

Roni Jo Draper: Classrooms are not a politically neutral space

By Roni Jo Draper

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I began my teaching career over 25 years ago as a high school mathematics teacher. I now prepare teachers to teach.

Teachers have a difficult job. They work every day with all the children in our community who come to learn and grow. Teachers do so, despite finding themselves in sometimes dangerous situations (think Sandy Hook, Parkland, COVID-19). And they do so while keeping the well-being of children at the forefront of their minds.

Perhaps that is why I felt so disappointed to read the [letter by the Utah Fraternal Order of Police dated Sept. 1](#), to Utah's state superintendent of public instruction wherein the group state, among other things, that, "The classroom is NOT the place for political indoctrination or social engineering based upon the political leanings of the teacher."



I have known, and I teach my students — future and current teachers — that teaching is a moral endeavor. As such, classrooms have never been a neutral or an apolitical space. Each day, in classrooms across America, teachers and children stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. This is a political act. Furthermore, this act violates some children's and families' religious values. In schools, we make space for these differences by allowing children to refrain from saying the pledge, perhaps even letting them leave the room. We rarely consider how this accommodation singles out children determined to maintain their religious convictions and places undue attention on them.

I'm not arguing for a discontinuance of the recitation of the pledge, I'm simply pointing out that it is not neutral.

This is just one example. American schools promote a particular kind of Americanness — a voting American, a civic-minded American, an American who doesn't necessarily question government officials (including police officers or even teachers). We can argue whether this is what we want. What we can't argue is that the classroom is not a place for political indoctrination, because it clearly is.

Likewise, in many schools girls get sent home because their skirts are deemed too short, [Black children have had their locks cut off](#), and some schools have attempted to [prohibit what they term cross-dressing](#). School dress codes and enforcement are demonstratively more [punitive toward woman](#) and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and peoples of color). But we continue to write and enforce dress codes from of our sense of modesty, decency, and order.

Again, I am not suggesting creating schools in which students attend in any sort of clothing or no clothing or clothing that promotes illegal activities. I simply want to point out that these policies work to engineer a particular kind of society, that looks a particular kind of way, with particular kinds of values, and this has been going on in schools since schools began. Thus, schools serve as important spaces for social engineering.

Nearly 50 years ago, Paulo Freire pointed out in his book "[Pedagogy of the Oppressed](#)" that "education is not neutral." It was true before he wrote it, and it has been true ever since.

I, too, would like children not to have to learn about the [increased risk of violence perpetuated by law enforcement toward Black people](#). However, classrooms must be places for teachers and students to discuss contemporary issues facing our society. Meanwhile, let teachers ensure that all the children in schools know that Black Lives Matter, and let police and law enforcement officers work on getting their house in order.

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