

# **“They're Dismantling Everything we Created”: Faculty in Teacher Preparation Programs and anti-DEI Initiatives**

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## **At Issue**

At a recent department meeting, the proposed legislation our state implemented concerning Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) issues was dissected and discussed. Ours is a large, urban, Mid-Western university and the teacher preparation program includes undergraduate, graduate, traditional and alternative certification, and special education. Specifically, current state legislation bans statements of commitment to DEI and eliminates training requirements for DEI. Ironically, even though these initiatives have been enacted, state legislators have yet to even agree on a definition of diversity. The laws are purposefully ambiguous with university funding and faculty positions at stake for violations of the decree (Hanna & Lieb, 2024). These regulations also display lawmakers' shocking ignorance of DEI as the bills predominantly target diversity in hiring practices making it look more like an anti-affirmative action bill than restricting DEI initiatives, but every state is different, and each presents a variety of educational gag orders (EGOs) for education thus creating confusion and ambiguity.

Although I live in a state identified by Kelleher (2022) as having strict EGOs for all levels of education, I teach in a neighboring state with no specific EGO, with the exception of the federal DEI mandate. Each state has various gag orders that vary in scope and sequence, and since January 20, 2025, teaching diversity, equity, and inclusion has been banned in all federal agencies (White House, 2025a). After witnessing confusion from classroom teachers about what they can and cannot say, it was crucial for me to discover how other university professors navigate the treacherous waters between university and program mandated DEIs and their states' silencing of free speech through EGOs. As of May 2023, almost 125 million Americans live in a state with EGOs in force. This represents nearly one-third of the American population (Friedman et. al., 2024). Currently, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) showed a more ominous trend in the growing number of EGOs which specifically target higher education. Almost 60% of the bills introduced in 2022 took aim specifically at colleges and universities (Friedman et. al., 2024). These gag orders are also becoming more punitive in nature creating a chilling effect for both university faculty and PreK-12 public school districts which in turn prompts the enacting of preventative measures to protect their funding. Measures include banning certain buzzwords

from faculty syllabi, renaming offices of diversity, prohibiting any diversity training, and more recently, targeting the LGBTQ+ community. University faculty are rightly nervous about changes to education law with one university in Iowa providing faculty with written instructions on how to “avoid drawing scrutiny to their teaching” (Friedman et. al, 2024. p. 54). Faculty discuss laws and the ramifications for not following the EGOs, but there is scant conversation on *how* we teach critical issues of DEI to future educators without fear of repercussion. It should be noted that every EGO varies widely from state to state. Some only target hiring practices in higher education. Others target curriculum and classroom content at all levels including higher education and Pre-K-12 public education.

## **Purpose Statement**

In this paper, I reflect on the experiences of university faculty in teacher preparation programs across the country and how they confronted the contradictions of following DEI policies which may be in direct conflict with their state Educational Gag orders (EGO). The theoretical frame for this study is based on a definition of social justice as it applies to education through the lens of Critical Race Theory.

When I began this project, I wanted to understand how professors in teacher preparation programs educate pre-service regular and special educators to critically teach about race, gender, ability, and socio-economic constructs in states that are hostile to EGO's. In the state where I live, there have been public and humiliating firings of Pre-K-12 public educators for violation of the state EGOs, so as a professor in teacher education, I wanted to know how to equip my pre-service educators to continue to teach about possibly provocative issues.

## **Why DEI is important**

For teacher preparation programs to be nationally accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) universities must “ensure(s) that candidates for professional specialties develop an understanding of the critical concepts and principles of their discipline and facilitates candidates’ reflection of their personal biases to increase their understanding and practice of equity, diversity, and inclusion” (CAEP, 2022, Standard RA.1). In addition, to ameliorate the nationwide teaching shortages universities are tasked with recruiting and retaining culturally, racially, and a linguistically diverse student population (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). However, an understanding of DEI is also essential for teachers at all grade levels. Future educators must recognize the ramifications of decades long disproportionate placement of students of color into special education services (Fernandez & Inserra, 2013; Kauffman & Anastasiou, 2019) and must also be taught about reasons for this inequity including test bias, unequal educational opportunities, and misunderstandings regarding cultural behavior (Sayegh et al., 2023). Educators must also understand unfair disciplinary measures that put students of color at risk for delinquency and incarceration (Stitt, 2023). It is the responsibility of university faculty in teacher preparation programs to equip future educators with the knowledge and understanding they need to know to combat issues of racism, sexism, classism, and ableism. Considering the threat of EGOs, how do we, as faculty in teacher preparation, accomplish this without jeopardizing our jobs?

## **The root of EGOs lay in anti- Critical Race Theory**

To understand EGOs and attacks against DEI, it is necessary to look at the roots of the anti-Critical Race Theory movement specifically within higher education. Johnson et al., (2024) posited that these attacks are not new and have been whispered about for over 40 years. But to the general public it seemed, as if overnight, Critical Race Theory became demonized and touted as a vile threat to the moral fabric of our society (Gillborn, 2024). Anti-Critical Race Theory tropes have morphed into an unrecognizable concept and not many who use the term completely understand the meaning behind it. However, that is by design. Conservative journalist, Christopher Rufo, who first disparaged the dangers of Critical Race Theory in his opinion column in the Wall Street Journal confessed that the term is purposely vague. He called it a re-branding of the word that did not need to carry an exact meaning. He admits to inventing conflict over a misleading ideology of the term, “We’ve needed new language for these issues... *wokeness* is a good epithet, but it’s too broad, too terminal, too easily brushed aside. *Critical Race Theory* is the perfect villain...” (Wallace-Wells, 2021, para 6.) While Rufo sang the verses of the anti-Critical Race Theory movement, the Heritage Foundation (2024) intoned the chorus. Much of the anti-Critical Race Theory legislation was drafted and disseminated by another conservative think tank, The Manhattan Institute, and authored by Rufo (Rufo et al, 2023). This push sought to eliminate Offices of DEI in public universities and prohibit the training of faculty and staff who identify systemic racism claiming that DEI initiatives represented unfair advantages to White Americans.

The rise in this current controversy was intensified by demands for racial justice subsequent to the murder of George Floyd in 2020 (Briscoe & Jones, 2024). As Americans watched the horrific torture and murder of a Black man by the police on all media outlets it brought attention to the reality of police brutality against people of color. Suddenly, there was a call for justice and the Black Lives Matter protests gained worldwide attention. As Eckart (2022) stated, Mr. Floyd’s death and the resulting uprising “shifted the conversation around racism, raising awareness of issues and laying the foundation for social change” (para 3). Suddenly, some Critical Race Theory terminology left the obscure world of legal theory and crept into mainstream usage. In response, many conservatives such as Rufo (2023), spoke nationally about the dangers of the movement declaring, “The Black liberation movement, which had been left for dead in the Nixon era, was reborn...with the founding of Black Lives Matter” (p. 114) and described protesters as a “loose but powerful network of left-wing militants” (p.122). Rufo accused academia of implementing “theory into concrete policies and practices or ‘diversity, equity, and inclusion’” (p. 249). Conservatives called for a colorblind approach to race is what was needed. This colorblind approach ignores racial inequalities and advances the belief that talking about race is what causes racism. A colorblind approach to race is one example of what Mills (2007) described as “white ignorance” (p.13). He elaborated that the deliberate misinformation and aggressive slanting of the realities of racial inequity is a specific form of authoritarian control that seeks to veil the truth of history that would expose the suffering of those in the minority. Through targeted disinformation campaigns anti-Critical Race Theory pundits sought to promote confusion and distortions of what Critical Race Theory is and, most importantly, what it is not.

All of these efforts came to fruition on January 21, 2020 when The White House issued an Executive Order (EO) detailing the abolishment of DEI. The EO stated that eliminating DEI is necessary for public safety because by “diminishing the importance of individual merit, aptitude,

hard work, and determination when selecting people for jobs and services in key sectors of American society” (The White House, 2025b, para. 4).

## **Theoretical Frame**

This study is framed in social justice as it applies to education through the lens of Critical Race Theory. In 1989 the first article on Critical Race Theory was published in the Harvard Law Review by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) titled *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics*. In this same article she also coined the term *intersectionality* to define the overlapping systems of oppression faced by Black women. This groundbreaking article marked the first time race was positioned at the center of inequality and injustice specifically within the American legal system. Critical Race Theory challenges the existing conditions that work to perpetuate racism within the context of the law and work through and throughout many institutions. Critical Race Theory shows how these legal means preserve discrimination, bigotry and division. Critical Race Theory moved into the field of education when Ladson-Billing and Tate (2005) published the first article connecting Critical Race Theory to education and demonstrated how embedded systems of oppression in schools worked against the success of marginalized students.

This theory is uniquely appropriate to frame the juxtaposition of EGOs and the need to teach DEI in the context of real-world situations. Critical Race Theory has been increasingly utilized over the past decade to unveil social oppression suffered by those with differences. Critical theory centers on issues of power, oppression, and domination and strives to expose how power relationships work in all aspects of culture with the goal to emancipate people through an awareness of that oppression. Researchers who espouse modern critical theory focus on social action along with recognition of the hegemonic issuance of subjugation. Social justice within democracy demands an inclusive education for all students. As Obiakor (2011) stated, “Social justice is a central ingredient of inclusion because it is in opposition to exclusion” (p. 10). Public education is one of the few arenas in American society where the hope of equity and diverse plurality may be realized by our children. It is the proving ground for success and the opportunity for all students to become productive members of our society.

Gag orders work to discredit how Critical Race Theory uncovers the inequities keeping one segment of the population in power. Anti-EGO and anti-Critical Race Theory mechanisms function to incite fear and intentionally promote ignorance and perpetuate misinformation to undermine critical discussions of racial inequities. Critical researchers have long recognized how inequalities based on race, gender, class, and ability have been used to discriminate (Baynton, 2013). Thinking of others in terms of a deficit permeates our nation’s schools and teacher preparation programs. It is the responsibility of faculty in teacher preparation to reject pedagogies aligned with these barriers and create educational practices that value the complex, rich diversity in our classrooms.

## **Method**

In reporting the data obtained by the participants, I felt since their opinions may place them in danger of losing their positions or reprimands from administration, I would further protect anonymity by not identifying a quote with a professor in relation to their state. I used online, virtual interviews conducted either through Zoom or Microsoft Teams. and documents. The questions developed for this study were semi-structured and focused on the participants entry into the field, their experiences dealing with EGOs, and how they continue to teach diversity in their teacher preparation program.

## Procedure and Participants

Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I searched websites for public 4-year universities in 10 states: Alabama, Texas, Florida, Oklahoma, Iowa, Idaho, Utah, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Tennessee. The focus was aimed at Departments of Education, Departments of Curriculum and Instruction, and Department of Teaching. Specific disciplines were elementary education, secondary education, literacy, and special education. This was a purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) because the participants were tenure-track faculty at public universities in Teacher Preparation. The IRB approved invitations were sent via email asking for participation. In total 1,529 invitations were sent to 95 public, 4-year universities in states with educational gag orders. Of that 16 responded and were interviewed for this project. The invitation can be found in Appendix B. The following shows the distribution of the invitations sent:

- 308 invitations were sent to 9 public 4-year universities in Florida,
- 181 invitations were sent to 12 public 4-year universities in Alabama.
- 97 invitations were sent to 5 public 4-year universities in North Dakota
- 50 invitations were sent to 4 public 4-year universities in South Dakota
- 45 invitations were sent to four (4) public 4-year universities in Idaho,
- 79 invitations were sent to three (3) public 4-year universities in Iowa,
- 99 invitations were sent to thirteen (13) public 4-year universities in Oklahoma,
- 139 invitations were sent to nine (9) public 4-year universities in Tennessee,
- 476 invitations were sent to twenty-eight (28) public 4-year universities in Texas.
- 55 invitations were sent to five (5) public 4-year universities in Utah

I speculated that the low response rate could be due to a variety of reasons. One could be that some professors do not see DEI and justice issues as a priority for their program. As one participant stated, *“To be honest. I don't think equity social justice diversity are core priorities for the college.”* Other reasons could be fear of being reported to administration for violating the EGO's. One participant said that when they tell their peers they are going to class to teach, a common response is *“try not to get fired today”*. This participant said one of his peers was *“put on The Turning Point USA [list]. Basically, you know, commie teachers to watch or whatever.”* Another participant talked about a staff member who repeatedly reported faculty to the Dean for teaching Critical Race Theory and diversity. Still another participant who discovered that a peer was called out on a conservative podcast because of their syllabi. That same faculty member faced backlash from Moms for Liberty who *“went after her.”* Although some of the participants felt they would have the support of their administration, many others did not. *“While we know we have the support of likeminded people in our immediate admin like department Head and Dean,*

*it's still scary.*” When asked if they thought the administration would support them if they were reported for violating an EGO, one participant simply said, *“I do not.”*

## **Results**

Several compelling themes arose from the analysis: *Love of teaching, definitions of diversity, students and community wanting diversity teaching, confusion over the laws, How EGOs have impacted their teaching, obedience in advance, Subtle subversion, rebel teachers, the chilling effect, and the future of teacher education.* Three themes were the focus of this reflection: *Confusion over the laws, Obedience in advance: How EGOs impacted their practice, creating brave spaces.* Every consideration has been made by the researcher to represent the participant’s meanings and perspectives. I made a methodological choice to use large data units to capture the voice and intent of the participants. Since these faculty are teaching in states with punitive EGO’s I felt that their voice and perspectives should be emphasized in this study.

### **Confusion over the laws**

When I asked if their state had EGOs, several participants from various states said they did not. However, legislation from those states do specifically bans DEI at the K-12 and University level. Could this be an issue with verbiage? Beaty (2024) reasoned the issue of vaguely written legislation when he stated, “At the university level, there is a loose doctrine of academic freedom that protects the teaching and research of college professors from laws seeking to impose a political orthodoxy on the university classroom.” (p. 140). He continued, “However, the doctrine is poorly defined and recent court decisions have not settled whether principles of academic freedom trump the increasingly narrow band of protected public employee speech.” (p.140). One participant in a state with rigid EGOs for all levels of education stated when asked: Does your state have educational gag orders for university professors or for K12 teachers? *“Not that I know of...I haven't heard of that yet.”* They did know that the state had banned DEI, and the university Office of Diversity was closed.

However, another participant from the same state and who is active in politics clearly articulated the state EGOs, voiced, *“...honestly, part of its really unclear because these laws have come out. But they're vague, and how they're gonna play out in court is unknown.”* They continued, *“I mean, so the part of the vague laws... We're not allowed to say anything that would make somebody feel bad about their gender or yours... like super vague...Poorly worded... you can't talk about gay relation, you know. Same sex relationships. But the way they've worded it was poor.”*

In a different state, the same pattern was observed. When asked if their state had banned DEI for education, they posited, *“It was banned in the state of my residence. But it was not banned in the state of where my university is.”* Again, two other participants from that state recognized the EGOs for all levels of education. One voiced,

*“... big stuff going around like we're not allowed to talk about critical theory. Lots of banned books are going on. Teachers are not allowed to have anything in their classroom libraries that has not been approved by the state, which basically there is some ugly stuff going on.”*

Another participant from this same state when asked if there are EGOs in your state for higher end or for K12 teachers, observed, *“I focus more on the K12 space more than I do...the higher Ed because I don't feel like I have been affected as much by the higher Ed gag order as the K12 teachers have been affected by the K12 orders.”*

This state has several EGO laws that have been enacted since 2019. Ironically entitled, “The Campus Free Speech Protection Act” explicitly bans divisive concepts by suppressing any discussion of uncomfortable topics. In addition, students and other staff have the right to sue public colleges and universities if they do not agree with issues discussed in the classroom. The legislation is replete with definitions of what constitute divisive concepts and what explicitly cannot be taught in any public institution of education. This participant stated that a colleague was targeted on a conservative podcast and The Moms for Liberty for their syllabi and curriculum. They also stated there was a staff member in the Dean’s office who would routinely file complaints targeting professors who teach DEI. This person was also reported to the Dean for promoting political views in class. However, they asserted, *“I just kind of racked my brain, when did I ever talk about politics? But then I thought Ohh to someone who is more conservative, just the fact that I'm an ally to the LGBTQ community and make sure that's known [and] just because I centered diverse voices.... That student is attaching politics to that.”*

When viewed through the Critical Race Theory/social justice lens targeted misinformation tactics, intentional spread of lies to keep these laws vague and overreaching seem to be successful to incite a vortex of confusion and chaos thus enforcing the chilling effect. In a dystopian twist, anti-Critical Race Theory laws efforts are emblematic of just what Critical Race Theory seeks to expose (Gonzalez-Rose, 2024). The bans promote an epistemology of ignorance, described by Mills (2007) as an ignorance which is both willful and destructive emanating from the highest levels of power amounting to a deliberate movement toward race evasion (Gillborn, 2024). This evasive tactic is a form of racial gaslighting (Gillborn, 2024). To perpetuate the myth that DEI promotes divisive concepts when in fact a critical conversation is required to reveal the intimidating redundancy which says racism isn’t a problem unless we talk about it. Planned, coordinated, and deeply entrenched laws that are purposely vague work to support a chilling factor (Gillborn, 2024). As one participant voiced, *“It's so vague like you know... which to me it could be scary, because if something happens then they could say, oh well, this they could interpret it in a way that is saying what I did is wrong... so I think that's scary.”* This creates a chilling effect on educators at all levels and instills an uncertainty and fear that one participant stated *“there's already a broader chilling effect where people are taking a step back. They're afraid to say the wrong thing. According to the law, not the wrong thing in like what students need, but they're afraid to say the wrong thing is.”*

### **Obedience in advance**

*“...because I don't want to do what others are doing with that unintentional chilling of stripping things out just out of fear, even though it wasn't asked for, but at the same time, I got a life to lead, and I don't wanna fight where I don't need to fight.”* The words of this participant exemplify how the chilling effect of EGOs fosters a tendency to make universities, school districts, and faculty to perform what Snyder (2017) coined as “anticipatory obedience” (p. 18). He further chronicled how simply the fear of repercussions elicits obedience in advance, for

compliance which was not asked. This theme wove through many of the interviews. Although many of the participants took a cavalier position and talked about how they did not care about EGOs or how they saw themselves as *rebels* despite the gag orders, when you looked at their other comments, there were many instances where they quietly complied anyway. This was echoed in Schrecker's (2024) prognostication, "When powerful outsiders threaten the integrity of higher education... administrators and faculty... all too often capitulated, collaborating with, rather than resisting the forces of repression." (p. 17). A participant echoed this sentiment when they stated of their department leadership, "... *no matter what they personally believed they would still take on the party line, our chair would hide behind the phrase because he's very much in support of DEI. But he would say, the provost has declared that we 'have to' .... placing blame on others so he does not look like he's the bad guy.*"

Another participant confirmed this saying of their Chancellor, "...*during the pandemic she was 100% supporting us ... And the minute this DEI question came up, she abandoned DEI so fast. And we were just in shock. It's been a huge difference and contrast.*"

The title of this presentation comes from a quote from an older participant who was denied promotion twice. This person felt it was due to outspoken views about the gag orders and some student complaints that they were too woke. Instead of continuing in their profession, they decided to take an early retirement. "*I couldn't put my finger on it at all why I've been targeted. I tell this not just because it's very upsetting or hurtful, but I went up twice for professor in our department... [they] turned me down twice, and it was one person. It was this leadership group that was just targeting me. Because basically, I don't.... I say what I say, I say what I believe, and I'm not doing the party line and that that was my punishment, I guess.*" They continued saying, "it's been a difficult place...*our whole department is has had has been bullied by this leadership team and so everyone lives in fear of their tenure and promotion.*"

It's not just faculty and universities who have conformed to anticipatory obedience, but also local PreK-12 school districts. Four of the participants from different states were dismayed by what they described as "canned curriculum" utilized in their local school district. One revealed, "...*as far as I can tell, it's just some good old boy social studies director at the district saying here's a list of all the dates and people and facts and events that you need to know. And I'm going to cram it all into chronological order and put it on a slide and throw some worksheets together.*" Another replied, "*but some of these district administrators are rather cowardly and how they go about trying to figure this all out, they over comply. They don't have all their students' interest. They're very OK with curriculum being whitewashed or omitted as long as they don't get complaints or feedback or something like that.*" Even having a scripted curriculum caused confusion and widely varied responses from each campus administrator. According to the participants, some of the scripted curriculum allows for a bit of personalization from the teacher. But there are some districts that are adamant, insisting the teacher follows the script word for word. "*But one thing that's really been a challenge with our pre-service teachers is we do have schools where the principals are like, yeah, just pretend you use that curriculum and keep doing what you're doing, right. And then we have schools that are like you might not bring any supplemental material.*"

Obedience in advance was seen at the university level in response to the fear of the loss of funds. “...our university started doing some things proactively to try to...They want to play nice and so they are going to go above and beyond with the legislature, asked for because they're going to tell us, well, we're not gonna get financed.” Faculty were directed to take out certain buzzwords from their syllabi or to rename courses that had provocative buzzwords in them. Offices of DEI were being renamed or eliminated altogether.

Intimidation and doxing are cruel, public means to instill a chilling factor to educators. Doxing refers to publishing personal details; home address, phone numbers, etc, on social media. This tactic has been used in various states to control the voices of educators (Gillborn, 2023). For example, in Oklahoma, a high school teacher was publicly intimidated and accused of violating HB 1775 (Martinez-Keel, 2024). This ambiguous legislation forbids educators in public schools from the teaching of certain racial or gender concepts. This teacher posted the QR code to the Brooklyn Library’s list of banned books on her bulletin board. She did not assign anything to it, simply posted it. Media attention was harsh and swift with the state board of education revoking her teaching license. The teacher resigned from the district after being relentlessly doxed and branded a pedophile (Clydesdale, 2022). She faced death threats and threats of rape. These actions of spreading fear and intimidation are widespread and vicious. Even though the former teacher did sue the state department of education and the superintendent, she has since left the state after being recruited by the Brooklyn Library. These assaults are not unique to Oklahoma. Similar tactics have forced superintendents, teachers, and faculty in many states to resign.

The conservative media has also deployed watch lists for reporting people suspected of violating anti-DEI laws. Charlie Kirk’s Turning Point, USA and Project Veritas are a few who publish misleading hate campaigns against progressive politicians, researchers, and faculty (Gillborn, 2024) with the Campus Reform organization specifically targeting liberal universities and professors. People who have been publicly listed on these sites have received threats of rape, death, and some have lost their jobs (Gillborn, 2024).

Applying a Critical Race Theory lens shows how intimidation, doxing, and fear can trigger obedience in advance. The media is compliant as they highlight teachers and school districts who are not in compliance with the laws and details the harsh punishment incurred because of it. Critical Race Theory unveils and challenges this deliberate ignorance by exposing how these vague laws work subtly to silence.

### **Creating brave spaces; Teaching strategies for Faculty**

Most participants mentioned how they used subterfuge to keep injecting DEI content into their classes in spite of the EGOs. Specific actions taken are changing the names of their courses, removing certain buzzwords from their syllabi, and not listing potentially contentious books in their course information. As one participant voiced, “*What you're generally doing is avoiding the buzzwords that made their ways into actual laws...creating brave spaces.*”

Derrick Bell, the first tenured African American professor at Harvard University and co-designer of Critical Race Theory, spoke of the absolute necessity of resistance as fundamental to Critical Race Theory (Bell, 2018). He advocated the use of counter-storytelling and self-narrative as

tools for social justice. As anti-DEI laws become increasingly enforced, the need to turn from “Eurocentric” (Caradonna, 2023, p. 406) ways of teaching and embrace a more culturally relevant curriculum becomes critical. Caradonna used *Whiteness as Property and Racial Realism* as analytical tools for understanding the current political climate and how it reflects historic trends toward oppression. The most powerful strategy offered is to assist faculty to teach about diversity is counter storytelling. Counterstory telling can be utilized in many academic areas to give voice to those who have been historically marginalized. Ladson-Billings (2021) stated, “Stories reflect a perspective or point of view and underscore what the teller, audience, society, and/or those in power believe to be important, significant, and many times valorizing and ethnocentric” (p. 41-42). Counter Storytelling challenges the way we think about race, gender, and social inequality. Miles (2019) confirmed counter storytelling is a way to push back against the “historical silences” (p. 253) that are often found in curriculum.

The participants in this study were aware of these pedagogical tools. As one participant voiced, “...we bring out family stories whose parents faced schools in south Texas, and they were beaten if they said one word in Spanish. Both Chirstian schools and public schools. So, they realize that although they are in churches that once beat people, they realize that there are complexities in their own histories.” Another participant clearly understood the necessity of counter storytelling as an act of resistance to the EGOs, “*These things are built to take away, take away, take away, take away, and make sure that not everyone's on equal footing. Not everyone's stories are heard. Not everyone's humanity is validated and affirmed.*”

Another strategy to teach about DEI in the mire of EGOs was through the use of public memorials and museums. Burgard and Boucher (2016) reexamined how historical sites and museums have been created to inform the public of our national heritage. They demonstrated that while historical sites are created as tangible ways to learn about our history, children of color often feel excluded from these spaces. As Michelle Obama said at the opening of the *America is Hard to See* Exhibit in Chicago, children of color do not associate their experiences with these historical events. Educators need to recognize how racialized these spaces become and the exclusion of marginalized voices. Educators must acknowledge these dissimilar experiences and teach their students how “minority students’ voices are excluded and majority students become miseducated about the past” (p. 697). While it may not be economically feasible for classes to physically travel to these places, the internet provides a wonderful platform to virtually visit.

Although the participants shared valuable information on how they continued to teach diversity despite the bans, some of the participants recognized the chilling effect of the EGOs and were determined to continue with their teaching as they have always done. However, they were acutely aware of the ramifications for violating the EGOs, “*because I don't want to do what others are doing with that unintentional chilling of, like, stripping things out just out of fear, even though it wasn't asked for, but at the same time, like, you know, I got a life to lead and I don't wanna fight where I don't need to fight.*” Others also stated they felt that if they were following state and professional standards, they felt somewhat more protected, “*I do follow the CEC guidelines, which includes being fair for all students with disability.*” Another participant said the phrase *sticks to the standards* five times during the interview.

Some of the faculty were more adamant about teaching DEI concepts despite the fears, *“I am not going to change. Who at the end of the day... who's this work for and what are we trying to accomplish? I would let myself down if I knew that a student that I had caused harm when they were in their classes because I'm thinking of other people's children. I'm thinking of a black boy, a black girl. I'm thinking of a trans student. I'm thinking of a student with a disability. Who's protecting them?”* They continued, *“I am doing the work to make sure that they get an educator that will see them and affirm them? And to me, that's my responsibility.”*

Another strategy faculty utilized was to take buzzwords, such as diversity, equity, inclusion, or justice out of their syllabi, or not assign controversial textbooks but present portions of them in class. *“I tell my students to subvert the system. I'm telling them to throw sand in the gears. I tell them to, you know, do whatever they need to do to start, to break this thing down and to become ungovernable— That's our job to teach them to push back.”* Some of the participants used the words *rebel* and *subversive* to describe how they continue to teach DEI concepts. *“And that's the one ESL pedagogy course that they're required to take. So, it's in that course that I have to be subversive, if you will. So, I say, “Bring it on! I'm waiting for you to take me to court in this state because I am teaching you this (holds up book ‘The Transgender Child’”) But my way out is they are not getting graded on the content of this book, but we are certainly getting a lot of discussion out of it, aren't we? So, that's how I get around using things like this (holds up book) which is didactic in nature....and it actually wouldn't even appear in my syllabus because it's not a book they buy.”* And another stated, *“I've always been a rebel teacher, and I don't think I'll ever stop if they wanna fire me, then I'll cross that bridge when we get to it.”* But some thought the term did not describe them, *“I'm not here to be a rebel and do these things just to piss somebody off or just because... I'm here to make sure I'm teaching my students to be the best they can be and have the tools they need in this very difficult teaching environment. And they are going into classrooms. and our students need to have the best tools.”*

## **Conclusion**

The application of a Critical Race Theory/social justice frame is appropriate to examine these conversations as one of its core tenants is to highlight the voices of marginalized peoples and to acknowledge multiple ways those voices are being silenced (Brazant, 2024). It is the responsibility of universities and faculty in teacher education programs to illuminate, name, and challenge racism in all its iterations. As one participant said, *“I do think that in some ways I've never talked about critical theory more in my life, because having it be in the news and telling me you can't do it is like waving a big red flag in front of the 18-year-old is going ‘I want to know what that is!’”* Students in teacher preparation programs must be able to educate the diverse student populations they will encounter in their future classrooms.

As far back as 2016, Patton proposed that increased use of Critical Race Theory in higher education is needed to guide scholars in disrupting “the ordinary, predictable, and taken for granted ways in which the academy functions as a bastion of racism/White supremacy” (p. 317). This is not the time to be silent. Faculty in teacher preparation are doing a grave mis-service to their students by not creating those brave spaces where critical thinking is nurtured and encouraged.

The participants in this study were passionate, committed educators who clearly understood the necessity of continuing to teach about diversity despite the obstacles and threats to them and their jobs. Many expressed optimism for the future of education and for DEI initiatives voiced by one participant, " ... *humans change their minds. Humans can be influenced. What's happening in [this state] is temporal. I can't tell you when it's going to change... when it's going to end and be something different. But change is a 'coming.'*" Critical Race Theory is being suppressed because it generates power with the goal of changing laws and policies that enforce structural racism (Gonzales-Rose, 2023). As Critical Race Theory is fundamentally about truth telling and critical thinking it is imperative for faculty to continue to use tools that actively advance social justice.

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