

# Tools for Learning

## WHY HAVEN'T WE MORE MATERIALS ON CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS?

Kimball Wiles

From his conviction that controversial issues must be faced squarely in the classroom through unbiased curriculum materials, Kimball Wiles asks educators why we haven't more of such materials and urges increased use of those now available. Mr. Wiles testifies from his use of them at New York University, where he is professor of education, concerning the effectiveness of these tools for learning in human relations.

FOR THE PAST four weeks (as of July 12th) *Gentleman's Agreement* and *Kingsblood Royal* have headed the fiction best seller lists. Both were written to help Americans re-examine their point of view in the area of intercultural relations. Both are excellent examples of the projection technique which allows the reader to place himself in the position of a person on the receiving end of discriminatory actions. Both, I can testify from my use of them in the classroom, are effective tools for learning in human relations. *Both will undoubtedly be banned in many school libraries.*

Should school libraries contain controversial material? Should the school have pupils study controversial topics? Our answer depends upon our philosophy of education.

The school has two major social functions: (1) to help pupils acquire the skills and patterns of behavior that enable them to function effectively in our society, and (2) to help pupils develop the ability to think and produce better solutions and ways of working together. Teaching for skills or habits comes under the first function. Teaching for creativeness and constructive thinking belongs under the second heading. In such activities as spelling, crossing the street with the light, shorthand, and multiplication, we do not want creative activity. We want acceptance and skill in applying. On the other hand, in many areas such as philosophy, human relations, and social problems, we have no fixed answers and we

want youth to develop their own answers.

When we have common acceptance of ways of behaving and values the function of the school is simple. It gives the youth the answers and values of adult society.

But in the United States we are a society of competing and conflicting values. We have many peoples and cultures living together. Even our most homogenous communities have areas of basic disagreement.

In such a society the school has three choices. It can teach only the patterns and values that are held by all peoples and groups. There are those in America who want the school to follow this course. They insist the school should confine itself to teaching the 3 R's and other basic skills. Secondly, the school can accept the values and patterns upheld by one element in the society and teach them. In most communities such a path would confront the school with a dangerous decision. Which group? And if the choice were wrong, the school personnel would change. However, it must be admitted that some communities in our country are so dominated by one group, often a minority, that this procedure is followed.

The third choice is to teach common patterns and give pupils an opportunity to explore the evidence bearing upon controversial topics and ways of behaving and allow them to arrive at their own conclusions. In schools that follow this practice, the emphasis is upon helping pupils develop skills in the thinking process, collecting data, analyzing data, organizing data, drawing hypotheses, testing

hypotheses, and reaching conclusions which serve as a basis of action. The answer a pupil reaches is not of major concern to the school. If skill in critical and constructive thinking is developed, the pupil's conclusions will change as he comes into contact with new data through additional experience.

To follow the third course, and the writer believes it is the one we should accept, means that study aids treating controversial areas must be secured. Where? They may be secured from partisan groups supporting various sides of a controversy. Biased presentations are valuable because they can be used to help pupils develop skill in analyzing propaganda. But they are not enough. Many teachers are unwilling to use them and many communities will restrict the points of view represented. Pupils also need objective statements. School publishers can fill a real need by preparing two types of materials. One type presents the issue in a way that arouses interest. *Kingsblood Royal* and the film excerpts selected by the Commission on Human Relations of the Progressive Education Association are good examples. After the problem has been defined, unbiased information is needed for class use. Study sources like the *Public Affairs* pamphlets and *Building America* should be available in many fields at all maturity levels.

If schools are to teach pupils to think for themselves, they need materials that

help pupils explore areas that are vitally important to youth, areas in which thinking is being done by adults. Youth lives in the same society, is subject to the same pressures, is challenged by the same problems. We need more publishers who are willing to attempt to help schools do successful work in controversial areas by supplying the necessary tools. But they cannot do it alone.

It is little wonder that publishers of school materials have produced less material in controversial areas than on topics on which there is uniform agreement. School textbooks, workbooks, and pamphlets are published to sell. When school people hesitate to buy and use materials on which members of the community disagree, publishers, with a few notable exceptions, center their attention on products for which the market is assured.

We have our part to play. More curriculum workers are needed who will assist publishers in defining the areas and preparing the manuscripts. More members of this association must take a definite stand that the school should devote a larger proportion of its time to examining the issues on which the community, the nation, and the world have not reached agreement.

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Tools for Learning in November will be introduced by Helen F. Storen, assistant professor of education, Teachers College, Columbia University, and will deal with reading for adults.

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## THE LISTENING POST

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zanship and uses the product in shaping the destiny of American education through sound and worthwhile legislation, the teaching profession will remain of minor influence in the attainment of the great ideal of equality of opportunity for all of our citizens.—J. L. McCaskill, director, *Public Relations, Florida State University, Tallahassee.*

## The Changing World

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stand convicted of treason to all mankind. To permit ourselves to remain captive to a cemetery mentality is to make this abdication and betrayal inevitable. Either we "bury" this mentality, or we shall before long be buried with it—in the blinding flash of an atomic explosion and in company with the peoples we will have betrayed.

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