

# Magdalena Gwioździk

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## Freedom to read : "censorship" addressed to school libraries in the USA

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Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

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MAGDALENA GWIOŹDZIK  
*Katowice*

**FREEDOM TO READ.  
“CENSORSHIP” ADDRESSED  
TO SCHOOL LIBRARIES IN THE USA**

In 2014 most of the states in the USA are planning to implement new educational standards in teaching (The Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects) [The Telegraph] in K-12 public schools [K12]. The purpose of these standards prepared by National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers is to help teachers be successful by providing clear goals for student learning<sup>1</sup>. The Standards also supply knowledge in classical literature as well as literary non-fiction [English Language]. The importance of the standards arise from they have a great influence on the teaching programs and school libraries especially that the world literature has been censored for political, religious, moral and social reasons [Green, 1990].

It was subjected not only to juridical restrictions but also too many other restrictions such as the removal of school programs and libraries, publishing censorship or self-censorship of teachers and librarians [Burruss, 1989]. Other institutions such as universities, associations, book-sellers, organizations (PTA<sup>2</sup>), magazines (ex. *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom*<sup>3</sup>) and courts and tribunals have joined the discussion about contemporary censorship.

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<sup>1</sup> “High standards that are consistent across states provide teachers, parents, and students with a set of clear expectations that are aligned to the expectations in college and careers. The standards promote equity by ensuring all students, no matter where they live, are well prepared with the skills and knowledge necessary to collaborate and compete with their peers in the United States and abroad” [Common Core].

<sup>2</sup> The National PTA has created the Parents’ Guide to Student Success based on the Common Core, with individual guides for each grade level to download and share with families [Parents’ Guide].

<sup>3</sup> *The Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* is the only journal that reports attempts to remove materials from school and library shelves across the country. The *NIF* is the source for the latest information on intellectual freedom issues. Published bi-monthly by the Intellectual Freedom Committee of the American Library [Newsletter].

The United States Supreme Court supports the belief that “the right to explore different ideas” is a part of a “meaningful exercise of freedom of speech, press and political freedom” [Karolides, Bald and Sova, 2004, p. 49]. The First Amendment to the United States Constitution “guarantees all individuals the right to express their ideas without governmental interference, and to read and listen to the ideas of others” [Hudson, 2010]. Organizations of librarians, particularly the American Library Association (ALA), adheres to this point of view. ALA, founded on October 6, 1876 in Philadelphia, provides leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services. It is the oldest and largest library association in the world. The position of the ALA is that intellectual freedom is “a natural right that every human being on this planet is born with, and that we should be able to see, read, or hear all sides of an issue before we decide what is the best thing for us to do” [ALA]. According to ALA, having all the possible information, we can make educated decisions in our lives and influence others to make educated decisions as well.

The purpose of ALA is to make all books available to everyone. The ALA encourages libraries to be proponents of information and work against issues of censorship so that everyone could get the same access regardless of religion, race and age. The ALA recalls the Constitution of the United States of America which says: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances” [Board of Education; First Amendment]. The position of ALA is supported by the Freedom to Read Foundation (FTRF) which is an organization affiliated with the ALA [Freedom]. This non-profit and educational organization protects and defends the First Amendment to the Constitution and supports the right of libraries to collect - and individuals to access information.

The matter of unlimited access to the literature was the subject of the trial under the U.S. Supreme Court which supported the claim of respondents alleging that the board of education’s actions had denied respondents’ rights under the First Amendment. Opponents point to the interpretation of this provision “in light of the special characteristics of the school environment” [Board of Education]. The special characteristics of the school library make that environment particularly appropriate for the recognition of such rights [Karolides, Bald and Sova, 2004, p. 49; Board of Education]. This means that there should be no censorship because everyone should have the freedom of speech and the right to read whatever he wants. Censorship reduces these rights. That may sound logical but do children count as “everyone”? The ALA has the answer – yes, they do, and they should be treated like adults. Parents conversely disagree.

Parents as well as religious organizations and representatives of the local authorities provide their own lists of books to that they think should be limited. Surprisingly, classical texts or the works of the Nobel Prize for Literature winners were on this list including *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Twelfth Night*, *The Prince and the Pauper* by Mark Twain, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë or *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller [Karolides, Bald and Sova, 2004, p. 116-117].

In 1989, reading and holding the Bible at a school area by a university student was prohibited. A few years later, in 1993 in America, people organized a protest against placing the Bible in the school library as it was obscene and pornographic book [Karolides, Bald and Sova, 2004, p. 265-266].

A subversive content and vulgar language was found in Robert Cormier's psychological thriller, *I Am The Cheese*. What is more, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* by George Orwell was repeatedly removed from school libraries owing to its "indecent" and communism as was his novel *Animal Farm*. The novel *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck aroused conflicting emotions because of its vulgar and obscene vocabulary, the negative representation of the characters, and inciting class hatred. The racial references were seen in the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain and *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Michell. *Slaughterhouse 5* by Kurt Vonnegut was called for removal because of its "obscenity, vulgar language, violence, ... wickedness ... unpatriotic image of war" [Karolides, Bald and Sova, 2004, p. 208]. In 1983, parents decided that the *Official Anne Frank* is too depressing as a school reading [Karolides, Bald and Sova, 2004, p. 465]. A list of 1 350 books which are inappropriate for various reasons was prepared by PAB-BIS (*Parents Against Bad Books In Schools*)<sup>4</sup>.

In 2012 the list of the most criticized books included a series of *Captain Underpants* by Dav Pilkey (offensive language, unsuited for age group), *Fifty Shades of Grey* by EL James (offensive language, sexually explicit), and *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini (homosexuality, offensive language, religious viewpoint, sexually explicit) [Perez, 2013]. These books should be either removed from the school libraries or at least access to them should be restricted (eg. borrowing under the written consent of parents), which in accordance with the principles of intellectual freedom expressed in the Constitution Libraries adopted by the American Library Association is only a compromise: "... to prohibit reading books is a dangerous thing. It could lead to a dangerous situation that we empty the libraries" [Karolides, Bald and Sova, 2004, p. 213].

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<sup>4</sup> As the evidence, parents wrote every inappropriate word out from these books. "Bad is what you think is bad for your child" [What is].

The basic reasons for censorship are moral religious, and social reasons and, in lesser extent, political issues. Some parents are afraid of their children's mental health. "There are very few libraries today in which I would leave my 13-year-old son unescorted", says the Executive Director of the Council for National Policy, Mr. Baldwin [Baldwin, 2006] He doesn't trust the ALA anymore. He admits that ALA defends books which feature "drug-gies, sex addicts, pedophiles, gang members and others on the fringes of society" [Baldwin, 2006]. It doesn't reflect, as the ALA says, the real life of Americans but, in fact, show pathetic behaviors and can be dangerous for everyone but mostly for young people who have not sorted their priorities yet. Those books, lying on libraries' shelves are not for everybody to read. But shockingly, it is observed that teachers – people who are supposed to lead the youth through their first years at school and show new horizons, whose work is to help – bring in potentially dangerous books to school libraries or act even worse – encourage to read those books by assigning them as mandatory reading assignments [Baldwin, 2006]. For example, a novel *Rainbow boys* tells about homosexual boys apparently making bad choices which leads to serious consequences such AIDS. Young people who do not know anything about the world yet, no matter how well they think they are informed, would automatically adapt this controversial knowledge. It is treating people who are only learning or even beginning to learn like fully grown and educated adults. Children should have their rights but not like every other person.

ALA responses to parents with a very immature answer. They created 'Banned Books Week'. "It's an ingenious tactic considering the ALA seems intent on phasing out the classics. However, parent researchers and bloggers have found many of these allegations to be false or grossly exaggerated. For example, the ALA counts ascensorship incidents as a parent simply requesting that the school or library be more age selective when assigning books or amend a teacher's mandatory reading list to include other books not so offensive. ... Banned Books Week was clearly designed by the ALA to direct attention away from the onslaught of violent, obscene literature in America's schools" [Baldwin, 2006].

The ALA also addresses its opinion to children. It says that adults sometimes forget that children have the same rights, "If a book you like is removed from the school or public library because someone does not think a young person should read it, you have the right to argue against this decision. You should talk to your parents about how you feel and they may be very supportive about you talking to the librarian, or to the principal, or even to the school board at one of its meetings" [ALA].

An ongoing discussion between parents, librarians, teachers and students shows that the problem is not easy to solve. Among the fighting sides the priority should be the interest of the children, it is not only a battle for

rights. Based on the general principle of the free development of library collections, without any political pressures, for which ALA fights, shaping decisions about individual collections in each library should be left to librarians. They know their users, their needs, and opportunities, as well as the requirements for them by the school. They also give the best chance of not being guided in this activity by prejudice. On the is basis, as well as taking into account financial possibilities, librarians prepare acquisition policy, which can be agreed with every concerned party (also with parents), so the activity is open and clear.

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**Magdalena Gwioździk**

***Wolność czytania. „Cenzura” dotycząca szkolnych bibliotek w USA***

### **Streszczenie**

W tekście zwrócono uwagę na różne aspekty ograniczeń dostępu do literatury w szkolnych bibliotekach USA. Przedstawiono toczącą się dyskusję w tym zakresie, prowadzoną głównie przez odpowiedzialne za standardy nauczania agendy rządowe, nauczycieli, American Library Association (ALA) oraz organizacje rodziców. Wskazano przygotowywane listy książek, z klasyką literatury światowej, do których dostęp dla dzieci powinien być ograniczony lub zabroniony, głównie ze względów obyczajowych, społecznych, moralnych, religijnych, niekiedy także politycznych. Opisano działania, podejmowane przez ALA, służące promowaniu wolności lektury, jak tygodnie zakazanych książek. Uznano, że bibliotekarze, którzy orientują się w potrzebach i możliwościach czytelników, a także wymaganiach szkół, są najlepiej przygotowani do kształtowania polityki gromadzenia i wykorzystania zbiorów, z uzgodnieniem oczekiwań każdej z zainteresowanych stron.

