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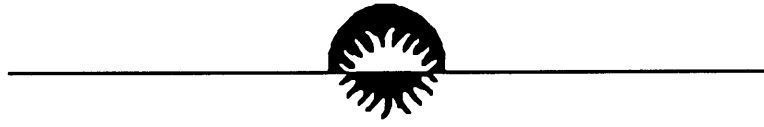

Be Ready for the Censorship Challenge

Linda Mixon Clary

In using a large variety of materials with readers and urging them to read widely, educators must realize that they will likely encounter problems with censorship. People for the American Way reported a new high in the number of cases reported in the United States in 1994 with a total of 760 incidents, a trend that has been in effect over the past twenty years (Simmons, 1994).

These facts, as well as Supreme Court rulings on this subject, suggest caution for the schools of our nation. Decisions that allow local communities to determine what is and what is not appropriate have led to self-appointed guardians of our children's morals and innocence who demand removal of many books from library and classroom bookshelves. This censorship might be done with the best intentions, but it constitutes an attack on the individual's right to read.

The threat is there. It is frighteningly real. It will take determined and prepared educators and public citizens to protect the rights of our young people and to maintain for them a wide variety of literature. However, as the respected Albert Harris (1956) said forty years ago, children do not develop reading tastes by being allowed to read only superior reading

matter. Their ability to discriminate develops through comparison and contrast, rather than from ignorance.

The purpose of this paper is to alert educators to the problems of censorship, to give specific examples of works that have been challenged, and to suggest means for being prepared to meet the censor. This knowledge is necessary for all of those who work with readers as they learn to be discriminating; it is a mandate for having the "freedom to read" in our schools in the years to come.

Intellectual freedom implies that the teacher and the students operate in an open atmosphere. The courts, however, have based their decisions concerning academic freedom on the age and sophistication of the students and the relationship of methods and materials to valid educational use. They have ruled differently on cases brought at the college and high school levels. These differences are justified by the three factors of the age of the students, compulsory attendance laws, and the need for the support of a preponderant body of educators. Most cases can be divided into two categories: teachers who sue when they are not allowed to use certain materials and parents and students who object to specific works.

There are great numbers of organizations and individuals involved in this movement. The American Civil Liberties Union, the National Council for Teachers of English (NCTE), the American Library Association (ALA), and the International Reading Association (IRA) support the belief of a universal right to read. In fact, NCTE and IRA (1993) have published guidelines for schools to deal with censorship. Conversely, there are numerous groups committed to censorship, including Parents for Decency in Our Schools, the Eagle Forum, Save Our Schools, the Pro-Family Forum, Citizens for

Excellence in Education, the National Legal Forum, and Educational Research Analysts.

While these beliefs may sound like an either-or situation, it is extremely difficult to balance academic freedom for educators. If educators want freedom, students must also be given freedom. Restrictive codes, regimented classrooms, and autocratic administrative decision-making do not create an atmosphere that is conducive to the freedom to learn. Likewise, parents must be allowed to seek alternative assignments for their children and to make reasonable objections based on careful reading of complete materials, not passages taken out of context. They must also understand that what they find inappropriate for their child might not be offensive to all students, and they cannot be censors for all youngsters without impinging on individual rights.

Consideration of materials that have been involved in questions of censorship or controversy constitute an interesting part of the knowledge base required to deal with this subject. They also alert educators to possible problems before they arise. Both books for younger children, such as *Witches* by Roald Dahl (Hydrick, 1994) and older classics for adolescents, such as Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, have received criticism. The use of periodicals, including *National Geographic, Life, Glamour, Time, Psychology Today*, and *Sports Illustrated*, has been questioned as well. A more in-depth look at some examples clarifies their use.

Go Ask Alice, written by an anonymous author and published twenty five years ago in 1971, is frequently the target of censors. It is a book with coarse language and harsh, disgusting, real descriptions. It is an authentic truthful diary of a young girl who begins writing as a typical teenager in a middle-class family. The diary records her introduction to

drugs, her pursuit of greater and greater "highs," her relentless degradation of self, her struggles at self-rehabilitation, and her eventual death by an overdose. Little of it is pretty, but students will recognize it as real and might be affected by the powerful message it conveys. Its potential for influencing students in a health class is much greater than lectures, brochures, and "Just Say No" campaigns on the danger of drug abuse. If it positively influences just one student to stay away from drugs, isn't it worthwhile for adolescents to read? In addition, it offers a graphic source for studying literacy elements and the social realities of drug culture.

The same is true of books like the regularly-challenged *The Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1951). As Gloria Swenson (as cited in "Censorship: A Continuing Problem, p. 88, 1990), a secondary English teacher in Wisconsin, points out, students often learn very powerful messages from the vicarious experience of literature. After a year in which her use of Salinger's book was questioned and she felt threats of physical violence, job loss, harm to her children, and community polarization, she asked her students to write what moral they had learned from the book. Two of their answers, printed below, are powerful statements:

> *This book has taught me it is wrong to commit suicide.*
>
> *This book made me realize it's OK to say "No" if I don't want to have sex.*

Swenson concludes that she has yet to find "a substitute that conveys those messages to teenagers." (p. 88)

Many other titles have been questioned in various communities throughout this country. Ken Donelson (1990),

who has studied censorship for many years, has ranked the most "protested/attacked/censored" books to be listed in the Newsletter of Intellectual Freedom from 1952-1989. Most are intended for adolescents. He notes that J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* has been protested 71 times in the Newsletter, while *Go Ask Alice* rates 31 incidents, and *Of Mice and Men*, 29. The rest range from 18 to 3, with Salinger, Blume, and Steinbeck leading the challenged authors. The appendix shows Donelson's complete list by rank.

However, many others have also been involved in attacks. According to McCarthy (1989), *The Diary of a Young Girl* (Frank, 1957) has been challenged for making all religions equal, while the supernatural references in *Cinderella, Macbeth,* and the *Wizard of Oz* have led to their attacks. Even *Romeo and Juliet* has been cited as a romantic view of teenage suicide.

More recently, the American Library Association (1995) reported 760 challenges to public and school libraries and materials in 1994. That list contains books on topics of sexuality, the supernatural, and related subjects. *Daddy's Roommate* (Willhoite, 1991) was first; *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman, 1991) and *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark* (Schwartz, 1981) tied for second. *Forever* (Blume, 1975), *The Chocolate War* (Cormier, 1974) and *Catcher in the Rye* (Salinger, 1951) made both lists.

This subject of how to meet the censor is probably the most important to be considered here; preparedness is the key to success in situations where controversy over books arise. If a school system has an accepted code of selection and an adopted method for handling censorship questions, many problems can be avoided. If a case is pursued, a school system with a specific procedure to follow has a better chance to win

its case than the unprepared one. It is also wise to know organizations that are supportive of intellectual freedom and who publish helpful information that can be used in formulating policies. The American Civil Liberties Union, the American Library Association, the International Reading Association, and the National Council of Teachers of English are among those who do. *The Intellectual Freedom Manual* (3rd ed.) (1989) and *Celebrating the Freedom to Read: Banned Books Week '93 Resource Book and Guide* (Doyle, 1993) are very helpful. *Common Ground,* (1993) a pamphlet by the NCTE/IRA Task Force on Intellectual Freedom contains an action plan and specific strategies for practitioners from the local to the international level.

Many helpful articles have also been published to guide teachers and administrators at all levels. The book *Censorship: A Threat to Reading, Learning, and Thinking* (1994) contains separate chapters for administrators, new teachers, secc ndary English instructors, media specialists and school board members. Stern's ideas for secondary English teachers are applicable with slight modifications for teachers at all levels and even contain sample forms. *Being Proactive, Not Waiting for the Censor* (Brown & Stephens, 1994) suggests guidelines for schools to use in forming committees to develop policies and procedures before a problem arises. Margo Sacco (1993) and NCTE have published rationales for books that are frequently censored, a step that can save endless hours of work.

Once a decision is made to adopt a censorship policy, the first step should be establishing a committee that will develop it. Such a committee should include administrators, teachers, librarians, school board members, parents, community activists, and students. Such a cross-section will give a variety of views and allow for input of information into the adoption

of the policy. A parent's view may be very different from a teacher's or student's or town council member's, but each has a right to that opinion. Initial consideration of these divergent views will make the code more likely to be endorsed and applied once it is adopted.

After the committee is formed, it will be necessary for it to develop several procedures. The most important of these should probably cover the three areas of materials selection, handling complaints, and public relations. First, a materials selection policy must be written. Such a policy should encompass the philosophy of the school system and reflect a consensus of the committee's views after they have sought input from throughout the community. There is no one specific way to compose the policy, although helpful information is available from organizations such as those noted above. However, it should require professional documentation and rationales of the appropriateness of materials for certain ages. Once adopted, it should be applied equally to all materials that are purchased or acquired as gifts. The area of technology should also be covered.

After the policy is set, a definite procedure on handling any censorship complaints should be set up. Again, there is no uniform procedure. Usually, there is a published form that must be submitted to make a formal complaint. These are generally one to two pages, but one Michigan teacher has written that his principal wrote one of fourteen pages (Censorship, A Continuing Problem, 1990). Since complaints usually begin with phone calls, the complainant should be listened to courteously, sent the form, and upon its return, notified of a hearing. The form should be designed so that passages cannot be taken out of context, and the entire text must be read to answer questions. Specific information should be required, including quotations and page numbers of

objectionable passages, the number of people involved in the group who are complaining, suggestions of solutions that the complainant would like considered, and listings of alternative texts that could be used in place of the questioned material. These detailed questions usually mean that those who are protesting may "cool off" in the time required to answer them and then react with less emotion and more reason. They also require reading the entire work. During any conversations between the school personnel and the complainants, great care must be taken to make no commitments, admissions of guilt or threats. Detailed, dated notes should be kept.

If the case is pursued to the point that the form is returned, all parties involved (as defined by the adopted policy) should be notified and should meet promptly, following standardized procedures outlined in the policy. The necessary meetings and hearings should be open to the public. As soon as a decision is reached, all participants should be notified in writing of the decision and the rationale behind it. There should be a route of appeal if the complainant is not satisfied. Eventually, of course, the courts may become involved, but that route can prove to be very time-consuming, costly, and divisive.

Finally, public relations should be an important part of a censorship policy. Civic, religious, educational, and political groups all need to have a clear understanding of how materials are selected for their schools and what they can do when they feel that there is a problem. Therefore, these policies need to be publicized in the media and easily accessible in every school. If the school district is doing its job, they will have their policies in place that have come from community input. There should be no reason to fear challenges if they are handled professionally, honestly, and openly.

Jongsma (1991) also advocates some additional steps. She suggests the importance of knowing the community's standards and keeping abreast of them as they evolve. Careful reading of all materials before they are used in the classroom is mandatory, as well as communicating the rationale for using specific works. She also recommends the rather novel idea of developing a community support group from citizens who believe in intellectual freedom before a problem comes up, so that they can be called on when needed.

It is evident that being prepared for censorship problems is not an easy, simple or new task. However, it is very necessary, and should not be ignored, since preparation helps prevent problems. Even though this incident happened a long time ago, one teacher reported (Hove, 1967) his true story of an experience with controversial books. He sent his reading list home, noted the professional selection aids that he had used to choose them, encouraged parents to read the books with their children, and suggested that parents come in for conferences with him if they had any questions. In three years, he had only a half dozen conferences; all were pleasant. There was no attempt to eliminate any of the books and no negative media publicity. In addition, the teacher got his masters degree, became a department head, and gained tenure at his school. While the political climate today is obviously more controversial, Hove's strategy is still sound.

Swenson (as cited in "Censorship: A Continuing Problem, 1990) practiced many of the same steps in her teaching of *Catcher in the Rye* in recent years. Marsh (1991) reinforces much of it in her book, *50 Ways to Fight Censorship and Important Facts to Know.* Also, the NCTE/IRA pamphlet "Common Ground" suggests similar steps at the local level.

While the necessity for all this work and the possibility of unpleasant situations may make educators reluctant to become involved in programs that stress wide reading, this quote from a letter by the popular author, Pat Conroy, to a Charleston, South Carolina, English teacher who ventured to use his challenged book, *The Prince of Tides,* may balance the risks with the rewards. Conroy wrote:

> *I call you Great Teacher ... It is because of teachers that I write books for a living. It was in the classrooms of my childhood that the English language first came to me in a visitation of light and fire. When teachers led me to books, they were handing me the keys to the city of literature, and offering to show me the shape and configuration of the tree of life itself (cited in Vernelson, 1988).*

Can the threat of censorship, the work involved in being prepared for such cases, and the likely personal and professional turmoil of these situations keep today's teachers from so empowering our students? "Schools should teach students how to think, not what to think. To study an idea is not necessarily to endorse an idea." (Connecticut State Department of Education cited in National School Boards Association, 1989). Yet, old ideas must be studied from many books for new ones to be born.

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Appendix
Most Protested/Attacked/Censored Books

Rank	Title	Author
1	*The Catcher in the Rye*	J.D. Sallinger
2	*Go Ask Alice*	Anonymous
3	*Of Mice and Men*	John Steinbeck
4	*Forever*	Judy Blume
5	*Soul on Ice*	Eldridge Cleaver
6	*Grapes of Wrath*	John Steinbeck
7	*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*	Mark Twain
8	*Flowers for Algernon*	Daniel Keyes
	Manchild in the Promised Land	Claude Brown
9	*Deenie*	Judy Blume
10	*Brave New World*	Aldous Huxley
	Lord of the Flies	William Golding
	Slaughterhouse Five	Kurt Vonnegut
	Then Again, Maybe I Won't	Judy Blume
	To Kill a Mockingbird	Harper Lee
11	*Catch-22*	Joseph Heller
	The Chocolate War	Robert Cormier
12	*The Inner City Mother Goose*	Eve Merriam
	The Learning Tree	Gordon Parks
13	*Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*	Judy Blume
14	*Black Boy*	Richard Wright
	1984	George Orwell
	Run, Shelley, Run	Gertrude Samuel
15	*Down These Mean Streets*	Piri Thomas
	It's Okay if You Don't Love Me	Norma Klein
	My Darling, My Hamburger	Paul Zindel
	One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich	A. Solzhenitzyn
	Ordinary People	Judith Guest
	The Color Purple	Alice Walker
16	*A Clockwork Orange*	Anthony Burgess
	A Farewell to Arms	Ernest Hemingway
	A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich	Alice Childress
	Blubber	Judy Blume
	Nigger	Dick Gregory
	Working	Studs Terkel

Rank	Title	Author
17	*A Separate Peace*	John Knowles
	Black Like Me	John Griffin
	Death of a Salesman	Arthur Miller
	Deliverance	James Dickey
	Hard Times	Don Bredes
	Headman	King Platt
	It's Not the End of the World	Judy Blume
	Native Son	Richard Wright
	Rabbit, Run	John Updike
	The Fixer	Bernard Malamud
	The Pigman	Paul Zindel
	The Shining	Stephen King
	The Valley of the Horses	Jean Auel
	When the Sky Begins to Roar	Alice Bach