

Public Schools and Intellectual Freedom in a Democratic Society

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I. Introduction: A History of Intellectual Freedom in American Democracy

Determined to give power to the people in order to enhance what Thomas Jefferson calls a “natural aristocracy” of educated citizens, the earliest U.S. Senate allowed states the opportunity to fund public education, free and equally available to all citizens. A radical mandate, this legal precedence for public education reflects core values on which this country was founded. Embedded in the precept of public education for all citizens is a concomitant: equal access continues long after one’s high-school diploma because public education is a community-based business.

A community’s public schools are responsive to and influenced by both those within and those outside the school. This virtually unlimited access to public education by the public at large can lead to vibrant changes; however, unlimited access also can create stifling standstills, symptomatic of the diversity of beliefs, socioeconomic conditions, and lifestyles that make up a community. Public education today is the result of this interplay between educators and the community.

Giving voice to community members is an important component of the sanctity of public education. It also can be a precarious challenge for public-school administrators and educators. Add to that mix federally- and locally-mandated testing, an influx of English-language learners, extensive special-education and gifted-education development, funding and salary issues, overcrowding, and the personal baggage each student carries with him/her each day, it often seems impossible for effective learning to occur. And yet, it does, over and over again.

This document has been created to address the myriad influences and responsibilities both within and outside public education that shape and affect the profession of teachers. It is constructed based on teacher knowledge complemented by school-district policies and expectations, additional guidelines and documentation from varied academic fields, and by Federal law. Its intent, though straightforward, is profoundly important: to create and maintain within classrooms an intellectually safe and thriving environment for the diverse voices that arise from and strengthen a democracy, predicated on debate, discourse, and difference, where equal access applies to ideas as well as to people.

To achieve its goals, this document serves to coalesce Lincoln Public Schools District requirements with teacher rights and responsibilities via curriculum selection to assure student access to participation in a discourse of ideas. The document is comprised of several sections: a philosophy of education; District policy and individual decision on text selection; and a review and explanation of current English curriculum. These sections have been included in order to help students, teachers, parents/guardians, school administrators, and the general public better understand complex education issues: selection of materials, the study of potentially controversial topics, freedom of expression. The document reasserts the genesis of public education’s mandate: to reach all students and to nudge them on their academic journeys by means of difficult texts that engage varied perspectives.

II. A Philosophical View of English Education

Curricular selection begins in philosophy, a philosophic view on why teachers select the texts they teach. For centuries theologians and philosophers have been telling humanity that life is full of problems. "Life is suffering," says Buddha. "Take up your cross," says Christ. There is no getting around it; life is a series of problems. Each of these tests, hurdles, and challenges presents an opportunity for humanity to grow through understanding. These challenges call for courage, intelligence, creativity, honesty, determination, and discipline. Yet, by means of such crucibles, humanity tests its societal and individual character.

If life is and always has been challenging, the demand of all teachers, in any subject area, is—through education—to help equip students to navigate this journey. This call, supported by the Lincoln Public Schools Board of Education, expects its teachers to provide opportunities to study controversial issues, in part to help our students to “think creatively and critically and to create new perspectives and possibilities.” Renowned educator/critical theorist Ira Shor echoes the LPS Board of Education’s charge to complicate student thought because, fundamentally, this is the aim of any course—particularly a humanities course: “The challenge to every liberal arts course is how much critical thinking does it generate and how much participation does it mobilize, how does it relate its body-of-knowledge to other disciplines, to the communities and literacies of students, and to the larger conditions of society. These are pedagogical responsibilities of any course, it could be said, not merely liberal arts” (Shor, 21).

The hope of all educators is to help the young people in our classrooms become more human, fully human: reflective, self-reflective, creative, honorable, tolerant, hopeful, humble, loving, forgiving, ethical. In short, teachers try to turn loose on the world young women and men capable of making a difference through their capacity for understanding. Again, this is an expectation of the LPS school board, that teachers “help students develop the knowledge and skills necessary to become informed citizens” (Policy 6450). To this end, teachers give them problems to solve (Find the value of x . Discuss the moral responsibility of the United States in dropping the atom bombs on Japan at the close of WWII. Memorize the state capitals. In five-hundred words, make a case for the character that is most responsible for the deaths of Romeo and Juliet). In the process, students learn to cipher and socialize, balance a checkbook and budget time, write an essay and right a wrong. As disparate as some of these learning objectives may seem, at their core is the value of “participatory learning that mobilizes critical thought and democratic debate” (Shor, 25).

As teachers of English, the fundamental "problem" we assign to explore life is literature in all its varied forms. Literature is art and, as an art form, is as varied as the human experience. Attempting to study and understand events as diverse as the Holocaust and heart transplants, the end of Apartheid and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, Americans landing on the moon and the mapping of the human genome, students cannot absorb all of this, but as readers of literature and as writers themselves, they attempt to place events into a context, distill this maelstrom into something comprehensible, something new; for this purpose, teachers offer these artistic pieces to students in a public classroom. As difficult as that task can be, it again is an expectation of the LPS school district, which supports the understanding and celebration of “the diversity and interdependence of our pluralistic world” (Policy 6440). That can be an uncomfortable process for many people.

Since a certain degree of dissonance is expected when teachers challenge students to explore beyond their range of experience, teachers must honor and allow for this divergent search. The National Education Association Resolution on Academic and Professional Freedom clearly affirms that “academic freedom is essential to the teaching profession. Academic freedom includes the rights of teachers and learners to explore and discuss divergent points of view. Controversial issues should be a part of the instructional program when, in the judgment of the professional staff, the issues are appropriate to the curriculum and to the maturity level of the student” (Ochoa, 6).

Teachers of English have the task of bringing into the classroom engaging literature that reflects the kaleidoscope of human experience, as we now understand it. Forty or fifty years ago the task was quite simple: select works from a few dozen dead, white males. Again, school board guidelines concerning controversial materials emphasize and support this responsibility, stating that books and materials should “tend to counteract stereotypes about cultural/racial groups, men and women, sexual orientation, or the disabled” (Policy 6440.1).

Today, because the world and world views are both more complicated and more eclectic, teachers of English must affirm intellectual freedom and the teachers’ necessary role as professionals to introduce new texts into the curriculum, even as we continue to validate older texts.

In fact, Regulation 6440.1 lists the criterion of “recency” as an instructional consideration for text selection. And in addition to the “recency” criterion is the vital inclusion of “nontraditional literatures outside the official canon, from labor culture, ethnic groups, and women’s rights.” These cornerstone features are part of any quality teacher education program (Shor, 25). Thus, these curricular choices are fundamental to what we do as teachers of English. Because we wish to expose our students to the world as it is and to prepare them for the diversity of experience they will face outside the classroom, we must introduce new titles into the curriculum alongside the older, “canonical,” titles that have been validated through use: “One of the significant arguments for any work is the ways in which it will open new perspective to its readers. In determining the reasons for using a book, teachers...also consider the potential impact it will have on students’ behavior or attitudes” (SLATE: NCTE).

Of course these new titles and authors will not appeal to all readers. They never have. Shakespeare, Twain, and Whitman all have been removed from reading lists for various “offenses.” Today, the names might be different: Angelou, Allende, King. Even as teachers select titles to achieve a specific goal for a particular class or individual, they also affirm the rights and responsibilities of students to select alternate titles if the student or the student’s parent/guardian objects to the standard course material. That is why the LPS school district offers parents the opportunity to request alternative texts, to engage in discussion with teachers and administrators and to seek a “Request for Reconsideration” form for personally troublesome text.

As with all pedagogical decisions, reading choices are difficult: the outcomes, uncertain. Choosing from a new canon of worthy writers and titles requires considerable risk-taking on the part of the classroom teacher. Few works of art are universally acclaimed. Yet, who better to make text decisions than those who know their students and the literature, that is, the teacher-professional? Based on LPS district policy and professional decision-making within a given classroom, teachers professionally choose specific works to provide specific experiences for specific students; as SLATE suggests, “...teachers might judge some books to be more appropriate for inclusion on an optional reading list than for whole-class study. Other books

might be seen as particularly appropriate for certain grade levels or student populations. Again, such decisions are in the realm of the professional judgment of teachers in the field. The primary use of rationales is to provide additional support and documentation for the thoughtful educational choices that are made by teachers” (NCTE). In addition, these teacher decisions are made based upon guidelines and policies provided by the LPS school district. For instance, as outlined by Regulation 6440.1, when selecting materials, teachers consider a text’s reliability, recency, appropriateness, and correlation to course objectives, as well as teaching and learning styles. In sum, teachers do not choose material whimsically. They do not choose material simply to fill time or to hurt in any way the young people in the classroom.

Furthermore, teachers affirm the right and responsibility of students to have access to the widest variety of literature, including that which is unknown, unorthodox, or unpopular. To know who we are, we must know who others are, what they think, and, insofar as possible, why they hold these ideas. This important exploration is supported by Regulation 6440.1 in a number of ways, including that “men and women should be shown in both traditional and nontraditional roles.” Teachers and students need not accept or endorse every idea contained in the literature they read. Indeed, teachers encourage students to challenge any view, idea, or author because they also know what we as humans are by examining what we are not. One measure of character, or individuation, is the degree to which one learns to think for oneself and to act out of an inner code tested by comparison to the thoughts and behaviors of others. This necessarily means coming into contact with ideas, beliefs, and behaviors that differ from one’s own. Students who read widely not only know more of the world, but more of themselves. And that is the teachers’ professional responsibility: to help assure each student is exposed to widely varied texts in order to foster intellectual exploration and thereby better one’s self and others. The LPS school district understands the importance of multiple perspectives, assigning its teachers the responsibility to present many voices that will “stimulate growth of students in knowledge, literary appreciation, aesthetic values and ethical standards” (Policy 6440).

As the District charges teachers to challenge students, so it is incumbent upon the public to safeguard this same access for teachers in the classroom. Educators and the public alike must resist attempts by any group to label any piece of literature as subversive, offensive, or undesirable, because a democratic society has no use for blacklists. Ideas (and their authors) are dangerous only if opposing views are silenced. Mein Kampf is dangerous only if the voices in The Diary of Anne Frank and Night are silenced. This means greater access, not less, a greater diversity of ideas, not censorship. According to NCTE, it “advocates and supports [policies and] guidelines that help teachers avoid censorship. NCTE opposes censorship wherever it appears” (NCTE). This concept is supported by LPS Board of Education guidelines, which state that controversial issues should be addressed with “competent instruction balancing the various and/or conflicting points of view in an atmosphere free from bias and prejudice” (Policy 6450).

If we as a society—as inheritors of democratic principles—indeed want student-citizens who can think critically, creatively, and compassionately, educators must be allowed to do their jobs in the classroom. As professionals we must possess the autonomy to challenge the young people in our care with the most powerful literary problems we can find: both a freedom from censorship and a responsibility for teaching that centers on English teachers’ selection of titles and authors that push students in new directions. This places text selection into the hands of those most qualified for the challenge: the professional teacher. Professional policies and guidelines for curricular choice must, “Respect the role of the English language arts teacher as a professional with broad knowledge of language, literature, and cultural traditions” (NCTE).

III. District-Based Guidelines for Text Selection and the Study of Controversial Issues

The basis for this professional right and responsibility of the individual teacher as part of the LPS District comes out of a context of District regulations.

The nature of the English classroom requires the utilization of a multitude of teaching and learning strategies. Students are required to read, write, and engage in critical-thinking activities based on a vast array of materials, including novels, poetry, textbooks, and student-generated pieces. This requirement is an expectation of the LPS school district, which assigns its teachers the responsibility of providing materials and learning opportunities that are varied, interesting, challenging and productive and that represent a variety of teaching and learning styles (Regulation 6440.0). In support of such varied methods, the NEA stresses, “As teachers, we [are] not merely dispensers of knowledge.... Rather, teachers can and must serve to protect and probe all ideas. As student-citizens must be exposed to a wide range of views and positions, ones we love as well as some we hate, and each of us, in our own classrooms, must see ourselves as seekers of truth and open inquiry” (Ochoa, 8). A thorough study of literature encourages students to examine their own thoughts and beliefs as a means of self-discovery as well as to develop an appreciation for the opinions and values of others.

It is a duty of the English teacher, therefore, to provide a forum for discovery and discussion of controversial issues. By its very nature, a controversial issue requires students to study different approaches to problems for which society as a whole has not found a consensus. More than simple disagreements, controversial issues are highly personal in nature and may be rooted in family and/or cultural values and/or beliefs. Through teacher-led discussions and discovery processes, such studies seek not to change a particular system of thinking founded in a familial or cultural basis, but, rather, to encourage students to discover for themselves the nature of their own beliefs and values as well as to promote tolerance of and understanding for differing views (Regulation 6450.2). Diversity of ideas is a hallmark, both for the necessity of controversial texts and for an openness of discussion to allow each student to navigate his/her own positions through such issues.

As an educational institution, it is necessary for the public school to provide multiple opportunities to study controversy. Teachers engage in extensive study prior to introducing and leading lessons about such issues. These issues may be more than uncomfortable to the general public; they are highly personal, political, economic or social, and are constantly changing (“Academic Freedom,” p.120). Instruction, therefore, is thoughtfully planned and includes: (1) opportunities to study the issue and the varying viewpoints surrounding the issue; (2) instruction and discussion free from bias and prejudice; (3) the recognition of the rights of students to express personal opinions in an intellectually-safe environment; and (4) the opportunity for a student to engage in an alternative-learning assignment if the student or student’s parent or guardian objects to the instruction. Since one generation’s controversy is the next generation’s accepted standard, teachers continuously update and maintain their instructional objectives in order to accommodate the changing nature of the controversial issue (Policy 6450 #1-4).

In addition to careful preparation, teachers also outline in detail specific learning objectives prior to beginning a unit studying a controversial issue. Such learning objectives include the means to help students deal with future controversial issues, verification that the issue to be studied is appropriate for the age and maturity of the students, and compliance with

District and school guidelines (Regulation 6440.1). The purpose of studying a controversial issue is to help students make informed decisions and engage in meaningful discussion and learning, not to coerce students into believing a certain outcome or position; therefore, teachers focus on the process of learning more than on specific solutions or outcomes for the learning.

The process of engagement is the process of democracy as envisioned in a Jeffersonian educational approach. Thus, controversial issues challenge students to think in nontraditional ways. Students bring to class unique perspectives and are asked to analyze and share those beliefs and understandings and to parse their origins and implications.

Study of such issues clearly aligns itself with goals for reading, writing, speaking, and listening in the English classroom (Regulation 6440.1). Students are asked to think creatively and critically, to solve new problems and to understand new or unique perspectives, as well as to participate in discourse common to a democratic society. Students are requested to understand the diversity of others' beliefs and values as well as to appreciate the cultural, political, and social differences present throughout the world (Policy 6440). Lastly, through the study of controversial issues, students gain an appreciation for learning as a process of discovery rather than simply as an act of rote memorization.

IV. Application of Philosophy and Policy to Curriculum: How Curriculum is Chosen

Teaching is an organic process: a teacher brings self, vision, hope, idealism, excitement, knowledge, and empathy; chooses the "what" and the "how" of curriculum; responds to the eccentricities, quirks, combinations and independence of students; and mixes all this together in the daily development of often small—but sometimes large—movements in knowledge and understanding.

Of this mix—and it is a mixture that together creates an organic whole—curriculum is the vision, the vehicle, and the process by which teachers connect with students to make meaning. It is the means by which teachers help students navigate their lives. This is why the LPS school board considers instruction to be the “most important contribution to education in our community,” and the reason the LPS district and its teachers work together in approving curriculum, setting instructional guidelines and expectations, and providing resources (Policy 6000). In English, curriculum is built on two solid foundations: reading and discussing literature; and writing innumerable expository, persuasive, narrative, descriptive, creative essays, and other forms of writing.

The world explored through literature portrays every type of "character" or person—selfish, generous, narcissistic, searching, people in their amazing vitality and variety—and every type of human thought and action. Through literature students find out who they are by examining the reflection of themselves in literary pieces. In literature, everything we think about in terms of who we are and whether we have meaning is either affirmed or challenged. Such affirmation or challenge presupposes that certain actions, certain ideas, certain possibilities create and/or imply certain outcomes. The student, through the intellectual experience of the classroom—whether reading a literary piece or participating in the controlled experiments in a chemistry classroom—comes to a form of recognition and insight. It also is an expectation for students to develop to their greatest potential (Policy 6410). From that the student learns something about the human condition and the self as part of that condition. Through knowledge gained, the student also reaches toward thought: making informed choices by coming to terms

with the new insights achieved. Self-actualization, in this case, unites with widely varied discourses/texts because “freedom in teaching is important not because it is a right of the teacher but because it is essential to an intelligent solution of the problems of modern society” (Beale, 615).

The world explored through writing is a world of meaning-making or purpose-giving. Writing allows students to shape the universe, to place their stamp on it. Where literature shapes *us*, writing shapes the *world*. Students themselves become "god," as "creators" of meaning. By placing themselves through words onto the chaos of reality, they co-create their own "text." That text is both themselves—they partly "create" or "birth" themselves when they place that self, through words, onto something outside themselves—and also give meaning to what is outside themselves. By writing, students engage in a dialogue of knowledge, understanding, reason, and art through a symbol system we call words in order to partake in a community of scholars also engaged in making meaning. Writing is the measure of humanity's ability to form communities and thereby to become part of something broader and more complete than the egocentric, youthful, self-aggrandizing beings who frame reality solely and simply as they deem it through their unexposed and thus curtailed world view. Writing is the means to detach or separate from the self, and, in that process, to become part of a larger communal spirit.

Thus, reading literature and writing are the primary tools by which English education in the classroom assures the continuance of giving voice to a community, rather than simply to one's unexplored, self-contained, restricted position.

A. Curriculum Objective

These two foundations—literature and writing—form the core of the discipline of English. As such, the goal of curriculum is to help students form and understand themselves while, at the same time, they become greater than those curtailed selves, become part of a world outside themselves, and in that process become critical thinkers who make decisions for themselves and the larger community—based on knowledge, understanding, reason, compassion, and courage.

To accomplish this democratic goal, English teachers must be willing to force students away from complacency, away from the comforts of their own time and place. The English teacher's objective in choosing any curriculum is to help liberate students from the confines of their time and place, from the complacency of what they think they know, an objective supported by District guidelines and policies (Policy 6410 and Regulation 6320.1).

Thus, "controversy" is built into the study of English.

Most of us do not wish to be confronted by ideas that we have not considered and that may not conform to what we've come to accept as "right." Yet, that's exactly what literature and writing force us to do; for the in-class moment, students are expected to participate in a dialogue of possibility in order to explore beyond their self-imposed satisfactions and their limited, comfortable world view. That's the essence of learning and education—to move into the depth of what has not been considered before, to tread into the uneasy depths of what we do not know. It's a frightening task, but it's endemic to what learning and knowledge is about. If they're doing their job, English teachers force students to push at the edges of their consciousness, to participate in discussions that are neither comfortable nor conforming (Policy 6450). In that experience is the core of learning and the beginning of student independence, where each student stakes a claim for self as a thinker among thinkers. Considered decisions that better the

community and not merely oneself come from a broad foundation of knowledge and not from biased presuppositions of the unreflective mind. Therefore, the preservation of democracy absolutely requires English education to be “controversial.”

B. *Curriculum Decisions*

Teachers—choosing what they teach—select texts based on Lincoln Public Schools’ Board of Education policies; District-generated curriculum processes; their own background and knowledge; the age level of the student; the nature of the class; the requirements for multivocality (students are exposed to all types of voices and speakers and writers, not simply those of their own color, place, and beliefs); the unique mix in a particular class; and the ability level of each student (Regulation 6440.1).

That is a great deal to consider as a teacher tries to cover both traditional artistic/literary values and, at the same time, contemporary culture presented in populist literature. The curricular purpose is always to move students from what they think they know. English teachers attempt to establish a curriculum that creates an environment where students, with courage and support, may disentrall themselves; only students can intellectually free themselves, but the teacher’s job is to select reading and writing assignments to help students recognize something beyond themselves and their immediate societal norms. Note, however, that in no way do curricular decisions determine what a student is to think. The teacher’s job in selecting curriculum is not to tell students what to think. English teachers select and present curriculum that represents many and varied views of the student’s own society and other societies, in multiple times and places, that have not as yet been opened to the student (Policy 6450).

Therefore, curriculum *must* be “controversial” in the sense that it is not a placebo; it is not “easy.” It is by definition what the student does not know; therefore, it is difficult and demanding; it presents views and ideas that are not understood or comfortable to the student; and it forces students to push at the edges of their consciousness and current knowledge base. Through the study of literature and in written responses to it about themselves and their society, together, students and teachers, open up ideas. They do not resolve the “rightness” or “wrongness” of such ideas. Instead, they open them as though they were “opening” a frog in Biology, as though they were “opening” the quadratic equation in math, as though they were “opening” the Soweto riots in social studies. Students open ideas in order to see where they come from, what they’re made of, what their implications are, how they affect and are affected by circumstances, and whether they have been important to any given people or group in any given time. Students open ideas in order to be both aware that they exist and, in making them understandable, to analyze them, and then synthesize them as part of the play of human concepts presented for intellectual consideration and worthy of social action.

C. *Implications*

The most difficult thing about curriculum choices is that the professional who is the teacher must make decisions that risks being unpopular with parts of the population because all kinds of ideas, including those that may be uneasy, make up the fabric of a society. As Abraham Lincoln understood, one can please some of the people some of the time, but not all the people

all the time. Ideas count. However, because what they choose for students to read, discuss, and write about is not based on propagandizing to the student, but rather on exposing students to many and varied concepts often in conflict with one another, English teachers who are doing their jobs will have questions raised by society about why they have made the decision they have. As professionals teachers must “Respect the concerns and convictions of both external critics and professional colleagues who have opposing ideas about either principles or practices” (NCTE).

The public’s part in this process is important but contextual: to suggest to the teacher that something may be amiss. However, the professional teacher, within the context of the LPS school district’s regulations and the rights and responsibilities of the teacher, must make the final decision on curriculum, knowing full well that though the public may disagree, no public person who lacks qualifications to teach English has the expertise to know why and how curricular decisions are made. “Teachers must make decisions about what they will teach and how they will then teach it, decisions that will achieve their purposes and address their students’ needs” (SLATE: NCTE). The District recognizes the essential role of the parent in a student’s education, though, which is why there are several policies, regulations, and venues in place for discussing or objecting to curricular choices (Policy 6443 and Regulation 6440.4).

Curriculum is the heart of an English teacher’s choices; in partnership with District officials, the teacher makes such decisions with care, insight, and knowledge. No decision need be final. However, the teacher in his/her classroom, knowing the students and the material and the greater needs inherent in helping students to become thinking adults, is the person who can best select the appropriate vehicle to achieve literary and writing goals.

V. Conclusion: Intellectual Freedom and the Future of Society

Students' voices, while often inarticulate, nonetheless are worthy of being heard. It is the English teacher's job to help students find and develop their voices, and curriculum is the most effective means by which teachers achieve this goal (Policy 6410).

In a recent *English Journal* article entitled, “Freedom of Voice,” writer Maura Stetson observes eminent composition theorist Donald Graves’ concern about distinctions between authentic and institutional voice in our student writers. According to Graves, “voice is the imprint of ourselves on our writing.... [T]ake the voice away and the writing collapses of its own weight. There is no writing, just word following word.” Educational theorist Lucy Calkins further extends the concern of prioritizing “safe” writing vs. writing that risks, explores, attempts in its own idiosyncracies when she laments, “When children begin to crank out safe little pieces of writing, they short-circuit their opportunities to learn” (Stetson, 74-76).

So we have a fundamental choice: do we, as educators, observe our work with emerging readers and writers as that of providing safety which often means oversimplification? Or do we hearken to the “authentic voices when students expose their own ideas on paper at the level where they live—ask questions and draw conclusions to the questions and problems they encounter and that concern them”? The process of inquiry is mirrored in text selection. Texts free from controversy are, perhaps, easier, safer, expected. But in addition to beginning where students authentically live, as Calkins suggests, we must elevate and broaden, complicate and problematize. If not, we are failing to uphold our commitment to enlightenment. “Despite the fact that some individual teachers, and some school boards and administrators, deny academic

freedom by censorship and threat, there still remains a basic educational commitment to enlightenment. It is in the pursuit of this commitment that the teaching profession is obligated to continuing vigilance and expansion regarding academic freedom. This puts academic freedom at the center of the profession, a matter of extraordinary significance. It is, therefore, a matter of profound concern for the teaching profession to develop the idea that academic freedom is basic to the survival of the profession and to the democratic society that it serves” (Nelson, 23).

English teachers, like their students, wrestle with language, trying to fathom its complexity and its wonder, and utilize it as a tool by which self-identity is achieved. Isn't that what students want, too—to achieve their identities?

It is tempting to limit language as a tool, to mistake it for a static and formulaic set of rules. Such a view, while perhaps comforting, does little more than constrict the student's sense of identity. Prescriptive rules may offer security yet they seldom describe life with any degree of accuracy. Prescription hurts education.

As students attempt to understand a personal and societal identity, they do so by studying language—through their own writing and the writing of others. English teachers use the study of language to guide their classes, as well as their own experience, to understand that, while mistakes will be made—by students and teachers alike—in the process, everyone must be given the opportunity to hear the multivocal voices of all people in a carefully constructed laboratory called a classroom, on behalf of a difficult and demanding body of knowledge called a curriculum, chosen by an able and highly educated professional called a teacher.

In English classes, it is this skepticism of the status quo and our students' confidence in their own idiosyncratic natures that demand of the teacher careful and professional analysis in selection of literature and curriculum. As noted in Policies 6410 and 6450 and Regulation 6440.1, in guaranteeing all students the right to their own idioms and their own voices, as well as access to the often different and difficult-to-understand voices of others, English teachers have both the right and responsibility to choose curriculum that ensures an intelligent public discourse on behalf of the principles of a democratic society.