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Censorship: Practice and Procedure

Earlier civilizations witnessed the fear and anxiety generated by the concept of new ideas. Power-hungry dictators and despots exercised their control over information available to the public; in effect, they denied the people access to works that could feed their minds, stimulate their imaginations, and provoke thought, discussion, and, potentially, debate. (Russell, 2005)

In the modern-day United States, such practices of manipulating resources was to be avoided by the creation of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution which states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press...” When faced with the challenges of literary choices and curriculum in the schools one must wonder, how does censorship factor into this right? Do our schools not fall under the protection of the U.S. Constitution? (Temple, et al., 2006)

When literature is judged to be inappropriate for a particular age group or the ideas expressed in a text are considered potentially harmful to the youth of today, an issue of censorship arises. (Russell, 2005) While censors have the valid and noble intention of challenging materials in an effort to protect the rapidly fading innocence of childhood, the reality of the issues at hand makes a stronger argument. (McGowen, 1993)

Children and adolescents are constantly facing sensitive issues in their every day lives – death, abuse, sex, violence, intolerance. By denying them the opportunity to

explore certain literary works, not only are they deprived of access to new worlds, they are lacking the mechanisms with which they may be able to better cope with the very real issues they face. Literature and language gives readers tools by which they can identify with their own experiences, become capable of empathizing with those situations and issues they have yet to encounter, and gain a better understanding the world around them.

Inevitably, a day will come when every educator will have to face a disgruntled parent and/or pressures from the administration or school board regarding some choice s/he has made to include a certain piece of literature or lesson plan in her/his curriculum. This is why it is crucial to have a procedure in place for the day a challenge arises.

Every teacher should be familiar with their school's guidelines for selecting materials based on subject area and age level. (Temple, et al., 2006) A thorough investigation of her/his school's policy regarding potentially controversial educational choices should be conducted as well.

Preparedness is a key factor in avoiding a hostile situation when dealing with a challenged text. When planning the curriculum, the teacher should research whether the chosen text has a history of complaints. Each book should be read carefully, with the purpose of identifying any topic, no matter how subtle, that may generate concern from parents or administrators. It is important to have a clear explanation – and defense – of why the students will benefit from these particular choices and what value they will bring to the learning environment. (Kelly)

Open communication with parents and students is invaluable to the success of a classroom. It is imperative that students feel they can be open with their teacher, especially if a certain book addresses sensitive topics that may make students curious or

uncomfortable. The teacher must carefully address the issues in class discussion and explain the author's motivation for including them; these issues should never be overlooked. Similarly, if a parent feels that the teacher is accessible, they may be more likely to approach the teacher directly before getting those outside of the classroom involved. (Kelly, 2005) While one would hope that educators could be trusted with their notion of meaningful choices in the classroom, having an alternative curriculum in mind will be beneficial should the need arise to utilize this last resort.

No stranger to the issue of censorship, author Judy Blume, who has five books on the banned books list, makes a resonating point: "[I]t's not just the books under fire now that worry me. It is the books that will never be written. The books that will never be read. And all due to the fear of censorship. As always, the young readers will be the real losers." (American Library Association) Hopefully by creating an environment of openness and by being aware of and able to defend the value of potentially controversial literature, this deprivation can be avoided or, in the very least, diminished.

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