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The Young and Mighty
The Empowerment of an Unheard Voice

As former first lady and youth advocate Michelle Obama writes in her memoir *Becoming*, “If there’s one thing I’ve learned in life, it’s the power of using your voice. I tried my best to speak the truth and shed light on the stories of people who are often brushed aside.” The voices of those who are ignored or marginalized often need help to be heard, and America has a long history of passing legislation to assist those whose voice ought to resound as loudly as any other citizen - to speak a little louder to get their message across. People of color were given the right to vote with the 15th Amendment in 1870, women with the 19th Amendment in 1920, and the impoverished and maleducated with both the 24th Amendment and Voting Rights Act in 1964 and 1965 respectively. School students, however, did not achieve the power to use their voice until 1969, with the revolutionary acts of Mary Beth Tinker that led to the decision of the *Tinker vs. Des Moines* case. Interestingly, the Amendment with which this earth-shattering decision was justified was simply the first and this raises a simple but puzzling question; What changed? It certainly was not the First Amendment, which was submitted for ratification in 1789 and passed in 1791. Since the legislation remained constant, the only possible source of change in the issue of students’ rights are the students themselves. This truth remains apparent today, with the appearances of high school students as political advocates for prominent social issues on national news, newspapers, social media, and talk shows, employing multiple platforms to express their concerns and ideas. The changes in the ability for students to properly and fully use their First Amendment right can be directly attributed to precedents set by revolutionary teenagers, along with the acceptance of student voices as valued contributions to American society.

"It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate" (*Tinker v Des Moines*, 1969). These words from Justice Abe Fortas in the *Tinker vs. Des Moines* case would become famously known as the precedent for students’ rights all across the nation. The case began when Mary Beth Tinker, a 13 year old 8th grader at the time, and two older high school students wore black armbands to show support of a truce in the Vietnam War in December of 1965. The students were sent home and suspended because of a refusal to remove the armbands, prompting the parents to sue the school district for violating the students’ freedom of speech rights. The Supreme Court sided with Tinker by a 7-2 decision, which was a victory for students all across the nation, an unheard-of freedom for students in the right to exercise the First Amendment in school.

The extent to which the students of America could use their newfound freedom would be tested and expanded over the years. In cases such as *Bethel v Fraser* (1968), *Hazelwood v Kuhlmeier* (1988), and, more recently, *Morse v Frederick* (2007), students have attempted to expand their freedoms and test the extent to which they can convey a message using the First Amendment. However, in all of these cases, the students have been shut down, as the precedent set in *Tinker v Des Moines* (1969) is not mutually exclusive from the precedent that the government and its facilities, such as schools, maintain a right to censorship. The idea of censorship can be best explained by the *Hazelwood v Kuhlmeier* case of 1988: “A school need not tolerate student speech that is inconsistent with its basic educational mission, even though the government could not censor similar speech outside the school.” Although this set a clearer precedent addressing the First Amendment interpretation for students within school walls, it also made clear that “the government could not censor similar speech outside the school,” an idea which would be used to fully empower students to make their voices heard.

On February 14th, 2018, the unthinkable happened inside of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. A former student, armed with an AR-15 style semi-automatic weapon, opened fire within the school, killing 17 people and harming many others. After such a tragedy, a voice for good was needed--a voice to lead the people in response to such a horrible event. A voice to prevent such a travesty from happening ever again. And this voice appeared. Except, it was not the voice people expected. It was not a political figure, or a celebrity, or a sports star. The voice came in the form of the surviving students of the shooting. Names like Emma Gonzalez and Cameron Kasky became household names, as millions of people all across the world bore witness to 17 and 18 year old students leading marches in Washington and speaking on issues which previously were only discussed by adults. An unfolding wave of evolution occurred in front of the eyes of hundreds of millions of Americans. Students, after 40 years, yet again became political revolutionaries for voice and justice.

Although the scale of the direct political impact of Mary Beth Tinker’s black armband pales in comparison to Emma Gonzalez’s March for Our Lives, many similarities can be drawn. Both are examples of passionate students determined to make a difference. These young women became household names because of revolutionary actions. And most importantly, they both inspired countless other students to make a difference, too. Although the laws have not changed, the inspiration given to the children of America by students like Tinker and Gonzalez have empowered countless voices that were once brushed. These similarities are summarized best by Emma Gonzalez herself: “We are going to be the kids you read about in textbooks...Just like *Tinker v. Des Moines*, we are going to change the law.”

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