

FREE TO CHOOSE

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(1) Since Ronald Reagan became President, cases of censorship have skyrocketed more than 500 percent! Judith Krug of the American Library Association reports that there used to be three to five cases reported each week; now there are three to five cases a day (Staveland and Gersor 1954). In this move toward censorship, everything is being attacked as dangerous: books, magazines, movies. Censorship can prevent people, especially children, from learning all aspects of any issue and can keep them from making their own decisions. If the children of today are to become the informed citizens of tomorrow, there must be less censorship and more intellectual freedom.

(2) Censorship comprises not only deletion of parts of published materials, but also attempts to ban, prohibit, suppress, remove, label, or restrict materials. Thus censorship denies people the opportunity to choose from all possible alternatives. Often a very small group tries to inflict its opinions or views on the entire population. Such an example is the case of the Gablers in Texas.

(3) Mel and Norma Gabler, a couple who have proclaimed themselves educational authorities, warn parents that they should urge the banning of certain textbooks. In fact, they state that adults should not risk reading the texts themselves. The Gablers reject these textbooks on such grounds as this: that the word "freedom" is used in connection with civil rights. After all, everyone "in this country has always been free unless he were in jail," they write ("Mind Control" 2). They further caution parents not to urge their children to pursue high grades and participate in class discussion, "because the harder students work, the greater their chances of brainwashing ("Mind Control" 2).

(4) This type of censorship has been called mind-control. Not only does it prevent people from thinking for themselves, but it always influences more than the tiny group doing the censoring. The Gablers, the Moral Majority, and similar groups have been successful in having publishers delete portions of some textbooks. Since publishers sell their textbooks in other states, they do not find it cost effective to print several editions. Often, then, they merely send this deleted version to other states, thus depriving students there of the full uncensored text. This lack of information can affect the way in which children learn.

(5) A child's learning process can be compared to a computer system. As more, and more diversified, information is fed into the data base, the computer will more and more quickly come up with a reasonable solution. Similarly, "it is the responsibility of the teacher to open minds, not to close them. There is a real world outside the

classroom, and students will be effective when they enter it if they have some understanding of it beforehand" (Erickson 41). Problems such as poverty, unemployment, pollution, and war will not vanish just because censors say they should be ignored. Students need to study unpleasant things and search for solutions. Students today need to see the true picture, and these materials must be available for them.

(6) Censors do not limit their attack to non-fiction; they censor literature, as well. Titles such as The Merchant of Venice, The Grapes of Wrath, The Scarlet Letter, Catcher in the Rye, and Huckleberry Finn have actually been banned in many schools and taken from the shelves in some school and public libraries (Manual xv). It is sad to relate that all too often people asking for the banning of these books have not even read the books. They may have gone through and counted the number of swear words in the book or have asked for the book to be banned just because of its title. The most outrageous case of such uninformed censorship is the attempt to ban Making It With Mademoiselle. This in reality is a sewing book put out by Mademoiselle Magazine. No book seems safe, and the real function of censorship seems to be preventing freedom of choice.

(7) It is exactly this freedom of choice which must be given to young people, and it is imperative that irresponsible censorship be replaced with intellectual freedom. The Student's Right to Know defines intellectual freedom as "the right of the inquiring mind to seek for information, the right of the curious mind to satisfy its curiosity" (Burrress and Jenkinson 3). It is the goal of the educational system to produce self-reliant, self-directed young adults who can decide for themselves how they want to conduct their lives. The schools, therefore, must teach students how to think; but, "you cannot teach people to distinguish between two opposing points of view if one point of view is completely and systematically excluded from the school house" (Burrress and Jenkinson 3).

(8) People must be taught to choose for themselves what they read. The reader has complete control of the reading activity: he can decide how much to read, how to interpret what he reads, how to respond to what is read, and what action, if any, to take in regard to what he has read (Burrress and Jenkinson 34). Some contend that comic books or other "bad books" cause delinquency. Not only is there no proof of this, but on the contrary, a study by the Gluecks has shown the opposite to be true. In a study of 500 delinquent boys matched with 500 boys considered not to be delinquent, they found no evidence that "bad books" played any role in the sample of 500 delinquent boys (Burrress and Jenkinson 34). Therefore, the study shows that "poor literature" does not affect a person's character. Selection in reading, then, can stand as one of the choices a person must be able to make for himself.

(9) In the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution, our founding fathers proclaimed that certain fundamental

freedoms are essential to our form of government. Foremost among these is the freedom of expression, the right to publish diverse opinions, and the right to unrestricted access to these opinions. In 1953, the American Library Association published a statement entitled The Freedom to Read, a document which supports the principles of intellectual freedom as outlined in the Library Bill of Rights. In addition, the School Library Bill of Rights supports the basic idea of a person's right to read and to have access to all materials (Manual 14).

(10) It is the responsibility of librarians to select the best books for their patrons and their communities. Librarians are specially trained in professional schools and taught how to use professional tools to evaluate books and materials. Some critics, however, claim that selection by librarians is really censorship. Lester Asheim, internationally recognized authority in library sciences, has stated the difference between selection and censorship very effectively: "Selection . . . begins with a presumption in favor of liberty of thought; censorship, with a presumption in favor of thought control . . . selection is democratic, while censorship is authoritarian . . ." (Donelson 54). Thus libraries are one of the most influential forces in the battle for intellectual freedom.

(11) With scientific developments and new technologies appearing so rapidly, it is crucial that the children of today learn how to make intelligent decisions. They cannot do this if censorship prevents them from hearing all sides of an issue. They must be free to choose what they want to read, what they want to think, and how they want to react. Only intellectual freedom can shape the children of today into a well-informed citizenry of the future.

List of Sources

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