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Historical Foundations of Contemporary Censorship in U.S. Schooling

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Overview

In recent years, censorship and book banning have become an even more prevalent occurrence in the United States Public school system. Banning literature and classrooms discussions on race, gender, and sexual orientation raises major concerns as to what freedom schools and teachers have over the content they teach. While this issue is currently viewed from a mainly political standpoint, it is critical to explore historically how the US school system got here in the first place. An analysis of relevant historical sources suggests that the purpose of US schooling from its inception is founded on intolerance within the curricula and all aspects of the schooling process. More than contemporary political culture, examining how religion, structural racism, and government legislation have all contributed to the restriction of content in US schools provide a more accurate explanation of recent censorship trends.

Keywords: Exclusionary Practices, U.S. Schooling, Contemporary Censorship

Exclusionary Practices in the Early Development of Schooling

The leading purpose of educating children during the early development of public schooling in the US was driven by a prevalent movement of religious ideologies. Within colonial America in the 1600s, New England colonists sought to create a process of schooling that was oriented around religion and intended to spread a particular interpretation of the Bible. These Puritan schools were exclusive in their nature, with

the education provided by town schools being primarily for the middle class and male students (Ryan & Cooper, 1998). This exclusive group of children was educated not only for the sake of becoming literate but also for the significant “moral” lessons that exposure to religious texts offered.

This convergence of literacy and morality illustrates the convergence of religion and legislation in shaping exclusionary practices of schooling. Beginning with the 1647 Old Deluder Satan Act, laws were passed to ensure that these children were taught to read, either through the town schools or parents. This act was created out of the Puritan belief that since “Satan assuredly would try to keep people from understanding the Scriptures, it was important for all children to be taught how to read” (Ryan & Cooper, 1998, p. 333). This heavy reliance on biblical scriptures displays the early purpose of schooling to not only educate children but also to a particular set of religious ideologies not shared by all children and their communities, even those who are Christians. This religious influence on education was also enforced by the New England Primer, which was first published in 1690. This text was used as a primary religious instruction for young children to learn how to read, using protestant references within rhymes and woodcuts. These rhymes not only attempted to teach children the alphabet but also passed on the gospel stories to children simultaneously. Examples of these methods include the description for the letter P reading, “Peter denies his lord and cries,” or for the letter S reading, “Samuel anoints whom God appoints” (Westminster Assembly, 1803, p. 13). The inclusion of these inherently teaching methods shows how early education in colonial times correlated with Puritan ethics within the New England community, spreading the teachings of only protestant beliefs. This exclusionary schooling practice then disregarded the religions and moral systems that some students were a part of outside of European Protestant communities, contributing to curricular intolerance within early US schooling.

The exclusive nature of this text and the teachings it provided conflicted with the beliefs of non-protestant or European communities, specifically African Americans. The 1619 project points to the fact that Africans were present within the American colonies long before European establishment. The presence of both Africans and Protestant Europeans caused a clashing of cultures, especially in terms of child-rearing and education. In terms of African children, the prosperity of young children was prioritized, with “rules, regulations, groups, and community being highly valued over individuality” (Flemming-Hunter, 2000, p. 78). This collectivist nature of African culture was then placed at odds with the prospects of Europeans, whose goal was to “improve the individual, to expand the consciousness of self. European education expectations revolved around power, resources, etc., for self-growth purposes” (Flemming-Hunter, 2000, p. 78). This emphasis on individualism from Europeans and the perceived superiority of this concept points to the primary focus of colonial education to rear children towards obedience and individual goals. This focus was also heavily followed through by physical or corporal punishment, setting high expectations on students to mold themselves into a “virtuous” member of society, even if it was outside of their cultural or religious views.

Continuing into the 1700s, education systems within Colonial America maintained the foundation of religion, utilizing different educational strategies across regions and ethnic communities. Within the New England Colonies, the instruction of education came from town schools and schoolmasters, with local governments having a significant role in the public financing of schools. New England also contained the local agency of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, which “sent out masters instructed to bring the dissenters back to the true faith; Baptists, Quakers and other religious groups strove to maintain schools purveying learning and their versions of Christianity...” (Middlekauff, 1961, p. 7). This priority of religion influenced the educational structure that New England possessed, making it a communal mission to spread the gospel through the schooling of male children of European families. In comparison, the Middle Colonies possessed less of a communal schooling system and instead, individual families and private tutors were responsible as instructors. With the Southern region having less state and local government involvement, schooling relied on these private forms of tutoring and apprenticeships that were needed in the rural communities. The foundation of religion was deeply present, with the role of the tutor or “master” requiring that “his charge was taught the essentials of the Christian religion and to read and write...Apprenticeship, of course, was never simply an educational instrument...the apprentice would always be expected to obey and serve his master for a specific time...” (Middlekauff, 1961, p. 5). This reliance on private tutoring was an exclusive practice, with children in these regions often going untutored due to a lack of academic resources from their families, and these strategies only being offered to European individuals.

The exclusivity of schooling directly impacted Native American communities, with religious missions inflicting the oppression of students. Missionary educators perceived Native American communities and students as inferior to the European population, wrongly deeming Native Americans as possessing mental and cultural deficiencies. These false perceptions led to specific pedagogical strategies used, specifically conversion efforts toward Christianity within schooling. These strategies form from Protestant ideals where “civilization and Christian conversion were assumed for centuries to be the same thing. Full status in one category required full status in the other” (Lomawaima, 1999, p. 5). The incorporation of this ideology into schooling conveys the perceived superiority of Western cultures and the attempts to “correct” and exclude Graphic 9, Shape Native American culture. Missionary educators also attempted to instill ethics of individualism within educational practices, a form of social order that conflicted with the collectivism valued within Native American culture (Lomawaima, 1999). These flawed methods purposefully attempted to make Native American students pliable to land expropriation, dispossession, and displacement within Colonial America, leading to off reservation boarding school systems and further attempts at forced assimilation.

Schooling was also denied to African Americans held under slavery, and this exclusion held religious justifications for the subjugation and labor extraction. The lack of education for enslaved people of color was due to the racist ideals that surrounded the purpose of schooling in the US and the perceptions of African American people. The history of African Americans illustrates how the

denial of an education can result in exploitation. Like Native Americans, Europeans rationalized the enslavement of other humans by classifying them as an inferior racial and cultural other (Spring, 2025). This act of othering enforced the enslavement of people and, in terms of education, created an excuse for white protestant educators to exclude African American children from schooling. This “inferior” view of African American people was based on biblical justifications, specifically the “Curse of Ham” within the book of Genesis (Genesis, 1611/2004, 9:24; Haynes, 2002). In this Catholic gospel story, Noah punishes the son of Ham, Canaan, by declaring that he will become a servant. It is crucial to point out, however, that “there is no reference to dark skin, to any skin color, or Africa, and Noah does not say the curse applies to Canaan’s descendants. Yet this story, as it was amplified and changed in extrabiblical interpretations, became the ideological cornerstone used to justify the slavery of black Africans thousands of years afterward (Haynes, 2002). This twisted logic within religious texts and the perceived inferiority of African Americans then led to the denial of education as a way of producing compliant and inexpensive laborers (Spring, 2025). This form of exploitation and restriction of academic freedom leads to further limitations in the lives of African Americans and the exclusive nature of early schooling in the United States.

Exclusionary Practices During the Establishment of The United States

By the American Revolution in 1775, the reliance on women to educate children created new foundations for what US schooling looked like. With men engaged in the war, women were responsible for not only maintaining the home but also for raising children who would become civil leaders. Women were required to instill the same moral values in their children, mostly boys, who were expected to become voting citizens at a time when women were not allowed to vote. This role is referred to as Republican Motherhood, where the education provided by women to their children held a profound influence on American society. This system was introduced due to the belief that “A well-ordered, harmonious society depended upon an enlightened, well-educated citizenry...a general diffusion of knowledge was seen as essential to the prosperity of a people and the best preservation of freedom” (McMahon, 2009, p. 480). This role for women also went beyond the building of prosperity in society, further influencing the field of education. As the roles within Republican Motherhood continued, women were drawn into the teaching force and laid the foundation of the teaching profession as demographically “white” and Cis female. This demographic continues to dominate the teaching force today, affecting both the instructors within schooling systems as well as the influence of identity on school curricula.

By the 1800s, these Puritan ideologies that set a foundation for public schooling had produced a religious culture of US schooling. As systems of schooling expanded, these religious ideologies remained, and many protestants led institutions revealed similar intentions of producing a sense of “moral transcendence” within young students (McKnight, 2012). US public schools under these religious influences were then intended to clarify the morals of life to students using religion.

To preserve the American ideals of being a citizen and a student, “schools must assume the role of imposing on or evoking from, children the morals that dominated institutional life. In effect, this meant treating children as abstract categories to be processed, packaged, and placed in society as efficiently as possible” (McKnight, 2012, p. 99). This form of schooling was then intended not to provide growth in students as individuals but to mold students into what was seen as the perfect models of a society that prioritized religious ideologies.

The establishment of the United States public school system set a foundation for education in the mid-19th century. The concept of a public school was championed by Horace Mann, appointed Secretary of Education of Massachusetts in 1837, who promoted the concept of a “moral education” to guide children at an early age. These morals were based on the religious and social expectations of US society, with academic success being able to “...equip the child to lead a life of virtue in a world full of temptations and relatively devoid of institutions capable of gently correcting wayward men and women” (McClellan, 1992, p. 16). These beliefs showcase the obedience instilled in students minds to “correct” them and conform them to fit what a “virtuous” child looks like in the minds of protestant policymakers. This purpose of conformity and obedience also translated into the “building of personality and character in everyday application,” prioritizing individual growth and perspectives in students (Mudge, 1937, p. 169).

However, the focus of developing students as individuals was complicated as the system of public schooling itself did not function in the interest of the individual. Instead, the system was created to condition students to fit into the capitalist structure of US society, preventing collective growth under a controlled environment. The religious ties within this schooling system continued to be significant, with Horace Mann and other leaders prioritizing the development of good character based on religion, which was itself based on the central teachings of the Protestant Bible (Blumenfeld, 2006). The prevalent focus of Protestantism continued to limit the cultural perspectives allowed in school curricula and exclude non-Protestant students. The Protestant control over US public schooling led to the discrimination of non-Protestant Catholics. This community, primarily Irish immigrants, faced discrimination towards their religious beliefs, which impacted the education of children. Non-Protestant beliefs were not allowed within the curricula of US Public schools, so much so that the non-Protestant Catholic beliefs were seen as dangerous to the education of young children. This form of discrimination was showcased within popular media, with the political cartoonist Thomas Nast depicting the perceived effects that exposure to non-Protestant Catholicism would have on young students in the United States. To combat this religious and educational discrimination, non-Protestant Catholics developed “Parish schools” within their own communities, teaching their children outside of the public schools that excluded their beliefs.

Through this form of protest, “Catholics, who could least afford to operate without government help, had continued their over-crowded parish schools, declaring that they would rather let their children run illiterate than enroll them in the Protestant “public schools” (McCadden, 1964, p. 189). The determination to have a fair schooling system shows the severity

of the exclusive nature of US Graphic 15, Shapepublic schooling, leading non-Protestants to prefer no education at all as opposed to forced, Protestant-based curricula. In connection to these issues, The Public-School Society of the City of New York, a privately incorporated philanthropy, was established to provide education to all children, yet still held heavily biased standards towards evangelistic Protestantism. This fueled the discrimination against non-Protestants when “the School Society trustees, proponents of the white-Protestant-Anglo-Saxon concept of Americanism, tried several methods of inveigling youngsters into their sphere of influence...pushing through the common council a resolution denying relief to welfare clients who failed to send their children to school” (McCadden, 1964, p. 189).

The discrimination towards non-Protestant Catholics ran so deeply that even the welfare of families and students was being threatened if they did not conform to the established Protestant schooling system in place. However, these threats were unsuccessful, with the resistance of non-Protestants being backed by individuals like John Hughes, the first Catholic Archbishop of New York. Hughes led the earliest fight to establish Catholic schools in the United States to spare Catholic students the virulent anti-Catholic sentiments that were dominating school curricula. This fight was successful, leading to the diversification of the US schooling system and breaking the Protestant foundation that had been laid for so long.

While this diversification prompted areas of growth in schools’ curricula, the discrimination of non-Protestant and non-European individuals persisted. A wave of resistance was triggered by people who were continually excluded from fair education, specifically African Americans. Following the Civil War in 1865, the introduction of the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery, the 14th Amendment granting citizenship to formally enslaved people, and the 15th Amendment granting all male citizens the right to vote, political and racial change was progressing. In the early stages of the Reconstruction era, “blacks turned to ministers, ex-soldiers, free blacks, and men who had, for one reason or another, achieved prominence as slaves, to represent them politically... such individuals were uniquely suited to serve as a bridge between the black world and the public political sphere dominated by whites” (Foner, 1982, p. 89).

These freedoms allowed African American men to enter the political world in ways they were denied before, but this broadening of powers was short-lived. As individualism and racism persisted within the 19th century, a series of anti-Black legislation spread throughout the United States. Forms of domestic terrorism, such as the emergence of the Klu Klux Klan and the lynchings of African Americans, were amplified under the Jim Crow laws enforced. This intense and outward racism laid the foundation for educational decisions, like the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, issued in 1896. This case decision issued the ruling of “separate but equal” that entrenched racism systemwide and upheld “what was colloquially called the Jim Crow system of pervasive, invidious racial distinctions... the facilities were vastly inferior, despite the injunction of the *Plessy* case that they would be equal” (Hoffer, 2014, p. 1). Schools within the US then became battlegrounds for negotiating the contradictions of a democratic society and the reality of racism. The foundation of religious ideologies within US schooling still heavily limited the freedoms of those outside of

Protestant beliefs and led to decisions, like Plessy, that used racist perceptions and strategies to exclude non-European groups. This system of segregation that was enforced was a subtle discursive violence towards African Americans and an erasure of the contributions of non-European individuals who had built the society with their own labor. This erasure of history and culture, as well as the forced segregation of individuals, contributes deeply to the exclusion of minority groups in education and curriculum intolerance.

Contemporary Censorship and Intolerance in US Schooling

The history of US intolerance within education shows how the foundation of schooling has always stemmed from exclusionary practices. With this history in mind, it is critical to acknowledge that contemporary acts of censorship are not new occurrences but practices that have been carried on for centuries. By connecting these historical acts of intolerance within US schooling to contemporary examples, there can be a better understanding of why modern-day acts of censorship occur and where the power to make these curricular exclusions comes from.

Contemporary Perspectives on the History of Religious Intolerance in Schooling

With the early purpose of American schooling revolving around religious indoctrination, it is significant to acknowledge the connection between religion and modern-day acts of censorship. This connection is revealed through a study by two religion researchers, Joseph Tamney and Stephen Johnson (1997), where they conducted a series of phone interviews on people identifying as Catholic, mainline protestants, conservative protestants, and nonaffiliated. They investigated the intolerance often presented by conservative protestants and saw how these beliefs contribute to book banning and censorship. To collect their results, the respondents were asked questions about their beliefs regarding the significance of the bible, book banning, and the role of minority groups within America.

The results of the study concluded that among the protestant respondents surveyed, religion and traditionalism correlated with intolerance of modern-day issues and topics, such as race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. They argue that intolerance occurs around religious ideologies due to conservative churches promoting an “anti-modern worldview in which intolerance is a morally superior position” (Tamney & Johnson, 1997, p. 268). This level of traditionalism presented by conservative respondents portrayed “humans as morally weak but offered bases for guidance beyond the bible, such as classical writings or simply established customs” and that “the acceptance of this tradition is what motivates support for book banning among mainline protestants” (Tamney & Johnson, 1997, p. 268). This conclusion shows that while religious scriptures have led to more intolerant beliefs, it is also the traditionalist

mindset of conservatives that leads to the censoring of these topics in modern times. These beliefs are reflected in current acts of censorship where “...the vitriolic language (and in some cases, actions) is used by those seeking to ban books. School librarians have been doxed, called ‘groomers,’ ‘pedophiles,’ ‘predators,’ and even ‘the arm of Satan’ for stocking books that feature Graphic 16,

Shaperomantic/sexual relationships or sexual health education” (Leggatt, 2024, p. 10). When conservative and religious individuals promote the censorship of content and declare these striking titles, it is important to acknowledge both the traditionalist ideologies that this stems from and the impact it has on academic institutions. As the purpose of schooling is based on these similar traditionalist ideologies, intolerance of outside content is evidently going to occur.

Contemporary Perspectives on the History of Racial Intolerance in Schooling

When continuing to investigate the true purpose of schooling in America, it is critical to look at the racist structures of educational institutions and how racist ideologies could prompt content censorship. The structural racism that is present in schools is observed in the research conducted by Benjamin Blaisdell (2015), where he describes classrooms as racial spaces. Blaisdell conducted interviews and observations at South Elementary, a public school in North Carolina. The interviews were done with four teachers within the district, all known for their success in working with students of color and their inclusion of racial equity within their teaching philosophies. This shared approach to education was used to prompt the teachers to focus on how their schools were complicit in the racial disparity within the classrooms.

It was revealed through this research that despite the physical desegregation of classrooms, there were still, in effect, “racial spaces where students’ access to educational resources was regulated by practices of white supremacy” (Blaisdell, 2015, p. 257). There were ways within the classroom that students were segregated based on the connection between student achievement and race. Students of color were often labeled as “fragile,” a term used by the district to describe lower-achieving students on standardized tests. The school’s reliance on tracking students by ability level created an environment where most students of color were often separated from the higher-level students and were given a more limited curriculum to learn from. The separation of students created the conception that students of color were incapable of the same critical and higher-order thinking as the other students. This issue emphasizes the need to “provide these children the content that other families from a different cultural orientation provide at home... ensuring that each classroom incorporates strategies appropriate for all the children in its confines” (Delpit 1996, p. 296). In this way, students of color are not separated from their peers and deemed “fragile,” but instead have their own identities and experiences valued within the classroom environment.

While the literary techniques used by the school were claimed to benefit lower-level readers, the approach was supposed to work for all students, but by being race-neutral, it secured the interests and privileges of white middle-class students, i.e., students who spoke ‘standard’ English (Blaisdell, 2015). This language superiority limited the opportunities for students who used different languages or English Vernaculars, creating a linguistic bias against students of color. The impact of language dominance is described by the scholar Vershawn Young when stating that, “The narrow, prescriptive lens be messin writers and readers all the way up, cuz we all been taught to respect the dominant way to write, even if we don’t, can’t, or won’t ever write that one way ourselves. That be hegemony. Internalized oppression. Linguistic self-hate...” (Young, 2011, p. 112). The

oppressive nature of this schooling system then negatively affects both how educational instructors perceive students of color as well as how those students view their own abilities.

The teachers in the study revealed that it was up to the teachers themselves to advocate for these students and not the district itself due to the practices and ideologies engrained in the policies. This lack of academic opportunities provided for students of color within public schooling is not a new occurrence but one that has been “rooted in the education system’s legacy of separate and unequal” (Hammond, 2015, p. 14). Despite the segregation of students based on race being illegalized from educational institutions, this unequal treatment towards students of color and the limited curriculum points to the inherent racist ideologies that continue to follow the practice of schooling in America. The continuation of these racist structures within schools makes it crucial to recognize the ideologies of the superiors who run these academic institutions and who control the curriculum within schools.

Contemporary Perspectives on Legislative Regulation of Intolerance in Schooling

The content censorship within US schools’ curricula does not start in the classroom but within the government’s legislative power over educational institutions. Government legislation regarding censorship was studied by two educational researchers, Catherine Lammert and Vickie Godfrey (2023), in their survey of literature teachers in Texas school districts. Their focus is on the state of Texas due to legislation passed that restricts how teachers discuss topics of race, gender, and sexuality within K-12 classes. Their survey consisted of open-ended questions to gauge teachers’ perspectives on what children’s literature topics lead to teachers self-censoring and what factors influence their self-censorship of literature in a state with topic-restrictive legislation. Their findings revealed that most teachers defined topics pertaining to race, gender, and sexuality as all risky topics to include in the content of their classrooms but that they were seen as needed topics of information to students. This then causes there to be “not only an explicit curriculum underlying how matters of genders and sexualities are taught but also often an implicit or even a null curriculum (Hess, 2024). The study also revealed that a prominent reason teachers self-censor the literature they teach is due to a fear of facing repercussions. Due to most of the topic-restrictive legislation being vague in their definitions of “controversial topics”, many teachers face the dilemma of deciding what social topics will be allowed in their classroom or not, despite their belief in the need for it. Teachers then face the risk of sanctions and termination, making self-censorship an often-protective action on teachers’ part. The vague nature of these restrictions is exemplified through the veiling tactics used in literature censorship. Within the deselection process in school libraries, “librarians or other media specialists decide not to carry media without officially removing it, a decision often ordered by the district leaders. This allows the banned amount to remain low, while the recorded deselected/weeded number reveals the true amount being restricted” (Seebalac, 2024, p. 7). The lack of specificity in the topic-restrictive legislation and the concealed nature of book banning increases teachers’ censorship due to the uncertainty of what actions or topics will lead to penalties.

The idea that some social topics are too controversial for young students to be exposed to is the foundation of this forced censorship of literature. This, in turn, damages the learning process done in classrooms because “learning to identify and navigate risk rather than denying its existence is key to preservice teachers’ growth as critical literacy educators” (Lammert & Godfrey, 2023, p. 3). This censorship then dampens not only the growth of educators but also the students who require diverse knowledge to navigate the world around them. When students engage with literature that “challenges dominant narratives around racism and racial inequality, it can also positively influence individuals’ development of racial literacy” (Lammert & Godfrey, 2023, p. 3). The intervention of government legislation within schools’ curricula then presents a threat to the growth of students as learners and individuals in a changing world. When it is left to those with authority to make legislative decisions over course material, both teachers and students are left with little room within the schooling process to advocate for a diverse level of literacy in the classroom.

Conclusion

With the purpose of education being founded on religious agendas, US schooling is then seen to not be intended to advance students as learners but to morph them to fit these religious expectations. In connection, by the institution of education being based on racist systems, these agendas are not only pushed but exclude minority students who are forced into positions with fewer academic opportunities and are seen as inferior learners. These systems also enforce that minority cultures and identities are not significant in the schooling process. Modern-day censorship has reflected this level of intolerance and exclusion through government legislation that contributes to the restriction of content and the instillation of fear in instructors who strive to go against it. This leads students to be taught in a schooling process that does not allow them to grow as individual learners but to be morphed into what the US school system expects them to be. While these historical factors and systems are significant contributors to modern-day censorship, the true source of this action and potential solutions are still indefinite. However, it is essential to understand the potential contributors and causes of censorship in order to begin addressing the issue at hand. Teachers have an obligation to engage in advocacy for students and their families who have historically fought against these systems of dispossession and erasure from school curricula. This advocacy may vary depending on the teacher, but possessing the same mission of acting on the side of students is essential to ensure the intellectual freedom and opportunities offered to all children.

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