

The Importance of People

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WHO CAN BE TRUSTED WITH IDEAS?

Not the common people, said an American Tory in the 1800's.—Thank God there are no free public schools.

Not the schools, said the dictator, for they are servants of the state.

Not the progressive educators, said Paul Mallon, for they have caused poor reading, poor writing, poor figuring, and juvenile delinquency.

Not the textbook writers, said the manufacturers while persuading schools to remove the Rugg Social Science series.

Not the parents, said a principal. If we make changes, we mustn't advertise them.

Not the principal, said the teachers, for he is afraid of public opinion.

Not the teachers, said the higher-ups, for they know only how to follow our instructions.

Not the students, said the faculty, as they vetoed a proposal by the student council.

Not the men of the armed forces, said the Congress, as it passed the bill which resulted in shutting off magazines, newspapers, and books dealing with current issues.

In a southern state, recently, four students in a combined eighth-ninth grade were talking among themselves at recess. They were really whispering, and it was about a pamphlet which they had read in the papers was being withheld from distribution by the U.S.O. They were wondering about it, and fingering it, in somewhat the same way that children do who look in the dictionary to see if those forbidden words are there.

The teacher saw the little group and discovered what they were doing. She suggested at once that the subject be taken up in the social science discussion period, so that all the class might ask questions and all who could, give answers. This was done.

The pamphlet was read aloud, and its meaning discussed. No one present could see why it had been made a forbidden book, but all were interested in the scientific news which it told, simply and effectively.

A newspaper published an article about the teacher's work and pointed out in headlines that "new methods" in race teaching were being tried in this rural school. As soon as the newspaper was distributed, phone calls were made from all over the state, asking for the teacher's dismissal.

People in the teacher's own community were slow to express themselves as a whole, but one man became a passionate advocate of her dismissal. It was said that he had run unsuccessfully for the school board. This man went from door to door, endeavoring to stir resentment against the teacher. He threatened to call a mass meeting to force action by the school board. He went to officials at the state capitol to request their action against the teacher and the pamphlet.

At home and at school, children talked of the furor which was going on among their elders. The younger ones did not quite know what it was all about, but they gathered that something wicked had been done in one of the classrooms and that the teacher would probably be fired.

The older children knew more about it. The children in the teacher's room had talked the situation over with her and most were staunchly with her and bothered only by what seemed to them an unnecessary disturbance over a normal school procedure.

A few, however, in the teacher's own room, were active against her. They had not been so at first, but one of them, a natural leader, was the daughter of the man who

sought to stir the community against her. Her father had made certain statements about the teacher's way of conducting the class, and his daughter had been asked to prove them true.

As the days went by, it became more and more evident that there was to be in this little rural school and community a test of almost all the human relationships and the assumptions on which democracy is based.

For example, what was the relation of student to student, of teachers to students, of students to each other, of administrators to staff and pupils, of the school to its immediate community and of both to the state as a whole?

And also, should school libraries be censored? Should hot social issues have a place in the classroom?

For this was not only a hot social issue, it came close to being *the* hot issue in that state at that time—the issue of race supremacy.

So here was a test of democracy.

There were strong forces advocating the course of authoritarianism—fire the teacher, ban the pamphlet, and put a summary stop to discussion.

But there were other forces which said, Let all the community hear the facts.

These latter forces prevailed.

The principal and the teachers and their friends in educational circles stood firm against hasty action and suppression of materials.

The teacher talked it over with the children until all saw that they were informed on all the points that puzzled them. No one was pushed into sympathizing or agreeing with what the teacher had done, but the situation was made clear. Then teacher and children went on with their work, much as before.

The school board met and declared itself for the teacher and her teaching, both officially and at neighbors' homes.

The principal and friends of the school from nearby places went from home to home to answer questions of parents.

A mass meeting was held. But it was called by an old neighbor, a respected professor, who went over all the criticisms and insinuations, and who read the controversial statements of the pamphlets, one by one, and discussed them with the citizens who had assembled. At the end of the meeting, only one man and a friend of his, remained in open opposition to the teacher or the pamphlet. The meeting voted full confidence in the school and its program.

The school went forward with children, teachers, and parents far more keenly alive to the meaning of the democratic principles of freedom of speech, of press, and of conscience. Nor did all agree on all points. General agreement was reached only on the idea that the teacher was trustworthy and the materials of study were not to be censored.

This incident affected most directly about 150 families and the educators who knew them. Indirectly it affected a whole state, and illustrated a pattern for dealing with public education in full view of the public, without repression of fact or opinion.

Also, it happened to work.

It happened that the teacher had, throughout her service in that school, trusted her pupils to be sensible and reasonable. She had plainly shown them her delight in their eagerness and curiosity, and had studied with them many subjects of interest and importance to the world and to them. So also, with the parents of the pupils, she had shown in her visits with them that she trusted to their good intent and their good sense. So, too, with administrative powers—that be.

Thus, it may have been, that when the pressure was strongest, administrators and parents stood firm for a principle.

Or was it for a human being whom they had come to know well, to like, and to trust?

DSCD BOARD OF DIRECTORS will meet in Chicago February 22-25. Among other things, the Board will draw up a platform of beliefs and plan of action for 1945 to be presented to the membership. Suggestions for items to be included should be mailed to DSCD, Executive Secretary, 1201 Sixteenth Street, N. W., Washington 6, D. C.

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