

U City teacher vows to continue to teach The 1619 Project despite pushback

By Christina Sneed

It was an early morning in August 2019 when I first heard about a special edition of the New York Times to commemorate 400 years of chattel slavery in America. Entitled "The 1619 Project," this brainchild of journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones introduced me to a new perspective on the origin of America and the integral role the system of slavery played in its founding. I immediately planned to incorporate it into my class and developed a semester-long inquiry unit to engage students in exploring the power of rhetoric, using it as the anchor text.

My students engaged in the unit of study in the Spring semester of 2020 and found the deep dive into its diverse texts to be an immersive experience that expanded their world views and enriched their lives in innumerable ways. Our learning journey was chronicled through a co-created website that included students' authentic thoughts and reflections about the prioritized role of race in American culture. Most concerned how the public education system teaches children to understand race-based historical accounts.

Our study ended with an enduring question of "Whose responsibility is it to teach children about America's racialized history?" My students never questioned whether it should be taught, but rather determined that this concept was urgent and necessary for children to understand America's wealth and prosperity as being built upon the enslavement, subjugation and oppression of Black and brown people.

Why? They felt strongly that learning about America's real, hard histories helped them to understand current racial and cultural conflicts, and would provide the same service for others.

To cite a former student's 2020 op-ed, published in the St. Louis Post Dispatch, "We examined and connected to [the 1619 Project], criticized and skepticized its claims, and left our junior year of high school with a better understanding of how America feels to people who are left in the margins."

So passionate about this work, some students published their reflections in a special edition of the Gateway Journalism Review entitled, "The 1857 Project," to share their newly acquired knowledge and compel others to study and consider counternarratives too often omitted from historical records. Inspired by the 1619 Project, this edition examined the racialized history of Missouri and southern Illinois through the Dred Scott decision and

Lincoln-Douglass debates. In addition to 1619, the 1857 Project presented accounts of history never taught in their classes. The biggest consequence of this work is that the students felt the urgent nature of these texts and the stories they recounted.

I later recounted the best example of this urgency in a post published in AACTE's "Ed Prep Matters" (2021) blog. "...after George Floyd's murder, various students emailed with gratitude, stating that our inquiry unit and subsequent conversations about race, injustice and the need to study hard truths prepared them to handle the rage, frustration, confusion felt by his and other recent murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks and Breonna Taylor."

One student wrote, "I know you couldn't have predicted this, but your teaching prepared us for this moment..." Isn't this the purpose of education and aren't these the words every teacher desires to hear from former students? Without knowing what "this" will be, teaching is supposed to prepare students for future unknowns... for a life of uncertainty.

Push back and book bans

Now, four years later, I am preparing to teach a new African American Literature course and have been ruminating over my experience teaching the 1619 Project. Although it was overwhelmingly positive for me and our school community, I am now hesitant to incorporate it and discussions of it into my syllabus out of fear of public attacks and political pressure.

The post-1619/1857 Project reality is that today's teachers do not have the same rights as those of 2019-2020 and are no longer entrusted with making professional decisions regarding the literary merit of texts. The current societal trends of normalizing politicians as educational experts, book bans, censorship, and "cancel culture" are harming education in deep ways that only educators can comprehend.

How can I create a learning environment in which my students can be equipped to think deeply and freely when my thinking, creativity and innovation is restricted by societal pressures and governmental control?

Rather than focusing on meeting my students' educational needs, I am forced to filter their needs through the agendas of politicians, "Moms of Liberty" and other special interest groups that assert to know the best approaches to educate America's future leaders.

Since know-how is forged from experience, our first thoughts typically are based on what's worked in the past. That's fine in familiar environments. But when faced with new, messy problems inherent in the ever-changing landscape of education, we cannot rest upon the certainties of the past workings of a public education system that was not designed to meet the diverse needs of students, and has not worked to effectively educate the majority of America's children.

As the world continues to evolve, educators are expected to equip students to successfully handle uncertain problems and for uncertain careers and industries. Those who want to restrict educators assert such certainty around this subject matter when it involves so many uncertainties. This paradox should halt their progress in arenas of public opinion. Yet, their persistent attacks have managed to disrupt the workings of public education to the point where many have left the profession, many school systems have cut courses that focus on the histories of marginalized groups of people in America and have banned the use of texts.

How are they so certain that their perspectives are right for Missouri's children and youth? I was in training this week with Jim Knight, a leading educational expert and authority on instructional coaching, and was struck by his warning to educational leaders: "Certainty feels logical, factual, and true. And yet, the reality is that the feeling of certainty is just that, a feeling. Certainty is a dangerous emotion because it makes people feel like they're right and act upon these feelings... especially when combined with bias and moral conviction, certainty stifles innovation, halts free thinking, and prevents progress."

Knight is about to publish an article titled, "The Power of Uncertainty," based upon Maggie Jackson's book, "Uncertain" (2023) that highlights, decades of research studies that shares

"...just a few minutes of perspective-taking inspires people to sit closer to, work with, and help others with similar or opposing viewpoints. The effects of perspective-taking are so powerful that this simple exercise is being used as a foundation of real-world efforts to combat hate. A promising counterpoint to prejudice emerges from a willingness to explore the unknown... But by mentally trying on another's view, we can imagine an individual with a life as textured as our own, a human worthy of connection. We can look past a label. Intriguingly, people

who are more tolerant of uncertainty show less neural disconnection from political opponents while watching clips of tense election debates than those who fear the unknown. The open-mindedness of uncertainty offers a kind of mental brake that we can apply to our tendency to categorize."

In order to progress, we need to embrace uncertainty and engage in more perspective-taking.

Teachers, not politicians, should decide

In 2022, I submitted a public comment to oppose legislation designed to restrict the selection of texts in K-12 classrooms and the teaching of American history. My opposition to this gross overreach of government was from the perspective of a Missouri taxpayer, a parent of three children, a 10-year educator, and a 21-year youth advocate who has dedicated her life to the service of children and youth, and their education.

I chose to engage my students in studying controversial text because I saw it as a rich opportunity to connect classroom content with current events and to study history in a way that exemplified the historical thinking standard of continuity and change over time. Why not this text?

Examination of the course content and educational standards demonstrated that I met all academic requirements while allowing high school students to debate and reflect upon content that is now centered in the discourse of adults and politicians all over the world.

Students deserve to learn with diverse, rich, powerful, enabling texts. Dr. Alfred Tatum (2019), a leading literacy expert, defines enabling texts as those "that move beyond a solely cognitive focus such as skill and strategy development, but also have sociopolitical and sociocultural influences."

Dr. Ghody Muhammad (2020) discusses these types of texts in her instructional text "Cultivating Genius," citing them as essential to build criticality in young people — equipping them with "the capacity to read, write, and think in ways of understanding power, privilege, social justice, and oppression, particularly for populations who have been historically marginalized in the world." As a believer in the power of education and Nelson Mandela's definition of it as "the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world," it is our responsibility to engage students with these types of texts and educational experiences.

The politicization of education threatens teachers' abilities to prepare students for true college and career readiness. By restricting students' access to enabling texts, we do not aim to develop agents of change, but rather "cogs in a machine."

This is one of the most dangerous, limiting factors in today's climate in

education because it prevents teachers from providing relevant, diverse instruction and attempts to ban instructional content, thereby causing further hardships and obstacles for educators who are already inundated with unprecedented learning curves as a result of the pandemic.

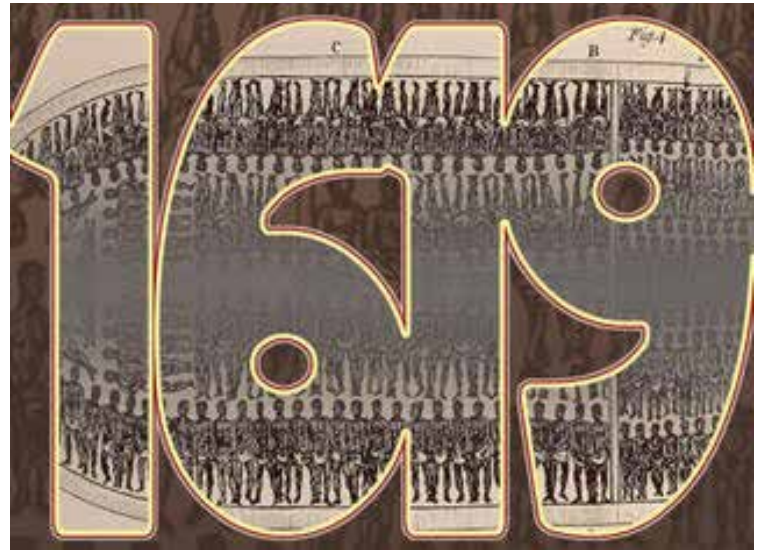
Teachers and educational leaders are doing our best to educate, inspire and equip students with career, college and life skills necessary to live successfully in our ever-changing global society. We need increased resources and support to effectively traverse this precarious landscape. Anything that attempts to limit resources and support is a threat to the institution of education.

To ban books and texts without close examinations of their use in educational settings inaccurately targets content that works to include the identities, cultures, perspectives, stories and lived experiences of Missouri's students — especially Black and Brown students who have not been appropriately represented through mainstream K-12 curricular content. We should not accept uneducated depictions of texts, nor should we allow politicians to make us believe that educators are trying to indoctrinate students in Missouri's K-12 system.

All students benefit from engaging with rich, powerful and diverse texts that allow perspective-taking, collegial discourse, debate, critical thinking, analysis and evaluation. Even seemingly controversial texts possess educational value.

This is easily evidenced through student work and can be ascertained by scanning the U.S. banned book lists. For example, one of my favorite texts, "The Awakening" — originally written in 1899 by novelist Kate Chopin — was banned in 1902 in some spaces and censored in others because some considered it as inappropriate content for school-aged children. This powerful, pre-feminists novel, once seen as controversial, is now considered to be of great literary merit. (Chopin was born in St. Louis, wrote *The Awakening* here, dying in 1904 after taking ill at the World's Fair.)

Should it have ever been removed from schools? Who should decide what content is appropriate for the education of school-aged children? This answer is easy: those who pursue specialized training and education



to organize and facilitate the teaching and learning process for children are best equipped to determine what content should be used. Not politicians. Not parents.

One of the major reasons is because educators have the responsibility to read, analyze, evaluate, and interrogate all content slated for instructional use. We also have the pedagogical knowledge and skills to process through educational research and apply it to improve instruction. Neither politicians, nor parents, nor any other position outside of education bears this weight and responsibility. It is not easy and it is a heavy burden to assume.

Educators do not take this lightly and are harsh critics of new curricula. We scrutinize content and question everything — studying, researching, reading, analyzing, debating, evaluating, interrogating thousands of complex, diverse texts each school year, in hopes of preparing high quality, engaging, student-centered lessons for our students. Not because we get paid enough to do this work (because much of this ensues during personal time), and not because we get the respect or appreciation for the personal, challenging, laborious work mandated by our positions... Educators do this work because we love our students and value the role education plays in developing them into strong, resilient adults and 21st century learners.

After much reflection, ten years after the murder of Michael Brown and four years after the murder of George Floyd, events that seemingly shifted our conversations and ideals about race in America, it is apparent that our ways of being have not shifted us towards progress. We have regressed. So, I will continue to boldly teach the 1619 Project and other rich, powerful, enabling texts deemed to be of literary merit because I believe in their ability to move us out of complacency and stagnancy — to free us from the "curse of certainty", one perspective at a time.