prefer. Generally, democrats are more supportive of SEL and opt for more explicit instruction (Tyner, 2021). These parents believe SEL is just as important as learning core subject area knowledge. Explicit instruction might be especially helpful for students with learning disabilities who struggle with social interaction and would benefit from explicit explanation and modeling of the correct ways to regulate emotions and interact with peers. Contrastingly, republicans tend to be more hesitant about implementing SEL into schools and they much prefer indirect instruction (Tyner, 2021). These parents strongly believe that traditional academics is more important than SEL, and do not agree with setting time aside in class to specifically focus on these life skills. In addition, any direct and explicit social

and emotional instruction, especially programs that deal with cultural diversity, might be seen as an attack on their personal beliefs and their role as the child's parent.

To meet the demands of both democratic and republican parents, schools should implement both direct and indirect instruction of SEL in schools. This mixed instruction style seems to have support from both parties, as both ranked this style of teaching the one that they most prefer (Tyner, 2021). Likewise, when asked "to rate thirty-two various skills, values, and subject areas that they wanted their child's school to focus on most and least," the parents' top ten choices were an even split between social and emotional skills and core academic subjects (Tyner, 2021). Based on this data, it seems that a mixed instruction style would appease both parties and help convince all parents to support the implementation of SEL in schools. Through explicit instruction, students learn the skills needed to regulate their emotions and interact well with others. To practice this learning, teachers need to indirectly encourage the use of these skills, such as by modeling correct behavior when interacting with students, setting and enforcing classroom expectations, and assigning collaborative group work. Explicit explanation and indirect practice are the key to students mastering these essential life skills.

SEL Between Teachers and Students

In her book, *Why Do I Have to Read This? Literacy Strategies to Engage Our Most Reluctant Readers*, Cris Tovani discusses the importance of seeing the students behind the masks of disengagement that they wear. Tovani (2021) writes, "Sometimes [the] masks give us the impression that kids don't care or that they are unreachable. In many cases, the mask is armor that protects them from the stinging bite of failure" (p. 3). These mask-wearers more often than not had a negative experience in the education system that left them feeling apprehensive to try new things and challenge themselves. It is easier for them to disengage than accept that failure is

a part of the learning process. However, there is more to a student than what appears on the surface. It is irresponsible for teachers to label students as the masks that they wear and to not try to remove these masks. When teachers acknowledge that students merely wear masks, and do not define them by their outward behavior, “it gives [them] empathy and energizes [them] so [they] don’t give up on the ones who appear unteachable” (Tovani, 2021, p. 3). Empathy can make such an impact on a student who has not received this high level of care and attention before. It gives them reassurance and support to show who they really are behind the mask. As a result, students will once again become active and engaged participants in their learning

The first type of masks that students wear are the masks of anger and apathy. Students wear these masks to “avoid failure, struggle, reading, and writing,” and they “give students a way to hide and cover up their academic insecurities and how they really feel” (Tovani, 2021, p. 51). In English classes, specifically, most students are not at grade level in their reading or writing skills. It is easier and more comfortable for these students to shut down and disengage than admit they need help. Nobody, especially students who have been taught that failure is unacceptable, likes to appear vulnerable. To help remove these masks, teachers should “[t]ry a little **T**enderness by slowing down and taking **T**ime to explain” and “**T**end to students by showing an interest in their lives both inside and outside of school” (Tovani, 2021, p. 76). When teachers explain their reasoning behind a class rule or assignment, they are treating their students with respect and valuing their autonomy. Students are more likely to respond with respect and engagement if they believe they are being respected. Likewise, showing an interest in a student’s life will help build a connection between a teacher and a student. This connection will help angry or apathetic mask wearers realize that their teachers value them as people and have a genuine

interest in seeing them succeed and grow. When these students are shown that their teachers care, they might be more willing to give their education another chance.

The next mask that students wear is the mask of the class clown. Although these students “want to be successful and taken seriously,” when “they struggle, they would rather be perceived as funny than as stupid” (Tovani, 2021, p. 79) These students joke around to “cover up [their] reading and writing deficits” (Tovani, 2021, p. 79). Class clowns are usually well-liked by their peers and know how to bring attention to themselves and make others laugh. If these students know they are struggling to learn, they believe they might as well turn their attention to something they will succeed at. One way to remove the mask of the class clown is to “**Tend to** student comments seriously and answer with honesty and vulnerability” (Tovani, 2021, p. 106). Much of the wisecracks that class clowns make subtly point toward the confusion and struggles they face as learners. When teachers respond to these comments in a caring manner instead of dismissing them, they are acknowledging and affirming the learning struggles that class clowns face. Likewise, showing vulnerability and admitting their own deficits as a teacher might help class clowns realize that struggle is a part of the learning process. Every person still has the capacity to learn and grow; it is impossible to know everything about a topic. When teachers, who are often perceived as the master of their discipline, model that learning is a lifelong endeavor, these students might be more willing to embrace their struggle as a part of the learning process.

The next mask is the mask of minimal effort. The mask of minimal effort emerges when students don’t understand what their teacher expects of them (Tovani, 2021). Without clear guidelines and a model of what they should strive for, these “learners cheat, give up trying, and do whatever it takes to keep them safe” (Tovani, 2021, p. 111). At one point, these struggling

students might have put effort into their learning and strived for success. However, without a clear outline as to what their teachers expected, all that work most likely resulted in little payoff. Given this negative experience, it is inevitable that these students would eventually don the mask of minimal effort. Removing the mask of minimal effort requires teachers to “**Tend** to students by...[finding] models to show students what the criteria of success looks like” and “[n]otice what students can already do in their work, and what they need next to grow” (Tovani, 2021, p. 129). Having models of exemplary work and showing students how to actively read and think are the key to students’ success. Unless students know how to monitor their thinking and have a clear picture of what the end product should look like, they will struggle through the whole learning process and harbor a dislike toward learning. To keep students engaged and continually challenge them, teachers need to recognize what students struggle with. That way, more attention and support can be given to that area. When teachers show an interest in the students’ success, the students will start to show an interest, as well.

The last mask that Tovani mentions is the mask of invisibility. These students “rarely give [teachers] any trouble with behavioral management,” but “can get lost in the shuffle, slip through the cracks, and if the teacher doesn’t care or ask to see their thinking, they may not grow as readers and writers” (Tovani, 2021, p. 132). Not all students like to vocalize their thinking or partake in class discussions. As a result, these students tend to fade into the background when compared to their more vocal counterparts. Both struggling students and non-struggling students can wear the mask of invisibility and face the negative consequences when their thinking is not acknowledged. For those that are learning well, they are not being challenged, causing them to plateau in their degree to think critically. For those that are struggling to learn, they will never receive the help they need to overcome their learning obstacles, and consequently will never

improve. To remove the mask of invisibility, teachers need to provide alternate routes for these students to show their thinking. Tovani (2021) recommends thinksheets, which are graphic organizers for students to write down their observations, thoughts, and questions. Teachers should respond to students' thinksheets by commenting on their current thinking and pointing to areas where their thinking could be expanded upon. This non-verbal communication meets the needs of the students who wear the mask of invisibility. However, teachers should also try to encourage these students to talk more in class, as verbal communication skills are just as important as thinking skills.

While the advice listed above is specific to each type of mask, there are also general practices teachers can do to reengage all the different types of mask-wearers. First, Tovani (2021) suggests that teachers should have compelling reasons as to why the topic of discussion matters and to encourage students to ask controversial and thought-provoking questions. If a topic is boring and has no purpose beyond the classroom doors, no student will ever care enough to put in effort into their learning. However, if teachers challenge students to think critically about controversial issues, students will be hooked on the topic and will want to learn more about it. In addition, Tovani also advises teachers to outline and model the use of long-term and supporting targets that will help students meet a standard. These targets give students a sense of what their teacher is looking for, such as the correct use of evidence in a paper or starting each paragraph with a thesis sentence. By providing these standards and modeling how to implement them, there will be less confusion about the teacher's expectations, which will keep students engaged. Lastly, Tovani also recommends that teachers provide multiple types of texts at different reading levels, as well as strategy instruction. No matter the grade level, there will always be a wide range of reading abilities in the classroom. To keep students engaged, teachers

need to offer texts that best suit each student's reading level. Likewise, different types of texts, from novels to pictures and graphs, can add vitality to class, as most students probably expected to read only literature. If teachers want their students to take an interest in their learning, to shed the masks of disengagement that hold them back, teachers need to show their students that learning is an interesting and engaging process.

SEL Between Classmates

One practical way to encourage SEL between classmates is through project-based learning (PBL). PBL is “a teaching method in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge” (PBLWorks, n.d.). PBL encourages students to immerse themselves in the topic and think critically about solutions to real world problems. This method of instruction engages students to actively participate and put effort into their learning. When students are engaged, they are much more likely to enjoy the learning process and become life-long learners. Given that our society is constantly changing and challenging old ways of thinking, teachers need to encourage students to become life-long learners, as these are the people that can embrace this change. Unlike a project that students might complete at the end of a unit, with PBL, “the project *is* the unit” and it is “the vehicle for teaching the important knowledge and skills [students] need to learn” (PBLWorks, n.d.). Instead of disjointed daily lessons, each class period contributes to the project, whether it be gaining background knowledge, crafting a thesis statement, or working on putting each individual piece together. Each day, students come to class ready to pick up where they left off the day before. When students know that each lesson is contributing to a project that has a greater significance than just

any old assignment that might be assigned in another class, they are motivated to show up and put in the effort so that they can be proud of what they create.

In addition to making meaningful, real-world connections to course content, PBL also teaches students social and emotional skills. One key SEL element that PBL develops is collaboration, as “PBL fosters an active classroom culture that relies on routine student interactions that drive the process of growth and discovery based on challenging content” (Baines et al., 2021, p. 4). These student interactions help students develop supportive relationships, as students realize that they can trust and rely on each other to reach new levels of thinking that they could not reach on their own. Likewise, these interactions help students manage their emotions and empathize with others. For example, in a PBL setting, a more knowledgeable student might try to explain a concept to another student. The more knowledgeable student might be frustrated if their peer does not grasp the concept. In this instance, the student must work to manage their negative emotion and empathize with the struggling learner to maintain a positive relationship. With frequent interaction, as is characteristic in PBL, students will continue to develop stronger relationships with their peers and be able to manage their strong emotions.

PBL also encourages students to improve their self-expression, another social and emotional skill. Baines and colleagues write, “Rigorous project-based learning provides students with ongoing opportunities to express what they know, can do, and are thinking and feeling...through speaking, writing, and visual mediums” (2021, p. 4). Communication skills are vital if students want to be able to express their thoughts and opinions with others. By opening up to each other and showing vulnerability, people can begin to form genuine relationships built on understanding and empathy. In addition, communication skills are especially important when

expressing opinions on controversial topics. If a person is not respectful in the language they use, articulate their arguments in a logical manner, or consider counter arguments, they will never be able to create a culture of mutual understanding and respect, which is necessary if we are to have these difficult conversations. Lastly, improving self-expression skills can also help strengthen a person's identity, which is the qualities, beliefs, and personality traits that characterize a person. By continually expressing these aspects of their identity, students will have a stronger sense of what their identity truly is.

Another SEL skill that PBL helps strengthen is self-reflection. Through PBL, students are given the opportunity to “critically reflect on themselves and their communities” which allows them to “identify patterns in their experiences and make changes that will help them achieve meaningful goals” (Baines, 2021, p. 5). By focusing on real world problems that these students will inevitably face one day, students are able to set personal goals that they, as an individual who knows their own strengths and weaknesses, can achieve to help solve the problem at hand in their community. PBL also requires students to improve their critical reflection when revising their work to “learn how to interpret and incorporate feedback from others” (Baines et al., 2021, p. 5). The first step in this reflection is for students to acknowledge that there are still reading, writing, or orating skills that they can still improve upon. This relates to emotional regulation, as students need to accept the feedback as constructive and helpful, instead of an attack on their abilities. From this reflection, students can set new goals regarding what they will work on next to improve their project.

Lastly, PBL helps students improve the SEL element of ownership. Baines and colleagues write, “Students are empowered decision makers in high-quality PBL environments and engage in projects that promote an ownership of learning” (2021, p. 5). This ownership of

learning emerges when educators create an empathetic and equitable environment in which all students are given the tools that are necessary for them to receive a high-quality education. When teachers validate and provide for the needs of their students, every student will feel that they have a right to learn, and consequently will feel obligated to make the most of their schooling. When students take ownership of their learning, they are more likely to make responsible decisions and set personal goals for themselves to help them stay on task and make significant strides on their project. In addition, when teachers model equity and empathy in class, their students are much more likely to become empathic and equitable people themselves. These are the type of people society needs if we are ever to create a world where every person has a fair and impartial opportunity for success.

SEL as it Relates to My Teaching Philosophy

As someone who values SEL, and wants to incorporate it into my classroom, it is very heartening to know that there is mostly unanimous support for its implementation in schools. To ensure that parents continue to support this program, I will use the results from the survey of parents nationwide to inform the practices I use in my own classroom. First, when making any reference to SEL, either in class or in conferences with parents, I will make sure to use the term “Life Skills.” Both republicans and democrats preferred this term over “Social-Emotional Learning.” This is an easy aspect to change in my behavior, one I will gladly do if it means I have bipartisan support in my classroom. I also like that the term “Life Skills” implies that the skills being taught—teamwork, communication, empathy, emotional regulation, and more—are not just to be used in the class. They are to be a part of our daily lives and in every interaction we have with others. This message is important to instill in students if we want them to remain socially and emotionally competent in their young adult and adult life.

Another aspect that I will incorporate into my classroom, based on the results of the survey, is to rely on a mixture of direct and indirect teaching of life skills. Both parties rated a mixed style of teaching as the one they most prefer. Given that we use these life skills in everyday lives to begin with, it will not be hard to indirectly teach these skills. When I ask students how their day is, ask them to share their thoughts and provide a meaningful response, and work to not let my own emotions control my actions, I am indirectly modeling how to be socially and emotionally competent. A more explicit way of teaching life skills would be through class expectations that I go over with the students at the beginning of the year. These could include life skills such as: listening to others and being open to new ideas, respecting class properties, completing assignments that are given to them, and giving respect to get respect. By going over these at the beginning of the year and explaining why each expectation is important to follow, I will explicitly be teaching these life skills.

As empathy is an important life skill that everyone should have, I will model empathy in my classroom by recognizing and trying to remove the different masks that students wear. The students who wear the various masks of disengagement are not defined by their masks. Remembering that students are people, who might have things going on in their life that affects their behavior in the classroom, is important if teachers are to empathize with these students. A teacher who equates the student to the mask might be more prone to berating and punishing the student, preferring to send them out of class rather than deal with them. This only reaffirms the mask to stay on and will never change the student's behavior. Instead, teachers need to try to get at the root cause of the mask, whether that be confusion with the material, boredom with the topic, or something else. When teachers treat the cause and not the symptom, these students will

shed their masks and hopefully become engaged once again. Hopefully by showing this empathy as a teacher, I will be able to instill a sense of empathy in my students, as well.

While it is important to recognize the masks of disengagement, it is also important to recognize and try to remove the masks that engaged and high performing students wear. As a student who was in the advanced classes and at the top of my class, I was constantly putting on a mask in front of my teachers. My mask was meant to hide the pressure and stress I was feeling because it seemed like everyone was expecting me to keep performing at that level, no matter the personal toll it took on me. These students need empathy just as much as the students who wear the masks of disengagement. If teachers continue to ignore these students, assuming that they are fine because they are performing well, these students will eventually burn out. They will lose the joy they once felt from learning and cease to have the motivation to put effort into their schooling. Teachers should make an effort to reach out to their seemingly fine, high performing students. If teachers acknowledge these student's effort and the stress they must feel, these students might be more likely to reach out and share what they are really feeling. This act could help these students set goals as to what they can realistically achieve without burning themselves out.

While recognizing and removing students' masks of disengagement is an indirect way of teaching life skills to students, implementing PBL into the classroom can function as a direct way of teaching life skills while still focusing on academics. In the survey of parents nationwide, many parents, especially republicans, felt that teaching life skills should not take away time from academics. As PBL teaches the course content through peer collaboration and self-management, life skills and academic knowledge are integrated with equal balance given to both. When implementing PBL into my classroom, part of the grading criteria will include life skills that they

were explicitly instructed on at the start of the project (e.g., active listening skills, providing meaningful peer-feedback, and reflecting on feedback to revise their final project). In addition, I will most likely have students write a short reflection paper at the end of a project outlining their understanding of life skills and how they used certain life skills while working on their project. This reflection paper seems necessary so that students spend time reflecting on the importance of these life skills as they use them in their everyday lives.

Another important life skill that PBL can help encourage in students, especially eleventh and twelfth graders, is a sense of identity and purpose. These are the students that are starting to think about life after high school. Although they don't need to have their lives completely planned out at this age, they should start thinking about what they might want to do in adulthood. In high school, I was required to take a class called career and finance. In that class, we had to research a profession that we were interested in and create a poster describing what the profession is, the annual salary, the work environment, and more. After creating these posters, all career and finance students presented them at a "Career Fair" in the school's gym. Students and teachers from other classes could come and ask us questions about the profession we researched. I think, if schools don't offer a class like this, that this would be a great project to implement into an English class. This is the type of work students should be doing with PBL, as it combines teaching academic knowledge with real world implications that extend beyond the classroom. With this project, students reflect on who they want to be and form a stronger sense of identity that will help guide them through life after high school.

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