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## Contending Voices: Intellectual Freedom in American Public School Libraries, 1827-1940

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This article describes the history of the development of the concept of intellectual freedom in American public school libraries from 1827 to 1940. From the beginnings of American public school library history, voices have been raised around the issue of intellectual freedom. However, most growth in support of the concept of intellectual freedom in American public school libraries occurred in the 1920s and 1930s. Because the terms intellectual freedom and censorship were seldom used in this time period, the early history of these concepts must be inferred from an examination of individual and governmental actions during this time. Selection policies and procedures, book lists and purchasing guides, articles by librarians and other interested parties, and early school library standards were the primary sources of historical evidence.

### Introduction

This history of intellectual freedom in American public school libraries traces the development of this concept from 1827, when New York's Governor DeWitt Clinton recommended the formation of school libraries in his state, to 1940, the year the American Library Association established the Committee on Intellectual Freedom to Safeguard the Rights of Library Users to Freedom of Inquiry (now called the Intellectual Freedom Committee). This article is based on primary sources from the time period under study.

The history of intellectual freedom in American public school libraries is an important area of study. Intellectual freedom is an integral part of the American school library media philosophy, and challenges occur-eventually-in almost every media center in the United States. Seeing how this issue developed from the past into the present aids us in developing a better understanding of where we have been and where we are going in relation to this concept. The question of intellectual freedom in American public schools has rarely been examined in the history of the school library media profession.

How does one record the history of a concept that was unnamed for most of its history? Such was the issue facing me when I decided to study the early days of intellectual freedom in the public school libraries of the United States. I knew that the concept of intellectual freedom did not spring into life in 1940. However, because the terms *intellectual freedom* and *censorship* were not used in the early history of the field, it was necessary to gather information

on this subject indirectly, by studying school library selection policies and procedures, book lists and purchasing guides, articles by librarians and other interested parties, and school library standards.

Today school library textbooks, such as Van Orden's *The Collection Program in Schools: Concepts, Practices, and Information Sources* (1995), include intellectual freedom issues as part of the selection process. Such texts stress that collection policies and procedures should address how to respond to possible challenges to library media in the schools. However, the consideration of intellectual freedom issues is a relatively new phenomenon. I explore here the days before the concept of intellectual freedom was recognized as a powerful piece of the school library media center puzzle. In this article, I show that school library practice and belief in the United States shifted from concerns related to the exclusion of objectionable books to concerns related to the inclusion of a variety of relevant, high quality, and interesting books. This article is organized chronologically, starting with the early 1800s and ending about 1940.

Views on intellectual freedom in American public school libraries, from 1827 to 1940, have been derived from the following sources: (a) book selection policy and procedures documents; (b) reports of discussions related to the placement, or the removal, of a particular library book or books; and (c) reports of practices related to student and faculty access to library materials. During the time period under study, at least until 1930, the terms *intellectual freedom* and *ensorship* were seldom used (Bowie, 1986). Instead, information on these topics can be discerned from selection guides, from school library standards and reports, from journal articles related to public and school libraries, and from state legislation and local ordinances.

Two points should be made at this time. First, because little non print was available in American public school libraries during the time period under study (Butler, 1995), the sources used in this study addressed-unless otherwise noted-book and other print materials only. Second, in the period from 1827-1940, not all American public school libraries had librarians. School library documents predating the 1920s seldom make mention of librarians in the schools, save for one instance in Ohio in 1864 and another in Oregon in 1857 (*Public Libraries*, 1876). The first school library standards document, the Certain Report, published in 1920, does mention the school librarian, and by the time of the second Certain Report in 1925, school librarians were becoming more prominent. This is evidenced by inclusion of practicing school librarians in the report's drafting committee. The hiring of professional librarians in school systems continued to gain support throughout the 1930s. During that decade more emphasis began to be placed on the selection and training of school library personnel, as well as on certification standards for school librarians and teacher-librarians (Witmer, 1936).

### *Definitions*

The following definitions are used throughout this article.

*Access:* the means by which library users and potential users are assured desired information and materials.

*Censorship:* "not only deletion or excision of parts of published materials, but also efforts to ban, prohibit, suppress, proscribe, remove, label, or restrict materials" (Office for Intellectual Freedom, 1989, p. xiii).

*Intellectual freedom:* "the right of unrestricted access to all information and ideas regardless of the medium of communication used" (Office for Intellectual Freedom, 1989, p. ix).

*School library:* A library serving an elementary or secondary school or a school with some combination of grades K-12, funded by taxation by state, county, and/or local government(s) and regulated by the same and/or the school system in which the library is located.

### Establishment of School Libraries, 1827-1876

A benchmark study in the history of libraries in the United States was *Public Libraries in the United States of America: Their History, Condition, and Management Special Report*, an 1876 assessment by the US Bureau of Education of libraries organized, funded, and operated by the public, that is, state and local governments. One chapter in the report traces the history of school libraries from their 1827 beginnings in New York state to 1876, by which time 21 states had made provisions for the establishment of libraries in schools: New York, Massachusetts, Michigan, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Iowa, Indiana, Maine, Ohio, Wisconsin, Missouri, California, Oregon, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Kansas, Virginia, New Jersey, Kentucky, Minnesota, and Colorado.

Most early public school libraries were funded and controlled through local and/or state legislation and taxation. Aid was granted to school districts to establish and develop school library systems; usually, library material selection was delegated to state superintendents and boards of education. This was not viewed as a wise move by the editors of the *Public Libraries* report, who were concerned with the "injudicious selections of books by state superintendents and boards of education" (p. 2). The editors felt it a "defect of legislation," when a school district was permitted to select books without supervision (p.1) and pointed to "a growing awareness of the need for sustained state-level participation in the establishment, maintenance, evaluation, and improvement of school libraries" (p.1). Between 1827 and 1876, laws were passed in many states to regulate the selection, purchasing, and circulation of books.

A wide variety of people might be in charge of book selection once the list reached the school. Selectors ranged from school board members, superintendents, and trustees, to the school librarians (Public Libraries, 1876). School librarians were not always in charge of selection or considered selection experts. In Rhode Island, for example, an 1845 law stated that school library

book selection should be done by the State Commissioner of the Common Schools. In rare cases, in Wisconsin, for example, individual schools could purchase library materials with local tax monies. More frequently, however, state officials felt that "district officers and teachers were not wise enough about books to select them intelligently or to buy them cheaply" (Hutchins, 1896, p. 185). Many early school administrators felt that "objectionable books" would not end up in their libraries if they either (a) selected books themselves, (b) prepared "acceptable" book lists from which others might select books, or (c) appointed someone either to select books or to create respectable book lists.

In Virginia, for example, the state board of education provided lists of books for public school libraries. Similar lists were prepared by district boards, superintendents of public instruction, and others in Iowa, New York, Ohio, Indiana, Kansas, and Montana (*Public Libraries*, 1876). From these lists, county and city boards of education selected books for their schools. In California, from 1867 to 1874, the state board of education designated the school director as the book selector and prescribed a list from which all school district library books were to be selected. This list, according to the state board of education that produced it, was composed of books that would cover the tastes of all pupils and their parents, and broaden everyone's horizons (*Public Libraries*, 1876).

From 1827-1875, who controlled school library materials' selection varied from state to state, but generally selection activities were denied to the people most knowledgeable in what materials were needed in the schools (librarians and teachers), and this raises an intellectual freedom issue. From the time of the first recorded school library book purchases in the early 1800s, another intellectual freedom issue was that of freedom of access. Many school administrators believed that novels and other books of "displeasing character" should not be available on their school library shelves. For example superintendents of schools in Delaware County, New York, complained, in 1843, that they found "in one library alone over thirty novels" (Koos, 1927, p. 3). These same superintendents stated that many libraries contained even more objectionable works. The concern of most people involved with school library materials at this time was with the need to exclude materials or restrict access to materials, that is, in today's view, to censor materials.

However, at least one state was concerned with intellectual freedom and freedom of access. The 1875 Rhode Island code of regulations says, in part: "The trustees or board of management of every library claiming aid under the provisions of Chapter 464 of the general statutes, shall show to the satisfaction of the board of education that the free use of all the advantages of the library is granted to all citizens of suitable age and character of the town or city" (*Public Libraries*, 1876, p. 9).

## The Librarian and Pernicious Publications, 1876-1920

During these years, in most states, book selection procedures continued to be controlled by the state, which provided schools with lists of "suitable" books for purchase and assigned specific individuals, from school librarians to school board members, to select materials. In the 1890s, State Superintendents of Public Instruction in Wisconsin and North Dakota were preparing lists of "suitable" books for school libraries. In Minnesota, the same occurred, except that presidents of the state normal schools were also admonished to prepare lists, and in Kentucky, Maryland, Michigan, and New Jersey, school district trustees were entrusted with book selection lists.

During the early 1900s, several states made rules about what kind of materials could or could not be selected for their school libraries. Alabama, Kansas, and Michigan established regulations stating that book selection must represent a wide field of literature and subject matter, and Delaware, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and Washington stated that reference books be chosen. In Colorado, no "publications of immoral or pernicious nature" were to be placed in the library, and Kentuckians were to find no books of an "infidel nature" in their libraries (Koos, 1927, p.15).

Attitudes toward freedom of access in other types of libraries may also have had an influence on attitudes towards freedom of access in school libraries. In 1885, in the pamphlet *Free Libraries and Unclean Books*, F.B. Perkins, a librarian at the San Francisco Free Public Library, reported pulling "dirty" books from shelves and stated that adults who felt that any kind of books could be on library shelves had no business associating with children. That same year in Philadelphia, Josiah Leeds (1885), author of *Concerning Printed Poison*, voiced his concern over the reading materials of public school boys and over how that material affected their behavior: "In one of our Philadelphia public schools, seven pistols were found in the possession of as many lads, whilst their stack of literature was made up of considerably over one hundred pernicious publications" (p. 7). It is possible that pamphlets such as those written by Leeds and Perkins did influence what was selected, purchased, and kept on the open shelves of school libraries of the late 1800s.

In the 1880s, a paper entitled "The School Library: A Factor in Education" was read to the New York State Teachers Association and subsequently published in the *Library Journal* in 1889. The author of the paper, George E. Hardy, was also concerned about the kind of materials to which students had access. He stated that it was more important to teach pupils what not to read than to teach pupils how to read. He decried the numerous dime novels and weekly story papers of the time, feeling that youthful minds were feeding on "literary pabulum." Hardy felt that such books should be relegated to a funeral pyre and that

the grave problem of moral education in our public schools can be solved ... the means for accomplishing so desirable an end are already at our hands. I refer to the well-selected and properly used school library which ought to be found in every school-house in the land ... The attitude of the school library towards the pupils ought to be a broad and catholic one. It should be at once a helper, an incentive, and a reward. (pp. 346-347)

Debate over the selection, purchase, and access to school library materials continued throughout the 1890s, and it continued in the broader library community as well. Arthur Bostwick (1908), President of the American Library Association, spoke of censorship in positive terms in his inaugural address at the ALA Annual Conference:

Some are born great; some achieve greatness; some have greatness thrust upon them. It is in this way that the librarian has become a censor of literature ... Books that distinctly commend what is wrong, that teach how to sin and tell how pleasant sin is, sometimes with and sometimes without the added sauce of impropriety, are increasingly popular, tempting the author to imitate them, the publishers to produce, the bookseller to exploit. Thank Heaven they do not tempt the librarian. (p. 113)

Bostwick's comments probably would have influenced school librarians as well, because the 1896 appointment in the ALA of a committee to cooperate with the library section of the National Education Association would have encouraged school librarians to see themselves as another branch in the varied library community.

The political situation of the time also influenced the library community. For example, by 1917, as the US entered World War I, the American public library, in an effort to meet the needs of the country by rejecting anything that represented the enemy, "readily abandoned any pretense of upholding principles of intellectual freedom and guarding against censorship, positions that it still had not carefully articulated, but that nonetheless occasionally slipped into the librarian's professional rhetoric" (Wiegand, 1989, p. 31). Given that public librarians were only too happy to censor (usually German language materials and similar materials concerning "the enemy"), it is likely that their school library counterparts may have followed suit.

However, throughout this period, a few voices were raised in support of intellectual freedom. Katharine L. Sharp (1895) promoted intellectual freedom through access: "The first element of a successful school library is to grant free access to the shelves" (p.10). In 1919, Jessie Brainerd, a high school librarian from Hackensack, New Jersey, wrote that high school students should have working knowledge of the school library, so that they could use it independently as an incentive to reading. If high schoolers could use the library independently, then they could take those things they needed or wished from the shelves.

This period was marked by the first attempt to formulate and standardize school library practice. In 1916, the first "Certain Report," *Standard Library Organization and Equipment for Secondary Schools of Different Sizes: Report of the Committee on Library Organization and Equipment*, appeared as papers presented at the National Education Association National Convention. Named after Caspar Carl Certain, chairman of the Library Committee, Department of Secondary Education, National Education Association, this report was published by the American Library Association in 1920. In these early standards, which were benchmarks in the search for school library program accountability, much emphasis was placed on the librarian's training in the art of book selection and the proper use of books for reading and enjoyment. Book selection, called "scientific selection," encouraged the librarian to select books on the basis of what was needed for classrooms, community interests, students' recreational and cultural needs, and curricular needs and recommendations by teachers and department heads. All selections were subject to the approval of the school principal. The Certain Report (1920) was the first attempt in the US to set standards for public school libraries and for school librarians' education, skills, and responsibilities. It also raised a voice for intellectual freedom, stating that "Freedom of access to the library must imply, not only freedom to consult books for reference and for supplementary and collateral study, but also freedom to read books for recreation and pleasure ... pupils should have direct access to the bookshelves" (p. 7).

### School Library Standards and "Appropriate" Materials, 1920-1930

Despite the 1920 Certain Report and those that followed-*Elementary School Library Standards* (1925) and *Summaries of Elementary and Secondary School Library Standards* (1932)-local educational authorities were still often seen by state governments as lacking knowledge in selecting books for their own school libraries. Thus, although an important task of the school librarian during that time was the selection of appropriate reading materials for young people, state book lists were widely available and used by the librarian and the principal in materials selection (Bowie, 1986).

In the early 1920s, after World War I, a "backlash of bigotry, ignorance, and intolerance that struck out in all directions" (Tebbel, 1978, p. 383) occurred. The *Book of Knowledge* was burned in Kansas because it mentioned evolution, and the *World Book* was banned in Arkansas for the same reason. It is during this time period that the terms *ensorship* and *withdrawn from circulation* began to appear in the literature (Baker, 1929).

Contending voices over intellectual freedom continued to be raised in the 1920s. For example, in 1927, Mary E.S. Root (Ayres, 1929) wrote an article for the *Maryland Library Notes* listing series books that should not be circulated by libraries. Among those she listed were books by Horatio Alger, the Great War series by Howard Roger Garis, the YMCA boys' series by Brook Hender-

ley, the Bobbsey Twins series by Laura Lee Hope, and a Boy Scout series by Gordon Stuart. Root believed that books portraying buffoonery, murder, violence, fires, wrongdoing children who were not punished, and sentimentality should not be purchased for the young child. She discouraged the selection of books-for older children-that were written in poor English, gave incorrect information, contained violence, and/or were books written in a series.

A bookstore proprietor from Boise, Idaho, named Ernest F. Ayres, took exception to Root's list and penned a rebuttal that was published in the *Wilson Bulletin* in 1929. Ayres' reply was a scathing opinion of librarians: "those worthy arbiters of our literary pabulum ... can-and do-exercise a most rigid censorship over what the dear public shall-and shall not read .... Why worry about censorship so long as we have librarians?" (p.528). He went on to say that children should read books in which they are interested-not just those that librarians thought appropriate. It appears Ayres felt, once children had read books they enjoyed, that these children might then be directed to materials that librarians felt were more appropriate-a sentiment voiced by many school and children's librarians today.

Lillian Mitchell (1929), a public librarian, took offense to Ayres' rebuttal and then penned a counter rebuttal. In it, she said that an intelligent person would not waste his or her child's time on series books. Mitchell felt that the best description of a good child's book was one that a "literary-minded" adult could enjoy. Although Root and Mitchell were both public librarians, it is safe to assume that their concerns and ensuing actions influenced school libraries as well, especially because at that time in the US, many children and teachers used public libraries or a combination school/public library as there were few school libraries available.

### Intellectual Freedom and The Library Bill of Rights, 1930-1940

Before the 1930s, state lists were used mostly in the selection of school library materials. By the late 1930s, however, book selection sources also included publishers' announcements, periodical reviews, and published bibliographies. In many cases, book jobbers (wholesalers) were also creating book selection lists, and this often gave commercial interests influence over book selection. Required book lists generated by state governments, however, continued to be heavily used in public school libraries into the mid-20th century in the US.

In the 1930s, Lucile F. Fargo, author of *The Library in the School* (1933), stated that there were three admonitions with regard to school library book selection. These were to select slowly, to vote No when in doubt about a selection, and to use standardized school library book lists. Mildred Hawksworth Lowell's 1939 article "Criteria for Book Selection in School Libraries" was much less restrictive in approach than Fargo's. Although both were written in the 1930s, Lowell's criteria more closely resemble a present-

day school library selection policy, with emphases on representing different nationalities, all sides to a question, recreational needs, broadening of students' surroundings, and students' interests. These emphases relate more closely to our modern definition of intellectual freedom in that all sides of an issue and all types of issues can be represented in the school library.

In the 1930s, book selection policies continued in the forefront of intellectual freedom issues. Widespread outcry over censorship of a single book, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, was partly responsible for the approval, in 1939, of the ALA Library's Bill of Rights, the forerunner of the present Library Bill of Rights. Originally adopted from the Des Moines (Iowa) Public Library, this manifesto came to represent, for all kinds of libraries and librarians in the US, the right to freedom of access and materials provision (Office for Intellectual Freedom, 1996). Indeed, the Library Bill of Rights was a major development in terms of intellectual freedom, given that "A review of library literature reveals relatively few articles on intellectual freedom prior to the 1930s, and many of the articles that did appear supported censorship and only quibbled over the degree and nature of it" (Office for Intellectual Freedom, 1989, p. xv).

## Conclusion

Before 1930, the terms *intellectual freedom* and *censorship* were seldom seen in the library literature and the development of the concept had to be inferred through examination of individual and governmental actions. The early history of intellectual freedom issues in American public school libraries can be derived from selection policies and procedures, from book lists and purchasing guides, from articles by librarians and other interested parties, and from the early school library standards. Although the most growth in support of intellectual freedom in the public school library field in the US occurred in the 1920s and 1930s, there have been voices calling for intellectual freedom throughout the early history of public school libraries in the US.

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