

POLICY DIALOGUE

Policy Dialogue: The War over How History Is Taught

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Abstract

Conflict over the curriculum is nothing new in American public education, which has never been insulated from the culture wars. In the past few years, conflict over the teaching of race has torn through history and social studies classrooms, inciting the most serious fight over America's past since the last "history war" in the 1990s. At issue in the current conflict are debates over what schools should teach K-12 students about the history of race and racism in the United States. The chief flashpoint in this fight has been the *New York Times's* 1619 Project, led by journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, which seeks to retell the story of America's founding through the lens of racial inequality. Pushback on the 1619 Project has included the Trump administration's 1776 Commission, which produced a series of proposals seeking to ban 1619-aligned curricula and oppose critical race theory.

For this policy dialogue, the *HEQ* editors asked Donnalie Jamnah and Jonathan Zimmerman to discuss the latest round of history wars in K-12 public education, exploring the extent to which the past helps us understand the troubled present, as well as what the future might hold. Donnalie Jamnah is the K-12 Partnerships Manager for the education team at the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. In that role, she manages several programs including the 1619 Educator Network. Prior to joining the Pulitzer Center, she worked as a classroom teacher and instructional coach. Zimmerman is a past president of the History of Education Society and the Judy and Howard Berkowitz Professor in Education at the University of Pennsylvania. His work examines how education practices and policies have developed over time, and the myths that often cloud our understanding of teaching and learning. He is the author of nine books, including *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools* (2002), which the University of Chicago Press will release in a revised twentieth-anniversary edition in 2022.

HEQ policy dialogues are, by design, intended to promote an informal, free exchange of ideas between scholars. At the end of the exchange, we offer a list of references for readers who wish to follow up on sources relevant to the discussion.

Keywords: history teaching; critical race theory; culture wars

Donnalie Jamnah: One question we were asked to think about in this conversation is if there are multiple purposes of history in the K-12 classroom, and if so, whether

they can coexist with each other. I think there *are* multiple purposes. If we were to ask educators or parents, or even college professors, what they're hoping students get out of their time in K-12 history courses, there would be very different answers.

As a teacher and a parent, myself, I value history's role in helping students understand their societal context, helping them understand little things—like “who my school was named after”—to bigger things, like how our system of government emerged and why it works the way it does. I think that education, in general, should be providing students with tools to shape the society that they want, and it seems to me like history's role. Other subjects play other roles. For me, history gives us a chance to review the test cases of the past.

Jonathan Zimmerman: Look, I endorse all of that. The only thing I would add is that, for me, the preeminent goal is to help each American narrate America on their own. One of the things we've learned, especially over the last year is—lo and behold—Americans tell different stories about America. This is not an opinion. This is a fact. And we can document it through the daily newspaper.

So, the question is, what do you do with that? I think what you do, and what I hope we can do, is present those different versions to our young people and, like you said, give them the tools to evaluate the different versions on their own. I think the best teachers are doing that already. But I also think that there are enormous inhibitors to that goal. For me, the biggest one is that not enough citizens want it. This problem has hounded me for my whole career. I've never resolved it.

The kind of instruction I just described, I call democratic education. But what if it turns out that the demos—i.e., the people—don't actually want it? Is it democratic, then? Most of the people that enter the disputes over history don't actually want what I just described. What they want is for their own position and their own views to be privileged in schools. So, in my book *Whose America?* I have this line a student said to me twenty years ago: “You know, Jon, there's no interest group called People for Debating the Other Side of the Schools.” He was right. Have you ever seen a protest poster demanding “more nuance”? That's not actually what motivates most people. It is, however, what motivates me, and I don't think people with my motivation have done a good enough job persuading the demos that that's what they should want.

Donnalie Jamnah: I do think democratic education is what some students want. I do think that if you asked middle school and high school students if they wanted to hear all of the different stories, and if they wanted to see the different sides, they'd say, “Yes, absolutely.” So, I'm very curious about where that shift happens. Where do folks begin to say, “No, this is the one I'm comfortable with, not that one”? At what point do they choose and decide “this is the history that my children need to hear”?

Jonathan Zimmerman: Right. We know that the students really like it. And we also know that it happens rarely. And that's the tragedy, right? History is often presented as what David Tyack called “monuments between covers”—that's the textbook. “Here it is, and there's a test on Friday.” And it shouldn't surprise us that when you survey students and you ask them to rank the major subjects in order of interest, history is often near the very bottom. That's how I would rank it, too, if that's how it had been taught to

me. But obviously I had some teachers who didn't teach it that way; that's how I got here. And so, I don't want to be too much of a downer. But at the same time, I also want to be realistic that the sort of teaching we're talking about is hard, expensive, takes very knowledgeable teachers, and may not be popular in our democracy.

Take the most obvious example, the 1619 Project, which you've been deeply involved with. I think the best teachers are presenting that alongside the regular history textbook and saying, "Okay, look at the account in your textbook about Columbus and look at the 1619 Project account. What do you know? What are the differences? Which story is better? And what does 'better' mean?" The students really like that, and like I said, it does happen, but I think it's also fair to say that it happens rarely.

To take another example, Robby Cohen and Sonia Morrow just published a book about the ways Howard Zinn's work is taught. And what they found is that the best teachers do exactly what I described. They don't just say, "Okay we're going to substitute Zinn for this other flawed version that you've been learning," because Zinn has his own flaws. Instead, they require the students to actually engage in the comparison I describe. And to your earlier point, they learn a huge amount about history—not just American history, but history with a capital *H*! About what history is and what historians do. I think the question for all of us is, how can we make it happen more?

Donnalie Jamnah: Nikole Hannah-Jones does try to establish that framing in the book expansion of the 1619 Project that just came out. She talks about how having these conversations—engaging with different sides, different stories, different scholarship, and responding to all of that—is how knowledge and understanding develop. It happens often in academia: these are conversations that people have where they understand that there's an iteration, that there are different viewpoints. But, because it does not often happen *outside* that space, when you have something like the 1619 Project, people respond by saying, "Oh, this is wildly different than anything that I have seen or read or know, therefore, there can't be any sort of truth here."

The point is to get people to see what the process of understanding history is, what the process of talking and learning and finding meaning is, and what that can look like if we keep doing it with other stories, with other perspectives, and not stopping there. We need to ask, "What other conversations do we clearly need to be having outside the university space?"

Jonathan Zimmerman: Right. And I'm glad you mentioned the university, because my book *Whose America?* was very much inspired by the contradiction that you've identified. I went to graduate school and did all of that dialogic work you're describing, and then I looked at the K-12 system and I'm like . . . it's not happening there. I wanted to know why. So, I looked for the usual suspects to explain why it didn't happen—you know, the American Legion, the Sons of the American Revolution, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and so on—and I found some of those groups actively trying to prevent this sort of dialogue. Then I also found Italian Americans trying to prevent it. Polish Americans. African Americans. Jewish Americans. German Americans. All of them were actually trying to block critical history in schools, going back to the 1920s. Because, the way they saw it, if you start to interrupt that great national narrative, you're going to

diminish each component group's contribution to it. So, if you're Polish, you don't want to interrupt the national narrative because then Kosciuszko looks less heroic, and you know in Chicago in the 1920s, 250,000 people came out for Kosciuszko Day. And if you're German American, you want to preserve that national narrative because you want to celebrate Johann de Kalb or Molly Pitcher, who some said was born Maria Ludwig. If you're African American, you want to preserve a narrative because your hero is Crispus Attucks, who might have been the first person to die in the Revolution, in the Boston Massacre. And yes, if you're Jewish American, your Revolutionary hero was Haym Salomon, the Philadelphia merchant who helped finance the war. All of these groups actually joined hands to block a critical view of history. So, it wasn't so simple as "the usual suspects" of bad right-wing White people. Everybody had skin in that game, and everybody was in a strange way united behind this mythical narrative.

For me the question is, how do we get beyond that, and how we get to a point where we're not simply including more groups in the same national narrative? The 1619 Project, as I read it, is not a plea for inclusion. Obviously you're not against inclusion, but that's not the point of the project. You can correct me if I'm wrong, but the project is actually about asking some hard questions—about what happens to this big story when you start to seriously include and seriously think about all the different Americans who not just contributed to it, but who perhaps suffered under it, were oppressed by it.

Donnalie Jamnah: I agree that some people think that the 1619 Project is only about representation, or about inclusion. As you noted, it's bigger than that. If you are a teacher who's invested in representation for Black students in your curriculum, you cannot simply say the 1619 Project is the only tool that you're going to use to do that, because that's not going to work. And that's not really its main focus. It's asking us to think about our nation, think about what we have been taught as true—our national narratives—and figure out what pieces are missing, the project offering some pieces of its own, and I think also challenging people to continue to do that work and that searching themselves.

Part of the debate on how history is taught in classrooms right now is around teaching history and current events together—if teachers *should* do that, and how they *can* if they should. A lot of folks are arguing that they should not—that current events should not be addressed or taught in the classroom. As someone who's been in the K-12 classroom, I'll say that it is near impossible to keep the world out. Students are bringing into the space their lived experiences and what they're seeing on the news and what folks are talking about at home. I actually think that we'd be able to get to that place of shared language and conversation and understanding faster if the two were happening together, but there seems to be a real push back against that sort of engagement with current events. Why does our healthcare system work this way, and what does that have to do with the legacy of enslavement? Those kinds of questions are the focus of the project. And there's such a resistance to it.

Jonathan Zimmerman: Well look, as a historian, I don't find the resistance surprising. I do find it appalling, especially the laws that try to ban this sort of discussion.

Often, by the way, they're brought to you by the same party that on Fox News complains about cancel culture. I mean, what could be a more explicit example of cancel culture than a law that says you can't talk about this? But, of course, the 1619 Project does represent a fundamental challenge to the way lots of Americans have thought about history. So, when Republicans say that this is a radically different way of thinking about history, I think they're right. It is. I just think it's a good challenge. A useful and important challenge.

Please understand, in no way am I endorsing the censorship, but I do think there is some wisdom in what Republicans are saying, insofar as they have correctly identified that these new narratives represent a fundamental challenge to the way lots and lots of Americans of all races, across space and time, have learned and thought about history. I think they're right about that.

Donnalie Jamnah: You're speaking to the exact nature of my work. I work with teachers who are saying, "We do want to have these conversations. We do want to make space for this. And we do want students to be thinking critically and expansively and with nuance in our classroom about this history and about these questions. But how do we bring parents and community members in, so that they are on board with this? Because otherwise it's the teacher against the community." How do we get folks on board with that, and do it in a way that is not insulting the intelligence of a parent? I think a lot of times people want to say, "No, no, no we're not challenging the narrative! We're not going against the grain!" Instead, the conversation should be about why this matters, why it is important, and how it is helpful to your child.

Jonathan Zimmerman: I think you're raising incredibly important points, and let me just say two things about them. I think the most important question I hear you asking is, "How do we get parents and communities to support this?" I think there are many good answers to that. But I also think that some people on the left have indulged in a kind of fantasy answer: that if you call people names, they'll change. You know, like, "Oh, Professor Zimmerman, I *am* a racist! Thank you for telling me that! You know, I'm definitely going to endorse your curriculum and I'm going to vote for your team in November!" I think some people really do adhere to that fantasy. And everything we've learned about political behavior shows exactly the opposite. That's going to make people ever more resistant. So, what would work? It cuts back to other comments that you were making, about how you're asking questions, not answering them. To do that honestly, you as a teacher have to abide by answers that you may not share. So if you compare the 1619 Project and the regular history textbook about Columbus or any other subject, you have to be both willing and prepared for the students to favor either of them.

Donnalie Jamnah: Yeah, I think that's why a lot of people do shy away. And there's this idea that as teachers you should have all the answers, especially in a class like history, which, as you pointed out before, has traditionally been, "Here are the facts, there's a test on Friday." You should know the dates and the facts and the laws and that's your job. It's a different thing to pose questions that have multiple answers, or have different interpretations, or that open up the possibility that you might

disagree with a student.

Jonathan Zimmerman: And this is at the heart of democracy. Democracy means being willing to lose. That's not the only thing it means. But I think that is a necessary condition for democracy. You have to be willing to lose in the sense that, when you conduct that debate about the regular textbook and the 1619 Project, and if you're all hyped on the 1619 Project, you have to be willing to let the class decide that they think the regular textbook is better. And if you're not, then don't do the exercise, because it's dishonest to engage in a debate that has a preordained answer. I want to come down hard on this, because I think everybody does this. My students have learned to call it Zimmerman's Fallacy. Here's how it goes: if everybody really engaged in the questioning and the dialogue that I'm describing, and if they did it fully informed and without propaganda, they'd agree with me! That's a fallacy, and it's deeply cynical. But it's also all around us. If you believe in critical thinking, you believe that people of equal goodwill can reason from the same set of facts and reach different conclusions. If you don't believe that, stop talking about critical thinking! All you want is for your team to win. And again, that impulse is bipartisan; it's all around us. But I think it's poison to what I'm calling democratic education.

I guess the only other thing that I would say, in response to your very eloquent comments, is that this is also going to require a lot of teachers. We have to remember the material conditions in our schools. The average schoolteacher in this country makes something like \$50,000 a year. About a quarter of teachers work another job just to pay their bills. The average teacher has at any time 120 students that she or he is supposed to be teaching. Given that, how do you expect the teacher to do all the planning, all of the dialogue, all of the work that this sort of instruction requires? I'm not saying people don't do it, because some obviously do, and I think they're heroines and heroes. But all of the material conditions are militating against them. And I would say that includes the way that we train and prepare teachers.

Donnalie Jamnah: Especially training teachers to lead the dialogues with students, right? With K-12 students, I know a lot of teachers focusing on middle grade and high school students who are fully able to engage with the critical thinking part of it. Students can get there, and they can consider multiple things, and they're full of emotion. They're coming in from different places and with different levels of confidence. So, you're creating a space to have this conversation that's going to look different than having this conversation in a college classroom, and how are you ensuring that students are able to be honest and engage with the work without also causing harm? Without making it so that some opinions get lost or devalued? And I think that that's part of the challenge for K-12 teachers. A lot of teachers are going to feel like, "Even if I am a person that is comfortable with these debates, and even if I'm a person who wants to engage with these conversations, to engage with this nuance, to talk with folks across the political spectrum, I don't know how to do that with a twelve-year-old. I don't know how to create this. Should I even attempt it?"

Jonathan Zimmerman: Right. And let's face it, all of this became radically harder after 2016. I don't think any person on any part of the political spectrum would

question that. After Trump was elected, I did a lot of talks with teachers on how to conduct these debates during this incredibly brittle moment in American history. The takeaway message that I try to leave people with is, I think your goal should be to create a classroom where anyone can like Trump, but no one can act *like* Trump. So, anyone can like his policies, vote for him, campaign for him, support the things he wants. But in my classroom, nobody can call Africa a shithole, or women pigs, or Mexicans rapists. I don't think any of that adds to our dialogues; I think it subtracts from them. Having a president that violated all of the elemental rules of civil discourse created an enormous obstacle and challenge for our schools. We need to create environments where we can really converse about our differences; but in order to do that, we also have to enforce some elemental rules of civility that our prior president openly violated and mocked.

Donnalie Jamnah: I want to take us back to the beginning of our conversation and talk about the purpose of carving out space for students to see themselves in the history classroom. It's important for each individual student to see their community, their cultural background, as part of our story. A lot of times that understanding of self—understanding of the contributions to society of folks that share my identity—happens *outside* the classroom space. There's not always space made for that in the classroom. But I do think that there is something critically important about making space for it to happen. And I want to be clear that this also means learning about those who are different.

I understand the fear that you named, Jon, about how, if we take this approach, it could then diminish the contributions of a particular group to a national story—a triumphalist narrative of progress. I understand that fear. But as a teacher, as someone who's been working on this, I don't think it's true. I think it really does create space for students to be more curious and to share in each other's celebrations and to make space to honor these different identities.

Jonathan Zimmerman: Look, you've raised a lot of great points. Let me just add just a couple of things. I think the "see themselves" goal has a lot of intuitive strength and worth, and if you think otherwise just look at any American textbook that was published before 1960 or thereabouts. Then imagine people that were not White and were not male reading that textbook and what that would do to their understandings of themselves and their place in this story. So, of course people should be able to see themselves in our history. They are part of it! And yet, at the same time, because I'm a historian I'm also wary of that argument, because it has often had profoundly conservative consequences. Let's remember all those ethnic and racial minorities that are trying to block critical readings of the American Revolution, so that they can have De Kalb and Kosciuszko and Crispus Attucks in the story. They're making the "see themselves" argument, too. Literally and explicitly. They're saying, "Oh no, we've got to see ourselves in De Kalb or Kosciuszko or Crispus Attucks. So don't mess with that big story, or we won't be able to see ourselves."

Now let me be clear: I don't think the "see ourselves" argument has to have those consequences. But I do believe that it has *had* those consequences across time. It has had a profoundly conservative effect on the way that we tell these stories. I also think

that sometimes it also leads us to distort the history of minority groups. If your only goal is to make a group of people feel proud of themselves, it seems to me that whatever that group is, you will almost by definition distort its story. You'll only have good news. Of course, so much of the history we have told in textbooks has just been a story of good news about America, writ large. I think, however, it would be a tragedy to then tell lots of little stories that are just good news about each group, because of course what that will do is just recapitulate the same problem. So if you want the African Americans to feel good, you probably won't tell them that that there was a whole other diaspora of enslavement that went in the eastern direction and it was almost entirely directed by what, today, we would call people of color, and that obviously Africans themselves were deeply involved in the slave trade in all kinds of different ways; why would you? Even more, people that want the curriculum to make certain folks feel good will hate on you if you start to introduce these difficult problems. They will say, "Gee, maybe you don't like Group X. If you did like Group X, why would you be introducing this problematic stuff about them?" So, I think these are real tensions and real issues.

Donnalie Jamnah: I think that the *seeing* themselves and *feeling good about* themselves can be and should be, to your point, separate. But so much of the curriculum has just omitted people, good or bad, positive or negative.

Let's also, by the way, recognize how resistant people are to negative stories in history. Historically, no one was looking at George Washington and saying, "Let's talk about what it means for you to be president and to own people."

Jonathan Zimmerman: I think you're also asking a really good question about how fairly we treat different historical figures. I would argue that part of the problem is that we still imagine history as a story of heroes. That, of course, creates this awkward balancing act, in which what we're asked to do is present an equal number of heroes, and treat them or analyze them equally. And that's probably not a great way to understand the past. Martin Luther King Jr. was a hero and a hugely important leader, but obviously the civil rights movement had lots of different highways and byways that were not all affiliated with or even necessarily friendly to him. And so, presenting the civil rights movement through the frame of MLK, or imagining him as the sole symbol of it, is going to be distorting in its own right. I think that's what hero-driven history does.

Donnalie Jamnah: I think that's a really important point, and part of what I'm hoping to see shift where we can talk about people, and events, and society outside of the lens of, "This is a hero and I am directly tied to this person, and any criticism of them is criticism of me, and my person, and my family." Because that's just not true. I'm ready to see what that does for students, and what it does for our conversations with each other, and the way that we think and talk about the present.

Additional Readings

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