

Dear Dillon Barto,

I am Professor Emerita, having taught in the Early Childhood Program in the College of Education at Cleveland State University for 28 years. I was the program coordinator for 13 years and was awarded the University Award for Teaching Excellence.

I write to communicate my fear that bill HB322 represents an effort to censor and constrain the work of professional teachers in our field of Early Childhood Education which typically includes children ages 3 through 8. Well-educated teachers know the importance of answering the multiple questions that young children ask about topics labeled “difficult” or “controversial” by adults. If we tell children that we are not allowed to talk about these topics, they will learn that some topics cannot be discussed (and therefore never dealt with) and eventually that silence equals complicity. They will learn to avoid the discomfort that comes when learning challenges important ideas. There is no such thing as neutrality when it comes to the difficult issues that our country faces and that young children need to be prepared to address as they grow into adults. Teachers need to be the trusted professionals who can educate and empower children.

I am reminded of an important article written several years by Rudine Sims-Bishop about children’s literature that applies just as well to curriculum. She wrote that young children need “mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors” in their educational experience. This means that they need to see themselves, see others who are different than themselves, as well as opportunities to step into other worlds. They need to see themselves portrayed accurately and honestly; the same goes for others as well. If we hide historical or contemporary events from them, they will learn to distrust us and the education we provide. The relevant literature is clear and confirms my many years of experience--that when young children have opportunities to discuss issues such as race with a skilled teacher in a supportive environment they grow into adults who can live and work collaboratively with others.

I wonder what kind of adults the Ohio legislators are hoping to educate with such legislation. Adults who have no tools for dealing with difficult issues in their lives? Adults who fear the truth? Adults who are afraid of people different than themselves, who discriminate because they don’t understand difference or equity? Adults who feel powerless to imagine or create a better world?

Yours truly,
Dinah Volk, PhD
Professor Emerita