

A Case for Cultivating Controversy:

Teaching Challenged Books in K–12 Classrooms

We seem to have come to a moment in the evolution of our culture in which the very idea of controversy is dreadful, its definition warped and twisted into a horror. But when divested of the nefarious trappings we've given it, the word itself simply means an exchange of differing views. That is what I propose that we should cultivate: the exchange of differing views. It shouldn't be a revolutionary idea, but, as a culture, we fear controversy. Teachers and school librarians who encourage students to engage with challenging (and thus usually challenged) literature have, in this moment, more reason to fear than anyone else. I believe, though, that we can make a space for healthy controversy in the classroom, despite the sometimes contentious relationship among "stakeholders"—students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community—and despite recent legislative moves like those in Arizona to criminalize controversial ideas in education. The space for healthy controversy can only exist in a neutral zone where all parties feel welcome and enfranchised.

I teach two undergraduate courses devoted to the teaching of literature: one for students preparing to pursue their credential in elementary education, and another for students preparing for their secondary English language arts credential. I choose at least half of the required texts in each course from an updated version of the American Library Association's Most Frequently Challenged Books list, and I do so specifically so that we can discuss the reasons these books

are challenged and/or banned, reasons and methods for teaching them, and students' own ideas about whether these books should be taught and whether they themselves would undertake to do so.

When we first encounter texts like *And Tango Makes Three* or *The Giver* (in the K–8 class) or *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (in the 6–12 class), students don't question whether the texts are appropriate—until I mention that they are among the books most often challenged by parents and community members. When that discussion starts, most students tend to assume that they should not teach these books. Our discussion then moves, as I'd intended, to a more general discussion of the Challenged Books list and censorship itself. The majority of students tend to report that they are opposed to censorship, but they also assert that they believe that certain books are "inappropriate" for certain readers and that parents should be the final word on what students should be allowed to read. Bercaw (2003), Schall and Kauffmann (2003), and Freedman and Johnson (2001) describe similar feedback from their preservice teachers.

Over the course of each semester, as we discuss some of the legal and cultural history of censorship in American public education, students tend to reshape their ideas about what constitutes "appropriate," how teachers should address issues of controversy in their classrooms, and what their students might be capable of accomplishing. But still, even as their ideas about the value of controversy expand, they remain reluc-

tant to undertake the risks of cultivating controversy themselves. This project has grown from my efforts to give them a scaffold and a safety net for walking that fine line.

Conceiving of Children as Capable

In working through our fear of controversy and ultimately embracing it as the infinitely valuable space for learning that it is, the first hurdle we encounter is our conception of children and childhood. Nodelman (1996), in his influential text *The Pleasures of Children's Literature*, uses Althusser's theory of ideology and "obviousnesses" (that is, ideas that we fail to examine because their rightness is obvious to us) to assert that "our ideas about children are a kind of self-fulfilling prophesy" (p. 67): if we think they are incapable of understanding complex and challenging ideas, we will attempt to protect them from such ideas and, by preventing them from gaining knowledge of and experience with those ideas, we will make them incapable of understanding them.

The problem, of course, is that we cannot protect children indefinitely. We cannot even protect them while they remain children. Nodelman observes that we "often manage to forget—or, perhaps, to try to hide from ourselves—the extent to which the innocent bliss of even fairly well-off children is a fiction," and that this fantasy of childhood we adults would like to create "excludes the experience of the many children who are sexually or physically abused, and of the even more numerous ones who go through the ordinary but nevertheless painful traumas of growth and adjustment to human existence" (p. 77). When we deny children access to stories about people who have faced struggle and trauma, who have felt different and alone, we deny them the chance to learn about—and talk about with their teachers, their peers, and their parents—struggles from a place of safety, and we deny them the chance to learn that the struggles they themselves have faced are shared. Koehnecke (2001) explains that "[w]hen children read about others who face emotional problems, they can be helped in coming to terms with their own repressed emotions of fear, anger, and grief" (p. 29). When we deny them these experiences, we deny them the chance to learn that those who do struggle are not freaks, misfits, or otherwise Other.

Nodelman (1996) also rebuts Piaget's stages of cognitive development, categories on which reservations about a child's readiness for challenging subject matter often depend. He notes that in the many decades since Piaget shared his theory (in which human cognition matures in linear fashion through "preoperational," "concrete operational," and "formal operational" stages—a path from magical thinking through concrete concepts to abstract thought), his idea has been repeatedly challenged, tested, and found wanting. Though Piaget remains entrenched in educational psychology, his theory, Nodelman contends (and I agree), is only useful when understood as a general observation rather than as a rigid linear process. Humans are just not that tidy and predictable.

Many children who, when held to a Piagetian framework, would be considered incapable of understanding figurative language or grasping thematic implications in stories or making contextual connections between their lives and the stories they read, do exactly that. "What was thought to be theoretically impossible has proven to be possible in the right circumstances—particularly when adults make the task relevant" (Nodelman, 1996, p. 78). In other words, when we take the opportunity to share challenging work with children and are available and open to their questioning and discussion, their potential to understand increases commensurately. When we believe that children are capable, they are. And capable, thoughtful children become capable, thoughtful adults. A belief that children are capable of understanding and synthesizing complex and challenging ideas is itself an ideology, an "obviousness," as Nodelman points out (p. 83), but it is positive and empowering for both children and adults.

An ideology that regards children as capable and thoughtful people has the added benefit of being politically and morally neutral at its core. While we as individuals might value a whole host of opposing ideals, I think we can all support the ideal that children should grow into capable, thoughtful adults. Regardless of our position on what kinds of choices

When we believe that children are capable, they are. And capable, thoughtful children become capable, thoughtful adults.

Because debates about censorship and appropriateness are ideological and the “stakeholders” tend to be wrapped up in their own obviousnesses.

are “wrong,” we all want children to be able to make good, careful choices, and we want them to grow into adults who make good, careful choices. I argue that teachers and parents need not necessarily agree on which choices are good choices in order to work together to help children learn to make them.

The Nature of Censorship vs Controversy

When we talk about censorship in schools, our cultural concept of the debate is unfortunately simplistic and wrongheaded, and we see each other as cardboard stereotypes: on one side, left-wing, activist teachers pushing a radical political agenda on unsuspecting, impressionable students; on the other, backward, narrow-minded, fundamentalist parents refusing to allow children to think for themselves. Because debates about censorship and appropriateness are ideological and the “stakeholders” tend to be wrapped up in their own obviousnesses, and because what is at stake is influence over children, we probably shouldn’t be surprised that the lines are so starkly drawn. With the sides eying each other suspiciously over the rims of their foxholes, there doesn’t seem to be any common ground. But there *is* common ground. We all want to offer the best possible education to our students, our children. If we can come to the negotiation agreeing on that one principle, there is room to build a foundation of trust.

Besides, though we think of the combatants on this battleground of the “culture wars” as parents versus teachers and librarians, parents are not the only agents of censorship, and active community challenges to books are not the only obstacles keeping children from quality books with controversial content. Censorship occurs on every side. What I’ll call “preemptive censorship”—self-censorship by publishers, libraries, schools, teachers, and booksellers—is the first barrier. In a way, it’s the most insidious, because it happens quietly, with little or no publicity, unbeknownst to most readers. Preemptive censorship is censorship that occurs in anticipation of a challenge that has not

yet happened, a means to avoid it. It occurs when a publisher chooses not to publish a book—or a library, school, teacher, or bookseller chooses not to order it—expressly because its content might be controversial. Preemptive censorship also occurs when a school, library or bookseller chooses to locate a book in its inventory out of reach of a particular audience because its content is deemed somehow inappropriate. This kind of censorship is rarely if ever included in censorship data.

Curry (2001) and Aronson (2003) both describe this preemptive censorship. Aronson (2003), a publishing executive, calls its occurrence in his industry “silent censorship” (p. 76), because it happens unnoticed by anyone except the person deciding to reject the potentially controversial text. He ascribes it to fear—fear on the part of a publisher (or a bookseller) that a book won’t sell, or on the part of school and community libraries that a book will draw protest because they themselves deem the content “too hot” (p. 78). Preemptive, silent censorship is impossible to track, and almost impossible to combat, because no one really knows it’s happening—at least not until it’s too late.

The irony, of course, is that books that are not released or made available to the public don’t even have the chance to become controversial. We don’t know whether they would elicit protest, because we haven’t had the chance to read them. And sometimes a book is not reprinted because a publisher has second thoughts. Aronson describes that situation regarding the gay-themed YA novel *Damned Strong Love*, by Lutz Van Dyke, which was not reprinted due to publisher’s concerns about the content’s potential for controversy—even though the book had not drawn protest (p. 77). A book rejected by publishers due to qualms about its content or left to languish in a dark corner by librarians is still a censored book, even if no one is picketing the library or writing letters to the school board. That silent, preemptive censorship shapes what’s available for students to read and, therefore, shapes what they know.

Moreover, preemptive censorship shapes the ways the community engages with the texts that are released. The more unusual the content of a book, the stronger the potential reaction against it. The fewer books we have an opportunity to read about a “hot” topic, the more likely those books that are published

will be perceived as unrepresentative, inappropriate, one-sided, and offensive—and the more we simultaneously expect those fewer books to *be* representative and condemn them for promulgating stereotypes.

Aronson puts it succinctly: “One person says a book about, say, a Muslim who has anti-American views is true, and another says that, since there are so few books about Muslims, and they are so frequently stereotyped, we need positive images, not negative ones, no matter how true” (p. 79). This places us between the horns of a dilemma: which should we privilege—the authenticity and integrity of an individual story, or the sensitivities (perceived or actual) of a particular group of people?

I argue that we must privilege the former. Readers don’t relate to, or react viscerally to, what bores them—and sanitized content is boring. If a reader relates personally to a story, or reacts viscerally—whether positively or negatively—that’s a valuable moment, one that could lead readers to some kind of self-discovery or insight into their local or global world. Scales (2001) suggests a variety of healthy, ideologically neutral ways to engage students in challenging texts to help them establish meaningful, safe dialogue. We should embrace opportunities for children to learn important lessons about themselves, each other, and the world in safety, with teachers and parents to guide them; we let them down when we leave them in ignorance to figure it all out on their own, especially when the scary stuff is *actually happening* to them or those they care about. When we divest literature of anything that might be exciting or upsetting or infuriating, we leave nothing to talk about. Without anything to talk about, there is nothing to learn.

This argument has been made before; in fact, it’s been made for decades. And still the polemic rages on. We seem no closer to a resolution (we are actually growing farther apart), yet I remain convinced that we can reach *détente*. Earlier, I cast the debate in the harsh, simplistic terms with which each side tends to label the other. Now, I’ll recast the sides in their best lights: on one side are those who believe that access to the widest possible array of ideas across the sociopolitical spectrum offers the best opportunity for students to learn and grow, and that public educators should be the final arbiters on appropriate content for their students; on the other side are those who feel equally strongly that children should be innocent of

the harsher realities of the world for as long as possible and that parents should be empowered to decide what is or is not appropriate material for their own children.

In the heat of conflict, harsh rhetoric is often spouted and the opposition sneeringly discounted,

but these are both compelling arguments. It is not unreasonable that parents would be interested in and concerned about what their children are reading, discussing, and learning about in school. Parental involvement in their children’s lives and education is, of course, *ideal*. But neither is it unreasonable that teachers expect to be considered experts in the content of their classrooms and expect a measure of deference regarding their pedagogical choices. As Bercaw (2003) points out, “earning a teaching credential inherently represents an individual’s achievement as one who is able to make decisions in a thoughtful critical manner” (p. 33). Teachers make educated, informed choices in the classroom.

While the conflict has remained so hot, parents and communities have learned to exert a great deal of influence over the choices made in the classroom. Pipkin and Lent (2002) describe (from the perspective of teachers undergoing a strenuous and often extremely unpleasant battle) how much influence a community can have when texts teachers select are challenged. But, as Degroff (2009) and Petress (2005) (and ultimately Pipkin and Lent) explain, when the courts become involved, the law has consistently come down on the side of educators.

DeGroff considers the legal trend on the issue of censorship in schools since the landmark 1987 case *Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education*, a Tennessee case in which fundamentalist Christians sued their public school board in protest over the selection of required textbooks, complaining that “the textbooks systematically marginalized traditional values and promoted beliefs at odds with their Christian faith” (p. 82) and that the board refused to allow alternative

When we divest literature of anything that might be exciting or upsetting or infuriating, we leave nothing to talk about. Without anything to talk about, there is nothing to learn.

Good citizens know how to think critically, are respectful of and willing to consider others' points of view, and can defend their own.

reading selections. The judge ruled that “the First Amendment guaranty of free exercise did not protect the students ‘from exposure to morally offensive value systems or . . . to antithetical religious ideas’” (pp. 84–85). Though the case bounced back and forth in appeal, the final ruling supported the original, with the appellate judge finding that:

even if the district’s policy had burdened the plaintiff’s free exercise rights, the burden was justified by the state’s compelling interest in ‘[t]eaching students about complex and controversial social and moral issues [in preparation for] citizenship and self-government’ (p. 86).

This is an important point to stress: the courts determined that *even if individual free exercise rights had in fact been burdened* by the school’s textbook selection and refusal to offer an alternative, those individual rights were trumped by the state’s interest in giving students access to a wide array of perspectives and experiences in the service of educating the citizenry.

Though he ultimately argues that the courts have been wrong, and that parents’ rights should prevail or at least be considered equivalent, Degroff’s review of the law since *Mozert* shows that the landmark opinion has stood the test of many subsequent rulings. Yet Petress (2005), undertaking a similar legal review, concludes that despite schools’ ultimate success in the courts, the legal wrangling often has a chilling effect on teachers’ choices:

Unfortunately, in many instances, objecting parties who lose in their quest to secure decisions they deem correct often resort to judges’ decisions. School officials thus frequently render defensive decisions or opt out of activities or choices in order to avoid the costs and inconvenience of endless hearings, appeals, and courtroom battles. Often useful educational experiences are sacrificed to avoid these battles and children lose out. The loss of confidence in teachers making classroom decisions has grown to large quarter and school administrators and school boards have reacted accordingly. (p. 252)

Here we have preemptive censorship again, at work at the school level, as administrators and teachers recoil from the thought of stirring up trouble, choosing safely rather than wisely. It can be expensive to fight

court battles over the right to offer students controversial material and encourage them to engage with it, and schools are in dire financial straits across the country. But we cannot run from a fight that hasn’t even happened, and we must stand up for what we, as experts, know is best practice.

It comes to this: if we as teachers refuse to select relevant, compelling, interesting materials that breed controversy *and therefore encourage class dialogue and discussion*, then we are not really teaching. The reason we have public education in the United States is not simply so that everyone can read and add. Education is public because it is in the country’s interest that its citizenry be educated. Good citizens know how to think critically, are respectful of and willing to consider others’ points of view, and can defend their own.

Challenges to Using Controversy to Educate

Though the courts have consistently supported schools’ right to educate from broad perspectives despite the specific ideologies of parents and communities, it’s important to see with clear eyes the real challenges of cultivating controversy. Some of those challenges supersede any individual teacher’s ability to combat them. Very recently, new challenges to the juridically endorsed idea of the broader purpose of education—and even to the definition of “good citizens”—have arisen. The most telling and worrisome example is H.B. 2281, a new law in Arizona that, in effect, prohibits ethnic studies programs. H.B. 2281 was signed by Governor Jan Brewer in December 2010, went into effect on 31 December 2011, and was immediately and aggressively implemented in the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) by the state Superintendent of Education, John Huppenthal. The law states, in part:

A school district or charter school in this state shall not include in its program of instruction any courses or classes that include any of the following:

1. Promote the overthrow of the United States government.
2. Promote resentment toward a race or class of people.
3. Are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group.
4. Advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals.

(H.B. 2281.15-112.)

Huppenthal used his interpretation of H.B. 2281, section 15-112, and of the curriculum of the TUSD Mexican American Studies (MAS) program to determine that the MAS program, among other complaints, promoted race resentment, was designed primarily for Mexican American students, and advocated ethnic solidarity. He shut the program down almost immediately upon the law going into effect. That decision was upheld in district court.

In a January 18, 2012, interview with Michelle Morris on National Public Radio, Huppenthal maintained that his quarrel was not with the books assigned in MAS courses but with the bias he perceived in the instruction:

The books aren't of concern at all. You know, I tell people you can bring *Mein Kampf* into the classroom, but you'd better be really careful about the viewpoint in which you're bringing that into the classroom. So it's never the book. It's all about what's going on, the kind of behaviors, and so what we see replete through the lesson plans were a characterization and literally the creators of the Mexican American studies classes . . . they were very explicit. They laid this out in a journal article. They said they were going to racemize the classes using [Paulo Friere]—he's a writer of the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, and he, right in his book, talks about [how] that word *oppressed* comes right out of *The Communist Manifesto*. And he talks about having a Marxist structure where the entire history of mankind is the struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed and characterizing—bringing that characterization into this. So the racemizing of the class was to imbue a sense that the oppressed are Hispanic kids and the oppressor is a white Caucasian power structure. And we felt that, in and of itself—and it was replete that that plan [was] to racemize those classes. . . . (Note: elisions were used only to compensate for the most awkward constructions inherent in an oral interview transcript.)

One wonders if it's possible that Arizona's decision to censor an entire academic field could boil down to no one in John Huppenthal's office or on the Tucson Unified School District school board remembering their high school chemistry. Huppenthal is misunderstanding the word "racemize"—later in the interview, he tells Morris that it's a word the authors of the journal article about MAS "created in their journal article."¹

Now, I'm an English professor, and my own knowledge of chemistry is limited, but a racemic mixture, as I understand it, is one comprised of equal parts of opposing ("left-handed" and "right-handed") molecules. Used as a metaphor for the MAS cur-

riculum in Tucson, racemizing ideas would seem to be best practice—creating a whole out of equally powerful but contradictory parts. In other words, a racemized curriculum would include all perspectives in all their complexity. That's best practice *and* completely within the supposed spirit of H.B. 2281, the first section of which states: "The Legislature finds and declares that public school pupils should be taught to treat and value each other as individuals and not be taught to resent or hate other races or classes of people" (H.B. 2281, section 15-111). It seems that Huppenthal, et al., saw the first four letters of the word "racemize" and stopped thinking there.²

Huppenthal's misreading—or, at least, limited reading—of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is also telling, and it speaks to an apparently instinctual antagonism within a significant portion of American society to ideas like "communism" and "Marxism." That antagonism seems to belie Huppenthal's insistence that the law is unbiased as well as his insistence that "it's never the book."

In fact, the disbanding of Mexican American Studies in Tucson has had the specific effect of banning books, both directly and indirectly. Seven books were officially removed from shelves throughout the district, boxed up, and sent to storage, far away from student hands. Herreras (2012) shared that list for the *Tucson Weekly*:

1. *Critical Race Theory*, by Richard Delgado
2. *500 Years of Chicano History in Pictures*, edited by Elizabeth Martinez
3. *Message to Aztlan*, Rodolfo Corky Gonzalez
4. *Chicano! The History of the Mexican Civil Rights Movement*, by Arturo Rosales
5. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by Paulo Freire
6. *Rethinking Columbus: The Next 500 Years*, edited by Bill Bigelow and Bob Peterson
7. *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, by Rodolfo Acuña

That's the list of books officially, expressly banned by the TUSD (though, of course, the TUSD does not use the word "banned"). When we also consider the books that had been taught in now-discontinued MAS courses, books to which students will have effectively no access or materially compromised access, the list is much longer. Calderón (2012) provides the complete list in her post for *La Política*. It is too long to share in

its entirety here, but I offer a representative sampling in Figure 1.

Yes, it is effectively about the books. It's about the books because books are the tangibles of instruction. One can point to the word "Marxism" in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. One can bring a copy of *The Fire Next Time* to a school board meeting and read a passage, out of context, wherein Baldwin expresses rage at white society. The intangible—what teachers and students do with those books, the context they understand and the context they create—is much harder to carry into a school board meeting and complain about. The context is harder to apprehend and thus harder to trust. It is also where education actually happens. We educators need to do a better job of forging bonds of trust with our communities. We need to pull back the curtain a bit and invite parents into their children's education in more individual, intimate ways.

H.B. 2281 is a new law and sure to be thoroughly tested in the courts. If precedent continues to hold, and the free exchange of ideas continues to be valued by the judicial branch as a whole, then the law will be struck down. Still, juridical support, which is far removed from the classroom, is not much of a shield for any individual teacher, and not much of a deterrent to parents acting out of a perceived need to protect their children. Pipkin and Lent describe a tortuously long year in their teaching careers in Florida during the 1980s, a year that started with a letter of protest from a parent to the school board superintendent regarding a middle school reading selection and ended with neither of them working at Mowat Middle School, the school in question. Despite overwhelming support from most parents of these teachers' students,

the issue was politicized in the community at large, and Pipkin and Lent, with their English department colleagues, were pilloried at endless board meetings and around their town. In their case, their administrators consistently sided with the community, and, at the local level, the teachers repeatedly lost appeals and petitions. They were called all manner of names and, eventually, as they held their ground, they even received death threats. They finally took the issue into the courts, during which process the case was settled, and most of the restrictions to teachers' materials were removed.

In the meantime, the case garnered national attention, including a cover story in the *New York Times Magazine*, after which the town gained notoriety as "the town that banned Shakespeare" (p. 71). Shakespeare had indeed been banned after the superintendent, overwhelmed by trying to determine what texts would be appropriate, reduced the decision to a simple mathematical formula (factoring the number of profanities or "vulgar" or sexual references [p. 71] a book contained) in order to determine its value. That attempt to quantify literary merit resulted in a list of 64 books banned from the entire school district, including, among other well-known and highly canonical titles:

The Great Gatsby
Lord of the Flies
Animal Farm
Twelfth Night
The Crucible
Great Expectations
Hamlet
The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin
The Red Badge of Courage
Fahrenheit 451
The Glass Menagerie
The Call of the Wild
The Merchant of Venice
King Lear
Wuthering Heights
Of Mice and Men
A Raisin in the Sun
To Kill a Mockingbird (pp. 71-72)

National opinion favored the teachers; Pipkin, in fact, won a Courage Award in 1989 for her stalwart defense of herself and her profession. Negative

Ten Little Indians, by Sherman Alexie
The Fire Next Time, by James Baldwin
Woman Hollering Creek, by Sandra Cisneros
Mexican White Boy by Michael de la Peña
The Tempest, by William Shakespeare
Feminism is for Everybody, by bell hooks
The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fist Fight in Heaven, by Sherman Alexie
Zorro, by Isabel Allende
Black Mesa Poems, by Jimmy Santiago Baca
The House on Mango Street, by Sandra Cisneros
"Civil Disobedience" by Henry David Thoreau

Figure 1: A sampling of books to which students in Arizona now have limited access

national press attention did nothing to cool the teachers' detractors, however. Though the teachers were considered heroes by many outside their community (and many within as well), the community temperature was hot, and none of the teachers involved were still working at Mowat Middle School by the middle of the following school year. Most were working at other schools; Pipkin, the last teacher to leave Mowat, left the profession.³

Pipkin and Lent describe the worst case scenario from a teacher's perspective. Even though they proved ultimately successful in that they were supported by law and eventually won their point, the cost was high. Yet despite that cost, and the bitterness that remains evident as they recount their story, the value of the fight was greater. Pipkin shares a letter she received from a ninth grader who'd read about the story in the *Times*:

Please Mrs. Pipkin, keep fighting. Don't lose hope. You're doing so much good, so don't stop now. I know it's frightening and intimidating, but don't stop. If you give up, no one will be left. Fight for Cormier [the author of *The Chocolate War*, a flashpoint of the conflict], because he's still worth fighting for. If you lose, your students are being deprived of great literature. Keep strong and don't buckle under. Jerry Renault [protagonist of *The Chocolate War*] stood strong, and so can you. And if you do lose, at least you can say you did your best. I encourage all the teachers to stay strong. . . . You've made more of a difference than you know. (p. 66)

This letter itself is evidence of the value of difficult literature, literature in which bad things happen to good (and not-so-good) people, wherein good (and not-so-good) people say "bad" things and have "bad" thoughts. This girl, who read *The Chocolate War*, one of the most-often challenged books for young readers in English, learned from it to be strong and to fight for what she believed.

Hope through Dialogue

Pipkin and Lent's experience serves teachers well to understand the boundaries of the risk they undertake when they select challenging texts, but most debates about school materials do not elevate to such public forums or result in such acrimony. In some, maybe even most cases, schools and teachers simply avoid controversy or acquiesce immediately upon receiving a complaint. Yet I believe that we *can* teach texts

that excite and challenge our students, that we can help them learn to welcome controversy, and that we can do so with the support and cooperation of their parents, regardless of anyone's personal views.

Cooperation between teachers and parents must be cemented in a foundation of trust, which is certainly in short supply in Arizona right now, or in any situation that escalates the way the situation in Florida escalated. To achieve mutual trust, we must agree on two premises: first, that teachers and parents want the best possible education for children; and second, that teachers are experts in education, but parents are experts about their own children. If we can agree on these two premises, then everyone can come to a discussion with a warm heart and an open mind.

Communication is the key, and it is really up to the teacher to shoulder that responsibility. Attached to a class of 30 students are probably somewhere between 30 to 120 parental units—moms, dads, stepmoms, stepdads, grandparents, guardians—all of whom have other responsibilities on which they must focus. The teacher is the nexus between students, parents, and content; the teacher and her or his school are responsible for selecting and conveying that content. Teachers and schools are the agents of education, and education is the site of the controversy; thus, the proactive communication must obtain there. Martinson (2007) asserts that teachers and administrators are chiefly responsible for "establishing a genuine dialogue in which education takes center stage" (p. 188). He shares several examples in which complaints about content were settled amicably and successfully, in large part because open, genuine dialogue among the parties was present.

In order to establish and facilitate open, genuine dialogue, specific and clearly conveyed protocols for handling complaints must be in place at the outset. The cockamamie list of banned books in Florida is partially the result of an incomprehensible policy about what texts are appropriate, and Pipkin and Lent

Teachers and schools are the agents of education, and education is the site of the controversy; thus, the proactive communication must obtain there.

explain that when, in the midst of their court battle, they sent out a query to all districts in Florida regarding their policies, the confusion was obvious:

Sometimes even the school officials who were responsible for administering each district's policy had no clear idea of its provisions for selecting and reviewing instructional materials. In one large school district with separate language arts supervisors for elementary and secondary schools, we got two survey responses with exactly opposite items checked—and identical policies attached in support. (p. 62)

If administrators themselves don't understand policy, how can parents? How can we expect them to trust us when we are not able to give them reliable answers to their questions? How can we expect them to see us as experts?

So, obviously, step one is writing and adopting policies and protocols that are transparent and easily comprehensible. The first requirement is to know the law. In California, the California Safe Schools Coalition (it's worth noting that the CSSC is not a division of the California Department of Education) has published a guide that clearly explains parents' and schools' rights and responsibilities. There, parents can opt their children out of some selected content, which the guide delineates specifically, but otherwise, as the guide states: "parents do not have a right to prior written notice and opportunity to opt out of any part of public school curricula, under California law" (California Safe Schools Coalition, p. 3). The California state law is in keeping with the legal precedent discussed earlier—the right to a public education does not include a right to determine the content of that education. Distributing a guide like this, so that all parties understand their rights and responsibilities, should be a key component of any communication protocol.

The law sets this basis, but simply closing parents off because the law states that we can't have bad policy and ultimately bad education—and it invites the kind of conflict Pipkin and Lent describe. A school board meeting is perhaps the worst possible place to engage in fruitful dialogue, so the next reasonable step in keeping the lines of communication open and respecting parents as participants in their children's education, is to have a specific and clearly detailed process through which complaints must move. A clear, official process has three obvious benefits: it conveys that the school takes complaints seriously enough to have established a policy and process and thus gives parents

reassurance that they have a voice, while also giving the school and its representatives professional presence; it serves to control how and where complaints will be conveyed and directed and thus to limit all parties' exposure to hot tempers. Also, because the levels of escalation are clearly specified, and because the higher levels of escalation are large and bitter pills for all parties to swallow, complaints tend to be resolved before they escalate very far. In short, the process itself communicates a great deal, supporting Pavonetti's (2002) view that "the best protection against censorship is a proactive stance on the part of everyone from the school board to the classroom teacher" (p. 11).

Pavonetti (2002), describing a Master Class on censorship led by Ginny Moore Kruse, Director of the Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC), and Lois Lowry, author of the Newbery Award-winning book (and constant presence on the ALA Challenged Books list) *The Giver*, relays Kruse's construction of a "Ladder of Escalation":

1. Expression of concern
2. Oral complaint
3. Written complaint
4. Public attack
5. Censorship

This is not intended to be a protocol; it is instead Kruse's explanation of the path a text takes on the road to being banned. But I think it serves as a template for a worthy protocol—a protocol that is, because it follows this path, organic and reasonable. I would eliminate the first element (because that happens privately) and choose less-loaded language for the last two elements. The following, then, might be a good protocol for receiving and addressing parental complaints about content:

1. Informal expression of concern to teacher—a conference including teacher, student, and parent
If matter is not resolved:
2. Formal, written complaint to teacher and principal—a conference including teacher, principal, student, and parent
If matter is still not resolved:
3. Public forum—matter is raised and discussed at school board meeting
4. Decision—made following established board protocols for such decisions

A protocol like this enfranchises all interested parties—including the students themselves—and frames the debate. Many problems can be avoided when we convey our professionalism. When teachers have answers to parents' questions, take their concerns seriously, and address them conscientiously—when teachers, that is, convey real respect for parents, parents are far more likely to trust teachers' choices.

Fling Open the Classroom Door: Full Disclosure and Open Access

I've described a process for dealing successfully with complaints. Better even than that is, of course, to avoid them altogether even while we teach challenging texts. While we shouldn't shrink from the possibility that our reasoned, careful choices will cause protest, we might still be hopeful that parents will support our choices from the start. Again, communication with parents is key. Newsletters, weekly emails, occasional phone calls to convey praise rather than censure of their child or simply to update them on current or upcoming events in class: these are all common and valuable means to connect with parents. Of course, a class website is also becoming mandatory; we want parents to be able to get information when they want or need it, and a class website is a wonderfully effective, professional way to do just that. But as convenient as all that technology is, it doesn't replace personal contact for building rapport. As I said earlier, we need to invite parents into our classes more readily—and I mean that both literally and figuratively. Those phone calls are a good start. Though more time-consuming than an email blast or an update to the website, they pay much greater dividends. Teachers routinely call home to report a significant behavioral or academic problem, but few call to report good news. Most parents, no matter how busy and distracted, are very happy to get that call, and it will pay hearty dividends in the teacher-parent relationship, the parent-child relationship, and the teacher-student relationship.

Such basic means of communication are crucial to building rapport, and rapport with parents gives teachers space to use their best practices in the classroom. But we also need a good strategy for informing parents about content. When a teacher chooses a book like *The Giver* or *The Chocolate War*, she or he is

aware that parents might complain. How should she or he best attempt to stave it off?

There are conflicting ideas about this: some say that parents, whether or not the law requires it, should be notified, and possibly given alternatives, if their children are about to read a controversial book. Others say that because teachers are the arbiters of content, parents need not be notified and, in fact, the notification itself could breed trouble where none might have otherwise arisen. Kruse is in this second camp, and goes further, suggesting that signaling the choice of one controversial text could shape parents' estimation of the whole class: "If teachers send a letter home only when they anticipate problems, they are asking for trouble. Kruse affirmed that she believes all teachers want to teach the best books available: Why emphasize one book in the context of a whole year?" (Pavonetti, 2002, p. 14). This is an excellent point. In Pipkin's case, for example, she and her colleagues became entirely defined as teachers by the battle over a few of their educational choices; in fact, their offering of alternatives became part of the problem.

My advice? Pull back the curtain. Don't think of parents as potential enemies or even obstacles. Think of them as interested parties who might have valid concerns. I submit that it is part of our job as educators to address those concerns as honestly and thoroughly as we can. The teacher who warmly welcomes parents into the process might cease to be a competitor for a child's worldview and instead become a partner. It does mean some extra work for the teacher in the short term, but it can save a lot of time and angst later. My suggestion is that teachers send their reading list for the whole year (or semester) to parents, including for *every* book a very brief summary, a rationale for its selection, and—important—the planned teaching focus. By explaining the context one plans to create when teaching a particular text, and by teaching all the assigned texts as a group, one can assuage any concerns parents might have about any "hidden agenda." (I am assuming, of course, that we all agree

The teacher who warmly welcomes parents into the process might cease to be a competitor for a child's worldview and instead become a partner.

that we should not be teaching from our personal political ideologies. If my assumption is incorrect, then I am *asserting* that we should not.)

Include in the comprehensive reading list relevant information about an inexpensive edition (and/or audio and digital versions) that parents can purchase so that they can read along, as well as an invitation into the classroom for book discussions and/or reading discussion guides that parents can use to talk with their children about the books. Perhaps invite parents to lead a literature circle, if they are able to join the class. The reality is that few parents will be able to take a teacher up on this kind of offer, so there's no need to worry that one's class will be overrun with parents—but think of the learning and rapport-building opportunities that would present themselves if *all* parents did join the class for a day. Regardless, the offer itself is invaluable in establishing that oh-so-important rapport, and, when some parents are able to accept the invitation, teachers should be willing—eager, even—to incorporate the views of parents into literature discussions. We value the free exchange of ideas, after all.

It's crucial that even if a comprehensive reading list includes a variety of challenging, controversial texts, those texts are contextualized into the general course. Sending out information only for texts expected to be controversial pulls those texts out of the course context and thus hoists a bright red flag over the material, signaling to parents that they should be concerned, whether or not they otherwise would have been. The purpose of this plan is to try to prevent parental complaints by bringing parents as far into the process as possible. The intent is not to obfuscate the controversial material, but neither is it to highlight it as a potential problem. Include all texts, identify the planned teaching focus (so parents can understand each book's value in the course), and invite parents to participate in a variety of ways—giving them real control over their own level of involvement. By opening the curriculum and the classroom to her or his students' parents, a teacher can minimize any sense of disenfranchisement that is so often the root of most parental protests.

School librarians, who don't often have particular lesson plans they might share with parents and who serve the entire student body, face many of the same kinds of concerns and complaints that classroom

teachers do. It would be impractical—impracticable, really—for a school librarian to send home the kind of reading list I've described for teachers. But librarians usually maintain the library website, on which they could update parents and students about new arrivals, popular holdings, even holdings that might align with units in individual classes (all of these are already commonly included on school library sites). Though it would be quite the (unrealistic) undertaking to include a synopsis of every text in circulation, it would be reasonable to include synopses for new acquisitions, recommended reads, etc. I would also recommend that the school library include information for parents about how they might proceed if they have questions or concerns about items in circulation. The more information, the better.

What Do We Gain?

Sometimes it seems that our political culture is becoming more polarized with every election cycle, and we are growing more judgmental and suspicious of each other with each passing hour of the 24-hour news cycle. Yet—or maybe hence—with every generation, with every year, our collective pedagogy favors greater tolerance, diversity, and understanding among a wide range of individuals, communities, and cultures. Teachers work in the midst of this polarity, and it's not always a comfortable place to be. But it is our job to nurture an educated citizenry, and we must be the bridge between the competing sides of the “culture war.”

We cannot encourage our students to become curious, engaged citizens of their local, national, and global communities unless we offer them safe and structured opportunities to learn about the widest possible range of people and experiences. We cannot encourage our students to assert a voice to which others will listen respectfully unless we have encouraged them to understand why they believe what they do and to listen respectfully when others express differing beliefs. Caporino and Rudnitski (1999) remind us that the “aim of the English classroom is to invite informed dialogue and reflection on language and literature so that students and teachers examine the ways persons and groups build respect for differences or contribute to the forces of hate” (p. 12). If we don't select challenging texts and embrace the controversy they elicit, we cannot invite or encourage meaningful dialogue

and reflection. Without meaningful dialogue and reflection, we cannot educate. But to do so effectively and seamlessly, we must respect our students' parents as part of the equation for educating their own children, and we must invite and encourage meaningful dialogue and reflection between teachers and parents. If we earn—if we deserve—parents' trust, they will, in vast majority, give us the space we need to educate their children to become informed, thoughtful, confident citizens.

Endnote

1. Huppenthal does not give any other information about the article to which he's referring, so I cannot discuss the content of said article, or even if it actually exists, though I suspect it does.
2. At the time of the interview, Michelle Morris didn't know the word, either. She instead uses "racialize" because it's one with which she's familiar. Her own ignorance and choice to replace "racemize" with "racialize" has the inadvertent effect of accepting Huppenthal's argument.
3. In a much more recent case, the court decided *against* the teacher in question by dismissing her wrongful termination case against her former school district. In October 2010, The United States District Court for the Southern District of Ohio dismissed the suit brought by Shelley Evans-Marshall, who had been fired for teaching a lesson about the Most Frequently Challenged Books List and censorship. The Court's decision was based on the 2006 *Garcetti v. Ceballos* ruling, which held that a public employee has no First Amendment rights when speaking officially (Staino 2010). This recent case is unfortunate and does complicate the decision to teach challenged books, but it's important to note that the suit was between a teacher and the public school that fired her, whereas the parties in other school censorship cases are generally members of the community versus the teacher, librarian, or school district; the case was decided on the basis of that employee/employer relationship. Both cases here underscore how very important it is that teachers who undertake to teach controversial texts understand the extent to which they have the support of their schools.

Susan Fanetti is an associate professor and the Coordinator of English Education at California State University Sacramento. She is a specialist in American literature, composition, and cultural studies.

References

- Aronson, M. (2003). Where does controversy come from? A publisher's perspective. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 29(1), 76–81.

- Bercaw, L. A. (2003). Small victories: Reflections on teaching Harry Potter to resistant prospective teachers. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 29(1), 32–35.
- Calderón, S. I. (2012). A copy of Tucson's banned books list. *La Política*. Retrieved from: <http://www.newstaco.com/2012/01/31/a-copy-of-tucscons-banned-book-list/>.
- California Safe Schools Coalition. (2004). Question & answer guide on California's parental opt-out statutes: Parents' and schools' legal rights and responsibilities regarding public school curricula. San Francisco: Author.
- Caporino, G. M. and Rudnitski, R. A. (1999). "General guidelines for teaching about intolerance and genocide." In J. P. Robertson (Ed.), *Teaching for a tolerant world, grades K-6: Essays and resources* (12-22). Urbana, IL: NCTE.
- Curry, A. (2001). Where is Judy Blume? Controversial fiction for older children and young adults. *Journal of Youth Services in Libraries*, 14(3), 28–37.
- Degroff, E. A. (2009). Parental rights and public school curricula: Revisiting Mozart after 20 years. *Journal of Law & Education*, 38, 83–133.
- Freedman, L., & Johnson, H. (2001). Who's protecting whom? "I hadn't meant to tell you this," a case in point in confronting self-censorship in the choice of young adult literature. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44, 356–369.
- Herreras, M. (2012). TUSD banning books? Well yes, and no, and yes. *Tucson Weekly*. Retrieved from <http://www.tucsonweekly.com/TheRange/archives/2012/01/17/tusd-banning-book-well-yes-and-no-and-yes>.
- Koehnecke, D. (2001). *Smoky night and crack*: Controversial subjects in current children's stories. *Children's Literature in Education*, 32, 17–30.
- Martinson, D. L. (2007). Responding intelligently when would-be censors charge: "That book can make them . . . !" *The Clearing House*, 80, 185–189.
- Nodelman, P. (1996). *Pleasures of children's literature* (2nd ed.). White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Pavonetti, L. M. (2002). It seems important that we should have the right to read *Journal of Children's Literature*, 28(1), 9–15.
- Petress, K. (2005). The role of censorship in school. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 32, 248–252.
- Pipkin, G., & Lent, R. C. (2002). *At the schoolhouse gate: Lessons in intellectual freedom*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Scales, P. R. (2001). *Teaching banned books: 12 guides for young readers*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association.
- Schall, J., & Kauffmann, G. (2003). Exploring literature with gay and lesbian characters in the elementary school. *Journal of Children's Literature*, 29(1), 36–45.
- Staino, R. (2010, November 2). Court: Teachers' first amendment rights stop at the school door. *School Library Journal*. Retrieved from http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com/slj/newslettersnewsletterbucketextrahelping/887566-443/court_teachers_first_amendment_rights.html.csp.
- State of Arizona. (2010). H. B. 2281. Retrieved from <http://www.azleg.gov/legtext/49leg/2r/bills/hb2281s.pdf>.