

[Back to Volume Thirteen Contents](#)

Teaching about Contemporary Controversies in High Schools and in University Teacher Education Programs

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Abstract

Because secondary school teachers face intense scrutiny and censorship, either self-censorship or official restrictions, in their teaching about contemporary controversies, preparing preservice teachers and supporting in-service teachers has become a major focus of the Hofstra University teacher education program. This article originated as a panel session at the 2022 American Historical Association Conference. A teacher educator and four secondary school teachers discuss their fears in the current political climate and ways they try to address them.

Secondary school and university teachers are legitimately worried about being targeted by politicians, administrators, school boards, and university trustees because of the content of the curriculum in their classrooms. This has become a special concern in teacher education programs, especially in social studies education, where preservice and new teachers fear they will be unable to hold a teaching position because of their commitment to an honest evaluation of US history.

Dan Patrick, the lieutenant governor of Texas, threatened to end tenure for new faculty hired by Texas universities after the faculty council of the University of Texas at Austin passed a resolution defending

academic freedom and the right to teach about gender justice and critical race theory (Ruth 2022; Zahneis 2022). During the 2020–21 school year, Matthew Hawn, a veteran high school teacher in Tennessee, was fired for asserting during a lesson that his students needed to understand that white privilege is a “fact” (Natanson 2021). The right-wing website the *Daily Wire* has been “exposing” teachers who signed the Zinn Education Project’s pledge to “Teach the Truth” about US history. The website accuses “teachers and education officials” of “flouting the law” with “increasingly expressed scorn at the desires of parents who entrust their kids to them, telling themselves they have a moral obligation to belabor a sense of pervasive oppression to impressionable young people” (Zinn Education Project 2022; Rosiak 2021).

Alan Singer, who teaches graduate methods classes in the social studies teacher education program at Hofstra University as well as undergraduate history classes, helped organize a 2022 American Historical Association (AHA) Conference panel on teaching about contemporary controversies in high schools and in teacher education programs. At the start of every semester, Singer alerts students that they will be discussing controversial topics, he will be asking them difficult questions, he has a point of view on many issues, and as part of class discussion he will share his views with the class. No one is required to agree with him in order to do well in class, but students are expected to address the questions and points that he raises and support their interpretations with evidence. Singer, who blogs prolifically, speaks at public forums, and signed the “Teach the Truth” pledge, has been attacked in social media but has always been supported by university officials and was twice selected by students as a teacher of the year. He advises his teacher education students that the best protection against censorship and self-censorship is to know the curriculum well, prepare lessons carefully, and ground their work in state and national learning standards that promote critical thinking, developing points of view based on evidence and preparing students to become active citizens in a democratic society (NCSS 2013).

On Long Island, New York, where Hofstra University is located, the right-wing assault on academic freedom and the right to teach the truth

has reared its head in a number of school districts as activists use opposition to critical race theory and the 1619 Project, as well as COVID-19 masking and vaccine policies, to stir the base in local school district elections. Cynthia Vitere, a Hofstra cooperating teacher and doctoral student who spoke as part of the AHA panel, was accused of expressing antipolice opinions in class because she included a newspaper article on police abuse in a document package. Parents wanted her reprimanded for expressing views in class they didn't like, and the district superintendent wrote parents that "lessons and activities that create divisiveness or that marginalize anyone have no place in our schools." One Long Island district, under pressure from right-wing activists, removed the graphic novel *Persepolis* from its required reading list and another restricted the use of thirty-four BrainPOP instructional videos in classrooms because they introduced topics like the Black Lives Matter movement and human sexuality (Spangler 2021; Singer 2021).

Every report that a teacher was disciplined for having a "political agenda," whether the report is accurate or not, and whether the teacher's action was later upheld, sends shivers through teachers and students in teacher education programs. No one wants to lose a job that they love and put their career and livelihood at risk for introducing current-event topics like immigration or gay, lesbian, and transgender rights, even when they are not adding their own opinions in classroom discussion. An *Education Week* survey conducted after the 2016 presidential election found that two-thirds of the K-12 classroom teachers who participated "noticed an increase in uncivil political discourse at their school since the presidential campaign began," and according to almost half of the respondents "the number of bullying incidents related to national politics has increased in the past year." Three-fourths of the teachers said they had begun trying to avoid discussing either national politics or other controversial issues with their students (Will 2017).

On the AHA panel, social studies and student teaching cooperating teacher Adeola Tella-Williams reported that, "for the first time in my professional career, I am apprehensive about teaching any subject having

to do with race, religion, Blackness, whiteness, and all things cultural.” She added, however, that, “while apprehensive, I remain true to history and will always teach as I have been doing for the past twenty-plus years.” Tella-Williams, who is of Jamaican and Nigerian ancestry, always involves her students in activities that translate civics education into civic action and includes students from the teacher education program in these projects. In 2014, students in her government class organized a forum for their school on police brutality after the shooting of Michael Brown. When President Barack Obama was elected in 2008, she assisted in planning a “controversial” inauguration assembly in recognition of the first African American elected president of the United States. The program was considered “controversial” because a number of white teachers objected and boycotted the event.

Tella-Williams has immersed herself in “contemporary issues” her entire career, but “in this day and age, the topics I chose to cover back then would be considered blasphemy today.” She helped organize a program pairing students in her overwhelmingly Black and Latino school district with students in a neighboring almost all-white school district. Participants discuss race, economics, and politics, with difficult questions and conversations encouraged. Divergent points of views are not shunned, with the understanding that students can agree to disagree with civility. Sessions have focused on the January 6 insurrection, the legacy of segregation for Black and brown communities, cross-cultural experiences of Black and white students, and why critical race theory (CRT) makes some white people uncomfortable (Bickman 2020, 17–20).

Tella-Williams believes that “school is the place to teach and grapple with controversial topics, in a responsible way, of course. . . . I am afraid that the attack on CRT will take over education and take us back to a time when teachers wrote notes on the board, students copied, memorized information, did not or could not ask questions, took a test, barely passed and moved on to the next grade anyway.”

Cynthia Vitere has been teaching history on the secondary and college level for almost thirty years, mostly on Long Island, New York, where her area of expertise ranges from contemporary issues and criminal justice to leading the International Baccalaureate program in history. At the AHA

conference, Vitere argued that “the most important function of history education is to establish the foundations for informed democratic citizenship. The critically thinking student is encouraged to evaluate multiple narratives about our pluralistic society. Education is a collaborative relationship where knowledge can be nourished and exercised through regular open discourse.” She admits she has goals as a teacher. “I want my students to take a seat at the historians’ communal roundtable, use the critical thinking skills particular to history, and contest our curriculum. By acknowledging the role of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and every other ‘divisive’ lens, students confront the fullness of our sometimes painful past and forge a meaningful place for their own individual narrative in our shared story.”

Since September 11, 2001, Vitere has felt a shift in the type of topics that can be openly discussed in the classroom. Because many of the families in the community were directly or indirectly affected by 9/11, a teacher had to “regularly question how your topics and discussions might upset students or community members.” She began to “introduce trigger warnings into my practice as a way to acknowledge students’ emotional challenges, sensitively modify my instruction, but not silence necessary discourse.” With the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008 the issue of race became more openly problematic and had to be addressed. Students discussed the 2003 California Newsreel series “Race: The Power of an Illusion.” The program and its companion website provide interactive resources that challenge student preconceptions about race and how it influenced government legislation and programs in the twentieth century. Until recently Vitere never felt anxious about the curriculum or her pedagogy and hadn’t experienced any negative feedback or reproach. But after four years of the Trump administration’s attack on evidence-based reasoning, the engagement of students in a critical examination of history has become much more problematic. Students have responded to historical evidence and claims with charges they are “fake news” and use this as a silencing response. When silence is the aim, civil discourse disappears.

In 2021, Vitere was targeted in the political culture wars. “My public crucible was in response to a lesson that asked students to assess the impact of racism in America today and the George Floyd/Derrick Chauvin trial.” After teaching this lesson, Vitere was attacked in the community because one of the documents students examined was critical of the police.

Vitere wishes having her curriculum and pedagogy subjected to media and community scrutiny had energized her efforts as a democratic educator, but her reality is not so heroic. She admits that following the attacks she self-censors. “My curricular choices are more conservative. I hesitate to bring contemporary documents into our discussions of the past.” She finds that she speaks more obliquely and asks neutered questions. At this point in her career, “to do differently is too charged, too dangerous, too divisive. But she is also torn: “I cannot surrender who I am as a critical educator. The challenge for today’s social studies educators is how to cultivate democratic students in a world that is increasingly opposed to democracy.”

There is always blowback to supporting student activism, especially in the current political climate. Pablo Muriel finds himself being scrutinized in ways that he had not been in the past. Recently, Muriel was investigated for appearing on a radio broadcast with a student where they discussed conditions in their school during the COVID-19 pandemic. The taping was after school and the student had parental consent to participate. Muriel believes the investigation was an attempt to intimidate him. While no disciplinary charges were leveled, the experience was unnerving.

Muriel teaches at a public high school in the South Bronx. Many of his students come from low-income families, face stressful circumstances outside of school, and have a history of below-level academic performance. Most of his students are identified as struggling readers, and several are classified with special learning needs.

Muriel identifies his approach to teaching as a form of critical social theory. His goal as a teacher is to directly challenge the social reproduction aspect of education that channels students into lives on the margins of poverty. Through education and activism, he wants to

empower students to seize control over their lives. In his classroom, “everything about history and society is analyzed, nothing is accepted on face value; everything is dissected by students to uncover the individuals and groups that benefit from the way society is organized.”

As a critical educator, Muriel believes teachers should guide students toward political activism and be models for their students as active citizens exercising their democratic duty. His teaching involves the recurrent use of projects, alternative assessments, semistructured learning, promotion of classroom dialogues and student voice, and the development of classroom community. He introduces this approach to preservice teachers at Hofstra, where he is an adjunct assistant professor.

While Muriel follows the New York State history curriculum scope and sequence, he begins units with student analysis of current events. Students delve into a topic and connect what they are learning about to their own lives. Often topics end with renewed discussion of contemporary issues and ideas for participating in current campaigns to redress inequality and injustice.

One investigation that morphed into student activism was a study of metal detectors in schools. During the 2010s, over 100,000 New York City students, mostly in high schools with overwhelmingly Black and Latino populations, passed through metal detectors before entering school every day. The New York Civil Liberties Union argued that the metal detectors “criminalize” students in largely minority schools (Colley 2015; Edelman 2011).

Dennis Belen-Morales, a student who is now a high school social studies teacher himself, launched a campaign to have metal detectors removed from the school. Belen-Morales spent a Christmas vacation researching the New York City Department of Education metal detector guidelines. He also spoke with the principal of one of the city’s newer high schools that had a similar student population but no metal detectors. The principal told Belen-Morales, “What do we look like? The airport? Our students are already minorities, we don’t want them to feel like criminals too” (Muriel and Singer 2021, 155).

Belen-Morales was startled to discover that there was no formal metal detector policy and was furious about the irrationality of the entire system. Following his investigation, he started a Change.org petition, and he and a classmate organized a forum on metal detectors in schools that was attended by students from other schools and a person from the office of their member of Congress.

The student campaign stalled in September 2017 when an eighteen-year-old student in a different Bronx high school stabbed two students in his class, prompting demands for more airport-like metal detectors in schools. Belen-Morales had a very different reaction to the incident. He argued, "Metal detectors might prevent actual weapons in a classroom, but they cannot prevent a student from doing harm to another. When pushed to their limit, a student can either find a way to bring in a weapon or use something available within the school" (Muriel and Singer 2021, 156).

When they became seniors, Belen-Morales and classmates in a Participation in Government class decided to make one more effort to have the metal detectors removed from the entrance to their high school. The metal detectors caused long lines when students entered the building in the morning. If someone set off the detectors for any reason, the entire line was slowed to a crawl.

The seniors selected a day when all students would line up to enter the building at the exact same time, just before the official start of classes. As anticipated, the bottleneck at the metal detectors lasted much longer than an hour, throwing off the entire day's schedule. Their action earned Muriel, who had not been party to the plan, a summons to the principal's office. The principal demanded to know what the students were studying about in his Participation in Government class. Muriel's response was simply, "The Bill of Rights."

Chris Dier, who has been teaching social studies in New Orleans for twelve years, was the only American Historical Association panel participant not from a New York metropolitan area school. Dier reported, "There has been an uptick in a desire to suppress certain historical narratives in the classroom" and argued, "It's paramount to emphasize

the voices that should be front and center in these conversations: teachers.”

Dier, who has personally experienced no parental pushback or suppression of history in the classroom, stresses upfront curriculum transparency with parents and establishing rapport and trust within communities. However, he does live and work in a state that has repeatedly tried to pass legislation to ban the teaching of critical race theory. One recently proposed bill, which is similar to laws passed across the country, was alarming considering its potential impact on students. While its wording implied that racism and sexism exist, it would render it illegal to teach that these issues are fundamental, institutionalized, or systemic. Dier is concerned that the proposed bans on critical race theory effectively erase “the resilience of those who fought and died struggling against structural racism, from slave insurrections to civil rights activists.”

According to Dier, “Ignoring the systemic nature of these issues and attributing them solely to a few misguided individuals is not only inaccurate, but it prevents us from addressing them. An inability to confront these issues will hinder students’ ability to draft solutions to our most pressing and ongoing issues. Ignoring how both past and present systems perpetuate racism and sexism locks us to the status quo.”

Dier describes bills like the one proposed in Louisiana and enacted into law in other states as a “dangerously slippery slope.” He asks, “Are teachers supposed to avoid discussing how humans held in bondage were tortured, or how enslaved families were often separated from each other, because it may cause guilt? Are we to ignore the institutional policies that led to massive death during the Trail of Tears or avoid teaching the testimonies of the US soldiers who conducted the 1864 Sand Creek massacre of Cheyenne and Arapaho in Colorado because it may cause *discomfort*?”

Dier acknowledges that he, as a white man, often experiences discomfort when he studies history, but he has learned to embrace and use this discomfort in productive ways. Discomfort holds him accountable and grants him the motivation he needs to provide students

with an accurate history that includes multiple perspectives different from those offered by people who resemble him. On the first day of class, Dier informs students that teaching authentic history will inevitably cause discomfort and that he and they must embrace it. Dier explains that “discomfort, when understood, is a powerful weapon and often leads to productive action.” He is committed to the idea that “teachers should not deny our students’ history because it may cause discomfort; it is our task to grapple with it together. To teach history by trying to avoid discomfort is to teach a fantasy that will merely shield students from the realities, both historical and contemporary, of our world. Obscuring the scars of our country solely to preserve comfort does a grave injustice to the victims and their descendants, and robs all of us who would benefit from an honest understanding of history.”

Due to resistance from teachers, the initial anti-CRT, antihistory, antiteaching legislation did not make it out of the Louisiana House Education Committee, and the committee member who proposed it was removed because of insensitive remarks he made about slavery when he tried to defend the bill. However, the battle against censorship continues. In January 2022, a bill was introduced in the Louisiana legislature to ban the teaching of critical race theory and mandate what the bill’s proponents call “apolitical, fact-based and race-neutral history” (Hilburn 2022). In an op-ed on the legislation, the chair of the Louisiana State Republican Party attacked critical race theory as “Marxist poison” and “un-American” (Gurvich 2022).

In a June 2021 joint statement, the AAUP, the American Historical Association, the American Federation of Teachers, the Anti-Defamation League, the National Council for the Social Studies, and about 150 other educational organizations denounced “a spate of legislative proposals being introduced across the country that target academic lessons, presentations, and discussions of racism and related issues in American history in schools, colleges and universities.” The statement charged that the bills infringe on the “right of faculty to teach and of students to learn,” “substitute political mandates for the considered judgment of professional educators,” and are designed to prevent an “honest reckoning with all aspects” of America’s past (AHA Staff 2021).

Despite this staunch opposition to legislation censoring the teaching of history in secondary schools and colleges, secondary school teachers continue to feel threatened by a political assault on academic freedom and their ability to engage students in a critical examination of the role of race and racism in American history and society. University schools of education must play a crucial role in preparing and supporting teachers to weather this assault. If these trends are allowed to shape the teaching of history in secondary schools, colleges and universities will increasingly find that their students have little or no understanding of how to think critically and historically and a distorted view of the role that race and racism played in the history of the United States and in shaping its present.

Alan Singer is a professor of social studies education at Hofstra University. Adeola Tella-Williams, Pablo Muriel, Cynthia Vitere, and Chris Dier are high school social studies teachers, at Uniondale (New York) High School; Alfred E. Smith High School (The Bronx); Rockville Centre (New York) High School; and Benjamin Franklin High School (New Orleans), respectively.

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