

Adventurous Thinking

FOSTERING STUDENTS' RIGHTS TO READ AND WRITE IN SECONDARY ELA CLASSROOMS



EDITED BY MOLLIE V. BLACKBURN

Principles
in Practice

STUDENTS' RIGHTS
TO READ AND WRITE

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The NCTE Executive Committee reaffirmed this guideline in November 2012.

This statement was originally developed in 1981, revised April 2009 to adhere to NCTE's Policy on Involvement of People of Color, and revised again in September 2018.

Overview: The Students' Right to Read provides resources that can be used to help discuss and ensure students' free access to all texts. The genesis of the Students' Right to Read was an original Council statement, "Request for Reconsideration of a Work," prepared by the Committee on the Right to Read of the National Council of Teachers of English and revised by Ken Donelson. The current Students' Right to Read statement represents an updated second edition that builds on the work of Council members dedicated to ensuring students the freedom to choose to read any text and opposing "efforts of individuals or groups to limit the freedom of choice of others." Supported through references from text challenges and links to resources, this statement discusses the history and dangers of text censorship which highlight the breadth and significance of the Students' Right to Read. The statement then culminates in processes that can be followed with different stakeholders when students' reading rights are infringed.

The Right to Read and the Teacher of English

For many years, American schools have been pressured to restrict or deny students access to texts deemed objectionable by some individual or group. These pressures have mounted in recent years, and English teachers have no reason to believe they will diminish. The fight against censorship is a continuing series of skirmishes, not a pitched battle leading to a final victory over censorship.

We can safely make two statements about censorship: first, any text is potentially open to attack by someone, somewhere, sometime, for some reason; second, censorship is often arbitrary and irrational. For example, classics traditionally used in English classrooms have been accused of containing obscene, heretical, or subversive elements such as the following:

- Plato's *Republic*: "the book is un-Christian"
- Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*: "very unfavorable to Mormons"
- Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*: "a filthy book"
- Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: "too violent for children today"
- Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*: "a poor model for young people"
- Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*: "contains homosexuality"

Modern works, even more than the classics, are criticized with terms such as "filthy," "un-American," "overly realistic," and "anti-war." Some books have been attacked merely for being "controversial," suggesting that for some people the purpose of education is not the investigation of ideas but rather the indoctrination of a certain set of beliefs and standards. Referencing multiple years of research completed by the American Library Association

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(ALA), the following statements represent complaints typical of those made against modern works of literature:

- J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*: "profanity, lurid passages about sex, and statements defamatory to minorities, God, women, and the disabled"
- John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*: "uses the name of God and Jesus in a vain and profane manner"
- Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson's *And Tango Makes Three*: "anti-ethnic, anti-family, homosexuality, religious viewpoint, unsuited to age group"
- Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*: "promotes racial hatred, racial division, racial separation, and promotes white supremacy"
- Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia*: "occult/Satanism, offensive language, violence"
- Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: "offensive language, sexually explicit, unsuited to age group"
- Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings's *I Am Jazz*: "inaccurate, homosexuality, sex education, religious viewpoint, and unsuited for age group"

Some groups and individuals have also raised objections to literature written specifically for young people. As long as novels intended for young people stayed at the intellectual and emotional level of *A Date for Marcy* or *A Touchdown for Thunderbird High*, censors could forego criticism. But many contemporary novels for adolescents focus on the real world of young people—drugs, premarital sex, alcoholism, divorce, gangs, school dropouts, racism, violence, and sensuality. English teachers willing to defend classics and modern literature must be prepared to give equally spirited defense to serious and worthwhile children's and young adult novels.

Literature about minoritized ethnic or racial groups remains "controversial" or "objectionable" to many adults. As long as groups such as African Americans, Pacific Islanders, American Indians, Asian Americans, and Latinxs "kept their proper place"—awarded them by a White society—censors rarely raised their voices. But attacks have increased in frequency as minoritized groups have refused to observe their assigned "place." Though nominally, the criticisms of literature about minoritized racial or ethnic groups have usually been directed at "bad language," "suggestive situations," "questionable literary merit," or "ungrammatical English" (usually oblique complaints about the different dialect or culture of a group), the underlying motive for some attacks has unquestionably been discriminatory. Typical of censors' criticisms of ethnic works are the following comments:

- Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*: "homosexuality, offensive language, racism, sexually explicit, unsuited to age group"
- Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*: "occult/Satanism, offensive language, religious viewpoint, sexually explicit, violence"
- Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*: "sexual violence, religious themes, 'may lead to terrorism'"

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- Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*: "anti-family, cultural insensitivity, drugs/alcohol/smoking, gambling, offensive language, sex education, sexually explicit, unsuited for age group, violence, depictions of bullying"

Books are not alone in being subject to censorship. Magazines or newspapers used, recommended, or referred to in English classes have increasingly drawn the censor's fire. Few libraries would regard their periodical collection as worthwhile or representative without some or all of the following publications, but all of them have been the target of censors on occasion:

- *National Geographic*: "Nudity and sensationalism, especially in stories on barbaric foreign people."
- *Scholastic Magazine*: "Doctrines opposing the beliefs of the majority, socialistic programs; promotes racial unrest and contains very detailed geography of foreign countries, especially those inhabited by dark people."
- *National Observer*: "Right-wing trash with badly reported news."
- *New York Times*: "That thing should be outlawed after printing the Pentagon Papers and helping our country's enemies."

The immediate results of demands to censor books or periodicals vary. At times, school boards and administrators have supported and defended their teachers, their use of materials under fire, and the student's right of access to the materials. At other times, however, special committees have been formed to cull out "objectionable works" or "modern trash" or "controversial literature." Some teachers have been summarily reprimanded for assigning certain works, even to mature students. Others have been able to retain their positions only after initiating court action.

Not as sensational, but perhaps more important, are the long range effects of censoring the rights of educators and students to self-select what they read and engage with. Schools have removed texts from libraries and classrooms and curricula have been changed when English teachers have avoided using or recommending works which might make some members of the community uncomfortable or angry. Over the course of their schooling, many students are consequently "educated" in a system that is hostile to critical inquiry and dialogue. And many teachers and other school staff learn to emphasize their own sense of comfort and safety rather than their students' needs.

The problem of censorship does not derive solely from the small anti-intellectual, ultra-moral, or ultra-patriotic groups which will typically function in a society that guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The present concern is rather with the frequency and force of attacks by others, often people of good will and the best intentions, some from within the teaching profession. The National Council of Teachers of English, the National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and the American Library Association, as well as the publishing industry and writers themselves agree: pressures for censorship are great throughout our society.

The material that follows is divided into two sections. The first on "The Right to Read" is addressed to parents and the community at large. The other section, "A Program of

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Action,” lists Council recommendations for establishing professional committees in every school to set up procedures for book selection, to work for community support, and to review complaints against texts. *Where suspicion fills the air and holds scholars in line for fear of their jobs, there can be no exercise of the 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 [sic] becomes instead a pipe line 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, United States Supreme Court:
Adler v. Board of Education, 1951

The Right to Read

An open letter to our country from the National Council of Teachers of English:

The right to read, like all rights guaranteed or implied within our constitutional tradition, can be used wisely or foolishly. In many ways, education is an effort to improve the quality of choices open to all students. But to deny the freedom of choice in fear that it may be unwisely used is to destroy the freedom itself. For this reason, we respect the right of individuals to be selective in their own reading. But for the same reason, we oppose efforts of individuals or groups to limit the freedom of choice of others or to impose their own standards or tastes upon the community at large.

One of the foundations of a democratic society is the individual's right to read, and also the individual's right to freely choose what they would like to read. This right is based on an assumption that the educated possess judgment and understanding and can be trusted with the determination of their own actions. In effect, the reader is freed from the bonds of chance. The reader is not limited by birth, geographic location, or time, since reading allows meeting people, debating philosophies, and experiencing events far beyond the narrow confines of an individual's own existence.

In selecting texts to read by young people, English teachers consider the contribution each work may make to the education of the reader, its aesthetic value, its honesty, its readability for a particular group of students, and its appeal to young children and adolescents. English teachers, however, may use different texts for different purposes. The criteria for choosing a text to be read by an entire class are somewhat different from the criteria for choosing texts to be read by small groups.

For example, a teacher might select John Knowles's *A Separate Peace* for reading by an entire class, partly because the book has received wide critical recognition, partly because it is relatively short and will keep the attention of many slower readers, and partly because it has proved popular with many students of widely differing skill sets. The same teacher, faced with the responsibility of choosing or recommending books for several small groups of students, might select or recommend books as different as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*, [Marjane Satrapi](#) ^[1]'s *Persepolis*, Malcolm X's *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart*, or Paul Zindel's *The Pigman*, depending upon the skills and interests of the students in each group.

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And the criteria for suggesting books to individuals or for recommending something worth reading for a student who casually stops by after class are different from selecting material for a class or group. As opposed to censoring, the teacher selects texts, and also helps guide students to self-select them. Selection implies that one is free to choose a text, depending upon the purpose to be achieved and the students or class in question, but a book selected this year may be ignored next year, and the reverse. Censorship implies that certain works are not open to selection, this year or any year.

Wallace Stevens once wrote, "Literature is the better part of life. To this it seems inevitably necessary to add / provided life is the better part of literature" (1957). Students and parents have the right to demand that education today keep students in touch with the reality of the world outside the classroom. Many of our best literary works ask questions as valid and significant today as when the literature first appeared, questions like "What is the nature of humanity?" "Why do people praise individuality and practice conformity?" "What do people need for a good life?" and "What is the nature of a good person?" English teachers must be free to employ books, classic or contemporary, which do not hide, or lie to the young, about the perilous but wondrous times we live in, books which talk of the fears, hopes, joys, and frustrations people experience, books about people not only as they are but as they can be. English teachers forced through the pressures of censorship to use only safe or antiseptic works are placed in the morally and intellectually untenable position of lying to their students about the nature and condition of humanity.

The teacher must exercise care to select or recommend works for class reading and group discussion. One of the most important responsibilities of the English teacher is developing rapport and respect among students. Respect for the uniqueness and potential of the individual, an important facet of the study of literature, should be emphasized in the English class. One way rapport and respect can be developed is through encouraging the students themselves to explore and engage with texts of their own selection. Also, English classes should reflect the cultural contributions of minoritized groups in the United States, just as they should acquaint students with diverse contributions by the many peoples of the world. Finally, the teacher should be prepared to support and defend their classroom and students' process in selecting and engaging with diverse texts against potential censorship and controversy.

The Threat to Education

Censorship leaves students with an inadequate and distorted picture of the ideals, values, and problems of their culture. Writers may often represent their culture, or they may stand to the side and describe and evaluate that culture. Yet partly because of censorship or the fear of censorship, many writers are ignored or inadequately represented in the public schools, and many are represented in anthologies not by their best work but by their "safest" or "least offensive" work.

The censorship pressures receiving the greatest publicity are those of small groups who protest the use of a limited number of books with some "objectionable" realistic elements, such as *Brave New World*, *Lord of the Flies*, *George*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Catch-22*, *Their Eyes*

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Were Watching God, or *A Day No Pigs Would Die*. The most obvious and immediate victims are often found among our best and most creative English teachers, those who have ventured outside the narrow boundaries of conventional texts. Ultimately, however, the real victims are the students, denied the freedom to explore ideas and pursue truth wherever and however they wish.

Great damage may be done by book committees appointed by national or local organizations to pore over anthologies, texts, library books, and paperbacks to find passages which advocate, or seem to advocate, causes or concepts or practices these organizations condemn. As a result, some publishers, sensitive to possible objections, carefully exclude sentences or selections that might conceivably offend some group, somehow, sometime, somewhere.

The Community's Responsibility

Individuals who care about the improvement of education are urged to join students, teachers, librarians, administrators, boards of education, and professional and scholarly organizations in support of the students' right to read. Widespread and informed support in and across communities can assure that

- enough residents are interested in the development and maintenance of a rigorous school system to guarantee its achievement;
- malicious gossip, ignorant rumors, internet posts, and deceptive letters to the editor will not be circulated without challenge and correction;
- news media will observe that the public sincerely desires objective reporting about education, free from slanting or editorial comment which destroys confidence in and support for schools;
- the community will not permit its resources and energies to be dissipated in conflicts created by special interest groups striving to advance their ideologies or biases; and
- faith in democratic processes will be promoted and maintained.

A Program of Action

Censorship in schools is a widespread problem. Teachers of English, librarians, and school administrators can best serve students, literature, and the profession today if they prepare now to face pressures sensibly, demonstrating on the one hand a willingness to consider the merits of any complaint and on the other the courage to defend their literacy program with intelligence and vigor. The Council therefore recommends that schools undertake the following two-step program to protect the students' right to read:

- establish a diverse committee that is representative of the local school community to consider book selection procedures and to screen complaints; and
- promote a community atmosphere in which local residents may be enlisted to support the freedom to read.

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Procedures for Text Selection

Although one may defend the freedom to read without reservation as one of the hallmarks of a free society, there is no substitute for informed, professional, and qualified book selection. English teachers are typically better qualified to choose and recommend texts for their classes than persons not prepared in the field. Nevertheless, administrators have certain legal and professional responsibilities. For these reasons and as a matter of professional courtesy, they should be kept informed about the criteria and the procedures used by English teachers in selecting books and the titles of the texts used.

In each school, the English department should develop its own statement explaining why literature is taught and how books are chosen for each class. This statement should be on file with the administration before any complaints are received. The statement should also support the teacher's right to choose supplementary materials, to build a diverse classroom library, and to discuss controversial issues insofar as they are relevant. In addition, students should be allowed the right to self-select books to read from classroom and school library shelves.

Operating within such a policy, the English department should take the following steps:

- Establish a committee to support English teachers in finding exciting and challenging texts of potential value to students at a specific school. Schools without departments or small schools with a few English teachers should organize a permanent committee charged with the responsibility of alerting other teachers to new texts just published, or old texts now forgotten which might prove valuable in the literacy program. Students should be encouraged to participate in the greatest degree that their development and skill sets allow.
- Devote time at each department or grade-level meeting to reviews and comments by the above committee or plan special meetings for this purpose. Free and open discussions on texts of potential value to students would seem both reasonable and normal for any English department. Teachers should be encouraged to challenge any texts recommended or to suggest titles hitherto ignored. Require that each English teacher give a rationale for any text to be read by an entire class. Written rationales for all texts read by an entire class would serve the department well if censorship should strike. A file of rationales should serve as impressive evidence to the administration and the community that English teachers have not chosen their texts lightly or haphazardly.
- Report to the administration the texts that will be used for class reading by each English teacher.
- A procedure such as this gives each teacher the right to expect support from fellow teachers and administrators whenever someone objects to a text.

The Legal Problem

Apart from the professional and moral issues involved in censorship, there are legal matters about which NCTE cannot give advice. The Council is not a legal authority. Across the nation, moreover, conditions vary so much that no one general principle applies. In some

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states, for example, textbooks are purchased from public funds and supplied free to students; in others, students must rent or buy their own texts.

The legal status of textbook adoption lists also varies. Some lists include only those books which must be taught and allow teachers and sometimes students the freedom to select additional titles; other lists are restrictive, containing the only books which may be required for all students.

As a part of sensible preparations for handling attacks on books, each school should ascertain what laws apply to it.

Preparing the Community

To respond to complaints about texts, every school should have a committee of teachers (and possibly students, parents, and other representatives from the local community) organized to

- inform the community about text selection procedures;
- enlist the support of residents, possibly by explaining the place of literacy and relevant texts in the educational process or by discussing at meetings of parents and other community groups the texts used at that school; and
- consider any complaints against any work. No community is so small that it lacks concerned people who care about their children and the educational program of the schools, and will support English teachers in defending books when complaints are received. Unfortunately, English teachers too often are unaware or do not seek out these people and cultivate their goodwill and support before censorship strikes.

Defending the Texts

Despite the care taken to select worthwhile texts for student reading and the qualifications of teachers selecting and recommending books, occasional objections to a work will undoubtedly be made. All texts are potentially open to criticism in one or more general areas: the treatment of ideologies, of minorities, of gender identities, of love and sex; the use of language not acceptable to some people; the type of illustrations; the private life or political affiliations of the author or the illustrator.

Some attacks are made by groups or individuals frankly hostile to free inquiry and open discussion; others are made by misinformed or misguided people who, acting on emotion or rumor, simply do not understand how the texts are to be used. Others are also made by well-intentioned and conscientious people who fear that harm will come to some segment of the community if a particular text is read or recommended.

What should be done upon receipt of a complaint?

- If the complainant telephones, listen courteously and refer them to the teacher involved. That teacher should be the first person to discuss the text with the person objecting to its use.
- If the complainant is not satisfied, invite them to file the complaint in writing, but make no commitments, admissions of guilt, or threats.

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- If the complainant writes, contact the teacher involved and have the teacher call the complainant.
- For any of the situations above, the teacher is advised to be aware of local contractual and policy stipulations regarding such situations, and keep a written record of what transpired during the complaint process.

An additional option is to contact the NCTE Intellectual Freedom Center to report incidents and seek further resources (<http://www2.ncte.org/resources/ncte-intellectual-freedom-center/> ^[2]).

Request for Reconsideration of a Text

Author _____

Paperback _____ Hardcover _____ Online _____

Title _____

Publisher (if known) _____

Website URL (if applicable) _____

Request initiated by _____

Telephone _____

Address _____

City / State / Zip _____

Complainant represents

____ (Name of individual) _____

____ (Name of organization) _____

- Have you been able to discuss this work with the teacher or librarian who ordered it or who used it?
 Yes No
- What do you understand to be the general purpose for using this work?
- Provide support for a unit in the curriculum?
 Yes No
- Provide a learning experience for the reader in one kind of literature?
 Yes No
- Provide opportunities for students self-selected reading experiences?
 Yes No
- Other _____
- Did the general purpose for the use of the work, as described by the teacher or librarian, seem a suitable one to you?
 Yes No

If not, please explain.

- What do you think is the author's general purpose for this book?

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- In what ways do you think a work of this nature is not suitable for the use the teacher or librarian wishes to carry out?

- What have been students' responses to this work?
___ Yes ___ No
If yes, what responses did the students make?

- Have you been able to learn what qualified reviewers or other students have written about this work?
___ Yes ___ No
If yes, what are those responses?

- Would you like the teacher or librarian to give you a written summary of what qualified reviewers and other students have written about this book or film?
___ Yes ___ No
- Do you have negative reviews of the book?
___ Yes ___ No
- Where were they published?

- Would you be willing to provide summaries of their views you have collected?
___ Yes ___ No
- How would you like your library/school to respond to this request for reconsideration?
___ Do not assign/lend it to my child.
___ Return it to the staff selection committee/department for reevaluation.
___ Other—Please explain

- In its place, what work would you recommend that would convey as valuable a perspective as presented in the challenged text?

Signature _____

Date _____

At first, the English teacher should politely acknowledge the complaint and explain the established procedures. The success of much censorship depends upon frightening an unprepared school or English department into some precipitous action. A standardized procedure will take the sting from the first outburst of criticism and place the burden of proof on the objector. When the reasonable objector learns that they will be given a fair hearing through

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following the proper channels, they are more likely to be satisfied. The idle censor, on the other hand, may well be discouraged from taking further action. A number of advantages will be provided by the form, which will

- formalize the complaint,
- indicate specifically the work in question,
- identify the complainant,
- suggest how many others support the complaint,
- require the complainant to think through objections in order to make an intelligent statement on the text and complaint (1, 2, and 3),
- cause the complainant to evaluate the work for other groups than merely the one they first had in mind (4),
- establish the familiarity of the complainant with the work (5),
- give the complainant an opportunity to consider the criticism about the work and the teacher's purpose in using the work (6, 7, and 8), and
- give the complainant an opportunity to suggest alternative actions to be taken on the work (9 and 10).

The committee reviewing complaints should be available on short notice to consider the completed "Request for Reconsideration of a Work" and to call in the complainant and the teacher involved for a conference. Members of the committee should have reevaluated the work in advance of the meeting, and the group should be prepared to explain its findings. Membership of the committee should ordinarily include an administrator, the English department chair, and at least two classroom teachers of English. But the department might consider the advisability of including members from the community and the local or state NCTE affiliate. As a matter of course, recommendations from the committee would be forwarded to the superintendent, who would in turn submit them to the board of education, the legally constituted authority in the school.

Teachers and administrators should recognize that the responsibility for selecting texts for class study lies with classroom teachers and students, and that the responsibility for reevaluating any text begins with the review committee. Both teachers and administrators should refrain from discussing the objection with the complainant, the press, or community groups. Once the complaint has been filed, the authority for handling the situation must ultimately rest with the administration and school board.

Freedom of inquiry is essential to education in a democracy. To establish conditions essential for freedom, teachers and administrators need to follow procedures similar to those recommended here. Where schools resist unreasonable pressures, the cases are seldom publicized and students continue to read works as they wish. The community that entrusts students to the care of an English teacher should also trust that teacher to exercise professional judgment in selecting or recommending texts. The English teacher can be free to teach literacy, and students can be free to read whatever they wish only if informed and vigilant groups, within the profession and without, unite in resisting unfair pressures.

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NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write

Approved by the NCTE Executive Committee, July 2014

During this era of high-stakes testing, technology-based instruction, and increased control over students' expression due to school violence, students' right to write must be protected. Censorship of writing not only stifles student voices but denies students important opportunities to grow as both writers and thinkers. Through the often messy process of writing, students develop strategies to help them come to understand lessons within the curriculum as well as how their language and ideas can be used to communicate, influence, reflect, explain, analyze, and create.

The National Council of Teachers of English believes

- The expression of ideas without fear of censorship is a fundamental right.
- Words are a powerful tool of expression, a means to clarify, explore, inquire, and learn as well as a way to record present moments for the benefit of future generations.
- Students need many opportunities to write for a variety of purposes and audiences in all classes. Teachers who regularly engage students in such writing should not be expected to read or grade all compositions.
- Teacher feedback should avoid indoctrination because of personal beliefs and should be respectful of both the writer and his/her ideas, even those with which the teacher disagrees.
- English language arts teachers are qualified to frame and assign student writing tasks, but students should, as much as possible, have choice and control over topics, forms, language, themes, and other aspects of their own writing while meeting course requirements.
- Teachers should avoid scripted writing that discourages individual creativity, voice, or expression of ideas.
- Teachers should engage students fully in a writing process that allows them the necessary freedom to formulate and evaluate ideas, develop voice, experiment with syntax and language, express creativity, elaborate on viewpoints, and refine arguments.
- Teachers should foster in students an understanding and appreciation of the responsibilities inherent in writing and publication by encouraging students to assume ownership of both the writing process and the final product.
- Teachers should explicitly teach the distinction between violent writing and violence in writing. Students should expect teachers to uphold the law in reporting all instances of violent writing.
- When writing for publication, students should be provided with high-quality writing instruction and be taught how to write material that is not obscene, libelous, or substantially disruptive of learning throughout the school.

NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write

- Administrators should work in collaboration with students who write for school publications such as school newspapers or literary magazines and, within the limits of state law or district/school policies, should avoid prior review.
- Districts should encourage the development and adoption of policies that support student writers as they learn to make choices in their writing that express their intent while still maintaining ethical and legal boundaries.

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Part I

Introduction: Revolutionary Teaching— Ensuring Students’ Rights to Read and Write

Mollie V. Blackburn

Whether students have the right to read and write is being contested in US courts. Recently, students in the Detroit Public Schools “sued state officials in federal court, arguing that the state had violated their constitutional right to learn to read by providing inadequate resources” (Balingit, 2018). In response, Judge Stephen J. Murphy III acknowledged that when a “child who could be taught to read goes untaught, the child suffers a lasting injury—and so does society,” but that the Constitution does not “demand that a State affirmatively provide each child with a defined, minimum level of education by which the child can attain literacy” (Balingit, 2018). Lawyers have countered, though, arguing “the ability to read and write is key to unlocking other rights . . . that federal courts have held sacred” (Balingit,

2018). Derek Black, in Balingit’s 2018 article, points out that this connection between voting and being educated dates back to before the Constitution. Ironically, the practice of tying together voting and literacy *then* was just as racist as *disentangling* them is now, since the students suing their states (California and Michigan) on the grounds of inadequate resources being provided for them to learn to read are overwhelmingly students of color (Black and Latinx). Still, NCTE asserts that literacy is a right. And this assertion, as articulated in NCTE’s position statements on students’ rights to read and write, is the inspiration for this book.

When I read these position statements, I am struck by this line in an earlier version of NCTE’s *The Students’ Right to Read*: “But youth is the age of revolt. To pretend otherwise is to ignore a reality made clear to young people and adults alike . . .” (National Council of Teachers of English, 1981/2009, p. 3). Revolt. This is not an easy word. To revolt can mean to offend, repel, and repulse. And although that is not how it is used in this statement, these meanings are there; they cannot be denied. To revolt, though, in this statement, means to defy, oppose, and resist. It is this meaning I strive to underscore.

“Youth is the age of revolt” does not mean that young people are necessarily or even potentially a part of a “Revolution,” that is, “revolution thingified with that capital *R* that usually marks an icon to be shot down” (Rich, 1993, p. 237). Some might be, but that is not the focus of the book. Instead, the focus is teachers working with youth who are revolutionary, or even “potentially revolutionary” (Rich, 2001, p. 7), when revolution is understood with a “small *r* that allows for many revolutions,” which Rich conceptualizes as “changes of consciousness,” “invisible, unquantifiable exchanges of energy” (1993, p. 238). These many revolutions are, she describes, “parallel and converging” (1993, p. 238). The small *r* revolution allows for “continuing revolution” (1993, p. 238), or, again in Rich’s words, the “long struggle for radical equality” (2001, p. 116). The young people you will read about in this book are a part of that kind of revolution inspired by their teachers.

Rich writes about artists, particularly poets, as revolutionaries, and I argue that her descriptions of artists and poets also fit teachers like those in this book. She asserts that the “revolutionary artist, the relayer of possibility . . . the revolutionary poet . . . conjures a language that is public, intimate, inviting, terrifying, and beloved” (1993, p. 250). Just as Rich’s descriptions of artists suit the teachers in this book, so too does her description of art suit their practice with students:

Revolutionary art dwells, by its nature, on edges. This is its power: the tension between subject and means, between the *is* and what can be. Edges between ruin and celebration. Naming and mourning damage, keeping pain vocal so it cannot be normalized and acceptable. Yet, through that burning gauze in a poem which flickers over words of images, through the energy of desire, summoning a different reality. (Rich, 1993, p. 242)

The teachers in this book are, in my estimation, revolutionary artists, and their teaching is revolutionary art.

And central to their revolutionary art, like the revolutionary poets that Rich describes, are words—written, read, as well as spoken. We, and they, know that in writing, we can come to understand injustices with more nuance and complexity, with more depth, when what we are writing about are issues of equity and diversity. We know that in reading, we come to understand injustices from a wider range of perspectives, or with more breadth, when what we are reading represents people, places, and circumstances that complement our own, sometimes by informing that which we already know, other times by challenging us to know more about others, and often both of these simultaneously. And all of this is understood better in the conversation with others. This demands that the youthful revolutionaries and potential revolutionaries write, read, and talk with sophistication, compassion, and strength. So, what a privilege it is not just to be the *teachers* of young people, but to be the *English language arts* (ELA) teachers of those who are in the age of revolt.

What a wonderful yet terribly tenuous privilege.



I used to teach middle and high school ELA in Los Angeles, California, and Athens, Georgia. I also engaged adolescents in writing and reading at lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth centers in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Columbus, Ohio. And, more recently, I had the opportunity to teach a high school LGBTQ literature course, also in Columbus. When I reflect on those experiences, I can see the faces of revolution; I can hear the voices of revolution. I remember Black and Brown students rejecting curriculum that did not include and embrace their concerns and their lives, particularly around the riots in response to the acquittal of the police officers who beat Rodney King. I recall white¹ middle-class students learning to see their privilege and the negative consequences it had on others, even their classmates, who did not share those race and class privileges (Blackburn, 1999). I remember queer kids of color dismissing teachers and schools because they couldn’t seem to see that finding a place to live was more important than an assignment’s due date (Blackburn, 2003). And I will never forget the ways these adolescents revolted against what they knew was wrong and the significant role of words as they wrote, read, and spoke up for themselves (Blackburn, 2002–2003).

I was also, between 2004 and 2017, part of a teacher inquiry group committed to combating homophobia and transphobia in central Ohio (Blackburn, Clark, Kenney, & Smith, 2010; Blackburn, Clark, & Schey, 2018). As a part of this group, I had the great honor of learning with teachers, most of whom were high school ELA teachers, who prepared their students, in all of their diversity, to write, read,

and talk with sophistication, compassion, and strength; who prepared their students in their revolt. I learned with teachers as they guided their students in writing letters to administrators about why their schools need GSAs (known in some places as Gay Straight Alliances and in others as Gender and Sexuality Alliances); as they engaged their students in queer-inclusive texts in their ELA curriculum for LGBTQ students as well as those who had the potential to be allies, whether or not they already were; and as they prepared their students to deliver speeches at the state house to argue for enumerated language in antibullying policies. These teachers emboldened their students to write, read, and speak up for themselves and one another. They emboldened students to engage words in revolution.

Indeed, NCTE reminds us, as ELA teachers, that “words are a powerful tool of expression” (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014, p. xxi; this and all subsequent references to NCTE position statements refer to the two statements at the front of this book unless otherwise indicated), one that students not only *deserve* access to but really *require* access to if they are to participate in, contribute to, and even revolt within and against society. However, having access to the tool is not enough; students must be taught how to use the tool well. According to *NCTE Beliefs about Students’ Right to Write*, subsequently referred to in this text as *SRW*, “teachers should engage students fully in a writing process that allows them the necessary freedom to formulate and evaluate ideas, develop voice, experiment with syntax and language, express creativity, elaborate on viewpoints, and refine arguments” (NCTE, 2014, p. xxi).

But even having access to the tool and knowing how to use it is inadequate if freedom to use it is restricted. Indeed, in our democratic society, the “expression of ideas without fear of censorship is a fundamental right” (NCTE, 2014, p. xxi). That is to say, students who have access to the tool of writing and the knowledge of how to use it well must also have the freedom to write about topics and ideas that may or may not align with those held by their peers, their teachers, their families, their communities, their schools, and their governments—topics and ideas related to their revolutions.

Just as writing is a tool, so too is reading, for both teachers and students. And, like writing, reading must not be censored. ELA teachers must be able to “consider the contribution each work may make to the education of the reader” (NCTE, 2018, p. xii) as they select “classic or contemporary” (NCTE, 2018, p. xiii) texts with respect to their “aesthetic value, [their] honesty, [their] readability for a particular group of students, and [their] appeal to . . . adolescents” (NCTE, 2018, p. xii). Teachers need to be able to select texts that “reflect the cultural contributions of minoritized groups in the United States, just as they should acquaint students with diverse contributions by the many peoples of the world” beyond the United States (NCTE, 2018, p. xiii). The texts ELA teachers select for their stu-

dents must not “lie to the young about the perilous but wondrous times we live in”; rather, they must be “books which talk of the fears, hopes, joys, and frustrations people experience, books about people not only as they are but as they can be” (NCTE, 2018, p. xiii). But books that tell various versions of truths of these “perilous but wondrous times,” truths that include “fears, hopes, joys, and frustrations,” are often the books that get banned. They get censored. Such censorship puts teachers, then, in the “intellectually untenable position of lying to their students about the nature and condition of humanity” (NCTE, 2018, p. xiii). It “leaves students with an inadequate and distorted picture of the ideals, values, and problems of their culture” (NCTE, 2018, p. xiii). Censorship denies students the “freedom to explore ideas and pursue truth wherever and however they wish” (NCTE, 2018, p. xiv). According to NCTE, both teachers and students are thus the “victims” of censorship (2018, p. xiv).

Censorship, however, is not the only obstacle to students being able to use the tools of writing and reading well enough to revolt, or doing anything else they are driven to do. Consider Jonna Perrillo’s blog post, “More Than the Right to Read,” written in recognition of Banned Books week. In it, Perrillo offers a brief history of NCTE’s role in fighting censorship. She acknowledges the important work done in the 1950s on this front but notes, too, that the effort “obscured the larger problem at hand: teachers’ avoidance of anything controversial or political” and their evasion of “anything potentially contentious” (Perrillo, 2018). She asserts that

teachers’ willingness to address controversial subjects has waxed and waned over time, but it has been consistently low since the 1980s. . . . The problem, then, is not just a matter of the topics or texts we teach *but how we teach them*. (Perrillo, 2018, italics mine)

In large part, this is the driving force of this book: how we teach students to read and write “between the *is* and what can be” (Rich, 1993, p. 242).

If we believed as educators that being inclusive were enough, a list of suggested writing topics and texts would be adequate, but we know that ELA teaching is so much more than what our students read and write; it is also their (and our) thinking, talking, and listening about their reading and writing. It can be an art. It can be a revolutionary art. But it isn’t always. In fact, Perrillo worries about “classroom work” that “reduce[s] potentially complex stories to easy truisms or didactic messages that compel little questioning or introspection” (2018). She knows that when students miss “out on more nuanced and complex conversations . . . they lose an opportunity to develop a more multifaceted understanding of civic life and their role in it” (Perrillo, 2018). She knows it is not the topics and the texts alone. Rather, it is the topics and the texts and the “important conversations we

want them to spur” (Perrillo, 2018). It is through these conversations that Perrillo argues we can “draw students in . . . empower them to participate in ways that are rational, intelligent, productive, and democratic” (2018). And even though I do not believe that we, as teachers, *empower* students, since such a dynamic locates and maintains the power with the teachers, I do believe that teachers can engage students with writing about topics and reading texts “that might offend some,” and, in doing so, we, as ELA teachers, might help “students wrestle with difference and complexity” (Perrillo, 2018).

So, NCTE’s position statements on students’ rights to read and write serve as a catalyst to think about how our teaching—not just curriculum, not just pedagogy, but the thinking, talking, and listening that we as ELA teachers do together with our students as they (and we) read and write—might best prepare them. How our teaching might best prepare them to engage with people—their peers, teachers, and parents—as well as to work within and against institutions such as their schools and governments. For this, we turn to accounts and reflections on teaching by teachers, by revolutionary artists.

The seven high school English teachers you are about to meet—from all across the country—understand writing and reading as tools, and they prepare students to use them well as they think, talk, and listen, as they summon a “different reality” (Rich, 1993, p. 242). To arrive at the chapters that this book comprises, I worked on several different fronts simultaneously. I drafted a list of topics that I knew teachers, whom I understand as revolutionary artists, were seeking resources for in order to explore these topics with their students. These topics are particularly pertinent today. I hope they will be less pertinent over time, but it seems to me that change happens in fits and starts and always more slowly than I hope. Even if, though, changes happen fast and some of these issues become significantly less important in the near future, the teaching practices are ones that will continue to be worthy examples. With this reality in mind, I perused the most recent years of *English Journal*, looking for high school English teachers who write about their teaching of topics in this realm. Elma Rahman, for example, wrote about being a Muslim teacher. I knew about Lane Vanderhule’s efforts in her school from our collaborations in a local teacher inquiry group. I also reached out to scholars whom I knew were working with teachers doing revolutionary work. Patti Dunn introduced me to Jeff Blair; Cathy Fleischer introduced me to Tracy Anderson; Wendy Glenn introduced me to Cat Ragozzino; David Kirkland introduced me to Arianna Talebian; and Rob Petrone and Allison Wynhoff Olsen introduced me to Melissa Horner, and I’m so grateful. In reading articles and talking with people, the list I had drafted evolved, of course. Reading Rahman’s article, for example, pushed me from wanting a chapter on exploring religion in high school English classes to wanting a chapter on exploring Islam, in particular, in high school English classes.

And although I very much wanted to make sure certain topics were examined, I also understood that none of these topics stood in isolation from the others or from other topics beyond the scope of this book. That is to say, Arianna Talebian’s chapter on the Black Lives Matter movement is not only about Blackness, but also about nationality and gender, among many other identities. The teacher-author-artists convey this sense of intersectionality (Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991) in their writing, but I also tried to underscore this in the way that I organized the chapters.

I start with Tracy Anderson’s chapter on immigration, mostly because families striving to migrate to the United States during the years when this book was being written were suffering terribly due in part but not entirely to federal policies and practices. Revolutionary teachers are some of the people who can be a part of alleviating this suffering. Anderson shares her experiences teaching two journalism students as they wrote about the experiences of migrants to the United States and the devastating consequences of anti-immigration policies and practices on their lives, but also about the potential of student journalists to interrupt such consequences.

It seems to me, though, that it is hard to talk about immigration without talking about linguistic diversity, since students often migrate to the United States from places where English is not the first language young people learn, but then, when they come to the United States, most of our schools either pretend that these students know English or demand that they learn it fast. That’s why Ragozzino’s chapter immediately follows Anderson’s. Ragozzino recognizes the importance of linguistic diversity in diverse schools and challenges teachers to enrich their high school ELA classrooms by scaffolding students’ language learning while never sacrificing academic rigor and essential skills. Since many immigrant students have to negotiate tensions around religion as much as they do around their language, Rahman’s chapter comes next. Rahman draws on her experience as a Muslim student and teacher in New York City schools to reflect on the dangers associated with perpetuating stereotypes with particular respect to Muslim students, and considers the importance of engaging students with autoethnography, critical literacy, and vicarious learning to counter such damaging stereotypes.

These challenges around languages and religions are not unique to immigrant students, but they are foregrounded in these first few chapters. In the following chapters, this foregrounding shifts, but just as the nonimmigrant students are not excluded from topics such as immigration, linguistic diversity, and religious diversity, neither are immigrant students excluded from the topics that follow: racial diversity, regional diversity, sexual and gender identities, and disability.

Talebian, the author of the fourth chapter, attends to just as pressing an issue as immigration. She focuses on Black and Brown people, in the United States, in

relation to police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement. Talebian begins and ends with poetic representations of classroom conversations that bookended a school year in which she committed to shaping the Black Lives Matter movement into a curriculum and pedagogy by engaging critical English education, text variation, and multimedia text production. Thus, she engages in revolutionary art in her poetry and her teaching as she facilitates her students as they write, read, and revolt. Like Talebian, Melissa Horner embraces an antiracist teaching agenda, but whereas Talebian is a person of color teaching mostly students of color in an urban school, Horner is white and Native American teaching mostly white students in a rural school. She reflects on her efforts teaching Native American literature as well as *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to teach about race and racism in the United States. In doing so, she illustrates instances wherein student discomfort, resistance, and unknowing need not be catalysts to excluding controversial texts and discussions in classrooms. I appreciate how these two chapters both fit together and don’t; how they complement and challenge each other; and how they show the importance and possibility of antiracist work in revolutionary teaching done by different teachers with different students in different schools.

The final two teacher chapters represent groups about which public awareness is waxing, even as federal support is waning. There is greater freedom for LGBTQ people to live authentically and out, although this freedom seems to be coming in fits and starts and sometimes with dire consequences. There is greater inclusion for those with disabilities, due to technology, medications, inclusion programs, and the ongoing mission for students to be in the least restrictive environment. Vanderhule reflects on her experiences as an out queer teacher who includes LGBTQ-themed texts and projects, reads gay authors, and queers traditional texts with her ELA students in a midwestern suburban high school. Just as Vanderhule considers the role of minoritized gender and sexual identities in her classroom, Blair considers in his class those who encounter society’s unwillingness to accommodate their physical and mental disabilities. He talks about the significance of asking students about their understandings of disabilities, including their representations in literature; how characters with disabilities are treated and how they, as readers, feel about that treatment; what lessons literature offers about disabilities; and, finally, and most significantly, how disability is a part of their lives.

When you look across the teachers’ chapters, as some things get foregrounded, of course other things get backgrounded. But that does not mean, for example, that no students migrating to the United States are queer, or that no Black and Brown students struggle with society’s inability to accommodate their neurological distinctions. Of course, we know that is not the case. The identities we embody are multiple and variable. Sometimes, in some situations, some identities matter more than others. And that’s why none of these chapters stands alone. They stand

together. And they are not everything. They are just some things, some things to get high school English teachers engaging with their students in the revolutionary arts of teaching and learning to read and write. A part of each of these chapters is a concluding list of questions crafted to challenge secondary ELA teachers to reflect on their students, to reflect on their classrooms, and to do the kinds of revolutionary teaching these seven teachers are doing with their students in their classrooms.

The book concludes with four shorter pieces that complement individual classroom teacher experiences. The first is an interview with Angie Thomas, author of *The Hate U Give* and the more recent *On the Come Up*, in which she reflects on NCTE’s position statements on students’ rights to read and write in relation to Starr Carter, the narrator of her first novel, and to herself as a writer. She offers teachers advice on promoting students’ rights to read and write and challenges them to step out of their comfort zones on behalf of their students. The second piece is by Millie Davis, who was director of NCTE’s Intellectual Freedom Center when this book was being written. She discusses how teachers can be proactive as they foster students’ rights to read and write and provides resources that can support teachers in this effort. This essay is followed by my discussion of themes that run through the book in an effort to foreground what *can* be done in these “perilous but wondrous times” in which we teach and learn and live and even revolt. The book concludes with a list of annotated resources to support secondary ELA teachers in their efforts to protect and embolden students and ensure their rights to read and write.

Taken all together, it is our hope that readers and their students will uphold the teaching and learning of writing and reading as not just a right, but also an art, a revolutionary art.

Note

1. Throughout this book, when *Black* and *Brown* are used as descriptions of race, they are capitalized. When *white* is used to describe race, however, it is not. This apparent inconsistency is deliberate and following the lead of scholar Lamar L. Johnson (2018), who writes, “I have purposefully chosen to capitalize Black and other racialized language to show a radical love (see hooks, 2003) for Black and Brown people who are constantly wounded by white supremacy. In conjunction, I have chosen to disassemble white supremacy in my language by lowercasing the ‘w’ in white and white supremacy” (p. 121).

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Drawing from the work of high school teachers across the country, *Adventurous Thinking* illustrates how advocating for students' rights to read and write can be revolutionary work. Ours is a conflicted time: the #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements, for instance, run parallel with increasingly hostile attitudes toward immigrants and prescriptive K–12 curricula, including calls to censor texts. Teachers who fight to give their students the tools and opportunities to read about and write on topics of their choice and express ideas that may be controversial are, in editor Mollie V. Blackburn's words, "revolutionary artists, and their teaching is revolutionary art."

The teacher chapters focus on high school English language arts classes that engaged with topics such as immigration, linguistic diversity, religious diversity, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, interrogating privilege, LGBTQ people, and people with physical disabilities and mental illness. Following these accounts is an interview with Angie Thomas, author of *The Hate U Give*, and an essay by Millie Davis, former director of NCTE's Intellectual Freedom Center. The closing essay reflects on provocative curriculum and pedagogy, criticality, community, and connections, as they get taken up in the book and might get taken up in the classrooms of readers. The book is grounded in foundational principles from NCTE's position statements *The Students' Right to Read* and *NCTE Beliefs about the Students' Right to Write* that underlie these contributors' practices, principles that add up to one committed declaration: Literacy is every student's right.

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