

Olivia: So, once again, thank you for speaking with us today! If we could just start by you introducing yourself, giving us your name, what you do, your role in the county, stuff like that.

Dr. Eickholdt: Okay! So my name is Lisa Eickholdt, and currently I work at Georgia Gwinnett College as a professor. During the case I was a literacy coach at Puckett's Mill Elementary School in Gwinnett County. And I had been a literacy coach at Freeman's... I wasn't really a coach there, I guess I just want to say I was more of a reading specialist. I was there about six years. Most of the time I was there I did that. Part of the time I was also an intervention specialist. I left Freeman's Mill and opened up Puckett's Mill, which is a school up the road, and worked there for another six years. So I was in Gwinnett County for about sixteen years. I've been in education, this is my twenty-fifth year I think? And I started as a kindergarten teacher, and then I was a first grade teacher, went from Michigan (I didn't teach in Michigan I student-taught in Michigan) and then I taught in Wisconsin, then I taught in Florida, then I came to Georgia. I've done a lot of things with my career: I was a reading recovery teacher, I was an interventionist. My kind of wheelhouse is really kids who strive, striving readers and writers, and that's one of the reasons I used the *Harry Potter* books, because it has definitely high interest. When I was at Peachtree Elementary, I did a lot of pull-out with striving fifth grade readers and writers. And now, like I said, I teach college-level, so it's just been twenty-five years of, and I'm in literacy, literacy is what I teach, so I have a PhD in education with an emphasis in literacy, but my master's is in literacy education as well.

O: Awesome, thank you! Based on that, with your long term of experience in education, how do you feel about book censorship in general, and how do you feel your role as an educator impacts that opinion?

E: I'm against book censorship. I feel like it tends to just target minorities and marginalized groups, that seems to be, the main reason we censor books. It seems to be parents that have a problem with the books, it's not students, and I don't think it's appropriate. I'm on twitter a lot and I do a lot with tweets and things about banned books. I feel like, you know, as a reading specialist and as someone who studied reading, we really have to champion the marginalized students, and when we ban the very books that they can find themselves in, it's very problematic. And that seems to be the kind of books that most often get banned. *Harry Potter* is the exception, but most banned books. Or there's potty humor, I know Dav Pilkey had the one of the most, the top banned book, or he does according to him, I know that graphic novels and *Captain Underpants* are one great way to get kids who don't want to read to read. So, it becomes very problematic when you start banning books, and it's not always a censorship issue. I don't believe in it.

O: And when you first heard about the *Harry Potter* case in Gwinnett County, do you remember your initial reaction? Or you know, what your first response was when you first heard about it?

E: I was like, are you serious? I just thought it was ridiculous, I'll be quite honest. I thought it was ridiculous that you think something needs to be banned because it has "black magic," or whatever, or "work of the devil." I think that's quite ridiculous.

O: And you mentioned using *Harry Potter* in your classroom, so is that something that you would use before this case was brought up? Or did you start using it after this point?

E: I had used it before, actually. What happened was I hadn't heard about the case, and then I had a media specialist at the time— so I had worked at Peachtree Elementary, where I had done a lot of intervention. But then I had since moved to Freeman's Mill since it was closer to my

home. And I was no longer doing special readers, I don't believe, at that time, but I had a media specialist, and she heard from other media specialists in the county that the lady was challenging the book, and it was particularly at one school. Well, the school district it was in also happened to be our former AP's new school, so I kinda had a connection there, and she said "Hey Lisa, you're the only one I would think of that would go stand up for this book, and be a proponent of it. Would you go to the case, and be, they want a literacy coach, and someone with a degree in literacy to stand up." And I said "Of course, totally, I would love to do that." And so that's kind of how I heard about it and got involved, because she said "You're the only person that can." [laughs] "And be the only one crazy enough, and be the one to, uh, stick your neck out there a little bit." And I said sure!

O: And since you were directly asked to be involved in the case, did you feel any hesitation or nerves doing it? Or did you feel like it was something that you needed to speak out on?

E: I did not. I mean sometimes, I don't know. Maybe I just did know it was the right thing to do, it felt right to me. And again I know what the book brought to the table for striving readers. I used it, I know the impact it had, I know it changed their lives as readers; which I think is my job as a literacy person, as a teacher of reading, our job is to help kids fall in love with reading. There's that great Patterson quote where he says "there are no kids who hate to read, there are only kids who haven't found the right book yet." And *Harry Potter* is often the right book. Books that we find controversial, or have a little emotional tug, like I know sometimes *Bridge to Terabithia* parents don't like that because of the girl that gets killed. Those are the kind of books, that emotional tug, that hooks readers. *Harry Potter* was hot, it was cool.

This was years ago, so when I was at Peachtree I was with striving fifth grade readers, their issue was with comprehension. So they could word call, but they were, most of them their comprehension was several years below their grade level, so that's a tough gig. So it's much easier to teach a kid who's struggling with word calling, then it is to work with a kid who's older, like fifth grade, who struggles with understanding. I did a lot of work with them based on the work of the mosaic of thought, and Pearson's working on the seven comprehension strategies that all readers need to read Harvey's work. So we were doing a lot of that work and that's how I used the *Harry Potter* book. I also used it because it was hot, it was new, everyone was reading it. So this was a long time ago, when I mean, it may have been out a year or two. I don't know the year but you could look it up, because it was the year the movie was coming out. So the other reason I wanted to read it is because I knew all my kids were gonna go see that movie, and they would never read the book. I knew I wanted to read it before, with them, before they saw the book [on film]. So I used it in class, I taught tons of great stuff, I mean the work you can do with that book. There's so much inferring you have to do, so much predicting, so many questions, the symbolism, the character study there, there's so much great work you can do with that book. So we did that work. And I would do the book on tape, so they would listen a few times to the book on tape and then we would go back and reread the part they had listened to and pull out the comprehension. Again I had kids who were reading at a second grade level, and these were kids who wanted to *stay in from recess* to listen to the book and work on it more. So when you have kids begging you to stay in from recess to read, you're doing the right thing. Right? And so I know it turned many kids into readers, and it was mainly because the amount of scaffolding and the work we could do that helped them become stronger readers.

I also know series books are huge resources in kids' reading lives. So if I could get them to understand the first in a series, then they have all that background now so if they do go on and read the second book and the third book, right, they've got that base. Because series book are, research shows that most strong readers start in some kind of series. So that was the reason for using it, and I was very unapologetic for it, and I was happy to share that at the trial. I didn't really get too much of a chance at the trial to say all that, but I was proud to take up its defense. It's very worthy of that. The trial was a little crazy though, so.. [laughs]

O: [laughs] So, speaking of that, what was your experience at the trial? What do you remember from that?

E: You know, it was really... I'll tell you the things that struck me. So again, that was 2007, when you, I'll tell you what shocked me when your partner sent me the link to the article, I had never even seen that article, like where it said "SHOCKING..."

O: Oh really?

E: It stood out to me that there was so much action, cause I think they were trying to say "no one's using this" and I was like "I used it, for this research." So you know, again it was a long time ago but the thing that struck me was one thing, the mom that was challenging it had never read the book. Which really made me mad. And then she said, she made a comment she said "well I don't need to read pornography to know it's not good." And I said, I thought, I didn't say it. My thought was "Yes you do, if you're trying to ban someone else from reading it." Right? If you wanted to say "I'm not reading that because I know it's inappropriate and it's nothing I want to read," for example pornography, then great! It's not good. Yes, you're right, you don't have to look at it to know pornography is inappropriate. But when you're trying to tell the rest of

the world, or a district that has 170,000 students in it at the time, not to allow kids to read that book, then yes you do. You do need to read it. And so she hadn't even read the book, which was ridiculous to me it. It was ridiculous to me that it even went to this trial, or panel or whatever.

I'll tell you the craziest thing that stood out to me. The craziest thing that stood out to me was at the end, she had 1 people there to support her, and there was a woman there, and she had had an accent and it felt like maybe it was, like, Lithuanian, that's just what stood out to me. So she stood up and was like... "Is there anyone else" was asked, "regarding the meaning, is there anyone else who has a comment about the book?" And she, this is where it got me: So she stands up and says "Yes, I have a comment. Harry Potter is the work of the devil, and it possesses spirits." And she said "My son was in the classroom," In a third grade classroom in some school in Gwinnett County, and the teacher had the poster of *Harry Potter* in her room. And she said "He was terrible, he was misbehaved, so I had all these meetings with the teacher, and he couldn't behave, and he couldn't do well in her class." So I think, now, this is the part I don't know. I think she asked the teacher to take down the poster and the teacher refused or whatever, but she demanded that her child be moved or put in another school or, I don't know, it's foggy with me on that part. But she moved him to a different classroom, and when he was out of the room with the poster, he was fine. And she said it was because the poster possessed him. And I'm sitting there, so she's saying this, and everyone's listening to her, and I'm looking around going "Okay, where is candid camera?" You're probably too young to remember candid camera, but I was like "come on." I remember at the time sitting there, [thinking] "We have to act like this is a legitimate thing? That a poster possessed your child and made him bad?" It had

to be taken seriously. It was like the whole time, I remember I was just like “this cannot, please tell me, is anyone here...” And we did it. And I was just like, “that’s ridiculous.” And no one stood up and said that. I feel like, we want to give a voice to people, but there does come a time when truth has to be spoken. And I think saying a poster possessed your child is a time. Someone around me should have spoken up and said “Hmm.” But, I don’t know if they didn’t say anything cause they were like “okay, they’re making our case for us.” So yeah the one thing that stood out for me was that she hadn’t read the book, and she, yeah. That was just a weird thing. So I just felt like “that’s just kinda crazy.” Then you know of course it wasn’t banned, but I do know, I think a few months later, whenever she lost the appeal, she then tried to get *The Golden Compass* banned.

O: Really?

E: Or she was going to try was what I heard sort of through the grapevine. And then it didn’t go anywhere.

O: Wow that’s really interesting, I didn’t know that!

E: Yeah

O: It’s weird to think about, because I was actually a student in Gwinnett County at that time, but I was, was ten, so I was not at the age where I would have remembered any of it. But it is very interesting to see from that angle, for sure.

E: Yeah! And I think Gwinnett did a good job. You know, they did honor her, and I think you have to approach it [that way], just that one thing was that crazy trial!

O: Right

E: And I do feel like that was wrong, that she didn't read the book. You cannot ban things and everyone else from something that you find personally objectionable. If you're going to, then you must dive into it, right? Like she just heard, and who'd she hear it from?.

O: Do you remember, was there a big community outpour for this case? Did you remember it being pretty crowded or was it just kind of the people that were directly involved that were there?

E: It feels like mostly it was just the people who were directly involved, like I said. There was a small audience, but it was in a room there wouldn't have been. Gwinnett County may have intentionally kept it on the downlow to kinda underplay it, I don't know. I mean there were definitely an audience, because not only the woman who said the thing about the poster but then she [Mallory] had a couple other witnesses stand up for her. And then of course there was the panel that I was on, but it wasn't really big, no.

O: Let me see what else we've got. Thank you for answering all these questions by the way,

E: Oh sure!

O: This has been really really fascinating, this has been so cool. Okay let's see. So as an educator yourself, if a student or teacher came to you and said "there's a book being banned in my local area, and I want to speak out about it, what should I do?" What advice would you give them?

E: Read it of course, and again I think you need to stand, we need to stand up for these things. And again it's always the marginalized students. I know books like *George* are now being targeted, banned. I'll tell you first one of the things I tell my students in the children's literature part of one of my courses, I say "You have to make sure your students can find themselves in a book." So, kids of color need to find themselves in a book. Right? You have transgender

students, they need to find themselves in a book. Whatever kind of area you live in make sure, if you live in a rural area make sure you have rural, you know, kids need to be able to find themselves.

So books, that idea of books as mirrors. Kids need to find themselves, and kids need to see themselves in a mirror, but they also need to have a window into other people's cultures and experiences, because the research shows that when you read a book your mind, whatever the character's going through it's like you're going through, right? So it brings empathy. And we need empathy in this world, so you need to do that. I have friends that are lesbians and, this was just several years ago my friend said to me, she's like "Lisa I never read a book, I didn't, I never knew anyone else was a lesbian until I got to college! That's when I finally saw myself in a book. There were no books with people like me." And I have another friend who said she was, this was just like again in 2000, she's a teacher-educator and she told me there was a book with a character who was gay, and she was told "You can have that in your class, but don't, it has to stay in your drawer. And don't let it out, you know, unless the parents say it's okay." And it's just, I don't know, I feel like it really is our job to stand up and champion the very books they want to ban are usually the very books that kids need. And I haven't read across a book that I haven't heard of, and sure there could be, I don't know, that I'd say "Oh yes, that's inappropriate, that should be banned." In fact I find it quite the opposite. I have a teenage son, and we really work hard to give him books that are about tough topics. I did a lot of that, now he stays up too late so I can't read to him, but I read to him every night until he was in eighth grade, we'd always read together. And I would read books that had controversial topics, like boning, and drugs, and, you know one of my favorites is *Orbiting Jupiter*, I don't know if you know that

book where someone gets this girl pregnant, and I purposely read those books as a read-aloud because it was great conversation that we could have about tough topics. And it was not like a weird feeling, like “Oh god, I’ve got to talk about sex with my mom? Ugh” but it kind of naturally comes up, right? And so I feel like it’s really almost the opposite. You’re not protecting kids, they know about this stuff, and by not giving them access to stuff where they can think about it deeply before they experience it firsthand, I think you’re shooting yourself in the foot. I mean, denying that these things exist is not helping anyone. So I would tell them, I just think if you are a believer in Young Adult lit, and Middle Grade lit, and you want kids to read, you’ve got to give them books that they want to read and that are real. And so it’s our job to stand up for those, so that the ones in their hands are usually the very ones that they need.