DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 364 880 CS 214 106

AUTHOR	Finley, Paris; Kleinfeld, Judith, Ed.
TITLE	Out of the Melting Pot: The Battle over the Booklist. Teaching Cases in Cross-Cultural Education No. 12.
INSTITUTION	Alaska Univ., Fairbanks. Center for Cross-Cultural Studies.
REPORT NO	ISBN-1-877962-27-9
PUB DATE	93
NOTE	26p.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom Use - Teaching Guides (For Teacher) (052)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Case Studies; Class Activities; *English Curriculum; English Instruction; High Schools; High School Students; *Multicultural Education; *Reading Material Selection; Secondary School Teachers; *Teacher Education; Teacher Response
IDENTIFIERS	*Case Method (Teaching Technique); Cultural Sensitivity; Educational Issues; English Teachers; Literary Canon; *Reading Lists

ABSTRACT

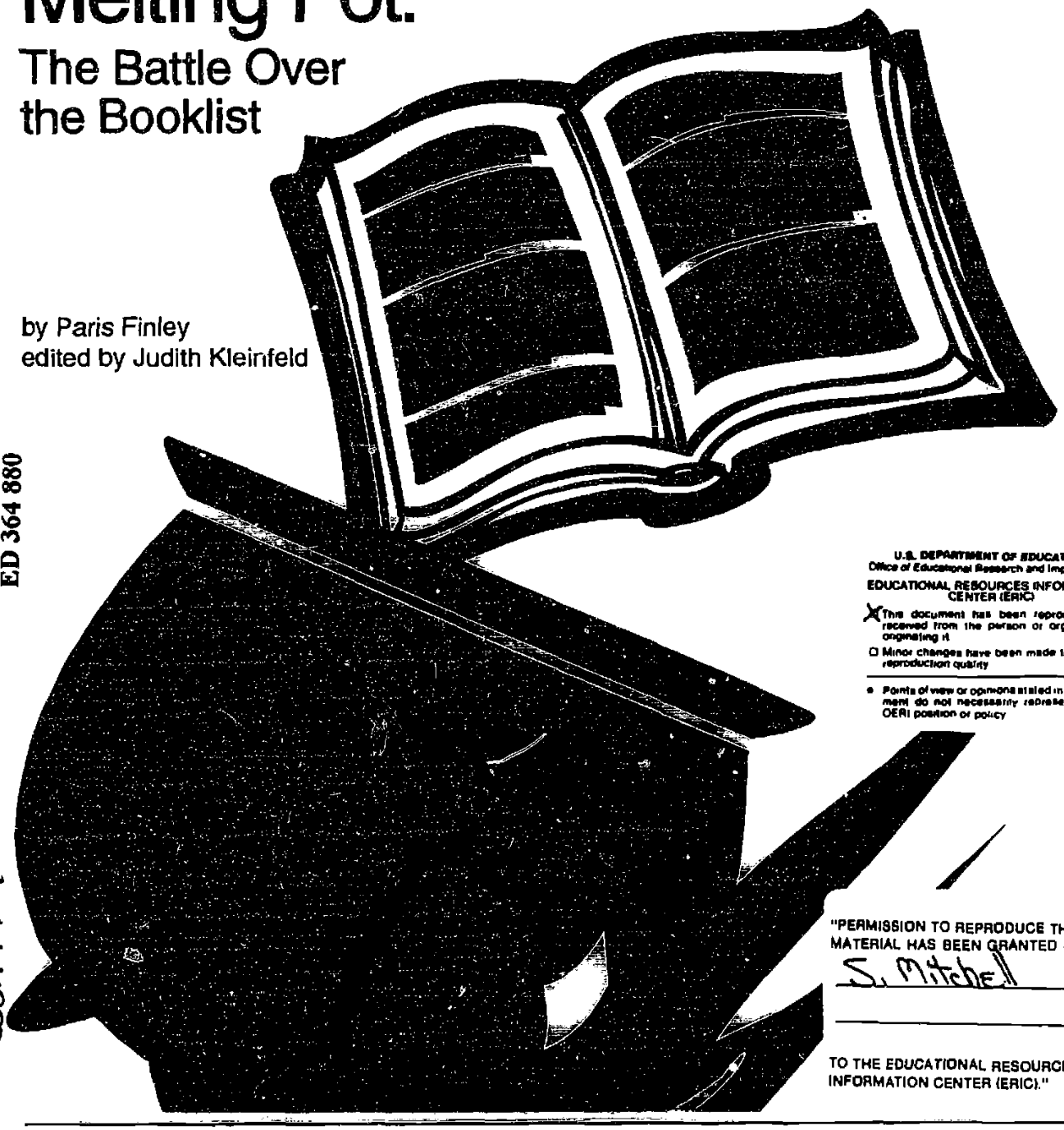
In the form of a teaching case, this paper recounts the difficulties of an English teacher whose reading list was challenged as being racist. In introductory materials, the paper explains that teaching cases help develop students' abilities to spot issues and frame problems in an ambiguous, complex teaching situation. The paper presents the case in narrative form, discussing: (1) the accusations made by a parent of a Hispanic student that the book list was "unrepresentative" and that her child was given less difficult tasks to do in class; (2) the book list itself; (3) progress reports sent to parents; (4) the teacher's perspective on the "classics"; (5) an earlier racially-related incident at a neighboring school; and (6) the teacher's decision. The book list, the parent's letter to the school board, the student's progress report, an assignment for "Brave New World," and a list of five questions to consider are attached. (RS)

TEACHING CASES IN CROSS-CULTURAL EDUCATION NO. 12

Out of the Melting Pot:

The Battle Over the Booklist

by Paris Finley
edited by Judith Kleinfeld



University of Alaska Fairbanks Center for Cross-Cultural Studies Fairbanks, Alaska 1993

Out of the Melting Pot

The Battle Over the Book List

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1993

Center for Cross-Cultural Studies
The University of Alaska Fairbanks, Fairbanks 99775-6480

Published 1993
Printed in the United States of America

Elmer E. Rasmuson Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Finley, Paris.

Out of the melting pot: the battle over the book list/Paris Finley — Fairbanks, Alaska: Center for Cross-Cultural Studies, 1993

p. cm.
ISBN 1-877962-27-9

1. Multicultural education—Alaska—Case studies. 2. Education—Alaska—Case studies. I. Kleinfeld, Judith, ed. II. Title.
LC1099.4.A4

Introduction

Out of the Melting Pot describes the difficulties of an English teacher who sends home a routine progress report about the problems of a Hispanic student in her college preparatory class. His mother writes to the school board, accusing the teacher of racism. Her son cannot relate to her reading list which features Shakespeare and Huxley, not people of color. Her son, she charges, also receives watered-down instruction in the name of individualization. The principal takes a pragmatic stance. He advises the teacher just to add some big-name minority writers to her book list. He says he will transfer the boy to a different English class, an even more advanced class, the only one which fits into his schedule. The English teacher is furious. The student, she says, doesn't have the academic skills to do the work in her class, let alone a more advanced class. Furthermore, the principal's solution communicates the message that she is a racist. In the background is the infamous Freeport incident in a neighboring school. A naive principal handled a racial issue in a way which destroyed the school community and his own career.

Out of the Melting Pot is not only a narrative, one teacher's story. Nor is it an ethnographic case study, a rich and careful description of a cultural setting. This story is a teaching case. It is a description of events written to help students understand the complex, ambiguous situations which arise in rural teaching. Teaching cases have long been a cornerstone of professional preparation in schools of business and law. Only recently has the field of education begun to explore their value in the preparation of teachers (Doyle, 1986; Shulman, 1987; McCarthy, 1987). In the teaching case, interpretations are left open and loose ends are not tied up. Relevant information is not known, and known information is not always relevant. The teaching case lets red

herrings swim and demands speculation from inadequate knowledge. The purpose of the case is not to establish "truth" but to prepare students for "wise action" (Christensen, 1987). Professional practice demands wise action, even where the truth neither is nor can be known.

Purposes of Teaching Cases

Teaching cases are useful when the purpose of instruction is not to communicate facts, information, rules, and fixed principles but rather to develop "qualities of mind (curiosity, judgment, wisdom), qualities of person (character, sensitivity, integrity, responsibility), and the ability to apply general concepts and knowledge to specific situations" (Christensen, 1987).

As Donald Schon (1983) observes, professionals often practice in situations which demand more than the application of technical knowledge to concrete problems. Professionals typically work in situations of complexity, ambiguity, and disorder where it is not clear what goals are desirable or where desirable goals may conflict. The professional's task is not simply to solve particular problems through the application of technical knowledge. The task is also to figure out just what the problems are. Preparation for professional practice should include preparation in spotting issues and framing problems, in thinking through the consequences and risks of different courses of action, and in staying sensitive to the particulars of concrete situations.

Teaching cases not only help to develop the cognitive capacities of judgment and insight, but also offer emotional preparation for dealing with an unjust and uncertain world. Young teachers typically expect a just world, a world in which good teaching is always rewarded and good teachers do not bear the legacy of a past they did not create. The cases help students become aware that these expectations are not entirely reasonable and that people like themselves can become caught in circumstances not of their making.

The Author's Point of View

Out of the Melting Pot is one of a series of teaching cases written for education students by teachers who have observed or participated in the events they describe. This case was *not* selected because it is representative of teaching situations. It was selected because it presented, in a concrete and dramatic way, an especially difficult teaching situation that students would benefit from reflecting upon.

The author of this case is an experienced teacher. To preserve confidentiality, he has disguised the identity of particular individuals and the particular community. All of the events described in the case actually occurred.

Questions to Focus Discussion of a Case

Teaching cases such as this one are intended to develop students' abilities to spot issues and frame problems in an ambiguous, complex teaching situation, interpret the situation from different perspectives, identify crucial decision points and possibilities for action, and recognize the possible consequences of alternative actions. In stimulating such reflection, we have found useful the following general kinds of questions. Most have been culled from the instructor's guide to *Teaching and the Case Method* (Christensen, Hansen, and Moore, 1987) and from discussions about case method teaching (Christensen, 1987).

These questions are:

1. What are the central issues in this situation? Which are most urgent? Which are most critical?

2. What, if anything, should anyone do? Who? When? How? Why do you think so?

3. How would this situation appear to other participants such as the students, superintendent, parents, school board? Why do you think so?

4. How did this situation develop? What, if anything, might alter the basic conditions which created the present difficulties?

5. What, if anything, have you learned from this case?

In teaching a case, we typically ask students to prepare for class discussion by writing a two-page paper (a) outlining what they see as the main issues in the situation, (b) describing the possible responses the teacher can make, and (c) appraising the risks and consequences of these responses. We begin the class by asking each student to identify the most important issues of the case and we list the issues on the chalkboard. We choose as a starting point for discussion an issue many students have identified as key to understanding the case. After the case discussion, we ask students to write another short paper on what they now see as the fundamental issues of the case, what actions they would have advised the teacher to take, and what they have learned or come to understand as a result of this case discussion.

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List of Characters

Katherine (Katie) Trutina	English teacher, grade 12
Anthony (Tony) Robigo	Principal of Chatfield High School
Andy Parma	Hispanic student at Chatfield
Mrs. Parma	Andy Parma's mother
Charlie Sikerios	English department head at Chatfield
Herbie Gramen	Head of Chatfield's school board

Out of the Melting Pot

The Accusations

"Message in the office for Mrs. Trutina."

Katie Trutina shot a glance at the speaker on the wall in her room. Her eyebrows and a quick downturn of the corners of her mouth registered her annoyance at the interruption of her all-too-brief planning period.

"Now what?" she wondered as she slapped her pen down and pushed herself back from the decrepit desk and its stacks of English compositions to be graded. Despite her extra weight, lately a concern and source of some sensitivity on her part, she strode quickly down the hall and turned left toward the office.

The secretary was briskly attacking the keys of her word processor, her head bearing the headset of the recorder, and the principal's somewhat grating voice was audible in tinny fashion from the earphones. Her pained expression signaled that she had been listening to it for most of the morning.

"Tony wants to see you. Mrs. Parma just called." A hint of warning tinged the secretary's statement.

Katie's heart did a little flip. *Uh oh*, she thought. "Must be the progress report I sent on Andy," she voiced.

The white-haired secretary clamped her lips and rolled her eyes sympathetically.

Tony Robigo had been hired as principal in the late sixties; his record as a tough, cop-like vice-principal made him attractive to a school board which was reacting to the "chaos" they attributed to the era and Robigo's permissive predecessor. He had been given the job as principal and a mandate to "clean up the high school," and he had done it; or perhaps the times just changed

and disorder gave way to order. In any event, the faculty and students presently chafed under his now-superfluous, martial style of administration, made more apparent given recent trends toward teacher empowerment and reform.

His voice called from the office, "Come on in, Katie, and close the door."

Someday he'll say "please" and I'll faint, thought Katie.

"Got a call from Parma."

Katie nodded in reply and seated herself.

"She was all hot about that progress report you sent on Andy."

"Good," she answered firmly. "That's why I send them." Katie had learned not to be defensive around Robigo.

"You may not think so. She says . . . no, *he* says . . . he's told her that he's doing lousy in your class because of your . . . because you . . . he's said you're a racist. In fact, he claims that the . . . "

"Racist? He's said I'm a racist? That's ridiculous! He doesn't know what he's . . . "

"Let me finish. She's written to Herbie Gramen on the board with your book list, and . . . " (See exhibits 1 & 2.)

"My book list!? Come on! So now the books are racist? They were good enough for the last 30 years. Besides, Tony, the list is *departmental!*"

"The bottom lin is—well, of course it's departmental, and the board approved every book on the list—but Gramen wants me to review the situation with an eye toward a hearing."

"Review what!" Katie exploded and stood. "What's to review? A hearing! That's supposed to be when she doesn't like the answer she's gotten from us. The woman hasn't even called me, and she doesn't call you until she's talked to the chair of the school board. Andy's playing games, and he's got her playing games, and now you're playing games. He's Hispanic and I'm not. That's enough to make me a racist in his eyes. This stinks, Tony!"

Robigo stood up. "It's not games," he made a placating gesture. "I mean, it is with the kid, maybe, but things being what they are, this can get serious. The climate is touchy. We get more of these people every year. Look at what happened in Freeport,

right next door. That was a bloodbath. We don't want that here. Now, I suggest you just sit down . . . "

Katie did not sit. "Anthony Robigo, you know as well as I do what kind of a student Andy is! How can you let something like this get this far? English isn't the only subject he gets low grades in."

"It's required for graduation. He's a senior. She's worried about graduation. That's all. Now, I know you won't like it, but I need to see your grades for Andy, and it wouldn't hurt to have your copy of the book list just to see if it squares with the one Parma gave Gramen."

Katie folded her arms. "What exactly did Mrs. Parma say? She said I was a racist. Did she say what I did, exactly, or am I a racist because of the book list?"

"She said that Andy can't relate to any of the books you give the class . . . "

"Shakespeare? Aristotle? Homer?" (See exhibit 1.) Her voice was challenging, so Robigo tried to look more sympathetic.

"And because he can't 'connect,'" Robigo made quotation marks around the word in the air with his fingers, "I think that was the word she used, because he can't connect with it, he can't write about it. I guess a really large part of the grade is the writing?" Katie nodded. He went on. "He's also claiming that you 'put him down' in front of the other kids in the class."

"Oh, come on!"

"Take it easy, Katie. You're losing all your perspective on this. You're not a racist. I'm not a racist. But we have to respond to something like this positively or we'll have another Freeport massacre."

"Listen. This kid is a lousy student. His writing is poor, his reading skills are poor, and he's lazy to boot. He's way over his head, and he knows it and he's just using this whole thing as an excuse. I don't want to hear any noise about book lists or racism or Freeport."

"You're completely right." Tony leaned back in his chair and put his fingers together. "But you've got to be a realist, too. If this kid stays in your class, you've got to give him the same assignments as the others."

"I give them *all* different assignments. All the writing work is individualized. I remediate whatever I see in the papers. He gets so-called 'easy stuff' because he makes easy mistakes. He shouldn't have been in the class in the first place!"

"You want a lawsuit for denying a Hispanic kid into a college-level English? No, what I meant is we may move him to Walter's section."

Katie's mouth dropped open. "Up? You'll move him up?"

"It's not up so much as out. We're not as big as we used to be. There's not so many of us, and that's the only section he can fit into his schedule."

"But why?"

"Katie . . . ," he spread his hands and rolled his eyes as if she should know the answer. In fact, though, she had a growing feeling that she knew less and less about anything. "Try to understand that it isn't you. This could happen to anyone in this business, and it does all the time."

The Book List

Katie reacted to the incident with a serious bout of depression. She lost a few days of work and had little or no interest in her classes.

Her thoughts about her own curriculum centered on one issue: should "special-interest groups"—as she sometimes heard them called—be allowed to water down the curriculum? Yes, it was important to fight the "-isms." But what about the main events, the most important literary works, the great issues of all time? The positive values fostered in her classes, she believed, were applicable to *all* students. Should they be shouldered aside in order to enhance someone's self-esteem? She had always felt that a "great works" approach would ultimately transcend all the interracial literary jockeying for position. Everything they read they examined in the light of its applicability to American society today. The culture of the United States was a synthesis of many cultures and traditions; the "melting pot" was an apt metaphor. Better to study what went in than to try to pull it back out!

Her next meeting with the principal didn't help her mood.

"What exactly did you put on the progress report?" His tone of voice said, "I'm your best friend," but his question made her feel that he thought she had erred somewhere.

"The usual, you know . . . 'below minimum acceptable quality' I think I put."

"He knew it was going home?"

"Sure. I showed it to him before I sent it. I always do that."

"Hmmm." Did his knitted brows imply another miscue on her part?

"They're seniors, after all, Tony."

"Right. Right. But sometimes an end run is a better play. And we're not a college. The parents still have a lot of clout. It'd be different at Valley Community College."

"This kid'll have trouble getting into even VCC."

"I doubt it. You're forgetting he's a minority."

"Yeah. Maybe that's my problem."

"It is now. So what's on your book list?"

"My book list?" she looked at him incredulously. His face remained blank. "So now it's 'my book list.' I thought it was a *departmental* list, Tony."

"Yeah, well, insofar as I've probably got a copy around here somewhere or other. But you know as well as I do that no one ever turns down a book around here. You teach what you want. Hell, it's in the contract that we can't tromp on your 'academic freedom.'"

"Tony, the course syllabus. It says 'recommended texts' right on it. I picked the texts from the syllabus."

He blinked. "That's a list of what we have. It's up to you to choose what you want for your course."

"The syllabus is really any book in the book room. Is that what you're telling me?"

"Do you have a multicultural unit?"

"Yes, of course, I . . . " she thought frantically. "I do excerpts from major religious works, the Upanishads, the Koran, we read

from the Old Testament . . . "

"That's not what I mean. Maybe you need a section . . . "

"I know what you want. You want a canned thing, one month for African-American literature, a week for 'Women of South Africa'—that kind of thing."

"It covers you against stuff like this."

"My teaching is infused with all that. There's nothing excerpted. We've called the course 'World Classics' after all. There's a story by Ciro Alegria, there's a . . . "

"What about Baldwin or Angelou? Got a big name?"

"I don't know. I'll look." Her voice sounded discouraged. "The stuff in the book room is so old. It's all that stuff that was bought in the sixties."

"Well, yeah, that's right. It was, actually. So what's the big deal? We'll find some money for this. Just tell the board you'll add a couple of titles."

"Just tell the board? I have to tell the board this kid is *right*? I have to tell the board I'm a *racist*?"

"That's the way he sees it. Says you make him do 'easy stuff' on his papers while the others do harder assignments." He looked at her as if she might explain. "Maybe . . . "

Katie glared at him. "I will get you the grades. And I will get you the book list. You can see for yourself. Yes, of course I emphasize the writing. It's a college preparatory section. Maybe, just maybe, he shouldn't be there?" Katie's voice was sarcastic now. "Have you talked to guidance? Does Charlie [English department head] know about this? There's probably a waiver on file." (Like many schools that utilize a tracking system, Katie Trutina's requires that when parents override the school's placement recommendation, they sign a waiver or letter of understanding.)

"I'll be talking with all of them, Katie. Why don't you go ahead and see Charlie; he's . . . " Robigo searched a chart with his finger, "He's free this period in room 23. I think you're right about the waiver. There probably was one. Let my secretary know when you can meet with me again. Go ahead and talk to Charlie first. Don't get all bent out of shape. I'm sure we can work something out."

Katie bit off another sarcastic reply, but the look she gave her principal was angry and resentful.

Katie's Progress Reports

The progress report that Katie Trutina sent to Andy's parents was a requirement of the school administration. (See exhibit 3.) The guidance office initiated the sending of mid-quarter progress reports for students with *D* or *F* averages because parents complained at report card time, "Why didn't you tell me my child was failing? Now it's too late for me to do anything." The guidance people felt that having it in writing protected the school, too. The form had two copies; the original went to the parents, the student's counselor received one, and of course the teacher kept one. Some parents complained that the reports were impersonal and negative. To counteract that feeling, Katherine Trutina tried to balance their impact by sending out at least one positive report for every negative one she was forced to fill out. The positive reports did not necessarily go to her best and brightest, either. The notices marked such relatively small milestones as improved class participation, noticeable effort on a particular assignment, or a better percentage of homework completed.

Because she had taught seniors for several years, she knew that their parents tended to be more concerned about progress reports and report card grades than at any other time in high school. She usually had one of two things to say: Either the student simply needed to work harder and would in all likelihood pass and graduate, or the student needed to be moved down to an easier section because success seemed unlikely. The first was an issue related to effort, in her mind, but the second was one of ability. She had put Andy in category two, and she had been planning to tell Mrs. Parma this—having assumed that they would be talking following the progress report.

Katie's Perspective on the Classics

Katie was vaguely aware of the controversies concerning textbooks. She knew, for example, that by and large public schools had always sought to minimize problems among groups and that their efforts had led for a long time to sanitized versions of many contentious topics such as slavery, immigration, and women's

roles. And though publishers (and to an extent, school boards) were now more sensitive to pluralism, she felt that any material could be useful if the teacher pointed out the possibilities of bias in the writer.

Recalling last year's class, she felt that the discussion on Huxley's Brave New World epitomized her notion of what a good literature class should be and how it should be taught. (See exhibit 4.) She recalled in particular a discussion arising from a writing assignment which asked whether Huxley's women were deliberately excluded from Alpha status. Was Huxley inadvertently reflecting the values of his age, or was he overtly signaling another area of social failure? Several students, including one male, chose to write feminist-oriented critiques of the work. Their skills at recognizing sexist language and stereotypic characterizations of women had been honed, and the fact that they had to do the analysis on their own had been a plus. They were tired of researching and reiterating other people's opinions; they preferred, it was evident from their efforts, to formulate their own.

The Freeport Incident

In the spring of the previous year, a racially related incident in Freeport caused every administrator in the county, including Anthony Robigo, to sit up and take notice. A strong flavor of irony infused the entire scenario, as well, since Freeport enjoyed the support of a nearby state university, was considered a forerunner in multicultural approaches, and enjoyed a culturally diverse student population. The incident began with a word written on the wall of the boys' bathroom of the Freeport Junior High School. The word was "nigger."

Unfortunately, the positive aspects of the situation never surfaced in the media, which chose to illuminate only that which was evidence of racism. For example, the two visibly upset boys who brought their teacher's attention to the graffiti were both white. Their teacher later reported, "I had to spend time after school with them trying to explain the why's and wherefore's of name-calling." Other students reported the presence of the word to their parents. Some of the boys and girls reported that there had been, occasionally, other hate language scribbled in the lavatories. Custodial staff corroborated this.

The phones began to ring. The Freeport Junior High School was almost immediately in turbid waters. Parents of African-American students, from their own experiences somewhat aporetic, found the explanations of the principal dissatisfying. Though the school was his second principalship, the principal was not prepared for anything like this. He had come from a small, hill-town school of white, middle-class student populations where prejudice and bigotry were present only as abstractions without a target group to suffer their effects and thus seemingly ignorable.

The principal made a bold decision. He elected to make the incident a learning experience for students and parents, and he called everyone together for a community assembly. His bold decision turned into a disaster of career-ending proportions.

The assembly began with an address by the well-meaning administrator, who outlined the scope of the incidents and the staff's plan to combat the problem. He then invited students and parents to an open microphone. The first speaker was a girl who wanted her classmates to know that she wasn't "prejudice" because she had "a lot of colored friends." The next was a white woman who asked if her children were "really safe." An angry African-American parent replied that it was his children who were at risk. It went downhill from there. Questions came about hiring practices: "Why aren't there more non-white teachers?" "When would a minority be a department chair?" Accusations and counter accusations flew across the space of the auditorium like arrows. The stereotypic thinking of much of the community exposed itself, and the resultant polarization was almost immediately militant.

Fifteen minutes into the program, parents were standing and shouting. People accused each other of over-reaction and under-reaction. For the students, it was an unparalleled learning experience, but not the one the principal had intended. He had to pull the plug on the microphone, order the auditorium cleared, and finally he called the police out of fear that the group would riot. They stopped short of that, but some parents left calling for a strike; others threatened to pull their children out of the school. A few recalcitrant students saw the opportunity to foment a situation that might lead to an unscheduled holiday.

The superintendent who had established a good rapport with his school board (five out of six of whom were faculty at the

university) found himself embroiled in one difficult meeting after another as the board established a first committee to look into the overall problem and a second to investigate the unhappy junior high school principal's handling of the affair. The local television station's van became a nearly permanent fixture in the parking lot. That it had happened in the spring was the superintendent's only bright spot, and over the summer things quieted down somewhat. But the issue simmered. Repercussions, Katie Trutina knew, were still heard. Sensitivity was high. And that school system was at the mercy of a small cadre of students who now knew how to interrupt the mission of their building every bit as effectively as if they were to telephone in a bomb threat or turn in a false alarm. Regardless of their personal beliefs, they knew that there was a new button to push.

Katie's Decision

Katie knew she had to make a tough decision. While the school board and the administration concerned itself with the rights of the parents and students, she felt that her rights and "rightness" were being trampled. Was she going to have to take a stand against them all, or should she try her principal's "end run" and opt for expediency? She was tempted to try the latter. Adding a few works by people of color—especially "big names"—was an easy out.

Exhibit 1

Book List for Katherine Trutina's College-Preparatory Senior English Class

Aristotle's *Poetics*

Homer's *Odyssey*

Huxley's *Brave New World*

Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

plus various short stories, poems, essays, and excerpts from religious works from around the world

Exhibit 2

Mrs. Parma's Letter to the School Board

Herbert Gramen, Chairperson
Chatfield School District
Town Hall, Chatfield

Dear Mr. Gramen:

I am writing to you to express my opinion concerning two things. The first is my objection to the books currently being used to instruct my son's class. Though I do not feel that these works are racist or contain racist material, I do find them unrepresentative of what the world has to offer. Moreover, their selection as classics assumes that all the students reading them come from the same background. I suggest that what may be classic to one group is not necessarily so to another. You may feel, for example, that Beethoven deserves classical status. I might prefer to choose Mr. Coltrane. I ask that you request a formal review of the high school English department's .eading list.

Second of all, I must protest on behalf of my son the "special treatment" he receives from Mrs. Trutina. Though her motives may be free from bias, her insistence on his working on tasks of less difficulty than the other students in the class is neither in his best interest nor, in my opinion, in the best interest of the other students who must surely conclude that he is inferior to them. In the absence of any other explanation, they might wrongfully assume that the differences stem from race or culture. I ask that you assign Tony to a different teacher.

I have had some assistance from Professor Ailey of the African-American Studies department in the preparation of this letter. She has volunteered her assistance in helping to prepare a more universal reading list.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Parma

Exhibit 3

Andrew Parma's Progress Report Form as Completed by Katherine Trutina

PROGRESS REPORT FORM

Date_____

Student Name_____ Year of graduation____

Course Title_____ Approx. grade to date____

Quarter 1 2 3 4 Absences this quarter____

Teacher Comments:

Mrs. Parma, Tony's efforts so far have not been sufficient for a student in a college-preparatory class. He has not been doing the reading assignments at home and has only turned in one vocabulary homework assignment out of 20. He participates in class when he can, but his lack of home preparation is critical. His writing is improving. Call me at home if you wish.

Please do not hesitate to contact me or the counselor at the high school (555-6263). This report is only an estimate of the student's achievement as of the above stated date.

Teacher signature _____

Parent's Copy (white)	Counselor's Copy (yellow)	Teacher's Copy (pink)

Exhibit 4

Assignment for Brave New World (Katherine Trutina)

In Huxley's novel we find society divided into five classes; Alphas, Betas, Gammas, Deltas, and Epsilons

Question 1 for discussion:

What parallels can you draw between Huxley's system of class distinction and American society today? Who are today's Alphas and who are today's Epsilons?

Question 2 for discussion:

In Huxley's society, status quo is maintained largely through the hypnagogic indoctrination processes. What mechanisms exist in our society to discourage movement from one class to another?

Question 1 for writing:

How close are we to achieving Huxley's vision?

Question 2 for writing:

Huxley's failure to include a single woman as an Alpha class citizen is indicative of what?

Questions to Consider

1. What is your view of Mrs. Trutina's position on the book list? Is her sense of universality free from ethnocentrism? Does her book list reflect the dominant culture of the nation? Should it?

2. Mrs. Trutina has not yet consulted her department head and the other English teachers. Should she do so? How do you think they will respond?

3. What should Mrs. Trutina do in her meeting with the school board? Should she defend her position concerning the universality of literary themes? Should she defend her practice of individualized writing goals? What are her options?

4. If you were Herbie Gramen, what position would you take on this matter?

5. Mrs. Trutina and Mrs. Parma both want Andy to do well in school. Do you see a way out of this messy situation for all of them?

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