



LET THE CHILDREN PERSUADE

By Rafael Heller | Jan 25, 2021 | Editor's Note

Two decades ago, during a brief stint working in a teacher preparation program, I got to know a young man who struck me as an exceptionally promising educator. Tom was a top student in the university's English department, a gifted writer, and, according to his supervising instructor at the local high school, far and away the best student teacher she had seen in her 40 years in the classroom. With our glowing recommendations in hand, he soon found a job teaching in a district not far from where he had grown up.

Tom's first day of teaching went well enough, but that night he got a call from his principal, who berated him for assigning his students to read John Steinbeck's classic novel *Of Mice and Men*. "I've been on the phone with angry parents all evening," the principal said. "Steinbeck was a communist. You have to apologize and remove his book from your syllabus."

Tom tried to explain that, in fact, while Steinbeck was sometimes accused of being a communist, an FBI investigation concluded that he wasn't. In any case, there's no trace of political dogma in his writing. Far from telling readers what to think, *Of Mice and Men* invites them to wrestle with competing ideas about individualism, friendship, and other topics. Still, the principal wouldn't budge. Tom's teaching career lasted all of one week.

As Tom learned the hard way, many Americans think the schools have no business asking children to hash out their own answers to difficult questions. In fact, the public has always been deeply suspicious of teachers who would bring controversial topics into the classroom at all, much less invite their students to debate them. "In the mid-19th century," observe the historians Jonathan Zimmerman and Emily Robertson (2017), "Southerners barred schoolteachers from discussing slavery; after America entered World War I, teachers who raised questions about the conflict were fired; in the 1950s, teachers were prohibited from inviting any real discussion of socialism and communism, except to condemn them." And in 1947, they note, members of California's state Senate went so far as to introduce a bill that would have blocked public school teachers from even mentioning controversial topics in the classroom.

And yet, it's heartening to know that at an especially bleak moment for American democracy — the Depression era of the 1930s, when Steinbeck's novel takes place — our schools responded by shaking off their usual reluctance to ask students to deliberate about important matters. As Renee Hobbs explains in this month's interview, when they saw civil society falling into a steep decline, thousands of school districts opted to teach students about propaganda and rhetoric, equipping them with the tools needed to analyze public persuasion and to participate in it effectively.

If Tom were to go into teaching today, I have no doubt that some members of the local community would rain down their wrath upon his syllabus. But I like to think that others — maybe even the principal — would rise to his defense, insisting that at a time when our democracy appears to be coming apart at the seams, students must have opportunities to wrestle with each other over controversial ideas and ask themselves whose versions of the truth are most persuasive.

Reference

Zimmerman, J. & Robertson, E. (2017). [The controversy over controversial issues](#). *Phi Delta Kappan*, 99 (4), 8-14.

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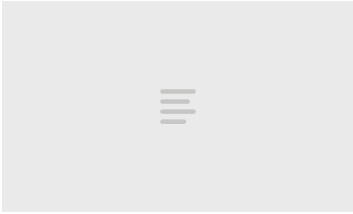
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