

The Effects of Censorship on Experienced High School English Teachers

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Although much has been written about censorship, few studies have examined its impact on individual English teachers and their literature curricula. This research, part of a larger study of high school English teachers' views on the literature curriculum, focused on how the threat of censorship influenced teachers' selections of literary works as well as their approaches to literature. These teachers addressed the effect of challenges on their goals for teaching, on their school administrators, and their colleagues.

The Power of Censorship

English teachers in public schools must accommodate diverse constituents and often find themselves caught up in conflicts about what texts are best suited for the literature curriculum. The question for schools and teachers often centers on *who* should decide what kinds of texts students read. In recent years, censorship cases have escalated as teachers are asked to introduce more contemporary and culturally diverse texts.

One disturbing aspect of censorship is its power to deny students in one class or an entire school system the right to read particular texts. Mike Rose argued that many schools, in spite of good intentions, actually deny students the opportunity to develop intellectually: "Our approaches to language and literacy as often as not keep us from deep understanding of differences and problems—and possibilities" (128). Even the threat of censorship works to exacerbate the fears of teachers and to undermine their attempts to introduce a broad range of texts that will help diverse groups of students enter a discourse that "defines them as members of an intellectual community" (Rose 192).

A particularly insidious effect of censorship is its power to silence teachers. Few teachers take a proactive stance or speak out against censorship unless forced to do so as a result of public challenges to the literature curriculum. Ken Donelson noted that we know only about cases that have gained media publicity or that have been reported to the *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom*, an American Library Association publication that documents challenges.

Public schools usually address censorship issues by taking one or more routes: imposing a list of acceptable literary works on all teachers, providing guidelines, or giving *carte blanche* to teachers and relying on their discretion. Even in the best of situations, though, teachers are often uncertain about the consequences of selections outside traditional or school-approved texts. Well-publicized cases of teachers whose professional and personal lives have been damaged by lengthy debates that take place in courts of law or school district offices have effects on English teachers and school districts everywhere (e.g., Marion Goldwasser; Cissy Lacks; James Moffet).

The Impact of Censorship on the Participating Teachers

The *IRA/NCTE Standards for the English Language Arts* called for students "to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world" and "to develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles" (p. 3). However, the teachers who participated in my research said choosing such texts could jeopardize their careers. Those teachers whose goals for teaching included reading diverse, contemporary literature took a number of risks to do so.

The selection process of print and non-print materials in English language arts classrooms, as the teachers in this study noted, is charged with social and political tensions that extend far beyond the classroom. Some were

willing to take the risk of going outside conventional selections, and others were not. A teacher's willingness to take risks with text selections was related to several specific factors. Strong support from school and district administrators, department chairs, and colleagues was particularly important to the stances of teachers who sought to include diverse contemporary texts. Teachers in English departments that had active reading committees and regular discussions about texts were more likely to use non-traditional literature than those who taught in departments in which a process was implemented only when needed.

However, even with the most supportive of atmospheres, teachers were cautious about their text selections. Those who were willing to take risks weighed their decisions against a number of factors and developed detailed, carefully planned strategies for introducing potentially controversial texts or films into the literature curriculum. One teacher, who provided a wide range of contemporary literature for her seniors, talked about how she tried to head off potential problems:

Anything I read, even for myself, I'm always thinking of bringing into the classroom, and, indeed you'll see my library in there. I've probably got thousands of books, that I have put on the shelves, and I tell the kids that these are adult themes. And, you know, you're free to borrow them. And I even let the parents know that. But know that there are real life things in there.

Another pattern that became evident in these data was the difference between younger teachers who had no personal experience with serious challenges and more experienced teachers who had been challenged. The more experienced teachers often knew the history of the relationship between the community and the school and spent more time articulating their stances in relation to that history. Younger teachers with fewer years of experience, even though aware of potential problems, knew less of this history. They were not as concerned as more experienced teachers about how censorship might affect their own selections of texts or their personal and professional lives. One younger teacher said he knew other teachers were concerned, but he was not. However, he admitted, "Maybe that will come and bite me some day."

The more experienced teachers all practiced self-censorship to some degree, trying to strike a balance between what texts they felt would offer the best fit with their instructional goals and what texts they believed could be problematic. However, for all these teachers, texts that had sex scenes, no matter what other qualities the text had to offer, were invariably off limits for required reading. One teacher said she had to decide whether a potentially controversial text was "worth going the distance for." Others opted to stick with the approved anthology rather than make such decisions.

Some of the teachers identified themselves as risk-takers because they sought to include more diverse contemporary texts in their literature curricula. They wanted to engage students in conversations that would allow them to increase their understanding of cultural differences and their respect for diversity. In contrast, other teachers, even those who said they wanted to add more diverse literature to broaden their students' perspectives on the world, relied primarily on an anthology. Fearful of potential controversy, they rarely added new texts. Adding a new text occurred only after watching other teachers in their school use them for a while.

These findings confirm prior research showing the dominance of anthologies and canonical works in the secondary school literature curriculum (e.g., Arthur Applebee). Teachers' reliance on such texts may, of course, be attributed to several factors, but a significant factor is the belief that teaching only from approved texts or traditional texts will help avoid potentially controversial situations, a response noted in other research on teachers' self-censorship (e.g., Cerra 36-50; Noll 59-64).

Where Do We Go From Here?

Even with strong support from administrators, school districts, and professional organizations, English teachers may find themselves facing a challenge at some point in their careers. However, careful planning, knowledge about the community, and clear communication with parents increase teachers' chances for support at every

level. Charles Suhor pointed out that "teachers who plan well and teach excellently are often the ones who are under attack in censorship cases," but that "the crisp definition of issues increases the likelihood that the professional integrity of the teacher and the instructional program will be respected, and we will not . . . 'lose a book'" (26).

The best defense is to develop multifaceted support systems and proactive strategies. School districts and English departments need to have clear policies as a beginning point, but they need to do far more to support teachers who want to develop rich, culturally diverse literature curricula. Regular conversations at the district, school, and departmental level are important. These discussions help all teachers, especially those beginning their careers, not only to understand policies but also to learn more about the issues and how experienced teachers have developed effective strategies for dealing with them. Such discussions are especially powerful because they break the usual silence and allay the kind of fearful self-censorship that occurs when teachers are isolated and uncertain. Understanding the perspectives of administrators and colleagues allows teachers to work with a greater degree of confidence within clearly defined support systems.

Proactive strategies are also important in establishing a climate that encourages teachers to include more culturally diverse texts in the literature curriculum. Brown and Stephens advise teachers, librarians, administrators, and parents (or others from the community) to form an Intellectual Freedom Group whose purpose is to coordinate a range of educative activities (125-132). Including censorship issues in a secondary school English curriculum is another strategy for bringing critical questions about students' right to read into the classroom in a proactive way. For example, experienced teachers in New York created an Annual Book-Banning Project for their eleventh-grade English classes. The students, representing two hypothetical law firms, either defended or opposed the teaching and reading of particular texts in their high school. During the process, they engaged in extensive research and conducted a trial that was rated by invited parents, school board members, and administrators. The students received extensive feedback on the process and reflected on their own research and performance as well (Marilyn Maxwell and Marlene Berman 92-96). Other teachers (e.g., Charles Ellenbogen; Jennifer Rossuck) have also made censorship a part of their secondary English curriculum to involve students in discussions about the tensions between personal beliefs and the larger freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution that are often misunderstood, misinterpreted, or taken for granted.

The role of professional journals and books are also critical components in creating a public forum for censorship issues. They create authorized spaces for the voices of teachers like those cited above to be heard by other professionals around the country or around the world. They also provide important information about resources and strategies for teachers who want more information about censorship issues or court cases.

In sum, if we want teachers to take seriously standards that encourage students to read texts that promote respect for the varied cultures that make up our nation and our world, our profession will collectively have to decide, in one teacher's words, "Is this worth going the distance for?" Teachers need more than lists of resources or procedures for dealing with challenges, although these are certainly helpful. They need the active support of teacher educators, administrators, and professional organizations in creating conversations that will help them realize their goals for a culturally diverse literature curriculum.

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