

Democracy in Danger S4 E11 Learning Curbed

Will Hitchcock [00:00:03] Hello. I'm Will Hitchcock.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:04] and I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:06] And from the University of Virginia's Deliberative Media Lab. This is Democracy in Danger.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:11] Will, we have touch on education in a number of our episodes, especially in a series that we did last season, on how state policies and politics are remaking American democracy. Well, today we would like to take a deeper and broader dive into education in America.

Will Hitchcock [00:00:29] Yeah, it's a great moment to do this, Siva. Lawmakers in Republican controlled states have been trying to restrict conversations in schools around race, sexuality and inequality. For example, we've heard how states are now pulling Art Spiegelman's celebrated account of the Holocaust "Maus" from school libraries. They're banning even Toni Morrison's books. We've heard about the Don't Say Gay Bill in Florida. Look, schools are ground zero in our political crisis.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:00:57] Yeah, you know, well, it would be easy to dismiss this stuff as, like, fanning the flames and getting the base worked up. But look, let's be clear about this. Classrooms are where we learn to deal with each other as American citizens. It's where we learn to talk across divisions. It's where we learn the complicated, often troubled and inspiring ways this country has come together, has fallen apart, come together again, and may be falling apart again. It's where we learn or are supposed to learn what living in a democratic republic means.

Will Hitchcock [00:01:31] Yeah. So no wonder classrooms are the site for so much division and controversy, as our guest today shows in her work, however, this is nothing new. We're joined today from New York by Natalia Mehlman Petrezela, a historian at the New School. She's the author of a book called *The Classroom Wars: Language, Sex and the Making of Modern Political Culture*. Natalia, welcome to Democracy and Danger.

Natalia Petrezela [00:01:55] Hi. I'm so glad to be here. I wish it weren't in such danger, but I'm glad to talk to you about it.

Will Hitchcock [00:02:00] Well, Natalia you wear many hats author, podcaster, speaker, but your main job is a historian. So let me take you back to your excellent book, *Classroom Wars*. Now, in it, you basically say that tensions over, you know, sex and gender in schools over race and ethnicity, even over history itself, the kind of things that we're we're going through today. These do go back quite a long way, maybe longer than people realize. You specifically were looking at debates in California, in the public school system there in the sixties and seventies. So just take us back a little bit. Why did your research begin there? What did you pull out of that time and place that echoes so much today?

Natalia Petrezela [00:02:43] Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, any historian will say, well, actually, it goes back much further than that. But, you know, there is a reason I started in the sixties and seventies in California. California, one is a huge state system. And two in the sixties and seventies, because it was so big, it was pretty centralized. So like what the

state superintendent of education and board did like actually had an impact in many schools in this big state. But then also it was a place I realized that both people on the left and the right like look to as this could happen next. And they looked at it in that way, both from a sense of like promise and excitement and look at all this innovation, but also with a sense of foreboding like it happened in California. You know, that's going to happen here next. And so that sort of led me to California. Now, California in itself in that period. But I would say still today politically is super interesting because it contains like all kinds. Right. And so I was really drawn to the fact that in that period, you know, to draw on a few sort of stereotypes, you had like Berkeley Coffeehouse liberals and campus radicals and Orange County homemakers, and then, of course, the changing demographics of all of these Mexican-American and Asian immigrants coming in. And I was like, okay, this is a place undergoing the kind of cultural and political and demographic changes that will affect the whole country. And their school system is grappling with it in a relatively centralized way that's already gaining national attention.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:04:12] So, you know, my mom was a schoolchild in California in the late fifties, early sixties, Navy kid, you know, working class white kid. And she, you know, talks about just how exciting it was to be part of this rapidly expanding, well-funded school system with, you know, energetic teachers. And then now when you talk to parents in California about their kids experience, it's nothing but frustration and worry and disappointment and anxiety, you know, and California is so much richer than it was in the fifties and sixties now. I can't help but think that one of the major things that changed was the 1965 immigration law. Right. The notion that all of a sudden schools needed to provide for children who came there without English as a first language in their homes. So what kind of social changes did we see in California and how did that connect to the really wrenching changes and you might actually say, defunding and degradation, of California public schools since the 1970s.

Natalia Petrezela [00:05:21] Yeah, absolutely. So, you know, for us, there's like a policy point that is a really well known one. But I think important to point out, which is in 1978, you have Proposition 13, which is this taxpayer revolt, which effectively ends up drawing a huge amount of tax income away from the public schools. You know, historically, the way a lot of people looked at that was like, oh, you know, people were angry about paying taxes and big government and oops, they killed public education in the process. But one of the arguments that I make is like no anger about what was happening in public education was actually central to fueling that revolt and that antipathy. And that Siva gets right to your point about a changing sense of who public education and public programs more broadly were for. And so you have in the fifties and the early sixties, like into the middle of the sixties, a sense that like this is this dynamic, exciting institution, public schools. It's part of the American dream. It's an engine of social mobility. But then I think particularly after the 1965 Immigration Act, which transforms the demographics with people from Asia coming and people from Latin America, primarily Mexico, there is a sense that, wait a minute, this richly funded taxpayer public project is in for us, white taxpayers, but we're paying for them. And that is a very powerful animus, I think, which fuels a lot of kind of anti-tax and anti-public education sentiment. And it's combined with a changing left wing politics more broadly, where the notion among a lot of people who are, you know, advocates and marching for educational equity and equality, there aren't just saying, like, let us into your classroom. But they're saying, hey, we want minority administrators. We want to learn Spanish. Like we want a fundamentally different kind of education, which isn't just letting us have a seat at the table, but it's kind of questioning the table.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:07:24] So let's take sex ed, for instance, and the questions that, you know today occupy us like gender identity and so forth, like, how did these issues grow out of that particular kind of turmoil about who gets to benefit?

Natalia Petrezela [00:07:36] So, you know, when I now like it's I think pretty common to see a headline that's like conservative has attacked curricula over sex and race. And we're like, okay, that makes sense. When I was first researching this book, like, the first thing people asked me was like, "How would you group those two together? That's so random. Why not, you know, some other curricula?" I'm like, No, no, no. They they cohere. And the way that they cohere, I think fights over sex ed and bilingual, bi-cultural ed, which is what I looked at, is that the promotion of these programs comes from a kind of liberal, progressive sensibility that the schools should meet kids on their own terms, that good education encourages kids to be sort of free thinkers about their own identity and their own place in the world. That education about race and sex and gender may just question sort of conventional ideas about these things -- conventional morality about these things encourage kids, to make their own decisions. And that really, in a moment of great political turmoil angers a lot of people. And so I think that that sort of big frame of a moment of great political tumult when there are curricula that are pushing back on kind of traditional mores and norms, taking hold in the schools, that hits a nerve. And it hits a nerve if you look at some of the discourse that it inspires, like it hits a nerve in a much more intense wave then you would think if you actually read the curricula, which I did, and I don't think too many others did.

Will Hitchcock [00:09:06] Right. Well, Natalia future scholars writing about the education and classroom wars of today might want to turn to Virginia. So, as you know, here in Virginia, we had a surprise election in which a right wing candidate reframed himself as the education candidate, Glenn Youngkin, and he won Virginia's governor's race. And I'll just remind our listeners that in that narrative, parents have been pushed to the margins of schooling, and they've been replaced by radical left wing teachers, by union officials, by various theorists of education who are brainwashing the kids. They're force feeding them books about, you know, gay marriage and gender fluidity and critical race theory. Now, for those of us watching this and who are familiar with what actually happens in the classroom, this struck us as sort of fake outrage. But your perspective on this is really important because you've written that, look, schools have, in fact, changed. They've changed a lot, especially over the last few years. And we shouldn't ignore that as we see how, you know, the Republicans are taking this and crafting a political argument out of them. So talk a little bit about how we should understand the you know, on the one hand, the moral panic that Republican leaders are generating, but on the other hand, the real changes in school curricula.

Natalia Petrezela [00:10:19] So there's this interesting thing that has happened in the last, I would say, 40 to 50 years, which is that in a big picture way, conservatives have been winning that kind of like defunding project around public schools and public institutions more broadly. And, you know, austerity politics is not leaving schools out in any way like that is definitely part of this project. But on the other hand, on a curricular level, I would say if I can make a sweeping generalization about schools, which always comes with a lot of caveats, progressives have won in a lot of ways, like there are many more kids that are more likely to say have a social studies class rather than a straight narrative chronological progress of American, you know, excellence, history class than there were 40 years, 30 years ago. I could go on. And kids are more likely to do group work than to do rote memorization or work by themselves. I mean, these are progressive curricular innovations which absolutely have been changing classrooms for the last many decades. In the past

couple of years, some of those curricular innovations have really accelerated. They accelerated in the wake of George Floyd's murder, for sure. And by the way, I think that's good. I think that that pushed a lot of teachers and a lot of schools to realize we have to teach about race and racism differently and in a more honest way. And this is a part of our history that we cannot avoid. And that's been happening. And I think that in the last two years, because of ongoing remote schooling, like a lot of parents, had a much closer view to what their kids were doing in class. It looked different, certainly from how they grew up. It might even look different from what their kids were bringing home for homework five years ago. And, in a moment when there is so much, as I said, turmoil and tumult that primes a lot of parents, I think, to be pissed off about what's going on and to, I think, be sort of susceptible to what are much more outlandish theories. And I don't know about fake outrage, because then the outrage is real, even if the target of that outrage is not real, but to be sort of primed for these more outlandish theories, which I totally agree are extremely, extremely damaging.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:12:28] Natalia, I have a confession. As a parent of a school aged child, I went through resentment moments myself over the past two years. I know I'm not the only one. Right. And I mean, I was a kid who respected teacher picket lines. I'm a child of an educator. I am an educator. Right. I never thought that I would find myself challenging and questioning the firm beliefs and concerns of teachers, except when I just looked around and saw just how miserable children had it over the last couple of years. Right. And so now, of course, I can talk myself out of jumping into the worst possible conclusions about what was going on and becoming, you know, paranoid and bitter. But, you know, I kind of get the emotional resonance. I get the emotional point from which a lot of people were operating. And and I think explains a lot of the reason why voting for Glenn Youngkin in Virginia as a way of just saying, screw it, let's try something else. Yeah. You know, or just as a protest kind of kind of made sense. I mean, did you sense the same thing? What was your experience through all of that?

Natalia Petrezela [00:13:41] Oh, absolutely. And I mean, you know, often our scholarship and our personal experiences intersect and push us in very uncomfortable and interesting ways. And I have had a very similar experience. I haven't been shy about it as a parent of school age children here in New York City. But stepping back from my personal experience for a moment, but I won't get into that. But I think there's, you know, at least a couple of things going on. So there is this kind of like long standing sense that's cultivated on the right, and it used to be very fringe and now it's very sort of middle of the road that teachers are these like left wing communists out to brainwash your children and like turn them into radicals and they're doing it on your dime, taxpayer, so you better stand up. So then what happens in the pandemic? Well, from this curricular perspective, because there were real changes, I think they're less substantial than a lot of people would actually think. But there were these changes. So that's sort of like a 'that's that' narrative. But then there's this whole pandemic school closing teacher activism aspect that yes, I think like ticked off a lot of parents who are like, "I don't care for, you know, more CRT in the classroom like that's fine with me, but dude, open classrooms". And I think that that antipathy to teachers really fired up a whole new group of people. And I'm like a little bit in that group of people for many of the reasons that you describe to who have long trusted teachers and trust them from a curricular perspective, but were really angry that schools stayed closed for so long in blue areas where teachers unions were more powerful. And so for me and I spoke at an open schools rally in New York City, and I said, I want schools to be open because the classroom is irreplaceable. The work that teachers do with kids is essential. Zoom cannot do it, and certainly not the truncated Zoom sessions that I saw my public school child getting 20 minutes a day or something like that of morning meeting. And I said, I

actually trust teachers. I want you to do your thing. Even though I was a public school teacher, I don't think I can do that at home. Like, let's get the PPE, let's get the hazard pay, let's call these teachers the essential workers they are and open schools. And I think that that sense and that sort of argument, that anger and extended school closures could be part of a kind of progressive view of how important education is and how essential teachers are. That's been lost in much of the sort of very vitriolic online debate. So, you know, I try to say that, but people tend to get really angry.

Will Hitchcock [00:16:20] But it's so it's emotional.

Natalia Petrezela [00:16:22] Yeah.

Will Hitchcock [00:16:23] Just let me ask you to talk about your experiences. You know, you're speaking out and you're engaged in the early period of the pandemic about the importance of reopening schools, the role they play in our development, the fact that we want our kids to be back in classrooms because the teachers are so good. What kind of response did you get?

Natalia Petrezela [00:16:41] Well, let's see. How do I be diplomatic here?

Will Hitchcock [00:16:46] You don't have to be diplomatic!

Natalia Petrezela [00:16:46] I mean, I think honestly, like I think like many scholars my general politics, are liberal, left and very left on certain things. And I was told, like, you're a union buster, like you hate teachers. What else? You're just a lazy mom who should have never had children. You just want to go work out and hang out with your friends. Like, yeah, I mean, everything you could possibly imagine. For me, the most stinging thing as a former member of the UFT here in New York and as someone who used to vote, like for all the minor elections where I should know who everyone is, but I don't. I used to be like, who are the UFT endorse candidates? Those are my people. Strong unions is better education better education's a better society. Now that is not what I do, and this is really shaken my sense that a strong teachers union necessarily leads to better education for all kids. I mean, it cost me some friendships like really like people don't want to talk to me anymore. It gave me some new friendships because there is this interesting political, I wouldn't quite go so far as realignment, but reshuffling going on where I have found really common cause with folks who consider this commitment to schools as like totally consonant with the progressive ideals we've always believed in and schools being just really important in people's lives. And that separates us, I think certainly from people on the right who I see are dismantling public education and attacking teachers. And, you know, I don't even know what they really want curricular really. But some kind of like flag waving, like Moral Majority kind of curriculum that no way do I stand behind. But yeah, but it was a hard moment because I think there was some real splintering and splintering along political and personal lines for a lot of us. And I know, honestly, a lot of moms who experienced that, too.

Siva Vaidhyathan [00:18:37] So let's end with our big picture question. This is this the challenge of every one of our episodes, too, while talking about really hot issues and fascinating issues and digging deep in their histories, connecting them to the health and fate of vibrant democracy. So how are we doing with that? Is that even part of the ethos these days, or is everything about personal development and return on investment?

Natalia Petrezela [00:19:03] Wow. Big question to end on there in terms of your "how are we doing?" question-- we're not doing so well at all. I think and I think that, you know,

public education, I still am optimistic enough to believe, as I think many of the combatants in these culture wars are, too, or they wouldn't be so pissed off and so like invested, optimistic enough to believe that a strong public education system absolutely can be an engine of fighting inequality and not just personal improvement, but kind of social improvement. Absolutely. I think that's why we're all in education, by the way, like we all spend most of our time in classrooms. But I do think we right now are just reckoning with such a deep fight about what a good society is and with the role of schools. And, you know, one curricular piece that I think is really important that, you know, leave your listeners with, because we didn't talk about this fight over like, standards and rigor, conservatives are sort of embracing that again and they're saying, hey, you vote a liberal person and they tell you learning loss isn't real. They want to get rid of standardized tests. They don't want your kid to have advanced math. And I think that those curricular battles are much less sexy than the race and sex ones to kind of talk about and fire people up. But I think to your question about like, what's the future of this institution? Many of those battles are going to be over this question of standards and rigor and knowledge and how do we get these basic skills like reading, numeracy, like things that I think everyone sort of thinks are important, but we're still very, very divided on. And so those are the curricular battles that I think should get more of our attention. But not that many people want to sit around reading like literacy textbooks and looking at different ways to teach math because it doesn't fire up the base or even, you know, like an individual's interests, like these more hot button issues. But I do think the intensity of the fights does reflect the fact that these are institutions worth fighting for. And that's, I guess, a good thing.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:21:00] Well, Natalia Mehlman Petrezela, thank you so much for joining us on Democracy in Danger.

Natalia Petrezela [00:21:07] Thank you for having me. It was really a great conversation.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:21:19] Natalia Mehlman Petrezela is an associate professor of history at the New School in New York City. She's also a writer, teacher and activist. Her first book was Classroom Wars: Language, Sex and the Making of Modern Political Culture. She also has a new book coming out. It's called Fit Nation: How Americans Embraced Exercise as the Government Abandoned It. This book traces fitness culture since the 1950s.

Will Hitchcock [00:21:45] Democracy in Danger is part of the Democracy Group Podcast Network. Visit Democracy Group dot org to find all our sister shows. We'll be right back after this message from our friends.

Unknown [00:21:56] I want to suggest another podcast to you. It's called The Great Battlefields, and it covers the progressive political ecosystem. The host is Nathaniel Pearlman. Nathaniel interviews key leaders, reformers, organizers and political entrepreneurs with three new interviews arriving every week. For instance, you recently spoke with Anna Galland about her time as executive director of MoveOn. You can find the Great Battlefields wherever podcasts are found.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:22:34] So, you know, I'm really struck by what Natalia said about the ways the various inequalities of American life map to the politics of public education in this country. Because, you know, think about how we fund public education. Overwhelmingly, it's through property taxes and the reputations of our public schools dictate, to a large degree, the property values within those districts. Right. So if you upgrade your public schools, if you pay your teachers more, if you generate better test

scores, then professionals with money flock to those towns. You've seen it in towns you've lived in. We see it in Charlottesville now. Right. And property values zoom. The way we've decided to do public education in this country has germinated so much of the wealth inequality and thus frustration and misery. And then it flashes back on our public schools.

Will Hitchcock [00:23:28] There's also the other side of the coin, which is that, okay, this public school is why I moved here. So darn, I now get to own that public school system. All right. I get to tell the school boards what to teach. I get to tell the teachers what to teach. I get to tell them when to teach. I have not just a stake in the system, but a sense of ownership over the system. And that's where things start to get a little ugly because, you know, it's not so much ill will or bad faith. It's just the way that public education is wrapped around so many of the things that we care about on a day to day basis, our place in society, our access to resources, our neighborhoods, you know, it's like the beating heart of our collective community. And if that's out of sync, yeah, then democracy itself does start to, you know, become a little bit unraveled or worn around the edges.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:24:14] Right. Natalia made the point that we lay so much on our public schools. We expect our public schools not only to be engines of social mobility. We also hope for them to serve as community centers, to serve as daycare centers, after-school care centers. We see them as the first stop on public health efforts. It's so weird how we immediately look to our public schools as the universal solvent of our problems and sometimes the source of our problems. And, you know, it's a rickety infrastructure that is unevenly distributed and getting more so. And it seems like a really bad choice to have put them in the center of American life of so many important things.

Will Hitchcock [00:25:02] And public schools are also a site of mythology. And this is something that many people come to a contemporary debate about what should public school into? What should public education look like? Through the lens of their own experiences, and depending on their demographic and their age and their class and their race, that might be a vision of a public school system from the 1960s or 70s that somehow was in this telling, more unifying, built around certain national themes and principles that everyone could rally behind regardless of race and class. Whereas, you know, other folks might come to it and say, well, I want public education to emphasize diversity, not the unifying experiences, not the homogenization, but the fact that we come from so many different places on the political and economic spectrum. So, you know, public schools then once again are a place where you have to fight out. Not only what kind of society do we want to build in the future, but what are the lessons were drawn from the past? What worked in the past? What didn't? So no wonder classroom wars continue. I mean, they reflect our own values and what we bring into the classroom as much as what we're getting out of the class.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:05] Right.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:10] That's all for today's lesson on Democracy in Danger. Stay with us next week. We will talk more about U.S. immigration laws and how crossing the border became a crime in the first place.

Unknown [00:26:23] The 1929 Act is the first time that one can be put in prison for crossing the border without papers.

Will Hitchcock [00:26:32] Stay in touch. You can tag us on Twitter @dindpodcast. That's d-i-n-d podcast. Share this episode on social media and please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. There's no better way to spread the word and help us grow our audience.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:26:47] Now, if you're a teacher, fight for democracy in your classroom. Make our show and our website part of your curriculum. We're at DinDanger.org on the Web.

Will Hitchcock [00:26:57] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol. Our associate producer is Jennifer Ludovici. Sydney Halleman edits the show. And our interns are Denzel Mitchell, Jane Frankel and Ellie Bashkow.

Siva Vaidhyanathan [00:27:09] Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and from the College of Arts and Sciences. The show is a project of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab. We are distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan.

Will Hitchcock [00:27:25] And I'm Will Hitchcock. We'll see you next time.