

# On Keeping Our Reading Free

DAVID K. BERNINGHAUSEN

The seeker after knowledge is entitled to access to alternative views and the right to learn in an unbiased atmosphere, according to David K. Berninghausen, and the well-ordered school library offers this balanced set-up for freedom of thought and expression. Mr. Berninghausen is librarian at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York City, and chairman of the American Library Association Committee on Intellectual Freedom.

*As long as I have any choice, I will stay only in a country where political liberty, toleration, and equality of all citizens before the law are the rule.*

These are the words of Albert Einstein who, in 1933, left his native land to become an American citizen. The United States found that it could make good use of this scientist for whom Hitler had nothing but contempt.

Why did this creative thinker come to America? He came because he had a picture of an America which permits freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression. He believed that here no modern John Huss would be burned at the stake for unpopular opinions about religion; no Galileo would be forced to declare that his scientific findings were false in order to save his life. A man who lives on the frontiers of thought must live in a free society where new ideas are welcome. It was this concept of America which brought to us a man who helped the United States, rather than Germany, to perfect an atomic bomb.

Dr. Einstein came to us even over the protests of a small group who resented his pacifism and liberalism and appealed to the State Department "to bar him

as a Red." Fortunately, the group was unsuccessful.

Sometimes, however, pressure groups are effective, and their misguided projects succeed. In the last two years there have been increasing demands for the removal of so-called "objectionable" reading matter from libraries and schools. Because of our tradition of free speech, public opinion usually resists such appeals. But many people, who defend free circulation of ideas on the adult level, question the inclusion of controversial materials in school libraries. Several national and local organizations now encourage their members to act as volunteer censors for our public and educational libraries.

## The Book-Banning Contagion

*Senior Scholastic* devoted one issue to Brotherhood, an unpopular subject in widely scattered areas, though not exactly a new idea. Birmingham, Alabama, reacted by banning it from all schools. *Building America*, sponsored by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, NEA, has been under attack in California for a considerable period of time. Other magazines under attack include *The Nation*, *New Republic*, *Survey*

*Graphic, Commonweal, Life, In Fact,* and the *United Nations Bulletin*.

In January, 1948, Newark, New Jersey, banned *Soviet Russia Today* and *The Nation* from its school libraries. In July New York City followed this lead by banning *The Nation* from all school libraries. As a further illustration that book-banning is a contagious disease, later in the same month in Massachusetts *The Nation* was banned from all state teachers colleges. Fortunately, this ban was lifted by the State Board of Education on September 28.

### Censorship As a Point of View

Should libraries discard any book or magazine which some member of the community considers objectionable? Should schools teach controversial subjects? Should controversial literature be permitted in school libraries? How much censorship is necessary?

Some people *honestly* believe that children's reading should be carefully controlled. If these individuals look on textbooks or all library books as authoritative sources of information, not to be questioned by teacher or pupil, then they will probably insist that high school libraries must be censored. If they happen to belong to a group that can influence the school, the library has a difficult problem. Someone can always be found to disapprove of any book or magazine. And if librarians bow to one group pressure, they should bow to all.

There is, of course, a very easy solution to the problem of pleasing diverse groups with opposing points of view. All we have to do is omit controversial subjects from the instructional program. The librarian's problem is easily

solved—he simply removes the book that is a point of controversy.

To an adult who thinks of education as memorization, banning seems necessary. A book that does not present "correct" ideas should not be allowed in a school library. This is a reasonable view *if* the student is required to read the "truth" in a textbook, take notes as his instructor presents the same material in a lecture, and then prove that he "knows" this truth by rewriting it on an examination paper.

### The Twentieth-Century Approach

To an adult who recognizes that there are various possible interpretations of some known facts, that our knowledge of these facts changes, that sometimes certain unpopular facts are suppressed, and that the postulates of even such a positive science as physics are constantly changing, it is not so obvious that unorthodox points of view must be removed from the school library.

Alfred North Whitehead remarked, when he was eighty years old, that during his lifetime almost every physical law that he learned at school had been superseded or revised. How many millions of pupils must have struggled to "learn" these partial truths! Is it a wise—or even safe—course to insist that our children be taught the same "truths" we learned a quarter of a century ago?

Our children will live in the latter half of the twentieth century. It has been unmistakably demonstrated by Darwin, Einstein, Whitehead, John Dewey, the Huxleys, and many other creative thinkers that this is a changing world and that man's ability to survive is measured by his ability to adjust to it. Related to this concept is the idea that

perhaps all that has passed for knowledge in the past is merely rationalization, that most of our "truths" have been illusions.

### **New Methods for New Knowledges**

Although this idea has not yet taken its proper place in our educational practices, there are few communities that insist upon teaching their children that the earth is flat or that the heavier an object the faster it falls. Nevertheless, for hundreds of years these "truths" were taught to students.

New discoveries in the physical sciences are usually accepted today without much protest. However, in the younger sciences of biology and the social sciences, new ideas are not so welcome.

The theory of evolution, for example, was announced to the world in 1859, but some areas still proscribe it. If recent newspaper reports are correct, biologists in the Soviet Union must also fit their discoveries into an acceptable system of knowledge. Any such requirement will eventually destroy scientific advancement in Russia, or in any country which restricts its scientists.

The social sciences are still younger and more complex. Most of our controversial literature is in this area. The methods and techniques of the social sciences are not established, and the possibilities for error are relatively large. Does this mean that we should forbid the teaching of social science? Does it mean that only orthodox ideas regarding social problems shall be permitted in a school library?

In order to handle the problem of controversial reading we must recognize the distinction between imparting

information and helping pupils to learn to read and think critically and for themselves. Education for democratic living in the twentieth century must emphasize the latter. With such emphasis the apparent need to ban books should rapidly disappear.

### **Make Available Alternative Views**

*The Nation* was banned from New York schools because of a series of articles criticizing Catholic attitudes on medicine, education, science, and politics—matters usually considered secular. It is declared that these are matters of faith and that criticism of any religious faith cannot be permitted in a high school library. The action is defended on the basis that it is illegal to give religious instruction in the schools.

But from the fact that a magazine criticizing Catholic attitudes and practices is in the school library *it does not follow that religious instruction is being given*. No school can force its students to accept as true the contents of all magazines and books in its library. Such is obviously impossible, for any good library contains various interpretations of the facts about any controversial subject.

Without doubt, one of the great values of a school library lies in the fact that alternative views of a problem can be found there. Such a library is the best insurance against the indoctrination of pupils by a persuasive teacher who is committed to any particular system of belief. Without it the development of a historical sense would be impossible. All will immediately recognize the fallibility of the single observer and interpreter. Alternative views, no matter how unpopular they may be to any

particular group, must be available to any seeker after knowledge.

The New York censors of *The Nation* should recognize that these critical articles should be met by refutation—if refutation is possible—not by banning all future issues of this traditionally critical magazine. Unless such bans are rescinded, the snowball of censorship will gain momentum and we may well lose the freedom of thought and expression which brought a Dr. Einstein to America.

### Librarians Take a Stand

The American Library Association warned at a private hearing on *The Nation* ban:

“Undoubtedly, the New York City Board of Superintendents and the Board of Education find it easier to ban *The Nation* because the Newark schools have already banned it. Undoubtedly, the schools of Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Plainfield, U.S.A. will find it still easier to ban *The Nation*. Following the ban of one magazine, many communities will find that pressures to ban this or that piece of literature will come pouring in from all sides. . . . We protest the ban of *The Nation* from the libraries of the New York City schools as an act that is a threat to freedom of expression and contrary to the Library Bill of Rights and the United States Bill of Rights. We hope that the ban will be lifted immediately.”

### Guidance Is the Positive Answer

Although very few librarians approve of book-banning, they do not deny that in some cases guided or supervised use of controversial material may be advisable. All experienced librarians know that it is not economically possible to put certain books on open shelves because they would be stolen within a

week. However, restrictions on use cannot often be justified on the grounds that the material itself should be kept out of the hands of readers.

The American heritage of free expression has never encouraged restrictions upon what people read. Perhaps in some high school libraries some literature can be more effectively used under the direction of a teacher and should be removed from open shelves. This is not the significant part of the problem, however. The point to be emphasized is that citizens in our free society must learn to read critically and to evaluate what they read. Book-banning is not a part of the American tradition.

There is no question about the right and responsibility of teachers and librarians to select, as wisely as possible, reading material for use in the schools. But as Laura K. Martin, an authority on magazine use in high schools, says:

“Extreme expressions of opinion (and the reactionary periodicals are also worthy of examination as specimens) are part of the living fabric of social studies materials to be weighed and analyzed more minutely in the classroom than they can be in the library. For the most violent of agitators, from soapbox or from the printed page, says some true things, and the recognition of half-truths, which are the common coin of the hypocrite of any political stripe, should be part of the learning experience of any high school student.”

Someone must select library materials, but selection must be carefully balanced to include various points of view on any controversial subject. Exclusion of literature because it “attacks the faith of some pupils,” or because it describes the unsolved problems of the United States, or because of any un-

orthodox position cannot be defended. Such exclusion will inevitably lead to a coercive uniformity of opinion and a static view of the universe that will weaken our chance of survival.

America has been able to adjust to the modern world because new ideas have been permitted under our concept of free inquiry. The approach to a new

idea, and also to an old idea up for reconsideration, should be to appraise it, approve, modify, or reject it as a guide to action—*never to ban it*. Teachers, librarians, authors, publishers, and the public must unite to prevent the burning of the books. For the burning of the books forecasts the decline of the nation.

## *Building America: a Case in Point*

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KIMBALL WILES

At this time the future of *Building America* is an unknown quantity. To ASCD members this situation has particular import and is one of immediate concern. To those members who have worked closely with *Building America* the developments over the course of the past few years have been of particular regret. It is not with the purpose of reviewing the history of this publication or to present an "official statement" that we include the following article. It is presented, rather, as a sample case to illustrate what may happen if free inquiry is not allowed in our schools. To Kimball Wiles, associate professor of education at New York University, and a present member of the *Building America* editorial board, we are indebted for this discussion of what happened to *Building America* in California and its implications for educators everywhere.

ALTHOUGH AMERICAN SOCIETY has many common values, its members also hold conflicting ones. Out of conflicts in basic values which we hold, the nation as a whole and all local communities have issues on which there is controversy. All citizens must deal with controversial issues day by day in meeting the problems of the community and nation. Ability to think through these issues and to take action in terms

of the decisions reached is an essential skill in our democratic society. *No school adequately trains for American citizenship unless it helps its students develop skill in dealing with controversial issues.*

Such skill cannot be developed unless students have experience in studying the issues. Skill comes with practice. Since only about fifty percent of our youth finish high school, study of con-

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