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ABSTRACT

Noting that teacher education students are unfamiliar with the censorship issue, this paper discusses three kinds of censorship the pre-service English teacher can be expected to face, and suggests ways to prepare them to recognize and remedy anticipated problems. The essay identifies the first kind of censorship as that imposed by English teachers, librarians, and parents who reject adolescent fiction and popular teen magazines as less worthy reading material than the traditional canon. The essay advocates using individualized reading programs to counter such canonical censorship, and recommends seeking assistance from the school librarian for information about good new books and writers. Second, the essay identifies teachers' self-censorship resulting from more experienced colleagues' advice to avoid certain lesson plans judged too "difficult" or too controversial with parents. The essay again recommends seeking the advice of school librarians, who will have the best sense of what students like to read, and what their parents will object to. Finally, the essay identifies the censorship efforts of groups from outside the school, and notes that most students training to be teachers are unaware of the motives and scope of book censorship groups. The essay recommends initiating in-class debates on the subject, and inviting a school librarian to share experiences in negotiating such objections to book selection. (JG)

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Preparing the New English Teacher
To Deal with Censorship
or Will I Have To Face It Alone?

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College kids who want to be English teachers know absolutely nothing about censorship. More important, they also know censorship intimately. A contradiction? Well, if you were to tell my students about a group in a community calling itself "Concerned Citizens" demanding the removal of a textbook from a classroom or a novel from the school library, they would reply that nothing like that ever happened "at home." They remember no cases where their reading was censored by anyone outside the school: that is, they can remember nothing that affected their lives that was the kind of censorship you and I worry so much about.

Censorship Type I: "I Know What's Best for You"

But ask them, "Did anyone ever try to keep you from reading what you wanted to read?" and they'll remember. And what they'll remember is insistence by English teachers that they read only certain books and stories, those books and stories chosen, of course, by their teachers. What they'll remember is the insistence by school librarians that they "check out a better book than that" or the librarians' sarcastic question, "Aren't you reading too much of that sort of thing?" What they'll remember is hiding a Judy Blume book from a teacher or not being able to take out a Norma Klein novel from the school library without a note from a parent. And, of course, some of them will remember their parents getting on them about what they were reading. They'll remember that the magazines that they wanted to read -- Seventeen and Hot Rod, for example -- never satisfied any adult. They remember what I call the "I know what's best for

you" censorship pressure that came at them from most of the adults in their lives.

Now about to be teachers, they know little about organized censorship. Though most of these about-to-be teachers don't use these words, what they are saying to us as librarians and English teachers is what Pogo said several decades ago: We -- English teachers and librarians -- truly "have met the enemy and he is us."

Kids see us as the censors. We censor the reading that they do in their daily lives. Phyllis Schlafly and the Gablers are unknown to them. Fundamentalists objecting to what they see as anti-Christian elements in textbooks, Blacks objecting to Huckleberry Finn as degrading to them, feminists objecting to the novels of Charles Dickens as demeaning to women -- none of these forces have touched their conscious lives. But we snatch away their comic books and their copies of Forever. Three or four years or more later, when they are preparing to be English language arts teachers, these former high school students identify us as the people who kept them from reading. Asked, "Who kept you from reading what you wanted to read?" they answer, "My English teacher." They answer, "The librarian." They answer, "My parents."

So the first thing I have to do in this regard as I try to prepare these college students to be English language arts teachers is to help them see that English teachers and school librarians shouldn't be in the business of keeping kids from reading what they want to read. Though, as a preparer of English teachers, I try to be subtle in how I send it, my message here

is. "Don't reject kids' reading. What they choose to read is what they are. Reject their reading, and you reject them."

I try to get the idea across "Be glad they're reading. Show interest in it. Read some of the books yourself. Discuss your reading with them. Swap books. You don't need to pretend you liked a book you didn't. But value the enthusiasm of your students. So you hated a 'Sweet Valley High' novel. That really isn't important. What matters is the fact that some of your students loved it. They can respond to it. You can't. So who's missing the literary experience? Maybe they can help you respond."

That message is very hard to get across to English majors. I know. I was one. I've seen it from the inside, so to speak. I started my teaching of high school English after finishing a thesis -- James Joyce's "Ulysses" as a Comic Novel. You can imagine how helpful that was to me when I faced my two slow ninth-grade and three slow eleventh-grade classes.

English majors who plan to be school teachers are prime potential censors. Are prospective librarians? I'd guess they are. You can almost hear them, teachers and librarians, saying, "What! You're going to read another 'Varsity Coach' novel for your book report? You can do better than that. Here, try Pride and Prejudice." The phrase that comes next, usually unstated but perfectly understood by both student and teacher, is "Or expect to receive an 'F' on your next book report."

And so I push at my teachers-to-be the idea of individualized reading programs. Now, I'm not even sure that there are any such programs out there in the schools any more.

But I keep trying. If I were head of education and libraries in the U.S., I'd threaten, plead, and argue for individualized reading programs as one of the best counters to censorship. Why? First, because kids who have had happy experiences choosing their own book to read will, I feel sure, grow up to be parents who will want their children to have similar happy experiences and so will be less likely to be censors. And, second, because censorship by teachers and librarians will, by these programs, necessarily be reduced greatly in the lives of the current crop of students. And, third, because some of the current cadre of students will be the English teachers and school librarians of the future and will, from their own experiences with books, be much less likely to act the traditional teacher-censor role.

Though the term "role model" is now something of a cliché, the concept it embodies is a powerful one. I don't know about school librarians for certain, but I'm as sure as anything that the most powerful force acting on potential English language arts teachers is not the methods instructor or even the supervising teacher during student teaching. No, prospective English teachers are most powerfully influenced by the tradition of English teaching that 12 or more years they have experienced as English language arts students has established for them. Another cliché: We teach as we have been taught. I expect that we librarian as we have been librarianed.

The long-range anti-censorship goal for me as a teacher of English teachers is to change what teachers and librarians do from controlling to assisting. Unfortunately, changing basic beliefs is very, very difficult. English majors want very much

to be missionaries for "culture." Like E.D. Hirsh, they forget that literature is not something to know about but something to respond to, to be moved by, to be changed by. They forget that knowing that Don Quixote was written by Cervantes and that "tilting at windmills" comes from it is nothing but trivial pursuit information. They forget that how our response to a work of literature changes us is the measure of that our reading of that work.

No one on the school faculty outside the English Department can understand the attitudes about reading that I want my students to have when they become teachers. Not the science teachers, though they face their own problems with censorship. Not the math teacher certainly. Not the P.E. teacher. Not the shop teacher. No one can understand, that is, except the school librarians. The librarians are the only people not in the English Department who can understand fully and passionately what a work of literature can be in the life of a teenager. The school librarians are the new teacher's greatest potential allies.

So I suggest to my about-to-be teachers, "You're thinking about an individualized reading program? You need the school librarian. Make it a joint project. You're both in the same business." And I pray that my students get jobs in schools with librarians who love books and kids and reading, librarians who believe in people choosing books and reading what they want to read when they want to read it. I pray that the librarians in their schools know about and value individualized reading programs. Otherwise, I've set my students up for disappointment.

And I suggest to my students, "Why should the literature program be kept in the English class? Why not pull in other people from the school who read? Social studies teachers? Sure. And maybe the principal. But, of course, the school librarian."

In my battle to keep these about-to-be English teachers from seeing themselves as the official voice of what should be read by whom and when, the school librarian is my best resource. Likely to know more about what is being published than any teacher in the school, and more familiar with reviews and recommended novels and bibliographies, the school librarian can serve, it seems to me, as a strong counter-balance to the English teacher's tendency to value only a narrow set of older, critically acclaimed works praised by scholars in college English departments. The stereotype of a librarian (I won't state it) notwithstanding, I've found school librarians much better informed about good new books and writers than most English teachers.

Censorship Type II: "I Wouldn't Do That If I Were You"

As potential English language arts teachers, my students will soon be out in the schools as timid, frightened, impressionable first-year teachers. They are likely to face a powerful but indirect force for censorship that I find very difficult to prepare them for. Indeed, if I have done the other parts of my job well, they will encounter this force almost at once as they try to implement some of the teaching ideas I've suggested such as using personal narratives and keeping journals. Should they plan to ask their students to write about a personal experience and mention their plan to other teachers, they will encounter the force of "I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Parents won't like it." If they decide to use one of the provocative novels they've read in my adolescent literature class -- novels like A Shadow Like a Leopard and I Will Call It Georgie's Blues -- they'll hear from their more experienced colleagues, "I wouldn't use that if I were you. Parents won't like it."

This is second kind of censorship that I try to prepare my students for -- the pull toward self-censorship. In some ways, it's easier to alert them to this kind of censorship force than to help them understand the kind that I've called the "I know what's best for you" type. Most of the prospective English language arts teachers I've known become angry at the notion that some one would dare to question their judgment about literature or writing. They have a surprisingly high opinion of their own importance and abilities and wisdom considering that they are 20-year-olds who have never taught a class. But then, so did I when I was preparing to teach. At least, in discussing censorship, I am pretty sure that I can start with a strong -- if uninformed -- hostility on their part to the notion of outside censorship.

Still, I know how powerful is the influence on the new teacher of the views of the experienced colleague. My students scorn self-censorship. They call it "wimpy" and claim that they will never yield to pressure from older teachers. But I know better. So, what I try to do is to make them realize that they will face three kinds of powerful pressures to change their instructional plans. If they can distinguish among the three and figure out how to deal with each, then, I hope, they have a chance of resisting pressures for self-censorship.

Wise Advice: First, they need to be able to detect wise advice when it is given to them. Sometimes the "I wouldn't use that if I were you" advice is educationally sound: "I wouldn't use Moby Dick with that slow ninth-grade class if I were you." I consider that sound advice based on educational knowledge and experience. Moby Dick, great though it may be as an artistic creation, is not a work of literature that those slow students will be able to respond to. The new teacher is being told: Don't ask them to read something they can't understand. Good advice' I say.

Wimpy Advice: On the other hand, if a colleague says, "I wouldn't use that novel if I were you. Parents won't like it. Stick to something safe." That seems to me to be wimpy advice based on fear and a general unwillingness to take risks. I don't consider that sound advice.

Ambiguous Advice: But, unfortunately, life rarely falls neatly into two classes, the good and the bad. So, there is a third kind of "I wouldn't do that if I were you" advice that I consider sound but that has the ring of the wimpy, self-censorship kind. No teacher should want to create a community uproar unnecessarily. And parents have a right -- indeed, a responsibility -- to protect their children from harm. The new, inexperienced teacher straight from a university campus sometimes selects a novel or a story or piece of non-fiction that is bound to offend most parents and lots of students. In that case, the "I wouldn't use that" advice might be wise, even though it is suggesting self-censorship. Maybe teaching Forever to a whole class or using the latest hit gay novel from Christopher Street

or some such isn't such a good idea. It's hard to distinguish between wimpiness and accepting community standards. But I believe that my students need to think about the differences.

When I'm suggesting to my students ways that they should go about deciding what literature to use in their classes, the first place I send them is to -- guess who? -- the school librarian. No one in the school knows more about what students are reading. What they like. What they object to. And what their parents won't want them to read. And no one in the school has a better sense of what books have caused concerned parents -- in the good sense -- to raise, not objections, but questions: Is this really good for Jane to read? Will that rough language influence Joe? I've tried to encourage him not to use that kind of talk.

No one in the school will know the various review publications that can serve as a source of information about the quality, popularity, and problems with works of literature under consideration. At best my students have encountered NCTE's Books for You and Your Reading. I require them to buy one or the other for my class in literature for adolescents. But, from the number I see with "used book" stickers on them, I'm doubtful about the value they place on such sources. The school librarians will have to educate them about what is available and how to use it. With that help, maybe the new English teacher can resist the pressures of self-censorship.

Working with the school librarian, the new teacher can select books for the whole class to read that will be liked by most students, that will stimulate most of them to read more, and that will be ones that can be justified to reasonable parents who

might raise a question. At the same time, knowing what kids have liked and what parents have been able to accept can give the new English teacher a security in breaking away from the traditional and safe. Hearing "I wouldn't use that if I were you. Parents might object," the beginning teacher will know whether the advice is wise or wimpy.

Censorship Type III: "Don't You Dare Teach That Filth to My Children

I try to prepare my students for the possibility that they will face a censorship effort mounted by people outside the school. As I said earlier, they almost never remember experiencing this kind of censorship, although some of them come from school systems that I know have been the targets of planned, organized efforts to remove textbooks from classes and books from the school library. But high school students live in their own world, and Beverly LeHaye is rarely a part of that world. Indeed, troubling as it is to concede, I have to admit that the university students that I encounter seem only vaguely to realize that people in this country want to censor the books that children and teenagers read. They haven't heard Anne Frank's Diary of a Young Girl accused of being subversive to religious values. They haven't been accused of "teaching filth to my children" when they suggested I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings to a group of students. Are prospective school librarians more knowledgeable? I don't know, but I suspect they aren't.

When my students read about such cases -- as I have them do -- and discuss the reasons why parents and others might come to the school with complaints about books, they usually react by

saying that kids should have the right to read what they want to, that forbidding a certain book will only make it more attractive to teenagers, and that kids aren't going to be hurt by reading a book, certainly not the kinds of books that seem to be the targets of organized censors. In other words, they say more or less what I would say.

In fact, I find myself having to take the other side of the issue in order to force them to think about what they are saying rather than merely reciting absolute truths. It's a odd role for me to play, though probably good for me to have to carry out. But I've found they hold their views simplistically, mostly without having thought much about them. Censorship is bad, right? Freedom is good, right? Censors are kooks, right? I have the right to lead my life the way I want to, right?

First, I try to deepen their understanding of why people might want to censor children's reading and of the rights of the various individuals involved in a censorship situation. But as important to me is the effort I make to prepare them to deal with a censorship situation if they find themselves in the midst of one. We talk about book selection policies and procedures for English Departments and school systems in general. We consider the mood and frame of mind of a parent who shows up in a school to protest the use of a piece of literature in class. We consider how to deal with such a parent, what approaches will be helpful and which will only make the situation worse. We consider policies and procedures that a school system might establish to deal with a complaint.

I ask them to read model selection policies and procedures

for dealing with objections to literary selections. I used materials from NCTE and ALA; and I try to help them see that the school librarian faces exactly the same problems that they will as language arts teachers: If The Wizard of Oz is objectionable to some parents when it is included in a reader or literature book, it will nearly as quickly become objectionable when those same parents find that it is in the school library and on lists of "books you might enjoy." If Anne Frank's diary is irreligious when it is assigned in English class, it will soon follow that it should be on a restricted shelf in the library.

The librarian is a member of the language arts team in regard to book and text selection and responses to censorship efforts -- as, of course, the school librarian should be in the whole language arts curriculum from reading skills and response to literature to linguistics studies to composing. It is the school librarian who will know the review sources that can be used to support the selection and use of books and films and videos, and it is likely to the school librarian who will know where to look for rationales for works of literature frequently under attack.

Obstacles to Collaboration

When I can, I invite a middle school librarian to come to my class to discuss book selection, censorship problems, the role of the language arts teacher and the librarian in facing such challenges. The students are always impressed and challenged, by the visitor. But, I must admit, when our guest leaves, my students usually express surprise: "She wasn't anything like my school librarian. I always felt threatened when I went to the

school library. I hated to check out a book. I was warned about lateness and not damaging the book. I was never encouraged to read it, talk about it, maybe keep it a bit longer for a second reading." That image of librarian seems to be the most common memory my students have.

I'm sure some of their memories are inaccurate. But my point is, if future language arts teachers are to see their common interest with school librarians in facing censorship, but more important, in promoting reading, they need to remember school librarians as positive people in their lives. I'd propose, therefore, that we try to help every school librarian in America to look upon every student in the school who wanders into the library as a future language arts teacher and act to cement the kind of close relationship teachers and librarians must have. That close relationship cannot begin when the new English teacher joins the faculty of the school. It must begin in the first grade when the future English teachers meets his or her first school librarian and begins to form an impression of the type.

I know it cuts both ways. I'm sure that many school librarians remember their English teachers as dragons who were never satisfied, who only condemn; teachers who sneered at the books they wanted to read, made fun of their efforts to talk about those books, assigned dull book reports on everything they read, and picked apart the grammar and punctuation of those reports. From my point of view, that's bad teaching, not just for future school librarians but for any student.

My point is that people who work together must understand each other, respect each other, have positive feelings toward

each other. English language arts teachers who hold a negative, stereotypic view of school librarians and librarians who hold a negative, stereotypic view of English teachers will have great difficulty working together when one or both groups are threatened by censors. Breaking down my students stereotypes of librarians is, then, another way that I try to prepare them to form an alliance with their schools' librarians. And by helping them to see that the kind of English-teacher image they project will be important if an alliance is to be formed, I also try to encourage them to be aggressive in overcoming the librarians' potentially negative view of them as English teachers.

Conclusion

There is only so much that pre-service teachers can absorb. With no experience and with daily survival their main concern, they quite wisely discard much detailed information that would only confuse them and make decisive action impossible. At this beginning point in their careers, the attitudes with which they approach teaching and its many problems are, I believe, more significant than any particular knowledge they may have about such matters as censorship. Positive attitudes about kids and their reading, cautious attitudes about advice not to try something, open but questioning attitudes about individuals and groups that want to remove books from the school, and positive attitudes about school librarians as allies will, I believe, equip my students to meet censorship challenges with the greatest possible success.