
Democracy & Education

The Value of Student Choice in Reading A Book Review of *Keep Them Reading: An Anti-Censorship Handbook for Educators*

By R. C. Lent and G. Pipkin, Review by Christi R. Keelen

KEEP THEM READING: An Anti-Censorship Handbook for Educators, by Lent and Pipkin (2013), provides a background in the importance of reading for school-age children as well as a thorough explanation of censorship and how it can appear in the school environment. This text contains information on how to prepare for a challenge before a book is questioned in a school or district. Although *Keep Them Reading* is small, it is a thorough, succinct, and effective explanation of how to keep censorship at bay in the school system. *Keep Them Reading* is appropriate for administrators, librarians or media specialists, and classroom teachers and serves as a valuable asset for anyone who wants to prevent censorship from occurring at the campus or district level.

Lent and Pipkin (2013) thoroughly explain the importance of reading, the students' ability to freely choose a text that appeals to them, and how censorship devalues these practices. Citing experts such as Atwell, Tovani, Krashen, and Beers, the authors support the critical aspects of reading in the classroom. Thoughts on the importance of classroom libraries, an explanation of how to build one, and guidance in what to choose are also provided for teachers who are unsure where to start. Lent and Pipkin advocate: "We must ensure that a wide variety of books is available to our students so that they have every opportunity to find that one book that will change them in ways that we may never be able to quantify" (p. 10). Lent and Pipkin want teachers and students to understand that "[students], not the teacher, must defend their reading choices and ensure they are adhering to their families' standards" (p. 17). This provides a culture of communication between the home and school environment and further empowers the students by having them explain their choice of text. This is the only item within *Keep Them Reading* that seems debatable. This expectation is quite appropriate for middle and high school students, who are well aware of their family's values and expectations, but elementary students are still developing a sense

of right and wrong and learning the expectations of their families. It is a hard sell to expect that elementary students should be emotionally and cognitively self-aware enough to match a text with their family values, but if students' responses are valued and a climate is created that supports those responses, most children will openly respond should a text makes them feel uncomfortable and then should be allowed to choose an alternative.

Many parents have and will argue that allowing their student to choose a text different from the one the whole class is reading will cause their student to stand out. The authors address this counterargument by advocating the use of literature circles. Literature circles are another best practice employed by the authors in promoting the culture of reading and student choice in the classroom. If the practice of literature circles is part of the culture of reading and student choice, then it is quite normal for students to be reading different texts at the same time.

Lent and Pipkin (2013) also provide a thorough explanation of what censorship can look like, taking the form of selection, self-selection, the chilling effect (teachers trying to predict and avoid texts that may be challenged), and book ratings. Many educators will find that they may be guilty of censoring books unintentionally. The authors provide thorough explanations of these types of censorship as well as examples to help the reader understand how the terms apply in a school setting. Lent and Pipkin explain, "The best way to understand 'selection' is that

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selectors *include* titles for pedagogically sound reason and generally think in positive terms about books; censors *exclude* titles that may offend and often think of books in negative ways” (p. 23). Likewise, “self-censorship occurs when educators decide not to make a book available to students even though it fits the criteria for inclusion in order to avoid a challenge or because of a personal bias” (pp. 24–25). This is powerful and eye-opening information for educators. While some censorship is unintentional, most censorship is strongly motivated by fear. Teachers choosing safe novels can adversely affect students because, “[students] often become turned off to reading when they are only provided with books that stand no chance of ever being questioned” (p. 26).

The authors effectively deter censorship through the use of book ratings as well. Book rating seems helpful because “they offer to do the work for parents and teachers by going through books and not only rating them but also objecting to part of these books in isolation” (p. 26). The authors provide real examples from websites to show how literary masterpieces, when taken out of context of their literary merit, can seem offensive or inappropriate.

Encouraging schools and districts to be proactive in readying themselves for a book challenge is part of the critical information provided in *Keep Them Reading*. Lent and Pipkin (2013) encourage community involvement and education about texts and censorship more methods to combat this growing problem. Providing students activities to analyze and understand censorship during Banned Books Week is one valuable idea presented. Having teachers and students discuss and debate censorship is another. The authors also encourage the use of a censorship simulation that involves the whole community as a method to educate the masses about censorship. This stance encourages knowledge and choice as power.

Lent and Pipkin (2013) expertly advocate the creation of policy at the district level so that the foundation is laid regarding book challenges and the district is prepared should a challenge arise. The authors take the reader through the process of how to deal with a challenge at the campus level and what to do if the issue cannot be resolved at that level. By fully explaining the process, the authors make the act of being challenged seem less scary, and the reader

will feel prepared for the event if it occurs. Sample policies, forms, and parent letters are provided for districts who are still working on creating their own policies, providing much-needed information. Two issues are stressed in the creation of these forms and policies: honoring family and student values and providing rationale for selecting instructional materials:

While it is important to let the challenger know that her family's values will be upheld, 'honoring family standards' does not mean that a family can impose its values on children other than their own. What it does mean is that the school recognizes that each family has its own culture and values that may differ from . . . the majority of the school community. (p. 50).

This is perhaps the most important and powerful statement made in this text. The text thoroughly explains the significance of students being able to freely respond to a text and having the teacher honor that response. Teachers must be able to articulate the educational value of a piece of literature and how it correlates to state standards. Lent and Pipkin advocate the same process for choosing an alternative text as well.

Providing students a choice in the texts they read and providing a rationale for why a piece of literature is being taught is one of the best ways to keep a school from being subjected to a book challenge. *Keep Them Reading* provides educators the toolkit they need to protect both teacher and students from censorship and thus, protect their academic freedom and the right to freedom of speech. It is important to plan ahead for such events, and Lent and Pipkin (2013) provide a thorough explanation and rationale for supporting student choice in the classroom and supporting teachers, librarians, and administrators who want to effectively combat censorship.

References

Lent, R. C., & Pipkin, G. *Keep them reading: An anti-censorship handbook for educators*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2013.