

# Preliminary Censorship Survey

By RUTH STEIN  
University of Minnesota

In an effort to help determine the prevalence and scope of censorship pressures in Minnesota schools, the Censorship Committee of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English conducted a survey during the autumn of 1975. The Committee devised a questionnaire which appeared in several publications which were mailed to their respective members. The publications included the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English Newsletter, the Minnesota Federation of Teachers Action, and the bulletins of many school districts throughout the state. One hundred fifty copies of the questionnaire were passed out at the annual meeting of the Minnesota Educational Association which was held in Minneapolis in October. To date, people have sent in seventy-six filled-in questionnaires. The questions and tallied response appear below.

1. What is your official school title? (Totals exceed 100% because of duplication of responses. Grade level and department chairpeople could also serve as teachers, so in certain cases, they were accounted for more than once.)

Student Teacher	1
Music Teacher	1
Resource Teacher	1
Media Specialist	1
Science Coordinator and Consultant	1
Language Arts Educational Leader	1
English Consultant	1
District Curriculum Coordinator	1
Secondary Reading Teachers	2
Librarians	4
Department Chairpeople	6
Grade Level Chairpeople	11
Teachers	51

2. Level of School?

Elementary	38
Middle School	1
Junior High	10
Senior High	23

3. In the past three years, has anyone objected to or asked you to remove any work?

Yes	23
No (or blank)	53

4. Does your school have a written selection policy or written procedure for handling complaints about instructional materials?

Yes	26
No	34
Unknown or omitted	16

Of the 26 respondents who said their school districts had written policies and procedures, 11 said they used the NCTE model. One used a principal-devised statement.

In situations where objections had been raised to material, 16 of the 23 cases were in districts with written policies and procedures.

5. In selecting instructional materials, which best describes your options?

Free Choice	49
Free Choice from approved list	13
Other	8

"Other" included: "free choice within reasonable limits," "defensible free choice," free choice with departmental approval, free choice as limited by funds, free choice from materials used by the district, some type of book selection committee.

In response to the query, "How do YOU see censorship threatening your professional status in the school?" the following comments were made:

"...close-minded people inflicting their biases upon teachers who are attempting to 'tell it like it is' and presenting the 'other side.'"

"...underground comics used very carefully."

"...amount of instructional material available makes it possible to offer alternatives to challenged or controversial material..."

"Being naive about one's community or creating a sensation is damaging to many."

"This (the questionnaire) doesn't seem to apply to elementary much."

"In our school a strong department chairman and a principal who backs teachers have helped this a lot."

"If a student does not want to read a selection for very personal reasons, another book is selected."

"The problem seems to be people. In some communities there are a few self-righteous persons who must impose their views on everybody else. In other cases there is an odd teacher who has a lopsided idea about life and ignores propriety. Neither is right. Both of these idiots have tunnel vision."

"We require some common reading...but these are certainly not objectionable. Objectionable books might appear on a free choice list."

"We are required to provide the building principal with a list so that he knows what is going on, but nothing beyond that, certainly no harassment."

Almost in all instances, books were selected on the basis of recommendations by other teachers, from book lists, because of merit and readability, mentioned in professional journals. Rarely was a book used "blindly." A great many, though, had not been read by the teacher. The exact number is impossible to determine from the responses.

# MATERIALS OBJECTED TO:

<u>Title</u>	<u>Objector</u>	<u>Reporter</u>	<u>Level</u>	<u>How used</u>	<u>Written Policy</u>	<u>Reasons</u>	<u>Disposition</u>
1. <u>Bonnie &amp; Clyde</u> (movie)	parents	teacher	8th	regular viewing	yes	violence & sex	hasn't reshown it.
2. <u>Catcher in the Rye</u>	1. parent	teacher	10-12	optional	yes	language	student given other option.
	2. grand-parents	teacher	10-12	optional	yes	language	student given other option, but grand-parents unhappy.
	3. grand-parents	teacher	10th	optional	yes	language	no resolution, book still optional.
	4. parents	teacher	10-12	optional	yes	language & sex	conference, student not reading book.
3. <u>Charley</u>	parent	teacher	9th	student choice	yes	allusion to sex	discussion with parents, problem solved, student unhappy-thought disposition should have been up to him.
4. <u>Clockwork Orange</u>	parent	Eng. Consultant	10-12	optional	yes	language, plot events	discussed with parents; retained.
5. <u>Dark of the Moon</u> (school play)	minister	Dept. Chr.	10-12	optional	no	sex, witchcraft	discussed with principal & ass't. director; complaint denied.

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6. <u>The Exorcist</u>	parents	Eng. Consultant	10-12	optional	yes	religion, language, plot events	complaint filed; removed from list.
7. <u>Go Ask Alice</u>	1. mother	teacher	6th	optional	no	child not ready yet	teacher removed book from room after reading it.
	2. parent	teacher	7th	optional	yes	language	taken to parent advisory council; unresolved.
	3. principal	Dept. Chr.	10-12	suggested	no	language, sex	after consultation with principal and ass't. prin., changed to optional.
8. <u>Grapes of Wrath</u>	parent	teacher	10-12	optional	yes	strong language	student given another choice; parents wanted book removed, but didn't fill out form.
9. <u>In the Night Kitchen</u>	mother	librarian	k-3	optional	yes	"full view of male organs"	committee met to discuss.
10. <u>Little Leo</u>	parent	music teacher	elem.	optional	being established	ethnic stereo-type	still up in the air.

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11. <u>Lord of the Flies</u>	parent	lang. arts chairperson	8th	optional	yes	language	spoke with parents; student given another book.
12. <u>Mad Magazine</u>	parent	teacher	Sr. High	optional	yes	sex	no action taken; student advised not to read magazine.
13. <u>Man, Myth, &amp; Magic</u> (encyclopedia of occult)	members of community	librarian	8-12	optional	no	promoting the devil	reviewed by 3 clergymen; left on shelf for "restricted use."
14. <u>Mr. &amp; Mrs. BoJo Jones</u>	parent	teacher	10-12	optional	yes	language, situation, & cover of book	after conference, student given another book.
15. <u>Of Mice and Men</u>	1. parent	Dept. Chr.	10th	required	yes	language used to describe Lenny; retarded person in objector's family.	phone conversation with parent; student given another book.
	2. parent	teacher	9th	optional	yes	language	student given another book.
16. 1776 (play)	parent	teacher	9th	required	no	swearing	parent preferred other material, but agreed it was useful.



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17. <u>That Was Then; This Is Now</u>	parent	Dept. Chr.	8th	optional	no	presence of discussion with parents. drugs; wanted child to read only "classics."	
18. <u>There's a Night-mare in my Closet</u>	parent	media specialist	K-3	optional	yes	??	still pending.
19. <u>365 Days</u>	father	principal	10-12	suggested	yes	language	student read another book.
20. <u>Witchcraft in England</u>	parents	district curriculum coordinator	10-12	?	yes	??	complaint resolved at building level, student offered alternative.
21. <u>Novels</u>	parents	reading teacher	Sr. High	?	?	religion	student can read only autobio-graphies.

(Note: Since some teachers cited more than one instance of material being objected to, the total number of objections exceeds the number listed in question 3.)

## Findings

Over 55% of the responses represented suburban Minneapolis. The rest came from all over the state. Fifty-one classroom teachers, 67% of the sample, comprised the largest portion. Of the seventy-six questionnaires returned, seventeen, or 23%, came from grade-level or department chairpersons--people answering for at least one or more persons. In the light of the small sample, this is significant. Only four librarians responded. Information from the Minnesota School Library Association will have arrived too late to be included in this preliminary survey. Results will be made public at a later date.

Questionnaires arrived in almost equal amounts from elementary and secondary school personnel. Twenty-six, or 34%, reported working in systems with written selection policies for instructional materials and for handling complaints. Sixteen did not know or left this item blank, while thirty-four, 45%, said they worked in school districts without such policies. Perhaps, had there been more than twenty-three objections cited, more personnel might be aware of the situation regarding this matter. Overwhelmingly, 82% described their options in selecting material as "free choice," or some modification.

The twenty-three complaints were mentioned in 30% of the sample. The vast majority of complaints were made at the secondary level, and parents were those most often mentioned as making complaints. In other cases, members of the community or school objected to the instructional material. There is no clear pattern as to whom the complaint was made. In most instances, the material used was optional, but this did not seem to forestall grievances. Language of the material was the primary cause of offense; sex, drugs, religion, and witchcraft were some of the other causes. Having written policies and procedures was no guarantee, as over half of the complaints were made under such conditions.

The disposition of the cases, in the vast majority of instances, was made amicably, with alternatives being given to the students. Only three times was reading material "restricted," or removed from the room or from a reading list.

## Conclusions

Obviously, no generalizations can be made from such a disappointingly small sample. Some thought should be given to cliches about those who do take time to fill in and return questionnaires. One is that these people feel intensely about the subject. This does not mean necessarily that Minnesota teachers do not care or worry about censorship attempts. It only serves as a caveat to those who tend to generalize with insufficient data.

Another truism is that more people will write to register disapproval than approval. In this case, only 30% of the sample reported attempts at what they saw as censorship. The other 70% reported no such efforts and had relatively very little to say about the matter.

From a first-hand investigation of censorship in Minnesota within the last three years, this writer knows of at least two dozen other cases which were not reported in this preliminary survey. Much of the controversial material constituted both text and trade books in the elementary schools. Some of the disputed books included the Landmark series, newer, more realistic stories for the younger adolescent, and picture books for the young child which offended women, religious, ethnic and racial groups because of illustrations and/or language. Quite a few books bothered adults because of the way they depicted American ideals, history, and heroes. Specific examples are below; one can only conjecture about their not being mentioned in this survey.

Parents in St. Cloud elementary schools objected to Marguerite Henry's horse stories, in which the stable boys were black. Her Album of Horses was singled out as presenting a negative image of the Native American.

Several incidents occurred in St. Paul. A representative of the Migrant Tutorial Council complained about the untrue picture of Mexican Americans in Marie Hall Ets' Bad Boy, Good Boy. This book is in the library, but not in the stacks and is no longer used by classroom teachers. Model City personnel protested the story of Little Black Sambo; the teacher ignored the protest. The same teacher received complaints about Garth Williams' Rabbit's Wedding. A sixth-grade teacher and school officials were severely criticized for using a version of Epimnades as the school play. Few adults were aware of the dramatic plans of the sixth grade.

Specific Landmark books re-evaluated include Neuberger's Lewis and Clark Expedition. High school teachers objected to the treatment of Native Americans. The same protest was made about Harvey's Texas Rangers. Both books have been removed from the stacks in Minneapolis.

An Alexandria teacher received complaints about the excessive patriotism in Johnny Tremaine. A member of the Human Relations Council in Anoka objected to remarks made about Native Americans in Polit's Little Leo.

Some librarians have stated flatly they will not order books over 200 pages long for their schools.

Taking heed of our own warning, we can say very little about

the state of censorship among Minnesota English teachers. We either do not know much about the matter, or we do not care enough to inform others, or we do not think it sufficiently important to be of concern. What do you think? Do we have the matter well in hand, or are we wearing rose-colored glasses?

## The Censors are Coming

The censors are coming!

The censors are coming!

One if by phone

Two if by mail

Procedure and policies are of little avail!

The librarian in the library

The teacher in class

Had better be ready for a kick in the BLEEP!

(censored)

Ruth M. Stein