Theory and Practice of Second Language Acquisition
vol. 11 (1), 2025, pp. 1/5
https://doi.org/10.31261/TAPSLA.17036

Rachelle S. Savitz, Leslie D. Roberts, & Jason DeHart (Eds.), *Teaching Challenged and Challenging Topics in Diverse and Inclusive Literature: Addressing the Taboo in the English Classroom* Routledge, 2023, 218 pp.

Considering the sheer amount of fresh American and European publications, it is safe to say there is a resurgence of interest in the interdisciplinary field of addressing taboo and controversial issues in (language) education. Upon closer reading of the scholarly work in either general education (e.g., Hess, 2009; Kubota, 2014; Ortega-Sánchez, 2022) or foreign language education in particular (e.g., Ludwig & Summer, 2023), it is also apparent that the majority of authors draw heavily on theory rather than illustrate how it translates into teaching practice, even though they recognize the latter as a primary concern for the general readership. To see an exception to this trend, let us turn to a refreshing volume edited by Rachelle S. Savitz, Leslie D. Roberts, and Jason DeHart, in which the authors go a long way in closing the notorious theory-practice gap. Although *Teaching Challenged and Challenging Topics in Diverse and Inclusive Literature: Addressing the Taboo in the English Classroom* is based entirely on the contributions of US authors responding to recent challenges in US literacy and language arts education, it addresses issues of global relevance and there are many reasons for me to bring this book to the attention of English language teachers (at all grade levels) and teacher educators in other contexts as well.

Firstly, it is remarkable how the authors go about addressing taboo and controversial issues in non-compartmentalizing ways and describe classroom activities in which students are led to understand the complex interplay and co-existence of such issues with other aspects of social/personal life in particular

settings. For example, Chapter 4 (Dail, Koch, Witte, & Vandever) suggests that if teachers wish to discuss the topic of non-normative gender identities in class (cf. Pakuła, Pawelczyk, & Sunderland, 2015), they should not do so by separating gender from other identity-relevant concepts. More specifically, in describing *Lily and Dunkin* (Gephart, 2016) as a young adult novel suitable for gender-focused instruction, the authors explain their choice of text as follows:

> While the novel deals with serious issues such as gender identity and bipolar disorder, it does so in a manner that focuses on friendship and adolescent struggles accompanying that at its core. The characters experience typical middle school issues such as bullying and family tensions. The novel also expresses the tensions adolescents experience between authentically balancing who they truly are on the inside with the persona they project to the world. (p. 52)

Similarly, Chapter 6 (Kruep & Popov) indexes several pieces of young adult literature in which clusters of taboo and controversial issues are used to portray how they operate conjointly in characters' lives and actions. Consider, for instance, racism, sexual assault, sexism, language barriers, financial distress, and discrimination as one cluster in *The House on Mango Street* (Cisneros, 1984). Clearly, the use of such texts creates a space for rich follow-up discussions, in which the study of multiple perspectives and aspects allows students to develop complex understandings of the issues at hand. It is also typical of most chapters that the authors present extensive lists—rather than singular examples—of texts for students at all grade levels, along with ideas and materials for related classroom activities.

Secondly, it is appealing how, instead of sugarcoating, the editors and authors advise teachers to haul not only teaching practices from the particular chapters, but also safeguarding practices which can help them respond appropriately to the resistance or challenges they might meet in the micro- or macro-contexts of schools. Thus, in Chapter 7, as part of their engagement with taboo and controversial issues, Smith and Warren suggest that teachers should become familiar with "policy and standards documents in which social justice standards are explicitly signaled and can be used for safeguarding practices" (p. 95; see description of the social justice standards taken from Learning for Justice, 2021). Similarly, in Chapter 11, Schucker draws attention to the framework of global competency standards (OECD, 2018), urging teachers to acknowledge "global and intercultural competence as a desirable outcome of a 21st century education" and inviting students to "investigate the world, recognize perspectives, communicate ideas, and take action" (p. 143). Further, the authors in Chapter 4 finish off with a step-by-step guide for teachers going

through a complaints procedure regarding classroom materials and activities, and offer a checklist for preventive action.

Thirdly, and in contrast with the publications cited earlier (Hess, 2009; Kubota, 2014; Ludwig & Summer, 2023; Ortega-Sánchez, 2022), it is laudable how the twelve chapters in this book bring forth one prime argument—literature is a fundamental gateway to learning about taboo and controversial issues—by way of amassing the teaching practices and perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including classroom practitioners, school librarians, teacher educators, and students at all grade levels. Regardless of which grade level or issue category is in focus, each chapter grows out of Sims Bishop's (1990, p. 9) seminal idea of depicting stories as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors through which readers view, enter, and think about "worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange." Thus, the authors bring together an exciting set of contemporary literary resources, ranging from interlingual and biographical picture books (Chapters 1, 2, and 8) through young adult literature (especially Chapters 3, 4, 6, and 7) to graphic novels, in which words and images are combined to engage struggling and unmotivated readers as well (Chapter 12). An interesting addition to these is the discussion, in Chapter 3 (Waymouth, Newvine, Fleming, Margolis, Mellon, & Middaugh), of multivoiced narratives which "de-center the importance of a singular character's identities, perceptions, and realities" (p. 34) and examine a given subject from the viewpoints of multiple individuals.

The construction of the authors' central argument progresses along descriptions of teaching from the lowest to the highest grades, with regular additions of theoretical and practical insights. Starting off with a call for early intervention, Buchholz and Garcia Reyes in Chapter 1 present scenes from a young learners' class to demonstrate how "books shared in classrooms send messages to children about which parts of themselves are valid and welcomed resources for school literacy engagements and what parts of themselves should be left at the classroom door" (p. 6). In Chapter 8, López-Robertson and del Rocio Herron argue that through the use of picture books and teacher scaffolding, even pre-kindergarten students can be prompted to think about what it means to be bilingual and live in a bilingual family, why families might move from one country to another, and what it means to have pride in one's linguistic and racial heritage. It is not surprising, then, that the authors of all chapters demonstrate an engagement with education for social justice, diversity, and equity, and a dedication to classroom instruction which is susceptible to all types and aspects of learner identity.

Regarding this type of instruction in the upper grades, the authors address a range of complex and interrelated concepts which they think students should learn about—consider, for instance, the discussions of social justice, social capital, socioeconomic status, and gentrification in Chapter 5 (Bianchi-

Pennington & Banack), of disabilities (e.g., dyslexia) and other related disorders (e.g., ADHD, autism) in Chapter 9 (Poynter & Savitz), and of queerness (e.g., in individuals, families, and communities) and gender norms in Chapter 10 (K. N., H. S., Carter, & Villanueva). To get a sense of how the authors lead students towards unpacking such concepts, it is worth looking at the types of questions posed—for instance, in Chapter 2 (Bentley, Broemmel, & Douglass)—to first- and third-graders: What makes you unique? Have you ever felt invisible? Why should we help people feel seen?

With the layering of such examples across grade levels, the twelve chapters seek to bring readers to two important conclusions. The first is that rather than teachers being banned from addressing taboo and controversial issues, they should be supported in selecting age- and level-appropriate texts and materials to gradually prepare students to confront those issues in informed and culturally responsible ways. The second is that education should focus not only on a value-free training of cognitive skills and intellect but also on (1) building communities inclusive of various identities, (2) engaging students morally and emotionally, and (3) fostering a reflexive stance to self and to social phenomena—all with respect to literacy and literature-based activities.

Coherent on the whole and relevant from beginning to end, the argumentation in the volume prompts three critical remarks. First, although the editors offer a rationale for sorting the chapters into three sections, the organization of the volume is not entirely clear. For instance, picture books as a teaching tool are discussed in Chapters 1–2 and then again in Chapter 8, gender-focused content is presented in Chapter 4 and picked up again in Chapter 10, and some other themes, in general, are simply revisited in the book's last section (or so it seems). In my view, it would have been better to put together chapters which focus either on a given age group, a specific literary genre, or a specific issue category. Second, despite the unquestionable merits of all the authors working on a joint set of arguments and concepts, the result of it, in the book's present form, is some repetitiveness (especially theory-wise) across the chapters. Again, this issue may have been resolved by structuring the chapters or sections differently. Third, something that many English language teachers might miss when reading this book is some guidance on how the suggested activities, especially if adopted for regular and long-term use, should be integrated into the main curricular content assigned to particular grade levels (see Gear, 2018, for comparison). If, as I suggest, the contents of the book are transferred to ELT contexts where little or no curricular time is dedicated to literacy instruction per se, then the question of which issue categories to cover and at what length (see Hess, 2009) will need to be addressed as well.

All in all, I have found it timely to come across a volume which foregrounds the voices of classroom practitioners well-versed in fostering critical literacy practices within socio-cultural, political, and educational settings where such

practices are increasingly pushed back rather than supported. Besides speaking up for teacher autonomy and expertise in assessing and dealing with issues relevant to students, the authors offer practically oriented chapters replete with engaging vignettes, transparent tables and visuals depicting learning materials and products, and links to websites for further resources. The content of the book, I believe, is a useful complement to current models of ELT as well as literacy and language arts instruction, in which student-centered and inquiry-based learning, social and emotional skills, and comprehension instruction are brought to the fore (see Gear, 2018). Finally, it is crucial to add that the authors' construction of an extended argument is significant both in (1) framing literature as a stepping stone to 21st century instruction that sensitizes youth to complex real-life issues and (2) shaping the emerging field of taboo and controversial issues, in which current grassroots ideas are slow to grow into coherent frameworks for supporting future research and instructional practice.

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