

Indoctrination

November 4, 2021

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By Alfie Kohn

Some years ago I gave a talk in which I outlined classroom practices that can promote caring and cooperation. When I was done, a woman stood up and informed me heatedly that she doesn't send her child to school "to learn to be nice." That, she said, would be "social engineering." Besides, she added, her child ought to be "taught to respect authority." It took a moment for it to register that, since the latter could also qualify as an example of social engineering, this phrase was being used just to discredit any topic she didn't like.

That exchange came to mind recently as I read about how right-wing political operatives have created "a constellation of well-funded groups dedicated to disrupting school boards." A key feature of their "trollification of real-life local politics"¹ is an orchestrated indignation about how educators are supposedly "indoctrinating" students with liberal ideas.

If I'm understanding this correctly, it's "political" to declare that Black lives matter but not political to act as if they don't. To teach the ugly historical realities of conquest and slavery in this country constitutes "indoctrination" – or, in the words of one Republican voter, "jamming a political opinion down these little kids' throats" – whereas to avoid teaching this does not. (Even more remarkably, people who employ the words *freedom* and *liberty* as weapons to undermine

public health measures have no compunctions about relying on coercion – banning books and making it illegal to teach certain topics.) What is unacceptable, apparently, is not racism but having the bad manners to use the *word* “racism,” which Texas legislators were warned to avoid while debating voter suppression legislation. Around the same time, one school district in that state instructed its teachers to offer opposing perspectives about the Holocaust, presumably to avoid indoctrinating students to believe that mass murder is a bad thing.²

There will always be disagreements about what to teach, as well as differing perspectives on the content of the instruction. But people who think that a certain event taught in history class didn't really happen, or wasn't really so awful, or isn't something children should learn about should just say that. It's dishonest to pretend that their preferred curriculum is apolitical or value-free. What has been taught for decades actually may amount to indoctrination by omission or misdirection.

This is not true only with respect to teaching history. What the sociologist Alvin Gouldner once referred to as the “vain ritual of moral neutrality” should be exposed as dishonest in any endeavor – and certainly with respect to every facet of education. To ask whether we should allow values to be taught in school is about as sensible as asking whether our bodies should be allowed to contain bacteria. Just as humans are teeming with microorganisms, so schools are teeming with values. We can't see the former because they're too small; we don't notice the latter because they're too similar to the values of the culture at large.³

That applies to the curriculum but also to the rules (and who gets to make them), as well as the school's programs, culture, and climate. All of these send messages about what matters most to those in charge, even if these messages are sent

unintentionally and received unconsciously. Are students evaluated individually rather than as a group? Are they set against one another in a race for artificially scarce distinctions? Is there only one person in each classroom who is addressed by his or her last name? Do children start each morning by pledging their allegiance to the nation-state in which they live – in effect, reciting a loyalty oath to the Fatherland?

These practices are indisputably value-laden; whether they qualify as exercises in indoctrination is less clear but a question worth asking. That word clearly does apply in some instances, and intellectually honest people do not use it only (or always) when things they don't like are taught, just as they don't refer to essays as "rants" or "screeds" just because they disagree with the author's thesis.

But even though there are hard cases – gray areas – where it's not clear whether indoctrination is an apt word, we should be able to agree that there is a meaningful difference between (a) giving students the tools (and, equally important, encouraging them to acquire a disposition) for critical reflection and genuine skepticism, and (b) getting them to parrot someone else's position or develop loyalty to a belief system or institution without asking questions and raising objections.⁴

The kind of education that looks suspiciously like indoctrination typically fails to call attention to the process: Rather than explicitly inviting students to explore the beliefs (and the premises underlying those beliefs) of whoever designed the curriculum, an effort to shape their assumptions is effectively hidden. Consider, for example, curriculum materials prepared by (and advancing the interests of) corporations without making students aware of their authorship,⁵ or social studies courses in which the country's economic system is treated as a fact of life (stock market

simulation games being a good example) rather than a subject for critical and comparative analysis.

There may be troubling exceptions here and there, but my impression is that what right-wing activists and politicians are currently denouncing in schools doesn't meet the definitional standard of indoctrination at all. Quite the opposite, in fact: It's about inviting students to apply critical analysis to what they've been told. And that may actually be what is eliciting outrage. As legal scholar Jeff Shulman put it, the point of contention is not "socialist educators [who] want to indoctrinate children" but the idea of exposing students to "other points of view...than those they bring from home" and being encouraged to "think for themselves."

NOTES

1. Participants in campaigns to harass and threaten school officials across the country include the violent neo-fascist group known as the Proud Boys. Yet Republicans have reframed efforts to "defend democratically elected public school boards as attacks on the democratic rights of parents." For another summary of what has been happening, see this article.

2. As the leaders of the American Historical Association explained recently, Texas's legislation "not only...require[s] teachers to figure out how to offer 'opposing viewpoints' on slavery, but also gives license to parents and administrators looking to challenge the teaching of incontrovertible facts relating to controversial issues." Now as a general rule, someone who asserts that there *aren't* multiple, equally defensible positions on a given question assumes a high burden of proof to show that he or she is not engaged in indoctrination. But lately we have witnessed attempts to invoke the virtue of "considering all points of view" in order to sow doubt where the reality *does* seem to be straightforward – not only regarding value-based questions (such as the moral status of genocide or slavery) but about empirical phenomena such as the fact that diverse forms of life evolved from common ancestors, or that the burning of fossil fuels is a major contributor to the global

climate emergency we now face, or that this country's economy was long based on the unqualified evil of owning human beings. What raises the specter of indoctrination is not teaching these things but *opposition* to teaching them.

3. This is true of research as well. When you take pains to avoid making a value judgment, you're likely just tacitly accepting the values of the status quo. "Research rooted in the dominant values of the society is less likely to be questioned about its scientific objectivity and yet more likely to suffer from the lack of it," observed the social scientist Herbert Kelman (*A Time to Speak: On Human Values and Social Research* [Jossey-Bass, 1968], p. 72).

4. Some thinkers are remarkably candid in endorsing just such indoctrination – as long as the values involved are those they favor, of course. A conservative proponent of character education, Ed Wynne, has written that "school is and should and must be inherently indoctrinative" ("The Great Tradition in Education: Transmitting Moral Values," *Educational Leadership*, December 1985/January 1986, p. 9). Wynne and other figures in the character education movement acknowledge their debt to the French social scientist Emile Durkheim, who believed that "all education is a continuous effort to impose on the child ways of seeing, feeling, and acting which he could not have arrived at spontaneously... We exert pressure upon him in order that he may learn proper consideration for others, respect for customs and conventions, the need for work, etc." (See Durkheim's, *The Rules of Sociological Method* [Free Press, 1938], p. 6.) More recently, see this 2020 call for "moral formation" of students – "habituation in virtue, inculcation in tradition" – by the conservative thinker Yuval Levin – and endorsed by the Fordham Institute.

5. For examples, see Alex Molnar's *Giving Kids the Business: The Commercialization of America's Schools* (Routledge, 2001); or his book with Faith Boninger entitled *Sold Out: How Marketing in School Threatens Children's Well-Being and Undermines Their Education* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015); or John Olson, "Do Not Use as Directed: Corporate Materials in the Schools," *Educational Leadership*, December 1989/January 1990: 79-80.

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