

UK secondary school's sweeping censorship of library books

Margot Miller
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The *Index on Censorship* magazine in March featured an interview with a former UK librarian, hounded out of a job she loved due to fallout from a book censorship drive by school management.

Over 50 percent of school librarians have reported similar incidents in schools across the UK, including in Birmingham, the Isle of Wight, Kent, Essex and Scotland.

At the time of the interview, the location of the secondary school was known—Greater Manchester—but not its name—the Lowry Academy in Salford. The librarian, referred to as Emily, wished to remain anonymous.

Problems at the school began in November when the headteacher demanded Emily remove *Men Who Hate Women* from the library. Author and feminist Laura Bates wrote the book as an antidote to the misogynistic culture promoted on the internet associated with the “incel” or involuntarily celibate movement, and manosphere, more widely associated with Andrew Tate—currently facing sex trafficking charges. The book was available for year 11 pupils about to leave school (15-16-year-olds).

Emily chose the book after attending a safeguarding course. After removing the book, the following morning she noticed gaps on the shelves where other books were missing. Management asked her to provide a book audit and pull books from the shelves deemed “inappropriate”, without providing a definition of inappropriate.

“It took me all day to take 15-20 books off the shelves, and it was killing me,” she told *Index*.

From then on things escalated. Emily, represented by the National Education Union (NEU), was told she had been reported to the Local Authority as a safeguarding risk and there would be an investigation and possible misconduct charge.

Caroline Roche, chair of the School Libraries Group (SLG), part of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), ridiculed the safeguarding claims. She said the school should have discussed the titles with Emily and have a library policy in place.

The school furnished Emily with a final list of banned books, up to 200 including titles with challenging themes that school children have a right to access such as romance, racism and sexual identity. Emily shared the list with the SLG who wrote

to the school declaring that none of the books were inappropriate, rebutting all the reasons for the censorship.

The texts are widely available in bookshops and libraries across the UK. Referencing the gothic comic book series *The Crow* by James O’Barr, for example, the SLG wrote, “One of the best-selling black-and-white graphic novels of all time.”

Michelle Obama’s autobiography, *Becoming*, was pulled with the note, for racism and political content, as was Reni Edo-Lodge’s *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. Terry Pratchett’s *Soul Music* with adult themes including sexual content, was deemed inappropriate.

A graphic version of the classic *1984* by George Orwell was considered too distressing for teenagers. Another title classed as unsuitable was *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer because of its romantic and sexual themes. *Queerly Autistic: The Ultimate Guide For LGBTQIA+ Teens On The Spectrum* by Erin Ekins was on the list. The book has a recommended reading age of 12-18.

Ekins released a statement that said: “Education on sex and sexuality is not a bad thing. It’s knowledge, and knowledge is power.

“Many autistic young people, autistic adults, parents and carers, and professionals, have reached out to me over the years about how vital a resource it has been.”

CILIP CEO Louis Coiffait-Gunn had sight of one document provided by Emily that revealed the school used AI to produce its hit list. He said that “rather than relying on a trained professional whose entire career is about working out what are the right books for different children and making sure that they’re provided,” the school used AI—which would reflect the prejudices of the school leaders.

He emphasised the right of children under the UN Charter of Human Rights to obtain age-appropriate information, if it is legal, and that Emily’s case set a worrying precedent.

The stress of the investigation was too much for Emily, who is autistic and she decided to resign. An investigation was still held about the safeguarding complaint under Salford City Council LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer) including LADO chair, LADO administration officer and school representatives. It concluded that, while not causing direct harm, Emily had not followed safeguarding procedures. Salford

council is controlled by the Labour Party.

For Emily, this means the end of her career. “The fact it’s gone through safeguarding means Emily will never be able to work in a school again,” said SLG’s Roche.

CILIP summed up its response to the book banning as a threat to “children’s freedom to read, learn and question.” It warned of the danger that under the threat of disciplinary action, librarians will self-censor what their training tells them is appropriate reading material for children.

An investigation by online newspaper *The Manchester Mill* revealed that the school in question was the Lowry Academy in Salford, part of the United Learning Trust (ULT). The ethos has “Christian roots” (ULT’s website) with the Archbishop of Canterbury a patron. ULT is the largest Academy chain in the UK employing 9,000 and runs 96 primaries and secondaries schools in the public and private sector. It plans to absorb southwest chain Authentic Education, seeing the ULT grow to 109 schools.

School academies, introduced by Labour under Tony Blair in 2000, are state funded but privately run, part of the creeping privatisation of UK education.

In 2016, the ULT received a donation of £5 million from major Tory donor and co-founder of one of world’s largest hedge funds, Alan Howard.

A *Mill* reporter spoke to parents at the school gate, none of whom were aware of the book banning. One said that children “shouldn’t be sheltered from these issues. These are real problems in society and children should be equipped with how to understand them.”

Teachers at the NEU annual conference held over Easter voted unanimously to oppose the censorship of books in school libraries.

In a press release, NEU General Secretary Daniel Kebede remarked, “The USA and Hungary are examples of countries which have implemented book bans in schools, primarily targeting books by women, Black and LGBT+ authors, and the NEU is clear that this is not a path we are prepared to follow in the UK.”

Fighting words, but the NEU leadership, along with all the education unions have capitulated to decades of attacks on education—funding cuts, staff pay erosion, punitive Ofsted inspections, impossible workload, decimation of special needs provision and the academisation of schools.

The future facing children when they leave school is bleak. There are 957,000 so called NEETS (12.8 percent of 16-24-year-olds Not in Education, Employment, or Training), according to the Office for National Statistics. This is before the economic consequences of the war in the Middle East kick in.

The Starmer-led Labour government’s policies of austerity and increased war spending bring them into direct conflict with young people, who were in the forefront of the global climate protests beginning in 2018—with thousands walking out of

school—and the demonstrations demanding an end to the Gaza genocide.

Young people have led “Gen Z” mass protests demanding a future free from unemployment, poverty and repression across Asia, Latin America in the 2020s.

The aim of governments is to curb this radicalization and create a conformist, compliant youth, who question nothing and willingly accept conscription when the call comes.

In March, Labour announced the launch of an antisemitism review into schools and colleges, due to report in autumn, advocated by the second largest teachers’ union, the NASUWT.

The antisemitism witch-hunt under Corbyn’s leadership, conflating anti-Zionism with the scourge of antisemitism, led to thousands of members who opposed the genocide of the Palestinians being driven out of the party.

Labour MP, Yasmin Qureshi, MP for Bolton South and Walkden—another constituency in Greater Manchester, where the school is located—said she has written to the Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson MP demanding an investigation to the banning of books at the school. She represents the same government which has attempted to intimidate and silence opposition to its support for US and Israeli war crimes in the Middle East. Thousands have been arrested for peacefully protesting the Gaza genocide, and the right to demonstrate is being curtailed.

The management at the Lowry refused to be interviewed by both the *Index* and *Mill*, stating they disagreed with Emily’s version of events. Because of the backlash, they have since back peddled, saying they merely wanted to do an audit and have returned most of the books to the library on age-appropriate shelves—without saying how many books have been permanently removed.

The victimised librarian should receive compensation for the hurt she has endured. All safeguarding accusations should be purged from her record, so she can pursue the career she was trained for without a blemish.

If your school has been affected by these issues, contact the Educators Rank and File Committee and share your experiences.



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