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e-ISSN 2519-593X
Perspectives in Education
2025 43(1): 318-333

PUBLISHED:
30 April 2025

RECEIVED:
25 July 2024

ACCEPTED:
21 January 2025

Published by the UFS
http://journals.ufs.ac.za/index.php/pie

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Censorship in literature education: Background and guidelines to facilitate the discussion of controversial youth literature

Abstract

Youth literature can be regarded as an important educational tool. However, controversial issues in youth literature become more prominent and the different opinions (internationally and individually) on such issues place the focus more on censorship. This article aims to provide an overview and analysis of the discourse on censorship in literature. Language teachers remain the most dominant role players in schools to make the correct text choices in promoting reading. Our study proposes a critical pedagogical approach to controversial issues in youth literature. We offer guidelines that language teachers can use in the classroom to facilitate the discussion of controversial issues in youth literature in a self-directed manner with learners.

Keywords: *censorship, controversial, education, literature education, self-directed reading, youth literature*

1. Introduction

Youth literature should be regarded as an important educational tool (Jaramillo, 2012; Tamayo & León, 2017) because of its appropriateness for knowledge development of social and cultural realities (Bruner, 2008; Ortega-Sánchez, 2023). Aquirre (2012) explains that literary texts with strong narrative elements have the following advantages for young readers: the stimulation of understanding, the achievement of sociocultural change, the construction of ideas and interpretations, and the development of cognition and emotional intelligence. Most important, of course, is the sheer pleasure of reading.

However, contemporary youth literature frequently addresses complex social issues and challenging life experiences. Controversial issues that have become prominent in youth literature in the 21st century include violence, politics, sexuality and religion (Fritz & Van der Westhuizen, 2010: 163-182), as well as drugs, alcohol use, smoking, sexual promiscuity, suicide and disrespect towards authority (Vos, 2018: 287). Issues related to power,

tyranny and justice (Delgado, *et al.,* 2016), gender categorisation and LGBT– lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender –phobia (Aguirre, *et al.*, 2020; Earles, 2017) and mental health disorders (Eisenbach & Frydman, 2023) are common controversial topics in youth literature.

Controversiality is a difficult concept to define because it is linked to a person's morality (Vos, 2018: 286). Therefore, persons acting from different moral perspectives will hold different opinions (angst versus catharsis theories) on facilitating and exposing these controversial topics in youth literature. On the one hand, supporters of the angst theory feel that gruesome, violent images alongside peaceful ones are a part of the fairy tale tradition. Fritz and Van der Westhuizen (2010: 168) explain that portraying revenge and violence in stories can influence the developing young reader to follow this example. According to De Jong-Slagman (2023), there is still a large following of the angst theory in the Netherlands because teachers from orthodox Christian or strict reformed schools, for example, mistrust public libraries and want to have control over everything their learners read.

On the other hand, adherents of the catharsis theory agree that reality should be portrayed to the reader precisely because of the therapeutic value of the narrative content connected to these controversial issues, either through stories from others or because of the narrative version of one's own experiences. Aristotle's Poetics is the root of the catharsis theory in psychoanalysis and literary theory. Bohart (1980: 192) explains that emotions are seen as entities, such as water or steam, which build up if not expressed. Moreover, the catharsis theory can let out such emotional steam vicariously and not necessarily via direct experience. Therefore, youth literature depicting gruesome images, pain and loss is significant in allowing readers to purify their emotions. This exposure to gruesome images enables readers to identify disturbing events and images in their own lives and experience closure from them. Related to catharsis is the text-internal corrective of a particular text to which Fritz and Van der Westhuizen (2010: 171) refer as follows:

> [T]*extinternal correctives can therefore be considered as story-like processes with which negative values in respect of characters' actions, the events, the space and time aspects within the story world are restored, reversed, changed or adjusted in order to bring forward the intended positive values let come and make visible.*

Many organisations oppose censorship because of the catharsis theory and the text-internal correcting process. Such organisations include the National Coalition Against Censorship, the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Reading Association, the National Education Association, the American Library Association, the Office of Intellectual Freedom and the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression. Al-Hassani (2020) thinks that young readers need books to help them understand the multicultural nature of the world in which they live. To censor controversial issues from books or to remove these books from libraries is to restrict lucrative discussions about sensitive topics.

A general educational objective is to prepare learners to fulfil their rightful place in society. To be able to do this, learners' critical thinking should be developed – they should be honed in a safe learning environment to express their opinions on sensitive or controversial topics in youth literature. As indicated by Vos (2014), the language teacher has the most dominant role in the school in selecting appropriate texts and promoting reading, even if these texts include controversial issues. Therefore, a self-directed and innovative language teacher with a broad knowledge of censorship can be a significant role player in the language classroom to facilitate the discussion of controversial youth literature.

2. Theoretical framework

In the context of censorship in literature education and controversial issues that are highlighted, the theoretical framework underpinning this article is the critical pedagogical framework. Critical pedagogy teaches learners to think critically and question the given information (Uddin, 2019). With this vital teaching strategy, learners should be made aware of justice and social equality while improving their knowledge. The context of this article entails an understanding and critical questioning of the censorship of controversial issues in youth literature by teachers and learners and trying to improve the situation in the interest of transformative education.

3. Methodological accountability

The primary research aim of the article is to develop guidelines for language teachers for self-directed literature education instead of censorship. These guidelines can be used for initial teacher training, in-service teacher training and the continuous professional development of teachers. The guidelines focus on improving language teachers' knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs regarding self-directed censorship in literature education.

The secondary research objectives of the article are to provide a concise overview and analysis of the discourse on censorship and to discuss the attributes of the language teacher as a gatekeeper.

To achieve the research objectives, a comprehensive literature review was undertaken (Onwuegbuzie & Frels 2016). During a comprehensive literature review, the state of knowledge of a particular subject, as contained in different published and/or unpublished sources, is recorded in various modes. The same is true for the literature review undertaken, as it encompasses the culmination of various subject journal articles, academic books and/or book chapters.

4. Literature review

This comprehensive literature review gives an overview of the philosophical background and historical overview of censorship as well as the Orthodox Christian background thereof. Furthermore, the attributes of the language teacher as a prominent gatekeeper are highlighted, for example, self-directedness, innovation, their role as guardian of morality and as promotor of a participatory democratic culture, his/her ability of critical thinking, his/her role as pedagogical and subject content expert and lastly his/her ability to make suitable text choices.

4.1 The nature of and reasons for censorship in different contexts

Al-Hassani (2020: iv), a scholar in censorship, explains that *censorship* is "a form of restriction and control over societies social and political agendas, and involves the freedom of expression, progress, innovation and political correctness". The main reason for censoring is to block out immoral or questionable content according to social norms and values.

Literary censorship can arise for any number of reasons. Concerned parties may find the content of specific youth literature unsuitable for the learning environment. According to Pekoll (2019), reasons for censorship include the protection of moral values, the prevention of harm such as hate speech (racism, discrimination or political extremism), threats to national security or public safety, and misinformation. Censorship can also be used by a dominant culture to suppress the voices of the minority (Al-Hassani, 2020: 5). This, for example, occurred during

World War II, when German citizens burnt books written by Jewish authors and texts that did not promote German nationalism. Where censorship is used for the desire for power, it can be very harmful.

However, even what may seem like benign literary censorship can have an adverse effect on role players, such as authors, readers, publishers, librarians and teachers. In an interview with Hailu (2023), the well-known American author of youth novels, Judy Blume, said that censorship can be constricting and controlling to authors because it limits and controls their artistic freedom and self-expression. If an author's story is censored, the author's ideas, thoughts and messages are kept from readers, and young readers are hindered from learning valuable life lessons. If publishers censor controversial material, they risk losing readers, financially impairing their business. School librarians have an arduous task: on the one hand, they should oppose censorship to fully inform the reader, while on the other hand, they should adhere to the understanding of teachers and parents as acting in the best interest of learners. Likewise, teachers may be limited in their choice of texts because parents fear that controversial content can negatively influence their children.

4.2 Philosophical background and historical overview of censorship

According to Fellion and Inglis (2017: 11), censorship "is inevitable because people impose limits on each other's actions". Society depends upon curbing particular actions, such as "You make me so angry, I want to hit you" behaviour, as well as much subtler cases, such as "You show me a picture of your new grandson, and the truth is, I find him quite ugly but, instead, I praise his similarity to your son". Therefore, many social interactions involve blessed self-censorship. However, beyond the triviality of polite social exchanges, a much deeper concern leads to literary censorship. The initiative for literary censorship often derives from a primordial fear for the survival of society, yielding a conservative motivation that abhors novelties.

The history of the philosophy of art, especially the philosophy of literature, is intertwined with censorial thought. Moreover, literature remains a particularly censored form of art, as Erlanson *et al.* (2020) show (see also De Oliveira, *et al.*, 2019; Gaffney, 2017; Russ, 1983). Since Plato considered the role of literature in the education of the guardians and all citizens of the state, the prism of the social role of literature has harboured the notion of censorship. Early in *the Republic*, Plato (1925 printing) considers guardians' education. He makes a logical move from the craving for luxuries to the necessity of censorship. For the state to grow to be able to provide luxuries, it must go to war and occupy the territories of its neighbouring countries. Therefore, it needs an army. The state should prepare children for a military future by selecting stories suitable for this purpose. Therefore, the state must supervise the literary education of children. The motivation for censorship is the prevailing of society: the state defends itself against educational messages, carried via cultural means, that may interfere with the values required for its survival. For example, Socrates explains that it is unwise to let soldiers believe death is terrible, or they will fear the battlefield. Therefore, one of the censorial rules in *Republic* prohibits the portrayal of the terrors of the afterlife in Hades: to ensure that soldiers "will be fearless of death" so that they will "prefer death to defeat and slavery", poets are requested "not to dispraise in this undiscriminating fashion the life in Hades but rather praise it". However, Plato believes that good poets cannot be trusted to follow the censorial dictates and, therefore, suggests banning not only unauthorised texts but also those poets whose remarkable poetic ability will not allow them to abide by the censorial rules (Barchana-Lorand, 2012) and banish them from the state altogether:

> *If a man […] who was capable by his cunning of assuming every kind of shape and imitating all things should arrive in our city, bringing with himself the poems which he wished to exhibit, we should fall down and worship him as a holy and wondrous and delightful creature, but should say to him that there is no man of that kind among us in our city, nor is it lawful for such a man to arise among us. We should send him away to another city after pouring myrrh over his head and crowning him with fillets of wool. Still, we, for our souls' good, should continue to employ the more austere and less delightful poet and tale-teller, who would imitate the diction of the good man and would tell his tale in the patterns which we prescribed in the beginning when we set out to educate our soldiers.* (397e-398b)

In one of Plato's most famous passages, he explains that while the best poets cannot be trusted, the state requires the aid of poets to convey its values, albeit only mediocre poets, who are "more austere and less delightful". Plato creates an equation whereby good literature is inherently socially dangerous or untrustworthy, while socially beneficial literature is safe.

However, Plato's student, Aristotle, dispels this gloomy prospect (Barchana-Lorand, 2010). For Aristotle, a work of fiction will not be perceived as artistically sound if it does not reflect the values of its audience. A work of fiction should comply with the values of its audience even to be deciphered because our understanding of the narrative depends on our understanding of the characters – part of which is their moral worth. Thus, the artistic evaluation of the work, according to the understanding of the narrative, depends on a shared value scale between the author and the audience. The poetic effect will otherwise be lost. For example, if we find a joke racist or demeaning, it will not induce our laughter. For Aristotle, external literary censorship (such as that executed by the state or teachers) is redundant because it would be in the author's artistic interest to reflect the audience's values in the work.

Despite Aristotle's rebuttal of Plato's stance, the logic of Plato's argument against free literature remains a strong source of concern in Western culture. The worry that literary fiction could become a Trojan horse, releasing unwarranted destructive values in the souls of readers, especially young and impressionable readers, haunts the history of literature ever since – from antiquity (Baltussen & Davis, 2015) to the present (Soucek, 2023). While this is true regarding extreme totalitarian regimes (Karimi-Hakkak, 2019; Kloc, 2016), the concern for young learners' moral and psychological well-being renders literary censorship prevalent even in liberal and progressive states.

The 18th-century concern for the moral character of young readers was partly a result of the rise of the novel as a literary genre, much more accessible to private individuals and, hence, less given to public scrutiny than theatrical performances. While theatrical performances are inherently public and, therefore, can be not only halted by the refusal of public funds but also forcefully stopped even in mid-action, novels may work their magic unbeknownst to others. A person, even a child, may get hold of a book – even one that teachers or politicians shun – and secretly read it privately. To completely prevent determined people from reading particular books requires a prison-like environment. However, even today, in liberal and progressive societies, it seems that parents and teachers believe that decreasing the publicity and accessibility of books, for example, their exclusion from curricular reading lists or even their banning from school libraries, will enable better supervision of the soul food presented by such books. Consider this headline from *The Telegraph*: "Religious parents want *Harry Potter* banned from the classroom because it 'glorifies witchcraft'" (Espinoza, 2015). Concerned that their children may be inclined to become Satan worshippers considering the portrayal of magic in this book series, parents revolted against the distribution of the books in elementary

school libraries. Thus, although children, especially adolescents, gain much by exercising their freedom to choose their reading (Ivey & Johnston, 2018), they face censorship more than any other group (Dávila, 2022; Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2020).

While literary censorship used to be exercised by the state or its organisations (including educational institutions), Erlanson *et al*. (2020: 9) warn that, in recent decades, "power over content and access has in several crucial regards shifted to the private sector". The concern is that this "private sector" (a relatively small number of people who govern social network policy) has control over the dissemination of information to many users. Written communication has seen unprecedented growth through social media platforms. However, this has paradoxically placed enormous censorial power in the hands of a few private individuals with neither an official, elected public role nor any role-related moral duty to the public. Given these circumstances, protecting freedom of speech, especially literary expression, should become a global priority.

4.3 Orthodox Christian background

Throughout the centuries, Christian education involved literary censorship. The so-called Index of Forbidden Books was in force in Roman Catholic circles. All printed material not originating from Roman Catholic circles was critically inspected and often rejected (Dane, 1996). Protestant circles introduced the ideal of internalised censorship: Readers were expected to cherish their conscience and discard books that challenged their faith (Dane, 1995; Van Koeven & Leeman, 2011). Because young readers were incapable of doing so, they needed adult supervision. Parents and educators had to guide young people in choosing and reading books. In liberal Christian schools, guidance became commonplace, but not in orthodox Christian schools.

Orthodox Christians, also called "Bible-believing" and "biblical" Christians (Senland & Vozzola, 2007), take the Bible literally, which influences the way they deal with youth literature (Dane, 1996: 82). Whereas liberal or open Christian schools have a wide range of books, orthodox Christian schools limit themselves to Christian literature. These schools pursue a limited admissions policy, serving church and family. The limited admissions policy ensures a homogeneous school population where the teachers, learners and parents share beliefs and values. In such an environment, discussing controversial issues is considered superfluous, as the positions are well known. These schools aim to form and educate learners in a classical manner, with the Bible as an important source in all school subjects. The range of books on offer must serve that purpose; therefore, youth literature containing controversial issues is rejected. The schools choose books – from trusted authors and publishers – consistent with their educational ideals regarding the content, message and morals (De Jong-Slagman, 2022; Lolkema & Prins, 2005; Van Koeven, 2011).

These orthodox Christian schools have an apparent reason for their censorship: they derive their *raison d'etre* from the Christian faith. In practice, this means making safe choices, avoiding confrontations and dismissing the guidance of young readers (De Jong-Slagman, 2022, 2023; Senland & Vozzola, 2005). Teachers at these schools are not always aware that they are censoring books. In their daily dealings with texts and books, they are usually in control instead of letting their learners make autonomous choices and encouraging autonomy-supportive behaviour. Dávila (2022) refers to this as tacit censorship. Van Koeven and Leeman (2011) show that teachers often keep away from books presenting magic features, strong language, violence and sexuality. Jalongo and Creany (1991) also recognise

too mature or realistic content as censorable. Learners are not confronted with such content, and discussions are avoided (De Jong-Slagman, 2022; Van Koeven & Leeman, 2011). This tacit censorship is nowadays also regarded as a form of territorialisation, which seeks to maintain existing borders at the expense of marginalised groups (Dávila, 2022).

By censoring youth literature in orthodox Christian schools, young Christian people are confined to their worldview instead of learning to consider relevant themes critically from multiple perspectives. Van Koeven and Leeman (2011) think this "safe learning environment" has a downside. If controversial topics are not discussed, this situation also implies a form of influence: one point of view is tacitly accepted, and values such as tolerance and respect are subordinated to one's safe education, resulting in anti-intellectualism (Knox, 2020). While counselling and talking to young people should be a basic pedagogical practice (Dane, 1996, 2005; Den Hollander, 2020; Renkema, 2022; Sønneland, 2019), modern youth literature is rarely a topic of conversation in orthodox Christian schools. Pike (2007) argues that Christian teachers should help learners discover the underlying values in books and compare them with their Christian values. Transactional reading contributes significantly to the education of young people (Pike, 2007).

When consciously or tacitly censoring youth literature, teachers consider the parents of their learners, which is a well-known complicating factor (Dane, 1995; Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2019; Van Koeven & Leeman, 2011). Christian parents want their children's schools to align with their views and choose schools accordingly. They often lack accurate information about school reading until issues arise. Concerns often stem from superficial judgements (De Jong-Slagman, 2023; Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2019; Knox, 2020). Informed parents are less likely to censor books, understanding their value and appeal (Jalongo & Creany, 1991).

Books that contain potentially disturbing elements are suitable for specific purposes. Brownlee (2013) illustrates this idea by using fantasy for young people traumatised by war. While many orthodox Christian parents object to *Harry Potter* (see Dane, 2005; Matzken & Nijburg, 1995; Van Koeven, 2011), she sees in this literature a "buffered fantasy world, creating a haven for child readers to explore" (Brownlee, 2013: 8). Others consider the *Harry Potter* series to be a Christian allegory (Senland & Vozzola, 2007).

4.4 The attributes of the language teacher as a gatekeeper

Establishing a safe and welcoming environment that promotes comfort among learners, motivating them to ask questions, express their opinions and engage in bold discussions is very important (Du Toit-Brits, 2018; Nasri, 2019). According to Skerrett and Smagorinsky (2023), since society and culture affect identity construction, teaching and learning contexts should promote critical inquiry that will help develop learners into social change activists sensitive to cultural conflict. Diverse teaching materials will contribute to that goal.

According to the South African *Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications* (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2015: 58-59), teachers should fulfil different roles. They should be specialists in subject content and mediate learning sensitive to learners' diverse needs. Therefore, teachers must develop a supportive and empowering learning environment based on a critical and ethical pedagogy. Teachers should reflect on their teaching and learning to be lifelong learners themselves.

The language teacher should possess important qualities to change the language classroom into an empowering environment for learners, especially when texts with controversial content are chosen for literature study. To achieve that goal, the language teacher should be self-directed, innovative, a guardian of morality, a promotor of participatory democratic culture, a critical thinker and a pedagogical and subject content expert.

4.5 Self-directedness

Self-directed learning is a paradigm shift in education that empowers learners to control their learning. Scholars such as Candy, Rogers, Knowles, Guglielmino, Long and Tough laid the foundation for this transformative approach. Probably one of the most important goals of teaching and learning is the guidance of learners to develop into strategic, self-directed and reflective learners. To succeed in this objective, reflective teaching practice should be implemented. Learners should take full responsibility for their learning and learn to use their critical thinking skills effectively (Wirth & Perkins, 2014). Full responsibility entails self-directed learners being empowered to use their preferred teaching and learning strategies, choose their learning materials (Sumuer, 2018; Tredoux, 2012; Vahedi, *et al.*, 2019) and determine their learning progress and objectives (Lai, 2015). Self-directed learners can seek out non-traditional learning environments (Horn & Staker, 2017), such as online learning services and learning strategies. The global COVID-19 pandemic lockdown proved worldwide that learning strategies and self-directed learning helped learners adapt more easily to changing educational landscapes. Teachers should become self-directed students and model the process to their learners to cultivate self-directed learners.

4.6 Innovation

In an international study, O'Sullivan, Attard, and Livingston (2024) found the following to be characteristics of an innovative teacher: open to change, risk-taking, critical reflection, flexibility, curiosity and creativity. These characteristics flourish under particular conditions. Most important is effective leadership in the education setting. Teachers need the trust and support of management. Likewise, teamwork supports innovation. Even if the innovator is a lone voice, the support of his or her leaders encourages the teacher's creativity and risk-taking. The third important condition for innovation concerns workload and resourcing (see also Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2017) regarding class size, teaching assistants, time for engagement and planning, financial support, concrete support for participation in continuous professional development, flexible space and information and communication technologies.

4.7 Guardian of morality

Thinking of teachers, especially language teachers, as guardians of morality seems to indicate that they should prevent their learners from engaging in specific content (Becnel & Moeller, 2021; Dávila, 2015, 2022). However, to help learners develop a strong moral consciousness, language teachers should let them explore controversial and complex texts, allowing them to discuss these openly in class and facilitate these discussions by contextualising them, raising questions about them and indicating their shortcomings (Fellion & Inglis, 2017). The role of the guardian of morality is not to ignore ethical dilemmas, as presented in literature, but to address them. Much as it is a health educator's role to discuss the dangers of smoking

or excessive sugar consumption, so it is the role of the educator who engage with ethics to review the dangers of racism or antisocial behaviours. This has implications not only for new literary works but even more so for past ones. Booth (1988), for example, notes that Mark Twain's novels for young people contain language and images that, a century later, are seen as racist. On the same note, we may find fault with many great classics, if not all, for presenting misogynist or racist views. However, if teachers refrain from engaging with such works in the classroom, the scope of the great literature they may teach would diminish ad absurdum. Moreover, teachers should expose their learners to texts that invoke moral problems to create moral immunity. Therefore, to act as guardians of morality, teachers should engage with various texts rather than hope to create a sterile environment in the classroom.

4.8 Promotor of a participatory democratic culture

De Jong-Slagman developed a website in the Netherlands where modern juvenile literature is made accessible for education to confront learners with sensitive or controversial issues (Den Hollander, 2020). Teachers are asked to facilitate the discussion of controversial issues with learners rather than censor it. It is precisely in the context of citizenship, which currently receives much attention in the Netherlands, that youth literature can be given an important place. Mahmoudi, Khoshnood and Babaei (2014) highlight schools as places for social change and evolution. Therefore, it is understandable that Ortega-Sánchez (2023) suggests that teachers should confront learners with controversial social problems. In this way, learners will understand reality better since confronting them with controversial social problems develops their critical social thinking, refines their social skills and, ultimately, contributes to a participatory democratic culture.

4.9 Critical thinker

Teachers focus on tests and scores in teacher-centred education by making learners passively memorise content. However, according to Freire's (2016) critical pedagogy, teachers should encourage dialogue and problem-posing in learner-centred education. Problem-posing education is designed to engage learners in solving any problem through brainstorming. This critical pedagogy gives the oppressed a choice and understanding, which leads to a better society. Learners engage in the learning process and can give their opinions (Uddin, 2019) on controversial issues in youth literature.

4.10 Pedagogical and subject content expert

The language teacher should have pedagogical qualities to provide powerful lessons in literature. Especially when there are reader-orientated assignments, the teacher should be able to guarantee a safe pedagogical climate where there is room for conversation, and the learners can wrestle with ideas (Knox, 2020). Renkema (2022) provides several design guidelines for this, in which knowledge, dialogue and experiences play an important role. First, learners are introduced to the literary work and the context in which it was created and delve into the social theme. The learners then ask questions about the text and the characters and converse with one another. Thirdly, they link their own experiences to the stretch and share them; they try to empathise with the experiences of others and the characters and make their thoughts and feelings experienceable in words, images or play. Lastly, the learners can make a creative assignment with room for moral judgement (Renkema, 2022).

To teach similar lessons, language teachers should have adequate didactic skills; they should use targeted teaching methods and activities to encourage the learners to think critically and reflect personally. To do so, they can ask text-orientated, reader-orientated and context-orientated questions. Doing so creates space to discuss history, culture and religion from different perspectives. Therefore, language teachers need not only pedagogical and subject-specific knowledge but also a solid foundation in the contemporary cultures and religions of the world (Dávila, 2015). In addition, it is important to evaluate the story or novel explicitly with the learners, which may involve different views (Jalongo & Creany, 1991).

For prospective teachers, it is important that they learn the difference between their personal selves and their professional selves, which is not obtained through education with a limited, censored literary offer in which they only find confirmation of their views (Kimmel & Hartsfield, 2019). Their professional identity should be developed to become defenders of the right to read.

4.11 Suitable text choices

Van Koeven and Leeman (2011) show that Christian teachers determine their book choices mainly because of opposing arguments. They do not allow a feeling of discomfort (Dávila, 2015). They are more inclined to withhold books that possibly stimulate discussion than to teach their learners to choose or make critical judgements (Van Koeven & Leeman, 2011).

Asheim (1953) explains the difference between selection and censorship: Where censorship has a negative approach, selection is positive. Selection begins with a presumption in favour of liberty of thought and censorship with a presumption in thought control. Censorship is harmful, seeking vulnerable characteristics wherever they can be found – anywhere in the book or outside. Selection, on the other hand, focuses positively on the value of the book. For teachers, the book's literary value and its use in the classroom are ideally the criteria for selection (Becnel & Moeller, 2020). Teachers should, therefore, be able to assess the value of a text and be aware of the current literary repertoire for young people. If they tailor their choice to socially relevant themes and do not shy away from discussion, literature in their classrooms is truly a school for thinking (Koek *et al*., 2019) and contributes to the democratic education of young people.

5. Guidelines for self-directed literature education instead of censorship

Here, we strive to fulfil our primary research aim, namely, to suggest some guidelines for language teachers to censor controversial issues in youth literature in a self-directed manner in the classroom while also facilitating the discussion of controversial issues in youth literature with their learners.

First, the language teacher must be aware of international discourses on censorship in literature, especially youth literature. However, the language teacher should always be aware of diversity: every country, education system, teacher and learner is different.

A safe and supportive learning environment should be created in the language classroom, where the recognition of inclusiveness and diversity is an important priority. When recognition is given to diversity (among other things, different genders, races and religions), the principles of social justice should be integrated into the discussions. Zhou (2022) defines *empathy*

as the ability to identify and understand one's and other people's feelings and put oneself in the situation of others (characters) to offer solutions for conflicts in the plot and release frustrations and anxieties. According to Aguirre *et al.* (2020), further teacher training and careful educational reflection from a social justice perspective are necessary because schools and their communities continue to present themselves as hostile places for LGBTQ learners. The study by Garrido-Hernansaiz *et al.* (2017) shows that training in affective-sexual diversity can change attitudes and perspectives in the learning environment.

Teachers should have intellectual discussions and debates with their learners on controversial matters in a controlled classroom environment. They should promote learners' critical thinking by highlighting controversial issues in youth literature while developing empathy and respect towards diversity. The therapeutic value hidden in this type of youth literature is enhanced by discussing the causes and consequences and possible solutions to such matters. Good questions should be posed, questioning gender and sexuality stereotypes and identifying the persistence of prejudices in this area. These matters can be addressed through textual analysis and critical understanding, reflexively connected to the social and cultural contexts in which texts are generated and read. As part of the critical pedagogy, teachers can offer projects that allow learners to self-direct their education. Instead of looking for one correct answer, learners will focus on critical thinking and analysis.

A reader-orientated approach should be followed. It is the teacher's responsibility to educate learners to engage with controversial youth literature and contemplate other identity models in which the reader can recognise him- or herself. Suppose the perspectives of authors and other experts in this field of study are kept in mind, as well as the reception aesthetics of Wolfgang Iser. In that case, one realises the extraordinary influence an author's youth novel may have on the moral consciousness of the young reader. It possibly remains the responsibility of the author to leave the reader with a spark of hope after reading a youth novel. Both the language teacher and the learners should reflect on the purposes of censorship in literature and the controversial issues in youth literature.

6. Summary

Although Plato explicitly suggested literary censorship in education in the fourth century BC and has remained an attractive tool since our research indicates that censorship is a double-edged sword in literary education. While the immediate inclination of parents and educators to protect young learners may lead them to opt for sterile educational environments, free of any materials that clash or misalign with their values and beliefs, such a move would only leave young people more vulnerable. This would mean not only that language teachers would have to narrow their scope, giving up many significant and complex works, but, more importantly, it would also mean that young learners may come across complex and controversial situations in life without any formal preparation as to dealing with them. Furthermore, such a limiting approach supports obsolete teacher-orientated education rather than contemporary learner-orientated education that encourages independent and active learning. However, language teachers embrace controversial texts and engage with the dilemmas they present in the safety of the classroom as they facilitate discussions professionally. In that case, their learners will become better equipped to confront controversiality in real-life situations. Moreover, they will feel empowered to reflect critically on various ideas and actions and become more resilient as individuals and citizens. Parents, often a central reason for such censorship, should also be made aware of the advantages of a non-censorial approach to versatile content.

Scientifical and ethical approval

This article forms part of the research outputs of a scientific and ethical approved self-directed learning project titled *Self-directedness regarding literary and non-literary texts*. Ethics number: NWU-00262-24-A2.

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