

CRT Battle Comes Close to Home

I teach at the middle school in Hempstead, New York, on Long Island with an overwhelmingly Black and Latinx student population. Unlike my students, I am white. I teach in this district by choice because of a commitment to making educational possibility available to all students. I will be discussing stories based on my own experience as a teacher and a mother.

I teach my own seven-year old son the truth about American history. It hasn't hurt him at all. Instead it has made him smarter and hungry to learn more about this country's story. Young people today have virtually unlimited access to information. How can we not teach them the truth in school? They are going to find things out anyway! But without the skills needed to analyze what they discover and the opportunity to discuss these topics, they will not be able to evaluate what they find or to make the connections that need to be made.

I have been aware of groups like Moms for Liberty and their anti-Critical Race Theory campaign work for some time. I know someone who joined when her son entered kindergarten. She complained to me that a local store only sold books about race, something I knew from experience was inaccurate. She denied their group was racist and argued they are recruiting conservative Latino and Black people who fear that teachers are encouraging children to become gay or "transgenders." When I asked her what she thought are the biggest challenges facing education today she responded it was CRT and teaching children about molestation.

The problem we face as teachers is not just parents like this woman; we have fellow "educators" who share these views. That is what scares me the most. How can I help my students understand the problems in this country, when other teachers are reinforcing the problems?

Some assume because I work in a middle school where the student population is 74% Hispanic or Latino and 23% Black or African American, controversy over policy that exists in other school districts doesn't impact on my teaching, but everywhere we face challenges over what should and should not be taught in schools and it has a very real impact on our classrooms.

In October 2022, I shared a lesson with my colleagues. My lesson objective that day was for students to identify how segregation has affected all Americans. One colleague wanted to know why the lesson only focused on the negative aspects of segregation. He then shared his opinion that Confederate statues were part of American history and shouldn't be removed because we should be proud of our history. I responded that I did not agree with him and that I was going to continue to teach the way I have always taught. I felt protected in that moment because he was untenured and I am a tenured teacher. But this is what we are all dealing with as teachers in the current political atmosphere.

I know colleagues and family members who feel defeated and unmotivated because of attacks being made against teachers. They feel like the entire country is against them and we are blamed for all the perceived ills of society. It can be really hard to get up some mornings and go to work when you feel treated like that, but I find motivation in my students. For seventeen years I have been teaching students to find their voice so they can make a positive impact on this world. I've learned that the best way to teach my students is to create a sense of community in my classroom and despite what that colleague felt, I always present different perspectives through historical documents and teach students the skills to analyze the documents and identify purpose and biases.

I encourage dialogue among my students and let them do the thinking. I listen to their thoughts and ideas and encourage them to form opinions and express them. I always provide opportunities for students to debate and make connections to their world when we are studying about the past. When we studied about industrialization in the United States students also discussed the human impact on the environment. My students aren't blind. When we talked about segregation in the past, they realized that the schools today are the result of segregation and redlining. They see that the town next to theirs is majority white. These are the principles that have guided my teaching during my entire career and sticking with this pedagogy has helped my students be successful even during these challenging, controversial times.

What also helps me be effective as a teacher is creating opportunities for students to be involved in civic participation. When students are excited about what they are learning I encourage them to take real action. They write letters to elected representatives. They've petitioned the school administration. They worked with Hofstra University to develop their own 1619 Project. Some of them, on their own time, attended rallies with family members to support immigrant rights and Black Lives Matter.

Students thrive when they are allowed to develop their own opinions and I welcome being challenged, although sometimes I am surprised by what a student says. Recently, I posed a debatable question and after class a student asked me, "Why are you so anti-American?" My initial reaction was to argue with him that debate is at the heart of democracy, but instead I quietly counted to ten and asked him why he thought that.

He explained to me that by encouraging he and his classmates to be active citizens, I was trying to make them anti-American.

I think his view is a reflection of a society that does not allow or respect different opinions and conversations about controversial topics. The political climate in this nation has divided its citizens. I fear this kind of thinking is what led that thirteen-year-old boy to call me anti-American. When there is no platform for open and respectful conversation, people do not learn how to listen to other views. How can we have a democracy when we can't respect the other views?

I am currently a leader for the Teaching for Black Lives Study Group that is part of the Zinn Education Project and I meet with educators who work in states where the teaching about race and racism is banned. They tell me how they are targeted including how their home addresses are publically shared online so parents can mail them complaints and they worry angry parents will arrive at their doorsteps.¹

I ask colleagues in my school why they think teachers are being treated as the enemy in so many states and towns. I explain that the attacks on teaching about race, racism, and gender are an anti-free speech campaign and we as teachers are their targets. Most of my colleagues are in the dark about how close New York State is to banning the teaching of anything that sounds like CRT. There are teachers in my department that vote for candidates who use white fears about race to stir voter resentment. They claim that the "left" wants to indoctrinate children, but provide no evidence to support their position. Aren't we supposed to teach students to support claims with evidence? With some close colleagues, I discuss how we could navigate our units to help students examine issues of race and racism if an anti-CRT law was passed in New York State.

My Black and Latinx students and my white son need to learn about this country's past, oppression and resistance struggles during slavery days and continuing into the modern era. They should know the names of Black congressman during Reconstruction and be aware of why Ida B Wells is one of the greatest heroes in American history.

My son has children's books that discuss segregation and Brown vs. the Topeka, Kansas Board of Education decision. He knows that once Black and white children couldn't play together in parts of this country. He asked me why if segregation ended 75 years ago, how come Black people still don't live in the neighborhood where we live? I don't have an easy answer for him.

Dawn Sumner McShane is a social studies teacher at A.B.G. Schultz Middle School in Hempstead, NY. She earned a BA in History and MS SED at Hofstra University and is a cooperating teacher in the Hofstra University teacher education program. She can be reached at dsum513@gmail.com.

Notes

¹ Zinn Education Project, “Pledge to Teach the Truth,” January 15, 2022, https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/pledge-to-teach-truth?_ga=2.266083661.351349941.1673714680-549979829.1668780087.