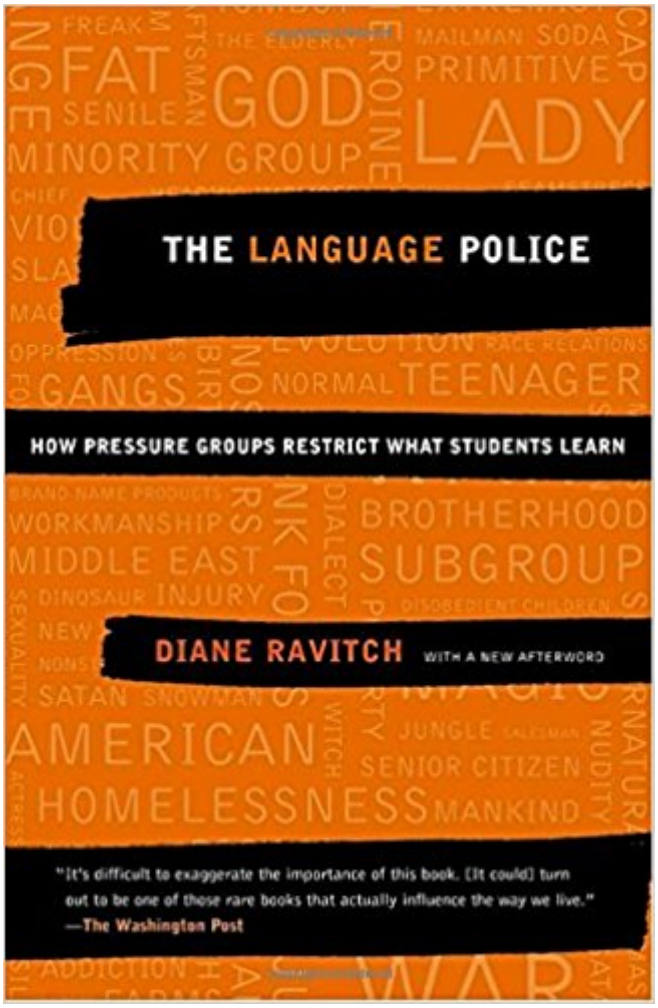
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The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn



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Synopsis

If youÃ¢â ¬â„¢re an actress or a coed just trying to do a man-size job, a yes-man who turns a deaf ear to some sob sister, an heiress aboard her yacht, or a bookworm enjoying a boyÃ¢â ¬â„¢s night out, Diane RavitchÃ¢â ¬â„¢s internationally acclaimed The Language Police has bad news for you: Erase those words from your vocabulary!Textbook publishers and state education agencies have sought to root out racist, sexist, and elitist language in classroom and library materials. But according to Diane Ravitch, a leading historian of education, what began with the best of intentions has veered toward bizarre extremes. At a time when we celebrate and encourage diversity, young readers are fed bowdlerized texts, devoid of the references that give these works their meaning and vitality. With forceful arguments and sensible solutions for rescuing American education from the pressure groups that have made classrooms bland and uninspiring, The Language Police offers a powerful corrective to a cultural scandal.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The impulse in the 1960s and ‘70s to achieve fairness and a balanced perspective in our nation’s textbooks and standardized exams was undeniably necessary and commendable. Then how could it have gone so terribly wrong? Acclaimed education historian Diane Ravitch answers this question in her informative and alarming book, The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn. Author of 7 books, Ravitch served as the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education from 1991 to 1993. Her expertise and her 30-year commitment to education

lend authority and urgency to this important book, which describes in copious detail how pressure groups from the political right and left have wrested control of the language and content of textbooks and standardized exams, often at the expense of the truth (in the case of history), of literary quality (in the case of literature), and of education in general. Like most people involved in education, Ravitch did not realize "that educational materials are now governed by an intricate set of rules to screen out language and topics that might be considered controversial or offensive." In this clear-eyed critique, she is an unapologetic challenger of the ridiculous and damaging extremes to which bias guidelines and sensitivity training have been taken by the federal government, the states, and textbook publishers. In a multi-page sampling of rejected test passages, we discover that "in the new meaning of bias, it its considered biased to acknowledge that lack of sight is a disability," that children who live in urban areas cannot understand passages about the country, that the Aesop fable about a vain (female) fox and a flattering (male) crow promotes gender bias. As outrageous as many of the examples are, they do not appear particularly dangerous. However, as the illustrations of abridgment, expurgation, and bowdlerization mount, the reader begins to understand that our educational system is indeed facing a monumental crisis of distortion and censorship. Ravitich ends her book with three suggestions of how to counter this disturbing tendency. Sadly, however, in the face of the overwhelming tide of misinformation that has already been entrenched in the system, her suggestions provide cold comfort. --Silvana Tropea --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

Textbook publishers are guilty of self-censorship, argues Ravitch (Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform) in this polemical analysis of the anti-bias and sensitivity guidelines that govern much of today’s educational publishing. Looking at lawsuits, school board hearings and private correspondence between textbook editors, Ravitch, a professor of education at New York University, shows how publishers are squeezed by pressure from groups on the right (which object to depictions of disobedience, family conflict, sexuality, evolution and the supernatural) and the left (which correct for the racism and sexism of older textbooks by urging stringent controls on language and images to weed out possibly offensive stereotypes)-most publishers have quietly adopted both sets of suggestions. In chapters devoted specifically to literature and history texts, Ravitch contends that these sanitized materials sacrifice literary quality and historical accuracy in order to escape controversy. She also discusses how current statewide textbook adoption methods have undermined competition and brought about the consolidation of the educational publishing industry, leading to more bland, simplistic fare. There is no shortage of colorful examples: a scientific

passage about owls was rejected from a standardized test because the birds are taboo for Navajos; one set of stereotype guidelines urges writers to avoid depicting "children as healthy bundles of energy

Diane Ravitch is a historian who worked in the U.S. Department of Education during the George H. W. Bush administration and was appointed to the National Assessment Governing Board by Bill Clinton. In this book she expresses her concerns about censorship of materials used in public school instruction and educational testing. This censorship began with reasonable concerns that female and ethnic minority students not encounter offensive educational material. It "...has evolved into a surprisingly broad and increasingly bizarre policy of censorship that has gone far beyond its original scope and now excises from test and textbooks words, images, passages and ideas that no reasonable person would consider biased."The book examines the original meaning of "bias" in educational materials and how that meaning has evolved in response to pressures from both ends of the political spectrum. The author's approach is noteworthy because of its even-handed treatment of conservatives and liberals. She shows how groups on the right and the left demand that test and textbook publishers to exclude controversial content from their products. Adoption procedures in the two largest textbook markets--California and Texas--constrain what is available in other states. Conducting "sensitivity reviews" and avoiding negative publicity, publishers produce materials that are simplistic, avoid controversy, and distort cultural and historical facts.Ravitch warns that these boring textbooks in our schools are having serious effects beyond discouraged teachers and disinterested students. Learning becomes increasingly disconnected from the world students see online, in the media, and around them. Great literature disappears from reading lists because it contains blacklisted words, competing points of view, or an "unrepresentative" balance of ethnic and racial groups. Students' ability to study history with a critical eye, learning why some cultures thrive and others collapse, is diminished as they absorb text after text cleansed of any evaluative judgments. "Great history consists of great stories, surprising convergences, the conflict of powerful ideas, and the historian's insights into motivation and character that illuminate the life of a man or woman--but all of that has been sacrificed to the gods of coverage and cultural equivalence."How do we fix these problems? There are three general strategies. First, we must take steps to restore competition to the textbook market. Individual schools need to have unconstrained access to a wider variety of textbooks from a larger number of publishers. Second, we need more "sunshine." The public needs to be made more aware of censorship by publishers, states, and the federal government. Third, we need better-educated public school teachers. They should have stronger

credentials in the subjects they teach, preparing them to more effectively evaluate educational materials and supplement or replace them if needed.I recommend reading this book and some of the sources it draws upon. It identifies an important problem in public education, describes it in useful detail, and recommends strategies to mitigate its effects.

One of the best books around on modern censorship. After reading this I found myself supporting home school after reading about the garbage and lowest common denominator philosophy that’s ruining our schools. Anyone who is interested in trends in education should read this. I mean, just for starters ... there’s how many textbooks in the U.S.? Yet, all the publishing companies are owned by 4 conglomerates and they all have the same rules of what students should learn about or, more likely, shouldn’t. And, shouldn’t is anything worth thinking about. Homogenization of our education system in great detail by an unbiased source. MUST HAVE

I am an "Oriental" (sometimes "inscrutable"), a "widow," a "senior citizen," a "housewife," a "bookworm," a university "alumna," and have been "chairman" of many organizations. According to the language police, the above sentence is "politically incorrect" and all the words in quotation marks are banned from usage in school textbooks. Never mind that it is a true statement and describes a "lady" (me) accurately.Diane Ravitch has scared the "hell" out of me by citing hundreds of appalling examples of textbook censorship perpetrated by both liberals and conservatives. Censorship, bowdlerization, and outright changes of authors’ words are enacted under the aegis of numerous evaluation, testing and textbook watch-dog groups. All are guided by the misconception that it is for the sake of educating children to become more tolerant, unbiased and sensitive to multicultural issues. Words in classic works by Twain, Whitman, Thoreau, Steinbeck, Wolfe, Dickens, Shakespeare...almost every literary giant...have been bowdlerized, expurgated or changed so as not to offend anyone even though the literature states and depicts history, and the words are true to the period. History books are treated in the same manner, leaving the student with half-truths and lies by omission. Even math and science are not free of this textbook mauling.Ravitch has made a strong case against both the PC liberal and religious conservative language police. Any thinking person ought to be outraged.Ravitch presents some guidelines for textbook writing and solutions for the selection of textbooks. One of her solutions is to allow teachers to select their own textbooks just as university professors are permitted. Ravitch, however, does not say enough about the need for teachers to teach objectively. Ideally, teachers should have textbooks that present both or all viewpoints, or 2 texts with opposing viewpoints. Teachers who are allowed, without specific

guidelines, to choose their own textbooks are most likely to choose them according to their biases. Bias is not confined to either left or right; however, recent studies have shown that over 70% of college professors are liberal and promote their own beliefs in their classes. If elementary and high school teachers follow their example, the problem, as perceived by conservatives, would be compounded. Conversely, liberals would, rightly, complain about biased conservative educators.Most important, Ravitch is right - teachers should teach what they know, or - in proper order - the teacher should become educated expertly in a subject and then teach that subject. An athletic instructor is seldom qualified academically to teach history. And finally, the qualified teacher should offer and encourage alternative literature and texts to study, then be open to unbiased discussions.Ravitch's research is thorough, thoughtful and truthful.

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