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# Facilitating Teachers' Appreciation and Use of Controversial Picture Books

Francesca Pomerantz

## Abstract

As a professor who teaches graduate courses in children's literature, I am concerned about teachers' self-censorship and limited use of high quality children's books that contain potentially controversial material. The rejection of what Leland, Lewison and Harste (2013) called "risky books" (p. 162) is problematic because "risky books" often deal with social and moral issues, broadening children's views of the world and presenting stories that require and help develop complex, inferential thinking. Voelker (2013) identified several factors that can help pre-service teachers think critically and expansively about children's books, including introducing them to literary criticism to help them identify quality in children's literature and defend their selections, as well as the use of small discussion groups to surface a variety of viewpoints. This article explains the challenges in presenting "risky" books to teachers and then presents a specific model for small group discussion that facilitated teachers' appreciation and use of such books.

Keywords: *children's literature, picture books, censorship, literature circles, adult learning*

## The Challenges

Understandably, many teachers "choose not to use certain books for fear that these texts will create controversies leading to confrontations with parents, the members of the wider community, or school administrators" (Freedman & Johnson, 2001, p. 357). Pre-course surveys indicated my students, who are mostly in-service elementary school teachers or teaching assistants, did not feel confident about knowing what to do if challenged. This fear is well-founded given the highly publicized controversies ignited by the inclusion of controversial books in the school curriculum. For example, *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005) and *The Librarian of Basra* (Winter, 2005), critically acclaimed picture books based on true stories, have been targeted for censorship due to concerns about depictions of homosexuality and violence. *And Tango Makes Three*, in which two male penguins take care of an orphan baby penguin at the Central Park Zoo, has been present on the American Library Association's Top Ten Challenged Book List seven times since it was first published. In March 2013, the *New York Post* ran a story entitled "New York approves war-oriented reading textbooks for third grade classrooms" in which *The Librarian of Basra's* inclusion on a recommended book list was described as highly inappropriate. This picture book is about a courageous Iraqi librarian who saved the books in Basra during the bombing of her city, but the misleading and alarmist opening line of the article stated "Tales of war, bombs and abduction – coming to a third grade classroom

near you" (New York Post, 2013).

My experiences teaching pre-service and in-service teachers confirm Wollman-Bonilla's (1998) findings from almost two decades ago that some teachers object to texts they think might frighten children "by introducing them to things they don't or shouldn't know about" (p. 289). For example, like the teachers in Wollman-Bonilla's classes, my students have expressed concerns about the picture book *Tar Beach* (Ringgold, 1991) on the grounds that talking about poverty and racial discrimination might be too upsetting. A student wrote on her pre-course survey: "I avoid books with controversial issues or books that seem inappropriate. I want to avoid issues with parents." Violence, religion, and depictions of drug/alcohol use seemed especially risky to my students. Another student wrote:

I tend to avoid books with any drug or alcohol use. An example can be seen... when I was substituting for another fourth grade teacher who had left an interactive read-aloud book about Babe Ruth- one specific chapter in this book focused on his alcohol addiction, which I felt was not appropriate to share with fourth graders so I skipped this chapter.

Some teachers are also uncomfortable with books that challenge an exclusively positive sense of national identity. For example, one teacher in my class rejected *The Librarian of Basra* (Winter, 2005) because the unidentified military personnel depicted could be U.S. soldiers and children might conclude that U.S. soldiers bombed Iraq. Apparently, she did not want her students to grapple with this fact, and thereby rejected a book that meets all of the selection criteria outlined by Al-Hazza and Boucher (2008) in their article about high quality literature portraying Arabs or Arab-Americans. Al-Hazza and Boucher (2008) provided useful criteria to help teachers identify and select literature with Arab and Arab-American characters that avoid stereotypes and build cultural understanding. They included *The Librarian of Basra* on their suggested book list; however, if teachers consider books like *The Librarian of Basra* to be too controversial, the use of such recommended books in the classroom will remain elusive.

## Adult Learning and Structured Discussions

The specific question guiding this inquiry was: How could I move teachers beyond their initial and narrow reactions to controversial books? Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997), discussion protocols (Ippolito & Pomerantz, 2013-2014; Pomerantz & Ippolito, 2015) and literature circles (Daniels, 1994; 2002) offered some ideas. Mezirow (1997) explained, "Adults have acquired a coherent

body of experience—associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses—frames of reference that define their life world...They selectively shape and delimit expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings” (p. 5). He theorized that adults “transform...frames of reference through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind or points of view are based”(p. 7). In order to support this transformation and critical reflection, educators need to provide adult learners with opportunities to use “their imaginations to redefine problems from a different perspective” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10). Dialogue is the key to this transformative process since “learning is a social process, and discourse... central to making meaning” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10).

Protocols are structured discussions with guidelines for dialogue that may, when implemented well, facilitate the discourse so integral to adult learning. There are protocols for all types of conversations, such as teachers looking at data to inform instruction or engaging a group of teachers in discussing an instructional dilemma (for more information about protocols see <http://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/>). Protocols “allow professionals to have meaningful, insightful discussions about challenging topics...without becoming too emotional, judgmental, or overbearing in terms of participation”(Ippolito & Pomerantz, 2013-2014, p. 49). The guidelines for dialogue encourage equal participation, listening, and the development of mutual understanding. According to Fahey and Ippolito (2015) “Protocols are the structures that help educators try on different ideas, examine assumptions, ask unsettling questions, and embrace discomfort in a way that is safe and manageable” (p. 3).

In order to consider the topic of controversial picture books from a variety of perspectives and encourage dialogue that would facilitate appreciation and use of the books, I reframed literature circle roles, originally conceived of by Daniels (1994, 2002) as the protocol for small group discussions. To assist teachers in implementing literature circles, Daniels created role sheets (Questioner, Illustrator, Word Wizard, Literary Luminary and Connector) to serve as a conversational scaffold. Thein, Guise and Sloan (2011) applied Daniels literature circle model in a 10th grade classroom “as forums for engaging students in discussion of multicultural or political texts” (p. 15). Their findings informed the development of the literature circle model implemented in my course. They concluded:

If teachers choose to enact literature circles in their purest form - with no teacher interference and free choice of topics for discussion - then students cannot be expected to take up any specific stances or perspectives toward texts. Moreover, if teachers want students to move beyond initial personal responses to a text, a typical literature circle is not likely an appropriate space for this work. (p. 22)

Instead, Thein, Guise and Sloan (2011) proposed modifying the literature circle roles with the purpose – critical literacy – in mind and suggested alternative role descriptions and tasks, such as “stereotype tracker” and “critical lens wearer” (p. 22).

## Method

With Thein, Guise and Sloan’s (2011) advice in mind to modify literature circle roles with the purpose of the learning in mind, I created roles specific to the discussion of controversial picture books. Assumptions about child development often shape teachers’ thinking about “risky” texts and overwhelm considerations of literary quality or curricular opportunities; therefore, the roles included “child development theorist,” “literary critic” and “curriculum coordinator” to help participants evaluate and appreciate aspects of the texts they might not initially perceive or value. A “discussion director” role was also included to facilitate dialogue and participation. Each role with its rationale is described in the section that follows.

*The Discussion Director* developed questions to discuss with the group, building on their own initial responses, but also the question-posing ideas of Fisher and Frey (2012) and Harste (2014). Harste stated that “text analysts not only gain personal and social meanings from texts but also examine how the text is trying to position them” (p. 95). For example, suggested text analysis questions include “whose voices are represented and whose are missing in this text?” and “what did the author want me to believe after reading the text?” (p. 95). Fisher and Frey (2012) emphasized text-focused questions involving making inferences, identifying the author’s purpose, and presenting evidence-based opinions. These types of questions can help readers move beyond negative or fearful reactions when discussing controversial books and scaffold thinking to higher levels of analysis readers might not achieve on their own.

*The Child Development Theorist* used the “Books for Ages and Stages” guide in Kiefer and Tyson (2014, pp. 39-48) to make recommendations regarding the approximate age/grade level audience for these books. This guide lists characteristics of specific age groups and the implications. For example, one of the characteristics of eight and nine-year-olds is that they are “developing standards of right and wrong” and beginning to “see viewpoints of others” (p. 44). The implications are that books shared with this age group should encourage discussion of multiple perspectives, standards for right and wrong and the nuances and complexities in determining right and wrong. Additionally, the Child Development Theorist consulted a child development text for child development theories to provide support for their recommendations. Grounding recommendations in child development theory is a way to move readers beyond basing all conclusions about a book on personal assumptions about child development.

*The Literary Critic* evaluated the book based on literary and artistic qualities with reference to the evaluation criteria in the course text (Kiefer & Tyson, 2014). The Critic researched why the book won awards, and, depending upon the book, read articles specific to evaluating literature with

African-American and Arab or Arab-American characters (Gray, 2009; Al-Hazza & Boucher, 2008). *The Curriculum Coordinator* researched how the book might relate to a teacher's curriculum and state frameworks. Additionally, the Curriculum Coordinator investigated and explained why the book is controversial or challenging for teachers and how teachers might respond if challenged. Keifer & Tyson's (2014) Ten-Point Model for Teaching Controversial Issues, originally developed by Susan Jones of Educators for Social Responsibility, was a resource for thinking about how discussion of the book could be framed in a classroom. The approach outlined in the Ten-Point Model takes the burden off teachers to have all the answers when discussing challenging material. For example,

...students begin by pooling what they know and what they think they know about an issue. They also develop a list of questions. This is followed by an information-gathering period during which students search for answers to the questions...using information they have collected, students correct any misinformation previously listed and develop more questions. This process continues until some type of culminating activity emerges from the information (p. 21).

In a follow-up course assignment after the picture book discussion, course participants selected and read a controversial children's book from the American Library Association's list of banned and challenged books and wrote a rationale defending the book's inclusion in the classroom library. The rationale included many of the same components as the literature circle discussions, such as referencing child development theories, making connections to curriculum standards and analyzing literary quality.

To carry out the discussions, students were divided into literature circle groups and each group read one challenging children's picture book. In addition to *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson & Parnell, 2005) and *The Librarian of Basra* (Winter, 2005), texts included *Patrol* (Myers, 2002) and *The Man who Walked between the Towers* (Gerstein, 2003). The "risky" subjects depicted in these books are the Vietnam War (*Patrol*) and breaking the law to tightrope walk between the Twin Towers, including a brief mention of the Towers' destruction on September 11, 2001 (*The Man Who Walked between the Towers*). Students completed reflections after the discussion in response to the following question: How did the discussion influence your thinking about the assigned picture book? They also completed pre-and post-course surveys about their beliefs related to selecting and using children's literature adapted from Voelker (2013). The adapted survey used a 5-point Likert Scale and 15 statements, such as "I would not read or provide books to children in which the characters or author appear to criticize the United States," "I would not read or provide books to children depicting war or violence" and

"I would not read or provide books to children in which the characters are gay." Students rated their responses "Strongly Disagree," "Disagree," "No Opinion," "Agree," or "Strongly Agree." Additionally, the pre-course survey had 5 open-ended questions, such as "What types of books do you avoid for your classroom?" and "What types of books do you seek out for your classroom?" Data collection occurred in two course sections with a total of 21 participants. Data analysis consisted of 1) comparing participants' responses on their pre and post-course surveys to note any shifts in thinking and 2) reading and re-reading for patterns across the post-discussion responses.

## Results

According to the surveys, all participants completed the course with a new confidence in recognizing quality literature and knowing what to do if challenged. Whereas all of the students initially expressed comfort with books depicting same sex parents, several changed their minds about other topics and indicated they would now share books that a) could be construed as critical of the U.S., b) depicted characters who drank alcohol, c) contained true stories presenting real life struggles and challenges, and d) depicted war. Several patterns emerged in the post-discussion responses: Participants increased their appreciation of stories that initially seemed controversial because they noticed their book's literary and artistic merit initially obscured by their concerns, and/or perceived learning opportunities offered by their book they had not considered prior to discussion.

### Literary and Artistic Merit

Increased appreciation of, as well as comfort and confidence with the texts, were strongly connected to new considerations of literary merit and themes surfaced by the discussion. Some students, initially put off by the subject matter of their books, did not consider or appreciate the themes or literary qualities of the books prior to the discussions. One student wrote about *Patrol*: "I think my opinion was fogged by the content at first, and I am now more clearly able to notice the strong literary qualities." Another student wrote:

By having this discussion, I was able to see more of the central message. When I first read this book [*The Librarian of Basra*], I was very intimidated by the war and violence aspect. I generally shy away from these types of books/themes but I feel more comfortable now. My main fear was how my children would react. I now know it is less about the war and more about Alia's heroic actions.

Similarly, other students wrote the following about *The Librarian of Basra* and attributed their changed appreciation of the book to the discussion:

The discussion influenced my thinking about the book

in many ways. The questions the discussion director presented opened my eyes to just how many themes are in this book. The big one is showing Alia as a hero. I look forward to using this book as a read aloud and/or in my reading group. Even though this book could be seen as controversial, I believe there is so much learning to be done and so much teaching.

Prior to reading this book [The Librarian of Basra], I never would have dreamed of talking about the war in the Middle East with my students. However, now, in reflecting on this book, I can confidently say that I would feel very comfortable sharing this book with my students. It addresses a topic (the conflict in the Middle East) in a manageable/understandable way for children to begin to become familiar with this topic...ultimately, I am thankful to have the opportunity to discuss this book in a literature circle because it helped show me that I can talk about the conflict in the Middle East with my students and I should not shy away from this topic.

Another student commented on her increased comfort and confidence, as well as very specific information about how she would approach using *And Tango Makes Three* influenced by The Ten-Point Model for Teaching Controversial Issues (Kiefer & Tyson, 2014):

Our literature discussion helped me to gain insight about how to address a controversial book with students and families. Some people in my group mentioned educating parents and opening up a dialogue with them before introducing the book [*And Tango Makes Three*]. I also thought it was a great idea to introduce the book with a question. For example, what is a family? This way students can ask questions and research answers. With these strategies for dealing with controversy in mind, I would definitely use this book in my classroom. Previously I was hesitant, but I now feel like I have some good ideas in place for addressing controversy.

### Learning Opportunities

The literature circle discussion also enhanced participants' abilities to recognize the learning opportunities afforded by the books. For example, one student saw many more curriculum connections after the discussion. She wrote:

Our discussion made me think more positively about this book [*Patrol*] in many ways. First of all, it was interesting to talk

about all of the curriculum connections that were introduced, and then built upon throughout the discussion. Most evidently, there is a clear connection to U.S. history and the Vietnam War. But beyond that, we drew connections to geography...and ELA standards [such as] descriptive language [and] point of view. After our literature circle, I see many more uses for this book than I did when I read it independently.

Another student explained:

The discussion changed my thinking about *The Man Who Walked between the Towers* because it brought to light the many ways this book could promote discussion in the classroom, including determining right from wrong, having consequences for your actions and more. Personally, I think the class discussion on the book helped me see how the book can be used in many different ways, not just focusing on the 9/11 attack.

In addition to changing students' perceptions of the books, the discussions increased the use of the books in elementary school classrooms. For example, one participant (a second grade teacher) wrote:

After taking this class I realized that some of my favorite books to read to students are the "controversial" ones. I think they have so much value and so much to give to young readers that it is a shame to shelter them from it. *And Tango Makes Three* was one of my favorite books I read in this class and I read it to my second graders. Every student loved it and wanted me to read it again, they also had very valuable ideas to add and it opened up a great discussion.

### Discussion

Some teachers might underestimate children's abilities and interest in "risky" texts such as the ones used in the literature circle discussions. However, many children want to talk about complex issues, "to dig deeper and talk about important real life" concerns (Leland, Lewison & Harste, p. 162). Helping teachers overcome their fear of books that initially feel risky is an important step towards putting high quality literature front and center in schools and children's lives. As one teacher explained on her survey at the end of the course:

I believe it is important for students to have access to books that present the characters with real life challenges and emotional obstacles, as students can learn

a great deal through vicariously experiencing life through literary characters. Topics such as gay marriage, alcohol, poverty, death, war, bullying and others that are often considered controversial, can give students much insight into the world. Students should be given opportunities to explore these difficult subjects with proper guidance and care from teachers. Students are not as "sheltered" as we would like to think and these topics need to be addressed in the classroom if students are to really understand them. In addition, students need to have opportunities to explore literature from other countries and cultures in order to become global citizens and develop respect and a connection with people of diverse cultures and ethnicities.

We are bombarded with stories of political controversy and polarization, terrorism, racism and war on an almost daily basis. Controversial books such as the ones described in this paper are perhaps needed more than ever to break down cultural barriers, replace stereotypes with deeper understanding of the lives of others, surface children's questions and concerns, and create empathy and connection. So far my students have used these books in their classrooms without reported incident. Although they may experience future controversy, these teachers are now better prepared to use high quality controversial children's books for the benefit of their students and to weather any potential storms that may arise.

The literature circle roles described in this article proved to be an effective scaffold for learning and dialogue as defined by Mezirow (1997):

Effective discourse depends on how well the educator can create a situation in which those participating have full information; are free from coercion; have equal opportunity to assume the various roles of discourse (to advance beliefs, challenge, defend, explain, assess evidence, and judge arguments); become critically reflective of assumptions; are empathic and open to other perspectives; are willing to listen and to search for common ground or a synthesis of different points of view; and can make a tentative best judgment to guide action (p. 10).

The literature circles were spaces in which participants collectively created a richer source of knowledge about the books, had opportunities to ask questions, evaluate the evidence presented, change perspective and form a decision about the book. The literature circle roles helped to focus the discussion, enabling participants to see beyond their initial response and broaden their thinking. Literature is one of the most powerful tools we have as

teachers to engage children in considering social issues, alternate viewpoints, different cultures, and the range of human experience. Structured literature discussions in university children's literature or literacy pedagogy courses offer a promising and potentially powerful tool to engage teachers in considering and using the full range of available quality literature.

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