



2021

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Recommended Citation

Riddle, Derek R. (2021) "Marrying Principles of Religious Freedom with Equitable Teaching Practices for Latter-day Saint Public Educators," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 60: Iss. 4, Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol60/iss4/9>

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Marrying Principles of Religious Freedom with Equitable Teaching Practices for Latter-day Saint Public Educators

Derek R. Riddle

A couple of years ago, a colleague recommended I read a young adult novel titled *How It Went Down* authored by Kekla Magoon.¹ This fictional novel tells the tragic story of Tariq Johnson, a sixteen-year-old fatally shot by a police officer. The story, written from a multicharacter perspective, creates an intentional effect through which the reader may find it challenging to discover the truth about the book's pivotal event because of the varied perspectives and accounts of its many characters. As a former secondary-school English teacher who taught in settings where conversations regarding police brutality and racial profiling were prevalent, I was intrigued by the potential this novel could have in an English classroom. Therefore, I began to preview the book. However, after reading in the first few pages the accounts of two of the characters, Noodle and Samuel, I put the book down and struggled to pick it back up. Why? The use of profanity in the book caused me to seriously reflect on whether I should continue reading further.

To be clear, the book is excellent. In fact, Kekla Magoon was awarded the Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book in 2015 for this novel, so my choice to no longer read the novel was not meant to negatively signify the quality of the book. For me, it was more of a moral dilemma between my religious beliefs and the types of literature I should or should not immerse myself in. As a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I have found that such decisions always

1. Kekla Magoon, *How It Went Down* (New York: Square Fish, 2014).

present a dilemma for me. The following statements are made in the *For the Strength of Youth* booklet:

- Choose wisely when using media, because whatever you read, listen to, or look at has an effect on you. Select only media that uplifts you.
- Do not attend, view, or participate in anything that is vulgar, immoral, violent, or pornographic in any way. Do not participate in anything that presents immorality or violence as acceptable.²

In considering those guidelines, my dilemma occurred when I wondered whether I should read literature with obscene language.

Ironically, there was some literature that I did not censor in either my personal or classroom reading. For example, I did not bat an eye when reading *Speak*,³ the story of an adolescent female protagonist who had been raped the summer prior to her freshmen year of high school, or *The Beast*,⁴ which focused on topics of drug use and sex. I eagerly shared with my students books like *Just Mercy*⁵ that directly and poignantly discussed issues of inequity in society, as well as short films like *In a Heartbeat*,⁶ a story with a protagonist struggling to express his affections for his crush, who happens to be another boy. I felt these pieces of literature and film would greatly help my students see themselves and others through what Rudine Sims Bishop coined the “mirrors and windows”⁷ of the characters in the materials I shared with them. I also believed that this subject matter could, as Deborah Appleman stated, “make a better world for [my] students and . . . help them make a better world for themselves.”⁸ The ideal of helping my students aligned with my faith, but I could not seem to justify personally reading or sharing literature in my classroom that included gratuitous profanity, even though I was comfortable sharing other content that could be perceived as contrary to the principles in *For the Strength of Youth*.

2. “Entertainment and Media,” in *For the Strength of Youth* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2011), 11.

3. Laurie Halse Anderson, *Speak* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999).

4. Walter Dean Myers, *The Beast* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2003).

5. Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2014).

6. *In a Heartbeat*, directed by Beth David and Esteban Bravo (Sarasota, Fla.: Ringling College of Art and Design, 2017), 4:05, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2REkk9SCRno>.

7. Rudine Sims Bishop, “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6, no. 3 (1990).

8. Deborah Appleman, foreword to Ashley S. Boyd, *Social Justice Literacies in the English Classroom: Teaching Practice in Action* (New York: Teacher’s College Press, 2017), ix.

My dilemma in choosing what literature to read and share became more complicated when seeking to renew my temple recommend. In that interview, I was asked, “Do you support or promote any teachings, practices, or doctrine contrary to those of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints?”⁹ This question created another paradox for me: Were some of my personal and classroom selections of literature showing support for or promotion of groups or teachings that contradicted those practiced and taught by my church? Naturally, I desired to demonstrate my devotion to my Heavenly Father; however, in that devotion, I was also concerned whether censoring some pieces of literature would be disadvantageous to my students’ social and emotional growth and consequentially exhibit a lack of love, tolerance, and acceptance for the diverse student population in my classes. As I shared these concerns with my ecclesiastical leader, he reassured me that my intentions were pure. I was not actively and intentionally seeking to “support or promote any teachings, practices, or doctrine contrary to those of the Church.” I was not reading or sharing literature with the intent to diminish or discredit the teachings of the Church. However, I found myself grappling, in preparation for that interview and somewhat since, with how, in practice, I could keep the two great commandments—to love God and to love my neighbor (that is, my students)—when selecting literature in my classroom, a public space constitutionally separated from the influence and practice of my religious beliefs. It was one thing to censor literature personally, but should this be done professionally? Would the action to professionally censor be what Jesus would do?

The debate on censorship of literature in schools is not a new one. However, the conversation around censorship among teachers with faith and how their selection of literature impacts them adds nuance to the conversation. I recently conducted a study exploring the perceptions of teachers who self-identify as members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I wanted to better understand their views toward teaching literature. Within my data, I found others facing similar dilemmas to what I faced when teaching literature with various themes, topics, and content. This led me to seek revelation from my own academic research and further study of the scriptures and Church leaders on how to teach literature that could meet the diverse needs of students while respecting the religious beliefs of a teacher with faith. The purpose of this essay is to offer insights for members of the Church on how we may still

9. See Russell M. Nelson, “Closing Remarks,” *Ensign* 49, no. 11 (November 2019): 121.

practice our faith while fostering equity and acceptance in our choices of literature for our classrooms and curricular purposes. I do not purport to have *the* answer or even *an* answer to this inquiry. When it comes to practicing one's religious beliefs, this can and should be deeply personal. Therefore, I chose to write this piece in a self-reflective narrative style in hopes to inspire others to critically analyze my journey and seek further understanding on how to approach this dilemma for themselves.

My Journey toward Truth and Understanding

As teachers, we naturally want to do well by our students. However, we are also worried about laws and policies and how they can affect our jobs, especially the retention of our jobs. Thus, juggling choices to teach literature with controversial content, doing what is in the best interest of students, and adhering to public and school policy can become complicated. This complexity is compounded among teachers of faith, like myself, who govern ourselves not just by the laws of the land but also by laws set forth by God. This can create further complexity in the decision-making process when we have to juggle student interest, public or school policy, and God's commandments in our curricular decisions. In my personal and professional quest for clarity, I first wanted to understand the laws regarding the censorship of literature in the classroom. What do these laws say I can and cannot do? Second, as a teacher of faith, I wanted to better understand my Heavenly Father's will toward censoring and sharing literature. How could I share literature in a way that would respect the agency and needs of my students without violating the commandments of God? In the next few sections, I will first describe what I learned regarding censorship of literature. I will then share what I understood from scriptures and teachings of Church leaders. Finally, I will show how I applied what I learned to my practice as an educator. I hope my journey provides guidance and insight for others facing their own dilemma.

Principles of Censorship

Writers as far back as Plato advocated banishing literature they deemed unfit for young minds.¹⁰ Ken Donelson, an emeritus professor at Arizona State University, explained there are various reasons teachers chose to censor literature. For example, he found teachers sometimes explicitly

10. Ken Donelson, "Giving Comfort to the Enemy: How Teachers and Librarians Aid the Censor," *The High School Journal* 66, no. 3 (1983): 155–61.

censored literature based on moral grounds in that they felt some literature could negatively shape the morality of young readers. Other times, teachers cited concern about community response (for example, the state or district requirements or the perceptions of parents) as their rationale for not choosing certain literature to bring into their classrooms. In addition to Donelson's classifications, current scholars discuss another form of censorship that is less visible—namely, preemptive censorship. This form of censorship occurs when teachers censor a book or other forms of literature before their students or communities know about it in order to prevent controversy and challenges from parents or the community.¹¹

I discovered that the laws on censorship require that books not be removed from a school setting based solely on the notion that someone does not like the ideas presented in those books.¹² This is not to say that books cannot ever be removed. These laws also empower school boards and other education stakeholders to remove books if they find them unsuitable for education or if the text is pervasively vulgar.¹³ Essentially, educators and education systems are not to take away a student's right to read or have access to reading material deemed suitable for education.

Critics argue that there are negative consequences to censorship, including restricting ideas and information¹⁴ and violating a student's right to read.¹⁵ The National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC) argued, "The decision about what to use in the classroom should be based on professional judgments and standards, not individual preferences. Efforts to suppress a disfavored view or controversial ideas are educationally unsound and constitutionally suspect."¹⁶ Many school

11. Sue C. Kimmel and Danielle E. Hartsfield, "It Was . . . the Word 'Scrotum' on the First Page: Educators' Perspectives of Controversial Literature," *Journal of Teacher Education* 70, no. 4 (2019): 335–46; Susan Fanetti, "A Case for Cultivating Controversy: Teaching Challenged Books in K–12 Classrooms," *The ALAN Review* 40, no. 1 (2012): 6–17.

12. Board of Education, *Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico*, 457 U.S. 853 (1982).

13. Claire Mullally, "Banned Books," Freedom Forum Institute, last modified November 29, 2017, <https://www.freedomforuminstitute.org/first-amendment-center/topics/freedom-of-speech-2/libraries-first-amendment-overview/banned-books/>.

14. Fanetti, "Teaching Challenged Books," 6–17.

15. "The Student's Right to Read," Position Statements, National Council of Teachers of English, October, 25, 2018, <http://www2.ncte.org/statement/righttoreadguideline/>.

16. "The First Amendment in Schools: Censorship," National Coalition Against Censorship, accessed October 10, 2019, <https://ncac.org/resource/the-first-amendment-in-schools-censorship>.

districts and educational policies now advocate for and evaluate teachers on their efforts to teach *all* students and to meet their varying needs. Critics argue that censorship may limit a teacher's ability to meet the varying needs of their students.¹⁷ For example, the School Library Journal conducted a study and found teachers typically censor books with sexually explicit content; lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and transgender (LGBT) themes; offensive language; drugs; and violence.¹⁸ The assumption then is that censoring LGBT literature (as an example) might limit a teacher's ability to meet the needs of students who identify as LGBT. Thus, critics of censorship would argue that teachers who censor in this way foster "their own sense of comfort and safety rather than their students' needs."¹⁹ Instead, critics want to ensure "young people have access to a wide range of ideas and worldviews, however controversial they may be."²⁰ In the end, they believe that teachers who intentionally or unintentionally censor literature may cause negative effects on student learning and growth and impede the work of fostering equity in education.

I was surprised to find in the aforementioned literature such a strong advocacy for teachers to limit the impact censorship could have on students without considering the impact that *not* censoring could have on teachers, especially those teachers who base their censorship choices on religious beliefs. While Donelson would classify these teachers as "moral censors," I empathize more with these teachers than he might have. In describing his opinion of moral censors, Donelson stated, "Moral censors frighten me. They are so sure of the worth of their morality and so positive that their morality must be inflicted on their students."²¹ While I agree that censoring in a way that imposes a teacher's beliefs on his or her students is wrong, I am not convinced that all teachers who censor on moral grounds do so to save their students from moral peril. As my anecdote at the beginning of this essay

17. Nancy Roser, "Heavy (and Heavy-Handed) Issues Surrounding Book Selection," in *The Texts in Elementary Classrooms*, ed. James V. Hoffman and Diane L. Schallert (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2004), 195–212.

18. School Library Journal, *Controversial Books Survey: Data and Findings* (New York: School Library Journal, 2016), https://s3.amazonaws.com/WebVault/SLJ/SLJ_ControversialBooksSurveyReport_2016.pdf.

19. "Student's Right to Read."

20. Kimmel and Hartsfield, "Educators' Perspectives of Controversial Literature," 345.

21. Donelson, "Giving Comfort to the Enemy," 157.

highlighted, some teachers censor because of their inner commitment to their faith, not necessarily to impose their morality on their students. I wondered then how a teacher's religious beliefs and the exercise thereof played a role in censorship.

Principles of Religious Freedom in Schools

In a general sense, religious freedom has been defined as one's ability to exercise agency in matters of faith.²² In the case of whether to censor literature in a middle or high school English class, the challenge in exercising religious freedom is in balancing an educator's ability to freely worship in matters of faith with the students' right to read or have a suitable education. In considering these competing needs, I understood allowing students the right to read the literature of their choice. I even understood that not providing them this choice may be inequitable. What I did not understand was how to allow students this agency and access to literature without violating the agency of the teacher. I wondered, What then are the laws and other guiding principles of exercising religious freedom in a public-school setting?

While teachers have the right to freely exercise their religious beliefs in many spaces, there are definite limitations to the exercise of that freedom in a public-school setting. Because of the establishment clause and the legal guidelines of separating church and state, many school districts and educational policies limit teachers' religious expression. This precedent has been set in the various court cases addressing this topic. Many court cases side with the school establishment clause defense when it comes to matters of religious expression in schools. This includes teachers not being able to teach scripture, wear clothing endorsing religious beliefs, or engage in any other proselytizing action during the instructional day.²³ Decisions from these various court cases have established the following two guidelines when considering the exercise of religion in public-school settings:

22. "Religious Freedom," Gospel Topics Essays, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed October 10, 2019, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/religious-freedom?lang=eng>.

23. See *Breen v. Runkel*, 614 F.Supp. 355 (1985); *Fink v. Board of Education*, 65 Pa.Comm. 320 (1982); *Marchi v. Board of Cooperative Educational Services*, 528 U.S. 869 (1999); *Downing v. West Haven Board of Education*, 162 F.Supp. 2d 19 (2001); *Holland v. South Bend Community School Corp.*, 93 F.3d 327 (1996); *Roberts v. Madigan*, 702 F.Supp. 1505 (1989).

- “A school can direct a teacher to ‘refrain from expressions of religious viewpoints in the classroom and like settings.’”²⁴
- “The employee must accept that he [or she] does not retain the full extent of free exercise rights that he [or she] would enjoy as [a] private citizen. . . . A school risks violation of the Establishment Clause if any of its teachers’ activities gives the impression that the school endorses religion.”²⁵

These guidelines delineate the *explicit* exercise of religious belief of public educators, but they do not clarify the more *implicit* exercise of religious freedom as found in preemptive censorship. There is, however, one case that provides some insight into implicit acts of religious exercise in classroom settings.

In the case of *Roberts v. Madigan*, school officials asked Kenneth Roberts, a fifth-grade teacher, to remove two religious books from his classroom library and to discontinue his silent reading of the Bible during his class silent reading time. Roberts along with others sued his school because they felt it violated the establishment clause by exhibiting hostility toward religion. In the end, the courts denied Roberts’s appeal. The court’s rationale for this decision was that “the students are, in a real sense, a captive audience vulnerable to even silent forms of religious indoctrination.”²⁶ This case led me to seriously consider whether a teacher’s actions to preemptively censor certain literature (regardless of whether the choice was grounded in moral or personal reasons) could be classified as a silent form of religious indoctrination.

As members of the Church, we are taught to be “subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law” (A of F 1:12). We want to comply with the law; however, I often see scriptural examples that advocate disregard of the law if we feel it does not allow us to exercise our religion. While I believed it was important to adhere to the laws of the land, I desired to know how God felt I should proceed in this matter. I turned then to the teachings in scripture and of latter-day Church leaders.

24. *Helland*, 93 F.3d 327.

25. *Marchi*, 528 U.S. 869.

26. *Roberts*, 702 F.Supp. 1505.

Doctrinal Discussion

President Boyd K. Packer taught, “True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behavior. The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior.”²⁷ I felt that understanding the doctrine could guide me to the best course of action to take. Throughout this experience, I have been guided by three fundamental doctrines and principles: respecting the agency of others, examining the intent of my heart, and following the two great commandments to love God and to love my neighbor.

Respecting the Agency of Others

Joseph Smith wrote that members of the Church “claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and *allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may*” (A of F 1:11, emphasis added). One of our beliefs as members of the Church is to respect the agency of others. It is the final phrase “and allow all men the same privilege” that was key for me to consider. As members of the Church, we would never compel anyone to believe, think, or behave the way we do, nor do we have the authority to do so. However, as teaching professionals, who do have authority over curricular decisions in our classrooms, we need to be careful that our choices in literature selection do not violate agency by not “allowing” our students access to literature that may foster personal growth. The scriptures are replete with examples of this principle to respect the agency of others. For example, in the Book of Mormon, Alma the Younger learned that his desire to speak with the voice of an angel to more fully persuade people to repent was not the will of God, for God “granteth unto men according to their desire” (Alma 29:4). Moreover, the father in the parable of the prodigal son allowed his younger son to choose how he wanted to live his life (Luke 15). Both scriptural examples highlight people in positions of authority who, when presented with the opportunity to use that authority in respect to others’ agency, exemplified that it is not the will of God to compel others to use their agency to make the choices we think they should make. Larry Gelwix, former coach of the Highland Rugby Team and mission president of the California Fresno Mission from 2011 to 2014, taught that “we cannot

27. Boyd K. Packer, “Little Children,” *Ensign* 16, no. 11 (November 1986): 17.

do the Lord's work in the devil's way."²⁸ When it comes to censorship, it may be wise to consider our intentions and whether our choices in literature selection are unintentionally inducing our students to think, act, and believe as we do.

Examining the Intent of My Heart

Our intentions regarding our choices in literature selection and censorship are also important when pondering how Heavenly Father views those choices. I was worried Heavenly Father would not approve of certain choices I made regarding the books I read and chose to share with my students. To reiterate, I was not so concerned with protecting my students from books I thought were not good for them as much as I was concerned about how Heavenly Father viewed my choice to read and share those books. Thus, the choice to not censor concerned my own agency, not the imposition of my agency on others. However, the scriptures teach that Heavenly Father "looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7) and "knows all the thoughts and intent of the heart" (Alma 18:32). As I reflect on the desire I had to share literature with LGBT themes or references to drugs, sex, violence, and other perceived taboo topics, I discovered my real intent in sharing those texts was to bless the lives of my students through carefully sharing topics that can positively enhance their worldview and hopefully build their character. Another of our Articles of Faith teaches us to do "good to all men" (1:13). This then became my guidepost on making decisions about the literature I selected to read and share.

Following the Two Great Commandments to Love God and to Love My Neighbor

Jesus frequently taught, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matt. 22:37–39). As I have mentioned, I struggled to find congruence in how I could show my love and obedience to my Heavenly Father and his commandments while also keeping the second

28. Larry Gelwix, "Focus on the Final Score," an interview conducted and included on the DVD of the film *Forever Strong*, directed by Ryan Little (Salt Lake City: Go Films and Picture Rock Entertainment, 2008).

commandment to love my neighbor when it came to literature selection. A few principles and teachings helped me here. First, Paul, in the New Testament, taught that “if it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with *all men*” (Rom. 12:18, emphasis added). This was a guidepost for me to evaluate my choices to censor. I would ask myself if this choice to preemptively censor could cause unnecessary contention and do more harm than good. This is especially true in my text selection for readings to be used with my whole class. Dallin H. Oaks taught that we should be tolerant of others’ viewpoints and that “our obligation to tolerance means that none of the behaviors—or others we consider deviations from the truth—*should ever cause us to react with hateful communications or unkind actions.*”²⁹ For me, I felt choosing to not share literature that reflected my students and their experiences could be perceived as an unkind action. President Oaks taught more recently two defining principles:

We must never persecute those who do not share our beliefs and commitments. Regretfully, some persons facing these issues continue to feel marginalized and rejected by some members and leaders in our families, wards, and stakes. We must all strive to be kinder and more civil. . . .

Meanwhile, we must try to keep both of the great commandments. To do so, we walk a fine line between law and love—keeping the commandments and walking the covenant path, while loving our neighbors along the way. This walk requires us to seek divine inspiration on what to support and what to oppose and how to love and listen respectfully and teach in the process.³⁰

In seeking to apply Elder Oaks’s teachings, I realized censoring literature on conflicting moral grounds could be considered a form of persecution if, for example, I chose to avoid LGBT-themed literature based on my views of morality or avoided a book with a social justice–related theme because of its language. I also needed to continue to seek the Lord’s will regarding my choices of literature. The next section will describe how I have to this point applied my understanding of the aforementioned scholarship, laws, and doctrines to my practice as an educator.

29. Dallin H. Oaks, “Truth and Tolerance,” Brigham Young University devotional, Provo, Utah, September 11, 2011, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/dallin-h-oaks/truth-and-tolerance/>, emphasis added.

30. Dallin H. Oaks, “Two Great Commandments,” *Ensign* 49, no. 11 (November 2019): 75.

Personal Applications

Below, I provide some of the concrete scenarios highlighting how I applied all that I learned to my practice specifically in teaching young adult literature that includes profanity, sex, and LGBT themes. My hope is that these examples will facilitate further pondering and increase awareness among Latter-day Saint educators of how they might deal with these decisions.

Profanity

I think that much of the law and the discussion of gospel principles would support the idea that gratuitous profanity should not be suitable for education. However, the NCAC helped me in making decisions on which literature containing profanity I might select and use: “Profanity appears in many worthwhile books, films and other materials . . . for emphasis or to convey emotion. . . . Works containing profanity often contain realistic portrayals of how an individual might respond in a situation.”³¹ My selection of literature containing profanity is always evaluated on this Article of Faith: “If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things” (1:13). For example, I have been required to teach *Of Mice and Men*³² to my eleventh graders. Not to start a philosophical debate on whether this book has merit or not, but my philosophy of literature would steer me away from this text for various reasons other than profanity. Nonetheless, I was required to teach it to align with my grade-level team and school curriculum. When I chose to do a read-aloud for this book, I would intentionally not read the racial slurs and profanity found in this book.³³

31. “First Amendment in Schools.”

32. John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men* (New York: Covici Friede, 1937).

33. I did this to highlight my own discomfort with using those terms. I transparently told my students that I do not curse. They would ask me my reasoning, and I would simply respond, “It is just not the person I want to portray. I like to use different words to express my feelings and emotions.” This would also lead to rich discussions about the purpose of language in regard to audience and task. I also expressed that I did not feel comfortable reading racial slurs as a white teacher who was teaching at the time in a school where half of my students were Black. I never had student issues with my choice to omit profanity and racial slurs. All of my students respected my beliefs. Some chose to continue to read those words out loud (minus the racial slurs, which all of my students chose not to read out loud); whereas, others omitted the profanity when reading aloud as well. I felt it created a safer space for all.

This allowed me to exercise my agency and demonstrate love toward my Heavenly Father by keeping his commandments. I also simultaneously respected the agency of my students. I did not hinder the book from being read, nor did I tell my students to not read those words when they participated in the read-aloud.

I also have taken the opportunity to teach my students to be critical of controversial language. We would have open discussions about why the author chose certain words and the effect they intended to have on the reader. By providing these learning experiences, I helped students learn concepts regarding the power of language and how to be intentional about their language choices within and among certain audiences. In this way, I felt I was empowering my students to use their agency to become more intentional with their use of language and teaching them that by so doing they can show a greater love toward their neighbor. For instance, I have many colleagues not of my faith who graciously and intentionally respect my beliefs and strive to use nonprofane language in my presence. However, I am likewise similarly gracious and loving when my colleagues use profanity intentionally or unintentionally in my presence to express their emotions. In this way, I am respecting their agency as well. These examples and conversations I have with my students about code-switching (a practice of alternating between one or more languages in a conversation) and knowing one's audience become invaluable lessons in the power of language that can be had in no other way.

Finally, I continue to study which texts I elect to read and consume that contain profanity. For instance, my wife and I recently encountered the story of *The Hate U Give*.³⁴ This fictional portrayal, similar to the circumstances of the racially charged incidents that occurred with Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, is told with the use of strong profanity. However, the profanity serves a purpose to highlight the aforementioned NCAC point. Now, I want to be clear that I am not trying to lower my standard, but the profanity used in this story highlights the intent of language and can serve to teach great principles. This is unlike literature and other forms of media that use profanity in vulgar ways. After both reading and viewing the film adaptation of *The Hate U Give*, I felt greater compassion, love, and sympathy for my brothers and sisters in the African American community, and this text inspired me with a new

34. Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give* (New York: Balzer and Bray, 2017).

perspective on how I can better relate, support, and serve those affected by racial discrimination, which new perspective I believe to be “virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy” (A of F 1:13).

Sex

References to sex and profanity typically become censored because of a belief that the more students are exposed to such material, the more likely they will be to engage in such behavior. However, my experiences and my understanding of human psychology tend to persuade me that the more we shield our students from conversations about sexuality, the more curious they become, and that curiosity may serve as a catalyst for inappropriate sexual relations. For years, prophets have taught that sex can be a beautiful and sacred way to express love but that it should be done “within the bounds [the Lord] has set.”³⁵ How can our youth understand those bounds unless they are taught? That is not to suggest we turn our English classrooms and curriculum into sex-education spaces. However, I do believe great literature can teach this concept. Books that highlight sex can strengthen concepts taught in sex education classes.

However, again I am cautious about how a piece of literature presents sexual topics and the maturity of my student audience (that is, their agency). For instance, I preemptively censored the book *Flowers for Algernon*³⁶ as a summer read with an incoming freshman honors English class. At the time, I felt the vivid description of female breasts was unwarranted for a group of freshmen I had not yet met, nor whose parents I had met. Had I taught that book in my class with them, might we have had a healthy conversation about the sexual references in the book? Possibly—it would have been done with respect to the students’ agency and their level of comfort with the topic. With more implicit sexual references, such as when a piece of literature implies a sexual act has occurred, I evaluate teaching it to the whole class based on the context of the book, the sexual reference, and whether it offers educational value while also considering the agency of my students. With literature that discusses acts of rape, I feel more inclined to share it because of its educational value (for example, raising the issue of rape culture and how to diminish it), but I also consider how it is described and the agency of my students.

35. Richard G. Scott, “Making the Right Choices,” *Ensign* 24, no. 11 (November 1994): 38.

36. Daniel Keyes, *Flowers for Algernon* (New York: Harcourt Brace: 1966).

LGBT Themes

In my research, this is a topic with which many teachers of faith are struggling. For example, one teacher in a recent study I conducted expressed a philosophy of teaching LGBT-themed literature in this way:

I attended the ALAN [Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of NCTE] conference for a couple years, and there was a lot of emphasis on using LGBTQ+ literature in secondary classrooms. I would be lying if I didn't say that this concerns me. I understand how LGBTQ+ individuals have been and are marginalized in society, and I would never want any student to feel uncomfortable in my classroom. I have had a couple students over the years that were open about their homosexual orientation; I have a student this year who shared gender identity questions she was having. I have these students, and I care about them. I accept them and treat them no differently. I am concerned, however, that at the point I start using LGBTQ+ literature as a point of study, that I would be normalizing those lifestyles.³⁷

What I appreciated in this sentiment was its focus on what this essay has intended to highlight: How can teachers treat all students equitably without feeling like they are teaching concepts contrary to their faith? The sentiment from this teacher highlights the fact that I am not the only one struggling with this dilemma of selecting literature that aligns both with my faith and beliefs and with my responsibility to help students deal with difficult issues they will confront in everyday life. I have one example from my practice that I believe can marry these two competing beliefs.

In my English class, I used a short film titled *In a Heartbeat* to teach literary analysis. This short film depicts a young man who has a crush on another young man. As I taught this lesson, I had two educational aims: (1) to help my students be able to analyze the text to see an author's purpose and (2) to help my students to develop greater empathy for people who identify as LGBT. Using a think-aloud as a teaching strategy and holding a class discussion, I was able to help my students see that the author intended this story to be geared to all audiences. We argued that the creator of this short film used literary devices to tell the story in such a way that a broad audience could relate to it regardless of their sexual orientation, for who has not experienced having a crush? It was later when the boys in the film were mocked and treated unkindly by members of

37. Data from an unpublished study exploring religious perspectives of young adult literature.

their student body that the text led to a discussion about how we treat others with different viewpoints. At the end of this class, hearts were touched, and I believe prior viewpoints may have been reconsidered. What I found interesting in this experience was that I did get backlash from my principal, who suggested that such literature should be censored. However, my educational aim and the intent of my heart was not to promote the practice of same-sex attraction and homosexuality but rather to teach literary analysis and the disposition of compassion toward others whose thoughts and actions differ from our own. Nowhere in that lesson was I teaching anything contrary to my faith. Instead, I was teaching my students to become more Christlike in the way they treat others, regardless of whether or not they share similar beliefs. This is what I believe Jesus would have done.

Conclusion

Speaking to those who are servants, Paul taught, “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh . . . ; not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, *doing the will of God from the heart*” (Eph. 6:5–6; emphasis added). I have come to learn that we, as public educators, can serve God and others as public servants when our *hearts* are set on loving God and his children. This experience of studying censorship in the classroom “by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118) has taught me much about how to be a better educator to all of my students and has strengthened my ability to follow and be a disciple of Jesus Christ. My hope is that my experiences can lead other teachers of faith to teach in ways that align with their faith and are respectful and equitable toward others who are not.

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