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Yes, Black Lives Still Matter and Politics-Free Schools are a Myth

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The crucial paradox which confronts us here is that the whole process of education occurs within a social framework and is designed to perpetuate the aims of society.

-James Baldwin, 1963

Ideological poison. Revisionist history. Toxic propaganda. These were the words that President Donald Trump used to describe the *New York Times* 1619 Project in a speech on Constitution Day 2020. In a previous tweet, President Trump had already threatened to restrict governmental funding from California schools planning to teach the initiative (Trump, 2020). However, on this day, Trump used the full weight of his moral and rhetorical power as president (Ceasar et al., 1981; Lim, 2002; Windt, 1986), to position the 1619 Project as the latest attempt at liberal indoctrination in schools, saying:

The left has warped, distorted, and defiled the American story with deceptions, falsehoods, and lies. There is no better example than the New York Times' totally discredited 1619 Project. This project rewrites American history to teach our children that we were founded on the principle of oppression, not freedom. Nothing could be further from the truth. America's founding set in motion the unstoppable chain of events that abolished slavery, secured civil rights, defeated communism and fascism, and built the most fair, equal, and prosperous nation in human history. (Trump, 2020, paras. 11-12)

In this speech President Trump expanded on a particularly prevalent ideology that has been ingrained in the fabric of the United States' political ethos: that America is an exceptional, benevolent nation with a historical record that is infallible and beyond reproach. Therefore, any attempt to provide nuance regarding the influence of chattel slavery and the contributions of Black Americans to this nation's founding, is positioned as a treasonous attack on the very idea of what it means to be an American.

In a recent *Education Week* opinion piece, a Virginia parent described her experience with her child's virtual learning orientation meeting, which primarily centered on her discomfort with the Zoom background of the school's dean of students that read: "No Family Separation, Black Lives Matter, Pro Civil Liberties, Climate Change is Real" (Gunlock, 2020, para. 7). Previous research has illustrated the significant levels of pushback from communities where teachers have engaged in controversial attempts to provide a deeper understanding of the complexities of American history, let alone present-day issues of justice and equality (e.g., Lintner, 2018; Swalwell & Schweber, 2016). Like President Trump, the opinion piece author decried this sign as further evidence of the indoctrination of public-school students and called for a return to a nostalgic notion of a "politics-free" education (Gunlock, 2020, para. 14). However, this idea in itself is a fallacy.

As many have argued, American education has never been inherently "politics-free" and never will be (Kolluri, 2017; McAvoy & Hess, 2013). Conservatives' attempts to ensure that America is heralded as a benevolent nation dedicated to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is an inherently political act that serves as little more than an attempt to silence those whose lived experiences and histories contradict that framing. As a former public-school teacher and current educational researcher, I believe that it is time for educators to disregard the notion of a politics-free education

and wholeheartedly acknowledge the ways that the various social identities of students, teachers, and families are inherently political and deserve to be acknowledged and embraced. This more critical approach acknowledges the legacy of oppressive political ideologies in schools and works to incorporate a deeper understanding of the ways that such ideologies continue to impact students' educational experiences. A crucial first step for this work involves integrating historically accurate and culturally relevant curricula, such as the 1619 Project.

A Brief History of the Influence of Political Ideologies in U.S. Schools

Political battles over the ways that we educate our children have raged for centuries (Zimmerman, 2002). In the 19th century, driven by xenophobic and fundamentally racist ideals, the United States government sanctioned what came to be known as "Indian schools," with an expressed mission of "civilizing" Native Americans through an assimilationist re-education program (Churchill, 2004; Malmshemer, 1985). In the 20th century, based on beliefs of White supremacy, segregationists worked tirelessly to deny Black students their constitutional right to public education until the Supreme Court forced their hands (Alexander, 1976; Day, 2016). Even today, textbooks and curricular materials in U.S. public schools are regularly and directly impacted by political pressures (Ighodaro & Wiggan 2011).

In yet another example, Senator Tom Cotton (R-Arkansas) joined President Trump in dismissing the 1619 Project as "a racially divisive, revisionist account of history that denies the noble principles of freedom and equality on which our nation was founded" (Cotton, 2020, para. 3). Paired with his proposed legislation to ban the 1619 Project, Cotton's statement aligns with conservative political leaders who quickly censor truths deemed divisive, especially when those truths appear to threaten the carefully constructed vision of American exceptionalism. This forms the crux of the argument against the 1619 Project. Therefore, it is important to understand exactly what the 1619 Project is and is not, rather than the caricature that has been presented by its critics.

Situating the 1619 Project

Complete access to the fundamental human rights explicated in the Declaration of Independence: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, all rest upon whether or not one can claim ownership to whiteness. In conceptualizing the exclusionary idea of *whiteness as a property*, Harris (1993) describes how the Virginia Assembly fundamentally altered previously settled common law in 1622 to further dehumanize Black people in order to justify the system of chattel slavery. By amending the law to change the legal status of a child from the father to the mother, Harris illustrates a clear example of White lawmakers using the power of White supremacy to change a legal framework and definition for the benefit and exclusion of anyone deemed nonwhite (p. 1719). In this regard, Blackness, and ultimately the Black experience(s) related to White people in the United States, have been inextricably tied to the degradation and dehumanization of Black people (Dumas, 2016; Wilderson, 2010), providing an explicit impetus for the development of the 1619 Project.

In August 2019, the 1619 Project was published by the *New York Times Magazine* in an attempt to provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which the institution of chattel slavery was a fundamental component of the founding of the United States. Recognizing that the significance of the year 1619 is largely unknown in the U.S., the developers of the initiative set out "to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of our national narrative" (Silverstein, 2019). The purpose of this project is not to

diminish the accomplishments and accolades of the Founding Fathers, but rather to provide critical context related to the inherent value of the contributions of enslaved Africans during this time period. Nikole Hannah-Jones (2019), the originator of the 1619 Project explains the importance of this initiative by asserting:

For centuries, white Americans have been trying to solve the “Negro problem.” They have dedicated thousands of pages to this endeavor. It is common, still, to point to rates of black poverty, out-of-wedlock births, crime and college attendance, as if these conditions in a country built on a racial caste system are not utterly predictable. But crucially, you cannot view those statistics while ignoring another: that black people were enslaved here longer than we have been free. (p. 26)

With this understanding, the 1619 Project provides critical context that has largely been missing from contemporary explanations of United States history in K-12 schools. This form of erasure is common in educational curricula as evidenced by Chu’s (2017) analysis of social studies textbook research. While attempting to address previously noted methodological shortcomings in textbook content analyses, her findings demonstrate the persistent lack of meaningful representation of racially minoritized populations. Although inclusion of racially minoritized groups in curricula has increased over time, representations of people of color largely remain “...stereotypical, biased, and inaccurate” (Chu, 2017). A report by the Southern Poverty Law Center (2018), *Teaching Hard History*, provides a complementary indictment of the ways that slavery is taught in American schools. Students are commonly taught about the triumphs and resilience of enslaved people with little attention paid to the philosophical underpinnings of White supremacy, anti-Blackness, and racial capitalism that fueled the system of chattel slavery. While the inclusion of this content absolutely has political implications for schools, I argue that this is not something to shy away from. Instead, I believe this is exactly what our schools and students need.

The Impact of Politics in my Own Classroom

Some research suggests a significant tension between teachers’ beliefs regarding teaching topics that could be deemed controversial and the potential negative consequences of taking such actions. Levitt & Longstreet (1993) argue that teachers believe it is important to tackle controversial issues in their classrooms. However, teachers also maintain that it is incredibly difficult and potentially harmful to their future careers (Byford, Lennon, & Russell, 2009). As a Black, queer former elementary school teacher who was raised and worked in the Deep South, I can empathize with those concerns. Even as I recognized the need to work with students to critically analyze our nation’s history in order to understand our current socio-political context, I acknowledge that my positionality directly impacted the way that I taught. Initially, I was hesitant to bring my full, authentic self into the classroom, as there was a clear understanding of the “correct” persona that I should portray as a Black male educator. However, I soon realized that my positionality was not something to be tucked aside when I became a teacher. Instead, it was an important component of who I was a person and who I would become as an educator. When students and educators enter their schools, whether virtually or in person, they do not miraculously shed their racial identities and the political implications of those identities. Their religious, gender, ethnic, national, and yes—racial identities are all inherently political and often directly impact their educational experiences and outcomes (Lewis, 2003; Moya, 2006).

During the 2016-2017 academic year, I was lucky enough to teach one of the most brilliant groups of students that I have ever encountered. My students were politically adept and had an incredible

aptitude for engaging in critical conversations. Although they were only 8-9 years old at the time, they came to me with well-formed opinions related to equality, fairness, and justice. As their teacher, I refused to shy away from issues that could have been deemed too political or controversial. Instead, we navigated the contentious 2016 presidential election with careful thought, discussion, and an ever-deepening sense of understanding. In the early days of the Trump administration, my students skillfully debated issues of national security and xenophobia, ultimately forming their own carefully crafted opinions on the development and implementation of President Trump's travel bans. Not only was politics a part of my classroom, the rigorous learning environment that we built together would have been impossible without it. Instead of ignoring the political nature of education, I believe it is absolutely necessary for educators to strategically counter societal myths, such as "politics free education," that oppressors have employed to maintain the status quo (Freire, 1972). Critical content like the 1619 Project is politically courageous and builds educators' capacity to do such work. It deserves to be praised and widely replicated, rather than shunned and struck down by those who remain beholden to the myths of the past. In that way, we do the work of shifting the very foundations of society, by asserting new, empowered roles that those who have historically held power never envisioned for us (Baldwin, 1963).

Conclusion

Although we are at the precipice of a new presidential administration, the reality remains that President Trump's assertions carry significant weight among his supporters. For example, even as his campaign has lost a dizzying number of election-related lawsuits and multiple recounts that repeatedly confirmed Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 election, 70% of Republicans do not believe the election was free and fair (Kim, 2020). Therefore, his faulty rhetoric positioning K-12 schools as factories of liberal indoctrination is likely to remain popular among his supporters even after he leaves office. In fact, he has demonstrated his continued commitment to this rhetoric by appointing members to his new 1776 Commission, which "was formed to advise the President about the core principles of the American founding and how to protect those principles through promoting patriotic education" (Guadiano, 2020).

Furthermore, the closer than expected election results have already begun to cause conversations about the need to be less vocal regarding issues of racial justice for Black people. For instance, moderate House Democrats, in search of a rationale for their unexpected losses, have expressed the belief that activists' calls and proposals to "defund the police," were too divisive (Farris, Caygle, & Mutnick, 2020). These sentiments have been further echoed by former President Barack Obama, who opined that Black Lives Matter activists pushing for a full restructuring of policing should "decide whether they want to get something done or feel good among the people they agree with" (Duster, 2020).

As the United States undergoes what has been described as a racial reckoning in the wake of continued police brutality that disproportionately harms Black people, it is important, now more than ever, for educators to do all that they can to affirm the humanity of their Black students. Critics have strategically used the words and policy proposals of individual members and affiliates of the Black Lives Matter Global Network to portray the larger Black Lives Matter movement as divisive, radical, and un-American. It is important to note that the affirmation of Black lives does not necessarily imply agreement with every policy that they propose. However, their mission of working "to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes" (Black Lives Matter Global Network, n.d.) should not be considered

controversial. Calls for a “politics-free” education system and labeling policies aimed at saving Black lives as too divisive are little more than thinly veiled attempts to silence any ideology that challenges the status quo that continues to leave Black people in constant danger. Instead of criticizing educators for daring to openly support their Black students, community members should instead do whatever they can to affirm the fact that Black lives do indeed matter. These efforts demonstrate to Black students that their teachers, school leaders, and the broader community are not simply aware of the legacy of anti-Black racial violence in America but understand that this intergenerational curse cannot and should not continue.

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