

Article

Locating Our Role in the Struggle: Lessons from the Past and Present on Teachers' Persistence, Solidarity, and Activism for the Common Good

Thea L. Racelis  and Hillary E. Parkhouse * 

School of Education, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA 23284, USA; racelistl@vcu.edu

* Correspondence: heparkhouse@vcu.edu

Abstract: The recent onslaught of educational censorship measures is the latest and most extreme manifestation of the perennial struggle over curriculum and politics in schools. Lessons from past and present teacher resistance, solidarity, and activism can inspire and galvanize teachers in this moment within the long struggle for educational justice. This article describes three orientations that may help teachers avoid self-censorship and take action: teachers as classroom-level judges, teachers as part of a collective, and teachers as historical actors. We also present reflective questions that can help teachers identify supports available to them and actions they can take in light of their particular contexts. Our hope is that these tools for thinking about the role of the teacher and taking action will offer both teachers and teacher educators critical hope in our collective struggle for the common good and a more democratic future.

Keywords: teacher activism; educational justice; critical race theory; curriculum; censorship; social movements; equity; democratic education



Citation: Racelis, T.L.; Parkhouse, H.E. Locating Our Role in the Struggle: Lessons from the Past and Present on Teachers' Persistence, Solidarity, and Activism for the Common Good. *Educ. Sci.* **2024**, *14*, 56. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14010056>

Academic Editor: James Albright

Received: 20 November 2023

Revised: 7 December 2023

Accepted: 22 December 2023

Published: 2 January 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Ideological battles over curriculum are as old as public schools in the United States, but never have they targeted individual teachers and classrooms on the same scale that they target them now. Teachers today are confronted with two contradictory narratives about their work and how best to serve children. On the one hand, states, districts, and professional organizations have called for teachers and schools to use culturally responsive approaches that recognize the systemic nature of racism, sexism, and other inequities. On the other hand, teachers in many states and districts are prohibited from discussing systemic injustices related to race or gender as part of a coordinated campaign to exploit and stoke fear of social equality and the possibility of a multiracial democracy [1].

Teachers are facing these contradictory challenges head-on, but ambiguous policy contexts leave them unsure of how to navigate prohibitions on teaching certain ill-defined content (e.g., “divisive concepts”) that are often little more than dog whistles [1]. Legal scholars contend that the Supreme Court needs to establish clearer boundaries around the specific First Amendment rights to free speech that K12 educators retain [2]. Until courts clarify students’ rights to learn about power and injustice, teachers need support for navigating these unprecedented attacks on their work. The purpose of this article is to provide teachers with some ways to think about their individual and collective work—in the service not only of their own students, but also the public good. This includes thinking about this work as part of a long lineage of teachers’ struggles toward civil rights and multiracial democracy.

Overview of This Article

This article has two purposes. The first is to offer three orientations for pre-service and practicing educators to keep in mind as they engage in the collective struggle for the

common good: teachers as classroom-level judges, teachers as part of a collective, and teachers as historical actors. First, teachers act as classroom-level judges, weighing in all the relevant factors of curriculum, professional responsibilities to serve students' best interests, school culture and climate, parent input, administrator guidance and support, time constraints, and so on. Within ambiguous policy contexts such as these, teachers must use their professional judgment to determine how best to serve students and the common good. Second, teachers should remember they are not alone—they are part of a collective, and in that collective, they can find safety in numbers. Finally, teachers should remember their history: they are part of a long lineage of other educators who struggled for justice. Taking lessons and inspiration from those who have preceded them can embolden and sustain teachers during these challenging times. We conclude the article with guiding questions to help teachers identify their place on a continuum of activism and map the resources available for actions that they can take now and in the future.

Another purpose of this paper is to assist teacher educators in equipping their teacher candidates with conceptualizations of teaching and questions for reflection so that they enter classrooms feeling confident about their ability to withstand these attacks on their work. The authors of this paper are both former secondary teachers and current teacher educators in a southern state with an anti-“divisive concept” measure in place. The first author, Thea Racelis, is a queer Latina woman who has taught in primarily Black Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) contexts, where students responded with excitement to the invitation to bring their whole selves into the classroom and to the study of literary texts that reflected their lived experiences. The second author, Hillary Parkhouse, is a White woman who saw the transformative impact of critical discussions of power and justice on students' views of the world and themselves while teaching social studies and English as a Second Language in the Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City. As we worked with teachers facing varying degrees of fear and uncertainty depending on their experience, administrative support, and personal risk tolerance levels, we realized that all of them need more resources and encouragement to persist in teaching difficult knowledge.

2. Background

If schools are “nurseries of democracy”, as former Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer has called them [3], then schoolteachers are the horticulturalists. As such, teachers have always been part of the long struggle for a more democratic and just society. Engaging students in this struggle is a primary way in which teachers help create a better world. To engage, students need skills in constructive disagreement, which includes challenging the status quo and criticizing accepted views [1]. Dissent is an essential process in a healthy democracy and needs to be taught, and not feared [3,4]. Teachers can help students cultivate skills in dissent and recognize entrenched societal problems that may call for it, such as racism, sexism, ableism, wealth inequality, homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of oppression. Throughout history, there are numerous examples of teachers who have raised their students' critical consciousness and collectively fought for a more equitable society. From the 1968 Chicano student walkouts in East Los Angeles led by Sal Castro to the 2016 Black Lives Matter at School movement in Seattle and nationally, models abound of teachers, students, and families working together in the struggle for a more just future.

At the same time—and partly because progressive movements threaten current power hierarchies—teachers now find themselves in the crosshairs of those wishing to preserve those hierarchies. At the time of writing, forty-four states have passed legislation restricting the use of critical race theory in the classroom and/or limiting how teachers can discuss issues of race, gender, and inclusion in the classroom [5]. Across these states and districts in other states experiencing related efforts, an estimated 35% of all K12 students in the United States have potentially been affected, and districts with higher levels of racial and ideological diversity are more likely to have been impacted [1]. These bills are part of a well-coordinated and well-funded effort to stoke parents' fears for partisan gain [1]. While the constitutionality of these laws is being judged in the courts, many teachers are avoiding

topics that they believe may threaten their livelihoods or professional statuses within their districts, thus limiting what students learn about these complex issues [1,6–8].

The widespread censorship of curriculum is a massive blow to democracy at a time when it is already under attack from many different fronts. The United States has never truly fulfilled its democratic ideals, from the first elections that were open only to property-owning White men to the recent voter suppression laws and racial gerrymandering [9]. Yet, the prospect of achieving those ideals seems bleak as we experience what some have called a democratic recession [10]. The past two decades have seen a decline in the health of elements that are essential to democracy, including the rule of law, civil rights, and trust in election results.

Attacks on these institutions can be attributed mainly to desperate attempts to preserve white supremacy in a rapidly diversifying nation [11,12]. This motive is apparent in the explicit racial rhetoric being used—types of rhetoric that have been considered politically unwise in the post-Civil Rights era until recently [13]. Such appeals to unconscious and conscious racism use fear to lead voters to support rollbacks of democracy [14]. The Legal Defense Fund succinctly summarized the current political climate and how language is used to oppress and attack: “What was once left to allusion and hushed tones has become a thunderous, almost deafening roar” [15]. However, the problem goes further than rhetoric: there has also been an increase in hate crimes as behaviors that were previously considered shameful are endorsed by political and cultural personalities [16–18].

The significance of the teacher’s role in defending against these tides of authoritarianism, racism, and hate is perhaps greater than ever. Teachers were (briefly) lauded as heroes of the nation during the pandemic shutdown before being cast once again as radicals. The burdens placed on teachers are enormous, but so is their capacity to influence education. School principals, district leaders, and other educators share in this responsibility, but in this article, we focus on what teachers can do within their own spheres of influence.

The public school classroom is one of the few remaining sites where people of diverse political, ethnoracial, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds come together and learn from and with one another. Although schools are as racially segregated now as they were before the Supreme Court de-segregated schools in the *Brown v. Board* (1954) decision [19,20], many other arenas of social interaction (e.g., neighborhoods, churches, civic organizations, and social media networks) are even more segregated along multiple lines of identity [21–23]. Thus, the classroom is one of our last remaining lines of defense against the growing threats of polarization and social distrust. That is precisely why they are being targeted by those who would exploit polarization and distrust for political gain. Accordingly, teachers serve as defenders of democracy now more than ever before. We hope this article will serve as both a resource and a reminder of the costs to democracy when erring on the side of caution.

3. Three Orientations

3.1. *Teachers as Classroom-Level Judges: Understanding the Policies and Applying Professional Judgment*

Now, just as ever, teachers must make countless professional judgments throughout their day. Prior scholarship has offered helpful frames for thinking about some of the specific types of judgments teachers make, for example, as “curricular gatekeepers” [24] and “street-level bureaucrats” [25]. In this section, we summarize those ideas and add a third role: teachers as classroom-level judges. We explain what this means in the context of censorship laws that may ultimately be ruled unconstitutional.

3.1.1. Prior Conceptualizations of Teachers’ Work

Even with efforts to teacher-proof curriculum through factors like scripted curricula, in most classrooms, teachers still have substantial discretion in how they carry out their work. The concept of “curricular gatekeeper” [24] is commonly used in education literature

to refer to the fact that teachers make reasoned judgments about which knowledge and skills to teach in a limited amount of time, given that state standards are often broad.

Alongside the conceptualization of teachers as “curricular gatekeepers” is the notion, within the literature on policy implementation, that teachers are “street-level bureaucrats”. When new reforms are introduced that put unrealistic, vague, and/or contradictory demands on teachers without commensurate resources, these teachers respond by rationing services, triaging, modifying goals, or otherwise finding ways to manage the chasm between demands and resources [25]. In other words, the idea that curriculum and instruction can be controlled from the policy level fails to account for the reality that “the meaning of policy cannot be known until it is worked out in practice at the street level” [25] (p. 173). In this case, the street level is the classroom, where teachers are immersed in the task of education, which is distinct and removed from the policy level, where politicians make their decisions. Thus, teachers should remember that policymakers do not dictate their work, as some would believe. Classrooms have the potential to be radical spaces for learning and teaching [26,27].

Historian of education Larry Cuban has analyzed education reforms since the start of public education and found that reform policies have had minimal impact on teaching practice in U.S. schools [28]. His analysis reveals several reasons for this, one of which is that policies often charge teachers with contradictory curricular goals. In the case of recent censorship bills, for instance, a contradiction exists between the aim of developing students’ critical analytical skills and the ability to understand multiple perspectives versus a new aim of avoiding the critical analysis of social conditions and perspectives that examine the root causes of those conditions. Teachers cannot achieve both. So, they must make professional judgments based on what they believe is ethical and in the best interests of students and society.

3.1.2. Classroom-Level Judges

In many ways, teachers thus act as classroom-level judges in addition to street-level bureaucrats. While we await court rulings on the constitutionality of new censorship laws, teachers are left to their own devices to decide what qualifies as “teaching critical race theory”, a “divisive concept”, or “making students feel discomfort”. There are no resources that teachers can consult for a definitive answer to these questions because the policies themselves do not define them [1,8]. In fact, the language is intended to be vague to avoid being deemed a violation of free speech protections while still squelching discussions of racism and sexism as teachers err on the side of caution [8]. Gómez and colleagues refer to this phenomenon as arrested semantics because they avoid the overt mention of race [29]. They argue that “racist semantics are arrested because they intentionally avoid literal meaning in order to disavow the real meaning; therefore, arresting the responsibility, answerability, or connection that White people have to racism” [29] (p. 2). Arrested semantics make policies a diffuse target for those who are tasked with making day-to-day judgments in the classroom.

This is the desire of the policymakers and their deep-pocketed right-wing backers: for teachers to self-censor out of an abundance of caution to protect their livelihoods. And it is working. In speaking with 31 practicing and prospective Tennessee teachers, the researchers found that teachers “constrained their own lessons in response to fears that their teaching would be scrutinized by parents or administrators, restricting their teaching beyond the specific letter of the law” [8]. Based on a survey of 275 educators, a UCLA study found that even teachers in states without prohibitions censored themselves to avoid local criticism [1]. Additional studies are finding that many teachers are self-censoring and avoiding topics that had previously seemed apolitical [6,7].

Even before this new wave of censorship bills, teachers and schools have sometimes over- or misapplied policies due to a lack of clarity about the policy’s boundaries. The language of repressive policies has created a false dichotomy with social justice on the one end and academic rigor on the other, as if the two could not coexist. With pressure

on teachers to get students to perform well in tests and to excel academically, tackling topics related to social justice is not only risky for teachers professionally, but also seen as potentially detrimental for students, at odds with high-level performance. Teachers make decisions in the classroom based on these assumptions and contradictory expectations.

3.1.3. Avoiding Hyper-Interpretation

As classroom-level judges, teachers should keep in mind that—although students and teachers have more limited First Amendment rights within schools than outside of them—the courts have ruled that students have a right to receive information and that limits on this right cannot be grounded in ideological concerns [30]. In *Chiras v. Miller* (2005), the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that limiting curriculum cannot be “motivated by ‘narrowly partisan or political’ considerations”. The partisan aims of the current legislation are apparent in the network of powerful conservative PACs, foundations, and politicians sharing tactics and bill templates to win elections across the country, from school boards to state houses [1]. Many campaigners are likely aware of the unconstitutionality of the laws but are undeterred because their partisan aims are being served in any case.

Teachers should weigh the intended chilling effects of these laws against their responsibility to prepare young people for active citizenship in a society in desperate need of citizens who are equipped and committed to fight for justice. Avoiding or minimizing inequities may feel safer in the short term, but doing so upholds a status quo that threatens the creation of a true multiracial democracy in the long term. As Howard wrote, “Where issues of racism and inequity are concerned, neutrality, silence, and inaction all serve as ringing endorsements for racial oppression and inequity and reflect deep-seated hypocrisy in the tenets of what it means to be a good citizen” [31] (p. 38). Teachers must take calculated risks about what to teach and recognize the costs to society of over-erring on the side of caution.

To do so, teachers need to understand the scope and limits of these policies. Without clarity and insight into the specifics of a given policy, teachers run the risk of hyper-interpretation and self-censorship. They may choose to take their cues from other sources with different interpretive lenses, such as major television networks that serve particular political agendas. Gutzman reports that Fox News mentioned critical race theory more than 1900 times in the period from April to mid-July of 2021, “marking CRT as a new focus of Republican and conservative donors and sparking a movement to ban teaching of the theory in schools” [32] (p. 334). Policies are inflated in our polarized political climate, and their reach is often overstated [1]. The consequences are significant for teachers and students, particularly those with minoritized identities.

In an NBC news report, Adams and colleagues offer illustrations of the rhetorical strategies used to mischaracterize CRT in the bills being proposed in various states to instill fear in communities and teachers:

Legislators behind an Idaho bill said critical race theory ‘tried to make kids feel bad’. Tennessee lawmakers said teaching about racism promotes ‘division’, and a pending bill in Rhode Island bans teaching the idea that ‘the United States of America is fundamentally racist or sexist’. [33]

These appeals build on the fears that are already part of the profession and emotionally engage communities to stoke fear and outrage. Who would want to have a school curriculum that intentionally seeks to make kids feel bad? When teachers are isolated from each other, they miss opportunities to strategize and plan. They also absorb the impacts of distress in the community caused by inflammatory rhetoric.

3.2. Teacher as Part of a Collective: Seeking Safety in Numbers

Teaching can be extremely isolating. With so many assaults on the profession and the professionals, educators can easily internalize the stress they face daily inside the classroom from parents, administrators, media, and public opinion [34]. Teachers tend to “personalize sources of stress and degraded work conditions rather than turning to each other and other

groups as potential allies” [35]. Such allyship is especially important as it can help allay the fear that is a defining feature of teachers’ professional identities, even outside times of attack [36]. Isolation can make teachers feel like they are the only ones facing the ethical and pedagogical challenges of responding to policies that limit their freedom to teach. Without a community of support, the risks, both real and perceived, are amplified for teachers.

Many levels of support are available to teachers, from national professional organizations, to local informal groups of colleagues, parents, and students, to social media spaces that can help teachers feel less isolated. Opportunities for teachers to connect both virtually and in person can be a source of solidarity, community, and, in extreme cases, legal support.

3.2.1. Professional Organizations

At the national level, a range of organizations have formally expressed their resistance to these bans. The statement entitled “Joint statement on legislative efforts to restrict education about racism and American history” was signed in June of 2021 by the American Association of University Professors, the American Historical Association, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and PEN America, with support from the American Association of Hispanics in Education, the Anti-Defamation League, the Modern Language Association, the National Education Association, and the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO [37]. In the statement, the organizations state their oppositions to the legislative efforts that “seek to substitute political mandates for the considered judgment of professional educators, hindering students’ ability to learn and engage in critical thinking across differences and disagreements”. In November 2023, the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) released a Racial Literacy position statement that asserted that “teaching about race and racism in the social studies classroom [is] an essential aspect of preparing future citizens who will be informed advocates in an inclusive and equitable society”, and that teachers should be “active participants in the goal of combating racism, xenophobia, and other forms of bigotry in social studies classrooms” [38].

National and state organizations can also provide legal services to their members. The American Federation of Teachers added over two million dollars to its legal defense fund to protect educators facing legal challenges related to teaching CRT [39]. The National Federation of Teachers president, Randi Weingarten, clarified the union’s position, declaring, “Our union will defend any member who gets in trouble for teaching honest history” [40]. She also made it clear that they would dedicate financial resources to challenging the constitutionality of laws that “are so broad that they undermine the required state standards for instruction” [40]. National Education Association president Becky Pringle declared that the union would defend teachers’ right to teach the truth [40].

3.2.2. Local and Virtual Networks

Teachers can also seek allies within their districts and buildings. If they have good relationships with their administrators, they can start by talking with them about how the school as a whole can protect its staff and students from the hostile climate. The UCLA study mentioned above found that teachers’ pedagogical choices in the midst of anti-CRT bills largely depended on the amount of support they received from their school leaders. Conversely, without explicit protection, “vocal minorities or individual critics could have large effects” [1] (p. viii). Therefore, if teachers can work with administrators to put supports in place, colleagues throughout their building will experience less of the chilling effect these bills hope to achieve.

If this is not possible, teachers can nevertheless find safety among their ranks. If a critical mass of teachers across a building pledge to resist self-censorship, all may feel more secure knowing that a mass firing or other punishment is highly unlikely. Even short of a collective pledge, teachers can form “small publics”, which are “important spaces teachers can return to again and again as they take risks and move beyond the safety of sympathetic audiences to frame problems and build coalitions and solidarity with other groups around

those problems” [41] (p. 166). In other words, lunchroom conversations can be powerful first steps toward solidarity and change.

Still, there may be readers in conservative leaning spaces that lack trust among colleagues or between colleagues and administrators. For those readers, social media can be a site for building community and holding space for dialogue. Virtual spaces can also support those without connections to national organizations like the ones listed above. For years, teachers have used private Facebook groups and Twitter Chats for Educators to interrogate and understand the powers at play and strategize for resistance. Unfortunately, both platforms have recently undergone significant changes that have led organizations and individuals to stop using them for ethical reasons. This has been a significant loss to teaching communities who found support in these spaces. To date, no new platforms have emerged with sufficient reach to build community for teacher activists in need of connections.

However, in the interim, there are other ways to connect virtually. For example, the Zinn Education Project has several grassroots campaigns to connect teachers committed to social justice, including Teach Reconstruction, Teach for Black Lives, and Teach Truth. The Teaching for Black Lives campaign provides free lesson plans and online classes and supports at least 100 teacher study groups each year. The Zinn Education Project website also provides resources for campaigning and spreading the vote for school board elections. It has sponsored a #TeachTruthDay of Action to rally educators nationwide with a shared vision of public education. The Pulitzer Center, in partnership with *The New York Times*, has built learning communities across the country to develop and implement teaching resources related to the 1619 Project.

Finally, teachers can leverage the relationships they already have with parents to build networks of solidarity. These networks could include two types of families: those who are already concerned about the possibility that their children’s classrooms will be spaces where diversity—and the identities associated with it—will be treated as taboo, and those who may not yet realize that this is a threat to their children’s futures. Equity-minded caregiver organizations like PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education) and the Baton Rouge Alliance for Students are working to ensure that the less representative but better-funded anti-equity parent groups cannot claim to speak for all parents [42]. If these types of groups do not yet exist in one’s community, teachers could begin speaking with caregivers about their vision for education. We often hear of parents’ desires for their children to surpass their own careers and income levels, but many parents also desire their children to imagine and create a better world than the one they grew up in. Schools can complement families’ efforts to cultivate empathy, conscientiousness, and perspective-taking. In order to do so, teachers must be able to discuss with students the systems of power that prevent the world from becoming better.

3.3. Teachers as Historical Actors: Learning and Drawing Inspiration from Past and Present Successes

Fully appreciating the political forces that teachers can be may encourage more teachers to join in the struggle. History offers numerous examples of teachers winning struggles for improved schools and working conditions. These examples offer teachers at this moment a source of inspiration and critical hope that, collectively, they have the power to fend off threats to their professional and ethical responsibilities. That is why the title of this paper suggests that we, as educators, should attempt to locate our roles in this long struggle as a way of connecting with influential educators in other times and places.

In a politically polarized climate, claiming an activist identity may feel risky for teachers. And yet, it is precisely this politically charged moment that makes teacher engagement necessary and vital as education faces challenges from political actors and corporate entities. Carl and colleagues define teacher activism as “the politically motivated activities of teachers to change existing educational policies, routines, and arrangements in pursuit of a perceived vision of justice, fairness, and equity” [35] (p. 315). Some activist strategies include classroom practices, organizing with other teachers, political advocacy, engagement on social media, and many other moves targeting systemic change

and equitable education for students. Teacher activism is best supported by finding spaces to connect with other practitioners. These connections may be forged with other teachers in the same building who are finding ways to enact resistance, or it might happen in professional organizations or even virtual spaces, as described above.

3.3.1. Lessons from the Past on Teacher Organizing

The long history of teacher activism includes organizing and strikes in response to a host of issues: from poor working conditions to standardized tests to restrictions on inclusive curriculum. The 1960s and 1970s saw numerous teacher strikes across the country; in the fall of 1979 alone, 150 strikes occurred across 18 states [43]. Fast forward to 2001, and the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act spurred an opt-out movement in which parents and teachers protested against standardized tests by choosing not to take them. Resistance also included grassroots organizing as well as parent and teacher protests. More recently, the Red For Ed movement resulted in school workers across West Virginia, Colorado, Arizona, and other states winning better conditions for teachers and students through strikes and—in states with prohibitions against teacher strikes—walkouts and sickouts.

Teachers have also engaged in organizing and coalition building with youth to protest restrictions on their rights to discuss topics like structural racism in schools. One example is the protest against SB 2281, the 2011 Arizona legislation that ultimately banned Tucson's highly successful Mexican American Studies program (profiled in the documentary *Precious Knowledge* [44]). Though the program was shut down, the legislation was overturned seven years later by Judge Wallace Tashima, who wrote, "The court is convinced that decisions regarding the MAS program were motivated by a desire to advance a political agenda by capitalizing on race-based fears" [45]. As classroom-level judges, teachers should keep in mind that this legal precedent exists for overturning any measures that would restrict curriculum to advance a political agenda.

3.3.2. Current Social Movements for Educational Justice

Education organizations around the U.S. also resist by developing critical, anti-oppressive curricular materials. These include Rethinking Schools, the Education for Liberation Network, the Zinn Education Project, and the Southern Poverty Law Center's Learning for Justice. Black Lives Matter at Schools is a national movement organizing for racial justice in education. They argue for the importance of student access to truthful lessons about history that include anti-racist perspectives. They state that "tolerance is the floor; we want relationships restored and communities transformed" [46].

While the battle against censorship is ongoing, new coalitions are emerging to bolster defenses for teachers, students, and communities. The National Coalition Against Censorship has a treasure trove of resources, including information on First Amendment rights, tips for activists, and an emerging repository of current and historical censorship. They argue that "censorship always strives to remain invisible—whether it dissimulates as care for moral values or protection of the young, or concern for the 'sensitivity' of religious, racial, and ethnic groups" [47]. Members of the coalition include the National Councils for Teachers of English, Social Studies, Mathematics, and Sciences, showing broad interdisciplinary support for educational freedom. The commitment to bring to light the efforts to restrict access to discourse, whether in the form of books, curriculum, or topics for discussion, is essential to know what is being targeted and how measures can be strategically resisted and defeated.

Teachers can also draw lessons from the history of youth activism in pursuit of educational justice. Youth activist organizations are growing in number and power to defend their right to learn; for example, the Georgia Youth Justice Coalition helped block the passage of an anti-LGBTQ bill in the state. The National Coalition Against Censorship (described above) seeks to support youth efforts with programs including a national coalition of organizations called Kids' Right to Read and the Youth Free Expression program.

#USvsHate is a national initiative that began with a small group of youths and teachers working together “to unite school communities against hate, bias, and injustice via ‘anti-hate’ dialogue and public messaging that drives continuous learning and action” [48] (p. 4). Through this initiative, teachers teach anti-hate lessons (encompassing racism, sexism, anti-semitism, transphobia, homophobia, and other forms of hate). Then, students submit their self-created anti-hate messages to a national contest. The winning messages are amplified online and turned into posters and stickers that are sent to participating classrooms nationwide. Although #USvsHate has received pushback from some school leaders, parents, and community members, participating teachers felt that using the anti-hate frame offered a “wide on-ramp” to anti-racist dialogue in communities that rarely discussed race [48]. This example shows how strategic framing and messaging can help teachers and youth in relatively conservative communities take initial steps. In the discussion, we return to the question of how teachers can locate their roles in the struggle in light of their particular community contexts.

4. Locating Our Role in the Struggle: Take-Aways

Author bell hooks referred to the practice of teaching as a sacred vocation. She wrote about teachers who “believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students” [49] (p. 13). This commitment to student learning, growth, and liberation is at the core of education for many teachers who are forced to make hard choices or face legal consequences. Gómez and Cammarota argued that “to teach is not to transfer knowledge, but to create the possibilities, the spaces, and the opportunities to co-construct knowledge with learners” [27] (p. 354). This freedom to create possibilities is at the heart of what is threatened. Many teachers are facing the choice between job security and teaching what they know to be the truth [50]. An analysis by *The Washington Post* found that more than 160 teachers lost their positions because of political debates [51]. It is essential to understand what is at stake to make informed decisions.

A glance at examples from around the country paints a sobering picture. A schoolteacher in Missouri became the target of the school board, and her contract was not renewed when she taught the award-winning young adult novel *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone [52]. In North Carolina, another teacher suffered the same fate for teaching that text [53]. The novel addresses themes of racism and police violence in the life of its main character. In Texas, a school administrator told teachers that if they assigned a reading about the Holocaust, they would be required to offer a reading with the “opposing perspective” [54]. This suggestion that teachers had to give validity and credence to accounts that would deny the events of the Holocaust in order to avoid creating discomfort or violating some vague policy or risk consequences is an example of the problematic overapplication of legislation.

The climate of fear that teachers live and work in is not an illusion of their creation. The consequences can be extreme for transgressions that hardly merit the loss of livelihoods and careers, such as teaching a young adult novel or presenting as closed for discussion the fact that the Holocaust was an attempted genocide and Holocaust denial is not a legitimate ‘other side’. Teachers must have strong working knowledge of policies to be effective classroom-level judges. They also need to feel supported and find a sense of belonging to help them navigate challenging curricular and pedagogical decisions and find sources of connection. In the aftermath of facing sanctions, teachers are coming together to struggle for justice and have started an organization called Teachers Under Attack. They are working with other teachers and media to help spread the stories and help bring about justice for those who have had to face extreme consequences for teaching the truth.

We recognize the many significant barriers teachers face in resisting these measures. Teachers’ work is often isolated in nature, leaving them with little knowledge of the calculated risks their colleagues may be taking and the relatively greater job security all may have as a result. The work is also a daily grind, with every minute absorbed in instruction, planning, grading, dealing with high-stakes testing, family communication, student emotional support, and other crucial tasks, leaving little if any time for reading

policy documents and organizing with colleagues. Teachers also lack visible role models for resistance from their K12 schooling experiences and teacher preparation programs. As a result of this and other features of preparation and induction, teachers are indirectly socialized to accept the existing conditions [55]. Finally, there are direct messages to teachers encouraging them to be apolitical [41]. In schools where teachers do not know if their administrators will protect them should a parent or student complaint arise, these teachers face a real risk of losing their jobs.

We hope these barriers will not be insurmountable as teachers recognize the dire costs to society if en masse schools are no longer nurseries for democracy. The campaign to limit the curriculum is inherently anti-democratic in that its supporters

seek to inflame people through misinformation and cherry-picked examples, more than inform; to refuse more than discuss complex ideas; to control more than share public schools in a shared multiracial democracy; to surveil and censor, more than support the freedom to think and discuss; to stoke fear of addressing complex issues in education, more than foster conditions necessary for dialogue and disagreement; and to divide more than include or unify. Ironically, the movement thrives on calling antiracist efforts “divisive” [1] (p. 7).

In our current polarized context, the fight for recognition of the fundamental dignity of all is now considered partisan and therefore political and thus off-limits by many teachers [56]. Inaction is never neutral, and it is especially not so in the context of educational policies that target people with marginalized identities.

Of course, the choice for teachers is not a binary of acquiescence or rebellion. There is a spectrum between abdicating one’s ethical responsibility and professional commitment on one end to sacrificing one’s job to bring a legal challenge on the other. Somewhere near the middle of the spectrum might be “strategic compliance” [57], which could look like giving students the option to select their own texts and assignments from a menu that includes explorations of race, gender, and inclusion. It could look like images on classroom walls that reflect racial and ethnic diversity, or it could even look like the most rudimentary act of addressing students by the name they wish to be called rather than their name of record. Teachers can also find ways to support student groups or help individual students find resources that reflect their multiple identities. Almost all teachers will find a point somewhere in between the two extremes, and we hope most will choose points in the latter half of the spectrum.

Teachers might locate their positions on the spectrum through asset-mapping, asking themselves questions, like “Where on this spectrum am I, and where would I like to be? What can start from where I am? Where can I go next? What actions align with my ethical commitments? What resources are available to support my dissent (e.g., colleagues, professional organizations, supportive administrators)?” One may begin with small acts of subtle subversion, such as providing options in readings and assignments that allow students to engage with material that teachers may be prohibited from assigning as a requirement. Teachers can also vote with their feet, moving from a school or district with low support for critical democratic education to one that aligns with their professional commitments. Teachers can provide support for parents and/or students who wish to mobilize in ways that may not be feasible for educators. Teachers can also support and encourage their peers and share strategies for resistance and dissent.

When teachers are assessing the risks and potential benefits in a situation, they can also consider their social identities and potential areas of privilege. The teaching force is overwhelmingly White, while the students in their classrooms are mostly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color [58]. White teachers, in particular, are able to strategically engage and leverage the institutional power that race confers. Similarly, straight teachers can engage homophobic and transphobic legislation and leverage their privilege to support safe spaces for students. Different social identities will hold different assets and protections when encountering challenges in education. Essential questions of power and access come into play when considering, for example, the following: Who stands to benefit from the risks

that I take? How can I leverage my privilege in order to effect change? Is there a way to use my power to move others in my sphere of influence into collaboration and transformation?

The asset mapping process may reveal that preliminary work is needed before one can feel reasonably confident that their dissent will not put their livelihood at risk. For example, one may first need to find allies within the district, join professional organizations that offer networking opportunities with like-minded colleagues, and build a trusting relationship with one's administrators. Even laying the groundwork for future dissent is a step toward educational justice.

Gaining a balcony view versus a dance floor view can help teachers avoid self-censorship. This metaphor is borrowed from the literature on adaptive leadership. According to Heifetz and colleagues, technical problems can be solved with existing tools and do not require significant changes in individuals or organizations. Adaptive challenges require changes and new ways of doing things [59]. The authors argue that "making progress requires going beyond any authoritative expertise to mobilize discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating the new capacity to thrive anew" [59] (p. 19). They use the metaphor of going to the balcony above the dance floor: on the dance floor, we can only see others dancing with us, but when we are on the balcony, we can see things that we would have missed while in the middle of the action. By moving between the two perspectives, we attain a more accurate view of the challenges and strengths of our organization. This is a perspective that is not naturally afforded to most teachers. Finding and creating opportunities to be on the balcony can help teachers think strategically and adaptively as they plan their response to the current situation.

Finally, the most important takeaway we hope to offer teachers is critical hope that justice can still be achieved. Duncan-Andrade defines critical hope as an ability to assess a current situation realistically with an eye toward equity and still envision the possibility of a better future [60]. Bishundat and colleagues argue that part of critical hope is "leading with love and passion as opposed to fear", which "helps educators focus on addressing concerns rather than avoiding them" [61] (p. 94). Critical hope allows us to envision new opportunities in 'unexpected places' and those assumed to have no potential for growth—this is how we grow roses in concrete.

5. Conclusions

In this article, we argued that teachers have a pivotal role to play in the long struggle for democracy. We emphasized teachers' collective power and the urgency of the task in an attempt to galvanize those who may tend toward hyper-caution. We then attempted to mobilize teachers by reminding them of the legacy of teacher resistance to attempts to narrow the curriculum. In an interview for *The New Yorker*, Kimberlé Crenshaw reminded us, "This is a post-George Floyd backlash. The reason why we are having this conversation is that the line of scrimmage has moved" [62]. In other words, George Floyd's murder sparked the greatest solidarity for anti-racism in decades. Thus, the current attacks on equity aim to move society back to a pre-George Floyd line of scrimmage—and that is not possible. The level of collective racial consciousness that exists post-June 2020 cannot be reversed and may only be fortified by attempts to bury it. That possibility may inspire critical hope that these censorship efforts will ultimately fail. Until that day, we hope teachers will remember three things: (1) that they retain greater jurisdiction over their classrooms than they may think; (2) they can find and create safety and solidarity through professional organizations and local networks; and (3) they are positioned to carry on an impressive legacy of teaching for social justice and advocating for students' right to learn. Teachers have the power to shape a more democratic future where all can flourish. Let us not give up that power easily.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, T.L.R. and H.E.P.; writing—original draft preparation, review, and editing, T.L.R. and H.E.P. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank Jose Alcaine, Ross Collin, Rachel Gómez, Dana Rabhar-Daniels, and Jesse Senechal for their helpful feedback on the early drafts.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

1. Pollock, M.; Rogers, J.; Kwako, A.; Matschiner, A.; Kendall, R.; Bingener, C.; Reece, E.; Kennedy, B.; Howard, J. *The Conflict Campaign: Exploring Local Experiences of the Campaign to Ban “Critical Race Theory” in Public K–12 Education in the U.S., 2020–2021*; UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access: Los Angeles, CA, USA, 2022.
2. Krebs, M.L. Can’t Really Teach: CRT Bans Impose Upon Teachers’ First Amendment Pedagogical Rights. *Vanderbilt Law Rev.* **2022**, *75*, 1925–1955.
3. Stitzlein, S.M. Even as our nation seeks unity, let there be dissent in schools. *Phi Delta Kappan* **2021**, *103*, 43–48. [CrossRef]
4. Cammarota, J. The value of a multicultural and critical pedagogy: Learning democracy through diversity and dissent. *Multicult. Perspect.* **2011**, *12*, 62–69. [CrossRef]
5. CRT Forward Tracking Project, (n.d.). CRT Forward.Law.Ucla.Edu. Tracking Project—Tracking Anti-CRT Efforts Introduced at the Local, State, and Federal Levels. Available online: <https://crtforward.law.ucla.edu/> (accessed on 1 November 2023).
6. DiGiacomo, D.K.; Hodgin, E.; Kahne, J.; Trapp, S. Civic Education in a politically polarized era. *Peabody J. Educ.* **2021**, *96*, 261–274. [CrossRef]
7. Geller, R.C. Teacher political disclosure in contentious times: A “responsibility to speak up” or “fair and balanced”? *Theory Res. Soc. Educ.* **2020**, *48*, 182–210. [CrossRef]
8. Kelly, L.B.; Taylor, L.; Djonko-Moore, C.; Marchand, A.D. The chilling effects of so-called critical race theory bans. *Rethink. Sch.* **2022**, *37*, 18–24.
9. McGhee, H. *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*; One World: New York, NY, USA, 2021.
10. Repucci, S.; Slipowitz, A. Democracy under Siege: Freedom in the World 2021. Freedom House. 2021. Available online: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2021/democracy-under-siege> (accessed on 1 November 2023).
11. Bonilla-Silva, E.; Yamashita, L. The problem of racism in “post-racial” America. In *Systemic Racism in America: Sociological Theory, Education Inequality, and Social Change*; T&F eBooks: Oxford, UK, 2022; pp. 23–35.
12. Wilkerson, I. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*; Random House: New York, NY, USA, 2020.
13. Westen, D. *The Political Brain: The Role of Emotion in Deciding the Fate of the Nation*; Public Affairs: New York, NY, USA, 2007.
14. Bartels, L.M. Ethnic antagonism erodes Republicans’ commitment to democracy. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA* **2020**, *117*, 22752–22759. [CrossRef]
15. DeVenny, K. How Language is Weaponized to Oppress and Marginalize. Legal Defense Fund. Available online: <https://www.naacpldf.org/white-supremacy-what-it-means-to-be-american/> (accessed on 12 July 2023).
16. Human Rights Watch. U.S.: Boldly Act on Racism, Poverty, Voting. Human Rights Watch. Available online: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/12/us-boldly-act-racism-poverty-voting> (accessed on 18 January 2023).
17. Lowery, W. *American Whitelash: A Changing Nation and the Cost of Progress*; Mariner Books: Hammond, IN, USA, 2023.
18. The Leadership Conference Education Fund. Cause for Concern 2024: The State of Hate. 2023. Available online: <https://civilrights.org/edfund/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2023/04/Cause-For-Concern-2024.pdf> (accessed on 1 November 2023).
19. U.S. Government Accountability Office, Report Student Population Has Significantly Diversified, but Many Schools Remain Divided Along Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Lines. 16 June 2022. Available online: <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-22-104737#:~:text=Schools%20remain%20divided%20along%20racial,%20ethnic,%20and%20economic%20lines%20throughout,a%20single%20race%20or%20ethnicity> (accessed on 12 July 2023).
20. Pendharkar, E. *Public Schools Are Still Segregated. But These Tools Can Help*; Education Week: Bethesda, MD, USA, 2023.
21. Anderson, E. The White Space. *J. Race Ethn.* **2015**, *1*, 10–21. [CrossRef]
22. PRRI. Religion and Congregations in a Time of Social and Political Upheaval. Public Religion Research Institute. 2016. Available online: <https://www.prri.org/research/religion-and-congregations-in-a-time-of-social-and-political-upheaval/> (accessed on 16 May 2023).
23. Vazquez, J. Racial Segregation in the Church. Equal Justice Initiative. Available online: <https://eji.org/news/history-racial-injustice-racial-segregation-in-church/> (accessed on 3 June 2022).
24. Thornton, S.J. Teacher as curricular-instructional gatekeeper in social studies. In *Handbook of Research on Social Studies Teaching and Learning*; Macmillan Library: Nairobi, Kenya, 1991; pp. 237–248.

25. Weatherley, R.; Lipsky, M. Street-level bureaucrats and institutional innovation: Implementing special-education reform. *Harv. Educ. Rev.* **1977**, *47*, 171–197. [CrossRef]
26. Cammarota, J. The praxis of ethnic studies: Transforming second sight into critical consciousness. *Race Ethn. Educ.* **2015**, *19*, 233–251. [CrossRef]
27. Gómez, R.F.; Cammarota, J. Taking the teachers to school! critical consciousness emerging: A qualitative exploration of Mexican American youth's Social Justice Orientation Development. *Urban Rev.* **2021**, *54*, 339–366. [CrossRef]
28. Cuban, L. Why so many structural changes in schools and so little reform in teaching practice? *J. Educ. Adm.* **2013**, *51*, 109–125. [CrossRef]
29. Gomez, R.F.; Bennett, E.; Cammarota, J. The battle for curriculum: Arrested semantics and reconciling racism with critical race theory and ethnic studies. *Race Ethn. Educ.* **2023**, 1–18. [CrossRef]
30. Postel, E. Indoctrination by elimination: Why banning critical race theory in schools is unconstitutional. *William Mary Bill Rights J.* **2022**, *31*, 581–606.
31. Howard, T. The dis(g)race of the soul of the social studies: The need for racial dialogue in social studies. In *Critical Race Theory Perspectives on the Social Studies: The Profession, Policies, and Curriculum*; Ladson-Billings, G.L., Ed.; Information Age: Greenwich, CT, USA, 2003; pp. 27–44.
32. Gutzmann, J. Fighting Orthodoxy: Challenging Critical Race Theory Bans and Supporting Critical Thinking in Schools. Headnotes Minnesota Law Review 333, SSRN. Available online: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4081551> (accessed on 5 April 2022).
33. Adams, C.; Smith, A.; Tambe, A. Map: See which states have passed critical race theory bills. *NBC News*, 17 June 2021.
34. Carl, N.M.; Jones-Layman, A.; Quinn, R. Taking back teaching: The professionalization work of teacher activist organizations. *J. Teach. Educ.* **2022**, *73*, 314–327. [CrossRef]
35. Burbules, N.C.; Densmore, K. The limits of making teaching a profession. *Educ. Policy* **1991**, *5*, 44–63. [CrossRef]
36. Wegwert, J.C. Looking the tiger in the eye: Overcoming fear-based teacher identities. *Child. Educ.* **2014**, *90*, 137–142. [CrossRef]
37. AAUP Joint Statement on Efforts to Restrict Education about Racism. 2021. Available online: <https://www.aaup.org/news/joint-statement-efforts-restrict-education-about-racism> (accessed on 5 April 2022).
38. NCSS. Racial Literacy: A Position Statement of National Council for the Social Studies. 2022. Available online: <https://www.socialstudies.org/position-statements/racial-literacy> (accessed on 5 April 2023).
39. Morgan, H. Resisting the Movement to Ban Critical Race Theory from Schools. *Clear. House A J. Educ. Strateg. Issues Ideas* **2022**, *95*, 35–41. [CrossRef]
40. Will, M. *Teachers' Unions Vow to Defend Members in Critical Race Theory Fight*; Education Week: Bethesda, MD, USA, 2021.
41. Stitzlein, S.M.; Rector-Aranda, A. The role of “Small publics” in teacher dissent. *Educ. Theory* **2016**, *66*, 165–180. [CrossRef]
42. Carey, M.H. Parents and Caregivers for Inclusive Education. Learning for Justice. 2023. Available online: <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/fall-2023/parents-and-caregivers-for-inclusive-education> (accessed on 15 July 2023).
43. Falk, W.W.; Grimes, M.D.; Lord, G.F. Professionalism and Conflict in a Bureaucratic Setting: The Case of a Teacher Strike. *Soc. Probl.* **1982**, *29*, 551–560. [CrossRef]
44. Palos, A.L. *Precious Knowledge [Film]*; Dos Vatos Productions: Burbank, CA, USA, 2011.
45. Astor, M. Tucson's Mexican Studies Program Was a Victim of “Racial Animus,” Judge Says. The New York Times. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/23/us/arizona-mexican-american-ruling.html> (accessed on 23 August 2017).
46. BLM at School. 2023. Available online: <https://www.blacklivesmatteratschool.com/> (accessed on 15 July 2023).
47. National Coalition Against Censorship. Censorpedia: NCAC's Wiki of Censorship History. Available online: <https://ncac.org/resource/censorpedia> (accessed on 9 December 2022).
48. Datnow, A.; Yoshisato, M.; Macdonald, B.; Trejos, J.; Kennedy, B.C. Bridging Educational Change and Social Justice: A Call to the Field. *Educ. Res.* **2023**, *52*, 29–38. [CrossRef]
49. Hooks, B. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*; Routledge: London, UK, 1994.
50. Wamstead, J. *I Don't Want to Choose between Job Security and Teaching the Truth*; Education Week: Bethesda, MD, USA, 2022.
51. Natanson, H.; Balingit, M.B. *Caught in the Culture Wars, Teachers Are Being Forced from Their Jobs*; The Washington Post: Washington, DC, USA, 2022.
52. Riley, C. *Southwest Missouri High School Teacher Accused of Using Critical Race Theory Loses Job*; Springfield News-Leader: Springfield, MO, USA, 2022.
53. Della Costa, A.M. *Charlotte Middle School Teacher Fired over Critical Race Theory, Lawsuit Claims*; Charlotte Observer: Charlotte, NC, USA, 2023.
54. Camera, L. *Federal Lawsuit Poses First Challenge to Critical Race Theory*; U.S. News: Washington, DC, USA, 2021.
55. Stemhagen, K.; Sober, T. *Teacher Activism in the United States*; Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education: Oxford, UK, 2020.
56. Dunn, A.H.; Sondel, B.; Baggett, H.C. “I don't want to come off as pushing an agenda”: How contexts shaped teachers' pedagogy in the days after the 2016 U.S. presidential election. *Am. Educ. Res. J.* **2019**, *56*, 444–476. [CrossRef]
57. Teitelbaum, K. Curriculum, conflict, and critical race theory. *Phi Delta Kappan* **2022**, *103*, 47–53. [CrossRef]
58. Schaeffer, K. *America's Public School Teachers Are Far Less Racially and Ethnically Diverse than Their Students*; Pew Research Center: Washington, DC, USA, 2021.
59. Heifetz, R.A.; Grashow, A.; Linsky, M. *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*; Harvard Business Press: Cambridge, MA, USA, 2009.

60. Duncan-Andrade, J. Note to educators: Hope required when growing roses in concrete. *Harv. Educ. Rev.* **2009**, *79*, 181–194. [[CrossRef](#)]
61. Bishundat, D.; Phillip, D.V.; Gore, W. Cultivating critical hope: The too often forgotten dimension of critical leadership development. *New Dir. Stud. Leadersh.* **2018**, *2018*, 91–102. [[CrossRef](#)]
62. Wallace-Wells, B. How a Conservative Activist Invented the Conflict over Critical Race Theory. *The New Yorker*. 2021. Available online: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/annals-of-inquiry/how-a-conservative-activist-invented-the-conflict-over-critical-race-theory> (accessed on 5 May 2023).

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.