The ripple effect of censorship: Silencing the classroom
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The Ripple Effect of Censorship: Silencing in the Classroom

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constantly self-censor literature and related materials. . . . No complaints have been lodged against me. . . . but the administration in our district has made it apparent that it will not support teachers’ legitimate text choices.” —John*, a high school English teacher from Arizona

Although much has been written about censorship in the schools, very little of the professional literature examines teachers’ self-censorship. Rather, the research focuses primarily on censorship incidents and court cases (e.g., James Moffett’s Storm in the Mountains [1988] and Joan DelFattore’s What Johnny Shouldn’t Read [1992]) or offers suggestions regarding selection of books, censorship prevention strategies, and the handling of complaints (e.g., Hunter and Madsen 1993; Weil 1988; West 1983). Reports on challenges to materials and programs appear often in the media and are summarized annually by People for the American Way, a national organization which supports First Amendment rights.

By all accounts, school censorship challenges—defined as efforts to bar materials and methods to all children—are on the rise and are limited to no one geographic region or to a particular level of instruction or area of the curriculum. People for the American Way (1994) documented 395 incidents of censorship in schools across the country in 1992–1993. Forty-one percent of those cases resulted in the removal or restricted use of materials. What the facts and figures in the literature rarely reflect, however, is the “ripple effect” of censorship. How do these often widely publicized incidents of censorship influence classroom teachers and their choices of literature and instructional methods? Does the threat of challenge and conflict—and even dismissal—impel teachers to engage in self-censorship?

That these questions are seldom addressed in any depth in the research on censorship is not surprising. Self-censorship is difficult to document. It is not apt to be reported or even discussed by teachers and may not be the result of fully conscious or intentional decisions. And yet the existence of this silent, but potentially far-reaching, form of censorship should be examined and its implications for teachers and students understood. Giving voice to teachers’ concerns about the threat of censorship and understanding how those concerns are played out in the classroom are important steps in addressing the problem of self-censorship.

As a former middle school reading and language arts teacher, I have been concerned for many years about the effects of censorship on the teaching of literature. Last fall I became especially troubled while listening to a group of English teachers in Tucson, Arizona, speak about their fear of censorship. The teachers discussed a recent censorship incident and their subsequent hesitancy to use—or decisions not to use—certain pieces of literature for fear of negative repercussions.

The incident involved a local high school teacher-of-the-year, Carole Marlowe, who had been fired over her use of the Pulitzer Prize-winning play, The Shadow Box by Michael Cristofer. Although Marlowe had received permission from her principal to use the play, one of the district’s superintendents later ordered its cancellation because of offensive language and references to homosexuality. She was accused of violating district obscenity standards, and eventually Carole Marlowe was forced to resign. Even though her case did not go to court, it received widespread publicity.

I left that English teachers meeting last fall wondering how teachers elsewhere respond to the threat of censorship. To find out, I solicited written comments from middle school, junior high, and high school English teachers in seven states (Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, and Vermont). A few of these teachers I already knew or had met, but most were simply names given to me by oth-

A recent survey of high school English teachers in seven states shows censorship of literature—by teachers themselves.
ers. Although their responses are not representative of any one state or region, they do offer a fuller understanding of how the threat of censorship affects teachers and thus influences the schooling experiences of their students.

**WHAT IS CENSORED?**

Nearly all of the teachers surveyed indicated that they have been questioned, challenged, or censored for their use of certain literature. They also know others who have been similarly treated. While all of the teachers expressed concern about the issue of censorship, those who have been personally involved or have had close ties to incidents were more likely to express uneasiness and even fear about the threat of censorship. While the impact of those experiences on the teaching of literature varied, some teachers avoid challenges by simply offering their students alternative reading choices. Others, however, feel compelled to limit all their students' reading, writing, and discussion options.

In describing their own and others' experiences, the surveyed teachers cite a variety of challenged or censored materials and authors. Novels are by far the most commonly mentioned materials, but films, videos, plays, short stories, journal articles, instructional programs, and school newspapers are listed as well. Among the wide range of titles and authors cited were: *Of Mice and Men*, *The Chocolate War*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *Black Boy*, *The Crucible*, *Go Ask Alice*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *Toni Morrison*, *Shakespeare*, *Washington Irving*, and *Voltaire*.

The teachers' descriptions of the nature of the incidents and how they were handled were equally varied. A teacher from Colorado, who used *A Day No Pigs Would Die* in her classes, writes that the book was censored, then later placed on a restricted book list. Students are now allowed to read it, but teachers may not use it as a class novel. From South Dakota a teacher writes, "A brouhaha over... *Blues for Mister Charlie...* resulted in a firmer process for selection of materials as well as a very effective process for defending those selections."

Natalia, a high school teacher in Arizona, describes a complaint taken to the curriculum director by a parent who objected to her use of the book *Helter-Shelter*:

The parent had not read the book but made the assumption it was the *Helter-Shelter* about the Charles Manson gang. In fact, the book was about two boys who became trapped in a cave while exploring. I was not permitted to know who the parent was. I was told to remove all copies, and my explanation as to what happened was given no credence. I felt the district found me somehow at fault for the incident.

Although some of the incidents originated outside of the school, others were initiated by fellow teachers or administrators. In two situations, newly hired teachers were instructed or strongly cautioned against using certain literature in their classrooms. John, an experienced English teacher from Arizona, notes: "From my first year at [this high school], I was told by my department chair that there were certain texts in our district that we did not teach, including *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Catcher in the Rye*. That set the tone for my career in teaching, and I have been cautious ever since."

Molly, another teacher from Arizona, describes the warning that teachers in her English department give to their less experienced colleagues:

New teachers and teachers in their first year of conducting a specific class are often advised by more experienced colleagues on what *not* to choose. Examples include *The Chocolate War* and *Ordinary People*. Certain books, available in class sets from previous years, are no longer used.

From this description, it would be easy to assume that Molly and the other teachers in her department are being unreasonably censorial of one another. And yet, given that a colleague was recently fired over a controversial piece of literature, the cautious behavior of these teachers is understandable. They have become keenly aware of their own precarious positions in the school and recognize that fighting for the right to teach certain literature could cost them their jobs. According to Ken Donelson (1979):

The teacher faced with censorship may be tempted to fight back, but unhappily, a rapid survey of the experiences of friends in similar straits and the terrifying track record of teachers willing to go to court will often put a damper on the urge to respond to censorship through legal means. (73)
Molly writes that, after the firing of her colleague, “our department discussed what literature we were willing to go on the mat to teach.” She herself has decided to no longer use The Chocolate War for fear of being censored.

PRESSURE FROM THE RIGHT

Molly and other teachers surveyed view the threat of censorship as coming from fundamentalist religious groups. She comments, “Censorship within my district comes primarily from the Religious Right and from administrators afraid of that Right.” Another teacher writes, “I think the censorship thing will get worse. The fundamentalists seem to be lurking everywhere.”

The perception of many of the teachers about the growth of censorship from the religious right is supported by research on censorship. DelFattore (1992) notes that “challenges initiated by people who identify themselves as fundamentalists not only outnumber the protests of all other groups combined but also involve far more topics” (4).

Research conducted by People for the American Way and reported in Attacks on the Freedom to Learn (1993) shows a correlation between an increase in challenges since 1980 and a rise in activism in the schools by far right and religious right groups.

Paul, a teacher who insists that his teaching has not been “cramped by the threat of censorship,” nonetheless writes:

I have hesitated to use certain pieces of literature because of fear of being challenged by . . . fundamentalist Christians, who object . . . to literature that discusses or portrays anything remotely resembling witchcraft, the occult, or what they consider deviant behavior.

Later, he adds:

It genuinely frightens me . . . that the religious right may get organized enough to take power in my district’s school governing board. Their agenda and its practical application, as evidenced by some other . . . districts, are affronts to free thinkers and teachers everywhere.

Natalia, whose choice of literature has been challenged more than once, is also very concerned about the power exerted by conservative religious groups. She writes:

In the last three years I have had parental complaints that by using Washington Irving’s “The Devil and Tom Walker” I was teaching satanism and witchcraft, and that by using Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” I was encouraging teens to be cannibals. I know how easy it is for a complaint to snowball into an incident and how easy it is for a district to fire, blacklist, and decertify any teacher, and I know how underhanded and “behind-closed-doors” these right-wing fundamentalists operate.

Anne, a middle school teacher from Pennsylvania, offers an opinion from a different perspective. She writes that she has never been censored for her choice of literature, but that, as a Christian, she feels censored by her colleagues:

There is a political correctness about [my school] which is subtle and unnerving. As a Christian and a promoter of civil rights for everyone, including the unborn, I am uncomfortable expressing my views because my views on abortion are in the minority. There is an unwritten, unspoken censorship of such views. It is inconceivable to my colleagues that any liberated woman in this day and age could be pro-life. Further, religious symbols in the form of pins, necklaces, etc. are frowned upon when worn by the faculty, although the students wear them without embarrassment. This, to me, is a form of censorship.

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THE CHILLING EFFECT

Just how does the fear of censorship influence the use of literature and the kinds of opportunities teachers offer their students? Donelson (1979) believes it has a negative effect that “has worked harm, both in chilling the spirits of teachers and students and in placing some books in the deep freeze” (71). His view is supported in the comments of several teachers. For example, when asked whether she has ever hesitated to use certain literature, Natalia responds:

Always. I cringe annually when I do The Scarlet Letter, Catcher in the Rye, Great Gatsby, Lord of the Flies, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Othello, etc. [I] deliberately chose NOT to use The Color Purple and Beloved because of language and concepts. . . . I carefully read everything several times to be sure there is nothing blatantly dangerous (to my job!). I “white-out” certain
words. I delete names of magazines sometimes when I use an article pertinent to class (e.g., *Playboy*).

John writes that he "carefully edited out the brief glimpses of nudity in Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*" and that two years ago he taught Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* but has since decided not to use it because of the "sexual scenes." He adds:

Most of the English teachers at my school self-censor materials but have still had complaints, e.g., that witchcraft was being taught with *The Crucible*. I know teachers who have recently stopped teaching *The Chocolate War* and *Black Boy* for fear of their jobs. And we have discussed eliminating *Huck Finn* because of the controversy around it. In fact, most of our teachers are now reluctant to adopt any new texts at all, and this especially hits multicultural literature hard.

Several teachers, though admittedly worried, write that they have made the decision to use certain literature, despite the risk of possible repercussions. Rachel, a teacher from Iowa, comments: "Sometimes I feel queasy thinking about teaching Voltaire's *Candide* because there may be those conservatives who object to [the] subject matter. But I use it anyway. Let them object to the classics!"

Similarly, Kara, who until recently taught in a rural Vermont high school, used to hesitate about showing films such as Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* as well as *Hamlet* and *Lord of the Flies* but "always followed through and decided to do it." She writes: "I was very upfront with my students and told them that if they had a problem with a piece of material . . . I would substitute something for that particular unit."

**IN INVOLVING OTHERS**

A significant difference in the teachers' responses to the threat of censorship lies in the extent to which they did or did not involve others—colleagues, administrators, parents, and students—in their decisions. Kara, for example, made it clear to her students that the literature taught in her class was open to negotiation. Furthermore, she actively involved her students in censorship dilemmas. Each year she taught a unit on censorship in which she and her students looked at books, music, and other forms of writing as well as at censorship of students' dress and language.

Like Kara, Martin—a teacher of English and advisor to his New Mexico high school newspaper—has involved his students in issues of censorship. Recently, he received in his mailbox what he calls "vehement objection" to two controversial front-page stories of the newspaper. He shared the unsigned attack with his student staff, "hoping they wouldn't be intimidated into writing mush." In fact, the incident and the discussion Martin initiated with his students created a sense of unity among them and helped them to recognize the importance of "writing well when they pick a controversial topic."

Ellen from South Dakota encourages her students to read, discuss, and write about novels which have been censored elsewhere and to share the books with their parents. When objections to certain literature arise, she discusses the book with the parents and, if necessary, allows their child to make another choice. She writes:

"I'm fortunate to live and work in a community with fairly liberal views about literature. However, I don't take that for granted . . . . I always encourage students to share what they're reading with their parents. I'd rather keep the communication channels open, and even make changes, rather than to allow something to fester to the point of confrontation over censorship. So far—it has worked."

In contrast to Kara, Martin, and Ellen, Gary, who teaches in Colorado, acted alone in his recent decision to restrict his students' reading choices. He writes: "I originally was going to allow my students to choose their own novels for readers workshop. I became concerned when I saw them bringing Stephen King novels. I worried about both parents and my principal objecting to these." Gary played it safe. To avoid problems, he decided to limit his students' reading choices to five novels of which the school already owned multiple copies.

In discussing similar cases of self-censorship, Sharon O'Neal (1990) asks: "What will be the price tag of such caution? By providing access only to that literature that does not discuss sex, politics, violence, or question the role of the adult, what are we doing to children's minds..."
Several teachers echo O’Neal’s concern. Martin comments:

When people of any age are too afraid of saying, doing, or reading something wrong, the tendency is to withdraw into a frozen state of immobility; then learning dies. Fearful silence would seem to do more harm than any speech or text I can imagine!

And Kara notes:

My philosophy has always been that ignorance and stupidity, not knowledge, are dangerous. . . . I believe that it is better to discuss very difficult issues with someone supervising than to let students either believe half-truths or know nothing at all. When discussing literature, some tough issues were raised (drug use, incest, drinking, sex, love, violence), but we faced them head on together.

FACING CENSORSHIP HEAD ON TOGETHER

Kara’s handling of difficult issues with her students “head on together” has significance for teachers struggling with issues of censorship and self-censorship. For many, the school day is not organized to allow time for meaningful dialogue with colleagues and to support collaboration and a sense of community within departments or across grade levels. Thus, there are few opportunities for teachers to discuss censorship concerns and potential challenges of literature. Feelings of isolation and vulnerability, common to many teachers, become intensified when censorship threatens.

Celeste West (1983) tells teachers facing challenges to “act on the courage of [their] conviction. . . . Many people will rally around you as soon as they really understand their own right to receive ideas is being denied” (1653). Some teachers, like Natalia, have reason to disagree. She writes:

I’m no longer so idealistic that I’m willing to put my head on the chopping block for principle. I did that once and got my head chopped off while all my supporters stood behind me—way behind, like [in a distant] county.

Carole Marlowe, the teacher of the year mentioned earlier, describes in an essay the despair, paranoia, and divisiveness at her school resulting from the censorship incident in which she was involved. She tells of being criticized by her superintendent in front of the entire school faculty. Carole Marlowe left the faculty meeting with friends who walked out with me . . . knowing they would be judged guilty by association. They are also heroes in this story, walking through legitimate fear to support me and a principle they believe in. (6)

The teachers at Marlowe’s school were sent a clear message that, in supporting her, they would be opposing the administration. Even when censorship does not originate from within a school, in fact even when no controversy exists, there is pressure for teachers to align themselves with the views of the powers that be. Those who rock the boat or question the status quo are viewed as trouble-makers. Being “good” teachers—like being good students—often means accepting the authority of others, not resisting or challenging it.

It is no coincidence that censored literature is usually that which challenges some “authority” by offering alternative perspectives of reality. Patrick Shannon (1992) discusses “covert censorship” in children’s and adolescent literature, the unconscious exclusion of alternative points of view, which strips us of our abilities to reason and to act because it makes us behave as if the world is static and that we are powerless to change it. [It] tells us that we can know only what others accept as fact [and] that we should accept our present circumstances. (70)

Teachers who seek out literature which instead explores multiple perspectives provide opportunities for their students to question the status quo. In doing so, these teachers also make themselves vulnerable to criticism and censorship. They become caught in the middle between a desire to teach according to their beliefs on the one hand and pressures to conform and use “safe” literature on the other. Pat, a teacher from Colorado, writes:

I believe that schools should encourage students to explore and question and challenge ideas. I experience tremendous internal conflict when I feel compelled—by subtle and not-so-subtle messages—to censor what my students read and talk about. As teachers, we never speak about self-censoring, but we need to and we need to make ourselves heard. It’s the only way things will change.

"Most of the English teachers at my school self-censor materials but have still had complaints."
OPENING DIALOGUE

Creating opportunities for honest and open dialogue is essential for all of us, at every teaching level, who struggle with censorship and self-censorship. Beginning within our own classrooms and departments, our dialogue needs to expand to include networks of schools and universities, professional associations and unions, local communities, and organizations that support freedom of speech. Our focus must extend beyond specific censorship incidents and examine underlying issues. For example, we might begin by asking ourselves:

- What are our individual and collective responsibilities in advocating our students’ intellectual freedom?
- In what ways do we support and silence our colleagues’ freedom of expression?
- What are our beliefs about the roles and responsibilities of schools as institutions of a democratic society?

Addressing such questions places our individual responses to the threat of censorship in broader, philosophical contexts that support a proactive, rather than a reactive, stance. By coming together in schools and communities across the country in a spirit of openness, trust, and common purpose, we give voice to the conviction that, as Kara says, “ignorance and stupidity, not knowledge, are dangerous.” That collective voice empowers us and others—like Natalia and John and Anne—as we all make choices about the literature we will share with our students. In turn, it supports the emerging voices of the students themselves.

*Note: With the exception of Carole Marlowe, all teachers’ names have been changed to protect their privacy.

Works Cited
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sciousness.* Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Films/Videotapes

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EJ TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

Talking Right/Talking Wrong

“Because people who rarely talk together will talk differently, differences in speech tell what groups a man belongs to. He uses them to claim and proclaim his identity, and society uses them to keep him under control. The person who talks right, as we do, is one of us. The person who talks wrong is an outsider, strange and suspicious, and we must make him feel inferior if we can. That is one purpose of education.”