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## **Literary Text Selections in Secondary School Classrooms: Exploring the Practices of English Teachers as Agents of Change**

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is to examine how Ontario secondary school English teachers make choices about which literature to teach in their courses. This will be done in order to more deeply understand why many secondary school teachers may or may not encourage students to read contemporary, social issue texts. This paper uses a critical sociology of schooling theoretical perspective to critique the study's findings. We examine the relation between policies and practice, the issue of resources and structural barriers, and how decisions are made around literary text choices. Some themes that emerged out of the interviews focus on a range of views expressed about personal agency, literary canons, gender, sexual orientation, and racism as central issues that shape text selection. We conclude by arguing for the need for policy to support individual teachers to take risks in their professional ability to select and teach contemporary social issues texts to high school students in all disciplines.*

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## Introduction

Secondary school English teachers in Ontario have the freedom to make selections from a wide variety of possible texts to teach. The Ontario Ministry of Education's English curriculum (2007a) does not impose an approved list of literature on teachers. So, in theory, teachers could be teaching a wider range of contemporary prose, which would enable students to move outside traditional boundaries and extend their intellectual opportunities. The purpose of this paper, then, is to detail the ways in which Ontario secondary school English teachers make choices about which literature to teach in their courses and why.

For this qualitative study, we interviewed ten English teachers, of whom two were currently in charge of their departments. We analyzed this data with Ontario Ministry of Education curriculum (2007a,b) and policy (2009) documents as well as with local school board policy documents. In Canada, education is a provincial concern. The province provides the broader policy, and school boards exercise some autonomy in terms of how they will implement the policy.

This paper examines the relation between policies and practice, the issue of resources and structural barriers, and how decisions are made around text choices. It draws upon themes that emerged out of the interviews, which focus on a range of views expressed about personal agency, literary canons, gender, homophobia, and racism as central issues that shape text selection. This paper concludes by arguing for the need for policy implementation that supports individual teachers to take risks in their professional ability to select and teach contemporary social issues texts to high school students in all disciplines.

## Literature Review

While the study focuses on Ontario teachers, the findings have broader implications. Today, at a time when educators, school officials, and policymakers across North America are working with increasingly diverse student populations, situated in the context of globalization, it seems remarkable that little if any work has examined how teachers choose texts within the Canadian context from a critical perspective. This omission is significant as critical perspectives on text selection are of particular importance to today's educators and policy makers. They help build a deeper understanding of the potential difficulties and consequences that arise when students are not provided with texts that are socially relevant, or how they might help our student population thrive when they are given access to diverse texts. Christenbury, Bomer, and Smagorinsky (2009, p. 16) posit that policy makers far too often ignore current research on literacy practices which focus on an ideological model, which views literacies as situated socio-political practices. Granted, the discipline of English is unique in secondary schools in that teachers choose literature without the same constraints as most content area teachers using sanctioned textbook lists, and the curriculum expectations are generalized. However, in any content area, there is latitude in teachers bringing in additional relevant materials. While this paper focuses on English teachers, the logistical, ethical, and conceptual decisions around which books are chosen in any school setting pertain to all educators.

In Canada, there are no research studies to our knowledge that focus on English teachers' selection of literary works for the high school classroom. Peterson and Bainbridge (2002) conducted a qualitative study that examined elementary school teachers' choices and their criteria for selecting Canadian literature for their students. They comment upon "the consistency

and strength of teachers' unquestioned adherence to conventional practice" while also observing that literature selection decisions "shape students' identities as readers and writers, emphasizing particular ways of being and thinking over others" (p. 1). Schell and Bonin (2001) in a quantitative study investigating the risk propensity and self-actualization of Ontario public librarians with regard to censorship behaviour found "librarians' attitudes towards censorship and intellectual freedom seem not to parallel their rather restrictive behaviours when it comes to material selection" (p. 367). Herriman (2001) provides a rationale, which advocates for teachers to resist censorship. In this article, she points out that the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (in the *Constitution Act, 1982*) guarantees freedom of expression. Canadian laws and educational policies are distinct in numerous ways from the United States, which further supports the argument that more work needs to be done to explore what underpins the decisions of Canadian teachers to work with specific texts.

### Conceptual Framework

Grounded in John Dewey's (1959) philosophy, which suggests that education can be a force for democratic practice (Shea, 1989), the theoretical support for our study comes from the broader theoretical framework of critical sociology of schooling (Apple, 1996; Freire, 1970, 1991; Giroux, 2002; Shor, 1994; Shor & Freire, 1987). This paper supports the key idea that schools are political sites of cultural and social reproduction embedded in systems of power relations, yet schools remain as contexts where there exists contestation, tensions, and struggles over curriculum and pedagogy (Giroux, 2002, p. 3). This paper seeks to illustrate, then, how English teachers negotiate among educational stakeholders such as students, colleagues, parents and the broader school community which texts to bring into their classrooms and examines the interplay between personal agency, self-regulation, pedagogical practices and the power networks in which they are situated.

We define censorship generally as limitations placed on freedom of expression and free access to information. More specifically, censorship functions to deny students in one class or an entire school system the right to read particular texts (Agee, 1999). The problem, as Agee notes, is that censorship has the power to deny students the opportunity to develop intellectually. Self-regulation, by contrast, should be understood as the mindset and everyday practices of individuals that shape their beliefs and actions in relation to their societal contexts. In Foucauldian terms, self-regulation implies individuals are completely subordinated to the larger social networks of society; individuals are not ascribed any personal agency (Foucault, 1977). This paper argues that while individuals internalize many hegemonic beliefs, they still have the power and agency to act and make decisions that will influence their own lives and that of others.

Not surprisingly, many of the educators in our study were dedicated professionals guided by a belief in the values of social equity and democratic practice. Yet, the problematic nature of power relations made working for social justice through text selection difficult at times. This is why an account of how teachers choose literary texts is important as it illustrates how complex and contested pedagogical practices like text selection are worked out at various levels – individual, institutional, and societal. In other words, choices for any teacher can take various forms, depending on the classroom, school, and broader community with whom a particular teacher is situated.

## Methods

### Site

Windsor lies in the most southern most part of Ontario, along the Great Lakes waterway that marks the border between Canada and the United States. Although currently experiencing an economic and population decline, Windsor remains Ontario's fourth largest city and is well known as an industrial manufacturer. According to Statistics Canada (2002), close to 23 per cent of Windsor Essex County's population were persons born outside Canada, reflecting the County's increasing ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity. The Greater Essex County District School Board (GECDSB) where the participants teach, is a large organization with over 4 000 staff and 37 000 students (GECDSB 2008, March 19), and according to school board minutes, has 207 nations reflected in their school community (GECDSB 2006, October 4).

### Participants

Participants were English teachers with varying levels of experience from two to thirty years teaching English. Reflecting the general teaching population found in Windsor and Essex County, all of our participants were white and middle class; six were female and four were male. Their age range was from late twenties to fifties. The circumstances of their teaching assignments included rural, urban and suburban contexts. All teachers had taught locally developed, applied, and academic English over the course of their careers. They all had experience teaching grade nine through grade twelve. One participant was on a long-term occasional position over the last four years; the others all held permanent positions. Pseudonyms used to refer to participants throughout this paper are: Felicity (long-term occasional), Nadia, Samantha, Flora, Mark, Wayne, Madeline, Kate as well as Greg and Bill (current Department Heads).

### Data Collection

Drawing on critical theory articles, Ontario Ministry of Education documents (regarding inclusion and diversity as well as specific to the English discipline), and school board minutes, we read these sources before and after conducting the interviews to inform our reading of the data. Upon approval from both the university's and school board's review of ethics boards, the researchers advertised the study through posters placed in schools and via a list serve specific to English teachers in the public board. Interviews were conducted with 10 teachers from January to June 2010. The interviews were conducted in the researchers' homes or cafes. Interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts were then sent back to participants for their review and approval. They were given the option to edit and delete any part of the interview they did not want included. The finalized transcripts were reviewed several times and coded thematically.

### Data Analysis

The overarching research questions were:

1. Which factors influence teachers' choices of literary texts for English classrooms?

2. How do teachers work within regimes of self-surveillance and how does this influence the way teachers negotiate and execute text selection practices?
3. How do teachers resist, negotiate and/or subvert various forms of external censorship?

We conducted face-to-face one-hour in-depth interviews (Johnson & Christensen, 2008) to elicit the thoughts, attitudes, beliefs and experiences of English teachers and department heads regarding literary text selection. This was done in order to investigate what motivated teachers' decisions. To know what motivates any individual in their choices is complex. Thus qualitative interviews allow for an examination of the subtleties of the choices they make, and the power dynamics involved in all of life's experiences (Dhunpath, 2000).

The research took a constructivist approach. Drawing upon grounded theory (Kirby & McKenna, 1989), the questions asked during the interview were purposefully broad to allow participants to take a lead in the direction of the discussion. As Creswell (2003) states, semi-structured interviews use an emerging methodology: "the questions become broad and general so that the participants can construct the meaning of a situation" (p. 8). Examples of some of the interview questions asked include:

1. What are your impressions of how teachers choose texts for their English courses in general?
2. What factors do you take into consideration when putting together the materials for your English courses?
3. Have you ever used strategies to circumvent or overcome potentially risky situations related to your choice of texts?

Grounded theory proposes that interview discussions, which allow for spontaneous questions and circling back to earlier points in the interview yield greater insight into the subject material. This is a preliminary study with a limited number of participants to hone the tools of the research process for a larger study that will take the research to a national level.

### **Findings**

In this section, we present four distinct themes that emerged from the interviews. The themes are described in detail using quotations to highlight and substantiate findings. The themes that emerged are as follows: (a) the tensions between traditional literary canon's influence on text selection and teachers as agents of change; (b) the role of gender in text selection; (c) sexual orientation and homophobia shaping literary choices; (d) race/ethnicity issues and implications for course design.

#### **The Tensions between Traditional Literary Canon's Influence on Text Selection and Teachers as Agents of Change**

The term canon refers to a group of literary works that are traditionally considered the most important of a particular time or place, and are of such transcendent importance that everyone or nearly everyone should know them (Nicol, 2008; Shea, 1989). The traditional Western canon as found in schools overwhelmingly favours dead, white male authors (Greenbaum, 1994), and privileges American and British over Canadian writers. Twenty years ago, a survey conducted by

Applebee (1992) of the texts offered to students at Canadian high schools, including public, Catholic and independent schools, found that only marginal changes were made to the kind of texts students were exposed to over the years. The survey demonstrated that texts such as *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 1938), *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1960), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Harper, 1960), and *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1970) dominated schools' curricula. So, why have some texts remained?

Fast forward two decades, and despite efforts by some teachers to broaden the canon over the past few years with books such as Cormac McCarthy's (2006) *The Road*, or, Eric Walters' (2008) *Sketches*, few book-length works from alternative traditions seem to have found their way into Ontario classrooms. One contemporary novel that participants indicated being used in many secondary schools is *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999), which is a novel that explores the feelings of a raped teenage woman. Felicity (pseudonyms used throughout), when teaching *Speak*, had students "who don't necessarily like to read, and were coming up to me and asking me and telling me that they couldn't stop reading it."

For many teachers interviewed in this study, the persistence of canonical texts was partly explained by the lack of available resources (for example, budgets, limited class sets of books, departmental dictates, lack of time and resources to explore other options). As department head, Bill notes: "money is the biggest issue that we face as English teachers when it comes to books." Similarly, Samantha noted,

The choice of literature, a novel, in my class is decided by a totally unworthy method. We have a backroom which is filled with paperback books, many of which are at least 30 years old ... I look for the least shabby, most up-to-date books, count them to see if there are enough, and if there are, that is the book we study.

When asked how texts were selected, all the participants' first response was that the books in the backroom decided their choices. Nadia commented, "Whoever keeps resupplying those books keeps limiting my choice."

Yet, for other teachers, there was recognition that school budgets are always in flux. Over time, there have been moments when there were ample resources. As Bill recalls, "there were times when I could spend ... \$4000 to \$5000 on books!" Sometimes, the opportunity was simply not taken up as Felicity states:

And if there's money that year then the department head can propose for some novels to be purchased, and then maybe the principal might, or the principal might not. But I think that for some department heads, there are some status quo novels that are always taught.

It is also important to recognize that principals and department heads determine what is purchased, and thus play a powerful role in controlling teachers' access to resources. Amongst the teachers interviewed, although some had a good rapport with their individual department heads, few could recall having a departmental discussion about which novels to teach. As Department Head, Greg seemed to expect teachers would come to him if they wanted a change rather than it being a departmental discussion. As he comments, "you would think with new teachers coming in constantly that you would get more and more requests for books that they don't have, but they don't." Felicity expressed sentiments also felt by Bill and Madeline: "There needs to be a balance between what's traditional and what's current."

Other teachers preferred to play it safe, although there was the ability to move beyond the canon. Samantha noted, “I see teachers who teach books ... that they probably studied in high school.” For some, the idea that canonical texts offered teachers a degree of safety and comfort also had the consequence of positioning new texts as ‘risky.’ Bill referred to a single complaint that led to book banning:

It was a single student who found a sexual reference in the book to be offensive, and her parents came in and made quite a stink about it such that the book was banned from our school by our principal. It could not be taught in this school, and once the principal left we started teaching it again. And it just demonstrates, as far as I'm concerned, the degree to which a squeaky wheel [affects] school board politics.

For many teachers, a common thread in their ability to be agents of change came down to administrative support. As Felicity observes,

It's the first year that I've been given the sufficient support and freedom where I felt comfortable being able to take on something that was that controversial, and if there's any type of backlash from parents or students, then I knew that I would be supported....by the department head and administration.

Some of the teachers in this study successfully use contemporary, socially relevant texts. How? Similar to Mark, Nadia took the issue head on by devoting a unit to the independent study of censored texts. She sent home a note prior to the unit articulating her rationale for focusing on censorship. Nadia explained, “The kids pick the book, so it’s up to the parents to look at the book and decide whether or not they want their child to read the book and sign a permission slip.” Nadia and Felicity made use of small sets of text recently purchased through the board to do literature circles. Kate observed, “We usually don't get a lot of parents coming in. But the ones I have talked to have been fairly supportive of it even in by way of saying, ‘my son or daughter is really interested in what you're doing.’” A strategy Bill, Felicity, and Greg employ to influence students’ reading choices is informal discussion. As Greg puts it, “I'll mention books in class, casually, books that I would never dream of teaching in a high school setting. I mentioned *Andronicus* (Shakespeare, 1994), which is very violent, and bloody. And kids will write it down....and then they'll buy the book.”

Several teachers pointed out they felt students’ high level of engagement made the effort (or risk) of using social issue texts worthwhile. Wayne commented that if students “are stealing them [newly purchased novels] that says a lot about how much they loved them.” Nadia reflected,

I change books all the time. I don’t think I have taught too many books over and over again because I just feel that shuts down conversations. Because whether you think it or not, I think you are looking for particular answers.

Mark said, “And the kids do get a little frustrated reading novels that are 30, 40 years old, and don't seem to have any relevance in their lives.” The teachers felt social issue texts yielded better class discussions.



Librarians were named as important allies in identifying, promoting, and purchasing socially relevant texts. Samantha gave recommendations to her librarian, rather than department head, knowing the librarian would buy enough copies of her suggested titles to allow her to use the books in literature circles. “I want them [students] to find relevant material that excites them and promotes discussion,” said Samantha. Felicity noted the librarian “is trying to change the library, and she's trying to focus more on the young adult novels.” When asked, ‘How do you pick relevant novels?’ Kate replied, “Actually, our librarian, she does readings with friends.... like, they have a weekly group, and they came across the book; and she had purchased it for our library.” The English teachers seemed to have regular communication with the librarians. Nadia said, “After Mr. [librarian] went there really hasn't been an influx of books like there was when he was there because he was young and he has young kids himself.” Wayne stated,

Our librarian went through and got a whole bunch of teen fiction and nonfiction that dealt with different issues including homophobia, even trans-phobia, and anti-black issues and a whole bunch of different ones. We actually set it up as a diversity section. I personally think that's a great way to start finding out what's popular and what kids want. Set it up in the library. Have that section, and then you can track what kids seem to be interested in, and so that way you can possibly put it in your classroom.

Madeline says of the school librarian: “She has her own budget. She would order books from the library where students can sign out, but not class sets. She has often brought a book to my attention that I will read.” Teachers found librarians to be excellent supports for their ambitions to teach contemporary, socially relevant books.

### **The Role of Gender in Text Selection**

Along with budget considerations, a largely discussed factor among the educators interviewed when it came to text selection was gender. In almost every case, teachers were more concerned with boys than girls. Nadia, for example, puts the point baldly: “what always concerns me are the boys, the girls don't concern me. We are always concerned when looking for books, are the boys.” Samantha observes,

I look for books for the boys in an applied class. I would generally try to stay with adventure or with biographies, and things that I hope will really hook them because I don't think they are willing readers in that stream.

Mark suggested that, “the girls are pretty easy to satisfy in terms of novel selections. The guys, by and large, they can be a tough sell.” Likewise, Greg observes “most girls will just pick up any book; they're like fine with it.”

Several teachers indicated they were drawing upon research to inform their choices. In a professional development workshop, Kate recalled, “*Boy Smarts* [MacDonald, 2005] was the book that they were focusing on, and they were looking at.... how boys learn differently.” Greg also claimed, “They've done studies and test scores that show that boys do lag behind girls, that there is this stigma in boys' literacy, and it's a problem.”

Nonetheless, despite the overall perception that girls will read anything, teachers' testimony demonstrated that some girls had an unwillingness to read 'boy books.' For Felicity, the girls in her class did not welcome a particular 'boy-book':

I know a lot of my students could not connect with *Lord of the Flies*....A lot of them were repelled....And I have one particular student that refused to do the assignment.

Most of the participants' views, if situated in the larger debate over gender-based reading practices in current educational research, reflect the notion that gender is an outcome of biology, or a manifestation of an inner essence, rather than viewing gender as a social construct.

### **Sexual Orientation and Homophobia Shaping Literary Choices**

Some of the teachers such as Greg noted that high school students freely use as pejorative words such as gay, fag and queer: "you can't go ten feet down the hallway without hearing the kids say the word gay ... gay for being bad; and it's something that's rampant." Some teachers interviewed expressed anxiety over how some students would respond to literary texts that featured gay or lesbian characters. Greg further remarks:

When it comes to race, they can read a book about a black character; they're okay with that. But they're not okay if it's a woman, and they're not okay with it being somebody who is homosexual. They're not okay with that.

Not all teachers, however, were reluctant to explicitly address issues of homophobia in the classroom through text selection. Madeline and Kate, both currently teaching in classrooms with students who have "learning or behaviour exceptionalities" used social issue texts that addressed a myriad of issues such as homophobia, racism, and sexism on a regular basis. As Kate commented, "I think it's great if we can build some life skills and coping skills into what we teach." Both felt they had administrative support, even if their colleagues were "set in their ways." Wayne noted that if texts do not reflect the reality of all of our students then they may not realize that "what they are going through, they are not alone." Flora brought in novels such as *The Four Dorotheys* (Ruditis, 2007) that featured gay and lesbian themes, which she thought would help address issues of social justice. Samantha noted,

I am taking my drama students to see a play, "Waking Up Blue [Rabideau, 2011]." It's being done for the anti-homophobic, Pride Day....and I know that there's a certain group of students who if they knew what it was about would immediately say, I'm not going ... that those are the people I want to have going. So I'm just saying, it's about diversity.

Indicating awareness of potential repercussions, Bill commented,

But if we're doing a whole class study and there was a homosexual theme, I think you would have some serious problems....and we also have a large number of Islamic kids whose parents may or may not have a serious problem with it. But I know that there are students at the school here who would have a problem with it.

Bill, however, also contends if a novel can show both sides of an issue, then he feels he can effectively teach a class and resist parental pressures. He advocates for novels that deal with gay/lesbian themes being offered as an option in independent studies to avoid confrontation with community challenges.

### **Race/Ethnicity Issues and Implications for Course Design**

Intertwined with concerns around gender and homophobia, issues of race and ethnicity were also raised as factors affecting course design. Bill recalls

A teacher had a parent call, whose daughter found the "N" word to be particularly offensive racially, and the only thing that saved us there was that the teacher was Black. And apparently when the parent came in, he did not know that the teacher was Black and was completely disarmed when he found out that she was. I mean, that could have gone farther and it could have resulted in that novel being suspended.

Larry and Wayne both commented that the only time their departments discussed changing a novel was in direct reaction to a novel being challenged. Larry states,

We had one controversy one year where...it hit the paper that it felt that it was racist...that became the initiative to change it and so we talked about possibilities of different novels to do. In these cases, the books were left for a year or two, and once the censorship issue died down or the people who had raised it left, the books came back into their teaching.

The participants' experiences suggest that text selection remains in a limbo state unless there is a critical incident that brings about a reaction. Teachers used waiting tactics in these two scenarios above to outlast the resistance and return the challenged texts.

With regards to racial issues and administrative perspectives, Greg said, with *Of Mice and Men*, the principal said, 'This is a big issue, we're going to get all kinds of complaints about it, let's just choose something else'; and that's what happened. So I think that it is important [to have] administrators who are also willing to push that agenda as well as the department head, and the teachers, because there is going to be resistance - absolutely.

Greg demonstrates an awareness of how the hierarchy in school systems affects teachers' abilities to make sound pedagogical choices.

Teachers such as Mark and Samantha at times felt it is difficult to engage students in conversations about race. Samantha recalled,

I suppose I walked away from a fight, but at the same time ... I never think that this is a fair fight. Why not? Because my black students consider themselves ... experts on it ... and certainly as a teacher I do not consider myself racist. I'm a person who has made choices in my life that reflect diversity. I don't necessarily share those choices with them, but they are very fast to attack me and attack other teachers here on the theme of racism.

Yet Samantha was clearly committed to exploring racial issues nevertheless. She recently used Paul Kropp's (2002) *Scarface*, a text that highlights challenges that may occur in Canadian schools for immigrant students. Situated in a school with a very high immigrant population, including many students from Southeast Asia, Samantha brought in the text because she thought it would connect with her Burmese students, who had themselves newly arrived in Canada, including some from refugee camps. Inspired when attending a reading by the author as part of a professional development workshop, Samantha said,

I'm using another book called *Of Beetles and Angels* [2001] by Mawi Asgedom, and it's about a boy who is a refugee and leaves Eritrea, I believe, and ends up living in the United States and finally getting a full scholarship to Harvard....I thought that would be good for some of my African students who expressed a desire to work on a harder book; but also I thought it would be inspirational for them.

Bill and Felicity remarked individual teachers make choices all the time – whether or not they are going to grapple with the more difficult issues – or skirt over them. Nadia said, “you can teach [a] book so that it's completely inoffensive or you can bring the racial issues in it to the floor, and I teach it so it is contentious.” Greg also observed “the teacher sets the tone” for discussing sensitive topics.

Yet, there was also recognition amongst some of our participants of the danger when instituting change, that teachers may not be doing so for pedagogically sound reasons. Texts that showcase diversity in very contrived ways, at the expense of any literary merit were problematic. Greg said:

There was one text ... the kid was half Japanese, half Hawaiian, his girlfriend was African American, and he had a green Mohawk ... it just seemed like it was overtly trying to appeal to every ethnic group ... I think it failed as a piece of literature.

In fact, Greenbaum (1994) cautions educators that token inclusions of works by “non-male, non-white, non-heterosexual voices,” serve mainly to reinforce the dichotomy between ‘us’ and ‘other’ which results from predominantly white male reading lists.

### Discussion

Examining data from the Findings, the Discussion takes up some of the complexities of issues such as gender, sexual orientation, and race as well as what motivates teachers who want to be agents of social change. The data suggests that while many of the teachers interviewed in this study clearly worked from a social justice perspective, their choices in text selection were limited by budgetary concerns as well as self-regulatory, societal, and school pressures.

### Teachers as Agents of Change and Taking Risks in Text Selection

The persistent preoccupation with selecting certain canonized texts for students evidences how systems of power work on an ongoing basis to narrowly shape some teachers' choice of

classroom texts. When asked why teachers are not likely to introduce a new text to their English students, Wayne suggested that, “the fear is that people don’t want to be the first.”

Yet, quite a few of the teachers in our study *did* in fact at times take risks and saw the advantages in using contemporary, non-canonical texts. The role of the school librarian as strategically key to many English teachers wanting to be agents of social change was a surprise in the data. It shows teachers overcoming societal pressures, budget limitations, and administrative silence to push forward with the texts they believe will best serve their diverse students’ interests. The data suggests that several of the teachers had experienced success in using potentially controversial texts. Wayne voiced what several other participants also said, “the advantages [of using socially relevant texts] is the students are more engaged because they see themselves in the actual material.” More importantly, however, Wayne’s feeling of vulnerability in his text choices were significantly diminished when he felt supported by official policy: “I have ministry documents to support me, so I’m not scared.” Research by Freedman and Johnson (2001) demonstrated that many teachers’ fears of bringing in new texts grow out of the lack of support they receive from their administration and school board and the sense that they are “out there” by themselves (p. 357). Certainly, the participants in this study reflected this viewpoint.

Yagelski (2000) has written about the importance of “local literacies” if students are to become truly literate readers and writers. Students, Yagelski argues, need to read, write, and talk about important issues that are relevant and real to them and that have immediate meaning for them in their lives. Lesesne (2006) offers a broad array of book title suggestions and insight into youths’ interests to help teachers find appropriate literature. Despite recent provincial legislation that obligated them to do so, and a personal commitment to equity issues, the strategies named by teachers to bring same-sex literature into the classroom often involved informally letting students know about books, keeping those novels on independent reading lists, or making them available through the library. Perhaps one of the most disturbing aspects of self-regulatory practices that shape teachers’ text selections is the way controversial issues such as gay and lesbian representations in texts were enough at times to foreclose on choosing non-canonical texts, rather than any actual condemnation having occurred (Aslup, 2003; Agee, 1999). As Aslup (2003) argues, we can no longer waste the ethical opportunities literature provides in the face of social injustices.

It is not only *which* texts are selected but also *how* they are taught. For instance, even within a canonical text, if the main issues are marginalized or ignored, teaching the book could be more damaging than not since students will at some level recognize that crucial issues have been skirted, reinforcing feelings of fear that socially relevant topics are not up for discussion. As O’Sullivan (2008) observes:

Many classroom teachers carefully avoid bringing politics into the classroom. When teachers fail to bring public issues (e.g., politics) into the classroom in a nonpartisan and grade-appropriate way, they are undermining both their own capacity and that of their students to develop into critical pedagogues (p. 100).

The community pressures felt and experienced by the participants underscores how societal factions may influence pedagogical decisions. The fact that book challenges are as prevalent today as they were decades ago (Boyd & Bailey, 2009, p. 660) shows clearly that the problem of censorship and self-regulation remains persistent.

As a step in the right direction, the increasingly diverse population found in Windsor and Essex County schools contributed to the public school board's decision to make a commitment to address issues of diversity. In the Director's words, to "prepare children to live in the next century" (GECDSB 2005, May 14). This commitment was demonstrated when, in 2005, the GECDSB funded Ontario's first school board diversity officer.

Perhaps cognizant of how diverse populations may hold conflicting beliefs, the local school board developed a policy:

Controversial issues include matters characterized by significant differences of opinion, usually generated from differing and underlying values, beliefs and interests, which produce social tension. Controversy arising from such differences is inherent in a pluralistic society. An important function of public education is to provide students with an understanding of how controversial issues are dealt with in a democracy (GECDSB 2010, May).

Still, despite the board's policy, only some teachers interviewed selected texts that would allow students to engage in 'controversial issues' in order to develop a more democratic, critical consciousness. For the board to implement this policy vision, teachers need the resources, and just as importantly, they need to feel supported by their educational institution that to teach critical material is the work of all teachers, not just daring individuals.

### **Gender, Race, and Sexual Orientation as Deciding Variables in Text Selection**

Feminist research (Skelton & Francis, 2009) into teachers' attitudes has indicated that many teachers are influenced in their dealings with pupils by gender-specific preconceptions, or what Martino (2008) describes as essentialist understandings of gender. For Martino, essentialist understandings of gender suggest that there is a generally held view that 'typical girls' are compliant, easy to please, cooperative, conscientious workers in the classroom (Browne & France, 1986; Skelton 1989). In effect, many of the teachers from our research seem to view girls as 'conformist plodders' who showed a willingness to accept uncritically any text that was given to them. Much of this was based on an underlying assumption among our participants that the English curriculum has become too 'feminized' and this is hurting boys. Yet, as Weaver-Hightower (2003) notes:

The "feminine" nature of the English curriculum is debatable at best, for many of the authors covered in contemporary schooling ... are still from the "dead White men" camp, and many of the themes are masculine and sexist and the protagonist male. If we accept this argument, then increasing the "fit" of the curriculum to boys' concerns will only exacerbate existing inequality (pp. 486-487).

Despite the teachers' best intentions, such attempts to bring more 'boy-books' as a way to engage boys in reading fails to recognize the way in which school texts have historically disproportionately represented males more often than females (Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, 1970; U'Ren, 1971.) The invisibility of female representations in school texts historically, suggests that educational publishers and educators, then and now (Weaver-

Hightower, 2003, p. 486), have all along been more concerned about the education of boys than girls. Perhaps most important, the privileging of boys' interests over girls' is problematic as it has the unintended effect of "confirming, reinforcing, and extending structures of masculine hegemony in education and more generally in society" (Ewing, 2006, p. 622). This is critical, as gender was a significant factor in how many teachers selected texts. Hegemony is reinforced through text selection – be it canonical or more contemporary texts if the underlying assumption is that boys need special texts geared to a certain kind of privileged masculinity. A number of the teachers interviewed indicated they had thought about the implications of praxis (theory put into practice) in their text selection. Yet, in terms of gender, their understanding of research was overwhelmingly influenced by a one-sided view currently promoted by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2004, 2009a).

For one teacher, the problem with the canon stemmed from how it functioned to support systems of power that sustained heterosexism: "the actual canon is so old, same-sex relationships or issues of homophobia are not in any of the books." For this teacher, the force of heterosexism found within canonized texts was also linked to other systems of power, which maintained other discriminatory ideologies: "I believe *To Kill a Mockingbird* should not be taught. I'm tired of books that focus on white people saving poor black folk." While this novel is often used by schools in Ontario and elsewhere as a way to address issues of racism, this teacher offers a critical perspective which highlights how *To Kill a Mockingbird* in fact functions to reproduce social inequities. Based on race the characters perpetuate the notion that racialized minorities can only be saved through the beneficence and generosity of white characters.

If we want to take seriously the relationship between equity, social justice and text selection, we need teachers to interrogate their own understandings of gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity issues. Existing power structures are reproduced because they become a part of our collective thinking as a society. Literature, and the values and ethics represented in it, are never isolated. Text selection and reading practices need to be viewed critically taking into account historical, socio-political, and local contexts. This kind of critical stance may serve to defamiliarize ways of viewing current power relations in schools and communities as well as to problematize and critique hegemonic discourse.

### Conclusion

Developing a critical consciousness in students who are preparing to live and work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can only happen if the diversity of student populations in terms such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and class see themselves in the materials educators choose to teach. The teachers are not alone in making these choices, although far too often they are left feeling isolated or that these are not even the kinds of discussions they can engage in with each other or in their local schools and communities. The silence serves to reproduce the status quo, where relations of power are left intact and function to work against the aims of equity and social justice. Ongoing conversations and professional development at the school board, school and departmental level, however, would help establish for teachers a collective space where they could openly discuss issues related to teaching potentially controversial topics in any discipline. Such discussions, Agee (1999) points out, are especially "powerful because they break the usual silence and allay the kind of fearful self-censorship that occurs when teachers are isolated and uncertain" (p. 68). Proactive strategies such as this are important as they help create a climate that encourages teachers to include more culturally diverse texts (Agee, 1999).

In sum, if we want to encourage teachers in any field to choose contemporary texts that have relevance for students' lives, this practice has to be actively supported by administrators, teacher educators, professional development, resources, and an articulated protocol for dealing with the controversies that will inevitably occur between schools and particular segments of society.

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