

ON CENSORSHIP

Eleanor, Elizabeth, the book mentioned in the article on censorship in schools (*InCite*, 26 July, 1985) is one of a number of titles including Judy Blume's *Forever*, Paul Zindel's *My Darling, My Hamburger*, Aidan Chamber's *Dance on My Grave* and *Go Ask Alice* which have been perceived as having value by many librarians but at the same time contain ideas and/or language from which some believe young people should be 'protected'.

Jean Hart and Anne Biddell discuss this issue in an excellent article in *Scan* 85/2 (published by the Division of Services, NSW Department of Education). They point out 'it is natural to wish to protect children from the "dark shadow of human existence" but fruitless to do so in the face of the child's own inevitable awareness gained through exposure to mass media and to life itself'.

Thoughtful consideration of the titles already mentioned has usually led to their continued inclusion in the library collection. Indeed in view of official statements such as the *Aims of Primary Education of NSW* (NSW Department of Education) which refers to the development of 'responsible self-direction and moral autonomy' a protectionist attitude is hard to justify. The library should provide the opportunity for students to exercise the critical skills developed in their school study of literature and to apply those critical skills even to 'the dark shadow of human existence'.

In schools the library statement on collection development (selection), approved by the principal, should reflect these considerations and should also allow for procedures to follow if materials are questioned.

Such procedures might include a requirement that complaints about material be made in writing on a form designed for this purpose.

The form should elicit

- specific examples of what is regarded as offensive.
- comments as to any value the material may have.
- the expected impact of the material on the reader.
- suggestion for alternative materials on the topic.

Such a form might then be presented to a school committee (including perhaps the principal, head teachers from appropriate faculties, teacher-librarian, specialists as required, eg the school counsellor, representatives from the parent body) for a decision on whether the material should be excluded from the library collection.

The committee's deliberation should include reference to the school's collection building statement and to such documents as the LAA Policy Statement on Freedom to Read. The committee's written report should be kept on file and a response be prepared for the original complainant.

It is acknowledged that parents have the right to request that their own child not be allowed access to certain materials and the school librarian can easily arrange this. However such arrangements should not impinge on the rights of other students to freedom of information.

In 1953 Lester Asheim wrote, 'Ultimately the selector has faith in the intelligence of the reader, the censor only in his own'. *Eleanor, Elizabeth* has received accolades from the judges of the Angus and Robertson Writers for the Young Fellowship, and from the Children's Book Council, as well as some criticism of its content from other members of the community. Young readers should not be denied the opportunity to form their own opinions.

Merran Dawson Beth McLaren

For the School Libraries Section (NSW Group)

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