

The Language Police

Diane Ravitch

Profound implications for what they teach in public schools

Public School textbooks are chosen by curriculum committees, most of which work at the school district and state levels.

Though Ravich doesn't reflect much on this fact, taking it as a given, it is perhaps the root of the problem. The staff and teachers of an individual school don't have the freedom to choose the materials they use for teaching. This is wrong from the very start. Teachers do a better job if they teach what they know. I can effectively use recipes in teaching fractions because I know about cooking. If it is working for me, my kids are learning math, culture, a bit of reading and maybe a practical skill. It wouldn't work at all for another teacher.

Now to Ravich's argument. Textbook and text selections are made by state level committees in Texas and California. These committees are subject to immense pressure from both left and right wing organizations on every conceivable subject: evolution, abortion, homosexuality, multiculturalism, and on down the line.

The textbook and test creators are businesspeople. They want to avoid conflict. They do it by reducing their products to the consistency of pap, inoffensive to everybody but by the same token uninspiring to everybody. The states pick it and dictate that the teachers teach it. I suppose it makes no difference to somebody whose vision of himself is as an automaton in a huge state bureaucracy, charged with dispensing small doses of standardized learning. I am sure also that there are teachers who reluctantly adopt the role of automatons and teach what is given them.

People with passion are ditching the public schools. I have had kids in, taught and served as a board member of private schools. All of them in our area are swamped with applications. Why? The teachers really care. A big part of that caring is that the teachers can choose what they teach. They do it according to their own interests and the skills of the makeup of their individual classes. They meet frequently to make sure that their curricula fit together year to year and across courses.

I thought about political correctness Thursday as I substituted for a Spanish class. As the classroom teacher had left an assignment for the students to work on, I was able to engage a very intelligent Marxist in a discussion in Spanish about the revolution by the indigenous people in Chiapas, Mexico. Public school would never entertain materials on either Sandinistas or Contras, or for that matter, any significant dialog about Palestinians and Israelis. Sad, because it is issues like these, in which the kids are invested, that lead to the best teaching and learning.

Homeschoolers have grown from a few thousand to a couple of million over the last two decades. The moms I have talked to are passionate about letting their kids select an interest and pursue it. One kid liked Chinese food, then saw a picture of the Great Wall of China in a picture taken from space. He spent a month visiting museums, reading and writing about Chinese history. What is most profound is that this student liked school and this teacher liked teaching. Why? Because they did it their way. I hardly need to add that the standard pose of most schoolkids is total boredom. It is more than an affectation.

I've digressed to a bigger issue, the fact that almost every aspect of public education is highly standardized, highly politicized and highly bureaucratized. Ravich's book shines an intense light on one nasty symptom within a far more pervasive syndrome.