

Cultural Hegemony & Censorship: A Call-to-Action

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While numerous scholars have chronicled the push to corporatize public education through highly organized attacks that present pro-business changes as “reforms” (e.g., Endacott & Goering, 2014; Ravitch, 2013), there are also less orchestrated attacks that may be no less damaging. An example of these assaults on education comes in the form of a recent wave of attempts to censor books from public schools in North Carolina. The first attempt came in September 2013, when the Randolph County School Board banned Ralph Ellison’s *The Invisible Man* from school libraries by a 5-2 vote. The book was challenged by a parent who felt the book was inappropriate to be one of three choices on an 11th grade summer reading list and was backed up by school board member Gary Mason who felt that “the book has no literary value” despite it having received the National Book Award (<http://gawker.com/the-bizarre-parent-letter-that-got-invisible-man-banned-1351663124>). The fallout from their action was widely chronicled in the media and even reached West Coast newspapers (<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/sep/19/entertainment/la-et-jc-ralph-ellison-invisible-man-banned-north-carolina-20130919>). After a week of much media attention, the board reversed its ban by a 6-1 vote. In November, the challenges in North Carolina continued with a parent who petitioned the Watuga County School Board requesting that Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* be banned from the 10th grade honors English curriculum. The reasoning behind the request was that the book was “too graphic” for use in high school even though it was recommended by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (<http://www.slj.com/2013/11/censorship/nc-school-board-to-consider-author-letter-in-review-of-allendes-house-of-the-spirits/> -). In February 2014, the Watuga School Board rejected the request to remove the book from the curriculum by a 3-2 vote (<http://www.hcpress.com/news/watauga-county-board-of-education-votes-3-2-to-keep-the-house-of-the-spirits-in-the-whs-curriculum-thursday.html>).

My personal experience with censorship began in October 2013, when there were rumblings that there was an impending move to ban Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* from Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition Courses in Brunswick County high schools. The process began as newspapers reported that school board member Catherine Cooke had concerns about the book stating it "was just awful" and "not good" (<http://pulse.ncpolicywatch.org/2013/10/30/brunswick-county-school-board-may-consider-banning-the-color-purple/>). Before there was even a formal challenge to the book, the issue was to be discussed at the November 10th school board meeting. The meeting, which can be found on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWTPOeEf5QI&list=PLoD6g8fuMG56kVzzj7OJ-LzO343JuSGk3>), featured speakers whose views ranged from believing that the Newtown shootings happened because Bibles were removed from public school (39:40) to a high school student, Hannah Caison, who spoke out arguing that rape is an all too real event that some students experience and that removing the text would perpetrate the taboo surrounding rape and rape victims (1:20:45). Though I was nowhere near as eloquent as Hannah, I also spoke at the meeting and attempted to make the point that just because a text depicts an action that some may find obscene does not mean the text itself is condoning that action (41:40). The meeting ended without any decision being made or even any discussion on the part of the board as there had not been an official challenge to the text (http://stateportpilot.com/topstory/article_oeb87dba-47f2-11e3-aa98-0019bb2963f4.html).

Pat Sykes, a Brunswick County Commissioner who does not even have a child in the school system and who had admitted she had not read the entire book, is the person who finally filed a formal challenge to the book. Sykes wanted *The Color Purple* removed from the curriculum because of its use "of the f-word and the n-word" and called the book pornography (http://stateportpilot.com/news/article_cd59b54c-61d6-11e3-ade9-001a4bcf887a.html). Interestingly enough, she made no effort to have *Huckleberry Finn* removed from the curriculum (which also contains the n-word and is taught in Brunswick County schools) or to have *Gone with the Wind* (n-word usage) removed from school libraries. Her official request to have *The Color Purple* banned was denied by the school, and then denied by Brunswick County Schools Superintendent Edward Pruden; she continued her challenge by filing an appeal to the school board requesting

an overturn of Pruden's decision. The fate of the book in Brunswick County was decided at a school board meeting on January 5, 2014, that I, along with many others, spoke at. At this meeting, the district's reading policy played a paramount role. Brunswick County schools follow what I consider best practices by allowing parents to opt their children out of reading any specific text. Parents were given a copy of the reading list for the year and surprisingly, none of them opted their children out of the reading during the controversy. Essentially this challenge was not about one person deciding what her children would read, but was about one person deciding what other people's children would read.

While language use did not attain an Orwellian level, it played an important role in discussion as Cooke repeatedly denied that she was in favor of "banning" the book; she professed that she only wanted it removed. She continued in this obfuscation until her own board attorney informed her pointedly that they were one in the same. After a 3-2 vote that actually banned the book, there were ten minutes of wrangling and confusion, after which the board voted 3-2 to reverse their ban and deny Sykes's request (<http://www.wwaytv3.com/2014/01/03/after-initial-confusion-brunswick-co-school-board-votes-to-keep-the-color-purple>). It may well have been the shortest lived book ban ever.

So why has North Carolina become a flash point for censorship? Why would Cooke, who does not hold a Bachelor's degree, feel that she is better qualified to judge Advanced Placement Curriculum than certified teachers and the school superintendent who holds a doctorate in education? Everyone knows that politicians pander to their constituents, but perhaps there is something larger at play here. Some may attribute it to Republicans gaining control of the North Carolina executive and legislative branches of government for the first time since Reconstruction. Indeed, the new leadership has executed an agenda that includes educational "reforms" such as eliminating salary increases for teachers with masters degrees, ending "tenure" for public school teachers, decreasing funding for K-16 public education, and increasing class sizes (great blog entries on the changes in North Carolina can be found here <http://dianeravitch.net/2014/03/06/ladd-and-fiske-a-guide-to-what-happened-to-public-education-in-north-carolina/> and here http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/10/opinion/the-decline-of-north-carolina.html?_r=0). However, it is important to remember that North

Carolina does not exist in a vacuum, and many of the ideas taking hold here with Republican legislators have been embraced elsewhere by Democrats at the city (Rahm Emmanuel, Mayor of Chicago), state (Andy Cuomo, N.Y. Governor), and federal levels (Barack Obama and Arne Duncan).

So how do all of these changes in education policy incite censorship? By employing Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1975) and some post-colonial theory, we can gain insight to this phenomenon (a great primer/review can be found here:

<http://postcolonialstudies.emory.edu/hegemony-in-gramsci/>). Briefly, cultural hegemony explains that in a society the lower classes are imbued through cultural phenomena with the values that codify beliefs that benefit the upper class as "common sense," thereby negating the need for more direct methods of domination and control. The current narrative offered by corporate interests is that the American education system is failing and that teachers are to blame. Never mind that whether or not our educational system is actually failing is highly debatable as numerous scholars have repudiated the claims from *A Nation at Risk* (Endacott and Goering, 2014) and studies that have accounted for poverty show that America is a leading nation in education (<http://nasspblogs.org/principaldifference/2014/02/pisa-its-still-poverty-not-stupid/>). However, mention poverty, and you are accused of protecting the "status quo."

This "common sense" has been pushed by the Gates Foundation, the Broad Foundation, and the current U.S. Department of Education that have funded initiatives such as charter schools (public schools are failing and cannot be saved), vouchers (ditto), the Common Core State Standards (teachers cannot be trusted to create curricula), merit pay for teachers (we need to find out who the bad teachers are), the elimination of teachers' union rights (unions just protect bad teachers), and parent trigger laws (more public schools need to be turned into charters); all of these so called "reforms" support a narrative that places the blame for a failing education system squarely on the shoulders of teachers. Smaller class sizes (https://www.princeton.edu/futureofchildren/publications/docs/05_02_08.pdf), one of the few changes that has been empirically shown to affect long term academic performance, has been ignored and denigrated by the current reform movement. After all, if teachers are the problem how could hiring more of them help?

The cultural narrative that educators cannot be trusted to educate America's youth is being cemented every day as the colonization of public education continues and its wealth is transferred into private hands. Considering that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and that Common Core State Standards architect and now College Board president David Coleman do not have any type of doctoral degree, do not have any degrees in education, and do not have any public school teaching experience, it becomes clear how the public can believe that anyone may be qualified to decide what is best for education. Teachers have been successfully *Othered* and for many, "Joe the Plumber" knows more about what constitutes quality literature than an English teacher or the Pulitzer Prize committee.

What are we to do? Endacott and Goering (2014) urge educators to "take back the story on education by any nonviolent means necessary" and I endorse their call to action. In doing so, I think those of us who are members of the professorate have an obligation to do more. Beyond writing articles and blogs, appearing at school board meetings, and supporting protests, we can bring the stature of the universities to which we belong in on the fight to save public education. What does this mean? If you disagree with the Common Core State Standards and their ensuing high stakes tests, hold a no confidence vote in your department. Imagine if universities started going on the record that the Common Core would not make students college ready. There are anti-testing movements (<http://dianeravitch.net/2014/03/12/bipartisan-bill-proposes-curbing-federal-testing-mandates/>; <http://dianeravitch.net/2014/03/12/united-opt-out-will-meet-in-denver-march-28-30-join-them/>) gaining momentum across the country and now is the time to involve your colleagues beyond colleges of education in the struggle. Speak to your associates in English, history, mathematics, and the sciences. Bring up a resolution at your faculty senate. It is time for the professorate to stand with our K-12 brothers and sisters, for if we do not, we are surely next (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/20/south-carolina-colleges-lgbt-books_n_4825489.html).

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