The challenge of censorship

BY FRAN FALK-ROSS AND JEANNETTA CAPLAN

In the midst of developing the literacy levels of our students and providing stimulating texts for our diverse learners, it is sometimes easy to forget the importance of intellectual freedom to our teaching and to our students’ burgeoning reading interests—until someone infringes upon this precious freedom. In today’s world, students interact with widely varied forms of text both in school and out of school, and we must consider how we can protect students’ access to these materials.

An important issue, then, becomes the openness of school administrators and parents to the availability of a wide selection of reading materials and an environment that supports intellectual freedom. Members of the International Reading Association’s Intellectual Freedom Committee feel strongly about the openness of school administrators and censorship to all members of IRA, their friends, and students—hence this article.

The importance of intellectual freedom

Intellectual freedom is based on the principles of free expression and the right to know set forth in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights to the U.S. Constitution and in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. The American Library Association (ALA) defines intellectual freedom as “the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all sources regardless of whether the information is affirmed, disaffirmed, or neutral in viewpoint.” (For further discussion of intellectual freedom, see “Freedom to Read,” by John F. Cotton, in the February 2000 IRA Journal.)

This is an area of great concern to schools and parents. Parents certainly have the right to be concerned about what their children read and to regulate their children’s reading, listening, or viewing. They do not, however, regardless of how well-intentioned their motives may be, have the right to determine what other children read, listen to, or view. That is censorship.

Despite constitutional guarantees and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, intellectual freedom is under constant threat, both in the United States and in various places throughout the world. The freedom to read may be our most threatened freedom.

Censorship challenges can take place in classrooms, libraries, publishing offices, stores, and on the Internet. Library books are the most frequent targets, but newspapers, magazines, comics, CDs, videos, and websites may face challenges as well. Curriculum content, student writing and speech, textbooks, and even teaching strategies are subject to attack. The most common complaints relate to offensive language, sexually explicit content, and material that is seen as unsuited to the age groups with which it is being used. Other complaints relate to violence, occult/Satanism, religious viewpoint, drugs, homosexual content, and racism.

Fortunately, books are seldom banned and removed from libraries, but they may be restricted or moved to another section. Recommendations often are made for alternate titles for reading lists, and sometimes plans are developed outlining how the books will be used in the curriculum.

Intellectual freedom in the form of critical literacy and thinking is stymied when materials presenting multiple or alternative viewpoints are censored and only one side of an issue or one viewpoint is presented. In short, intellectual freedom needs constant vigilance and protection from those who would, however well-intentioned, erode those rights.

The challenges before us

“Offensive books banned” and “CIA redacts parts of spy Plame Wilson’s ‘Fair Game’” were recent headlines in a local newspaper. The attempted removal of two of Pat Conroy’s novels from the English curriculum in a West Virginia high school prompted him to send an urgent letter to the editor of a West Virginia newspaper decrying censorship.

The release of the newest Harry Potter book last July renewed the outcry against these popular books. Since 1999 they have been the object of numerous censorship efforts for their supposed promotion of magic, witchcraft, and wizardry. The books have often appeared on ALA’s list of most challenged books of the year. Last year’s Newbery Medal winner The Higher Power of Lucky was the object of many challenges due to use of the word scrotum. (For a further discussion of the outcry surrounding this book see the article “Newbery winner spawns controversy,” which appeared on page 28 of the June/July 2007 issue of Reading Today.)

Another incident involved the response of critics to the recently released fantasy movie The Golden Compass, the screen version of Philip Pullman’s novel Northern Lights, released in the United States as The Golden Compass. The specific concern voiced by some members of the Catholic community and other Christian churches is that the plot criticizes the religious doctrines of the Christian church. Parents were warned not to bring their children to see the movie or to buy the book, the first of a trilogy referred to as His Dark Materials. Proponents of the film argued that the movie does not criticize Catholic or other Christian doctrines but rather unquestioned response to any religious or philosophical dictates.

These incidents are only a few of hundreds of censorship challenges that occur every year in the United States and throughout the world. ALA reported 564 challenges in 2006. Offensive language, sexual content, and homosexuality were the reasons most frequently given concerning the “10 Most Challenged Books of 2006.” (For further information, visit the Intellectual Freedom section of ALA’s website at www.ala.org/ala/oif.)

Regardless of the intentions behind them, acts of censorship fly in the face of intellectual freedom, a right that as educators we should cherish and work to protect.

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Symposium scheduled

IRA’s Intellectual Freedom Committee invites those attending the IRA Annual Convention in Atlanta to the committee’s symposium, “Voices and Choices: Protecting the Freedom to Read, Write, and Think in YOUR Classroom.” The symposium is scheduled for Wednesday, May 7, from 2:00 p.m.–4:45 p.m. It is a ticketed session, so you should plan early if you wish to attend.