

## **In Between the Lines: Tacit Censorship of Diverse Children's Literature**

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I prepared this essay as schools and libraries across the nation celebrated Banned Books Week (BBW), which originated in 1982 to formally recognize the freedom to read in the U.S. Today, BBW is sponsored by a coalition of organizations, including those that support youth literacy such as the American Library Association (ALA), Freedom to Read Foundation, National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and PEN America. Each year the ALA and NCTE collaborate with literacy education stakeholders in schools and libraries to raise public awareness about the problematic nature of censoring literature and media for children and adults.

Here, I discern that powerful social narratives have undergirded book bans and book challenges, and have influenced educators' selection and censorship of books for use with their students. As suggested by Kidd (2009), censorship stems from negative responses to texts or ideas and "needs to be understood not as an isolated action or singular event but rather as part of a complex set of exchanges and leverages within the cultural field" (p. 199). Understanding the perspectives that are embraced by the dominant sociocultural groups can provide insights to the varying forms of censorship in schools and libraries. In the U.S., the social narratives that are part of the tapestry of mainstream culture have influenced the direct, indirect, and tacit censorship of certain materials and resources for youth.

Direct censorship is often linked with the individuals and groups who challenge books by filing complaints with local institutions about the elements or ideas they dislike in the texts. It is also associated with local institutions that formally ban or make certain books inaccessible to the communities they serve. Indirect censorship, as described in NCTE's *Guidelines for Dealing with Censorship of Instructional Materials*, "occurs when teachers, in an attempt to avoid controversy, self-censor their classrooms, limiting their students' education, for instance, by restricting the viewpoints and perspectives of authors, producers, and community members that may be deemed controversial" (Garcia, Loomis, & Teasley,

2018, para. 5). Indeed, research shows that some educators deliberately skirt certain views and evade certain topics that could give way to controversial conversations in their classrooms (e.g., Dávila & Barnes, 2017; Noddings & Brooks, 2017).

Tacit censorship, on the other hand, occurs for reasons that are less apparent. It reflects the routine selection or rejection of books based on implicit ideologies that are so ubiquitous with mainstream culture that they are difficult to identify, let alone critique. Recognizing and examining tacit form of censorship requires researchers, teachers, and teacher educators to be deliberate in exercising the kind of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) needed to confront pervasive ideological social narratives and to disrupt the spontaneous everyday decisions that silently discard certain topics, stories, and/or texts. I am especially concerned with the social narratives that influence this quiet, tacit censorship of books written by or for members of diverse and minoritized communities.

Diverse books for youth are more prone to censorship than books depicting the lives and experiences of the dominant sociocultural groups in the U.S. (e.g., cisgender, White, Christian, middle class, healthy, able-bodied, heterosexual, member of a stable living environment) (PEN America, 2016). At the same time, the libraries of some U.S. classrooms, including those in diverse communities, privilege the representations of dominant sociocultural groups (e.g., Crisp et al., 2016). These findings are exacerbated by the fact that disproportionately, only a small fraction of the children's books published each year are by and/or about minoritized people (Horning, Lindgren, Schliesman, & Tyner, 2018).

Moreover, having access to diverse books does not guarantee that educators will select these books for instructional purposes that (a) disrupt harmful stereotypes about minoritized groups and promote sociocultural pluralism (Dávila, 2015) or (b) provide young readers mirrors of themselves and windows or sliding-glass doors into the lives of others (Sims Bishop, 1990). Thus, at a time when the quality, publication, and accessibility of diverse books are receiving national attention, it is important to examine the unspoken ideologies that perpetuate the tacit censorship of these works of children's literature in schools. My forthcoming research identifies ten of these social narratives that are deeply-rooted in mainstream U.S. culture and affect the inadvertent avoidance of diverse books in some classrooms.

In the interest of space, I examine one of them here, the moniker for which is based on the song, “Sunshine, Lollipops and Rainbows” (SLR) (Hamlish & Liebling, 1963).

The SLR social narrative corresponds with the common stance that adults should preserve for children the “innocence” of childhood by limiting youngsters’ exposure to certain information or stimuli. This stance, which reflects the notion that children deserve joyous carefree childhoods both merits our attention and has been the subject of studies across different disciplines (e.g., McGinn, Stone, Ingham, & Bengry-Howell, 2016). It reinforces the social narratives that classrooms and instructional materials should provide havens from real world difficulties. Hence, it makes sense that under the SLR influence, some sincere teachers tacitly censor texts with justifications such as, “This book exposes my students to information that they don’t need to know at their age.”

Across the corpus of literacy research are clear examples of how some well-meaning adults have applied the SLR stance, to knowingly or unknowingly, limit students’ access to divergent views and perspectives in children’s books. Schmidt, Armstrong, and Everett (2007) found that some teachers believe in preserving children’s “innocence” (p. 52) by selecting innocent stories and materials for instruction. Wollman-Bonilla (1998) found that many teachers avoided books that “might frighten or corrupt [children] . . . by introducing them to things they don’t or shouldn’t know about” (p. 289). For instance, some rejected the picturebook *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991) because the book, which features a homeless child who lives at the airport with his father, could disavow young readers of their sense of stability in their own living environments. The preservice teachers in Apol, Sakuma, Reynolds, and Rop’s (2003) study wanted to protect students from the sadness of books such as *Sadako* (Coerr, 1993), a story about a Japanese child’s struggle with leukemia after an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in WWII. Alternatively, as not to upset young readers with the hardships of immigration across the Mexico/U.S. border, some of the preservice teachers in my study restricted the picturebook *Friends from the Other Side / Amigos del otro lado* (Anzaldúa, 1993) for use only with older students (Dávila, 2012). Last, Pierce (2006), who started her career as an elementary school teacher, described how she use to say to herself, “[I am] protecting my young charges from the ‘weight of the world’ and adult issues and responsibilities” (p. 428) by selecting topics

and materials that would not cause discomfort. Collectively, this sampling of teachers' voices illustrates how the SLR stance has fueled the tacit censorship of stories about persons whose life experiences deny mainstream conceptions of an ideal, if not romanticized, childhood.

Here I have described just one ideological set of social narratives that has subtly endorsed the dismissal of books that could serve as mirrors, windows, and/or sliding-glass doors to the nation's increasingly diverse population of young people. My forthcoming work offers a comprehensive examination of, and antidotes to, ten of these systemic narratives that are embedded in dominant U.S. culture and often yield indiscernible forms of censorship. I call on education stakeholders to disrupt and dispel these narratives. Together, we can reveal and combat the explicit, implicit, and tacit forms of censorship that undermine our efforts toward cultivating an inclusive and pluralistic society.

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