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Writing Assignments, Journals, and Student Privacy. ERIC Digest.

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Nearly nine years ago, hundreds of angry parents descended on seven cities to protest what they perceived to be some of the wrongs perpetrated by public school teachers. The U.S. Department of Education conducted hearings across the nation, giving citizens the opportunity to testify on proposed regulations for the Protection of Pupil Rights

Amendment, commonly referred to as the Hatch Amendment. Grieving parents and teachers denounced courses, teaching methods, and specific assignments.

Within five months of the hearings, Crossway Books published Phyllis Schlafly's 447-page "Child Abuse in the Classroom." Advertised as excerpts from official transcripts of proceedings before the U.S. Department of Education, the book became a best-seller among critics of public school education. In the introduction, Schlafly declared:

These Hearings provide page after page of documentation for the foresightedness of former educator and U.S. Senator Samuel I. Hayakawa, who warned the Senate in 1978 that the schools have become vehicles for a heresy that rejects the idea of education as the acquisition of knowledge and skills and instead regards the fundamental task of education as therapy. He said that such inquiring into attitudes, beliefs, and psychic and emotional problems is a serious invasion of privacy (Schlafly, 1984).

Many of the protesting parents accused the schools of invading student privacy in sex and drug education classes, in counseling sessions, and in English classes. Some of the parents denounced any questions and/or assignments that call for students to express their feelings or opinions about anything. Citizens from Oregon to New Hampshire gave hundreds of examples of questions and activities through which teachers invaded the privacy of students and/or their families. Here are only a few:

* Are you going to practice religion just like your parents?

* Who has the last word in your family?

* What is your parents' income?

* Do you believe in a God who answers prayers?

* How important is making-out with a girl? Smoking pot?

* Complete at least a 5-day daily dietary intake chart, and keep a health and feelings journal.

* Discuss misuse of some substances by parents, for example, alcohol, valium, etc. (Schlafly, 1984)

STUDENT WRITING

Some of the parents who testified at the hearings also rejected journal writing and any speaking or writing assignments that called for the revelation of personal experiences. But teachers of writing at all levels know that powerful writing frequently explodes from a writer's narration of personal experiences. Teachers also know that writing can serve as an excellent tool for self-examination and for the discovery of solutions to personal problems. Writing can be used as therapy, as a cry for help, as a means of discovering how to bring order to a chaotic life.

Today, an ever-increasing number of teachers of all subjects give students opportunities to write about a wide range of topics and a variety of experiences. In their journals as well as in writing assignments, students record impressions, experiences, ideas, likes and dislikes, dreams, and responses to classroom activities and lessons. But many parents are convinced that such writing should have no place in a classroom because they see it a clear-cut invasion of privacy (Jenkinson, 1989).The professional issue here is the kinds of prompts that teachers use to stimulate writing. Any direct requests for specific information about the personal life of the family or the student may easily be interpreted as an invasion of privacy. It is quite appropriate, however, for teachers to remind students that effective writing often includes personal experience and concrete details, but the students should have the option of deciding what is to be shared with the teacher (Gowen, 1985).

TEXTBOOK REVIEWERS

Long before the hearings on the Hatch Amendment, Norma and Mel Gabler found what they charged were invasions of privacy in a variety of textbooks. As the founders of Educational Research Analysts, the Gablers are self-appointed, independent reviewers of all textbooks submitted for adoption in Texas. During the 32 years they have scrutinized textbooks, they have attracted a large following of disgruntled parents and they have had an immeasurable impact on schoolbooks for the entire nation (DelFattore, 1992). They have provided their volunteer reviewers with a 3-page listing of objectionable items to search for, including invasion of privacy. The following are only two examples of textbook items that they objected to:

TEXT: Segregation because of race has been ruled illegal by the United States Supreme Court. What other kinds of segregation can you think of? Should all kinds of segregation be prevented?

OBJECTION: Invasion of privacy. This question deals with student values and is inappropriate for the classroom.

TEXT: Do you sometimes feel the way they [the characters in the story] feel? Then ask the children to set their own purposes for reading by asking them questions similar to the following: What kind of feelings does the boy have? What makes him have these feelings? Do you ever have the same feelings?

The boy in the story said he was happy because he liked himself. What are some things you know how to do that make you like yourself? If you were feeling lonely or unhappy or disappointed, what are some ways you might help yourself feel better?

OBJECTION: This section concentrates too heavily upon feelings both in the story and by the students. This invades the privacy of children and is objectionable to many parents (Quoted in Jenkinson, 1990.).

The Gablers object to questions that call for students' opinions or declarations of values. They object to expressions of feelings, of thoughts, of beliefs. But many of their objections would not be classified as actual invasions of privacy by teachers of English who have strong pedagogical reasons for asking students to respond in writing (Fulwiler, 1987).

If students are asked to reveal secrets which might cause harm or embarrassment to themselves or their families, then such revelations could be considered invasions of privacy. But questions that call for expressions of non-secret, non-threatening feelings, thoughts, or beliefs generally would not be so classified (Jenkinson, 1990).

INVASION OF PRIVACY

Here are examples of journal and/or theme assignments that could be classified as invasions of privacy:

*Describe a fight between your father and your mother.

* Write about a time you cheated and were caught.

* Write about a time you embarrassed your parents.

* Write a factual account of an incident during which you broke a law or a school rule.

A charge of invasion of student privacy cannot be dismissed lightly. Teachers, counselors, and administrators must consider carefully the classroom questions, activities, and assignments that call for the revelation of private information about students and/or their families. Educators might wish to ask themselves questions like these:

What educational objectives are being served by the questions, assignments, or activities?

How do they add to the students' knowledge or understanding of the subject matter?

* Why must anyone know this particular information? How will it be treated? Who will have access to it?

* What harm might result to students or their families if other teachers, students, or administrators have access to the information? (Jenkinson, 1990).

All too frequently, students volunteer private information without any questions being asked. Many students reveal secrets about themselves and their families because they trust teachers and administrators. When such information is volunteered, it is certainly not an invasion of privacy by teachers or administrators; however, it is imperative that such information be treated confidentially, except in the case of child abuse, which must be reported according to law (Gluckman, 1987).

Though many educators may find it hard to believe that teachers are callous enough to ask questions such as those reported in the hearings on the Hatch amendment, apparently some are guilty. It is helpful, therefore, to raise our consciousness and to use some of the guidelines suggested by the National Council of Teachers of English:

* Explain that journals are not diaries but are concerned with the content of courses.

* Do something active and deliberate with what students write.

* Award points for journals but do not grade them. Respond only to those entries that pertain specifically to the class.

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