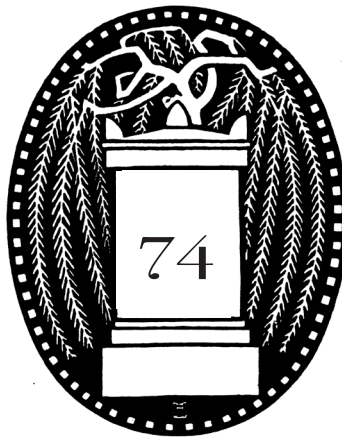


JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY & HISTORY OF EDUCATION



2024

The Journal of the Society of Philosophy & History of Education

Book Banning, Censorship, and Gag-Order Legislation: Working through the Fear and Distrust That Threatens Public Education and Jeopardizes the Public-at-Large

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The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity. But no society is really anxious to have that kind of person around. What societies really, ideally, want is a citizenry which will simply obey the rules of society. If a society succeeds in this, that society is about to perish.

—James Baldwin, 1963/1988, “A Talk to Teachers”

Introduction

On December 13, 2023, Kevin Stitt, Governor of Oklahoma, signed Executive Order 2023-31, officially defunding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in Oklahoma State agencies, including public colleges and universities. Six months later, on June 27, 2024, Ryan Walters, Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction, directed all public schools to “teach” the Bible which, he stated, is “a necessary historical document to teach our kids about the history of this country, to have a complete understanding of Western civilization, to have an understanding of the basis of our legal system.” Walters added that the state may also supply teaching materials and instructions for teachers to “ensure uniformity in delivery” (Mervosh & Dias, 2024, para. 7).

These are just the most recent in a series of efforts by Governor Stitt, Superintendent Walters, and others to mandate what can and cannot be taught, discussed, and thought about in public schools. Oklahoma is not

alone. In violation of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, conservative state politicians across the country are making significant curricular and instructional decisions as part of an ongoing attempt to, in the words of Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953), "conceal our faults by concealing the fact that they ever existed" (para. 21) and, in the words of Robert F. Kennedy (1964), to "invoke the security of a comfortable past, which in fact, never existed" (para. 12). We argue that these practices are profoundly mis-educative, erode public education, and jeopardize the public itself.

Maxine Greene (1988) insists obstacles to existential wellbeing must be "named" in order to be effectively addressed. We argue that the recent legislation poses an existential threat to our safety, wellbeing, and very identities as individuals and as a society (Baldwin, 1963; Baldwin, 1963/1988). Greene (1988) maintains that imagining something better (a more fulfilled life; a more just society; a safer and more caring world) is a precursor to recognizing the obstacles to those possibilities. Until there is a perceived possibility that things could be otherwise, an obstacle, by definition, does not exist. "As has been said, a rock is an obstacle only to the one who wants to climb the hill. Not caring, the traveler merely takes another path" (p. 5).

Focusing on existential issues stemming from negative conceptions of freedom, *laissez-faire* government, free-market capitalism, and systemic race, class, and gender oppression, Greene combines social critique, critical reflection, and the power of imagination in a dialectical quest for the "achievement of freedom by people in search of themselves" (1988, p. xi). Without risking free choice, she argues, we cannot perceive even the *possibility* that things could be otherwise. However, existential risk requires action, both physical and mental. As Foucault (1984) states, "Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects upon it as a problem" (p. 388).

Greene (1988, 1995) acknowledges that existing conditions can be viewed fatalistically, as taken-for-granted realities that cannot be changed. They can be seen as simply "the way things are," as hopelessly "there" (1988, p. 5). Thus, she insists, we must name both what currently *is* and what potentially *could be*, along with the obstacles that stand in our way.

In this paper we seek to name, as fully and accurately as possible, the legislative activities unfolding before us, including the fundamental problem, its consequences and causes, and the implications for education. First, we document the current book-banning, censorship, and gag-order legislation. Next, we examine the impact of this legislation on education and society. We then consider the underlying causes, including intersecting factors that simultaneously reproduce systemic challenges and obscure their existence. Finally, we discuss implications for education.

Book Banning, Censorship, and Gag Orders in Public Education

Within Oklahoma and the nation, extreme tension surrounds questions regarding what ideas may be taught, discussed, and thought about in public K–12 schools and higher education, as well as who should decide these matters. Freedom of speech and separation of church and state are guaranteed by the First Amendment. Yet, state lawmakers across the nation are making unilateral decisions that profoundly affect schools and society. Targeting three broad issues, conservative officials have passed sweeping legislation prohibiting the “teaching” of Critical Race Theory (CRT), “staying woke” (pejoratively referred to as “wokeness”), and issues related to sexual orientation and gender-identity development.¹ These are just the most recent in a history of political efforts to control public education, teachers, higher education, and critical thinking in general (Apple, 2006; Greene, 1988; Houser, 2023; No Child Left Behind, [NCLB], 2021).

As of 2022, eleven states² had banned teaching about racial issues (Ray & Gibbons, 2021), and 25 additional states³ had either already installed new school policies or were moving bills through their legislatures forbidding the teaching of CRT (Schwartz, 2021). Equating CRT with indoctrination, Arkansas Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders stated, “We cannot perpetuate a lie to our students and push this propaganda leftist agenda, teaching our kids to hate America and hate one another. It’s one of the reasons that we put into law banning things like indoctrination and CRT” (Snyder, 2023, para. 5). Similarly, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, claiming to fight “indoctrination of children” (Reed, 2023, para. 1), adopted learning materials for Florida schools developed by PragerU. Dennis Prager, founder of the institution, admits his organization’s goal is indoctrination, which is evident in an animated video in which “explorer Christopher Columbus defends enslaving people on the grounds that ‘being taken as a slave is better than being killed’” (Reed, 2023, para. 6). Oklahoma has joined Florida in adopting the PragerU curriculum, touting it as “pro-American” (Wallis, 2023, para. 1).

Many conservative state legislators also oppose teaching about what they pejoratively refer to as “wokeness.” In Florida, Governor DeSantis rejected “54 of the 132 math textbooks on its adoption list” because they contained “woke content” (Bever, 2022, paras. 1 & 5), including “common educational terms like social–emotional learning and equity” (Prothero & Blad, 2021, para. 3). Similarly, the Edmond Public School District in Oklahoma removed the books *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *A Raisin in the Sun* from their classrooms and school libraries. Such actions are especially significant in Oklahoma, “whose history includes the 1889 Land Run, ‘Indian’ boarding schools, the 1921 Tulsa [Race] Massacre, and racially segregated schools” (Fallik, 2021, para. 10).

State educational boards, textbook publishers, and curriculum companies have fallen in line, complying with state mandates by distorting,

sanitizing, and omitting historical facts and troubling relationships. As Greenlee (2019) observes, this has led to “omissions, downright errors, and specious interpretations, particularly regarding racial issues” (para. 7). Texas textbooks euphemistically note that “the Atlantic slave trade brought millions of workers from Africa to the southern United States to work on agricultural plantations” (Isensee, 2015, para. 2), while failing to mention that “Africans [were] forced to the U.S. as slaves” (para. 5).

Getahun (2023) notes that *Publisher Studies Weekly* “removed mention of Rosa Parks’ race” in its Florida first-grade social studies textbooks, and that its fourth-grade textbooks “removed language saying Black people were discriminated against” during the Reconstruction Era, “instead opting for language like ‘certain groups’” (paras. 3 & 5). Other textbooks refer to “[w]hite settler colonialism” with “Imperialistic expressions such as ‘Empire of Liberty,’ ‘Manifest Destiny,’ ‘The American Frontier’ [and] ‘wards of the state’” (Gahman, 2016, p. 320) without acknowledging the forced assimilation, reservations, removals, boarding schools, and murder that also occurred.

Similar distortion, sanitization, and omission of historical facts has been practiced by state school boards. For example, the Florida Board of Education’s new middle-school standards for African-American history assert “slavery gave Black people a ‘personal benefit’ because they ‘developed skills’” (Quinn, 2023, para. 1). Florida’s high-school students receive equally misleading information about a 1920 deadly white mob attack against Black residents of Ocoee in a lesson that states the attack involved “acts of violence perpetrated against *and by* African Americans” (para. 3). In 2023, the same board refused to pilot an “Advanced Placement high school course on African American studies, saying it violated state law and ‘lacks educational value’” (Fortinsky, 2023, para. 2). New York Senate Bill 1452 goes even farther, banning teaching about four core ethnic groups: “Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Latina and Latino Americans” (Gutkin, 2023, para. 2).

Rather than explicitly forbidding the teaching of specific historical events, vaguer language is often used. Examples of such legislation include bills designed to limit “teaching about ‘divisive subjects’ such as racism and sexuality” (Prothero & Blad, 2021, p. 10) and teaching that “one race, color, religion, sex, ethnicity, or national origin ‘is inherently superior to another’” (Coote, 2022, para. 3). Oklahoma House Bill 1775 (2021) mandates that classroom instruction should not cause “any individual discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex” (OK HB 1775, General Prohibition 7). Brint (2023) argues such injunctions are evidence “the institutions of the United States were created to maintain racial and gender inequalities and to preserve the supremacy of [w]hite people and men” (para 1).

Another major contention involves teaching about sexual orientation and gender-identity development. Scholars working in these areas underscore the importance of affirming people's rights to make their *own* choices and define their *own* identities rather than continuing to be controlled and defined by others (Butler, 1990, 1997). Theories of gender identity place emphasis on deconstructing the gender-binary assumption, the "pervasive idea that there are two, rigidly founded and dichotomously existing genders...biologically determined and stable over time" (Shelton & Dodd, 2021, p. 625). Many biologists no longer view gender as rigidly bound by binary constructs, yet there is still widespread adherence to binary gender classifications, and these classifications remain "deeply connected to other binaries...subsequently reinforcing the hierarchy of [w]hite, European, male dominance" (Shelton & Dodd, 2021, p. 627).

Here again, state legislators seek to eliminate critical thinking about issues that upset their constituents. In 2022, Florida's Governor DeSantis led a boycott on discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity and signed into law Florida House Bill 1557 (which has, ironically, come to be called the "Don't Say Gay" law, despite this phrase never appearing in the legislation) (HB 1557, 2022). Since then, thirteen states⁴ have followed suit, proposing bills designed to prohibit instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through eighth grade (Jones & Franklin, 2022). As with issues related to race and ethnicity, books featuring LGBTQ-identifying people or themes related to gender identity are being removed from K–12 schools across the U.S.

In February 2022 alone, "69 anti-LGBTQ school policy bills [were] proposed in numerous states...some of [which] advocated banning LGBTQ books from school districts, while others ban discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity" (O'Loughlin, Schmidt, & Glazier, 2022, p. 1). PEN America reports that "41% of [2021's] banned books were targeted due to LGBTQ+ content" (Monteil, 2022, para. 2). In public hearings on Idaho House Bill 666 (2022), which forbids "disseminating material harmful to minors" (Section 1, 18-1517), speakers listed "queer texts as examples of...pornography/explicit material" (O'Loughlin et al., 2022, p. 5).

Despite containing no sex scenes, Maia Kobabe's graphic memoir *Gender Queer*, "about growing up nonbinary and asexual, was [2022's] most banned book" (O'Loughlin et al., 2022, p. 5). At a 2021 Virginia school-board meeting, two board members "called for 'sexual' books to be burned" (Riedel, 2022, para. 3), and Oklahoma's Superintendent of Public Instruction, Ryan Walters, banned what he calls "pornographic material and sexualized content from public school libraries, including 190 LGBTQ titles" (Villarreal, 2023, para. 5). Some districts across the U.S. are even banning books about human development and changing relationships during puberty, human rights and activism, and biographies,

autobiographies, and memoirs that feature characters of color or religious minorities (Martin, 2022), such as Judy Blume's pre-teen classic *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* (1970/1988); Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* (2023); and Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* (2023).

Along similar lines, Florida pulled Advanced Placement psychology courses rather than allowing students to learn "how sex and gender influence socialization and other aspects of development" (Marcotte, 2023, para. 2). Florida's ban, based on a 2022 law signed by Governor DeSantis, forbids "classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity." This course was targeted in part because the AP Psychology course, as Amanda Marcotte argues, will not "stigmatize LGBTQ people as... perverts" (2023, para. 4). Further, twenty-three states⁵ have passed laws that either restrict transgender girls specifically or both transgender girls and boys from participating in sports "in accordance with their gender identity" (Barnes, 2023).

The new legislation has also affected higher education. For example, South Dakota House Bill 1012 prohibits colleges and universities from teaching "divisive concepts" (Flaherty, 2022), anti-CRT legislation for higher education has been passed in Iowa and Oklahoma (Greene, 2022), and Tennessee's CRT ban forbids teaching about racism, sexism, and social class in higher education (Wise, 2022). Florida is currently adopting the *Classic Learning Test*, an "anti-woke alternative" to "left-leaning" SAT and College Board examinations, designed to "reclaim education rooted in truth, goodness, and beauty" (Bartlett, 2023, paras. 1, 14, & 16). In some cases, entire academic programs are being eliminated. For example, Florida's House Bill 999 bans courses in "Critical Race Theory, Gender Studies, or Intersectionality, or any derivative major or minor of these belief systems" (Roberts-Grmela, 2023, para. 1).

More than 30 bills across the country also propose to eliminate Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) offices in public colleges and universities (Bryant & Appleby, 2024).⁶ Historically, one purpose of DEI offices on campuses has been to support belonging and acceptance regardless of ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, or physical ability. According to Lu (2023), not only do anti-DEI bills communicate to "students and faculty of color [and members of] marginalized communities that there is a lack of interest on the part of the government in supporting them when they're on campus" (para. 6), but state-level bills that ban DEI mean states that pass such legislation can lose much needed private, state, and federal funding for diversity work (Marijolic, 2023).

States' assaults on civil rights, constitutional freedoms, and academic integrity have not gone unchallenged. Concerned teachers, students, and community members have resisted what they perceive as attacks on their civil rights and academic integrity. Many, including members of

communities personally affected historically and presently, caution about the need to “stay woke,” to remain constantly vigilant in what is perceived as a continuing war being waged against their minds, bodies, families, communities, civil rights, and constitutional freedoms.

Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), “promised to fight ‘cultural warriors’ who attempt to limit lessons on racism and discrimination by labeling it as critical race theory” (Binkley, 2021). The first federal lawsuit challenging a state statute preventing teaching about race and gender, filed by the American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU of Oklahoma, the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, and pro bono counsel, indicted Oklahoma’s classroom censorship bill, House Bill 1775 (Fallik, 2021, para. 2). Soon thereafter, a group of students and educators “filed a lawsuit against the state of Oklahoma, accusing it of violating their [First Amendment] rights with a law that restricts the teaching of race and gender” (Coote, 2021).

Another lawsuit, filed by a group of university students and educators, claims that Florida House Bill 7 “unconstitutionally violates the First Amendment by imposing restrictions on speech and information in college classrooms, and is void for vagueness under the Fourteenth Amendment.” This suit also claims the “Stop Wrongs Against Our Kids and Employees Act violates the Equal Protection Clause because it was enacted with the intent to discriminate against Black educators and students” (Legal Defense Fund, 2022, para. 1).

In response to growing resistance from teachers and communities, legislators have moved quickly to enforce their mandates, issuing gag orders to stifle dissent. As of October 2022, “educational gag orders...increased 250 percent compared to 2021” (Young & Friedman, 2022, para. 3). “Noncompliant” teachers have subsequently been fired, and entire districts have been targeted by state legislators and superintendents, as recently observed in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Negative Impact on Education and Society

Following decades of efforts to control public education (Apple, 2006; Houser, 2023; Houser, Krutka, Roberts, Pennington, & Coerver, 2017; Kuelzer & Houser, 2019; NCLB, 2001), the recent legislation is taking a toll. Not only are these activities profoundly mis-educative (Dewey, 1938; Woodson, 1933), they are eroding public education and, indeed, the public itself (Houser, 2023). A few years ago, a title like Parramore’s (2018) *The Corporate Plan to Groom U.S. Kids for Servitude by Wiping Out Public Schools* might have seemed laughable. This is no longer the case. Of course, these are not the first attempts to achieve social, political, and economic aims by controlling public education. Public schools have been contested spaces since their inception, and in recent decades they have become ideological battlegrounds (Apple, 2006; Fortinsky, 2023; Giroux, 1985; Gutkin, 2023; Villarreal, 2023; Wise, 2022).

It must be acknowledged that mistakes, excesses, and even abuses can occur on all sides. For example, although DEI initiatives were instituted to support diversity, equity, and inclusion, questions have arisen about some of the policies and practices. Criticisms range from allegations of reverse discrimination to charges that DEI ratings have been cultivated by profitable corporations and elite universities simply to boost their status and revenues. Khalid and Snyder (2023) argue that DEI offices have, albeit perhaps unintentionally, undermined meaningful discourse about important issues by replacing “careful, philosophical deliberations about the meaning and value of inclusion” (para. 3) with sets of “administrative policies and practices” (para. 4). Still others note cases in which prosecutions of alleged DEI violations have denied the defendants’ constitutional rights. Similarly, questions have arisen about possible excesses in efforts to “remain woke” to the continuing impact of systemic racism. For example, concerns have been raised about indictments based on limited evidence, such as the use of single words or phrases, without due consideration of the broader context or intent surrounding their usage.

We acknowledge mistakes have been made on every side. However, recognition of shortcomings, failures, and even abuses in efforts to address systemic oppression is not an indictment of their need or purpose, and it is far from an admission of moral equivalency. It must be remembered that these are *responses* to continuing (and, we believe, intensifying) oppressive and exploitive societal conditions. As Freire (1970/1990) famously observes: “Never in history has violence been *initiated* by the oppressed. How could they be the initiators, if they themselves are the *result* of violence? ... There would be no oppressed had there been no prior situation of violence to establish their subjugation” (p. 41).

The fact remains that the majority of people in the world, not to mention nonhuman life and the planet itself, have been and continue to be exploited for the comfort and privilege of the few. The U.S. and other “developed” nations continue to profit from the exploitation of other countries and marginalized populations throughout the world. These are the facts, and no amount of denial, deflection, or distraction makes them any less true. The fact is that CRT, commitment to “staying woke,” and organizations and movements like BLM, DEI, MeToo, and the continuing fight to determine one’s own sexual orientation and gender identity originated, and still function, as legitimate means of coping with systems of oppression and exploitation that have not only persisted but intensified despite concerted efforts to end them.

We think there is legitimate cause for concern that the current legislative actions are designed to dismantle public education and the (re)public as we know them (Houser, 2023; iHeartRadio, 2024; Klam, 2024; Mader, Samuels, Butrymowicz, Gilreath, Morton, Preston, Willen, Sanchez, Kolodner,

& Marcus, 2024; Stanford, 2024; The Heritage Foundation, 2005/2023, 2023/2024; Zimmer, 2024). Consider the *explicit* and *acknowledged* aims and initiatives of the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025, a 922-page political initiative also referred to as the 2025 Presidential Transition Project (The Heritage Foundation, 2005/2023, 2023/2024).

The stated purpose of Project 2025 is to promote conservative policies by reshaping the federal government and consolidating executive power (iHeartRadio, 2024; The Heritage Foundation, 2005/2023, 2023/2024; Zimmer, 2024). It was crafted to coincide with an expected Donald Trump victory in 2024 (Zimmer, 2024). Based on *unitary executive theory*, Project 2025 insists that the entire executive branch is under direct control of the president (The Heritage Foundation, 2023/2024). Based on this premise, it advocates reclassifying tens of thousands of federal civil-service workers as political appointees who would (presumably) be loyal to the President (The Heritage Foundation, 2005/2023, 2023/2024; Zimmer, 2024).

As might be expected, strong concerns have been expressed about the meanings and implications of this plan. Georgetown historian Thomas Zimmer argues that Project 2025 can best be understood as:

The American Right's declaration of war on the idea of a multiracial, pluralistic, diverse society. Project 2025 is a plan to execute what amounts to a comprehensive authoritarian takeover of American government to transform [it] into a machine that serves two purposes. First, exacting revenge on what they call 'the woke, leftist, globalist enemy' and, secondly, imposing a minoritarian, reactionary vision of white Christian patriarchal order on society. (iHeartRadio, 2024)

Under Project 2025, the Department of Justice would come under the partisan control of the President, as would the Department of Commerce, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Federal Communications Commission, and the Federal Trade Commission (The Heritage Foundation, 2005/2023, 2023/2024). The Department of Homeland Security would be dismantled, and the Department of Education would be eliminated (The Heritage Foundation, 2005/2023, 2023/2024). Project 2025 also proposes terminating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, and tasking the Department of Justice with prosecuting anti-white racism (The Heritage Foundation, 2023/2024; iHeartRadio, 2024). The Project also recommends a complete ban on abortion and most contraceptives, a ban on Muslims entering the country, and a ban on courses in African-American History and African-American Studies. Report authors also recommend cutting Social Security and Medicare, increasing tax breaks for "the one percent," eliminating unions and worker protections, arresting and deporting illegal immigrants, and using the U.S. military for domestic law

enforcement (iHeartRadio, 2024; The Heritage Foundation, 2005/2023, 2023/2024; Zimmer, 2024).

Is it mere coincidence that conservative state governors, superintendents of public instruction, and boards of education are currently defunding DEI, banning resources and teaching about racism, sexual orientation, and gender identity construction, disallowing conversations about the need to “stay woke” to continuing acts of domination and dehumanization, and gagging those who dissent against these unconstitutional actions? Is it a coincidence that Oklahoma’s Superintendent of Public Instruction has enlisted Kevin Roberts, head of the Heritage Foundation and architect of Project 2025, and Dennis Prager, founder of PragerU, to radically overhaul the Oklahoma Social Studies Standards, including determining how the Bible will be taught? We do not think these are coincidences.

One effect of the recent legislation is that it continues the division and conquest of the nation’s people that has existed for decades (Freire, 1970/1990). Undermining, invalidating, and alienating countless members of society who have historically endured systemic violence, hatred, and intolerance in the forms of racism, sexism, and homophobia, and striving to silence those who object, these activities lend credence to the claims of Critical Race Theorists “that racism isn’t just a flaw in American democracy, but part of the design” (Critchley, 2021, para. 5).

Another effect of the bans, mandates, and gag orders, following in the aftermath of NCLB, is that they have created extreme fatigue as teachers have coped with continual second-guessing, micromanagement, and external control at the hands of state legislators and district administrators far removed from schools and classrooms (Gallegos, 2023; Houser et al., 2017). Public school teachers feel exhausted, intimidated, and discouraged, and they are exiting the profession in record numbers (Houser et al., 2017; Kuelzer & Houser, 2019; Perna, 2024; Staake, 2024; Will, 2024). These are not just the relatively few who explicitly advocate for social justice; there is an exodus of qualified educators in general, the vast majority of whom do *not* focus on CRT, the need to “stay woke,” or issues of sexual orientation and gender identity and equity.

Yet another effect of the current legislation is that it severely restricts learning and development. Indeed, it is profoundly mis-educative (Dewey, 1938; Woodson, 1933), arresting continuity of growth by limiting opportunities for students to consider diverse and challenging thoughts, perspectives, and experiences. Quality learning thrives in diverse, inclusive, equitable, honest, and affirming yet intellectually challenging educational environments (Nieto & Bode, 2017; Palmer, 2007; Saad, 2022; Vantieghem, Roose, Goosen, Schelfhout, & Van Avermaet, 2023). Many children and adolescents learn, before and outside formal education, that serious social conflicts have existed in the past and persist today. Failures to acknowledge

these facts in school are not only dishonest, but they represent missed opportunities to help students make sense of their world. Moreover, failure to address past and continuing societal challenges denies valuable opportunities for students to struggle and grow.

Piaget (1969) demonstrated decades ago that intellectual growth requires opportunities to experience and reconcile cognitive disequilibrium. This occurs as humans grapple with new and diverse experiences and perspectives. Banning and censoring discussions of challenging ideas, perspectives, and societal experiences denies access to valuable information that can help students grow intellectually and socially, becoming more informed, empathetic, thoughtful, and critically reflective members of society. For what other purpose do we teach than to promote growth by helping students think beyond their “immediate world[s]” (Robertson, 2022, para. 17)? The current bans, censorship, and gag-orders trivialize education and deny opportunities for growth in an attempt to retain inequitable conditions established throughout history.

Retired Tulsa Public Schools English teacher Amanda Trower notes that Oklahoma House Bill 1775 restricts teachers’ ability to enhance critical thinking (Robertson, 2022). From an English literature standpoint, *Hamlet*, Act 2 Scene 2, includes a quotation that, in today’s political climate, is paradoxical: “There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so” (para. 10). Classroom discussion of *Hamlet*’s implication that “nothing is inherently bad,” or over what moral codes, if any, all people share, would likely violate House Bill 1775 (para. 12). More broadly, however, from a social-historical perspective, without exposure to materials that document how people of color were colonized, enslaved, abused, and murdered, and without being taught to recognize that many of the thoughts and sentiments underlying how those atrocities persist today, students will be less-capable of understanding the continuing struggles, the significance of constitutional amendments, or the implications of the marches, protests, and legislative efforts intended to ensure the Constitution is upheld. Similarly, censoring LGBTQ-related materials and discussions not only invalidates LGBTQ students and citizens but denies opportunities for straight students and citizens to enlarge and expand their own feelings, understandings, and views of the world.

In addition to eroding the effectiveness of public education by narrowing diversity of thought and arresting continuity of growth, the current bans, censorship, and gag orders, coupled with prior national legislation such as NCLB, also threaten the public itself (Houser, 2023). Undermining democracy, effacing the Constitution, privatizing public resources, and failing to recognize the importance of the commons, we believe rightwing efforts to control what is presented, discussed, and thought about in schools pose a serious threat to the (Re)public (Houser, 2023;

Klam, 2024; Mader et al., 2024; Stanford, 2024; The Heritage Foundation, 2023/2024; Zimmer, 2024). Public relationships and experiences, shared social and environmental spaces, understanding and appreciating the value of the “commons,” and a willingness to work together for the “common good” are essential to the health and sustainability of people, society, and the planet (Houser, 2023, 2024). Limiting opportunities to think, question, and grow minimizes students’ ability to value, preserve, and protect the (Re)public.

Underlying Causes

Having identified the manifestations of the problem, we now consider the underlying causes. To some, the situation may seem straightforward: angry, fearful, distrusting, defensive, entitled, individualistic, and increasingly desperate members of the political right select opportunistic rightwing leaders who take hardline stands on issues their constituents view as a fight for the heart of America, which they believe is being lost to a weak, corrupt, unpatriotic, and godless political left. Or, from a different perspective, angry, fearful, distrusting, cowardly, unpatriotic, and increasingly desperate members of the political left elect opportunistic leftwing politicians who take hardline stands on issues their constituents view as a fight for the heart of America, which they believe is being lost to an angry, fearful, distrusting, greedy, hypercompetitive, and highly individualistic political right.

Realizing that one way to change a society is to shape the narrative and control access to information, elected leaders and activists have used various means to accomplish their aims. On the left, much of this work is still enacted through traditional protests, organizations and movements such as BLM and MeToo, social media activity, and academe. On the right, in addition to traditional protests (such as Back the Blue), organizations and movements (such as the NRA, anti-environmentalism, opposition to immigration, English-only, and anti-federalism), and social media (such as Truth Social), this is also currently being accomplished by imposing unconstitutional mandates (e.g., to teach the Bible), banning books, censorship, and issuing gag orders to dictate what can be read, discussed, and thought about in schools.

Fear, anger, and distrust are experienced on both the left and the right, and everywhere in-between, but what are the sources of these feelings? For members of historically marginalized, minoritized, and otherwise-oppressed and alienated groups, many of the answers lie in historical and continuing violations of minds, bodies, families, communities, civil rights, and constitutional freedoms, in addition to brutal histories of servitude, enslavement, removals, erasures, and genocide, coupled with the breaking of trust, time and again (Deloria, 1999; Stannard, 1993; Zinn, 1995). But this is not all. As Baldwin (1963, 1963/1988) explained decades ago, living

with ever-present knowledge and understanding of these cumulative experiences cannot help but affect one's identity.

At the height of the Civil Rights Movement, in his powerful essay, "A Talk to Teachers," Baldwin (1963/1988) implores educators to refuse to participate in, condone, or permit Black children to believe what they have been told about who they are or about their role, place, position, abilities, or value in this country and world. Baldwin brilliantly turns the tables in this and other essays and presentations. He begins by stating that white Americans, then the majority in the U.S., have always perceived Black Americans as "problem" people, treating and defining them in the most cruel, inhuman, and loathsome ways. However, he continues, he knows he is not who white Americans think he is. And if they are wrong about who they think *he* is, they must also be wrong about who they think *they* are—about how they have defined themselves. In a 1963 Hollywood Roundtable discussion of the Civil Rights March on Washington and how best to deal with the "Negro problem" (Reelblack One, 2017), Baldwin challenges white viewers to shift their focus to themselves, asking them to think about who *they* are, and what is it about *them* that *needs* Black Americans to be who white Americans misperceive them to be.

Shifting the focus to questions of self-identity, Baldwin gets to the heart of the matter. He argues that the U.S. suffers an identity crisis, not knowing who we are because we have never fully acknowledged what we have done or why we have done it. One reason we have not acknowledged our past actions and motives is that these are shrouded in a mythology that has been repeated so often and believed so ardently that many are no longer capable of distinguishing fact from fiction. Another reason we fail to acknowledge our past is that many continue to benefit from it. Intergenerational wealth accumulated for centuries on the backs of servants, slaves, underpaid workers, and unpaid domestic partners, along with lands that were originally tribal hunting and trading grounds, continue to enrich not only the descendants of the original European colonizers, but all who still experience the unearned privileges of whiteness.

Critical Race Theorists draw heavily on Baldwin's logic in their portrayal of what is still occurring, and the recent bans, censorship, and gag orders could not provide clearer evidence of the continuing national mythologies or our continuing refusal (or inability) to distinguish fact from fiction. To understand the source of the fear and anger on the right, it is instructive to consider what the current legislation does and does not actually target. The legislation does not, by and large, explicitly state that historical events cannot be taught.⁷ Rather, what it attempts to control is the *analysis* of the events—and critical analysis in general. Much of the legislation we have identified targets: (1) Critical Race Theory, which reveals factors and processes—including white-supremacist beliefs and practices—

that reproduce racism; (2) “staying woke,” which emphasizes vigilance against continuing efforts to exploit, alienate, dominate, and control; and (3) education on sexual orientation and gender identity construction, which challenges binary logic and emphasizes the importance of defining one’s own identity rather than being defined by others.

It is also instructive to note that each of these efforts is having an effect. For example, Habermas’ (1991) theory provides “knowledge and understanding and action plans intended to free [people] from oppression” (Fleming, 2012, p. 2). Building on Habermas, Critical Race Theorists argue “that racism isn’t just a flaw in American democracy, but part of the design” (Critchley, 2021, para. 5). CRT has become a means of *understanding and addressing* the structural phenomenon of racism in the U.S. (Karimi, 2021). CRT’s power is that it provides a lens by which to examine how systemic racism endures “through systems, laws, and policies—and how those same systems, laws, and policies can be transformed” (George, 2021, p. 4).

Thus, we maintain, while much of the fear, anger, and distrust on the left is based on past and continuing violations that must constantly be reconciled with personal identities as members of a society that remains unwilling or unable to examine itself for the common good of all, much of the fear, anger, and distrust on the right is grounded in the growing effectiveness of CRT in identifying the root causes of racism, combined with the persistence of “staying woke” to what is occurring, along with the insistence by increasing numbers of people that they define their *own* identities rather than allowing themselves to be defined by others. What critical race theorists and scholars of sexual orientation and gender identity construction realize, as Baldwin (1963, 1963/1988), Said (1978), Butler (1990, 1997), and Spivak (1987) clearly understood, is that it is at the level of self-identification that the work of social transformation ultimately must be done.

Critical Race Theorists argue that whiteness is a socially constructed identity that underlies past and continuing racism (Applebaum, 2016; Delgado, 2012; Haney López, 2006). The concept of socially constructed identity is founded on the post-Structuralist idea that *reality is a social construction* (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The basic claim is that much of what we perceive as objectively “real” is actually socially constructed individually or collectively based on our thoughts, feelings, experiences, wants, needs, fears, perceptions, and so forth. Post-Structuralists theorize that among the “realities” humans construct are our personal and social identities (e.g., Who am I? Who are we?), as well as our assumptions of who others are. When socially constructed assumptions are applied to our understandings of who we are, they form the basis of our socially constructed identities.

In Western societies, just as language meaning is juxtaposed in word-pair binaries, the identity of one social group is constructed simultaneously

with, and in contrast to, the identity of other groups (Butler, 1990, 1997; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1987), and in the co-construction of self and other, the self is typically constructed as superior. Our own identities are constructed in contrast with and as superior to “others” because Western epistemologies and languages are based on binary, absolute, and hierarchical logic. Therefore, as Said (1978) demonstrates, the European concept of the “Occident” (“The West”) was simultaneously constructed in contrast with and as superior to the “Orient” (“The East”).

Within an absolutist, binary, and hierarchical Western epistemological context, for one person or group to be defined as normal or ideal, others must *necessarily* be defined as *abnormal* and *less-than-ideal*. In this system, one identity literally cannot come into existence without the simultaneous co-construction of the “other.” The one identity cannot be recognized and understood without juxtaposing it against the existence of the other. This is what James Baldwin (1963, 1963/1988) understood, and this structural understanding is why Critical Race Theorists insist “that racism isn’t just a flaw in American democracy, but part of the design” (Critchley, 2021, para. 5). Similar constructs are evident in Spivak’s (1987) assessment of the plight of the “subaltern” in the processes of “worlding” and in Butler’s (1990, 1997) concepts of the “paradox of subjection” and the role of “performativity” in transforming dominant social constructions of gender.

These epistemic and language structures also apply to gender identity construction. Like whiteness, prevalent binary gender conceptions of masculinity and femininity are produced and reproduced through everyday social and linguistic practices and relationships, and they similarly accrue the attendant benefits (or liabilities). Here again, part of the problem is that the constructions are generalized. They are absolute, hierarchical, and defined in binary opposites. When perceived as total and essential, there is little room for variation. Many who do not fit the social ideal are perceived, and perceive themselves, as inferior. As the roots of these beliefs are epistemological, these are legitimate causes for anger, fear, and distrust, and they exist across social and political spectra.

Returning to questions of race and power, Chubbuck (2004) theorizes that the “social construction of [w]hiteness...was the mechanism that forged a [w]hite ‘national’ identity in American history, as various ethnic groups defined themselves as different from people of color in order to benefit from the privileges accorded to the [w]hite population” (p. 304). According to Harris (1993), racial hierarchies have historically depended on the “central principle [of] [w]hiteness as an identity...not by an inherent unifying characteristic, but by the exclusion of others deemed to be ‘not [w]hite’” (p. 1736). Whiteness as a power relation has been based on a mythology that white is supreme, coupled with “assigning...inferior status” to racial groups who are considered subordinate (p. 1761). As Bonds and

Inwood (2016) explain, white supremacy is “the presumed superiority of [w]hite racial identities...in support of the cultural, political, and economic domination of non-[w]hite groups” (pp. 719–720).

Socially constructed “truths” are reified, propagated, and in time achieve “commonsense” status, implicitly agreed-upon knowledge perceived as “what everyone knows.” When a belief becomes “commonsense,” it is no longer seen as needing or worthy of consideration. Why waste time contemplating what everyone already knows? As socially co-constructed assumptions about our own and others’ identities proliferate, achieve commonsense status, and are reproduced generation after generation, the entire process (including the implicit, commonsense knowledge) is obscured and becomes virtually impossible to see.

This process explains why it is difficult for so many to recognize and acknowledge inequitable systemic conditions such as racism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity even when their harmful effects have been shown to exist.⁸ Problematic systemic conditions are reproduced through intersections of perception, practice, power, and time, and these intersections limit our ability to see, acknowledge, and address the fundamental nature and underlying causes of the problems themselves (Houser, 2023, 2024). As everyday practices and perceptions are passed from generation to generation, they are internalized as aspects not simply of what we *do* but of how we *think* and who we *are*—as aspects of our self-identities. As these ideas achieve implicit commonsense status, they are no longer deemed necessary of further contemplation. For many today, Western practices and perceptions are viewed as all that exists, all that is worthwhile, and all that is possible (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Lukacs, 1923/1968/1994; Quinn, 1992).

Thus, perception, practice, power, and time intersect to reproduce existing conditions while obscuring the entire process, rendering it difficult to see and address (Houser, 2023, 2024). The primary function of perception in this process is that it constrains what we are capable of seeing, and therefore of consciously addressing. The function of everyday practice is that it continually reinforces and normalizes existing perceptions. The function of power is that it is used to enforce everyday practices long enough for them to “take hold,” no matter how oppressive or alienating they may be. The function of time is that it provides the necessary space for the normalization of daily practices and perspectives to occur, and for their eventual achievement of commonsense status. The commonsense status of modern Western practices, perceptions, and epistemologies, coupled with loss of memory that things ever have been or ever could be otherwise, reinforces the belief that what we currently see is all there is.

This is the heart of the problem. Absolute, binary, and hierarchical epistemological assumptions, reinforced by everyday social relationships

and linguistic practices, shape our social constructions of our own identities simultaneously with, in opposition to, and as superior (or inferior) to our constructions of “others” identities. Historically opposed communities, co-constructed and hierarchically arranged in binary opposition, struggle to live together and to make sense of the world they share. Since perception, self-identification, and hierarchical social arrangements are reified over time, the underlying nature, causes, and processes of the social inequities embedded in Western society remain, for many, largely unseen. And even when these processes are revealed, their existence can be difficult to accept, because acceptance requires acknowledging that their benefits and liabilities are still being accrued (Baldwin, 1963, 1963/1988; Houser, 2023, 2024; Said, 1978).

Implications for Education

We are deeply troubled by the book banning, censorship, and gag-order legislation currently enacted across the nation. We consider these actions mis-educative, unconstitutional, and dangerous to public education. Moreover, we fear this legislation threatens the very public upon which all of us depend. Where does this situation leave higher education? First, we think it is imperative that academics understand the impact of such legislation on education and society, and that we communicate this information to our students. This is essential for those who prepare teachers, counselors, administrators, community educators, and other educational personnel.

Second, it is important for us and our students to research and understand the underlying causes. From our reading of the situation, the current legislation appears to be an unconstitutional attempt to seize unprecedented power and control. We are witnessing extreme tensions throughout the country, manifested in fear, anger, and distrust across social and political strata. Many people’s deeply held beliefs are grounded in past and continuing experiences of violence, brutality, exploitation, domination, dehumanization, and alienation. Other feelings are based on fear and uncertainty associated with real and perceived losses of power, privilege, status, and wealth amidst significant social and economic changes. Much of the fear, anger, and distrust on all sides is existential, involving deeply felt concerns about lives, families, and communities, about physical, social, and emotional safety, and about fundamental understandings of who we are as individuals and as a society. These sources of fear, anger, and distrust must also be known and taught to humanize each other as we work together to resolve our monumental challenges.

We believe it is also necessary to understand why it is so difficult for many to see, recognize, acknowledge, and address our problematic systemic conditions (e.g., racism, patriarchy, and heteronormativity) even when their harmful effects have been shown to exist. Here the task is to learn and teach about how intersections of perception, practice, power, and time

simultaneously reproduce and obscure the very conditions many seek to transform.

We strongly encourage those who are engaging in the incredibly difficult but vitally important work of identifying and addressing the roots of systemic oppression to *stay the course*. Legislative bans, censorship, and gag orders are being enacted because Critical Race Theory, “staying woke,” and insisting on determining one’s *own* sexual orientation and one’s *own* gender identity rather than allowing them to be determined by others, are having an effect. If they were not effective, they would not be censored, banned, and silenced. The effectiveness of these challenges is *why* CRT, “remaining woke,” and sexual orientation and gender identity education are being targeted by conservative state legislators.

Of course, those who engage in this work must proceed in ways that are both effective and allow them to remain in the profession. One way that we (from our admittedly privileged positions as white, middle-class scholars) have sought to do this is to begin by presenting historical events (which has not yet been banned), and then opening space for authentic dialogue. Not lecturing or admonishing (no matter how warranted these may seem), but genuine, reciprocal, mutually respectful conversation. At this point we ask, “What are your thoughts? Do you have questions? Does anyone have further information? Are there other views, based on different experiences? How is it possible for people living side-by-side to experience the world in such vastly different ways? Where does this leave us? What does it suggest for where we should go from here?”

If our primary purpose is to help our students learn how to think rather than what to think, it will be more difficult for others to argue that we are being divisive. There will also be greater possibility for lasting change if we engage our students in honest, informed discussion of the problems of the past and present. For this to occur, we will have to forego the gratification of being agreed with, refrain from defaulting to Western epistemologies to dismantle Western constructions (Lorde, 1984), and resist expecting radical transformation when what is ultimately required is the (painstakingly slow) process of human growth and development.

Finally, we can and must continue working on ourselves, challenging our own ideas, perpetually complicating and expanding our own identities and understandings. As fully and accurately as possible, we must continue to name the nature, causes, and processes of the systemic problems we encounter, including the distinct possibility of our own complicity, so we can imagine and enact better alternatives. This is essential if we are to avoid reproducing the very conditions we seek to transform.

Endnotes

- ¹ At times, we utilize binary language—such as “rightwing” and “leftwing”—for the sake of clarity. We recognize these oversimplifications do not reflect existing variations, nuances, and complexities.
- ² Arkansas, Florida, Iowa, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Wyoming.
- ³ Alaska, Alabama, Colorado, Georgia, Iowa, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Montana, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, West Virginia, and Wyoming.
- ⁴ Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.
- ⁵ Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, West Virginia, and Wyoming.
- ⁶ In Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and West Virginia.
- ⁷ This is an important point, because it suggests that teachers can still identify the events.
- ⁸ James Baldwin famously stated that the crime is in the innocence (1963).

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