

Risky Texts

By

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- Jules Lester's *From Slave Ship to Freedom Road* (1998): "This book is not age appropriate for the children I teach."
- Virginia Walker's *Making Up Megaboy* (1998): "I don't think the children I teach would understand this book. It's way beyond their instructional level."
- Peter Hautman's *Godless* (2003): "If I think a book is controversial, I don't use it. Who needs it? I have found contemporary novels, too often, deal with drugs, premarital sex, alcoholism, divorce, school shootings, high school gangs, school dropouts, racism, violence, and sensuality. Any one of these topics would get the parents in my district up in arms."
- Ntozaki Shange's *White Wash* (1997): "I think this book makes white people look bad."

As is evident from these oral and written comments by teachers, there are lots of ways to censor books. Teachers are particularly good at it. Oh, they don't call it censorship. They call it "selecting," but, it's censorship nevertheless, plain and simple.

In "selecting" books for reading, teachers will tell you they consider the contribution that the work will make to the topic under study, its aesthetic value, its honesty, its readability, and its appeal to the children they teach. "All that sounds fine," you might say. "It's what professionals should do."

And, to some extent I agree. But, when the net result is safe texts that are not worth talking about, I have to take issue. In fact, I would argue that most of the reasons

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you may be thinking of not using a particular text in your classroom should be reconsidered. Your reasons are probably the very reasons you should be not only be using it, but using it with a vengeance!

Let's get first things first. It is the right of every individual not just to read but to read whatever he or she wants to read. This is absolutely basic to a democratic society.

Second, this right is based on an assumption that an educated person can be trusted to make their own decisions because they understand consequences, can make judgments, and are knowledgeable and informed.

Third, reasons 1 & 2 are not only what schooling is all about but why you absolutely need to use risky texts if you really do your job. It is also why banning particular books in your classroom is a very bad idea even when you think you have some pretty good reasons.

It is bad enough that we have narrow-minded, anti-intellectual, ultra-moral, and ultra-political groups against freedom of speech and of the press. I'm arguing that you don't inadvertently join them or support their cause by avoiding risky texts and in effect preparing the children you teach to think like them.

Keep in mind these two facts. One, when asked, teachers will say they abhor censorship. Fact Two, more teachers ban more books than any censorship group has ever managed to ban.

Said differently, neither of the following reasons hold water:

It's not at their instructional level. What does this really mean? The book has hard words in it? The book contains too many hard words?

Too often, teachers are taught that if a child reads a page of text and comes to five unknown words on one page, the book is too hard. It's not at that child's instructional level. Teachers who have been taught this belief often teach children to censor books themselves by holding up one finger for every word they can't read on a page, with the message being that if they get all the fingers on one hand held up, they should choose a different book.

The problem is this might be a topic that the child is really interested in. Wouldn't it be a lot better to say, "I know you might not be able to read every word in this text, but just read as much of it as you can because you are going to love this book."

I knew all of the words in some of the hardest books I have ever read; books, like John Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916). I'm still trying to figure out all of the relationships he saw between democracy and how we educate. And, one of the most meaningful books I ever read is one in which I still can't pronounce all the words – Makhail Bakhtin's *The Dialogic Imagination* (1983).

Instructionally the problem is we try to make reading safe. Most basal reading programs have teachers introduce all of the new words in a story prior to inviting children to read the story. But this is crazy. We have a right to run into a new word every now and again.

We read to learn things. This is what drives the learning process. It is only in schools that we read to "practice reading." We call it "reading instruction" and kids mistake "reading instruction" for "reading." No wonder we create what Charlotte Huck (1966) called, "aliterate literates," citizens who know how to read, but don't.

So, censoring books because they have hard words in them is not a good idea.

Nor is readiness. We are never ready for the stuff we learn. If we are ready, we probably already know it and it is not new. I'd say the same about scaffolding. I think we over scaffold in the name of good teaching and in the process make learning dull and prosaic.

Think of it this way: Risky texts can help you put an edge to learning.

It's too controversial. Too often we want to play it safe. Few of us got into teaching because we were rabble-rousers. We're nice people. We like to talk about nice things.

We study things like "clowns" and "magnets," not "condoms" and "race riots!"

The teacher, now novelist, Bailey White (1994), tells the story of teaching a particularly hard group of 3rd grade non-readers to read. She said she was reading about the sinking of the Titanic at home one night and was struck with the horror of the sinking, the death, the destruction, the ugliness of the affair. She decided to bring the book into class to read the next day. She reported, "Once those children found out that reading could be about things this ugly, this bloody, this brutal, I had no trouble teaching them to read, nor keeping their interest either!"

Teachers often complain to me that they can't get good literature discussions going in their classrooms. They want to know the secret. The secret is: Read a book worth talking about.

I'm not talking about reading politically correct controversial texts. Read some politically incorrect ones. Read some books you know they will never get in Sunday school or at home.

My recommendation is that you put together text sets that represent lots of divergent views. If 'war' is the focused study, put together books that question war as well as books that describe our latest military machinery. Don't say goodbye to *Babar* (de Brunhoff, 2000) or that there will be no more *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1981) just because these story lines aren't in vogue anymore. Juxtapose these texts with texts that send a different message. The tension is what guarantees a "grand conversation" (Peterson & Eeds, 1999).

Contemporary children's books and adolescent novels talk about contemporary life. This is what makes them good and worth reading. They talk about the very issues that students are talking about and need to think through. Better to talk about premarital sex or homosexuality than be faced with a 6th grader who is pregnant or one that has committed suicide.

Sometimes districts have policies about what topics can and cannot be talked about. More frequently, teachers censor themselves, thinking they need permission to talk about certain topics like sexuality.

I say both of these stances are wrong. If we are not going to send a note home asking parents if we can talk about race relations with their children, I don't think we should be sending a note home to see if you can talk about sexuality. Sexuality is a very important topic to people at all ages. Kindergarten children already have notions of what girls can do and what boys can do. There is a lot about sexuality to work through. Better to be conscious of the decisions we reach and their consequence to us and to others than to hold positions unknowingly. It is easy to feel weird or to be positioned as odd. We know a lot about sexuality and learning more daily. Most parents are probably not going

to talk with their kids in an open manner. And, if learning about sex back behind the barn worked, we wouldn't be in the mess we are. "What better place than in the classroom?" I ask.

I'm going to end this essay with a quote from Justice William O. Douglas of the United States Supreme Court (*Adler v. Board of Education*, 1951):

Where suspicion fills the air and holds scholars in line for fear of their jobs, there can be no exercise of free intellect...A problem can no longer be pursued with impunity to its edges. Fear stalks the classroom. The teacher is no longer a stimulant to adventurous thinking; she becomes instead a pipe line for safe and sound information. A deadening dogma takes the place of free inquiry. Instruction tends to become sterile; pursuit of knowledge is discouraged; discussion often leaves off where it should begin.

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