

Censorship and Education in a Postmodern Society

Censorship of school publications has become a hot topic in Williamsburg lately; *The Pillory*, a humor publication at the College of William and Mary, has been lambasted for a cartoon it ran of superhero "Mighty Whitie" saving a white woman from the clutches of a black drug dealer, resulting in outrage from students, administration, and the community at large. The College's administration and the editor of the publication itself issued an apology to the entire College community, stating that it had basically all been a big misunderstanding.

There are some differences between this situation and the high school newspaper censorship case of *Hazelwood v. Kuhlmeier*, S.Ct., 1988, and some similarities. Public funding supports both publications indirectly. The high school had a policy to have the school newspaper checked out by the principal before publication, while the college had no such checking system. Why this checking system exists I am not sure. It seems to me that either you enable free speech or you do not, and there can be no purpose for the principal checking the pre-publication materials except to exercise control over what is later printed. While I appreciate the dilemma of the principal and the teacher--a censored newspaper or no newspaper at all--I see other options. Why could they not have printed the paper as is while initiating a procedure of disclaimers that should long have been in place already: "The opinions offered in this publication reflect those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the school, its administration, its faculty, its staff, or its other students." This would enable the full six-page edition to be printed with impunity from administrative constraints and punishments, while also enabling the students to experience the *real* "legal, moral, and ethical restrictions imposed upon journalists with the school community," and "responsibility and acceptance of criticism for articles of opinion." [It would seem that the only opinion that matters is that of the principal...]

Unfortunately, our summary does not make available to us the details of the principal's objections, which are, it seems, material in determining the degree of censorship exercised here. If, indeed (as seems unlikely), the objections were of some sort of legitimate editorial nature (and hopefully if that is the case the principal is in

fact some sort of legitimate editor), then pulling the stories seems extreme but plausible under some circumstances. If, however, the objections were of “moral” or personal nature, then it seems to me that they had no place in the realm of the principal’s duties as regards the school’s newspaper, if in fact the objectives driving its existence included its “educational implications” fitting in with its “basic educational mission.” Furthermore, the principal had no reason to believe, as far as I can tell, that these stories would “substantially interfere with the work of the school or impinge upon the rights of other students.”

The idea that this publication was intended as an extension of other educational activities and assignments and should be handled as such defeats the motive of censorship over editorship as well. Would teachers at that school give a student an automatic zero if they turned in a paper with which the teachers disagreed? Would they throw it in the trash? This is essentially the treatment received by “papers” written by the journalism class, which I feel to be an unacceptable educational practice, aside from stepping over the boundaries of censorship.

In a postmodern society, in which plurality and pseudo-relativism become of tantamount importance, the idea of an administrator making editorial decisions based on what he or she deems to be “inappropriate, personal, sensitive, and unsuitable” is even less acceptable. Allowing the students a forum for dialogue about issues important to them not only enables their individual liberties and therefore is constitutionally supported, but it also meets the stated educational goals of the school stated here: “School sponsored student publications will not restrict free expression or diverse viewpoints within the rules of responsible journalism.”