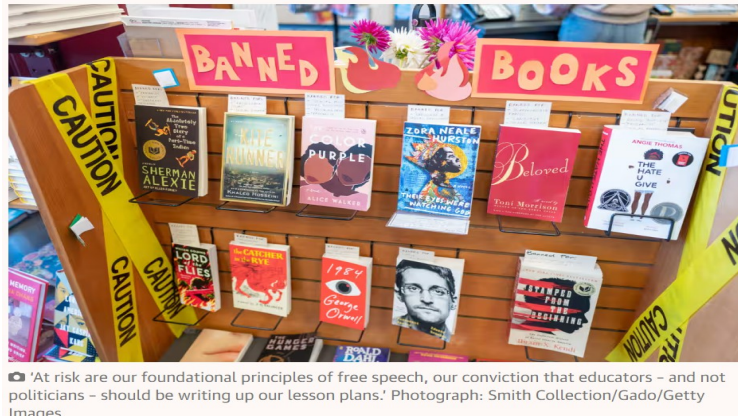


4a1- Ron DeSantis' academic restrictions show he hopes to change history by censoring it

Florida's Stop Woke Act and ban on African American studies will only deprive students of the right to think and learn



For some time now, conservative groups have pressured libraries and classrooms to remove certain “controversial” books from their shelves and their syllabi. These are texts that tell uncomfortable or unpopular truths about our nation’s origins, including inequality, race, history, gender, sexuality, power and class – a range of subjects that a small but vocal group of Americans would prefer to ignore or deny.

These efforts achieved one of their most notable successes last April when the Florida governor, Ron DeSantis, signed the Stop Woke Act, which prohibits in-school discussions about racism, oppression, LGBTQ+ issues and economic inequity. Books that have not been officially vetted and approved must be hidden or covered, lest teachers unknowingly break an ill-defined law against distributing pornography – a felony.

On 1 February, these pernicious restrictions on academic freedom spread beyond Florida, when the College Board announced its decision to severely restrict what can and cannot be taught in the newly created advanced placement class in African American studies. Cut from the curriculum (or in some cases made optional) was any discussion of Black Lives Matter, mass incarceration, police brutality, queer Black life and the Black Power movements of the 1960s and 70s.

These decisions are alarming and disturbing on so many levels that it’s hard to decide which aspect is the most damaging and insidious. At risk are our foundational principles of free speech, our conviction that educators – and not politicians – should be writing up our lesson plans and deciding what transpires in our classrooms, our belief that students can (and need to) consider complicated issues. As someone who has taught for decades, I can hardly imagine abruptly cutting off class discussions that have veered into these now forbidden areas. Must we fear that our students will report us as insurrectionists and felons? I believe that education not only involves the transmission of hard information but also helps students to think for themselves, to weigh opposing arguments and to make informed decisions. How can these goals be accomplished when we are being told to (quite literally) whitewash our nation’s history, to deny that we are walking on appropriated land in a country built by kidnapped and enslaved people, when we are being encouraged to lie about the very ground beneath our feet?

In the past, authoritarianism – and the indoctrination that sustains it – has used educational systems to further its agenda. We can recall images of first-graders wearing little red kerchiefs and saluting the eastern bloc dictators, of students let out of class to welcome the Führer to town. We know that democracy depends on the free and open exchange of ideas, on conversations that begin early in the life of its citizens – and that fascism thrives when only one point of view is permitted.

We cannot change history by censoring it. We cannot pretend that we were never a slave-holding society, that racism ceased to exist when Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. We cannot erase the past, or influence a young person’s gender and sexuality by removing a book from the library. Students are not political pawns or ideologues-in-training. They are our future and it’s frightening to imagine a future populated by citizens who were forbidden to argue and debate, to hear about a historical event from multiple perspectives and to learn to make the critical judgments and necessary distinctions that will help them navigate our increasingly complex and challenging world. (...)

Ultimately, what’s most troubling about the new restrictions and proscriptions is that historical facts are being recast as snowflake propaganda. The truth is being distorted or omitted at a moment when we, as a nation, have never so desperately needed to maintain our grip on reality.

Without being taught to distinguish truth from fiction, without being asked to think, without learning how this country evolved – a history not just of heroism and noble principles but of theft, brutality and crime – our students will be easy prey to every conspiracy theory that comes along. They will find it far more difficult to imagine and implement the important ways in which we hope to become a more equitable, less racist – and better educated – society.

• *Francine Prose, Thu 9 Feb 2023 12.00 The Guardian*

• *Francine Prose is a former president of Pen American Center and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*