



Mary Butz

Diane Ravitch

THE LANGUAGE POLICE: HOW PRESSURE GROUPS RESTRICT WHAT STUDENTS LEARN

by Diane Ravitch

Book Review by
Paula Marantz Cohen

JUST WHEN IT SEEMED that there was nothing left to say about the sorry state of American education, Diane Ravitch, a historian and professor of education, has found something new. Her book, *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn*, is a comprehensive study of how testing materials and textbooks adopted widely throughout the United States suffer under an egregious “regime of censorship”. Her book chronicles in exhaustive detail the ways in which bias and sensitivity guidelines have bowdlerized the language and the content of educational materials, principally in the humanities, though affecting math and science as well.



Ravitch, who served as Assistant Secretary of Education under President George H. W. Bush and is now a Visiting Senior Fellow at the liberal-leaning Brookings Institution in Washington, DC, is no ideologue. She finds that both sides of the political spectrum have contributed to the problem she describes. Her previous book, *Left Back: A Century of Failed School Reforms* (2000), explored the way progressive American educators at the beginning of the twentieth century instituted a utilitarian system of education that had its roots in the anti-intellectualism of the American frontier. This funnelled large numbers of students into vocational training programmes, depriving them of the benefits of a liberal education. *The Language Police* offers a kind of sequel to this argument. For, where earlier educators concentrated on practical learning, their successors concentrate on moral uplift and the building of self-esteem. In both cases, this comes at the expense of critical thinking.

Ravitch admits that much of the censorship imposed on educational materials today was spurred by the Civil Rights and Women's Movements of the 1960s and 70s. The original goals were laudable: to rid textbooks and test questions of prejudicial language and to open history and literature to neglected voices and points of view. Anyone who was educated in the American public schools in the 1950s and 60s (as I was) can recall the white-bread "Fun with Dick and Jane" imagery and the uninflected view of American power and moral virtue in the textbooks of that time. But Ravitch demonstrates that the effort to provide students with a more varied and just perspective has been taken to an extreme. Now, only the most blandly inclusive, morally simplistic material can gain entry. Stylistic eloquence and the free play of ideas have no place.

Ravitch's discovery of textbook censorship began when she was appointed by the Clinton administration to the National Assessment Governing Board, a non-partisan federal agency charged to develop a voluntary national proficiency test. The Board began gathering material from literature and history for a fourth-grade national test. But no sooner had they compiled this material than it was handed over for review to a "sensitivity committee", a group with backgrounds in counselling, diversity training, guidance, bilingual education, and so forth. The committee flagged many seemingly innocuous passages gathered by the Board as potentially offensive or biased: an essay on peanuts because some children are allergic to peanuts; a biography of the designer of the Mount Rushmore monument because the site is considered sacred by some

Native Americans; a legend about dolphins because it reflects a regional bias against children who don't live near the sea; an inspirational story about a blind mountain climber because it suggests that a blind person might find it harder to climb a mountain than a sighted one. The examples go on. Even Aesop's fable, "The Fox and the Crow", was flagged as sexist because a male fox flatters a female crow; to gain approval, the gender of the animals had to be changed. The review committee also gave the Board a list of topics to be avoided. These included abortion, evolution, expensive consumer goods, magic, personal appearance, politics, religion, unemployment, unsafe situations, weapons and violence—among others.

The attempt to create a national test was eventually abandoned, but Ravitch found her curiosity piqued. She did some research and discovered that most tests and textbooks used in American public schools were governed by sensitivity and bias guidelines, many of them more detailed and absurd than those she had encountered on the National Assessment Governing Board. Anything that could be categorized as disability bias, regional bias, or ethnic bias was immediately flagged. Any word using the term "man" (man-made, manpower, mankind, salesman), and any images of men, women or minorities engaged in allegedly stereotypical activities (women sewing, white men practising medicine, African Americans doing athletics, Asian Americans studying) were judged to be stereotypical and therefore unacceptable. Any passages that were situated in particularized locales (rustic environments or urban ones, for example) were said to be discriminatory against those who had no experience with these environments. By the same token, references to religion, to parental discord, to disrespectful children, and to evolution were also judged to be out of bounds. Conservative interest groups had learned from liberal ones to exert their influence. In short, the textbook and testing guidelines were wary of anything that might raise an eyebrow—whether it was the brow of a maiden aunt or of a committed anarchist. The goal was to satisfy everyone. This meant not only censoring and bowdlerizing what might be offensive but also cramming in as much innocuous material as possible so as to give every interest group its due. Ravitch quotes one textbook writer who finally broke under the strain:

They sent 10 pages of single-spaced specifications. The hero was a Hispanic boy. There were black twins, one boy, one girl; an overweight Oriental boy; and an American Indian girl. That leaves the Caucasian. Since we mustn't forget the physically handicapped, she was born with a congenital malformation and only had three fingers on one hand. One child

had to have an Irish setter, and the setter was to be female . . .
They also had a senior citizen, and I had to show her jogging.
I can't do it anymore.

The drive to please everyone explains why textbooks have increased in size and why the weight of children's school backpacks are causing health problems.



As Ravitch notes, the textbooks are not only big, they are visually spectacular. They use glossy paper and are crammed with photographs and colourful graphics. But the content is stultifying. There is no overarching narrative to inspire students with a love of literature or history. Everything is presented as equally important, since any use of emphasis would suggest that certain ideas, cultures or individuals are worthier of interest than others. Ravitch further notes that these textbooks are, in their own way, discriminatory. By mandating that students only be exposed to material that conforms to their presumed experience, the books engage in the very stereotyping they take pains to avoid on the level of language and imagery.

Having demonstrated the nature and extent of textbook censorship, Ravitch explores why it exists. She gives two reasons. One involves the limited number of companies involved in the creation of tests and textbooks. There are only four parent companies that produce these materials: the British-based Pearson, the French-based Vivendi (which sold its American publishing interests in 2002), the Dutch-based Reed Elsevier, and the American-based McGraw-Hill. Each of these companies has a number of textbook imprints and educational testing services under its aegis. This means that within one company there is an inevitable copying of material, including the copying of sensitivity guidelines. Guidelines

are also copied across the large companies. What better way to avoid the possibility of litigation from new interest groups than to borrow from other companies that have already experienced pressure from these groups?


The second reason Ravitch gives for the regime of censorship, at least as it exists in the United States, lies in the way in which textbooks are adopted. Almost two dozen states have state-wide textbook adoption policies, and two of these states, Texas and California, are so large that they represent a substantial portion of the market. Textbook publishers are therefore in thrall to these states. California has strong liberal lobbies, devoted to the idea that no cultural group be discriminated against with regard to language and imagery. Texas is dominated by conservative lobbies that concentrate on moral content. The combination produces textbooks that are severely curtailed in both directions: at once attuned to political correctness and deferential to so-called family values. The state adoption policies of Texas and California mean huge contracts for the companies that can satisfy these states. Smaller publishers cannot compete, and other states and local school systems (where there is no state-mandated textbook policy), generally end up adopting what has been developed for Texas and California for reasons of convenience and cost.

Ravitch has uncovered a scandal here. She shows an industry that exists in flagrant opposition to fundamental educational principles: that thwarts critical thinking and is imitative and cowardly, buckling to pressure groups, even when these represent the most marginal interests. This may not be a surprise to those who are politically and economically aware. Textbook companies, like all companies, are market-driven and litigation-shy, and the system of textbook adoption in the United States has evolved to assist these tendencies rather than curtail them. What, then, are educators and concerned citizens to do?

Ravitch advises three remedies: competition, sunshine and educated teachers. Competition would occur if state-wide adoption were eliminated, thereby reducing the leverage of any one large market in dictating textbook content. This would leave room for smaller publishers to produce books of quality that would appeal to teachers rather than to politically driven state adoption committees. The second remedy, sunshine, would make known how textbook content is developed. Bias and sensitivity guidelines should be freely available over the internet, Ravitch says, so that parents and teachers can evaluate their validity. Exposing the methodology of text-

book development would weaken the power of the pressure groups that have been allowed to operate in secrecy. Publishers would have to be more responsive to common sense. Finally, Ravitch calls for educated teachers. This is both an obvious and a complicated sort of remedy. Indeed, it is the one that Ravitch deals with least. I suspect that she skirts the issue because the subject of American teacher education is a complex one that Ravitch isn't prepared to deal with here. Perhaps she hopes to make it the subject of another book—it deserves to be. For the fact is that the problem with teachers parallels the problem with textbooks. Teacher training, like textbook development, currently places greater emphasis on form than on content. Teachers are given extensive training in the latest pedagogical methods, but less training in their individual disciplines. Admittedly, pedagogical skills are important, but these skills cannot substitute for knowledge of one's field. Bad textbooks would not be such a problem if there were teachers capable of criticizing them and teaching around them.

Ravitch notes that one of the major problems in history textbooks is the absence of an author. A name at the end of a chapter would make clear that the account is the product of an individual with distinct interests, tastes, and, even, God forbid, prejudices. And why should students be protected from knowing that “he” once was, and sometimes still is, used as a generic pronoun, or that “negro” was once the commonly endorsed term for African American? To make these issues the subject of discussion in the classroom is to acknowledge the inequities of the past without necessarily condemning the past for not being as enlightened as the present. The contemporary world also needs to be represented as it actually exists. Textbooks that whitewash this world provoke only contempt from students, who know when they are getting a snow job.

Perhaps the best alternative to bad textbooks is no textbooks. *The Language Police* has an appendix containing a list of primary readings for grades three to ten. This is a good idea but an impractical one. Using primary materials, especially in the early grades, poses logistical and pedagogical problems that most American schools are not prepared to handle. Thus, textbooks are likely to remain with us. One can only hope that Diane Ravitch's book will help bring about a revision of the sanitized texts that are currently breaking our children's backs and dulling their minds. 

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