

REVIEW ARTICLE

How Ravitch Restricts What Readers Learn about Censorship

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The Language Police: How pressure groups restrict what students learn

Diane Ravitch. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2003. Pp. 255. Hbk £15.00/\$24.00.

Diane Ravitch's *The Language Police* has been hailed as probably the most important book of 2003, 'one of those rare books that actually influence the way we live' (Yardley, 2003). Its topic, censorship of educational materials, is indeed important and relevant, and not only in the United States. *The Language Police* aims to unveil how, in Ravitch's own words, 'the sensible principle of removing racist and sexist language turn[s] into [an] effort to delete whatever might annoy or offend the most agitated imaginations' (p. 18).

Ravitch begins by laying out the problem of 'beneficent censorship' and relating it to her own experience in the National Assessment Governing Board. This Board was created in 1990 to supervise the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a set of standardised tests given to samples of American students in grades four, eight and twelve, and intended to provide some measure of 'aggregate achievement' in the United States (p. 5). In Chapter Three, Ravitch discusses the 'bias and sensitivity reviews' carried out by textbook publishers, and in a later chapter she relates this practice to the power relations in the textbook adoption process, paying special attention to Texas and California because these two states have centralised the approval and purchase of textbooks and are, as a consequence, among the largest purchasers in the country. She also discusses the important fact that textbook publishing in the United States is in the hands of a few large companies such as McGraw-Hill and Reed Elsevier. In Chapters Five and Six, Ravitch takes as her point of entry into the question of censorship not the companies carrying out the censorship, but the groups pressuring governments and companies to do so. She pays attention to attempts both by conservative religious groups ('the right'), and by liberal feminist and multiculturalist groups ('the left'). The two subsequent chapters are dedicated to the question of censorship as this arises in connection with textbooks available specifically for English ('language arts') and history. The book concludes

with three recommendations to alleviate the situation, a lengthy ‘Glossary of Banned Words, Usages, Stereotypes, and Topics’ to illustrate just how serious the problem of censorship is, and suggestions for ‘Classic Literature for Home and School’ for students in different grades.

Although Ravitch emphasises that empirical research is at the basis of the book, the genre is much less research report than polemical essay. I am certainly not the first one to observe that Ravitch’s style is heavily rhetorical. After reading her book *Left Back*, William Wraga (2001) accused Ravitch of reading selectively, oversimplifying, slanting the historic record and relying on rhetorical tactics (p. 38). And Paul Shaker wrote, ‘*Left Back* is less history than advocacy’ (Shaker, 2004, pp. 503–504). *The Language Police* is not primarily intended for an academic audience, but rather for those who have a direct stake in what is written, taught and tested: parents, teachers, publishers and politicians. This is clear not only from the tone throughout the book, but also from her recommendations. ‘What can we do? We can stop censorship . . . The reign of censorship must end’ (p. 165). With these exhortations Ravitch launches a campaign to increase competition among textbook publishers, expose the selection criteria for curriculum and test passages to the public, and improve teacher education. Before too many people jump on her bandwagon, however, let me take a closer look at her argument.

The word ‘censorship’ is a powerful indictment, and conjures up images of apparatchiks scrutinising private correspondence and media broadcasts. Under this one heading Ravitch bunches together a variety of attempts to influence teaching and test materials that really are quite different. The term ‘censorship’ as used by Ravitch covers a great range of phenomena, including the elimination from the curriculum of topics deemed biased (e.g., evolution), the elimination from standardised tests of topics judged to be contentious (e.g., religion or politics), the elimination from existing literary texts of words or passages, the changing of language deemed biased (e.g., ‘mankind’) in curriculum and test materials and the changing of the selection of titles and topics in literature and history textbooks. These apples and oranges sit uneasily together in the same crate. Attempts to eliminate topics from the curriculum altogether, in other words, to limit what students are invited or allowed to speak and write about, are not the same as attempts to change the language that students use to speak and write about a topic—any topic. Attempts to change the literary and historical canon are not the same as attempts to remove contentious language from standardised tests. Ravitch gives little serious consideration to the motives and contexts of these various attempts at ‘censorship’; what matters to her is the end result: certain words and topics do not appear in teaching and test materials.

Ravitch herself acknowledges that education necessarily involves selection, simply because within a human life—let alone within a government budget—it is not possible to study everything there is to study. ‘Teachers have a responsibility to choose readings for their students, based on their professional judgment of what students are likely to understand and what they need to learn’, writes Ravitch (p. 63). But of

course the issue is precisely that there are varying opinions about what it is students 'need to learn'. The real questions are with what *motive* topics and terms are excluded, and in what *context* the exclusion takes place. The belief that language habits that are based on outdated situations or mistaken beliefs should be changed, for instance, is quite a different motive from the belief that students should not read or think about topics such as evolutionary theory or same-sex parenting. And the political conviction that it is important and defensible in curriculum materials to give voice to individuals and groups who have historically been marginalised, is quite a different motive from the publisher's belief that in a litigious society it simply is not worth the trouble including language that someone could start a lawsuit over.

It is regrettable that Ravitch does not provide a more nuanced discussion of the various manifestations of selection and censorship, and their various contexts and effects. Some of the examples Ravitch provides made my jaw drop as much as hers—but what matters is not *that* our jaws dropped, but *why* they did. For example, the changing of language within existing literary texts is appalling not because language as such is untouchable and should never be changed, but because *in the context of a literary text*, it shows a narrow focus on content and an utter disregard for literary form. And the banning of certain books from libraries needs to be opposed not because these books are part of a sacred canon, but because *in the context of a library*, access to materials, whether one agrees with them or not, is a value worth defending in a democratic society.

There are other parts of the book where attention to context would have strengthened Ravitch's argument. Many of the examples Ravitch provides, and all fifteen in the first chapter, are examples of passages intended *for standardised tests*, not for inclusion in the general curriculum. Testing and teaching are two related, yet distinct activities. Ravitch is a strong advocate of standardised tests, which explains why she does not consider the role that these tests themselves play in causing some of the problems she describes. As Canadian political scientist Janice Gross Stein (2001) explains, standardised tests are typically

focused not so much on what students know, but on how they compare with every other student taking the test ... Using averages to measure educational performance is a curiously competitive standard. It tells us little about what students actually know, about how proficient they are, and instead assesses only whether they are better or worse than the average (pp. 161–162).

Standardised tests are for comparison, not for evaluation of individual learning. In fact, any kind of learning that is not easily measured, quantified and compared tends to be excluded from standardised tests. If the bias-and-sensitivity reviewers exclude certain questions from standardised tests, it is because they anticipate and wish to avoid objections not from individual students or parents, but rather from groups of people—schools, regions, or particular populations—whose collective

score ends up being 'below average'. When, with a flair for drama, Ravitch writes, 'Farewell then to *Great Expectations*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, and 'The Little Match Girl', with their unacceptable images of wealth and poverty' (p. 23), it is easy to forget that what she means here is not farewell in general, not even farewell in the school curriculum, but farewell in standardised tests that are intended for comparing populations, schools and regions.

Throughout the book Ravitch deploys the well-known rhetorical devices of 'common sense' and 'the reasonable person', but fails to inform the reader on what grounds, other than her own imagination, she distinguishes between what would offend a 'reasonable person' and what might offend 'the most agitated imaginations' (p. 18). At the end of the final chapter Ravitch writes quite plainly that whoever feels 'offended' should simply stop whining. 'Sometimes words do hurt', Ravitch shrugs, 'but we learn to live with that hurt as the price of freedom' (p. 162). Not only in this passage, but throughout the book, Ravitch ignores opportunities to give a more nuanced account of the power of words to do harm. She ridicules the belief in 'the power of the word' held by both left-wing and right-wing pressure groups, but does not explain why this belief is mistaken or simplistic.

Pressure groups on the right believe that what children read in school should present [an idealized] vision of the past to children and that showing it might make it so. . . Pressure groups on the left feel as strongly about the power of the word as those on the right. . . They want children to read only descriptions of the world as they think it should be in order to help this new world into being (p. 63).

Ravitch is right to address simplistic understandings of the force of language, but by denying language's force altogether, and offering an equally simplistic *representational* understanding of language, she weakens her own argument. For instance, when Ravitch discusses the guidelines used by Riverside Publishing for passages and questions on standardised tests, she takes issue with the warning against 'community setting stereotyping':

It is a stereotype to show African Americans living in an urban environment. It is a stereotype to show Caucasians living in an affluent suburb. Since these 'stereotypes' represent reality for significant numbers of people, writers must either omit any community setting, or always write counter to the stereotype. . . Denying reality is a common feature of writing against stereotype (p. 27).

Ravitch suggests here that language is the innocent messenger, simply relaying a reality that is outside its sphere of influence. In this representational view of language, changing language makes no sense if the reality it represents has not changed already. But as speech act theorists such as Judith Butler (1997) explain, language does more than represent reality: it constitutes it. This does not mean, as Ravitch quite

rightly points out, that an individual speech act suffices to bring about the identity or situation it refers to. It does mean, however, that every speech act participates in the *reiterative history* of a discourse, and it is precisely through reiteration that discourse has the power to constitute identities and situations. Ravitch fails to theorise language, a central concept in the book, and thus fails to take into account the responsibility that all in education carry for perpetuating or derailing hurtful language.

The reasons behind Ravitch's opposition of censorship reveal her view of the aims of education. One of those reasons is that censorship threatens the freedom of expression. Whereas Canada, the United Kingdom and other European nations have placed limits on this freedom in the form of protections from injurious forms of expression ('hate speech acts'), freedom of expression is almost untouchable in the United States. Censorship is also undesirable, according to Ravitch, because it threatens the historical and scientific truth and accuracy of the curriculum, and because it reduces the range, level of difficulty, sense of humour and provocativeness of the material students encounter in school. 'The bias and sensitivity reviewers work with assumptions that have the inevitable effect of stripping away everything that is potentially thought-provoking and colorful from the texts that children encounter', thus 'reducing the curriculum in the schools to bland pabulum' (p. 8). Lastly, censorship poses a threat to the transmission of a common, American culture. 'It demands that we abandon our belief in *e pluribus unum*, a diverse people who are continually becoming one' (p. 165).

This last motive for opposing the influence of pressure groups on the curriculum deserves more attention. When Ravitch laments, 'Quietly but inevitably, what we once considered our literary heritage disappears from the schools' (p. 160), she fails to address who is included in and excluded from her 'we' and 'our heritage', but of course this has been the crux of decades of battles over who and what is important enough to be included in 'the canon' and school curricula. In her essay 'Education after the culture wars' (2002), Ravitch more strongly emphasises this concern over the erosion of a common American culture. In this essay she asks,

how, in a society as varied and rapidly changing as our own, can a common culture survive without a clear commitment to broadly shared standards for the teaching of literature and history? And absent any such shared culture, how can we communicate across lines of race, religion, ethnicity, and social class in order to forge common purposes? (Ravitch, 2002, p. 6).

These are important questions for curriculum developers not only in the United States, but in many other countries whose populations have grown increasingly diverse. The challenge is to find a balance between, on the one hand, enabling people to participate and interact as equal citizens in a common public realm and, on the other, having the state and its citizens recognise and honour the constitutive differences of individuals. Censorship is generally a poor response to this challenge. It is

unimaginative, uneducational and, as Butler (1997) analyses, potentially harmful to the very individuals and groups it purports to protect. However, ridiculing individuals and groups with legitimate concerns about gender equality, respect for religious differences and the effects of discursive performativity, is not a helpful response either. There is in Ravitch's work more than a trace of cultural pessimism, and nostalgia for the good old days of liberal education. As a historian, perhaps Ravitch could have made a more constructive contribution by discussing the educational avenues that open by teaching histories not only of events, but of words and ideas, and indeed of the very construction of history and the literary canon.

When Jonathan Yardley (2003) writes that Ravitch 'has no political axes to grind and no ideological agenda to pursue', he has been blinded by the ideological claim to neutrality of the defenders of liberal education and the academic curriculum. The question is not whether certain topics and words get excluded from educational materials, but which ones, and based on whose values. If there is one thing that *The Language Police* does very well, it is to make clear that education is never value-neutral, and that battles over values are at the heart of most, if not all, educational policy controversies.

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