Censorship and literacy

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Article published as:
Wray, D. (1988) 'Censorship and literacy', in *Reading*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 137-142

Recent events have once more brought to the fore the issue of the censorship of books provided for educational purposes. From the United States have come reports of particular states under the control of fundamentalist Christian movements banning textbooks explaining and propounding an evolutionary view of the history of the world. Closer to home we have had bitter controversy over the presence in the Inner London Education Authority's central loan collection of a book containing photographs of a five year old girl breakfasting in bed with her homosexual father and another man. (T.E.S. 19/9/86) The protest over "Jenny lives with Eric and Martin" came largely from a particular part of the political spectrum, but pressure towards censorship has come from most political quarters for many years now. The chairman of the ILEA supplies committee who is quoted as saying, "We are not interested in buying from anybody books, videos, slides, tapes or materials of any kind which carry outdated images, outdated messages about women, about ethnic minorities or about disabled people" (T.E.S. 10/10/86), is reflecting a view on censorship which has had immense impact on books for children over a number of years. Studies have demonstrated the gender bias of many books for children (Stones, 1983; Hodgeon, 1985), and books containing racial stereotypes have also been criticised (Dixon, 1978). Children's books have been attacked for either portraying a biased view of working class life, or for not portraying a view at all (Jeffcoate, 1982), and, more recently, attention has been brought to bear on the portrayal in books of a variety of handicaps. As a result of this pressure many teachers and schools have taken positive steps to exclude certain books from their classrooms. Books that were formerly held to be classics have been banned from use in schools. "Little Black Sambo", "Doctor Dolittle", and "Biggles", to name but a few, have been condemned as ethnocentric, and likely to encourage racist attitudes among children. Traditional fairy tales thought to encourage sexism have been frowned upon by some teachers and others showing female characters in a more positive light have been used instead (Lyons, 1978). The books of Enid Blyton have been rejected by many teachers as, among other things, offering too cosy a picture of middle-class childhood which did not reflect the social backgrounds of the children reading them. It has also become quite difficult for authors to publish books that portray sexist, racist etc. images (Evans, 1987), so the potential provision of books is already changing in far-reaching ways.

There are pressures for censorship emanating from many quarters and reflecting many different political views of the world. Many of these pressures are, of course, understandable and it is difficult not to feel sympathy with them. How, though, do the practices arising from these pressures, i.e. the banning of some books, and the limited use made of others, fit with a concept of literacy? Can censorship and true literacy co-exist, or does the one affect the other? In the rest of this article, it is my intention to explore some of the issues arising from these questions, and to advance the argument that censorship in fact militates against true literacy.

Let us begin by looking closely at what 'literacy' might imply. A brief, if somewhat functional, definition of literacy might include something like 'the ability to cope with the printed word at a level sufficient to function effectively in modern society'. There will, of course, always be

debate over what precisely is involved in effective functioning in society, but it is possible to analyse in more depth what ‘coping with print’ is likely to involve. In functional terms this can be seen as a process of handling information. (There is, of course, an affective side to literacy as well. Reading novels, poetry, or going to the theatre are all literate activities. I am, however, concerned more here with what has been termed ‘functional literacy’.) It has been suggested that this information process is made up of six discrete stages (Wray, 1985), that is:

1. Having a purpose for finding and using particular information.
2. Locating the information in whatever sources are appropriate.
3. Selecting from the information found.
4. Organising the information found.
5. Evaluating the information.
6. Communicating the information in whatever form is appropriate.

It can readily be seen that ‘literacy’ tasks, from consulting a bus timetable to planning a holiday, involve these six stages, although clearly different tasks will put greater emphasis upon different stages of the process. If this is what literacy involves, then it follows that to be fully literate, one must be competent at each of these stages of the process.

Although each of these six stages is a necessary component of literacy, it is nevertheless possible to value some of them more highly than others as expressions of true literacy. One revealing way of doing this in these days of modern technology, is to ask the question, “Can computers be described as literate?”

It is immediately obvious that computers can, in fact, perform some of these tasks much more efficiently than human beings. Handling information is what computers are designed to do, and they can process information at rates in excess of millions of operations per second, and deal with quantities of data millions of times greater than the most efficient human. They can locate information very quickly, having the capacity to search immense databases in seconds. They can select very quickly from these databases the precise pieces of information which match particular criteria. They can pull together several pieces of discrete information, and organise them into a coherent whole. They can also communicate information to anywhere in the world at speeds no human could match. Clearly at stages 2, 3, 4 and 6 of the information process they out-perform humans. Are they then more literate than humans?

The key to this question lies in the fact that there are two out of these six stages at which computers are not competent, and if literacy implies competence at all stages of the process, this allows us to classify computers as non-literate objects. Firstly, computers cannot set themselves purposes in the way that humans can. Although computers can do marvellous things, they can only do them when instructed - by humans. Computers are simply tools, albeit very efficient ones. The ability of human beings to define their own purposes for action is one of the things that sets us apart from machines, and nowhere is this more apparent than in the field of literacy.

The second thing that computers cannot do is evaluate the information they process, except in a very limited way by checking for internal consistency. In the early days of computer use many tales were told of ‘computer errors’, such as people getting gas bills for £0, or worse, £1,000,000. These were not, of course, computer errors, but errors in human

programming of computers. What the computers had failed to do was recognise mistakes in this human programming. In other words, they were not able to evaluate the information they were given. This fact is so well known as to have become almost a law of computer operation. GIGO - garbage in, garbage out.

Both these areas of computer weakness can be seen as examples of a lack of a quality fundamental to most areas of human endeavour, including literacy, - autonomy of action. Computers cannot define purposes for themselves. They are assigned purposes. They cannot evaluate information unless someone instructs them how. They cannot operate as autonomous entities. Yet humans can and do operate autonomously. It is precisely this autonomy which allows them to operate across the whole range of activities which make up real literacy. The operation of autonomy is essential to literacy.

To return to the question of censorship of books, it is now possible to ask whether the removal of certain books from the reach of children, however well-intentioned, is likely to encourage the development of this autonomy which, it has just been argued, is essential to literacy. The answer, of course, must be no. Autonomy cannot be developed in children by depriving them of it, and imposing criteria upon children about which books they may and may not read is depriving them of the opportunity to make their own decisions.

We do, of course, want children to become discriminating in their choice of books. We want them to be able to recognise bias when they read it, and to be alert to the hidden values that may underly the books they read. How we achieve these things may, in fact, be by the precise opposite of the protective approach adopted by those who would ban biased materials from use in schools.

It has to be recognised that children will read vast amounts of biased materials in the world outside school, and certainly in their adult lives there will be no well-meaning teacher around to protect them from materials often quite blatant in their bias. In literature it is obvious that some of the classics of our culture could be construed as conveying very undesirable messages. “Robinson Crusoe” portrays racial superiority, “The Merchant of Venice” anti-semitism, and many, many novels, including a vast range of popular fiction from Ian Fleming to Jeffrey Archer, can be accused of sexism. Other printed sources of information can be accused of similar things. A brochure from the South African Tourist Board shows only one black face, and that is of a Zulu chieftain in traditional costume, and just about every holiday brochure you could mention uses pictures of scantily clad young women as a lure to people to buy particular holidays. Sexism, racism and class bias abound throughout popular reading material, from newspapers to advertisements via magazines. Political bias is also there, although in this country we are at least fortunate in being able to choose the bias we read to a certain extent. No amount of censorship of books in school will prevent children from being faced with all this material, and, in fact, censorship may actually hinder children’s abilities to deal with it all.

One approach to enabling children to deal with bias in what they read is to make a deliberate policy of confronting them with as many types of it as possible, and to bring the bias out into the open and to discuss it openly. Of course, messages which we might see as negative (sexist, racist etc.) need to be balanced by opposing, more positive messages. Classrooms do need books portraying positive views of a variety of cultures. They also need books in which the female characters are assertive and not secondary to male characters. Providing a balance of messages and opportunities for the discussion of these

messages can allow children to develop the critical faculties with regard to print that will be necessary for them if they are to become autonomous users of print.

This approach, of course, makes certain assumptions about classroom environments and the philosophies they reflect. There is a danger that, in a classroom environment that does not encourage an open, questioning attitude in its children, the presence of biased materials might signify tacit approval by the teacher. But it is questionable whether, in the terms of the argument advanced earlier, such a classroom will encourage children to develop their personal autonomy, and hence real literacy.

In the space of a brief article it is clearly impossible to do more than scrape the surface of this very complex and contentious issue. Much fuller treatments of the context and nature of literacy exist (e.g. de Castell, Luke & Egan, 1986), and the issues of bias and censorship have also received much attention (Zimet, 1976; Jeffcoate, 1982). What this article has attempted to do is to examine some of the implications arising from a linking of these two areas. It has been argued that the key concept here is that of personal autonomy. If this is central to literacy, then, it is argued, the problem of bias in printed materials is not averted by censorship, however well-intentioned, and a much more open approach needs to be adopted.

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