

## **Jazz, Drama, and a Librarian: Advocating Against Book Censorship in Public Schools**

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### **Abstract**

Each year, books are challenged and/or banned from public school libraries across the country and most recently there has been an increased number of books with diverse characters banned from public schools. Removing books from public schools restricts students' abilities to read and reflect upon these texts. Students have a right to access books depicting characters and events that they can relate to and characters and events that they can learn from. These books can become "mirrors" to the reader or "windows" to the world around the reader. Administrators, teachers, librarians, students, parents, and community members should advocate for access to books of all types for all students.

### **Keywords**

literacy, censorship, book banning, school libraries, advocacy

### **Introduction**

Each year, books are challenged and/or banned from public school libraries across the country. Removing books from school libraries restricts students' abilities to read and reflect upon these texts. This negatively impacts all students because it prevents students from seeing themselves in the books and it prevents students from learning about others from reading the books. As Smolkin and Young (2011) note, "such books are seen as self-affirming mirrors for children of a given culture and as windows into other lives for children outside that given culture" (p. 217).

All students deserve the opportunity to see themselves in literature. For these students, books become "mirrors" that reflect their own lives. All students (students with disabilities, students in rural settings, students with diverse backgrounds, etc.) need to see themselves in literature – sometimes those "controversial" texts are the ones that students can relate to the most and removing them also removes the chance for a student to connect with a text. In addition to giving students the opportunity to "see themselves" in literature, other students (not those necessarily with the same characteristics as the ones found in the text) can learn from reading these types of texts. These books become "windows" to new information and help readers develop an understanding and an appreciation of the diversity that exists in their school, town, state, country, and the world. Books are sometimes the only place where readers may meet people who are not like themselves and who, therefore, offer alternative worldviews (Tschida, Ryan, & Ticknor, 2014).

All children have a right to access books that reflect their own images and books that open less familiar worlds to them (Bishop, 2012). However, books are routinely challenged and banned throughout the country. Administrators, teachers, librarians, students, parents, and community members should advocate for access to books of all types for all students.

### **Background**

In 1982, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in *Board of Education, Island Trees v. Pico* by Pico, which addressed the removal of certain books from a public school library by the Board of Education members who felt the books were "anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic, and just plain filthy" (Board of Education). In its decision, the Supreme Court stated that a balance must be struck between the school's role as an educator and the students' rights of access to materials. However, the Court ruled that local school boards may not remove books from the library

shelves “simply because its members disagreed with their idea content” (Board of Education). The Supreme Court’s ruling in 1982, however, did not cease the challenges made to books in public school libraries. Typically, in a school setting, a book is “challenged” by a parent, community member, administrator, etc. and then that challenge is reviewed (typically by the district school board). The school board (or other group) either denies the challenge (leaving the book in place) or approves the challenge (resulting in a “ban” of the book).

In recent years, multiple challenges (some proving successful) were made to books in various parts of the country for various reasons. Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) was removed from a high school supplemental reading list after parents complained that it was “anti-Christian” (American Library Association [ALA], 2014a). Green’s *Looking for Alaska* (2006) was challenged, but retained, at a high school because it was labeled “too racy to read” (ALA, 2014b). In 2014, Harris’ *It’s Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex & Sexual Health* (2009) was challenged at a middle school library because of its depiction of cartoon nudity (ALA, 2014a). Each of these incidents represents the continual controversy in our society over what is appropriate literature in public schools.

### Recent Shifts in Challenges

Recent research has indicated that the *type* of books that are challenged and/or banned has shifted. While twenty years ago books that depicted drug use, sex, or offensive language were most often included on the American Library Association (ALA)’s list of the most banned/challenged books, more recently it has become books containing diversity as a theme that have begun repeatedly being banned/challenged. Books that focus on different races, religious minorities, people with disabilities, LGBT identities, etc. have pushed out books with offensive language, drug use, and sex on the lists of the most banned/challenged books. Begley (2016) notes that the shift “seems to be linked to demographic changes in the country—and the political fear-mongering that can accompany those changes” (p. 1). According to the ALA (2016), the most challenged books in 2015 included two books about transgender people, two books containing homosexuality, and two books featuring Muslim characters.

For example, in 2015, a group of parents in Florida requested the removal of *The Librarian of Basra: A True Story from Iraq* (Winter, 2005) from the schools in the Duval County School District. The book is based on the true story of Alia Muhammad Baker, a librarian who saved 30,000 books from the Basra library’s collection before the building was burned in a fire. The book was awarded one of the ALA’s 2006 Notable Children’s Books (ALA, 2007) and was chosen as the city of Philadelphia’s “One Book, One Philadelphia” book (Free Library of Philadelphia, 2017). Despite its message of courage and determination, the parents that challenged the book’s inclusion in the school library found it “inappropriate for promoting another religion that is not Christianity” (Thompson, 2015; ALA, 2015b).

In addition, despite a message of anti-bullying and acceptance, *I Am Jazz* (Herthel & Jennings, 2014) was the third most challenged book of 2015 (ALA, 2016a) and the fourth most challenged book of 2016 (ALA, 2017). The book is based upon the life of co-author Jazz Jennings and her experience as a transgender child. According to the ALA (2017), the requests to remove the book from public schools throughout the country were based upon the depiction of a transgender child, offensive viewpoints, and being unsuitable for children. In 2015, in response to a transgender child enrolled in the school, a primary school in Wisconsin planned to read the book to its student body to educate and inform the students of the topic (Diaz, 2017; ALA, 2016b). The school was threatened with a lawsuit if the book was read (Diaz, 2017). Despite the school’s cancellation of the reading, the local library held the reading which was attended by 600 community members and one of the authors (Diaz, 2017).

Further, according to the ALA (2017), the second most challenged book of 2016 was *Drama* (Telgemeier, 2012). This graphic novel depicts the story of a middle school girl who deals with, among other things, her “crushes” at school. The story, which also was one of the most challenged books in 2014 (ALA, 2015a) contains a scene in which a male student has to take over the role of the female lead in the school play at the last minute—resulting in an onstage kiss with another male. This onstage kiss between two males in the school’s musical performance resulted in multiple challenges against the book. According to the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas (2016), the book was challenged at a junior high in Texas due to its “socially offensive” nature—and the book was banned from the school.

This shift in banning books containing these types of diverse characters threatens the opportunities for students to learn about themselves and the world around them. In today’s society, it is essential that students have access to books that depict diverse identities—so that they can relate to those characters or learn about others from those characters.

### **Advocating for Access**

It is imperative that students have access to texts depicting all types of ideas and people—including ones like themselves and ones unlike themselves. Books should be accessible to students to serve as a mirror of the reader or a window to the world. Through connecting with character or events in a story or gaining new knowledge about differences among people, students can learn about themselves and others, leading to a more informed citizenry.

It is the responsibility of a library to serve everyone (Jacobson, 2016). Teachers, librarians, administrators, school specialists, parents, and community members should be encouraged to support the inclusion of books about a variety of topics in school libraries. This does not necessarily mean these books should be required reading—rather, these books should simply be made available to students in the school library so that they have the opportunity to read them if they choose to do so. Many students may not live near a public library and many may not have internet access at home, so the school library becomes one of the main resources for students to learn about themselves and the world around them. If there are multiple voices opposing banning books and advocating for access, individuals challenging books may gain new information regarding the importance of their inclusion. By vocalizing a position that students need to have access to books that depict people like themselves and people unlike themselves, challenges based on a misunderstanding of the importance of this may lessen.

More specifically, in order to protect student access to books, the following two specific recommendations are made:

1. **Avoid “Restricted” Sections.** In order to accommodate the concerns of individuals who find books inappropriate, some school districts have implemented “restricted” sections where “controversial” books are kept and can only be checked out by students with parent/guardian permission. This only encourages the belief that the content within those texts is “wrong” or “forbidden.” For example, if a school library shelves a book about a family with same-sex parents in its “restricted” section, a student with a similar family dynamic is taught that a family like that is so different, abnormal, and unacceptable that special written permission must first be obtained before he can read the book. Further, it conveys to other students the same message—that book about families such as those are so offensive that they cannot be kept on the same shelf as books about “acceptable” families. This segregation of the books can create a further divide among students—from those students feeling like their lifestyle is inadequate to possibly reinforcing that notion to other students who see that books containing that

content do not deserve a place on the “regular” shelf in the library. While designating sections as “Young Adult” or “Older Readers” is acceptable, restricting access to books is not. Making texts available to all students (without the stigma of being “restricted”) might provide students with a sense of being “accepted” and might send the message to others that differences are valued.

2. **Require Reading and Discussion.** According to the School Library Journal’s Controversial Books Survey (2016), the majority of challenges originate from parents, especially in elementary schools. More specifically, 92% of challenges in elementary schools and 80% of challenges in high schools are made by parents (Jacobson, 2016). In order to have an informative, productive conversation about the challenged book, the challenger (most often a parent) should be required to read and discuss the book with a group of other parents, librarians, teachers, students, etc. Some challenges are made without the challenger having read the entire book, but instead just a paragraph. Without full knowledge of the entire text, the challenger cannot have an informed opinion about it. Further, a discussion about the book’s content will give the challenger an opportunity to hear how the book may be a positive resource for students—perhaps in ways the challenger had not thought of before. Listening to teachers, librarians, and, in particular, students discuss the text may provide an opportunity for an eye-opening discussion that results in the dismissal of the challenge. Even if the challenge remains in place, a thorough reading of the book as well as a respectful discussion about the book should occur.

## Summary

Students have a right to access books depicting characters and events that they can relate to and characters and events that they can learn from. Denying students the opportunity to access information encourages and reinforces ideas that certain topics are wrong and unacceptable. Schools should strive to give students opportunities to learn about the world around them. By advocating for access and eliminating barriers to books, public school libraries can fulfill their responsibility to serve all students.

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