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Schools: A Place Where Freedom of Speech Ceases to Exist

Rousseau, a Genevan philosopher, once said that every man is born with natural rights. One of those rights is the freedom of speech, made in the 18th century (Powers 141). Now, it is the 21st century and the world still struggles on how to interpret freedom of speech. The freedom of speech is a right that is violated not only in the most remote countries- such as North Korea, but in the walls of the United States- a country that is known as “the land of the free.” A country that even has a constitution in its place where the freedom of speech is listed in the first ten amendments (U.S. Const. amend I). Today, the victims of speech limitation are the students in school. Elementary, middle, high school, and even colleges limit the rights of speech on their property.

Most schools believe letting kids have a voice and a right to speak freely disrupts the learning environment, promotes violence, and causes a power shift among students and authority figures. However, limiting the freedom of speech in school settings can negatively influence the youth. If kids are taught to keep their mouths shut in school settings- a place where they may spend more hours than being at home, than whose to say they won't keep their mouths shut everywhere? The freedom of speech is an important right to exercise, as it leads to people finding a voice to protest and to hold assembly in matters that need attention. Not only that, students that are able to exercise the freedom of speech will gain more insight on ideas they may

have not been exposed to before; this will lead to schools being an environment where new ideas can flow freely and lead to positive social changes.

Elementary schools are where freedom of speech is the most limited. In a study done by Stamatovic and Cicvaric, they found out that out of 351 elementary school students, most students did not know their rights in expressing free speech and most agreed school was responsible for teaching them that (99). The study also revealed that out of the 231 teachers and 351 students interviewed, “The rights to freedom of expression of students and their participation in decision-making are the least respected” (Stamatovic and Cicvaric 83). The education system teaches obedience and following instructions rather than teaching children to be creative and voice their opinion. This is a hindering factor, if kids were taught to actively think and voice their thoughts, they would be better suited to respectfully argue as they grew older. Freedom of speech conflicts arise from the fact that people don’t know the difference between voicing their opinion and delivering hate speech. If elementary schools focused on developing debate techniques, this would not be so much of an issue. Stamatovic and Cicvaric’s study reveals that creating a curriculum where the child is focused on expressing their voice, helps the child develop better decision-making skills and makes the child more prone to accept responsibility for their actions (99).

Schools claiming that they limit freedom of speech due to it being a harbinger for violence and classroom disruption is not always the case. A prime example of this would be the story of Mary Beth Tinker. She was a middle schooler who was suspended for wearing a black armband to school to support the cause of the U.S. backing out of the Vietnam War. Wearing a black armband posed the school nor anyone in the school any harm, neither did it cause a disruptive environment, yet, she was forced to leave. If one could wear a black armband outside

of school grounds without facing consequences, why can't a student wear one? Ironically, Lüsted and Thain believe Tinker was suspended because people believed "it would cause a disturbance in school," however, the wearing of armbands didn't cause the disturbance; the school's banning of them did (66). The Vietnam War was something that students had every right to protest. The people being drafted for the war were as young 18 years old. It's unjust to expect a student to go to war for a country that doesn't respect their rights to protest such a war. Fortunately, Tinker's cause was brought to court and the court ruled in her favor. Lüsted and Thain deem the court reached a verdict stating, "It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" (111). Furthermore, Tinker's exercising of free speech helped students realize they have a voice to cause change and defend their fellow classmates who were at war.

Unlike elementary, middle, and high schools, colleges allow students to practice their freedom of speech. However, in this era, colleges are slowly trying to change their policies and limit the use of the freedom of speech on their campuses. According to Magistro IV, many colleges are now implementing a policy that creates "safe zones" where freedom of speech is denied. These so called "safe" zones are said to be created to protect students from hearing things that they don't want to hear (371). However, what these zones are actually doing is sheltering students from outside views. Not only is this a violation of the constitution, but it also hinders the growth of the student body and community of the college. What is the point of protests if one can simply go to a safe zone to ignore what is being said? Safe zones are the starting ingredient to outright banning protests in college all together. Schools shouldn't implement filters or warnings to others that may be more sensitive. Magistro IV states, "I want you to be offended every single day on campus. I want you to be deeply aggrieved and offended

and upset and learn how to speak back” (371). Practicing free expression allows one to effectively communicate and learn how to argue. These are the students that will one day be the future leaders of the United States. If they are sheltered, how will they express their opinions and argue for changes and influence the nation? A good example of how a college protest changed views would be the case in the University of Missouri. Luckerson wrote about how African Americans protested due to the inability of the president and chancellor to address the racism and discrimination that has been happening on the campus. The result of the protests lead to the resignation of the chancellor and president and a one-million-dollar forfeiture fee (35). This was good news as it meant the new president and chancellor would focus on addressing matters such as the racism and discrimination. It also meant that it is evident that college students hold the power to cause change to happen.

Unfortunately, the concept of total free speech is a scary one, especially in school settings. Free speech can be abused and may be a ground in creating offensive and harmful environments. Not only that, it does create tension between authority figures and the general student body. In some colleges, freedom of speech is abused and leads to students taking advantage of higher figures. For example, in one article about free speech, Jack Dickey argues, instead of promoting meaningful changes, Yale’s goals are more concerned about pleasing students due to the college’s fear of receiving hate (34). However, these fears can be prevented. Instead of worrying about reputation and letting intimidation from students bully colleges, they should also challenge the student body. If what the students are protesting for is silly, the colleges should fight back. Weiland et al., state, “The positive impact that participation in protest can have on students’ personal growth and development is equal to, if not more important than,

the cause itself” (7). Rather than worrying about students taking advantage of freedom of speech, colleges should encourage it and challenge students to promote further personal growth.

The founding fathers of this nation wrote the constitution and the first ten amendments in hopes of seeing the people in the United States take advantage of the freedoms this country offers. Freedom wasn't meant to have an age limit or restrictions. Schools are a place where learning and knowledge are encouraged; the first step to create this environment is having a zone where students can voice their opinion and listen to what others have to say. Freedom of speech is an essential power to continue the nation's growth. On some grounds, speech should be controlled. There should be no toleration of speech that actually does cause violence or promotes hate. A balance in this is hard to produce, but schools need to commit to the first step of allowing free speech.

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