

# TEACHING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

It's Critical!

THIRD EDITION

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## Challenging the Challengers

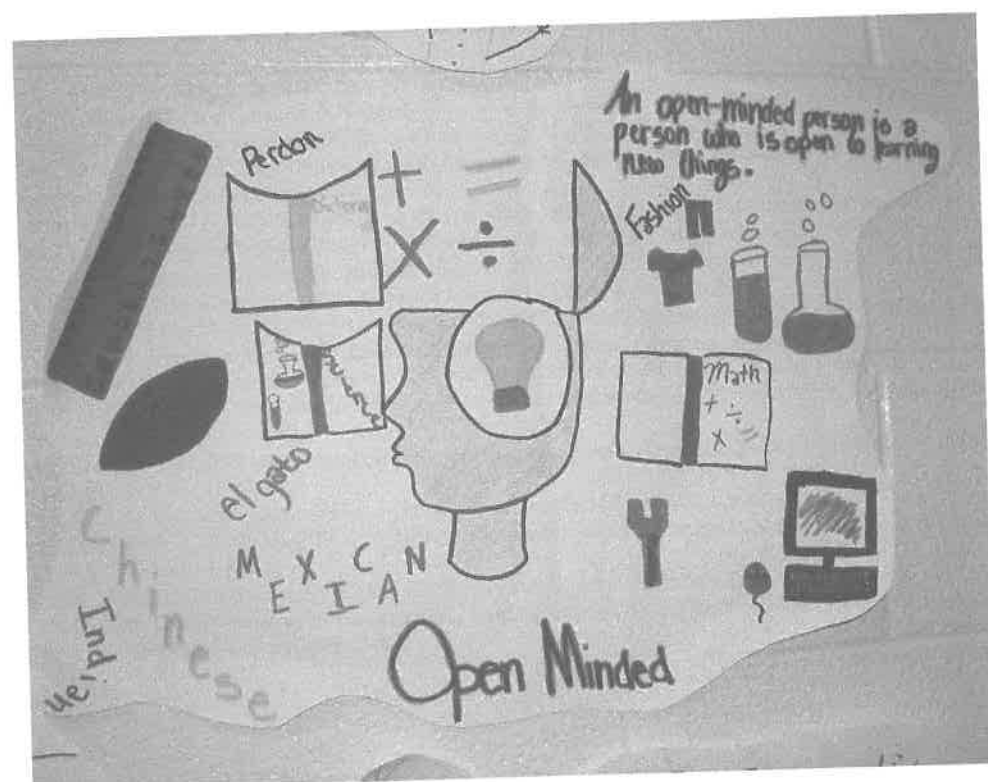
Where suspicion fills the air and holds scholars in line for fear of their jobs, there can be no exercise of free intellect. . . . A problem can no longer be pursued with impunity to its edges. Fear stalks the classroom. The teacher is no longer a stimulant to adventurous thinking; she becomes instead a pipeline for safe and sound information. A deadening dogma takes the place of free inquiry. Instruction tends to become sterile; pursuit of knowledge is discouraged; discussion often leaves off where it should begin.

—Justice William O. Douglas (Dissenting Opinion, United States Supreme Court: *Adler v. Board of Education*, 1952)

### TEACHER VIGNETTE: OVERCOMING SELF-CENSORSHIP

Lisa Hannon taught first grade at a Catholic school. She had been teaching for 14 years and didn't think of herself as a person who censors books or approves of censorship. She did recall picking up books to read to her class and then putting them down because of her own discomfort. Lisa owned a copy of *Feathers and Fools* (Fox, 1989), an allegory about war that makes some teachers uneasy because a group of swans and a group of peacocks become suspicious of each other and use the weapons they've collected to kill each other. Lisa had owned the book for quite a while, but never read it aloud because of the references to the birds fighting and the mention of blood and weapons. While taking a class with Chris Leland that focused on children's books and critical literacy, Lisa decided to take a chance and read *Feathers and Fools* aloud to her first-grade students. The kids had a lively conversation and talked about the violence among the birds, but they didn't connect the meaning of the book to people or war. *Feathers and Fools* ends on a hopeful note—two eggs remain, and the new swan and peacock hatchlings focus on their similarities instead of their differences. Lisa's students noticed the eggs and hatchlings and discussed how they hoped that the "kid" birds would do better than the parents and not fight with each other.

When reading this "troublesome" book aloud to her first graders, the world didn't fall apart, and Lisa realized the discussion they had was really an important one. Had she not enrolled in a class where controversial children's literature was discussed, she



might have left the book on the shelf and this important conversation would never have happened. The experience of reading *Feathers and Fools* and other risky books to her first graders had such a significant impact on Lisa that she talked to her principal about buying more social issues books for the school library. She also volunteered to do a webinar on critical literacy for the Archdiocese of Indianapolis.

Lisa's story is a familiar one. As we've worked with hundreds of teachers over the years, we've heard stories of so many books that seem too violent, too graphic, too realistic, or too uncomfortable to read to students. As we discussed in Chapter 4, time after time we have found that once the books are read, amazing conversations happen. There seems to be a hunger among students to *dig deeply* and talk about important real-life issues.

### PRINCIPLE #1: WHY CENSORSHIP THREATENS DEMOCRACY

Just as Lisa was uncomfortable using the picture book *Feathers and Fools*, some teachers are unsure about reading the chapter book *The Great Gilly Hopkins* (Paterson, 1987) with their students. This is a moving book about the seemingly incorrigible 11-year-old Gilly, who has been placed with one foster family after another until she goes to live with the Trotters. It won the Newbery Honor Book prize, the National Book Award for Children's Literature, Best of the Best Children's Books, and at least nine other awards. What charms readers most is gum-chewing Gilly's bold, angry, irreverent, and eventually lovable character.

#### Challenged and Banned Books

A few years back, Mitzi Lewison found herself on a school district committee that was reviewing a parent's request to have *The Great Gilly Hopkins* taken off school shelves. The complaint was similar to the scores of challenges to this book that made it one of the 100 most challenged books in the country for two decades (American Library Association, 2022d). The complaint focused on the use of "profanity" by Gilly (*hell* and *damn* were artfully used to show Gilly's anger and frustration) and the "low moral standard" in the books (Gilly talking back to adults). The theme is one of transformation, allowing readers to witness the diminishing of Gilly's anger and the change in her language and attitudes toward her troubling situation as a child who was dumped into the foster care system by her mother. In Mitzi's case, the school board took the committee's recommendation and did not ban the book.

Unfortunately, this was not the case in many schools and libraries across the country. For example, *The Great Gilly Hopkins* was banned in school libraries in Albemarle County, Virginia. Here the school board convened a panel of educators who recommended that the book remain on the shelves, similar to what happened in the district where Mitzi worked. But in Albemarle County, "the school superintendent ordered it removed anyway" (Staples, 1996, p. 2). In a response to the Albemarle County School Board, Katherine Paterson (the book's author) wrote, "Though Gilly's mouth is a very mild one compared to that of many lost children, if she had said 'fiddlesticks' when frustrated, readers could not have believed her" (Deming, 2012, unpagged).

Paterson's words were echoed in the voices of "at-risk" seventh and eighth graders when Laura Robb (1992) read the book aloud to them. Robb describes the deep impact that Gilly had on her students.

Keysha, in a letter to Gilly's mother, chastised Courtney for abandoning her daughter [Keysha's spelling is as she wrote it originally]. "If you had any sence, you would know that you just broke a young girl's heart, somethings thats hard to replac," she wrote. Gilly's story struck a deep, responsive chord within these troubled adolescents and helped them to talk and write about powerful feelings. They begged me to read another Paterson book. (Robb, 1992, p. 2)

Some say, why worry about *The Great Gilly Hopkins* being banned? It's an old book anyway. We worry because there are scores of books being challenged and banned each year. In 2020 there were 273 attempts to ban books (American Library Association, 2022c) and this number reflects only incidents that were reported. The American Library Association estimates that up to 85 percent of actual challenges to library materials receive no media attention and remain unreported (Doyle, 2016).



Most school districts have policies and guidelines that must be followed if a book is challenged. Be aware of these policies.

The following elementary and middle school books have appeared on five recent American Library Association *Top Ten Challenged or Banned Books* lists. Most of these titles have appeared in multiple years.

#### Picture Books

- *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005)
- *I Am Jazz* (Herthel & Jennings, 2014)
- *A Day in the Life of Marlon Bundo* (Twiss, 2018)
- *Prince & Knight* (Haack, 2018)
- *This Day in June* (Pittman, 2014)
- *Nasreen's Secret School: A True Story from Afghanistan* (Winter, 2009)

#### Chapter Books

- *George* (Gino, 2017)
- *The Absolute True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (Alexie, 2007)
- *This One Summer* (Tamaki, 2014)
- *Harry Potter* series (Rowling, 1999–2007)
- *Captain Underpants* series (Pilkey, 1997–2018)



In this list, six of the 11 titles are picture books like *And Tango Makes Three*, which is based on a true story of two male penguins in New York City's Central Park Zoo that raise a baby penguin on their own. Similarly, the book *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014) is based on the authors' experience with their youngest son. This book was read in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools for Child Abuse Prevention Month. A conservative group found out about the use of the book and eventually got it removed from the schools (Marchal, 2017). This banning has caused lots of controversy in North Carolina on both sides of the issue.

### A New Wave of Censorship

Recently there has been a wave of right-leaning state legislatures passing bills that censor curriculum and books that might make students feel uncomfortable about racism, sexism, or any other concept that could make a child feel uneasy. In Texas, Republican State Representative Matt Krause emailed district superintendents a list of 850 books that he wanted banned from school library shelves. Governor Gregg Abbott directed education officials to investigate "criminal activity in our public schools involving the availability of pornography" (Powell, 2021). In a suburb of Dallas, the Southlake School Board reprimanded a "fourth-grade teacher—a former teacher of the year—after parents complained that their child brought home a classroom book about racism that troubled them" (Powell, 2021, unpagged).

The books that are being taken off library shelves, not just in Texas but across the country, are predominately about marginalized individuals and communities (Jiménez, 2021). An article in *Publisher's Weekly* described how targeted titles in a school district in York, PA included books such as *I Am Malala: How One Girl Stood up for Education and Changed the World* (Yousafzai, 2013), *Hidden Figures: The True Story of Four Black Women and the Space Race* (Shetterly with Conkling, 2018), and *Little Legends: Exceptional Men in Black History* (Harrison, 2019). "The main thing those books, and almost all of the books that were banned, share in common: they are about, or written by, people of color" (Violet, 2021, unpagged). The same thing is happening with books that have LGBTQ+ themes. In short, books that feature characters and storylines that venture beyond White mainstream narratives are being labeled as divisive and unpatriotic, thus being open to censure.

Although this wave of laws banning books is widespread, so is resistance by students, parents, librarians, and teachers. The airwaves and print media are filled with stories about students similar to this one from CNN: "Pennsylvania School District Reverses Ban on Books by Authors of Color After Students Fought Back" (Alsharif & Reilly, 2021). A group of librarians in Texas started the #FReadom movement to support other librarians who fight back against challenges of books on race, equality, and sexuality. They publicized the positive impact these books have on students and created a hotline for librarians to report when books have been removed from library shelves without going through the process outlined in school board regulations (Chavez et al., 2021). In York, PA, Kansas City, MO, and other U.S. cities, parents and community members promote diversity by creating Little Free Libraries featuring many of the books that were banned by local school boards (Benevento, 2021; Paz & Cramer, 2021). In the Winter 2021–2022 issue of *Rethinking Schools*, Rachel Cohen

documented the inspiring stories of teachers nationwide who have been fighting back barriers to racial justice teaching by "standing up to register their resistance and solidarity, organizing rallies, supporting school board candidates who reject these bills, and doubling down on their own efforts to learn and teach about race" (p. 16).

### Kid Quotes About Banned Books from the *New York Times*

"I am frustrated that people are limiting the books kids can read in school."—Naomi Ortiz (2022, age 11)

"In Florida they are trying to make a law that could ban books for bringing up stuff like the L.G.B.T.Q. topics, which I don't think is OK."—Meera Carroll (2022, age 11)

"I think children should have the right to read any book they find intriguing."—Molly Friedman (2022, age 11)

"We should be able to read whatever we want . . . because it will make us realize what's happening and make a change in the world."—Giovana Artese Baker (2022, age 11)

In Indiana, the House passed HB1134, which jeopardized teachers' freedom to teach about race and racism. It required all materials and books used in class to be posted online for inspection by parents, who were encouraged to report anything that would make their child feel "uncomfortable" around instruction about race and racism, sex and sexism, and other "divisive" concepts. The bill also restricted schools from requiring students or employees to participate in training on diversity, equity, and inclusion. This, of course, would have a disproportionate impact on Black, Brown, and Indigenous People and Students of Color (Skiba, 2022). Teacher, community, civil rights, and university faculty groups responded with strong activist organizing and protest. In the end the Indiana Senate killed the House Bill.

We absolutely understand that another version of HB1134 will probably arise in the future and the valiant efforts of students, parents, librarians, and teachers will not hold off all attacks on what our students can read and learn about. That said, working in collaboration with others is a proven way to combat some of the repressive measures that will continue to arise in local school boards and state legislatures.

Beyond the current wave of partisan censorship, there has always been a "type of censorship that involves books quietly disappearing from libraries" (Hill, 2010; Staples, 1996). Adults can simply walk into a library and pull a book off the shelf. This preemptive censorship (Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2021) and the self-censorship we exercise as teachers is something to look at closely.

### Self-Censorship in Classrooms

In a study comparing how middle school teachers and students reacted to reading and discussing *I Hadn't Meant to Tell You This* (Woodson, 1994), Freedman and Johnson (2001) give us a comprehensive view of teacher self-censorship of books and how it

can silence and shortchange students. This book is the story of two girls who form an unlikely friendship—a White, poor, abused girl and a Black, popular, suburban girl—both without mothers. The book includes issues of friendship, racism, child abuse, class prejudice, abandonment, hope, and courage. The book has won many awards including the “Coretta Scott King Honor Book, ALA Best Book for Young Adults, ALA Notable Book, a Booklist Editor’s Choice, and a Hornbook Fanfare” (Freedman & Johnson, 2001, p. 359).

The 15 female teachers and 11 middle school girls who read and discussed this book in separate groups all *enjoyed* the book. They understood and remarked about the power of the story, made personal connections to characters, and alluded to the importance of discussing current societal issues including racism, classism, and the compelling dilemmas adolescent girls encounter. Although both groups were deeply touched by the book, their responses differed. The girls saw the book as helpful to understanding the difficult and troubling issues that affect their own lives. For example, one girl noted:

This book makes me think in a lot of ways. Look on the inside, not just on the outside. And it’s just saying that it doesn’t matter what color you are to have friends. About Blacks and Whites, I think they’re saying there’s always going to be that little wall, and so how are we going to break it? And I think they broke it right there by standing up for their friendship. I think friendship is more important than color. (p. 362)

Although the teacher group also found the book compelling, Freedman and Johnson’s study demonstrates the “self-censorship paradox.” The teachers showed a keen awareness of the pedagogical power literature has to engage young people in deliberate questioning, genuine dialogue, and critical reflection, yet their feelings of insecurity pressured them into opting for a less provocative piece (p. 358). All the teachers except one said they wouldn’t use the book because it was too controversial, that they lacked or were unsure of support from their administrators, and that although the topic of sexual abuse was discussed in school, it would be a problem if it were presented in a novel.

Freedman and Johnson are clear that, “the practice of simply substituting a less controversial book solves nothing. . . . As teachers, we must take our professional responsibilities seriously and make proactive decisions on behalf of our students” (p. 368). We strongly agree, but we also realize the pressure teachers are under when laws forbid them to use certain books. One proven way to fight book challenges is to work together with colleagues, community organizations, professional associations, and teacher study groups. In York County, PA, a district diversity committee created a list of hundreds of books and other materials to help teach about diversity and racial issues. A group of parents objected saying these materials would indoctrinate or make White kids feel guilty. The school board banned everything on the list. Teachers, students, and parents were outraged. They held daily protests, wrote letters to newspapers, and read parts of the books on social media platforms. This drew lots of media attention and the school board lifted the freeze. “The York ban was largely symbolic: None of the listed books had been removed from school libraries and teachers already

using them were not affected (Nierenberg, 2021, unpagged). It is more important now than ever to become involved in the politics of education.



Work with colleagues, community organizations, and professional associations to protect students’ right to read.

### Help If a Book or Other Media Is Challenged

If you do have problems with censorship at your school, there are a number of resources that can be helpful. Text Box 9.1 presents a variety of useful resources.

#### Text Box 9.1 Resources for Book Challenges

- National Coalition Against Censorship (2021): *Kids Right to Read Action Kit for Students and Parents*. This student-friendly publication contains information about censorship and practical ideas on how to respond to challenges, including ten “advocacy” tips and sample letters. <http://ncac.org/resource/book-censorship-toolkit>
- American Library Association (2022b): *Intellectual Freedom: Issues and Resources*. This site contains a wealth of resources including an Office of Intellectual Freedom that is available for assistance and consultation. [www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom)
- National Council of Teachers of English (2022): *NCTE Intellectual Freedom Center*. In addition to materials and workshops, NCTE has added a hotline aimed at responding to book challenges. <https://ncte.org/resources/ncte-intellectual-freedom-center/>
- American Library Association (2022a): *Banned Books Week*. This website provides everything a teacher needs to call attention to Banned Book Week in September including free downloads, display ideas, research materials, and ideas on how to involve authors. [www.ala.org/bbooks/banned](http://www.ala.org/bbooks/banned)
- Book and Periodical Council of Canada (2022): *When the Censor Comes*. Developed for teachers and librarians on how to deal with censors. [www.freedomtoread.ca/resources/when-the-censor-comes/](http://www.freedomtoread.ca/resources/when-the-censor-comes/)

Hartsfield and Kimmel (2021) make a strong case for using selection principles to guide teachers’ classroom book choices. They note:

Applying selection principles such as a book’s relevance to the curriculum, suitability to the developmental needs of students, and inclusion of diverse perspectives can help educators avoid preemptive censorship when choosing books. (p. 420)

## PRINCIPLE #2: EVEN TROUBLESOME BOOKS HAVE POTENTIAL

Jerry Harste was gleeful when he found a particularly obnoxious book written in the 1970s called *I'm Glad I'm a Boy! I'm Glad I'm a Girl!* (Darrow, 1970). The book is filled with stereotypical illustrations and text such as “Boys can be policemen. Girls can be meter maids.” When Jerry reads this book to classes, or better yet, has a male read the “boy” pages and a female read the “girl” pages, he is greeted with booing and hissing. What’s interesting to us is that many important conversations about gender issues in children’s literature spring up after reading this book. Questions like *Is it really better now?* and *What groups are still being stereotyped?* open up new inquiries for the class.

We hold “the more books the better” philosophy. With this stance comes the possibility of using books that are especially disturbing—those old sexist and racist books that we occasionally still find stuck in a back cupboard of a classroom or on the shelves of our libraries. We have found these books have the potential to start important conversations that might never occur if we hadn’t dragged them off the shelf. So instead of self-censoring these texts, we now collect them for use with students.

Against popular wisdom, we believe that nearly all books, even books like *I'm Glad I'm a Boy! I'm Glad I'm a Girl!*, belong in classrooms. What’s critical is how we use these books. If they are read and never interrogated for stereotypes or hurtful descriptions, school becomes a place where racism, sexism, and many other “isms” are simply reproduced. On the other hand, when we only use books that have been evaluated as “stereotype free,” students never get the chance to spot, discuss, and challenge representations that privilege certain groups while marginalizing others. By engaging students in strategies that help them read with a critical edge (see Chapter 5) we have seen many young people become critical consumers of books, TV, and other media. With this in mind, we believe that *even troublesome books have potential* to be useful resources in our classrooms.

An American book, *Everyone Poops* (Gomi, 1993) and its British version, *Everybody Poos* (Gomi, 2012) are about bodily waste and defecation, starting with an elephant and moving to a host of creatures including humans. Many of us have witnessed similar situations to what Mitzi Lewison saw one day in a second-grade classroom. A small group of youngsters was in the back corner of the classroom snickering over what they believed to be an illicit piece of literature. The smart teacher stays away from that corner and the “naughty” book eventually gets *enjoyed*, giggled over, and read repeatedly by nearly every child in the class.

### Pulp Fiction for Kids

It’s worthy to note that although librarians often can’t keep what we call pulp fiction books, like *Goosebumps*, on their shelves because the kids love reading them so much, many believe these books have no place in the library. Nonetheless, like many other teachers, we have seen the incredible power book series like *Captain Underpants* (Pilkey, 1997–2018), *Goosebumps* (Stine, 1992–2021), and *The Stupids* (Allard, 1977–1989) have on both enthusiastic and less-than-enthusiastic readers.

The controversies surrounding these books are evident in the pervasive way they are taken off shelves in libraries and classrooms across the country. *Captain Underpants* is one of the top ten most challenged books; *Goosebumps*, the 16th most challenged; and *The Stupids*, the 26th most challenged of all books (American Library Association, 2022c, 2022d, 2022e).

Children’s literature scholar Perry Nodelman details some of the surprises he found when he actually read 18 *Goosebumps* books:

Here’s my experience of *Goosebumps*. I got interested in them after I read that *NY Times* piece last summer about best-selling books. I figured that any series whose sales almost equaled the fifteen next most popular series was worthy of my attention. I expected real junk. I found some undeniably simplistic writing and characterization, but some very ingenious situations—many borrowed from adult films and novels. (Nodelman, 1995)

We love the way Nodelman really *digs deeper* and finds out what draws students to the *Goosebumps* series rather than just dismissing it as trash.

In his book, *The Hidden Adult*, Nodelman (2008) theorizes how both *Goosebumps* books and award winners like the Newbery books maintain the characters, plots, themes, and structures that are typical in most books in the children’s literature genre (pp. 312–315). Other scholars have agreed with Nodelman. Nutting (2013) writes, “The series never goes too heavy or serious; the child protagonists never die, and the threats are almost always supernatural events that couldn’t really happen.”

R.L. Stine was asked why so many kids get into *Goosebumps*. He noted:

I think kids like returning to the *Goosebumps* series because they know what they’re going to get. It’s a world they know, they know it’s going to be creepy, scary, they know there are going to be twists and turns. But they also know the story’s going to have a happy ending. (McKerrow, 2019, unpagged)

We are not book police, deciding which books are appropriate for which students to read. Rather, we are committed to respecting kids’ choices. We see keeping pulp fiction out of classrooms as counterproductive to creating readers. That said, we do try our darndest to make the books we love so attractive that kids want to read them just as much as they want to read *Goosebumps* or *Captain Underpants*.



Let kids read the books they love. A love of reading is always the first step to reading great literature.

### Not All Books Are Equal: Starting Important Conversations

One of the main reasons we feel comfortable allowing students to read troublesome books is because our classrooms and those of the teachers we work with are filled with lots of great children’s and adolescent literature, which we believe has the power to start important conversations that can move kids from books like *Captain Underpants*

to books like *brown girl dreaming* (Woodson, 2014). This quality literature serves as a backdrop or criterion from which kids can engage in text analysis the way Nodelman did in his study of *Goosebumps* books.

As an example, we present Lori Norton-Meier's story of how her kindergarten class analyzed one of the books from a set they ordered with book money from the school's parent/teacher association (2009). The class ordered *The Story Box* book set, because it contained a book they loved, *Mrs. Wishy-Washy* (Cowley, 1980). When the books came, Norton-Meier spilled them on the rug to the oooohs and aaaaahs of the children gathered around in a circle. She picked up one of the books, *The Bicycle* (Cowley, 1991), and started reading. "The clown got on and the lady got on, and the boy got on, and the girl got on, and the bear got on . . ." (Norton-Meier, 2009, p. 189). Norton-Meier described the unusual silence that followed her reading, and how both she and the children were stunned by the mind-numbing quality of the text. "Then Jeffrey pop[ped] to his knees, and, with his hands firmly planted on his hips, exclaim[ed], 'Now, wasn't that a crappy piece of literature!?' " (p. 189).

This started an amazing conversation among the kindergartners about how "crappy" is a perfect way to describe the book, how awful it was, how it didn't have a good ending, and how nothing happened in the text. One child queried, "It doesn't really have a happy ending—or a sad ending—does it have an end?" (p. 189). This moved the conversation away from simply talking about how terrible the book was to *digging deeply* and analyzing why it was so disappointing and what the author might have done to make it better. The kids talked about how it reminded them of other books they read and liked, but these other books had plots (our words not theirs)—and something actually happened in the story. They talked about how maybe the author didn't use enough words to include a plot. Meier-Norton describes the variety of responses students had from reading *The Bicycle*, including "an emotional response (crappy literature), a critique about the structure of text, a comparison of two texts, and a wondering about how the text could be more intriguing to the audience" (p. 192). Norton-Meier attributes the presence of some crappy literature in her classroom as an impetus to her students becoming better readers, responders, and critics.



With enough reading and conversation, even our youngest readers can analyze books and know what makes a good story.

But if Norton-Meier had only read "crappy" books to her class and had not spent lots of time discussing quality literature with students, the incredible conversations around *The Bicycle* probably would have never taken place. So, from our perspective, bring on the books—all books, any books, but make sure to create spaces where students know a good book when they hear it or read it and can talk about what makes it a good one. We believe important conversations can start as a response to any book as long as the foundation of our literature program helps students appreciate good literature and gives them many occasions to try on the identity of a critical reader.

Sometimes we might be tempted to believe that if we have mainly award-winning books in our classrooms, all of our problems of choosing the right book will be solved. The next section challenges that assumption.

### PRINCIPLE #3: STUDYING BOOK AWARDS CRITICALLY

Lee Heffernan taught third grade for years. When she changed grade levels to sixth grade, Lee looked forward to working with young adolescents. She had her sixth graders engage in the regular beginning-of-the-year curriculum—reading books that have been nominated for the state book award. Students started the school year by reading titles from the list of Young Hoosier Book Award (YHBA) nominees. Like many states, Indiana presents a book award to an author each year. The award is designed to "stimulate recreational reading among middle-school students" (Indiana Library Federation, 2022) and is chosen by a committee composed of members of the Association for Indiana Media Educators, a subgroup of the Indiana Library Federation. Students who read five or more books on the list get to vote for the winning title, with the award being announced in the spring of each school year (Heffernan & Lewison, 2009).

Because the current YHBA list did not contain many titles that focused on social justice issues, Lee anticipated that inviting students to question the notion of book awards, and awards in general, would bring a critical lens to the class literacy work, with students investigating how awards influence and shape us as consumers and creators of texts. Work during this unit was guided by the question, *How do book prizes, and prizes in general, work and why do we have them?* The year began with a discussion about the criteria for choosing books for the YHBA and the purpose of the award. During the discussion, many students noted the arbitrary nature of the criteria. *Why did the books have to be published within the last five years? Why couldn't foreign-born authors have their books nominated? Why can't the book be a Caldecott or Newbery winner?* Students began understanding that these criteria had real impact on the types of books that were nominated (Heffernan & Lewison, 2009).

In order to learn more about book awards, students read descriptions of awards on the American Library Association website and found out that book awards have a wide range of purposes. While some book awards promote reading generally (YHBA), others promote specific genres (Edgar Award for mystery writing), reading for older kids (Prinz Award for young adult literature, Newbery Award for American fiction for children), and younger kids (Caldecott Award for an American picture book artist). Others promoted awareness of specific underrepresented social groups (Rivera Award for literature that depicts the Mexican-American experience, King Award for African-American authors and illustrators, Schneider Award for artistic expression of the disability experience). Students worked during their computer lab time to research specific book awards and to design a book award with a purpose and criteria of their own (Heffernan & Lewison, 2009). They ended up studying all kinds of awards and how they affect people. In this chapter, like Lee's kids, we ask *What are book awards and what is their purpose?*



### Complicating Book Awards

There are hundreds of book awards given every year. Here we focus on the major children's book awards or those that we feel are especially important. We have posted descriptions of these awards on our website (see Chapter 9, *Resources*, <http://routledge.com/cw/leland>). This listing on the website is meant to be a reference, a way for you to get to know some of the major book awards. We've included the criteria for each award, so you and your students can interrogate different awards the way Lee's students did.



Award-winning books need to be critically examined just as carefully as any book in our classroom.

### Stereotypes in Award Winners

A complicating issue around award-winning books is that they may perpetuate racial and gender stereotypes. Albers (1996) examined 12 years of Caldecott-winning books and found the representations of females and people of color to be limited and stereotyped. Martinez et al. (2016) examined the ethnicities of characters in Caldecott medal winners and honor books over the past 25 years. What they found is not encouraging. Main characters in these books were 71% White, 19% Black, 4% Asian, 1% Latino/a, 1% biracial, and 0% Native American (pp. 21–22). They contrasted these numbers to current statistics on nonwhite students in U.S. classrooms (51%) and projections for future years, which brings the percentage of nonwhite students up dramatically (p. 20).

When we read multiple-perspective *Text Sets* that include stereotypical books like *I'm Glad I'm a Boy! I'm Glad I'm a Girl!* (Darrow, 1970), we also include books like *Piggybook* (Browne, 1986), and others that challenge commonplace gender representations of female characters. Multiple-perspective text sets allow students to examine complex questions and develop important insights about how characters are portrayed in books. They can examine questions such as:

- How are diverse characters (Black, Latinx, Asian, LGBTQ+, poor, rural, etc.) portrayed in each of the books?
- Whose voices are represented most often in these books? Whose are missing?
- What does each author want us to think about the main character?
- Do you notice any stereotypes?
- Which of the books in this text set would you recommend for friends to read? Why would you recommend these books?

### What Are the Consequences of Book Awards?

Another complicating issue around award-winning books is the work they do in the world. For example, Sibert Award-winning author Marc Aronson (2001) notes that many librarians don't read books carefully before they order them if they have won

awards. We have noticed this ourselves—if a book has won an award, we are more likely to buy it without reading as many reviews as we might for other non-prize-winning books. In addition, Kenneth Kidd (2007) asks us to consider the market ramifications of books winning awards in terms of sales. His article made us think of the “Oprah Effect,” where books that she recommended on her TV show became bestsellers. Kidd points out that although there is no cash prize associated with awards such as the Newbery, “it can double the sales of a book, as well as increase sales of the author's other books” and getting the award “keeps the titles and authors in circulation for decades” (p. 168). Kidd notes that these award-winning books also are likely to be showcased in prominent places in libraries and bookstores. So, another aspect of awards that students may want to consider is their economic impact. It could be interesting for groups of students to look at book sales numbers in relation to awards. They could also conduct an inquiry into which books are prominently displayed in local bookstores and other retail establishments where books are sold.

It was our intention in this chapter to bring to the surface the idea that the books we choose to use with our students are never neutral. Whatever we choose, there can be unexpected issues. This makes having a sound rationale (even in the back of your mind) for why you are using particular books in your classroom an important part of teaching practice. Pure *enjoyment* of reading is a fine rationale for having particular books in your classroom. Being able to discuss why you think a book is important for your students to read can circumvent most problems that arise. Table 6.1 in Chapter 6 is a great resource to use for creating justifications for using particular books as it delineates seven principles that explain why we use literature in classrooms. And remember, the vast majority of teachers have not had the experience of having a book they are using challenged.

### KEY ISSUES IN IMPLEMENTATION

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to using good or troublesome literature are district mandates for basal reading programs or leveled book collections. There have been commercial reading series in schools for many years, but in the past, teachers were viewed as professionals who knew what students needed in terms of reading development. In Mitzi's first teaching experience she was given a basal reader, but she used only a portion of the stories from those books. The majority of reading her students did came from the classroom and school libraries. We acknowledge that some reading programs can be helpful to novice teachers, as they were to Mitzi, while she slowly added a wide range of books and activities such as sustained silent reading, partner reading, and other strategies to promote the love of reading in her students.

Although we may not have entered the teaching profession to become activists, with the myriad state laws impinging on our freedom to teach, we may need to take on an activist stance. As we write this book, nine states have enacted laws that restrict the teaching of racism in schools. Rachel Cohen (2021–22) has documented the work of teachers across the United States who are making a difference in their schools, districts, and states. Here are a few of their stories:



- In Youngstown, OH, Heather Smith and Penny Wells invited folks to gather at a local swimming pool that was segregated throughout the 1940s. At the rally, they explored the history of segregated pools and an Ohio State Board of Education member read the board's official resolution against racism and hate (p. 16).
- In Rhode Island, third-grade teacher Lindsay Paiva was concerned as her legislature discussed a bill to ban teaching so-called "divisive topics" in public schools. Paiva and her colleagues held a local rally at the DeWolf Tavern in Bristol, which formerly held enslaved people between auctions (p. 16).
- In Kanas City, KS, high-school teacher Michael Rebne joined a study group focused on deepening teachers' commitments to racial justice. His group (in coordination with student groups and the student council) is planning the first Black Lives Matter Week of Action at their high school (p. 18).
- New York City, Title I teacher Vanessa Spiegel began organizing parents in her home community of Westchester to fight groups who formed to ban lessons about systemic racism. She is a founding member of "Teach the Truth," which helps mobilize parents to support diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in local schools (p. 19).

These are just a few examples of possible actions teachers can take to combat the "deadening dogma" that Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas wrote about in the 1950s. There is a long history of teacher activism in this country that is once again becoming a prominent part of the profession.

#### Media Resource: Help in Teaching for Social Justice

The Zinn Education Project has a number of ways to become involved including:

- *A Pledge to Teach the Truth* (2022a). A petition signed by over 8,000 teachers. [www.zinnedproject.org/news/pledge-to-teach-truth](http://www.zinnedproject.org/news/pledge-to-teach-truth)
- *Teaching for Black Lives Campaign* (2022b). Supports teachers with free lessons for teaching about racism, distribution to school districts of the book *Teaching for Black Lives*, teacher study groups, a podcast, online classes for teachers, and more. [www.zinnedproject.org/campaigns/teach-black-freedom-struggle/](http://www.zinnedproject.org/campaigns/teach-black-freedom-struggle/)

### WORKING WITH LINGUISTICALLY AND CULTURALLY DIVERSE STUDENTS

As we noted in the sections on self-censorship and new waves of state and local censorship, books that address important issues in kids' lives may never get into the hands of students who could benefit from reading them. We worry that kids who are struggling with issues of racism, gender identification, violence, physical abuse, verbal abuse, or religious persecution may not have access to books that can provide images of other kids who are in similar circumstances to their own. In other words, those students who are most vulnerable have the least chance of reading books that could be helpful in dealing with difficult issues that are present in their lives.

This self-censorship doesn't just affect individual students, but also the class as a whole. If we never read books about LGBTQ+ issues related to the age group we teach, how are we ever going to create tolerant, caring classrooms? As we are writing this chapter, the Florida Senate passed a bill that prohibits Florida schools from teaching students in kindergarten through third grade about topics involving sexual orientation or gender identity. "Last week, students at dozens of Florida schools walked out of their classes to protest the legislation. Several corporate leaders also spoke out against the legislation" (Craig, 2022, unpagged). Teacher groups also protested, but this did not stop passage of the bill.

For teachers not in Florida or teachers in the state who are willing to fight for social justice, we provide an example of how to use LGBTQ+-inclusive literature in elementary classrooms. At the end of this chapter, Selena E. Van Horn's *Voices from the Field* vignette describes her work with second-grade girls in an afterschool book club. The children in the book club raise all kinds of difficult questions when reading LGBTQ+-inclusive picture books and we learn how Selena helps these students appreciate difference and challenge heteronormative gender roles. In addition to the books that Selena suggests, we list a few more LGBTQ+-inclusive picture books in Text Box 9.2.

#### Text Box 9.2 More LGBTQ+-Inclusive Picture Books

- *Pride Puppy* (Stevenson, 2021)
- *Papa, Daddy, & Riley* (Kirst, 2020)
- *Rainbow: A First Book of Pride* (Genhart, 2019)
- *Maiden & Princess* (Haack & Galupo, 2019)
- *Jacob's New Dress* (Hoffman & Hoffman, 2014).
- *Worm Loves Worm* (Austrian, 2016).
- *Stella Brings the Family* (Schiffer, 2015).

We are not saying it's easy to bring books with controversial themes into your classroom. It takes courage. But as professionals, we have a responsibility to all of our students, not just the ones who fit into "safe" categories of difference. What if the student who lives with two moms never sees anyone like himself in books, even though there are a number of wonderful picture and chapter books on the subject? What if we don't let other students in our class know that there are all kinds of families, none better than others, just different? If we want to walk the walk and not just talk the talk about diversity, then we need to be brave, work with colleagues and professional organizations, and open up the often-narrow definition of what diversity means in our classrooms.

### TECHNOLOGY EXTENSIONS AND ELECTRONIC RESOURCES

The web has great resources for having your class explore issues related to challenged or banned books. The American Library Association's *Frequently Challenged Books* webpage is one of the best and is easily found on any search engine. It includes information about banned and challenged books; a listing of challenged books by year, by author, by decade, or by statistics; a link to the *Banned Books Week* site and associated

classroom resources; and much more (American Library Association, 2022a). [www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks](http://www.ala.org/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks) Another very helpful American Library Association site is *Intellectual Freedom: Issues and Resources* (2022b).

### Media Resource: Banned Books Week (Freedom to Read)

There is a wealth of video resources that we use during Banned Book Week (the last week in September) and throughout the school year. Ballard (2015) and other librarians suggest using the patriotic theme “freedom to read” rather than “banned books.” We think either is fine. Here are some of our favorite “freedom to read” videos:

- *Banning Books in the 21st Century* (2013): This entertaining four-minute video gives an overview of banned books and the future promise of online libraries. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbBtMNTuzrY&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbBtMNTuzrY&feature=youtu.be)
- *Judy Blume for the Banned Books Virtual Read-Out!* (2011): This two-minute video developed for Banned Book Week features frequently censored author, Judy Blume, discussing the effect that book censorship has on children. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuhp3VTQQ2Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuhp3VTQQ2Q)
- *Whoopi Goldberg Reads Shel Silverstein—Virtual Read-Out!* (2021): In this one-minute video, actress/comedian Whoopi Goldberg reads a poem by Shel Silverstein. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCfTeat4eEs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCfTeat4eEs)
- *2016 Banned Books Week Promo Trailer—Mooreville Public Library* (2016): This two-minute video was made by a public library in Indiana. It is an example of what you and your students can do for Banned Book Week. It's a great way to **take action** on an important issue. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGjRsNM39Ms](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGjRsNM39Ms)

In short, there are hundreds of websites that address the issue of challenged or banned children's books. Those we highlighted here are just a sampling of what's available electronically as resources in your classroom.

### ASSESSMENT

There are a number of ways to assess whether we are providing students with a wide range of literature and accepting our professional responsibility to have children read books that are important to their lives, even if they are controversial. The following questions are helpful in assessing classroom libraries and reading programs.

#### Text Box 9.3 Assessment

- *What is the range of books on your classroom shelves (great literature; books that you may not like, but those that the kids do; controversial books; books that are important for students gaining multiple perspectives on topics of your curriculum)?*

- *How do you use books that contain stereotypes? What range of strategies do you use with students to help them unpack problematic images of others?*
- *If a parent questions a book you are using, how do you provide a rationale for using the book, and if necessary, provide an alternate book for the child to read?*
- *What questionable book(s) will you use this year?*

It is important that all of us educate ourselves relative to censorship. The invitation *Mini-Inquiries into Challenged or Banned Books* invites students to enter the conversation by asking them to re-examine books they plan to read as well as some they will have already read at an earlier age. For details on how to use this invitation in your classroom, click on Chapter 9 on the *Invitations* tab of the website for this book: <http://routledge.com/cw/leland>. Selena E. Van Horn's *Voices from the Field* vignette also provides support for using risky texts.

### VOICES FROM THE FIELD

#### Sharing LGBTQ+ Literature with Young Readers: Critical Engagement for Equity

By Selena E. Van Horn

As an assistant professor of literacy education, I regularly share lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) children's literature with pre- and in-service teachers. Each time, I hear comments like “I've never seen books like this before,” and questions like “What will parents say?” I remember asking some of the same questions when I was a second-grade teacher. Many young readers engage in complex discussions about race and religion. They also can identify ways society genders children's clothing and toys. But why are topics of diverse families (that include same gender parents) and gender identities (that include transgender and nonbinary people) considered to be so controversial? For some, it may be due to a lack of exposure to LGBTQ+ children's literature. For others, it may be due to a belief that teaching should be apolitical. I believe teaching is a political act and that as teachers, what we choose to omit from our classroom libraries is just as important as what we choose to share.

One of the most powerful ways for teachers to begin sharing LGBTQ+ literature is to learn from the brilliance of young children. When working with an afterschool book club of second-grade readers who identified as girls, I asked how young readers would engage with LGBTQ+ children's literature and wondered what questions they would have and what connections they would make with the characters and topics of the texts. The book club met about twice a week for six months. Together, the readers and I chose books to share. We responded to the literature through discussions, reader response notebooks, paintings, and

other forms of art. Although we only met for book club a couple of times each week, we spent almost every day after school together. We formed a strong bond. Reading, responding, and taking actions for equity and social justice is collaborative and often emotional work. It is not something we can try out for one day and then move on with our lives. It is a practice, just like our relationships, that can move slowly and build with time.

When the readers in the book club first read about characters with two moms or two dads they had mixed reactions. A couple of them giggled out of discomfort, while one of the readers drew on her schema about same gender relationships in her life and assumed the parents were just best friends. When reading *Who's in a Family* (Skutch, 1995) a text with diverse family structures, they had questions about "real" moms and "stepmoms," believing that there could only be one "real" mom. Several of the readers experienced cognitive dissonance as the new information seemed to challenge what they knew about parents. A couple of the readers drew on their connections to media (e.g., recalling TV shows with two moms/dads), recalled personal relationships they had not considered before (e.g., one of their classmates had two dads) and continually revised their thinking throughout their reading and reflections.

When the concept of two "real" moms was understood and accepted by many of them, they questioned how two women could have a baby. Many teachers and parents feel least prepared to answer questions like this. I found that by asking for clarification and waiting for students to engage in the conversation, I could begin to understand what the students were really questioning. Adults often make assumptions about what children are asking. In the book club, the readers were not concerned with a biology lesson; they wanted an example to draw on. When reading *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005), a highly contested yet accessible text, we learned how two male penguins chose each other like the male and female mates do. They adopted an egg via their zookeeper and became dads to baby penguin, Tango. The readers understood and accepted adoption, asking no further questions. Children want answers to the questions they have in the moment. Teachers can follow their lead, answering their questions as they arise, researching the questions they do not feel prepared to answer in the moment, and reading in preparation for the next questions.

Gender identities and expressions are two topics that can be confused as the same concept. Cisgender denotes that a person's gender corresponds to their assigned sex at birth (i.e., woman/female and man/male). *Gender identity* refers to the gender (cisgender woman/man, girl/boy, trans woman/trans man, etc.) with which a person identifies, regardless of their assumed sex and/or sex assigned at birth (i.e., female/male) or outward appearance. It is important to use the terms cisgender, transgender, nonbinary, and so on to clarify that individuals can have many different gender identities and ensure that we do not "other" transgender and nonbinary identities and normalize cisgender identities. *Gender expression* refers to the ways a person chooses to dress, wear their hair/makeup, and so on. The readers and I discussed these topics when reading about transgender and gender creative youth. The readers easily connected with the characters in *My*

*Princess Boy* (Kilodavis, 2011), a story of a little boy who loves to wear dresses, told from his mother's point of view. In the story, both the princess boy and his mother receive negative reactions from others.

The readers in the book club were staunch defenders of an individual's right to express their gender in whichever way they choose. They each shared stories of ways they felt they had defied gender norms for girls (e.g., playing football or basketball and taking out the trash) and ways they accepted boys who defied gender norms (e.g., wearing skirts/dresses, ballet dancing, and taking care of babies). Additionally, we read *Oliver Button Is a Sissy* (dePaola, 1979) the story of Oliver, who wants to be a star performer, and *Roland Humphrey Is Wearing a What?* (Kiernan-Johnson, 2012) a story written in verse about classmates bullying Roland for wearing barrettes in his hair and colors and prints that do not meet "Lucy and Ella's color rules for boys." With each read, the readers were outraged by the lack of acceptance and bullying displayed by characters in the books. Interestingly, the readers understood a double standard of masculinity; boys were much more likely to be bullied for dressing and acting feminine than the girls were to be bullied for dressing or acting masculine or in defiance of femininity.

While the readers were not new to the concept of defying gender norms with clothing and actions, they began to understand gender identity and expression to be more complex than outward appearances. They were introduced to transgender characters in *10,000 Dresses* (Ewert, 2008) and *When Kayla Was Kyle* (Fabrikant, 2013). In *10,000 Dresses*, Bailey's family refuses to see her for who she is, saying things like "Bailey you're a boy . . . and that's that!" Bailey dreams of beautiful dresses every night and eventually she meets a friend who says, "You're the coolest girl I ever met, Bailey." When first reading about transgender characters, the readers were confused. They first thought that the stories were about boys who wanted to wear girl clothing and were bullied. By engaging in ongoing discussions about gender identities and expressions, some of the readers came to know Bailey as the girl she is, even though her family was not ready to accept her. Not all of the readers agreed or referred to Bailey with she/her pronouns. As the facilitator, I challenged the young readers to think critically about identity and question the taken-for-granted assumptions we often have about people.

Noticing, naming, and brainstorming resistance to these injustices spread to the readers' experiences outside of book club sessions. They often brought stories from their homes and classrooms, asking for ways to challenge gender norms and broaden acceptance for LGBTQ+ people and books in their classrooms. The readers and I built a relationship, reader-to-reader, on trust, acceptance, and love. We tackled topics that some might consider controversial, but in a safe and supportive learning environment, we were able to ask questions, make mistakes, and grow together.

When reading and learning about LGBTQ+ topics, there are still people and topics that can be silenced. For example, when learning about two moms or two dads, lesbian and gay topics are covered, although bisexual topics are rarely, if ever discussed. The T stands for transgender, but there are many gender identities one could have. There are variations to the acronym including the plus sign to signify the many identities that are included but not listed. The Supreme Court

decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015) legalized same-sex marriage, although many LGBTQ+ people are still not protected legally from losing their homes or jobs. This makes the need to bring in diverse texts even more important. There are children in our classrooms who identify currently or may identify in the future as LGBTQ+. There are students in our classrooms with loved ones who identify as LGBTQ+. We have colleagues and community members who identify as LGBTQ+. By sharing a book with diverse characters and engaging students in meaningful dialogue, we have the power to bring more love, honor, celebration, and acceptance into our schools and communities.

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