

"Having the freedom to read and the freedom to choose is one of the best gifts my parents ever gave me."

— Judy Blume

What are controversial texts?

Controversial texts contain sensitive subject matter, ideas, or language. These texts provide important opportunities for students to engage in meaningful learning. The selection of controversial texts requires teachers to consider what is developmentally appropriate for their learners. Controversial texts can include subject matter relating to racism and difficult history, discrimination, suicide, disordered eating and body image, homophobia/transphobia, Holocaust education, gender-based violence, climate change, and substance misuse.

Why teach controversial texts?

Texts provide readers with important opportunities to engage with real-world context and topics. Texts can be deemed controversial when they include information, ideas, and language that are the subject of public discourse. Thus, what is considered controversial can change over time and from reader to reader. Texts that are considered controversial often evoke strong emotional reactions in readers. They can challenge widely accepted versions of community or societal values.

When choosing materials, educators should offer "mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors" that enable students to engage with topics and experiences that resonate with their lives, those of their peers, and societal realities. These materials provide opportunities for students to make important real-life connections that allow them to build their own sense of agency and empathy. Teachers, however, need to set the context for these texts effectively so that students can examine them in a developmentally appropriate manner that supports their well-being and the well-being of others.

'Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors' refers to providing students with reading materials that reflect their own identities (mirrors), offer insights into diverse experiences (windows), and allow them to step into others' perspectives (sliding glass doors), fostering empathy and understanding.

"You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive."

— James Baldwin

How do I teach controversial texts?

Ensuring that every student sees themselves reflected throughout their schools, learning resources, and within their learning experiences requires us to invite complexity and a diversity of narratives into our classrooms. We want students to exercise voice and choice in selecting the texts that they read. Preparing students for controversial texts requires balance, compassion, and a knowledge of how students will handle the content. Teachers need to use evidence-based strategies to address topics in culturally responsive, developmentally appropriate ways that affirm the well-being and achievement of all students.

"We read to know we're not alone."

– William Nicholson

Supporting Teaching and Learning:

Creating a Safe Learning Environment

From the beginning of the academic year, creating a classroom culture that recognizes and values all students' identities and provides opportunities for students to explore identities that are different from their own is essential to fostering a safe learning environment. When planning learning experiences, you can:

- get to know your students and their communities,
- take time to reflect on your own identity and positionality in relation to the topics covered by the text,
- position yourself as a learner and educate yourself about the topic, especially in the context of your local community,
- foster a classroom atmosphere where every student feels valued and respected,
- co-create a classroom collective agreement that outlines expectations for you and your students so that discussions will be conducted respectfully,
- support students in understanding the content of the text, and that experiencing difficult emotions in response to the learning is expected,
- introduce various ways that students can process their emotions with support through reflective writing, and
- suggest support staff like guidance counselors, youth health centre workers, ANS and Mi'kmaw support workers, and SchoolsPlus staff if students need someone to speak to.

Positionality refers to how an individual's social, cultural, and personal background influences their perspectives and understanding of the world.

Resource Selection

Choosing to teach controversial texts requires careful consideration. Teachers must review resources before using them with students. Below are questions to guide your resource selection:

- Does the resource align with curriculum outcomes for your course?
- Is this resource developmentally appropriate?
- Does the resource pass the [Bias Evaluation Instrument](#) and [Know the Signals](#)?
- Is the resistance and resilience of people reflected in the resource?
- Is there a different resource that meets curriculum outcomes and the needs of students that could be used instead?

Language Use within Texts

Before introducing a potentially controversial text to students, teachers need to consider the language used in the text. In the past, terms and phrases that are no longer acceptable today were commonly used. In other instances, terms are still used today but in particular contexts, such as “Indian” in relation to the Indian Act or “colored” in the case of the Nova Scotia Home for Colored Children. This distinction requires explicit instruction so that students understand appropriate and inappropriate contexts for the word. The words should not be used in the classroom outside of direct references to the resource.

If you are unsure of the appropriateness of the language used in a resource or the subject matter it contains, it is best to seek advice. Check with your administrator or Regional Coordinators before using the resource.

Teachers need to be aware that resources containing language such as slurs or hate speech can harm students. These words come with traumatic history and can re-victimize students. In terms of other objectionable language, the overall context of the resource needs to be considered. If the story is about resilience and the lessons taught by the text are affirming, then a resource may be used. Any swearing in a text needs to be judicious and not gratuitous. When selecting a resource, consider the following questions:

- Is the resource necessary for students to meet course outcomes?
- Is the resource developmentally appropriate?
- Is there a different resource that can be used?
- Does the resource support critical conversations about prejudice or discrimination and its effects?

Teaching Strategies

There are evidence-based teaching strategies you can use to support your students in tackling controversial texts. Strategies that are not evidence-based should be avoided. Below you will find information you can use to guide planning and instruction.

✓	Select texts with authenticity and relevance. Choose controversial texts that are authentic, relevant, and linked to the curriculum. Ensure that the topics resonate with your students' interests and encourage engagement.
✓	Read ahead. Read and watch everything you plan to use in class.
✓	Involve students, administration, and families. Clear communication with students and families is essential. Explain to students your rationale for teaching controversial texts and how you approach these topics in the classroom. Emphasize that the goal is to develop critical thinking skills and promote diverse perspectives rather than advocating for a particular stance. You can include information in your communication plan, as part of curriculum night, or other ways you communicate with students and their families. Offer copies of the texts for families to read so they can have meaningful conversations with their children. If a family decides their child should not read a text, be prepared to offer an alternative.
✓	Start gradually. You should take time to get to know your students and what is developmentally appropriate for them. Begin with resources celebrating diversity and promoting agency and empowerment before tackling controversial texts. Start with less controversial discussions and gradually build students' capacity to tackle more complex issues. This approach allows students to develop critical thinking skills and creates a safe space for exploration and inquiry.

✓	Prepare students for reactions. Explain that people respond to controversial texts in different ways. Some people feel anger, guilt, shame, sadness, laughing or defensiveness. Explain that behaviors such as joking are inappropriate and provide other ways for students to respond when uncomfortable.
✓	Anticipate personal connections. Be aware of your students' backgrounds. Students may have personal connections to the experiences in the texts that they are not comfortable disclosing. Be open if students volunteer their experience, but never single out anyone to share. Occasionally, students might share information that is not appropriate, and it's important to tactfully redirect the conversation back to the original topic. If students need support processing their reactions, you should direct them to the comprehensive guidance team.
✓	Be prepared to be honest with students. Being open and sincere creates a foundation of trust and relatability. While sharing personal experiences, maintain appropriate boundaries. Avoid disclosing overly intimate or sensitive details that could make students uncomfortable.
✓	Include messages of hope and resilience. After discussing controversial texts, teachers need to provide ways for students to feel empowered. Sometimes the experiences described in the texts can leave students with a bleak picture of the world; to follow they will need texts that show people at their best, showing kindness, empathy, and courage in the face of challenges. Follow-up learning experiences can focus on ways students can make positive differences in their communities.
✓	Be aware of historical fiction. Historical fiction can be an effective way to humanize traumatic experiences for students. However, teachers need to be aware that some historical fiction texts (e.g., novels, films, etc.) dramatize events to exploit the audience's emotional vulnerability. Choose texts that respect survivors' experiences and are age-appropriate for students.
✗	Avoid violent or harmful images or videos. Teaching controversial texts involves careful preparation and scaffolding for students. Introducing images and videos associated with the experiences in the texts should be well thought out. For many students images and videos can be more upsetting than written texts.
✗	Avoid using humour connected with the depiction of adverse life experiences. Using humour is not an appropriate way to ease discomfort or lighten topics.
✗	Avoid singling students out. Do not ask students to share personal experiences of prejudice or discrimination based on race, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, or other aspects of their identities. Do not ask students to speak on behalf of a group they identify with. Do not ask them if they have experienced trauma or considered suicide or self-harm.