

The principal taught her pupils a dismal lesson

The Cranky Professor

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Neither Ottawa *Citizen* writer Elizabeth Payne ("Rude treatment for Sir Fartsalot," 17 June) nor the person at the centre of the incident, children's author Kevin Bolger ("Principal cuts kids [sic] book reading," *Citizen*, 15 June), has identified what most went wrong at the reading Bolger tried to give last June at Manor Park Public School.

Bolger's reading was interrupted by the principal of Manor Park, an Ottawa elementary school. The principal sent 200 pupils back to their classrooms because she objected to the title of Bolger's book and to the name of one of his characters.

After the event, Bolger said that a principal has a right to shut down inappropriate goings-on in her school. He added that what was going on wasn't inappropriate. Bolger's complaint was merely that the principal acted before she understood all the facts.

That principals should have such a right cannot be disputed (though of course pupils, parents, and teachers have a right to hold principals accountable). But Bolger is wrong to suppose that shutting down a reading and dismissing the audience would have been the right thing to do were the material in fact inappropriate.

Payne is a bit closer to the mark when she writes "it is rude to invite someone to read and then shut him down." People ought not to be rude to people, and so people, such as school principals, whose behaviour implies standards that others are to internalize doubly ought not to be rude to people.

But Payne's criticism is about good manners, and modelling good manners. It's not about teaching or education. What's really at stake in this incident, though, is, precisely, teaching and education. The principal, in closing down the reading, failed dismally not only as a host, but also as an educator.

Consider the question: What is one to do when someone is saying or doing something that offends one, something that one thinks is inappropriate? Teachers live for moments when questions like that become salient to their pupils. The principal of Manor Park was privileged to be handed one of these teachable moments. Sadly, she gave entirely the wrong lesson.

The answer her behaviour conveyed, the answer the pupils witnessed, is that one should exert one's authority and master the situation by force. This an answer the children can hardly put into practice themselves, lacking authority as they do, except by assuming the role of victim and summoning authorities to intervene. It is also an answer inconsistent with liberal education. It is illiberal in that it rejects, first, the idea that one

has, or should develop, the internal resources to deal with offence, and, second, the idea that the people whose behaviour offends one might be reasoned with and persuaded to stop.

The pedagogically sound thing for a teacher to do when confronted by inappropriate behaviour begins with assuring oneself that what is going on indeed is inappropriate. It would not have been wrong for the principal to interrupt the reading to ask Bolger about his words. If Bolger's explanation didn't satisfy her, then, after allowing Bolger to finish the reading as he planned, the principal should have taken the opportunity to discuss with the children her misgivings about what they heard.

A serious and honest discussion of bad or hurtful words would have been a terrific thing. Not only would the children have benefitted from such a discussion, they would have seen how an intelligent person committed to liberal values responds to offensive behaviour. Such a person responds, they would have seen, not by wielding the stick she carries, but with discussion and argument.

Both Bolger and Payne miss the bad pedagogical ramifications of the principal's behaviour. That might just be an oversight, but there's reason to think they neglect them because they themselves are not keen on liberal education. I wonder about that because Bolger says "I wouldn't put a book called *Sir Fartsalot Hunts the Booger* on the shelf in my classroom without vetting it first," while Payne writes "It is the job of teachers and principals to vet what their students read and hear...." Neither Bolger nor Payne seems to want pupils to make what they will of what they read, and neither seems to trust teachers to help their pupils in that complex and serious task.

Teachers shouldn't vet the books in their classroom. Neither should principals, school boards, or parents. Teachers should make sure that they have books that serve the pedagogical purposes of their class. After that they should just load up the shelves. Teachers might want to be at least vaguely familiar with the content of most of the books circulating in their class, of course, so that they can be useful when questions or comments come up. But a good teacher isn't a censor, even if we pretty-up the practice by calling it "vetting."

Payne ends her column by noting that "the printed word is still a powerful tool." That's a very strange comment for her to make, and not just because in this case it was a spoken word that had power, and, moreover, had power only because a person in authority misunderstood it.

Rather, it's strange because one would think that the printed word is a powerful tool by virtue of its ability to persuade through stimulating thought. At least that's how those who approve of the power of words understand that slogan. Payne, though, must understand the power of the printed word to lie in its ability to warp our view of things without our being conscious that that's what's happening. I can't see why else one would insist that teachers vet the books their pupils read.