Textbook Controversy Intensifies Nationwide

Court cases and censorship attempts reflect broader conflict over values, as well as problems with the quality of teaching materials

THE conflict over the teaching of evolution, which has now reached the Supreme Court (see story, p. 22) is only part of a profound clash in values that is increasingly being played out in the nation's public schools.

The broader conflict revolves around the whole range of beliefs now identified under the term "secular humanism," as evidenced in two federal district court cases, in Tennessee and Alabama.

The clash is also evident in the increasing reports of censorship attempts at individual schools. The most recent report comes from People for the American Way, a lobby group on church-state separation and other constitutional issues. The group documents a 35% increase of "censorship incidents" in the nation's schools and libraries between 1985 and 1986, and a 117% increase over the group's first survey 4 years ago. Most of these attacks are, as they always have been, directed at allegedly obscene materials. But they are now covering an increasingly wide variety of teaching materials and courses, ranging from *Romeo and Juliet* (for allegedly encouraging drug use) to lessons on global pollution (which supposedly promote "one-world government").

These actions reflect not only the growing vocalism of fundamentalists, but also a backlash against the liberal social philosophy that has been the primary ideological force influencing the development of new readers and social science texts for well over a decade.

The two court cases have given a partial airing to some of these issues. The first, in Hawkins County, Tennessee, was brought in 1983 by a group of fundamentalist parents protesting a series of grade school readers produced by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Misleadingly dubbed "Scopes II" in the press, the case actually represented an attack on a bundle of issues, including feminism, pacificism, and vegetarianism. A selection from *The Diary of Anne Frank* was criticized for implying that all religions are equal. *The Wizard of Oz* was said to diminish the role of God in determining human qualities. *Riders on the Earth*, a book about the first moon landing, was seen as advocating sun worship, internationalism, and one-world government. Objections were also made to the failure to portray women in traditional roles. Parents, claiming that their right to exercise their religion is being violated, demanded alternative textbooks more in line with their views.

The judge, Thomas G. Hull, agreed in a 25 October decision (now under appeal) that the Holt series "burdened" the plaintiffs' First Amendment rights. He ruled that students have a right to be excused from class when objectionable materials are under discussion and to receive instruction at home.

School book trial: *After a textbook trial in Tennessee, books are wheeled from the court.*

The other case, currently under consideration in Mobile County, Alabama, is a class action suit brought by 634 conservative Protestant and Catholic parents and teachers. This one has its beginnings in 1981 when a father brought a suit leading to the 1985 Supreme Court decision outlawing the state "moment of silence" law in the public schools. Judge William Brevard Hand reopened the case and turned the issue around to examine whether secular humanism is being unconstitutionally promoted as a religion. At issue are 46 social studies and home economics textbooks. The plaintiffs want to show that the social studies books exclude the study of traditional religions, that the home economics books promote humanism, and that humanism is a religion.

Unlike the Tennessee case, which directly concerns only fundamentalists' children in one county, the Alabama decision will affect all the schoolchildren in the state. However, Timothy Dyk of the Washington, D.C., law firm of Wilmer, Cutler, and Pickering, who argued for the defendants in the Tennessee case, says that the two suits are basically "two routes to the same end"—that is, radical alterations in public school curricula.

The Alabama case has thrown some important light on the treatment of religion in textbooks. The fact is, testified Paul E. Vitz of New York University, there is a "total absence of any references to American religious life of any kind, Protestant, Catholic or Jewish" in a group of elementary textbooks he examined for the National Institute of Education. Some of the more egregious gaps Vitz has mentioned are the failure to mention who the Pilgrims were thanking in Thanksgiving (pilgrims, in one book, are "people who make long trips"); failure to identify Joan of Arc's religious motivations, and omission of the fact that Martin Luther King was a minister. Vitz and others have found that in both elementary and high school textbooks, exotic religions get far more play than those in America. The Salem witch trials are often omitted, and the role of religion is ignored in discussions of the antislavery, women's suffrage, and temperance movements.

More complete treatment of religion in textbooks would not, of course, defuse the controversy, because secular humanism is perceived as pervading the curriculum. What is "secular humanism" anyway? Philosophy professor Paul Kurtz of the State University of New York at Buffalo, the only acknowledged secular humanist to testify in Alabama, says he sees it as a "method of investigation, basing evidence on hypotheses and reason." Humanism, which generally refers to any philosophical system based on human freedom and dignity, has its roots in the 18th-century Enlightenment and rejection of religion as the font of all truth. But, says Kurtz, it does not imply belief or lack of belief in God.

The term has a different meaning for conservative Christians. In an article in the 1986 issue of *Creation/Evolution*, Barbara Hargrove of the Iliff School of Theology in Denver writes that fundamentalist and evangelical groups basically believe that the social order is firm and fixed, whether it

Wizard of Oz
undermines God's role in fashioning human character, fundamentalists argued in court.

applies to species, races, families, sexes, social classes, or national boundaries. "Such a world view takes it for granted that any contrary point of view must come from an equally well-structured ideology that represents the opposite pole." In the 1950s, it was "atheistic communism." Now it is secular humanism, which, according to one definition, stands for atheism, evolution, amorality, "autonomy," and a socialist one-world view. With this monolithic outlook on things, a threat to any one "Christian" value is a threat to all.

Thus, at the Alabama trial, the home economics textbooks, which no longer teach cooking but instruct people how to run their lives, are seen as quasi-religious tracts. For example, a passage from a text called *Contemporary Living*, which dealt with peer influence, was cited: "The best approach is to try to combine family and peer influences as you shape your personality and establish your identity." A lawyer for the plaintiffs argued that this undermined parental authority and condoned running around with peer groups "having free sex and drugs."

The potential extent of public dissatisfaction with schoolbooks is difficult to assess. According to Hargrove, the spectrum of conservative Christian groups, ranging from "closed" fundamentalists to the new evangelical left, probably numbers no more than a few million. But the fact that censorship issues are rising in all areas of the country indicates that dissatisfaction with school offerings is not confined to fundamentalists.

Whatever the numbers, the impact they are having is disproportionate. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) relates that reported challenges to materials in public school libraries almost doubled in a decade, affecting 50% of the libraries by 1982. Even in cases where a challenge is brought to court and turned down, "the controversy so divides the school and the community that a form of self-censorship settles upon school officials, who find it less troublesome to trim educational judgments." In its report on "Liberty and Learning in the Schools," the AAUP also notes the intimidating effect on teachers and librarians, who sometimes face pay loss or even dismissal "for assignment of materials later viewed as objectionable."

The Hatch amendment has also had an intimidating effect. This provision authored by Senator Orrin G. Hatch (R–UT), which took effect 2 years ago, prohibits schools from conducting federally funded "psychiatric or psychological experimentation, testing or treatment" without parental consent. Annoying enough in itself for researchers, it has been seized on by some as a prohibition against exploring any sensitive subjects with pupils. For example, Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum has decided that the amendment applies to any curricula covering "alcohol and drugs; antinationalistic, one-world government or globalism; organic evolution; discussion of witchcraft and the occult; guided fantasy techniques; and autobiography assignments." The amendment has been cited in parental complaints around the country over subjects as varied as nuclear war, sex education, mock elections, a voluntary alcohol and drug abuse project, discussions of death and dying, the teaching of critical thinking skills, and diary-keeping.

According to People for the American Way, "today's censors are more likely to be part of a nationally organized effort" and are increasingly turning to the courts and the legislatures for remedies. One evidence of increased sophistication is a booklet that has been distributed to public school science teachers in North Carolina by the American Scientific Affiliation, "a fellowship of Christians in the sciences." Entitled "Teaching Science in a Climate of Controversy," it contains a section urging caution in the teaching of evolution. After sober explanations of why, for example, "strong pressures seem to have existed against the evolution of walking on the hind feet," the account concludes that "too many problems remain unresolved and too many pieces of evidence are missing to say with certainty that we share a common ancestry with the apes."

It is extremists who are the activists, but many of their sentiments find sympathy even among those who do not share their antagonism to science. Although some of the past excesses of "liberal" pedagogy have been abandoned, innovations continue that are construed by many as a threat to generally accepted values. The latest example is the "whole language" approach to reading, which in its emphasis on the overall meaning of a text allows children to mispronounce and even substitute words. As for content, efforts to accommodate liberal social beliefs sometimes result in unrealistic portrayals of American life. Curriculum expert Arthur Woodward of the University of Rochester says some readers try so hard to depict women in alternative roles that you never see a housewife. His favorite example of an attempt to cater to liberals within the constraints of available space was a photograph of a handicapped black woman judge.

There are many who believe that the liberal emphasis on individualism strays perilously close to moral relativism. Harriet Bernstein, who headed a textbook reform project for the Council of Chief State School Officers, sees this as part of a deeper trend—the "separation of knowledge and values" wrought by the "reigning orthodoxy," which she identifies as a blend of "logical positivism and behaviorism."

Anthony Campolo, sociologist of religion at Eastern College, Pennsylvania, observes that there is a certain inevitability in today's clash of values. In the postwar years, he observes, there has been a breakdown of the traditional balance between individualism and "obligation"—to society, church, and family. Parents want the schools to teach their children values, but schools can no longer resort to God as a legitimate authority—a development spurred by the 1962 Supreme Court ruling against prayer in the schools. Campolo says schools therefore had to find another philosophical basis for values, and this has been found, as it has in the larger society, in psychotherapy and the goal of "self-actualization." Ironically, he notes, "liberals started the whole problem."

Harvard child psychiatrist Robert Coles, who was asked to testify in Alabama, has expressed a similar view. *Newsweek* quoted him saying "What you find in these texts is the exaltation of looking at the world through psychological theories, especially of

the self and its needs. . . . There's no reference to the self as subject to something else."

Whether or not the court challenges will open up a larger philosophical controversy, they have certainly cast a spotlight on what may be a more urgent issue for public education: the quality of textbooks.

Because publishers are aiming at a national market, the number one criterion for any textbook is avoidance of controversy. Since they must respond to a variety of specific criteria from their buyers, this has resulted in what has been called the "dumbing down" of textbooks.

The books are mainly targeted at the 22 "adoption" states, that is, those that have statewide textbook adoption procedures, dominated by Texas, California, North Carolina, and Florida (school districts select their own books in the rest). Ideally, a textbook should be acceptable in both California and Texas, which are at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. Each state has a welter of specific requirements—California, for example, demands positive treatment of women, minorities, the elderly and the handicapped, as well as minimal portrayal of junk foods, and encouragement of thrift, fire prevention, and humane treatment of animals. Texas, on the other hand, does not want material that will "cause embarrassing situations" in the classroom, or "encourage life-styles deviating from generally accepted standards of society." Capitalism and patriotism must be positively portrayed.

Every state also has its special needs with regard to content, such as aspects of its own history or natural environment, and particular historical documents. On top of this, some require that "readability levels" be designated based on word counts and vocabulary. Texas requires them, California rejects them because texts constructed according to the formulas tend to make for dull reading. Many books also suffer from being team-written, and from hasty revisions made for the sake of a recent copyright. (States issue calls for particular textbooks every 4 to 6 years.) Because so many criteria must be kept in mind, "writing a book is like putting together a crossword puzzle," says Bernstein.

Balance and context are often lost as publishers attempt to jam in all the required material while still avoiding controversy. For example, My Lai is avoided in discussions of the Vietnam war. Watergate coverage is timid—Woodward relates that one text's brief coverage of the scandal contains the line, "President Nixon tried to help his friends." Elementary school books omit information on human reproduction. Evolution is handled with kid gloves. Woodward says his survey of biology books revealed that only 40% dealt fully with the subject, while the rest either omitted it entirely, gave "equal time" to creationism, or omitted discussion of human evolution. In readers, such words as "God" and "Bible," are often deleted, even from selections from the classics, as are racist-sounding terms such as "honest injun."

Textbook publishers are clearly in a bind. Donald A. Eklund of the Association of American Publishers says publishers are intimidated by the "social content guidelines" and bend over backwards—when a guideline says no religion should be held up to ridicule, for example, it may be better to omit any description of Mormonism rather than to say the religion accepts polygamy. Because of the California dislike for junk foods, even birthday cakes are omitted from stories.

Herbert R. Adams of Laidlaw educational publishers puts some of the blame on school textbook selection committees, whose members have little time to inspect proposed books and will often select those with the glossiest presentations or the most persuasive salesmen. Adams says "a single person on a committee can affect what is read by hundreds of thousands of kids." Woodward points out that schools would be in a better position to resist parental intimidation if books were chosen with more input from the community.

Many observers believe that from the publishers' standpoint, the only solution is to diversify. Adams believes that to begin with, the adoption system should be eliminated to dilute the market pressure exerted by the big buyers. Woodward believes quality would stand a better chance if different books were designed for different markets.

Since any change in publishing practices threatens to cut profitability, the impetus for change will probably have to come at state and local levels. If California is an indication, this is already beginning. Last year, California state school superintendent William Honig threw out all the elementary school science books and gave publishers a deadline for producing ones that gave better coverage to evolution, pollution, and human reproduction. The state now has a curriculum commission to reevaluate the entire public school history curriculum. According to commission member Diane Ravitch of Columbia University, the books presently used are "plodding, have too much detail, and are not good at picking out what's significant." The commission is charged with deciding just what children should learn and mapping a curriculum raising the required number of history courses from 1 to 3 years. "I don't think the publishers will like it very much," says Ravitch. But "California is such a large market that others might tailor theirs after it."

The courts may eventually act to curb the more flagrant attempts to impede public school education. But the deeper problem will have to be solved by local school districts. One thing the fundamentalist challenge has done is to expose some of the real deficiencies—such as the paltry coverage of religious history—and in so doing to bring public attention to the larger problem of quality in public school teaching materials. ■ CONSTANCE HOLDEN

Romeo and Juliet And Youth Suicide

In some parts of the country parents have objected to *Romeo and Juliet* for its portrayal of teen lust, drug use, and suicide. But in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, students recently came together to hear a discussion of the play as a case study in youth suicide.

Genie Barton, the Folger Theater's expert on Shakespearean text, approached the Youth Suicide National Center with the idea. "If a modern-day young person realizes that a fictional character 400 years ago was as depressed as he gets," Barton told the *Washington Post,* "then that person is not alone." She said Romeo falls into a suicidal depression several times during his rocky romance.

The meeting, including students and actors, was part of a program developed to encourage discussion of the play in high schools "in ways which might be conducive to discouraging rather than romanticizing suicide as an option, and to stimulate the learning of coping skills." The tragedy is seen as raising a wealth of timeless issues relating to love, loneliness, family conflicts, communication, friendship, guilt and responsibility, and feelings of panic and powerlessness.

Teachers and counsellors from 50 local high schools were also brought together for coaching on how to lead classroom discussions of the play. For example, they were advised to note that Benvolio's advice to his friend Romeo—to go out and find a new love—is not particularly helpful because it does not acknowledge Romeo's feelings of rejection and despair. ■ C.H.