

ReLeah Cossett Lent

## Facing the Issues: Challenges, Censorship, and Reflection through Dialogue

ReLeah Cossett Lent provides practical advice for ensuring that books are kept on shelves and in classrooms for students to read. She outlines steps for creating professional learning communities that engage with censorship issues and prepare schools to deal with book challenges in thoughtful, supportive ways.

The cover of Julie Ann Peters's *Luna* beckons the reader with its image of a spectacular Luna moth. Its velvety green wings outlined by golden veins, the moth follows the wispy trail it may have taken on a flight before it was captured in the upper right-hand corner. Although the front of the book offers only three words—*Luna, a Novel*—the back entices with a short piece to lure the reader into the text.

“Luna,” she said. “I’ve taken the name Luna.” Her eyes fixed on mine. To gauge my reaction, I guess. Or seek my approval. What did it matter what I thought? . . .

Rolling over, I muttered, “You’re such a freak-show.”

Her hair splayed across my pillow, tickling my face. “I know,” she murmured in my ear. “But you love me, don’t you?” Her lips grazed my cheek.

I swatted her away.

As I heard her slog across the floor toward my desk—where she’d unveiled her makeup caddy in all its glory—a sigh of resignation escaped my lips. Yeah, I loved her. I couldn’t help it. She was my brother.

What is a teacher to do with this book, a beautifully written, sensitive portrayal of a teenage girl who holds her brother’s secret? Luna, born Liam, knows that her birth gender has somehow trapped her in a male body, but how can she escape without destroying those she loves?

There is much in this book that reminds us of traditional literary themes and motifs com-

monly taught in English classes. In addition, *Luna* is rich with possibilities for teaching symbolism, the coming-of-age journey, the loss of innocence, and even figurative language through Peter’s rhythmic prose. There are exquisite character development, realistic dialogue, and stark universal truths. But my guess is that most English teachers would choose not to use this book in place of *A Separate Peace* or even *The Catcher in the Rye*. The topic is risky, and most teachers would fear the possibility of a challenge or wholesale censorship. But what about placing the book on a classroom library shelf or in the media center? Would teachers feel safe enough to allow students to explore this book on their own? Would they recommend it to a student? How can we, as a profession, ensure that books such as *Luna* are not as ostracized as Luna herself fears she will be? How can we provide students with texts that are insightful, engaging, challenging, and appropriate for individual tastes and needs without risking our careers as teachers?

Nancie Atwell speaks for most English teachers in *The Reading Zone: How to Help Kids Become Skilled, Passionate, Habitual, Critical Readers* when she writes that her goal is for students to become “smarter, happier, more just, and more compassionate people because of the worlds they experience within those hundreds of thousands of black lines of print” (12). Providing hundreds of thousands of lines of print to students has its risks, however, especially if those lines, in any way, elicit a challenge based on a book’s content, language, or graphic references.

## Challenges and Censorship

Perhaps we should begin our examination of this complex topic by acknowledging that reading is an experience that goes far beyond the current notion of comprehending for the purpose of distilling information into answers on tests. When students make choices about their reading, they are engaging in decisions that will contribute to their self-efficacy as well as ones that will facilitate their independence as readers. Other advantages of allowing students' choices in their reading are supported by research. Richard L. Allington states that "when students were provided opportunities to select which text(s) they would read for a given topic or unit, their level of engagement in academic work was high and sustained. Giving students such choices is a powerful factor in motivating engagement and fostering achievement" (278).

For the purpose of this discussion, student choice can also be a significant factor in preempting challenges. As students take responsibility for their reading within the boundaries of their family's standards, the burden shifts to the reader—where it rightly belongs. Often, parents are much more

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reluctant to challenge a book if their child is not *required* to read it, especially when selections are offered by teachers who know students' interests and abilities.

Despite the advantages of student selection of texts, many teachers are reluctant to allow students wide choice because of the chilling effects

of censorship. They self-censor, fearing the often painful public consequences of censorship battles. Headlines in the news reinforce their fears, such as this one from the *Baltimore Sun*: "Book Removed from Harford Class" (Fortin). The book? Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War*, a 1974 novel that describes in grim detail how a boy is bullied because he refuses to participate in his school's chocolate-selling fundraiser. This incident of censorship occurred in 2007, with the raw footage of Columbine's tragedy still replaying in our minds. In this case, the removal of a novel also cost stu-

dents a unique opportunity for exploring the causes and consequences of bullying within the safety of a fictional account. If books such as this are removed from the curriculum, then how careful must teachers become in their selections? Allow students choice in their reading? A chilling thought, indeed, to many teachers and administrators.

Fortunately, challenges don't always result in removal. An article from the *Billings Gazette's* Web site titled "West Parent Challenges Required Book" describes how a parent objected to her daughter's being required to read *Red Sky at Morning* because of curse words on "67 of its pages" (Tode). The student was offered an alternative selection that satisfied the parent, daughter, and teacher. In this case, a strong district policy on challenged materials turned a potential censorship event into a diplomatic solution.

As a teacher who survived two public censorship battles in a small Florida town, one for students' rights to read freely, the other for the rights of student journalists, I understand the complexities and destructive potential of censorship. Our censorship story led to the banning of over sixty books and our filing two federal lawsuits. In *At the Schoolhouse Gate: Lessons in Intellectual Freedom*, Gloria Pipkin and I explore two of the main reasons for censorship, fear and control, as well as expose our vulnerabilities as we struggled to maintain a successful reading program in a junior high school and an award-winning journalism program in a high school. In the first case, books were removed due to one parent's complaint, despite the fact that her daughter was offered an alternative selection and that a majority of parents agreed that their children should read the book. Without even considering a review process, the superintendent banned books, including classics, from instructional use until public outcry forced him to reverse his decision.

Although the battle left its scars, Gloria Pipkin became a fierce advocate for intellectual freedom, directing the Florida Coalition against Censorship; the lessons I learned led to my current work as a consultant with teachers, students, and districts in exploring book selection, choice, challenges, and censorship. One of the beneficial outcomes of the controversy was the creation of a policy on challenged materials, one modeled after strong policies in other districts (see fig. 1). The

**FIGURE 1.** Summary of Sample Policy from Bay District Schools, Panama City, Florida

1. If a parent or citizen objects to classroom material, he or she should attempt to resolve the issue with the teacher and principal. If the issue is not resolved, the complainant must fill out a Reconsideration of Instructional Material form, citing specific objections. (See NCTE's Anti-Censorship Center for a sample "Citizen's Request for Reconsideration of a Work" form [<http://www.ncte.org/about/over/positions/category/cens/107616.htm>].)
2. The request is submitted to the school's Instructional Material Review Committee. The makeup of the committee is spelled out in the policy.
3. The committee's recommendation is forwarded to the principal who decides whether the material will be retained or removed.
4. If the principal retains the material, the complainant has five days to appeal the decision at the district level. If the principal determines that the material is to be removed, the recommendation automatically is referred to the District Instructional Material Review committee, made up of thirteen members, including lay persons, district staff, instructional staff, principals, parents, teachers, and a union representative.
5. The district committee makes a recommendation to the superintendent. If the superintendent elects to remove the material, the case goes to the school board. If the superintendent elects to retain the material, the complainant may appeal to the school board, who makes the final determination.

**Note:** The challenged material will not be removed from classroom use during the process.

procedure is straightforward and provides a thorough examination of any questioned material. It also assures teachers that a reasonable process will be followed when a challenge arises, something that did not happen in our case.

This policy works well, provided teachers and administrators within the district know the policy and are willing to insist on its enforcement. If the policy is unknown or ignored, it cannot do its job. For example, when the principal of the high school in which I was teaching decided to remove John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* from whole-class instruction because of a parent's complaint, not one of over twenty English department members protested when he announced his decision at a specially called meeting. These seasoned, knowledgeable teachers silently acquiesced and gave up the option of whole-class use of the novel, one that had been included in the curriculum for years. I did not understand their silence. Were they unaware of the policy? Did they believe the principal had the right to make such a decision? Were they simply too intimidated to oppose him? Although I was using the novel with small groups, a practice that would have been permissible, I was familiar with the district policy and voiced my objection at the meeting. The principal replied that he would only discuss the matter in private, but our subsequent conversation did not persuade him to reverse his decision. When a parent made the media aware of his actions, he

finally conceded that he had bypassed the process and agreed to reinstate the novel for whole-class use.

Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing how many books have been removed by teachers, media specialists, principals, or others without following their district's policy regarding challenged material. In Bay District, for example, some teachers mistakenly believe that unless a book is on an approved list, they may not use it, unaware that a simple form exists for them to request its approval for whole-class use. Many others discontinue using a book or remove it from their classroom library when a parent objects or when asked by the principal to self-censor if rumblings emerge. One media specialist quietly slipped a book inside her desk, making it unavailable for check-out although it remained on the inventory.

Others may not understand the difference between the procedure for placing books in the classroom library and those used for instruction, thinking they must have approval for all supplemental materials. Many policies require that teachers only need to provide a list of classroom library books to the media specialist, not for approval but as a means of record-keeping. Usually, the requirement for selecting

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books for classroom libraries is the same as those governing selections for the media center.

### Censorship Learning Communities

Even with a strong district policy, how can teachers ensure that books such as *Luna*, *Red Sky at Morning*, or *The Chocolate War* are available to students without finding themselves at the center of a censorship storm? There are ways to diminish challenges and avoid the type of public battles that we faced in Florida. The plan must be laid far in advance of creating an engaging lesson or organizing a classroom library, for the sad truth is that *any* book has the potential to draw censors' fire, and while we know that certain books appear time and again on frequently banned booklists, others just happen to be in the right place at the wrong time.

The first step is to organize a professional learning community or study group with a focus on censorship. Ideally, such an endeavor would be district-sponsored, as are professional learning communities on any topic related to learning. In any event, each school would do well to embark on a study of censorship, prompting understanding through honest dialogue about the nature of learning, literacy, and censorship itself. Teams or departments would also benefit from in-depth dialogue focusing on students' rights to read and potential challenges to the works used in their school. The resources in Figure 2 are ideal for beginning study.

**FIGURE 2.** Resources for a Censorship Study Group

National Coalition against Censorship  
(<http://www.ncac.org>)

- Updates on education issues regarding censorship
- Court decisions
- Current incidents of censorship in schools
- Explanation of censorship/challenges/selections

National Council of Teachers of English  
(<http://www.ncte.org>)

- Resources regarding censorship/challenges/selection
- Rationales for teaching challenged books/sample rationale form
- Statements and guidelines regarding censorship
- Challenge support
- How to report a censorship incident

American Library Association (<http://www.ala.org>)

- Statements and policies regarding censorship
- Challenge support
- Banned Book Week activities
- Lists of frequently challenged books and authors

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (<http://www.ascd.org>)

- First Amendment Schools project

An action goal of the censorship study group might be to write rationales for each supplemental text that teachers use for whole-class instruction or small-group work. A sample rationale form is provided in Figure 3.

**FIGURE 3.** Sample Rationale Form

Title of Book:

Author:

Date Published:

Grade and subject for use:

1. List curriculum goals that you will address with this book.
2. How does *this* book specifically meet those goals?
3. How will you use the book to further learning goals?
4. What reviews, awards, or recommendations support the use of this book? See *School Library Journal* (<http://www.schoollibraryjournal.com>), *Voice of Youth Advocates* (VOYA; <http://www.voya.com>), *The ALAN Review* ([http://alan-ya.org/index.php?option=com\\_magazine&Itemid=9999](http://alan-ya.org/index.php?option=com_magazine&Itemid=9999)), and the Young Adult Library Services Association (<http://www.ala.org/yalsa>).

5. What previous experience with the book supports your use of the book? (Include student and parent comments, teacher observation notes, student work samples.)
6. What activities are planned to ensure that students will have a meaningful learning experience with this book?
7. What objections to the book do you foresee?
8. How do you plan to handle sensitive material within the book?
9. How does the educational or literary merit of the book outweigh possible objections?
10. What alternative selections are available that meet the same educational objectives?



Photograph by Ryan Brenizer. Used with permission of the Student Press Initiative.

As groups work together to discuss instructional materials, research on reading, and the possibility of challenges, specific benefits emerge. School communities come to a focused understanding of the role of reading in all subject areas, often leading to exemplary literacy programs across the curriculum. In addition, they begin to broaden their ideas concerning student selection and create plans for differentiated reading to meet the individual needs of students. Finally, because the cloud of censorship is ever present, study groups turn into support networks if or when a challenge arises.

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### Censorship Forums

The questions in Figure 4 can be used to build a foundation for communitywide forums on reading, with a focus on censorship. Such events can take place after school or in the evening, perhaps with students in leadership classes serving as moderators. Those committed to addressing this topic will move beyond defending their viewpoints into the rewarding work of understanding through dialogue. As

**FIGURE 4.** Questions to Prompt Dialogue about Literacy, Challenges, and Censorship

- What does it mean to learn?
- What does it mean to read?
- What does the research say about the importance of students' independent reading?
- What works are being taught in English classes? How long have they been a part of the curriculum? Why are they being taught?
- What is bibliotherapy and how can it be used for counseling purposes?
- How is a book selected for whole-class instruction? Small-group reading? The classroom library?
- What are family standards or community standards? To what extent should they be a determining factor in students' reading choices? Who, ultimately, decides what students should read? At what age should students make choices about their reading selections?
- What is the district's challenged materials policy?
- How many times have materials been challenged in your school or district and why? What was the result?
- Do teachers complete a rationale form when using novels with whole classes?
- Should teachers have to read every book in their classroom libraries? Should media specialists have to read every book placed on media center shelves?
- What is the difference between censorship and selection?
- Are alternative selections available to students? Under what circumstances? How are alternative selections chosen?
- What is the difference between censorship and a challenge to instructional materials?
- Why are books censored in public schools?
- How can you use the American Library Association's Banned Book Week to raise awareness of censorship issues?
- Should teachers send letters home to parents before requesting a class novel be read? What if one parent objects? More than one? A majority?
- What does the law say about censorship? Does the First Amendment protect teachers? Students? Principals? Parents?
- What are censorship issues involving art, photographs, plays, speech, or written material produced at school?

teachers, parents, students, and administrators come together to talk about the issues represented by these questions, they will reflect more deeply, consider diverse points of view, and collaboratively consider the nature of literacy. The greatest advantage, however, is that if a challenge arises, there will not be a panicked rush to put out the fire by taking actions based on fear. Schools will be prepared to meet those challenges in a measured, thoughtful manner. Parents who are aware of district politics regarding reading selections as well as the research that supports wide reading may be willing to engage in a dialogue rather than blindly insisting that works be banned because of offensive words or themes. Communities and school districts have an obligation to support students' reading choices, teachers' instructional practices, and family standards; it will be much easier for that to happen if the groundwork is laid prior to a censorship threat.

As for the book *Luna*, I read the ending and rejoiced—for Luna, yes, but more for Luna's sister, Regan, who, at last, becomes liberated from the

burden of protecting her transgender sibling and free to embark on a journey of self-discovery. I also rejoiced for the many other teens who go to a school where they may choose to read this book, perhaps increasing their empathy for others—or possibly even finding themselves within its pages.

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#### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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One way to avoid parental complaints about the texts used in class, Lent suggests, is for students to choose their reading materials. "Developing Reading Plans to Support Independent Reading" encourages students to do just that. Students identify books they have read recently and look for patterns connecting those that they enjoyed the most. Once they have examined past readings, students complete a reading plan, a wish list of books they hope to read in the future based on their preferences in the past. The finished list becomes a supporting resource to guide independent readers. These lists can also guide teachers when they make future text selections. [http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=836](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=836)