

Our Students Don't Feel Connected

Teaching controversial issues is about truth, justice, and the empowerment of young people, which are the stated goals of education, even in Texas and Florida. Not only are secondary school social studies teachers content specialists, but we are also trained in conducting research, reading critically, coding information, questioning ourselves and others, and thinking about ideas, qualities that we bring to our students. Our goals as teachers include teaching students these skills and how to make connections between the past, present and potential futures. Whatever the topic under discussion on any particular day, we want students to make sense of what they are learning about, no matter how difficult or controversial it might be.

One problem we face as social studies and history teachers is that today, everyone considers themselves a “history teacher” and believes they have the right to decide how we teach and what gets taught. I am referring to decisions made by state legislatures and also to the controversial remarks of Kanye West and Elon Musk, the opinionated commentaries of Candice Owens and Marjorie Taylor Greene, and material posted on Tik-Tok, Instagram, and Twitter by unlicensed, untrained, and uninformed commentators, social media outlets where many of our students go to find quick “history” lessons.

Young people are eating up the news feeds on these platforms because they often do not feel connected to curriculum in schools where topics that relate to their lives and would interest them are watered down or not addressed at all. One of the most outrageous examples was where Texas, in the process of revising its history curriculum, proposed relabeling slavery as “involuntary relocation.” Of course Texas is not alone. Legislatures in a number of states have proposed enacting bans on teaching Critical Race Theory and so called divisive concepts with significant penalties attached. Also in Texas, a school district suspended and then voted not to renew the contract of a popular high school principal after he declared in a letter addressed to the community that systemic racism continues in American society. In Pennsylvania, where this American Historical Association meeting is being held, a local school board voted to ban books from the library that explore race and social justice. Among the banned books were children’s stories about Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, and the autobiography of

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai. The school district also banned showing a CNN/Sesame Street Town Hall on Racism that was posted on YouTube. While these bans were eventually dropped, it is troubling that these educational materials could ever be placed on the chopping block.¹

How could anyone graduate from high school without knowing the true history of America? As history educators we are being attacked in the media, by politicians, some parents, and we may even feel unsupported by our administrators and some colleagues. The repercussions for me teaching true history, because I believe that is what it is, not controversial history, is not from parents or administrators. I have a lot of support from my administrators and parents who like to hear that students have a teacher like me who makes a concerted effort to teach engaging lessons. The repercussion for me is that there is no solid effort in the district to get scholars to question what they are learning, to insist that the curriculum present the truth, and to support them as activists. When I push these ideals I am praised, but there is no effort to make this a universal agenda. The commitment is just to passing them and pushing them to get good grades. Don't get me wrong, I am glad when students get good grades, I just think teaching students how to think matters more and then everything else will take care of itself. Repeating lies just to get good grades hurts the students. Teaching what is labeled as controversial topics is the curriculum that is needed in every classroom in every school to move students from being passive learners to active learners, from students who just work for good grades to students who want to improve their communities and the world.

In my district we have a program that was started over six years ago called Bridges. It is designed to foster empathy and collaboration among white, Black, and Latinx students who attend different schools in neighboring by largely segregated communities. My school district is predominately Hispanic and Black and we partner with a predominately white school district. The goal of the program is to engage students in an evaluation of a contemporary issue related to race, economics, or politics. We want students to become active, engaged, well-rounded citizens. In Bridges, difficult conversations are encouraged and asking hard questions is nurtured. Divergent points of view are not shunned and students learn they can agree to disagree.²

This year, I had my pre-Advanced Placement Global History class research the race of Egyptians. I guess in some states this would be seen as the introduction of a divisive concept. Student teams received literature with multiple perspectives and they had to draw their own conclusions based on an evaluation of the evidence and the reliability of the different sources. Not surprisingly, the teams arrived at different conclusions which they shared. That they arrived at different conclusions enriched discussion. The goal was not to get them to accept one view, but to make them aware of an issue that has stirred up a lot of controversy among historians while teaching them how to evaluate evidence presented in texts. Coincidentally some Egyptians recently went on social media demanding that a show featuring the comedian Kevin Hart be canceled

because of comments he supports that ancient Egyptians were African people. Again, celebrity culture found its way into history. When we prepare students with the skills to research and weigh opinions, they can draw their own conclusions, they don't have to depend on celebrities to tell them what to think.³

Culturally relevant pedagogy is vital for the success of students beyond high school. White teachers make up 79% of the teaching staff across this country and Black and Latinx each make up less than ten percent of teachers nationwide. The figure is even lower for Black and Latinx teachers in schools where the student population is predominately white. How are students of color being taught or having their issues addressed in the classrooms? When will a white child meet and interact with a Black or Brown educator? It is much more important that our schools and country address these issues than worry about how students will respond if a topic discussed in class makes them a little uncomfortable. These are the topics that must be discussed in education, but how can they be discussed when an examination of race and racism in the past and its implications for the present are banned and slavery is renamed to make it more palatable.⁴

School is the place to grapple with controversial topics, in a responsible way of course. As states look to erase truth history, I fear educators like me will feel increasingly marginalized and alone in our mission to teach the truth. Fearful teachers will go back to a time when they wrote safe notes on the board and students copied and memorized information without ever thinking about it or asking questions and then regurgitated it when they took a test so they would get a good grade. This type of teaching does not prepare students, especially Black and Brown students, to advocate for themselves and to be active citizens in a democratic society. They will continue to be mislabeled, and punished because they feel alienated from what they are being told to do and learn.

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Notes

¹ Brian Lopez, “State education board members push back on proposal to use “involuntary relocation” to describe slavery.” *The Texas Tribune*. July 30, 2022, <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/06/30/texas-slavery-involuntary-relocation/>; Adela Suliman, “Texas education board rejects proposal to call slavery ‘involuntary relocation’,” *Washington Post*, July 1, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/07/01/texas-board-education-slavery-involuntary-relocation/>; Alison Flood, “Pennsylvania school district reverses ban on books by authors of colour,” *The Guardian*. September 22, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/sep/22/pennsylvania-school-district-reverses-ban-on-books-by-authors-of-colour>; CNN, “Students fight back against a book ban that has a community divided.” *7 News Boston*, September 16, 2021, <https://whdh.com/news/students-fight-back-against-a-book-ban-that-has-a-community-divided/>.

² Olivia Winslow, “Students learn about Long Island's 'inequities' through ERASE workshop.” *Newsday*. February 5, 2022, <https://www.newsday.com/beta/long-island/erase-racism-workshops-students-w33841>.

³ MEE Staff, “Calls grow to cancel Kevin Hart's comedy show in Egypt over 'Afrocentric' views.” *Middle East Eye*. December 16, 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/calls-grow-cancel-kevin-harts-comedy-show-egypt-over-afrocentric-views>.

⁴ Katherine Schaeffer, “America’s public school teachers are far less racially and ethnically diverse than their students.” *Pew Research Center*, December 10, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/12/10/americas-public-school-teachers-are-far-less-racially-and-ethnically-diverse-than-their-students/>.