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The Authoritarian Threat to Public Education: Attacks on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Undermine Teaching and Learning

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Many of us in the field of education watched with bewilderment around the time of the 2020 presidential campaign as Critical Race Theory (CRT) became a source of heated conversation in right-wing media and vitriol was increasingly directed at both K-12 and higher education over the issue. Most recognized the tactic as part of a larger culture war meant to inflame the sentiments of voters and rouse opposition to those segments of society that embrace diversity. But when substantial portions of the general populace came to accept the inflamed rhetoric regarding CRT, real-world consequences were inevitably the result. Citizens protested and lobbied local school boards for action (Legal Defense Fund, 2022). State politicians took up the cause to enact legislation with the purpose of clamping down on teachers and professors whom they suspected may be responsible for pushing the tenets of CRT on vulnerable students. This has had an especially detrimental impact on educators in the field of language arts, an area that is by nature steeped in culture and diversity. How could a teacher successfully teach language arts without offering students a range of literature written by authors from a variety of backgrounds and without taking into account the language and culture of the readers?

Recently laws have been passed around the country, including here in the state of Georgia, that

limit teachers' ability to choose reading selections and which ultimately narrow the topics they may incorporate into their lessons (Ray & Gibbons, 2021; Sawchuk, 2021). These laws also give parents and community members who have no training or formal education in language arts or the field of education the ability to dictate what students will read for class and limit what is covered within the curriculum. The hysteria over CRT misinformation which has started to become ingrained in policy and laws infringes on academic freedom and may have profound negative consequences on education at several levels. Here I will argue that these actions by state legislatures, particularly in the state of Georgia, come at the nadir of decades of mismanagement of education by politicians and state legislators and have left the field of education on a precipice, pushing society into a historic crisis.

We must first establish why I feel confident in labeling the rhetoric fueling CRT opposition as misinformation. The most obvious indication that CRT rhetoric is misinformation is that CRT is *not actually taught* in K-12 schools or in teacher education programs. I challenge anyone to find reference to CRT in any state curricular standards or in the standards or objectives in teacher education programs (CCSSO, 2013; Georgia Department of Education, 2022; NCTE, 2009). You will not find it

because it is not there. It does not exist. CRT is a theory that is taught predominantly in law school and applies to graduate-level legal scholarship (American Bar Association, 2022). To be clear, K-12 students and undergraduate teaching majors are not taking graduate-level classes in law school. So what exactly do pundits, “concerned” citizens, and politicians mean when they object to CRT being taught in public schools? I contend, and will provide evidence here, that they mean they object to a commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and to social justice in general.

In February of 2022, David Knight, a State Representative on the Appropriations Subcommittee on Higher Education in the Georgia legislature, sent a request to the acting chancellor meant to be forwarded to each public college and university in the state. In [that letter](#) Mr. Knight requested that the schools furnish him with information regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts, not with the intention of promoting those efforts, but to monitor and limit them. The implication was that the Appropriation Committee may use a school’s involvement with DEI as a reason to withdraw funding for those schools, an overt attempt to stifle DEI in higher education.

In his letter, Mr. Knight asked the universities to identify any faculty or staff who were involved in DEI efforts and their salary information. He requested information regarding individuals who “advance, advocate, or support” issues of racial identity, anti-racism, gender, ethnicity, social justice, DEI, or bias. Among other information, the letter demanded details on scholarship funds, campus initiatives, offices and positions, speakers and book studies dealing with those areas, and whether faculty are permitted to do research and scholarship in any of those areas towards their job responsibilities. It additionally asked about programs that serve students in any of those areas, publications and materials that include the terms “equity” or “anti-racism”, or publications produced at the university that reference the authors Dr. Ibram Kendi, Dr. Beverly DiAngelo, or Dr. Carol Anderson. Such requests not only infringe on academic freedom but arguably tread on 1st Amendment rights and reflect

an authoritarian, almost dystopian level of control over the types of thought and discussion that may take place in the learning environment. (In fact, this policy paper would violate most of the restrictions that Mr. Knight would like to see in place.)

The clear implication was that issues of anti-racism, social justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion are not topics to be discussed and promoted, but topics that should be prohibited and must be censured. But if anti-racism is a bad thing, does that mean that racism is the goal? If social justice is problematic, does that mean we should strive for injustice? Should *inequity* and *exclusion* be ideals for places of higher education? As one might expect, such requests by the state government caused grave concerns among faculty, whether those issues were central to their expertise and course topics or not.

In tandem with Mr. Knight’s intrusive “oversight” into higher education, state legislators passed Georgia House Bill 1084 (2022), which was signed by the governor into law and is directed at K-12 teachers in the state. Like Knight’s letter, House Bill 1084 does not mention CRT directly, but CRT hysteria clearly fueled the premise for the bill. Instead of referencing CRT, Bill 1084 uses the term “divisive concepts”. The bill is written in such a way that it is cloaked in language meant to sound as if the bill prohibits racial discrimination. However, a close reading of the bill reveals it was actually designed to limit discussion of issues related to DEI. The bill establishes a system for complaints against teachers who may touch upon these “divisive concepts” and bans the use of “curricula or training programs which act upon, promote, or encourage certain concepts”. It also forbids training programs or requirements toward certification that involve DEI principles. Chillingly, it provides procedures for complaints and discipline of teachers who are found in violation, including suspending and revoking their certification.

House Bill 1084 (2022) actually seeks to keep teachers from including reference to DEI in their classrooms. In the language that appears to protect against racial discrimination, the practical effect would be to allow White students and parents to have

a teacher disciplined if, for instance, the teacher's lesson dealt with issues of race in the Old South or during the Harlem Renaissance and the student or parent felt that such topics negatively portrayed White citizens from the time period. The parent could claim that the topic was a divisive concept and that they believed their child was being attacked, and it is possible that the teacher could face punitive measures if administrators agreed the lesson qualified as a divisive concept. There is language in the bill that allows for discussion of race and equity if it is deemed to be within the proper academic context and germane to the field; but, the ambiguity regarding what actually qualifies as a divisive concept and the broad nature for allowable complaints against teachers serves to limit the speech and content that teachers may include in their lessons. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) describes such bills as educational gag orders and characterizes them as infringing on academic freedom (2022). While the AAUP is a national organization that can represent and defend professors in higher education, K-12 teachers in Georgia do not have even the limited protections of a similar organization.

This overreach on the part of the state legislature comes on the heels of decades of mismanagement of education at both the K-12 and university levels. For years public school teachers have been maligned as inadequate, and bureaucratic hurdles were put in place for those entering public education. This was done under the auspices of "raising standards and rigor" in teacher preparation. As any of the hundreds of teachers I have trained in the past decade would attest, I believe that improving the quality and rigor of teacher education is important, as is improving the effectiveness of teachers; but, in order to make that work, the profession must be more attractive to potential teachers, and one essential way to do that is by raising teacher salaries. However, that has not been the case. The state legislature has made it more cumbersome for candidates to become teachers, with additional requirements and assessments, some of which have questionable validity (Cuevas, 2018).

The legislature made it more difficult for candidates to become teachers without increasing compensation in a meaningful way, which, when adjusting for inflation over time, has the effect of actually lowering real-life buying power of teachers. This has made the field less attractive to those considering becoming teachers, and states across the country are facing massive teacher shortages (Natanson, 2022). Florida now has plans to allow veterans and their spouses to become full-time K-12 teachers without any university-level training in education or the content area they will be teaching (Ali, 2022). They will not even be required to have a college degree. One of the reasons that teachers have left the profession in Florida is the state's efforts to limit diversity, equity, and inclusion (Nittle, 2022). In the north Georgia and Atlanta suburbs served by my university, counties have begun allowing college seniors to teach full-time, without the presence of a mentor teacher. This may have a detrimental impact on those teaching candidates, who are not prepared to be full-time teachers, and those K-12 students they serve. The push to raise teaching standards, but doing so in an illogical and counterproductive fashion, has essentially led to a situation where there are no longer any standards.

These are just limited examples of how education has been mismanaged over the last two decades. Now the legislature has further damaged the teaching profession and made the job even less palatable with its authoritarian policies based on CRT misinformation. With teachers already leaving the profession due to the Covid pandemic and low pay and fewer prospective teachers entering the field, the state government now mandates what teachers can discuss and what readings they can assign. This is not just irresponsible; it's destructive. Diversity, equity, and inclusion, which as I have shown, are what the state legislature is really attempting to limit-, are essential to education and the educational environment, and they benefit *all* students (Dawson & Cuevas, 2019). These principles are particularly important to language arts. How can a teacher cover the Harlem Renaissance without discussing issues of race and equity? Will teachers be prohibited from assigning works of authors like Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, or Judith Ortiz Cofer because their

writing deals with “divisive concepts”? This can only serve to further deteriorate the profession and drive quality teachers from the field when they feel they do not have academic freedom and cannot adequately teach their subject without fear of reprisal.

Several of my recent studies and papers have examined the psychological processes related to misinformation and authoritarianism of this nature, including the prejudices associated with it (Cuevas, 2015; Cuevas & Dawson, 2020; Cuevas & Dawson, 2021; Cuevas, et al., 2022). At this point, while the reasons for the spread of misinformation and proliferation of authoritarianism are worth investigating, the real-life consequences should

concern every rational citizen. This comes as the lowest point of decades of poor stewardship by the state, and I believe it may be a tipping point for K-12 and higher education. Those of us who value education and who recognize the importance of diversity, equity, inclusion, and more broadly, social justice, cannot allow state politicians to continue to degrade public education for partisan purposes. The health of our society is dependent on the quality of the education system, and good citizens must not be blind to the damage being done to education. Teachers, administrators, and citizens must act collectively to repel such efforts and reject and replace those authoritarian lawmakers who would seek to undermine public education.

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