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Humanities

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About Politicized Education

Of the many things that make Americans start waving signs in protest, education and politics are two very controversial, and closely linked, protest inducers. The influence of politics on the educational system comes from both within and outside of it, and has lasting impacts. Within the system are the teachers, who are people and citizens, and will thus have their own biases. Outside of the system are the educational laws and government funding that directly link education with politics. Within the educational system, there are inherent political biases in educational materials and laws that change how students are taught, which perpetuates the imbalance of power within the United States educational and political systems.

Every person has biases, teachers included, and these biases, specifically political based biases, can affect how and what teachers teach; however, though too much bias can be bad, biases do still help students formulate their own opinions. Teachers' biases, unconscious or otherwise, have effects on how they teach and what they teach. These biases, though they may seem small, can “deeply affect students;” most students are children, and oftentimes, children learn new skills by following the example of others, and by learning from teachers who show biases to certain groups, they may learn to also have these biases. Essentially, the children are “inheriting” the biases that they are observing, which can lead to many issues. One of those issues relates to people, who in this case are teachers, having ideas that certain groups are lesser, or having biases against those groups. Those ideas and biases can be passed down and perpetuate

a negative cycle where those groups continue to be put down, which is unfair and not morally right. Furthermore, similar to how students can see teachers treating their classmates differently and “pick[ing] up this learned behavior,” a teacher’s opinions on controversial or political topics outside the classroom can rub off on the students. Now, students receiving different viewpoints is not necessarily a bad thing; however, if they are constantly under the influence of a teacher that projects only their views, students may not be able to formulate their own opinions as they should be allowed to do (Smith). The biases held by a teacher present themselves in the classroom through the educational materials that the teacher uses, which can have a detrimental effect on students' abilities to develop their own thoughts.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, there are teachers that are not as comfortable sharing their biases, political or otherwise, which highlights one of the differences between opinions of educators and can also lead to problems. One such education is a teacher in Connecticut who said “that it [is] the ‘parent’s job’” to teach children about politics. This viewpoint creates a classroom that is vastly different from a classroom where a teacher shares their political biases, and this can be just as much of a problem. The issue that students do not necessarily get to develop their own opinions is still prevalent, though now it is the “families” of the students that “influence [the] [students’] viewpoints,” rather than the teacher. A balance of different viewpoints needs to be provided for students to formulate their own; there should not be just one type or the other (Dunn 457). Not every teacher thinks the same, nor do all people think the same. Some teachers, like the one from Connecticut, may choose to not talk about political matters because of their own personal belief; however, some, like one teacher from Carolina, may choose to talk about politics. The school the teacher taught at had rules that leaned towards not talking about politics, however this teacher did not “hesitate to discuss it” if the students

“[brought] it up.” Such variation in what teachers are willing to teach can cause great differences in the education of students, even those within the same school, which can create many issues. One of these issues is a lack of knowledge and experience in certain areas where others may be well versed, and thus being forced to follow whichever opinion is loudest because they do not have a solid understanding of the concept (Dunn, 462). Some may think that the information brought up about teacher biases means that there should be no teacher biases at all; however, as stated, some teacher bias may not be the worst thing. With no biases allowed within the teachers at all, that means that the teachers are not able to make decisions on what should be taught. If teachers are not the ones that are deciding what should be taught, then that role must fall upon others, namely, the government. The government’s school decisions, in the past, has “promoted conformity to authority of all kinds” meaning all teachers should be the same, and, to an extent, all students should as well (Tough 15). This can create a number of impacts that will be expanded upon in future paragraphs. An abundance of bias, and no bias at all, both create environments in the classroom where issues are more likely to occur.

An example of an educational bill that has had the bias of the lawmakers woven into its wording is the Austin Texas bill. The bill became law and took effect in 2021, and it looks, on the surface, like a bill that was designed to promote the importance of teaching and learning different viewpoints, but that is not the true meaning behind the law. It was made to “curtail [academic freedom] in highly specific ways” by requiring teachers to teach opposing viewpoints for everything, with no exceptions, meaning that a lesson around “the evils of the Holocaust” would need to offer “‘opposing’ perspectives,” for which there are none that are morally acceptable. It is impossible to offer “‘opposing’ perspectives” of the Holocaust because there is no logical opposing perspective that a teacher could promote (Tough 14). There is clear

infiltration of personal opinion within the law, which exemplifies how lawmakers are biased and will create laws that promote their ideas. The main issue with the bill is the lack of differentiation between promoting multiple opinions of topics that have many multiple viewpoints, and promoting multiple opinions of topics that do not have other viewpoints that are factually correct. Subdivision 1 of the bill essentially says that teachers should not be required to teach a controversial topic, examples of which are not defined, and it expands on this rule in Subdivision 2. Teachers who do choose to teach these controversial topics must “strive to explore the topic from diverse and contending perspectives” and not give “deference to any one perspective,” which could be a good rule, if there were restrictions for inherently wrong topics for which there is no other morally sound perspective (“2021: Austin Texas.” 165). The lawmakers specifically made the law without these restrictions because they want to impose their beliefs into the classroom. The lawmakers understand that students' “political leanings” are based on both “*what* they are taught,” and, importantly, “*how*” they are taught, and so have changed the law to change what and how the students are taught (Tough 17). Ultimately, teachers will find it hard to teach multiple perspectives of some topics, like the Holocaust or slavery, which could be considered controversial or widely debated because of the vagueness of the law, and so may choose not to teach those topics at all. The bias of the lawmakers is a clear characteristic of the Austin Texas bill, and it changes the structure of the Texan education system to better align with the political goals of the lawmakers.

The biases stated above impact the classroom and student’s education greatly; the biases create many inconsistencies within education, along with many other notable issues. Teachers may want to support their students, however, when things such as laws or school rules forbid them from showing deference towards anything, including issues, that any one group may be

facing, it could be to the detriment of the teacher if they were to show support. An extreme interpretation of the Austin Texas bill could involve not talking about race or sex at all, which can cause issues with ignorance and ignoring genuine issues with racism and sexism. The interpretation further leads to students who are not exposed to the problems that other groups face, and no empathetic bonds are formed, which can lead to children inheriting the racist or sexist views of the people around them. Some of these views can show themselves within the school, with students who may “[run] around the school with a confederate flag,” or wear a “swastika on [their] jacket.” Teachers cannot “love and support” all of their students to the fullest extent if they cannot bring up and address the issues that they are facing (Dunn 461). By forcing teachers to neglect the issues that their students are experiencing related to being a minority, those students are not able to get the help they may need. Relating this back to the Austin Texas bill, it can be better understood why not having limitations on the topics that must have “diverse and contending perspectives” shared is not good (“2021: Austin Texas.” 165). For topics such as the Holocaust or slavery, the suffering that people experienced can be more easily overlooked if a supposedly contending perspective is given, making students less likely to empathize with the victims. Another important aspect of the Texas law is how it changes the Texan educational system, which makes it very different from the educational system in New England, for example, which creates even more inconsistencies in the educational system in the United States. “Slavery and racism” can only be taught as ““deviations from...the authentic founding principles of the United States”” in Texas now, which is a result of the biases the lawmakers had. This can lead to teachers “skip[ing] over” the fact that in “Article 1 of the Constitution” enslaved people were “counted as three-fifths of a person,” which is variable from the educational standards about slavery in many other states (Tough 14). So a complete absence of deference is a bad thing, and,

bringing back into focus how an overabundance of one sided bias is also bad, then having varied biases and opinions is a more positive middleground. Of course, for subjects like the Holocaust, there is no real varied opinion, however, for the majority of the time, this middleground can be applied. Teacher representation that “match[es] the diversity of children” will allow for higher opinion diversity and a better resource for students to develop their own varied opinions. Having a middleground and “increas[ed] teacher diversity” can also begin to break down the barriers of separation in education between minorities and their white counterparts, and can lead to “measurable student improvement” (DeRuy). There are some issues with a middleground, as it may cause some inconsistencies between what is being taught; however, it would lead to higher student achievement and a more diverse mindset.

Biases implemented within laws, and biases within classroom education both have an effect on the education students receive, which leads to the continuous imbalance of power in the United States. These imbalances are majorly products of political differences and biases that have existed both inside and outside the educational system, and that have now created a network of flaws. Allowing for students to develop their own thoughts and opinions through exposure to many biases might just lead to an overall change in the system.

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