

Anthony Robinson and Annemarie Young

Dr Christine Ackerman
Chappaqua School Superintendent

15th June 2024

Dear Dr Ackerman,

Subject: *Young Palestinians Speak: Living under Occupation*

It has come to our notice that our book, *Young Palestinians Speak: Living under Occupation*, has been subject to removal from the Seven Bridges Middle School library, on the grounds that the context would not be understood by that age group and that our intent and perspective is unknown. We strongly disagree with that assessment of the cognitive abilities of most children in that age group. In relation to our *intent and perspective*, we write books and conduct seminars for the purpose of giving a voice to the voiceless. We all want to have a voice. Having one means we matter, and we all want to matter. Nothing more, nothing less. That is what we have done in this book, we present what we found on the ground in Palestine. To this end, we visited Palestine four times between 2013-2016, to guarantee that what we reported back on was what we saw and heard, and was not second hand.

The book was written for ages ten to sixteen and upwards. There is something for everyone interested in this conflict, adults included. The language and the concepts are clear and simply put, as are the voices of those quoted in the book. The many reviews of the book attest to the accessibility of the language and concepts. We think that to deny access to this age group is wrong, and it makes no sense, not least for pedagogical reasons. It is also true that children are fascinated by the lives of other children in other cultures. This is our experience of working in the field for so long, and Anthony's own experience of travelling through Soviet Russia in 1973. Why deny them an opportunity to quench this thirst?

Anthony: I left Japan after a year and travelled on the Trans-Siberian Express through Soviet Russia to Europe. I was a very young man, and many memories remain of this trip, but one of the most profound was the desperate thirst that all those ordinary Russians we met had for information, information about how we all lived in our various countries. These were rarely political queries. They were about our day-to-day lives. I had to draw them a rough map of the world to show them Australia, where I come from. They thought it was Austria and had only rudimentary notions of geography beyond Eastern Europe.

Denying the young access to books, especially those about current events, like the Israel-Palestine conflict, is to deny them knowledge and a space to think. It's denying the value of freedom of thought – a very dangerous road to go down. Children are sponges. They can be unduly influenced by one-sided arguments or they can be given the dignity of being allowed to decide for themselves. Surely this is a manifestation of freedom. Fear of knowledge runs through human history, as do attempts to suppress knowledge – attempts which only work short-term in any case. The consequences of any suppression can be dire.

When a Middle School student searches books under Israel, 39 books are displayed, including books on history. A search under Palestine reveals 11, only two of which represent Palestinian voices with humanity and dignity. This is an imbalance that should send red flags for educators. However, this does not appear to be the case.

Another purpose of our book is to stimulate discussion. It is hard to stimulate discussion if the overwhelming weight of material is about one side in the conflict. It seems you have no objections to the middle school students reading the one-sided accounts.

Are you really afraid that the children's unfamiliarity with the context will render the material confusing? Why not let the children decide and help them if they need it.

As authors, we have striven to present a comprehensive and honest look at the lives of ordinary Palestinian young people caught up in an extraordinary struggle not of their making. They want their voices to be heard. Cancelling the platform for a discussion out of a fear that the young will ask questions is invidious.

Finally, we think it would have been a matter of courtesy to speak to the authors prior to your decision to remove the book from Middle School eyes.

Yours sincerely,

Anthony Robinson and Annemarie Young
13 June, 2024
Cambridge, UK

Copied to: Andrew Corsilia, Assistant Superintendent; the Board of Education, Chappaqua Schools