Sensitivity Training
History and literature, heavily edited

The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn
By Diane Ravitch
Alfred A. Knopf, 2003, $24; 255 pages

Reviewed by Nathan Glazer

Broadly defined, “political correctness” means being excessively sensitive to the fact that almost anything one says or writes can be found objectionable if one searches far enough to find an audience that might object. This movement has been making inroads into education—in textbooks, curricula, tests, and teaching—for more than 20 years now, but The Language Police discovers that “PC” has reached further and deeper than we realize. For instance, for some time I have been using the increasing number of references to Harriet Tubman as an example of the rise of this kind of sensitivity. As an African-American heroine, she appears in texts, curricula, and tests more frequently than almost any other figure in American history. But it turns out that I am woefully out of date: according to The Language Police, the sensitivity guidelines for one major publisher warn against paying too much attention to figures like Harriet Tubman (along with Martin Luther King, Jackie Robinson, and George Washington Carver), because they are “acceptable to the European-American establishment.” To be PC, one must reach out to

costly. According to Egan, one of the imaginative costs of an education that teaches us to write and to think critically is that we lose the ability to generate metaphors. But this is not at all clear. Is someone who can read and appreciate great poetry really less able to think metaphorically than a preschooler? Not even Egan seems to believe this consistently. “What we know forms a resource for our imaginations,” he writes later in his book.

The second problem is Egan’s claim that progressive educators regard literacy and rationality as unmixed blessings. This isn’t quite right, since Egan’s dismissive attitude toward literacy is most often echoed by progressives and their allies. Canadian scholar Frank Smith, a progressive known best for his contributions to the “whole language” movement, made this case rather famously in a 1989 Phi Delta Kappan article:

Let me stress at the outset that I’m in favor of literacy. I think that people who don’t read and write miss something in their lives. But I think the same about anyone who doesn’t appreciate some form of music. Nevertheless . . . I don’t see buttons or bumper stickers saying: “Stamp out unmusicality,” and I don’t bear lack of musical ability referred to as a national disgrace. Furthermore, I don’t think music would be helped much if war were declared on tone deafness.

Smith went on to claim that “literacy doesn’t make anyone a better person,” that “literacy doesn’t generate finer feelings or higher values,” and that “literacy won’t guarantee anyone a job,” and concluded that literacy was being oversold.

With its lavishy romantic views of childhood, with its belief that it is oppressive for adults to visit their knowledge on the young, progressive thought is the perfect seedbed for the notion that literacy is of doubtful benefit. That Egan is confused on this point is surprising.

A similar confusion pervades Egan’s last chapter, wherein he condemns empirical research in education. Now, there is certainly a lot of bad research in education, and some of it rides under the banner of empiricism. But there is also good empirical research that has provided valuable guidance. I think of the meta-analyses done by the National Reading Panel in 1999 that showed the benefits of systematic phonics instruction. I think of the late Jeanne Chall’s survey of 25 years of research comparing student-centered with teacher-centered instruction. “The methods with the highest positive effects on learning are those for which the teacher assumes direction,” Chall concluded.

Because Spencer’s misguided theories had a scientific gloss, Egan seems to entangle empiricism with progressivism. The truth is that empirical research is anathema to progressives today, since it undercuts favored notions like whole-language instruction and child-centered classrooms.

Nevertheless, Egan’s general animus toward progressivism is redeeming. In a section called “The Joys of Rote Learning,” Egan observes that “the emphasis that has led away from rote learning, and in this way eventually learning by heart, has been one that gradually and greatly impoverishes minds.” He also makes a fine case for teaching history as a separate discipline, instead of lumping it together with social studies.

Egan should also be praised for taking up an important topic: “current education and how the persistence of powerful progressivist ideas continues to undermine our attempts to make schooling more effective.” But he would have done this topic more justice had he depicted progressive thought more accurately.

—Lynne V. Cheney is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and was chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities from 1986 to 1993.
The real problem is that much of the literature that might connect us to a tradition of learning is no longer acceptable.
The first edition of this pioneering book produced surprising conclusions from research around the world into the extent of private education. Drawing on examples from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, India, Indonesia, Peru, Romania, Russia, South Africa, Zimbabwe and other countries, Professor Tooley gave a snapshot of private education that was unknown to many readers; contrary to expectations, the private education sector was large in the countries studied, was innovative, and was not the exclusive domain of the wealthy. On the contrary, he found that the private sector often provided social responsibility, subsidised places and student loan schemes.

In this second edition, Professor Tooley contributes a new preface which shows how his work has developed and extended into other countries. In particular, he provides a fascinating account of how private education is flourishing in China.

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**book review**

HIV and Aids in Schools

Ravitch's main solution is to decentralize the process of adopting textbooks. Currently, textbooks used in public schools in states like Texas and California must first be approved at the state level, a process in which various stakeholders get the chance to pressure publishers into addressing their concerns. In turn, such states largely determine the books used in the rest of the country because they are the book publishers' largest customers. Ravitch wants many more textbooks of different kinds and approach to be made available to teachers, so that they rather than state officials may make the choice. She also urges more public exposure of the process and tools that are stifling the range of materials and language that can be presented to schoolchildren. Thus the bias and sensitivity guidelines should be made public.

These are excellent proposals, but one wonders how much they will change the situation. Perhaps more helpful would be the freeing of public education from state officials through charter schools and voucher programs, which would limit the reach and power of small veto groups, who can so easily intimidate public authorities. But we know the difficulties that surround this course.

--Nathan Glazer is the author of We Are All Multiculturalists Now (Harvard University Press, 1998).