

Intent vs. Impact: Analyzing & Reforming Problems within School Curriculum

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Abstract

With the current-day assault on Critical Race Theory, I discuss the mental dilemma and controversy behind removing a novel that featured satire and overt racism. I argue that my intentions, considering the social context of my community, reaffirm my decision. Removal was the first step toward reimagining the education system and building an ideal society where teachers can teach the book better, and mature students can handle the nuanced subtext behind the book. I dive deep into how I identified the problem, pushed for a petition to remove the novel, and ultimately replaced it with a better alternative. I call for policymakers, educators, and the youth of our nation to speak up in their schools and advocate for implementing an anti-racist curriculum. Finally, I reflect on my actions and outline the differences between intent versus impact.

Keywords: Asian-American, Anti-Asian Racism, Critical Race Theory, Curriculum, Education and Public Policy

Part 1: Identifying the Problem and Creating a Solution

Sitting in my ninth grade English class as the only Asian-American, I was speechless and shocked as my classmates ridiculed the main character "Chin-kee" in *American Born Chinese*. While the English Department had good intentions in adding a diverse text, it accomplished the exact opposite with its impact. The book attempted to use satirical aspects of Chin-Kee's character to dismantle stereotypes about Asians. Yet, reading it in a predominantly white space of ninth-grade boys who have yet to mature and could not take this topic seriously inherently led to many problems.

Many of my classmates left the novel with reaffirmed stereotypes and even new racist jokes that they may never have learned—exacerbated by the fact that there were no Asian faculty or peers to defend me at the time. Out of all the novels we read throughout high school, my school selected only one novel, a graphic novel, about the Asian-American experience as an attempt to include more diverse texts. When I became the head of the Pan-Asian Alliance two years later, I decided to write a petition to remove the novel because I did not want any Asian-American student to experience the same humiliation.

Part 2: Spreading Awareness and Pushing for Change

It was not going to be easy. This was the only work of AAPI literature taught within our curriculum for over a decade. Challenging the status quo seemed daunting. Despite all odds, I committed to making my voice heard.

By crafting a petition, I drew attention to my cause by pushing the administration, mobilizing students and faculty from all backgrounds, and making headlines in my school's newspaper. Everyone in the hallways, from teachers to students, started engaging in a dialogue about the book. As a result, the English Department vowed to sit down with members of the Pan-Asian Alliance to discuss solutions.

During the meeting, I spoke openly about how the book normalizes and perpetuates anti-Asian racism within our student body. Instead of a polarizing debate, we engaged in an eye-opening and meaningful dialogue that heard voices from across the spectrum. Teachers in the English Department explained their good intentions in adding a diverse text to educate the student body about the Asian-American experience. As the Pan-Asian Alliance, we discussed how the impact was the exact opposite. After reading the novel, many of our peers left with reaffirmed stereotypes and even new racist jokes that they may never have learned. It was clear that freshmen boys in a predominantly white space could not handle the novel's nuanced subtext behind the racist tropes and satire. We all discussed how teachers could be deliberate when focusing on sensitive subjects such as painful stereotypes.

The English Department ultimately decided to pass my petition and replace it with George Takei's *They Called Us Enemy*, my recommendation as a better alternative. Additionally, our conversation motivated the English Department to change other books, reshaping our curriculum to become more inclusive. I felt euphoric.

Part 3: Reflection: The First Step towards Combating Anti-Asian Racism

Over time, I've reflected on my decisions and question what I could have done differently. While my petition addressed and removed the symptom, the root cause of my peers' xenophobia still existed. In retrospect, the larger problem was much more complex, and the solution was not black and white.

Dismantling a systemic culture of xenophobia and anti-Asian hate is daunting, but I took the first step to create change. As a part of the process, I realized that I could not change the past, but I could learn from it and grow as a human being. Trusting myself, taking risks, and learning from my experiences are integral to me as a leader.

I will continue to dig deeper to dismantle racism by taking risks. In every space that I walk into, I have the power to recognize and change the problems within our systems. By reforming our curriculum and amplifying the voices of my community, I know that students like me will have a voice in the classroom. With incremental steps like this, we will gradually solve the greater problem of xenophobia and racism.

Part 4: A Call to Action for Students and Educators

In an era of political polarization and calls to ban Critical Race Theory and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work, we must ask ourselves our end goal. Our goal is not to mass "indoctrinate" children but rather to make sure that the texts we are reading represent groups justly. We all agree that we want our children to live in a society where everyone is treated equally, starting with our classrooms and curriculum. If we truly want a better future, the time has come for a diverse, anti-racist curriculum. This approach to social justice and education is action-oriented. I firmly believe that when we identify systems of oppression, we must tear down those barriers of oppression—in this case, removing the novel. But then we must build these systems back, hence replacing the book with a better alternative.

Removing a novel, controversial in itself, can be manipulated and exploited for the wrong reasons. For example, many school boards have tried to remove and ban *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Maus*, simply because they don't want their children to learn about racism or antisemitism.

Banning novels is not my intention. I fully believe that actively engaging in these conversations about how we choose and select novels for our curriculum and spreading awareness about these issues is much more important. Ideally, we eventually live in a society where my peers can fully grasp and handle the nuanced subtext behind this book. However, we must consider the social context: there is a time and place for everything.

For these freshman students, this is their first exposure to the Asian American experience and coupled with the fact that it is a graphic novel with "childish" illustrations of extreme stereotypes. Students can breeze through this book in an hour and not spend enough time focusing on the intention behind the novel itself. Given the age of these students, the graphic novel might have been targeted toward them. Still, the content is hard for them to grasp. The impact is students learning and reaffirming new stereotypes, whereas the author intended to dismantle these stereotypes.

I call for educators to implement positive affirmations of the Asian-American experience from as early as lower elementary and continue throughout middle school. Once we expand their knowledge, students will eventually be able to better understand the Asian-American experience, and they will be able to handle the satirical nature of American Born Chinese.

We also need to focus on the role of teachers and how they can teach this material better. In that sudden incident of my peers ridiculing the novel, I wish my teacher would have stood up for me and defended me. Teachers must be upstanders, not bystanders, when it comes to defending and amplifying marginalized students' voices. With better teaching and early affirmations from an early age, students and teachers can build a relational sense of teaching that is uplifting and gives room for people to unlearn their racist preconceptions. We must amplify both teachers' and students' voices equally.

I call for policymakers and school board members to implement diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training for all faculty and staff members in all schools. I acknowledge the disproportionate lack of funding for teachers in under-resourced communities. I fully believe that for any of this to be implemented, we must care and invest more into our teachers and uplift them to progress as an anti-racist society.

Going to a private school, I also recognize my privilege in being able to remove a novel from my school's curriculum in a matter of months. I know there are many more obstacles for public school students, like school boards and state mandates, that make it much more difficult to challenge the status quo. I firmly believe, however, that students must realize that their voice has importance and speak up in each and every school. We need more students and youth to fight for change because it only takes one person, one petition to change a school.

Students should be involved in selecting the curriculum, as we are the ones who are leading the classrooms and participating in discussions. It is time we leave ageism in the past and realize that our youth have voices equally as important as everyone else. We then can start having these conversations, spread awareness about these problems within our school's education system, and develop solutions. Reimagining an education system is hard. Challenging the status quo seems daunting. But I took the first step toward change. And you can too.

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