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Editorial: Handcuffs for Teachers; The Dilemma of the Experimental School Teacher

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EDITORIAL
HANDCUFFS FOR TEACHERS
by ROSE EMERY BLIVEN
THE DILEMMA OF THE EXPERIMENTAL SCHOOL TEACHER
by SYBIL MAY

CURRENT NOTES ABOUT CHILDREN CURRICULUM AND RESEARCH FOR TEACHERS AND PARENTS

COOPERATIVE SCHOOL FOR STUDENT TEACHERS
HARRIET JOHNSON NURSERY SCHOOL
BUREAU OF EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENTS

69 bank street · new york city
The papers, even the headlines, are flooded with news that pertains to academic freedom. Our most conservative organizations, professionally speaking, and our most radical, politically speaking, are forced into action in defense of academic freedom. A problem once closeted with the niceties of academic distinctions has been thrust into the market where no niceties survive.

The editors of 69 BANK STREET are faced with difficulties in introducing this number. They might go philosophical on a matter that stems from and returns to important philosophical considerations. Or they might go concrete and list the ways that schools have met such an issue as the loyalty oaths. They might even go historical. Or—but in any event they have chosen to treat this issue as an introduction to a forum in which they invite their subscribers to participate. They have chosen to jump straight into reader discussion after the subject has been oriented in its national scope with all types of institution, and further oriented in one field of action: the teacher's union. The Bulletin believes in action: evidence, its request that you send in your experience, your decisions, or your viewpoints about academic freedom for a follow-up discussion.

The very words academic freedom have become so endowed with feeling and so generous of application that they may be but symbols of some vaguely precious thing that must be defended regardless of cost or of issue. Much of the ink spilled about them has been wasted. What we ask of you is that we face the question in terms of the reality of daily experience. Perhaps your news stories will bite into these or related interests:

Evidence in your own school or community of efforts to curb what you consider professional prerogatives.

Evidence of the interests that individuals or groups have at heart which promote their impulse to dictate to schools or to other educational groups what
stand they shall take on controversial matters. An analysis of the sources of the threats that threaten us.

Evidence of the restrictions laid on private schools or of the freedom in policy granted to them by their supporters: parents, donors, friends, or foundations. And what do we know, because we have lived through it, of the tie-ups as well as mix-ups of social ideals and practical politics?

Evidence of the results that groups—teachers only or teachers with others—have achieved that individuals alone had failed to gain.

Evidence of the dilemmas that individual teachers face in trying to separate out rationalization from responsibility in order to reach decisions as to what stand they will take on immediate issues.

Evidence of the conflict into which teachers may be pitched between their adult interests and attitudes and those which they are free to act upon in the classroom. In conjunction with this, perhaps the tantalizing uncertainties of working out social attitudes and responsibilities with grade school children, especially should be considered. Surely the answer differs with different teachers as to the pedagogical propriety and effectiveness of, for instance, one or several interpretations of history?

Perhaps—and how the editors wish it—perhaps through the news submitted, a picture will be sketched of the manner in which some teachers, previously casual about the origin, intensity and functional application of convictions of professional rights and responsibilities, have been propelled into an awareness which in turn has lowered the walls of the classroom and broadened the view of the social scene. Or are the editors premature in seeking evidence that teachers may come to see themselves as workers of the world?

Contributions of five hundred words or so (it's the point, not the number of words, that matters) will be published soon, if the fan mail justifies a second issue on academic freedom. Please sign your material and indicate whether you wish your name published. Speaking of freedom!
HANDCUFFS FOR TEACHERS

Rose Emery Bliven

When Dr. Kirtley F. Mather, Harvard geologist, announced early in October that he proposed to defy the Massachusetts law requiring all teachers to swear they are loyal to the principles of the United States Constitution, his declaration received nationwide publicity in the press, and helped draw attention to a situation which in many states is already serious and rapidly becoming more so. Dr. Mather was subsequently persuaded by President Conant of Harvard to withdraw his declaration for the present; but this does not mean that President Conant is in favor of the Massachusetts law. On the contrary, he was a member of a group which included the head of every important college in the state, that appeared at a legislative hearing and protested vigorously when this statute was under consideration.

It is an ironic fact that "freedom in the classroom," which for twenty years has been discussed in terms of increased latitude for the pupils, should today connote the freedom of the teacher to tell the truth as he sees it and to present both sides of controversial questions. A concerted attempt is now being made throughout the United States to control the teacher—an attempt which, if it is as successful as its protagonists hope, would reduce him to a mere automaton parroting the ideas desired by the dominant powers in the community. It seems clear that real teaching would be impossible under such circumstances.

Today, according to a survey made by the American Civil Liberties Union, public school teachers in twenty-two states are required by law to take an oath of loyalty to the Constitution. These laws follow in general the form used in New York State: "I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support the Constitution of the United States and the Constitution of the State of New York, and that I will faithfully discharge the duties of the position of (title of position and name or designation of school, college, university or institution to be here inserted), to which I am now assigned." (Laws of New York, Chapter 862.)

In twenty of these twenty-two states, such laws have been passed since the end of the Great War. Twelve of them have come since the beginning of the depression, and seven—those of Arizona, Georgia, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, Texas and Vermont—have come during the present year. This is no accident; powerful groups such as the Daughters of the American Revolution, the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and other "professional patriots" have lobbied these laws into existence against the inertia of state legis-
latures and the emphatic opposition of teachers.

Not a single educational body has sought to bring about such laws; on the contrary, many of the men and women whose names are highly honored in the world of the school have vigorously protested. They have included, in addition to President Conant of Harvard, the presidents of the University of Chicago, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Mt. Holyoke, Radcliffe, Williams, Amherst, Smith, and Wellesley, as well as professors in these and other colleges. Seventy-two members of the faculty of Northwestern University signed a resolution protesting the loyalty oaths. The National Education Association, at its Denver meeting, took a similar position. Distinguished laymen who have protested the encroachments on academic freedom are C.C. Burlingham, of the New York Bar Association, the Rev. J. Gresham Machen of Philadelphia, leader of Protestant Fundamentalism, and scores of others. Public interest in this question is indicated by the fact, reported by the National Education Association, that during the past four months, freedom for teachers has led all other educational subjects in the amount of attention received from the nation's leading magazines. Three outstanding universities, Wisconsin, Pittsburgh and Chicago, have all been recently the subject of investigations by the legislatures of their respective states, the general purpose of which has been, particularly in the cases of Chicago and Wisconsin, to see whether "radicalism" is being taught, with the evident aim of ferreting out for dismissal professors found guilty. These investigations are generally believed to result principally from the anti-radicalism campaign now being conducted by William Randolph Hearst in his nation wide chain of daily newspapers.

That many teachers have been dismissed from their posts primarily on charges of radicalism, every reader of the press is well aware. A few of the recent instances are: Professor Granville Hicks failed of reappointment at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Troy, New York; Dr. Leinhard Bergel was dismissed from the New Jersey State College for women because his personal views on Nazi Germany differed from those of the head of his department. Dr. Ralph E. Turner was dismissed from the University of Pittsburgh.

A subject closely allied to freedom for the teacher is, of course, freedom for the student. In recent months students holding radical views have been dismissed or suspended from numerous colleges, including the University of California at Los Angeles; the University of Michigan; City College in New York; and Medical School of Columbia University.

It would be easy to say, and many people do say, that teachers' loyalty oaths are of negligible importance; that "they have never done anybody any harm." To take this attitude is to misunderstand entirely the present ominous pressure against freedom of thought in the United States. The reasons for opposing loyalty oaths have been set forth on many occasions by many persons. The presidents of sixteen Massachusetts colleges, on the occasion already referred to, jointly signed a statement which I quote:

This oath is one which everyone would gladly take, but to require it of any one group of people is to cast the suspicion of disloyalty on this group....

We do not believe that this oath
will be of the slightest service—no disloyal plotter or seditious conspirator, if any such, indeed, exists in our whole teaching force, would hesitate to take this oath and then violate it....

Oath taking by conscientious professors could not increase the sense of responsibility they already feel, and oath taking by persons not conscientious would be meaningless....

This bill, if passed, might be the first step in a series of acts which some future legislature might enact requiring oaths and tests of political, social, or even religious nature....

Said President William Neilson of Smith College:

The whole performance seems to me, if I may speak frankly, just silly. Nothing is to be gained by it. It is the same kind of thing as those naive questions that they ask at immigration stations, when they want to know whether you are criminal or not, before you may enter—as if a criminal would at that point confess it....

Professor Morris Cohen of City College, New York, says that

the history of the requirement of oaths in the British universities shows conclusively that such oaths have never served any useful function but have operated only to handicap and keep out those who are unusually conscientious and take these oaths seriously.

Professor William Kilpatrick of Teachers College, Columbia, warns us of the danger of the "oath spirit":

If, as now becomes necessary, the schools are to prepare citizens for the intelligent study of change and proposals for improvement, what kind of teachers will be needed? The answer discloses the lurking danger in the loyalty oaths. If students are to learn how to study and criticize with reference to wise social choices and consequent wise changes, clearly, teachers must be of the kind to help such study and criticism best go on. In particular, prospective teachers should come from the flower of our youth, not the culls and leftovers after the capable and daring souls have gone on to other fields of work.

Teachers' loyalty oaths are sometimes defended on the ground that other employees of the state are required to make similar pledges; but this is fallacious. The only other persons who take such oaths are members of the legislative, judicial and executive branches of the government, whose precise duty it is to carry out constitutional provisions. This is not, and never has been, part of the obligations on teachers, and such pledges have never been asked of them in the past.

As already suggested, the movement for teachers' loyalty oaths is part of a national campaign for suppression of fundamental American liberties, including the censorship of free speech and prohibiting political parties with a "revolutionary" tinge, no matter how remote and theoretical.

Not only are repressive state laws rapidly increasing, but there is a threat of similar legislation by the federal government. At the beginning of the last session of Congress a resolution calling for a nationwide teachers' loyalty oath was introduced into the House of Repre-
sentatives. While it failed of pas-
sage, it will undoubtedly be intro-
duced again. If it were passed, the 
requirement that teachers shall swear
to their loyalty, which now exists
in twenty-two states,* would immedi-
ately and automatically exist in the
other twenty-six.

To be sure, pressure upon the
schools is not a new development in
American education. Among the types
of censorship that have long existed
is that which requires text books to
be edited in accordance with the pre-
judices of the community. Only the
other day the Conference on Education
and Race Relations, with headquarters
in Atlanta, Georgia, studied a large
number of text books in history,
civics and literature, and found anti-Negro prejudice in practically
all of them. Everyone remembers how,
a few years ago, no biology text book
was permitted in the state of Tenne-
see which endorsed the theory of evo-
lution. The great publishing houses
which produce text books for the pub-
lic schools of the United States
could tell many similar stories, did
not discretion seal their lips.

In thousands of communities,
patternably in smaller towns, re-
strictions upon teachers extend to
their personal life. Even the great
and tolerant city of New York has
recently tried to dismiss a teacher
because she was too plump. In many
communities a teacher is dismissed
if she marries (sex discrimination
is shown here since there is no re-
striction on men who enter the marital
state). In certain cases it is all
right for a teacher to marry, but she
is dismissed if she has a baby. In
hundreds of towns teachers are re-
quired to be members of a church, to
refrain from using alcoholic liquors
or tobacco, to eschew lip stick,
rouge and perfume. Brightly colored
or "immodest" clothing is proscribed.
Social contacts with the other sex
must be limited and decorous in the
extent.

A vivid portrayal of the plight
of a teacher under these restrictions
appeared in the American Mercury for
July, 1935. Says this writer:

I doubt if anyone who has never
been a teacher realizes the pre-
cariousness of my job. I may be
dismissed for almost anything: for
failure to go to church, for spend-
ing too many week-ends out of town,
for living in an apartment, for too
strict discipline, for too lax dis-
cipline, for not associating with
the natives, for being too friendly
with certain natives, for getting
into debt, for spending too much
money outside the community, for
having too many opinions, for not
playing favorites with the children
of school board members or for
holding a position coveted by some
home town girl. Every one of these
causes, to my own personal know-
ledge, has brought about the dis-
missal of some teacher.

This writer, who says she must be
anonymous or lose her job, points out
that in her fairly typical community,
teachers must eat their lunches in
the school building, may not receive
telegrams at school, may not talk to
other teachers in the halls and must
conform to official ideas regarding
nail polish, make-up and coiffures.

*The twenty-two states now requiring loyalty oaths are Nevada, Washington,
Ohio, Colorado, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Florida, Vermont, Indiana,
Rhode Island, West Virginia, New York, California, Massachusetts, Montana,
North Dakota, Michigan, Arizona, Georgia, New Jersey and Texas.
She has learned the danger of discussing public affairs in the classroom.

Not only politics but also national policies, religion, prohibition, sex and evolution are topics which I as a teacher had better let alone....I cannot deal intelligently with the problems of a vitally changing world if I am afraid to expound any ideas less than fifty years old. I cannot win the respect of the young, whom I ought to lead, if I am to be a namby-pamby.

I believe, then, that citizens defeat their own ends when they force my colleagues and me to become school-teacherish.

Somewhat the same view is expressed by Wendell Brooks Philips, writing in the Atlantic Monthly for October, 1935. Mr. Philips has just been dismissed from his post in a small college about which he has written affectionately in earlier Atlantic Monthly articles. He points out that the question of academic freedom, not unknown throughout the country generally, is especially acute in the South, where strong pressure is brought to bear on college presidents and trustees by constituents who have not the faintest idea of what a liberal education is. An opposite kind of pressure is exerted by the Southern Association of Colleges and the various other agencies who demand that intellectual standards be raised....The only faculty member who could fulfill both requirements would be an intelligent and highly trained scholar on the one hand, and a consistent fundamentalist on the other....Such men are increasingly hard to find.

The situation of the teacher has, of course, become much worse during the depression, when positions have been harder to get and many teachers have been willing to sacrifice an increasing degree of their intellectual integrity to avoid dismissal. In many colleges an ominous change has been the transfer from life tenure (assuming, of course, competent teaching and reasonably good behavior) to positions held for one year only. Under the rule that formerly existed in many institutions, formal dismissal was necessary to drive out an undesired member of the faculty. Today all that is necessary is that he shall "fail of reappointment." Among other evils of this system is the suffering it causes practically the whole faculty during the spring of each year while they wait to learn whether they are to be employed for an additional year. A favorite device to penalize an instructor who has earned the ill will of the authorities is to withhold the news that he has not been reappointed until so late in the year that it is difficult for him to find a place elsewhere. This device was employed in the case of Professor Turner of Pittsburgh, and has been used in many other instances.

Let me close by quoting again from Professor Kilpatrick, who has summed up the case for academic freedom more effectively than I can hope to do. Says Professor Kilpatrick:

The fear and emotion we now see in the loyalty oath laws is but the vain struggle of the old and outmoded old world view against the inevitable new outlook. What we witness are the death throes of a dying philosophy. It is this which explains the emotion and the threat to the schools. If this outmoded theory of no-change can have its
way, education will remain static and so fail to prepare the young for the life they must live. Teachers must be loyal not to what has hitherto been accepted, but to the best that better thinking can now find out. Reliance and allegiance are put here not on any authoritative pronouncement but on methods of search and whatever these may find. This means that as long as there is suffering or want among us, an inequality of opportunity or treatment, these good teachers will join with others to seek better things, for better ways of ordering American life. And equally, this means for teachers no indoctrination of prior chosen views, but obedience to the highest vision that their study can find and the teaching of others themselves to seek and follow the highest vision they can get.

THE DILEMMA OF THE EXPERIMENTAL SCHOOL TEACHER

Sybil May

The first article in this issue concerns more especially dissenting teachers in the public school system. What about teachers in private schools of the experimental type? Are the handcuffs being forged for them too—constructed, it may be, of silk instead of steel, as befits the privileged class? Certainly at the moment theirs is by far the greater freedom, but because of this very fact their dilemma is greater. The socially minded public school teacher who takes education seriously wishes to teach children to think for themselves on social questions, not to accept blindly the judgments of parents, teachers or text books. In order to do this she must encourage and help her children to find out as much as they can about both sides of these questions. She is quite justified in using any means of exposing her students not only to carefully selected truth but to the whole truth. Often this is dangerous and she must carry on discussions with one eye on the door, prepared to modify her procedure should a possible censor enter. She knows that public schools will continue just the same after she is dismissed, and that the chances are that however little of the whole truth she has brought out, she will be replaced by someone with a less exalted and uncomfortable mission. If she is to be an influence she must hold her job. If, in spite of her caution, she is fired and becomes a test case, she may have a union back of her to help her. In neither case is her line of action complicated by the fear of endangering the existence of her school.

But the choice of the radically minded experimental school teacher is different. To be sure, she too must consider—even in a private school, if it is conservative in its social philosophy—the possibility of dismissal for her opinions. But if she is a radical in a radical school and believes in the experiment her school is carrying on, she must fear for its future as well as her own when she attracts the attention of the reactionary forces in the state and in society to her dissent from accepted opinion. Then why not do as the public school dissenters do, go as far as she dare in the classroom without publicly proclaiming her controversial views and thus exposing her school to the
reprimand of conservative educational forces and the qualms of jittery parents? Herein lies her dilemma. The experimental schools should and do stand for social experiment as well as educational experiment in the narrower sense of the term. If the schools are to live up to their purposes, they must take the chance of being dubbed breeding grounds of little Reds. They must preach openly what the public school teachers would like to, but cannot because of their handcuffs—or perhaps gags would be the more appropriate figure. And they must act quickly before their mouths also are stopped up by gag laws.

Those who work for a new society are of two minds as regards the source of the leadership which is to bring it about. One group believes that the leadership must come from the masses who are to gain from the transfer of economic power into their hands. Hence they consider the private experimental schools totally insignificant. For them such schools can neither make nor mar leaders, since in the main they do not touch the proletarian class. The sole service of private schools from their viewpoint is to administer oxygen, in the form of a few fresh ideas, to a class dying of degeneracy. But there is no fear on the part of these apostles to the masses that the patients will revive permanently enough to make trouble. The other group hopes for much help toward social change from teachers such as members of the Progressive Education Association. They maintain that because teachers in experimental schools are freer to speak their minds, they will train children to be leaders in bringing about a new society; and they will meanwhile protest boldly against the increasing regimentation and censorship of which their fellow teachers in the public schools are helpless victims.

As regards verbal protests on the part of teachers in experimental schools, their hopes cannot have been disappointed. The rising flood of oratory has almost washed away the bridge. But how far, I wonder, do the experimental schools dare go when it comes to action, not talk? Is it here that the silken handcuffs are revealed? The Ives Bill was taken seriously by all kinds of private schools—in the Progressive Education Association and out. Its implications were understood and feared. Yet not one school that I know of, not even the most radical, many of whose students are young communists, dared to refuse to sign the loyalty oath and become a test case as a school. They were all forced to submit, because (I name the more glorious reasons first) 1. they feared to risk losing students through the parents' dislike of publicity; 2. they feared actual interference in their teaching from state authorities who might not otherwise have been aware of their existence; and 3. their economic existence depended upon tax exemption which might have been denied a "disloyal" school.

The question of war is one tie that binds all progressive schools, which disagree on most matters pertaining to education. Would the same reasons which operated toward the universal submission to the Ives Bill prevent an organized protest against war on the part of these schools? One would expect a bold stand from one of the private high schools in New York which sets itself up as a laboratory for high schools all over the country and claims to mold adolescent opinion along progressive, if not radical lines. Last spring I was told by a student that this school would not allow its students to join the April 12th demonstration against war without written permission from the parents. Who were the leaders here?
The teachers? The students? No, the final responsibility was passed to the parents. The school must protect itself against being sued by the parents, as had been done in an allied institution. The school did all it could within its walls to inform the students about war and to influence them against it. But direct action, as part of their teaching and against the wishes of the public, was not possible for these teachers in an experimental school any more than it would have been for public school teachers.

I know of another school which for another cause dared to go further into the field of action. This school one day allowed its students to print leaflets on the school printing press during school hours, leaflets protesting against the Jacobs Bill, which was to come up at a meeting of the Board of Aldermen that very day. (This bill provided for drastic curtailment of political freedom for teachers and students.) Students distributed the leaflets at various schools during the noon hour, and a delegation of over a hundred students from a number of schools attended the Board of Aldermen meeting. The bill was not brought up that day and has never been passed.

It remains to be seen whether such action will get schools into further trouble or will prevent further curtailment of their academic freedom. The teachers who permitted such direct action took the chance that parents, city authorities, and the general public might disapprove to such an extent that the existence of the school would be endangered. But if the protest does not come from such daring schools, there seems to be no point, socially speaking, in experimental schools.

There is one new field of action which should, once it is thoroughly cultivated, yield greater freedom for private school teachers who have suffered from social pressure to the extent, perhaps, of being eased out of or dismissed from their jobs. That is the Union of Private School Teachers in New York City. This union has been in existence for less than two years, but it has already proved such a force that it is feared by administrators whose interests are not identified with those of the teachers. One school Board of Trustees fired a teacher on various charges proffered at different times, two of them being that she taught Communism in the classroom, and that she was active in the Union; none of them being criticisms of her ability as a teacher. Of course the Union is taking up the case, employing the usual weapons of a trade union. The experience, while hard on the victim, is valuable education in trade union tactics for "white collar" workers. And if they benefit by their experience, other teachers will be allowed to teach what they believe and join what they will. They will want to join, too, not only for freedom but for security, economic as well as spiritual, because the Union has already accomplished definite results in the matter of increased salaries, tenure, and written contracts. But the Union is going to meet with the same opposition that unions have always met with: refusal to recognize the right of workers to stand together. It has already run up against the condition made by one principal, that new teachers do not join the Union. Sometimes opposition to the union idea for private school teachers comes from the most unexpected quarters. The trustees of one school of my acquaintance who objected to dealing with the Union when a teacher had been dismissed (partly because of Union activity) were themselves carry-
ing on a rent strike! They finally saw their inconsistency and met with a union committee. The parents in this school split up into two camps, for and against the dismissed teacher, and as a result the school this year is almost wiped out. The answer may be that such a school should be wiped out, but that is no solution for the unemployed teachers.

I have tried to show by a few illustrations that action as well as talk is being attempted by those who are in the best position to take action, teachers in experimental schools. I have showed the dangers of action for teachers and for schools which depend for their existence upon a fickle public’s patronage. But the teacher in an experimental school is hardened to an exposed position in the vanguard. I am sure of this consolation for her, that though her body may and probably will lie a-molding in the grave she has noisily dug for herself, her soul will go marching right on into the promised land of liberty and justice for all—even respectable school teachers.

CONTRIBUTORS

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