



Exposing Students to Different Viewpoints is Not Indoctrination

By Educator Barnes – September 23, 2020

Protests this summer brought to the forefront the need for social justice and racial equity. Many advocates and activists have been fighting this battle for decades. These advocates and activists aren't only on the streets or at meetings speaking up for change; they are also inside of the classroom. Whether these educators are veterans or new to this work, some are facing opposition and being accused of indoctrination.

Parent Bridget Ziegler, who is also a member of the Sarasota County School Board in Florida, claimed indoctrination is taking place in Sarasota County Schools. Her concern is with the popular education resource BrainPOP. BrainPOP provides short videos to explain topics. The particular video accused of indoctrination was in response to a letter the characters Nat and Moby received which read, "Why are so many people protesting about racism? I thought we fixed all that stuff a long time ago." Before viewers could even see the video, BrainPOP provided a warning. "This movie explores a sensitive subject. Please watch this movie with an adult, and take time to discuss it."

After viewing the video, Ziegler posted the video on her public Facebook page with her thoughts and actions in response:

I spoke with our Superintendent first thing this morning to make him aware and share my concerns and the concerns I have received from many people in the community since last night.

The following items are being reviewed:

- *How long we've contracted with Brain Pop*
- *Who selects what content is made available to our students?*
- *Who & How is the content on the platform vetted to make sure it is appropriate, aligns to Florida Standards, and aligns to our curriculum?*
- *Was this video in particular assigned by any teacher?*
- *A review of our user agreement with BrainPop*

... I will close with my strong belief that our schools must promote values such as kindness, respect and safety for all, and create an environment that fosters a love for learning.

Our job is to educate, not indoctrinate.

The questions Ziegler asked are not necessarily problematic. What is problematic is if the only time these questions are being posed is for certain content and not for all content this school district uses. Should a resource be completely thrown out the window because Ziegler and some parents have an issue with one video?

Katie Benard challenged Zeigler's viewpoint.

Indoctrinate? The video was both accurate and appropriate for children. We cannot and should not hide the racial discourse that is happening in our country right now so how else should educators be discussing this "current event" with students? I would be happy for my child to watch that in class and, in fact, I will show it to him myself today.

Ziegler responded.

Katie Benard I absolutely support your right as a parent to choose to show this to your child and discuss this topic as you see fit. You are correct, it is a very important topic and it's one that belongs around the dinner table with your elementary student (whom this was created for) ... BLM, Planned Parenthood, NRA, Right to Life ... I'm not picking sides ... regardless of where you stand – public schools need to be focused on education fundamentals – not indoctrination.

The district responded by restricting access to the BrainPOP video in question, but parents can request access to the video if they would like their children to view it.

If a teacher did use the video, what was the discussion like after the video? If the teacher said, "You must believe this to be the gospel truth," then parents would have an argument for indoctrination. Exposing students to views they may not have been exposed to before is not indoctrination. This is an opportunity for children to learn how to have tolerance for others and their views because many adults lack this skill right now.

Florida is not the only place where indoctrination accusations are being thrown around. It is also happening right here in the Hoosier state.

The website [Chicks on the Right ... Because Conservatism Needs a Makeover](#) recently accused an Indiana teacher of being in "full indoctrination mode." The chicks, Mock and Daisy, received an audio they say is of a Hamilton Southeastern teacher indoctrinating students because the teacher mentions Black Lives Matters and systemic racism during a lesson.

They also posted a response they received from the principal.

Good Morning,

Thank you for reaching out. I would like to add some context to the audio excerpt that has been shared with you. The class is AP Business Administration, which is a college

level course, and the short audio clip comes from a multi-day lesson on the advantages and disadvantages of capitalism and the advantages and disadvantages of socialism.

Have a good day,

Janie M. Ulmer

Principal

Mock and Daisy go on to say, "So now you've heard the clip. Does it sound to you like there was really gonna be any part of that instruction that included a neutral and objective discussion about capitalism and socialism?" Do Mock and Daisy care about "neutral and objective perspectives" being shared in all classes in the HSE school district or only the ones where Black Lives Matter is being included in the lesson? The chicks also posted a parent's disdain for Dr. Erica Buchanan-Rivera, HSE's former Chief Director of Equity and Inclusion. Buchanan-Rivera is now the Director of Equity and Inclusion for Washington Township.

Unfortunately, I am not surprised that HSE is turning towards the leftist indoctrination. They hired a Director of Equity and Inclusion a couple of years ago and she has unleashed a lot of the current toxicity that I am seeing throughout the high school.

Over in Rhode Island, my friend Erika Sanzi also weighed in on the topic of indoctrination. We both fight for and advocate for other people's kids, but the headline of her recent piece "Stop Trying to Indoctrinate Our Kids" caught me off guard. Her major concern is that she believes some teachers are pushing political views and agendas instead of teaching basic information such as how our government functions. A specific point of contention was, "Requiring that my 5th grade child write a letter addressed to an elected official telling them to remove Columbus Day from the calendar is a bridge too far."

Sanzi elaborates more on what she believes should be happening in schools.

Many of us hold tight to the belief that the best teachers are those who engage their students in robust study and debate without ever showing their own ideological hand. They approach political questions like a competition of ideas—students study, read and listen to a variety of perspectives, draw an informed conclusion and make their case.

I agree that educators should provide a variety of perspectives in school, but I disagree that educators should feel as if they cannot share their opinions. When I was a teacher, I allowed discussion about current events and controversial issues. Many times, I did not share my opinion. I simply facilitated the discussion. When you spend every day with students Monday-Friday, they want to know what you think. When pressed repeatedly, I would share. I also would tell students I was sharing my beliefs, and I would encourage my students to come to their own conclusion. I see it no differently than my student and I debating which book is the best in "The Hunger Games" series. It is "Catching Fire," if you are curious. My students knew my opinion, but some disagreed based on the information they had and what they believed.

If the battle between educators and parents in different states isn't enough, now it is being pushed into the national spotlight by President Trump. He is pushing for the creation of a pro-America and pro-patriotic curriculum. He also used the word indoctrination when speaking about the need for this curriculum. He took particular issue with the 1619 project which details the plight of enslaved Africans and expressed, "It will destroy our country."

What will destroy our country is having a closed mind to alternative viewpoints. Listening to another viewpoint does not mean children will believe it. I have never had a class discussion where everyone agreed even if the topic was not controversial. Students do have free will and the ability to think for themselves.

Families of color have been fighting for representation of their children in the curriculum for years. But a white woman in Florida gets upset about a video, and within a short period of time, it is restricted from the curriculum. This shows families of color how hard this fight is becoming. Even if they are successful in getting changes or diverse and controversial topics into the classroom, the word of a white woman can have it gone with just a little rant on Facebook.

At the end of the day, the people who are harmed are the children. Ziegler said, "it is a very important topic and it's one that belongs around the dinner table." Are people who accuse teachers of indoctrination willing to discuss these topics at home? Our students are growing leaders into leaders right now. We need them to be well-informed. They can't be well-informed if they aren't exposed to multiple viewpoints and perspectives.