

# **Last Time, the Religious Right Told Us Not Only What We Can Teach but How**

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# **Last Time, the Religious Right Told Us Not Only What We Can Teach but How to Teach It**

**By Alfie Kohn**

Christian conservatives are banning books and censoring school curricula – and not for the first time. Materials dealing with sexuality and sexual orientation have always been popular targets for them; indeed, researchers have found that literally nothing outrages highly religious people more than “violations of conventional sexual morality.”<sup>1</sup> Their earlier attempts to restrict what can be taught in science class (such as how life evolves), meanwhile, have given way to prohibitions on what can be taught in history class (such as the prominent role that racism has played in American history).

But the authoritarian impulse has not stopped there. For one thing, many of the same activists have simultaneously mounted a campaign of intimidation against school authorities for implementing public health measures to prevent the spread of

Covid. For another, they have begun “targeting school initiatives centered on students’ mental health and emotional well-being” – until recently viewed as an uncontroversial and even “unifying idea” – claiming that social-emotional learning (SEL) programs are efforts to “indoctrinate” children.

Even more ominous is how the right-wing furor over these issues has been leveraged to attack democratic public schooling itself. The primary provocateur stirring up hysteria about teaching unsettling historical truths (and about LGBTQ educators) has acknowledged that these organizing efforts are ultimately intended to destroy public education – a “naked attack on the very existence of public schools” that has been actively abetted by leading Republican politicians. (Indeed, much of the funding for opposition to “critical race theory” comes from long-time proponents of privatization.)<sup>2</sup> Alongside new laws to ban certain works of literature or readings about race, 22 states passed laws to expand “school choice” measures just in 2021. And all of this – the censorship, the attacks on public schooling, the anti-vaccine and anti-masking protests – is defended in the name of “parental rights.”

Mindful of Mark Twain’s observation that history often rhymes, I decided to revisit the last major surge in the religious right’s efforts to muzzle educators. It turns out that quite a bit of material from the 1980s and ’90s was available on my bookshelves and in my file cabinets. (Apparently if you live long enough and resist the urge to throw stuff out, you are no longer a mere hoarder but an “archivist.”)

One source I found was an account of how conservative Christians fiercely opposed multicultural language-arts anthologies in the 1970s. James Moffett spent time talking with the leaders of that movement and came to realize that

the rich range of ideas and viewpoints [in those books] were exactly what fundamentalists don’t want. They believe that most of the topics English teachers think make good

discussion are about matters they consider already settled...The censors really wanted to fill up schooling with rote learning of facts and avoid student thinking. They wanted, for example, more grammar, which has no subject matter, and less literature.<sup>3</sup>

As I sifted through other books and clippings, I discovered something interesting. The last time around, groups like the Moral Majority and Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum were keen to control not only *what* students could be taught but *how* they could be taught. The most salient example of politicizing pedagogy concerned how children learn to read. A 1985 essay in *Education Week* explained that, to conservative activists, "only systematic phonics, employing sound-symbol decoding, is acceptable...Reading comprehension is to be taught...[using] didactic reading materials and literal-level questions."<sup>4</sup>

By the 1990s, Nicholas Lemann reported that reading instruction had become "one of the main organizing issues for the Christian Coalition." Legislation compelling teachers to rely on explicit phonics instruction was introduced by Republicans in many states – especially those in which the party was dominated by the Christian right. Mel and Norma Gabler, known for their successful campaigns to censor textbooks in Texas (and then elsewhere), were also outspoken on this issue, as were Cal Thomas, James Dobson, John Rosemond, and others. Pat Robertson announced that learning to read is "a breeze...if reading is taught the way God made us to talk – by syllables, by what is called phonics."<sup>5</sup>

The flip side of this defense of phonics was a coordinated attack on a model known as Whole Language (WL), which critics sometimes confused with a "whole word" method of teaching reading and also falsely depicted as representing a complete repudiation of phonics. WL actually challenged the assumption that traditional phonics instruction is the only way to help kids learn to read and offered a broad array of strategies for

decoding, typically teaching letter-sound correspondences in the context of making sense of engaging stories. A child who is taught only phonics rules may be able to pronounce a word flawlessly without having any idea how it's related to the words on either side of it or the ideas those words are intended to convey.<sup>6</sup> (In the decades that followed, conservatives have continued to demand explicit phonics instruction for everyone, but ironically their activism has been amplified by efforts to rebrand this campaign as "the Science of Reading" – even though good science actually fails to support it.<sup>7</sup>)

Viewed from a distance, it may seem odd that the way reading (or anything else) is taught would be as politically charged as curriculum content. I mean, you can see why conservatives might object to inclusive sex education or would prefer patriotic propaganda to a troubling discussion of historical realities, but why do they care about pedagogical strategies?

The answer turns on the central role that religious dogma has always played for social conservatives. That link was clear during the heyday of the Moral Majority, but these days less attention is paid to how religion continues to drive right-wing activism on a range of educational, social, and political issues: the January 6 mob attack on the Capitol (which has aptly been termed a "Christian insurrection") and the broader movement to keep Trump in power after he lost the 2020 election, QAnon and similar conspiracy theories (which are "propelled by religious faith [and] the language of evangelical Christianity"), the Ottawa truckers' protest, the demand for easy access to guns, and, indeed, virtually every variant of extremism that has come to define the Republican party.<sup>8</sup>

Just as social conservatism is all about religion, so religion – or at least this version of it – is all about not only order and obedience, but also faith (which means belief without

evidence) in the conviction that Truth resides, fully formed, in certain texts. Carole Edelsky, an emeritus education professor at Arizona State University, has explained that “the far right’s love affair with phonics” reflects their “universe of moral absolutes,” the goal being to decode “what is ‘there’ [and to affirm] appropriate hierarchies – the authority of text over interpretation and ultimately of (the Christian) God over man. To the theocratic right, promoting phonics is a tactic for asserting Christian control of schools.”<sup>9</sup>

Whole Language, by contrast, not only encourages active interaction with texts but gives students choices about their reading and writing. To Samuel Blumenfeld, who was involved with the ultraconservative John Birch Society, that means it allows for “subjectivity” – the reader’s own experiences and interpretations – “anathema to adherents of the Bible who believe that God gave man language to enable him to know objective reality, not to create it.” To Tim LaHaye of the Institute for Creation Science, WL is designed to “secularize our once God-conscious school system.” To Phyllis Schlafly, any departure from strict phonics instruction makes it less likely that students will accept everything in the Bible as literal truth.<sup>10</sup>

Of course obedience also figures prominently in the religious right’s insistence that parents should rely on corporal punishment to break a child’s will.<sup>11</sup> (Even parenting guides that reflect a subtler, but still basically authoritarian, approach are often infused with religious content.<sup>12</sup>) Thus, it’s fascinating to hear conservatives talk about discipline and pedagogy in the same breath, as did one member of the Texas state board of education in the 1990s: “I had four children in four years. I put a list on the refrigerator, what they got a swat for and what they didn’t get a swat for. Those were the rules of the house. You obeyed those rules or you didn’t” – just as in school “we tell children what is right,

how to spell a word, what the correct answer is.”<sup>13</sup>

But reading was not the only example of how conservatives' educational activism made the jump from curriculum to pedagogy. They were also enthusiastic about Direct Instruction, in which teachers read from prepared scripts, drilling children on the basics of each subject in a highly controlled, even militaristic fashion, offering reinforcement for correct responses as if they were training pets. In 1998, highly complimentary articles about this method (and its creator, the behaviorist Siegfried Engelmann) appeared in the *National Review* and the house organ of the conservative Heritage Foundation, while an endorsement of E.D. Hirsch, Jr.'s *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* was featured in the Eagle Forum newsletter. (A “bunch o’ facts” conception of education pairs well with a teacher-centered, control-based form of instruction.)

Right-wing activists, in short, didn't just insist that children must be protected from ideas that might lead them to question their parents' worldview; they also wanted to make sure that learning itself is conceived as a fundamentally passive process. The teacher's job is to transmit objective facts and absolute truths; the student's job is to absorb them. Educators who instead emphasize active learning, with children invited to construct meaning, pose just as great a threat to those on the right as those who reveal disturbing truths about racism or debunk a beloved fable about the origin of life on earth.

It's entirely possible that religious conservatives will again decide that issuing education gag orders is not enough and will also demand traditional forms of teaching.<sup>14</sup> That should alarm all of us who want students to read critically and with deep understanding, to think deeply, remain curious, and eventually participate in sustaining – or reviving – a democratic society.

## NOTES

1. Of course there is an important difference between sexual behavior and sexual/gender identity, but conflating these two – and attacking people not only for what they do but for who they are (if that diverges from traditional expectations) is a salient feature of religious conservatism.

2. For more on this connection, see [here](#) and [here](#). Back in 2004, I argued that, for conservative groups, the emphasis on “accountability” and higher test scores was similarly intended to undermine the legitimacy of public schools rather than to improve them.

3. The opposition to multicultural lessons reflected something more than racism, in Moffett’s view: “Their real fear is of the Other, any other. They resented references to other cultures and other religions.” Moffett published his account as *Storm in the Mountains: A Case Study of Censorship, Conflict, and Consciousness* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1988) and revisited the issue in his later book *Harmonic Learning* (Heinemann, 1992), from which these quotations are drawn.

4. Dianne Sirna Mancus and Curtis K. Carlson, “Politics and Reading Instruction Make a Dangerous Mix,” *Education Week*, February 27, 1985. This essay also listed other developments that will sound all too familiar 37 years later, noting that those on the right had “successfully mobilized public pressure to influence...the adoption of textbooks by school districts, the censorship of existing libraries as well as the selection of new books for them, the firing of teachers, the funding and development of private academies, and even the kinds of questions and assignments teachers are free to use.”

5. Robertson is quoted in Constance Weaver and Ellen H. Brinkley, “Phonics, Whole Language, and the Religious and

Political Right," in Kenneth S. Goodman, ed., *In Defense of Good Teaching: What Teachers Need to Know About the "Reading Wars"* (Stenhouse, 1998), p. 127.

6. I explore these contrasts in greater detail in *The Schools Our Children Deserve* (Houghton Mifflin, 1999); a lengthy excerpt dealing with reading instruction is available [here](#).

7. An examination of multiple research reviews published in *Educational Psychology Review* in 2020 found "little or no evidence that [systematic phonics] is more effective than many of the most common alternative methods...including whole language." Moreover, "a careful review of the National Reading Panel (2000) findings" – a source commonly cited by proponents of traditional methods – actually "shows that the benefits of systematic phonics for reading text, spelling, and comprehension are weak and short-lived, with reduced or no benefits for low-achieving poor readers beyond grade 1." (Subsequent reanalyses have raised doubt about whether even those weak benefits are real.) The researchers noted that there are "few areas in psychology in which the research community so consistently [claims] a conclusion that is so at odds with available evidence" as the defense of teaching phonics.

The following year, a report by the Literacy Research Association added that "the idea that there is a 'settled science' that has determined the only approach to the teaching of reading is simply wrong...Evidence does not justify the use of a heavy and near-exclusive focus on phonics instruction, either in regular classrooms, or for [children having trouble] learning to read." That conclusion was then echoed by three other literacy experts, who debunked the notion that direct phonics instruction is a prerequisite for attaining proficiency at real reading – or that such an approach is "science-based."

Yet another specialist explained, "The impact of intensive

phonics is clear only [on] tests in which children pronounce lists of words in isolation. It is minuscule or absent on tests of reading comprehension after 1st grade.” And in 2022 a “landmark study” in England found that children’s reading proficiency as well as their *desire* to read tend to suffer when phonics is overemphasized in reading instruction.

The evidence goes on and on, but, unfortunately, so does the “Science of Reading” disinformation campaign that’s waged by traditionalists and uncritically accepted by many education reporters.

8. Religion is of paramount importance to most of the key people in the Trump administration: Pence, Barr, Pompeo, Meadows, DeVos, Carson, Cuccinelli, press secretary Kayleigh McEnany, and even the little-known budget director who systematically sabotaged the transition to the Biden administration. The same is true of the most far-right Republicans in Congress, such as Sen. Josh Hawley and Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (whose embrace of white nationalism is inseparable from her “strong Christian faith”); these people and their allies see themselves as holy warriors. All six conservatives on the Supreme Court are devout Catholics; in fact, five of them attended Catholic schools rather than public schools. The more than 50 million Americans whose views qualify them as “highly right-wing authoritarian,” meanwhile, tend to see their rejection of democratic values as divinely ordained. Religiosity was at the heart of covid denialism and the rejection of vaccines, and, not surprisingly, it is a strong predictor of support for Trump: 71 percent of whites who attended religious services at least once a month voted for him in 2020, as opposed to 46 percent of those who attended less often and only 28 percent of the religiously unaffiliated.

9. Carole Edelsky, “It’s a Long Story – And It’s Not Done Yet,” in Goodman, op. cit., pp. 39, 50.

10. These three citations appear in Frances R.A. Paterson, "The Politics of Phonics," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 15 (2000), pp. 199, 191, 202, respectively. It's worth pointing out that Whole Language is not only anathema to conservatives but disproportionately likely to be viewed as appealing to progressives. One survey found a .86 correlation between teachers' commitment to this approach and their liberal views on social and economic issues. (D. H. Creek's data, reported at the 1993 meeting of the American Educational Research Association, was cited in Steven A. Stahl, "Why Innovations Come and Go (and Mostly Go): The Case of Whole Language," *Educational Researcher*, November 1999, p. 18.)

11. The best known examples over the last few decades are James Dobson's *Focus on the Family* and John Rosemond, but religious justifications of cruelty to elicit absolute obedience from children has been in evidence for centuries. See Philip Greven, *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse* (Vintage, 1992).

12. For example, the creators of the "Love and Logic" program frequently refer to God and the Bible in their materials, as does the Jewish parenting author Wendy Mogel in her book *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee*. I discussed the troubling authoritarian premises of these works in chapter 4 of *Beyond Discipline* (ASCD, 1996/2006) and chapter 2 of *The Myth of the Spoiled Child* (Da Capo, 2014), respectively.

13. Donna Ballard is quoted in Rick Lyman, "Best Little Election-Year Brawl in Texas Is for Control of Schools," *New York Times*, October 12, 1998, p. 12.

14. For one indication that this is beginning to happen, consider Hillsdale College, a conservative Christian institution endorsed by Rush Limbaugh and various Trump appointees, which has created a network of publicly funded charter schools in 13 states (so far). The curriculum used by

these schools doesn't just downplay racism and climate change while teaching students to oppose affirmative action; it is also characterized by a repudiation of "student-centered learning" and an emphasis on "explicit phonics instruction."

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