

Everyday Censorship in United States Public Schools

Ravitch, Diane. The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought?
In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be
no words in which to express it.

- George Orwell, *1984*

Of the twenty-seven Amendments to the United States Constitution, the First is the most well-known. The founding fathers of this country did well to place this amendment as the first; it contains some of the most fundamental and necessary rights the American people can claim and exercise as citizens in a democracy. That "Congress shall make no law... abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press,"¹ is essential in a democracy. And yet these most fundamental rights are so frequently opposed, especially when the ideas being voiced do not agree with popular sentiment. This opposition is occurring in schools today as censorship, a practice that is not only contrary to democratic principles, but is unreasonable and obstructive of students' learning.

The American Library Association (ALA) has long been an advocate of intellectual freedom.² According to the ALA, between 1990 and 2000 there were 6,364

¹ United States. Library of Congress. National Archives. Bill of Rights. 4 Mar. 1789. 1 Dec. 2004 <http://www.archives.gov/national_archives_experience/charters/bill_of_rights_transcript.html>.

² "Intellectual Freedom Basics." American Library Association. 1 Dec. 2004. <<http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/basics/Default2272.htm>>

books which, for various reasons, individuals or groups have tried to remove from public libraries and schools. Of these books, seventy-one percent were challenged in schools and school libraries.³ Among the 100 most frequently challenged books between 1990 and 1999 were *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger, *Goosebumps (series)* by R.L. Stine, *A Light in the Attic* by Shel Silverstein, and *A Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley.⁴

But banning books isn't the major type of censorship that is taking place in schools today. Currently, most censorship is done before the materials even reach the classroom in the form of self-censorship by major text book and test-making corporations. Pressure groups on both the right and the left are using their power to influence textbook publishers, test-makers, and governments to censor the materials allowed in schools before they even reach the classroom. Often, the intention is to avoid offending or confusing students and their families by introducing topics that they will not be able to fully grasp at early ages, such as material that is sexually explicit or racially offensive. But this form of censorship is restraining children from learning to their full potential. This self-censorship, the reasons for it, and the damage it is doing to students are the focuses of Diane Ravitch's *The Language Police*.

Diane Ravitch has long been an important figure in the world of education policy. She serves as a historian of education and Research Professor of Education at New York University, as well as Nonresident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C. She has also served as assistant secretary of research in the U.S. Department of Education for the administration of President George H.W. Bush, and was

³ "Challenged and Banned Books." American Library Association. 1 Dec. 2004.

<<http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/challengedbanned/challengedbanned.htm#mfcfb>>

⁴ "100 Most Frequently Challenged Books of 1990-2000." American Library Association. 1 Dec. 2004.

<<http://www.ala.org/ala/oif/bannedbooksweek/bbwlinks/100mostfrequently.htm>>

appointed by President Bill Clinton to the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB). It was while working as part of the NAGB that Ravitch became particularly interested in this quietly endorsed self-censorship by textbook publishers, test-makers, and state and federal government.⁵

The Language Police explores this issue from both ends of the political spectrum, and shows the ways in which both the right and the left have caused children to learn (or not learn) from watered down and sometimes inaccurate texts. Public schools should not expose students to only one particular point of view, but by ruling out controversial material at either end of the spectrum this is exactly what is happening in schools today. Students are being taught only the versions of subjects by which no one can possibly be offended.

Throughout *The Language Police*, Ravitch shows that through the redefinition of “bias”, texts and tests are being heavily censored by their creators because of controversy produced by individuals and interest groups who object to certain words and topics. In order to avoid prolonged controversy (and for businesses, subsequent loss of sales), corporations and governments that provide educational materials now submit their texts to “bias and sensitivity review panels”. These panels are made up of rather small numbers of people, and their findings do not need to be made public; they are property of the company that conducts the review. Ravitch had access to many of the bias and sensitivity reviews only because she was part of the NAGB, which was to be responsible for the creation of a national standardized test (7). Ravitch asserts that by the time material has been thoroughly cleansed of anything and everything that is potentially offensive to anyone anywhere, text is at best exceptionally bland. At worst, the resulting texts do not

⁵ “Diane Ravitch Curriculum Vita.” 1 Dec. 2004. < <http://www.dianeravitch.com/vita.html> >

represent reality and stray from fact. Ravitch shows quite powerfully why it is imperative that we stop the Language Police from censoring the information that is available and taught to students in public schools.

While powerful and opinionated, *The Language Police* is written in a very sensible, rational, forthright manner. Ravitch draws upon her experience as an educational historian and her role in policy-making to demonstrate some of the absurd reasons for which works are censored. The first chapter, *Forbidden Topics, Forbidden Words*, is nearly exclusively dedicated to brief examples of some rather bizarre cases of censorship. In one outstanding case, a bias and sensitivity review panel voted 12-11 to remove a passage entitled “The Blind Mountain Climber,” from the pool of possibilities on a reading comprehension test. What could be so offensive about the heroic true story of a young blind mountain climber? The reasoning behind the panel’s decision was that the passage demonstrated “regional bias” and was demeaning to blind persons. By “regional bias,” the panel makes the assumption that children not living in a region that contains mountains would have no way of relating to the story. The panel also found that the passage was demeaning to blind persons by suggesting that they were at a disadvantage as compared to people with sight. Most people would probably not object to this story. Few people would argue that it is not a disadvantage to be unable to see on a rocky, icy, dangerous mountain. But these types of decisions are made time and time again by bias and sensitivity panels. Ravitch makes her point loudly and clearly in her first chapter. This censorship is not only contrary to our fundamental democratic principles, but is pure foolishness.

One of the reasons for the seemingly bizarre decisions made by the bias and sensitivity panels is the new definition of “bias,” which was the focus of the second

chapter. In a document entitled “Bias and Sensitivity Concerns in Testing” provided to Diane Ravitch by Riverside Publishing as part of her work for NAGB, “bias” is defined as anything in a test item that might cause any student to be distracted or upset, which could prevent a student from demonstrating their full ability. Such broad definitions of bias also give broad power to the panels that review tests and texts for bias. Initially, bias and sensitivity reviewers were meant to remove blatantly racist and sexist language from texts, but their roles have been expanded to cleanse text of anything possibly objectionable, and seemingly without logical consideration. As Ravitch puts it, “How did the sensible principle of removing racist and sexist language turn into this effort to delete whatever might annoy or offend the most agitated imaginations (18)?”

The two following chapters discuss the process by which test-makers and publishing companies use bias and sensitivity reviews to censor out any controversial material. With some difficulty, Ravitch was able to collect information regarding the bias and sensitivity guidelines of most publishing companies. From the research she conducted, Ravitch could not identify a single publishing company that did not subject its material to a bias and sensitivity review. Because of the interconnections in the publishing world, she was not surprised to find that the documents did not vary significantly from publisher to publisher. One rather astounding fact, however, was that most of the blatantly sexist and racist phrases were deemed so obvious that they were not even listed in the company guidelines (32). Ravitch goes on to describe the ways interest groups have pressured textbook publishers to write against the stereotype, sometimes to the point of ignoring reality completely. For example, editors selecting multicultural literature in 2001 for Houghton-Mifflin were cautioned not to choose passages that depicted Latinos as migrant workers, African Americans as athletes or musicians, or

Asian Americans as a “model minority (47).” Although Latino migrant workers, African American athletes, and Asian American valedictorians all exist, it is not acceptable to document their challenges and successes because it would be feeding a stereotype. Interest groups also pressure publishers to depict statistically accurate ratios of minorities, females, disabled persons, and ages. While journalists and editors in other areas are allowed to use discretion to determine what stories to cover and what language and illustrations to use, in the textbook business the topics, words, and illustrations are pre-formulated. Ultimately, Ravitch’s point is that in a country that is built upon the right to freedom of speech, people should be outraged by this widely accepted, long standing practice of censorship in the educational publishing industry. Yet this process has flourished almost undetected for years.

Censorship in educational publishing is coming from two very different and often conflicting angles. According to Ravitch, censorship from the right end of the political spectrum comes in the form of idealized visions of the past and a desire to control the topics presented in classrooms, while censorship from the left is characterized by idealistic visions of the future and attempts to limit specific words and phrases included in texts. The right is often concerned with broad topics which represent views contradictory to those to which they adhere. Such topics include secular humanism, satanism, witchcraft, fantasy, magic the occult, disobedience, dishonesty, feminism, evolution, telepathy, one-world government, to name a few. Examples of large movements for censorship from the right include efforts during the 1950s to block from classrooms and schools any point of view that could be considered “un-American”, or the more recent and ongoing effort to limit the teaching of evolution. Ravitch points out that these groups are often concentrated on censoring individual books, such as Aristophanes’

Lysistrata, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, or more recently, the Harry Potter series by J.K. Rowling. The left, on the other hand, is interested in censoring particular words and phrases that are deemed offensive, and have great success doing so in the textbook industry. This movement might seem to be a much more optimistic than the movement from the right, and the stated goal is "fairness." However, Ravitch asserts that "fairness" is an Orwellian concept in its new application. One of the most infamous examples of this is the ongoing effort to censor Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, because of its use of the word *nigger*. When both groups are able to effectively edit out of textbooks anything deemed unsatisfactory, what remains is fairly insubstantial.

Part of the reason interest groups from either the right or the left are able to pressure publishing companies so successfully is the manner in which states select textbooks. In many states a small board reviews textbooks and creates a list of those it deems suitable. If an individual district within the state wishes to use a different textbook, the state will not pay for the cost of the books, and there are few districts that can afford to purchase books that do not appear on the state list. Because textbooks are published to make a profit, it is financially important to publishers to have their textbooks accepted in states that use this centralized method for selection, especially in large states such as California and Texas. Because it is so financially important for publishers to sell their books in the few large states with a centralized textbook adoption process, textbooks are often tailored to fit the specifications of only a few small committees. This drives competition down substantially, narrowing the market and making it more difficult for small publishing companies to compete, no matter the quality of their product. The

centralized process of textbook adoption also makes it much easier for small interest groups to effectively pressure the adoption process.

In the eighth chapter, *Literature: Forgetting the Tradition*, Ravitch laments the lack of great American literature being read in public schools today. Whether because it has been maimed in the process of removing so-called offensive language, because it is simply not required, or because it has been completely banned from classrooms and school libraries, most children are not exposed to strong American literature. There is not a single state in the U.S. that requires its students to read any particular book or author. Few even recommend that students read any particular important pieces literature. And many of the books and authors considered to be the most important are also among the most controversial. Mark Twain, George Orwell, John Steinbeck, and Maya Angelou are just a few of the prominent authors whose books are frequently challenged. Ravitch has similar concerns with history. Censorship in history textbooks can seemingly change history. Censorship from the right and the left has been known to try to revise the way history is written in order to change the perception of it to better fit a certain set of views.

Ravitch is firm in her assertion that censorship, no matter what the intention, ought to be abhorrent to the American people. In our drive to ensure that no one is offended, we forget the latent meaning in the right to free speech; *everyone* has the right to speak freely. Even when ideas are offensive or bothersome to someone, the right to express them remains. As Ravitch so eloquently puts it, “This is the burden of maintaining a free society...No one has a right not to be criticized or offended (161).”

There is hope. Diane Ravitch concludes with some very concrete and seemingly feasible ways in which to stop the Language Police. The first suggestion is competition. We should put an end to state textbook adoptions so that the market for them is more

diversified and the power to purchase them is in the hands of more people and closer to the classroom. The second is sunshine, or to shed light upon the bias and sensitivity reviewing process. Corporations and governments should be required to make public the decisions to edit (censor) information out of textbooks. Ravitch also believes that textbooks should be reviewed in a process similar to that of other books by critics and scholars, and these reviews should be made readily available. The third policy set forth to stop censorship in schools is better-educated teachers. When teachers are better-trained (and teaching in their subject of expertise) they are able to recognize material that is heavily politicized and is not factual. They are also able to exercise discretion about the appropriateness of the material presented in class.

Throughout *The Language Police*, Diane Ravitch makes quite clear just how widespread this harmful (and largely absurd) practice has become. Ravitch is not without her own biases, and while her opinions are made quite clear, she covers this issue from many political and social viewpoints. Her criticism does not fall upon any particular group or set of views; rather, she criticizes all who would inhibit students from gaining access to a wide variety of accurate information. *The Language Police* is valuable to any person interested in the role censorship plays in public schools today. Written by a leading educational historian with years of experience in policy-making, *The Language Police* demonstrates the extent to which censorship occurs in public schools, how this has developed, and the harm it is doing to the nation's students. Ravitch's opinions, stated very clearly throughout this book, will not necessarily be congruent to those of its audience. However, regardless of differing points of view, this book presents and discusses in careful detail a very important subject affecting education in America today. Justice Louis D. Brandeis once said, "The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious

encroachment by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding (3).” *The Language Police* carefully contributes to the understanding of the issue of censorship in public schools by shedding light onto little-known practices. But it is up to us to see these practices and act to change them.

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