



## “We still have power in shaping what and how students learn”: Activist Teachers Respond to Book Bans

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### Article Info

Received: May 6, 2025

Accepted: October 20, 2025

Published: February 22, 2026



10.46303/repam.2026.2

### How to cite

Neal, E., & Miller, E. T. (2026). “We still have power in shaping what and how students learn”: Activist Teachers Respond to Book Bans. *Research in Educational Policy and Management*, 8(1), 22-38. <https://doi.org/10.46303/repam.2026.2>

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### ABSTRACT

In this study, we learn from seven teachers in a graduate level program in Urban Education about how and why they enact activist pedagogies in their classrooms. So often, teachers are positioned as passive puppets of the state—they are seen as the “tools” with which public thinking is controlled. By repressing, silencing, and fear-mongering teachers and determining through legislation which epistemologies and histories they can teach, subjugation through schooling is indeed a powerful mechanism of control. Yet, the participants in this study were a far cry from being passive puppets. They all engaged in epistemic disobedience, or what Quijano might call epistemic subversion, meaning that they intentionally, if covertly, remained firm in their commitment to teach non-dominant histories and worldviews rooted in acceptance, inclusion, and truth despite a growing array of gag order legislation across the US.

### KEYWORDS

Gag-order legislation; activist teachers; fugitive pedagogies; US book bans; research as activism.

## INTRODUCTION

Jarvis Givens' (2021) shares the story of Tessie McGee in his popular book *Fugitive Pedagogy*. McGee was a Black teacher who secretly read her Black students' passages of Black history from Carter G. Woodson. Reading histories that celebrated the achievements of her students' ancestors was not permitted in McGee's Louisiana classroom in the 1930s, where the district mandated a pre-approved curriculum that served White interests. This covert pursuit of Black education as a strategy for subverting racial subjugation illustrates how Black educators engaged in Black freedom struggles through subversive activism. By subversive activism, we mean the use of covert strategies to undermine or challenge an existing power structure.

Although McGee enacted subversive activism nearly 100 years ago, she is an ancestor who inspired the research described in this manuscript. As instructors in a college of education within an urban research university in the Southeastern United States, we are interested in how teachers enact subversive activism in response to the current wave of book bans sweeping the US. By positioning the teachers in this study as activists, we mean that they are intentional about teaching Black education and centering LGBTQ+ identities and use covert strategies and legislative knowledge to do so. This is happening despite overt curricular repressions in many of their teaching contexts.

We also believe researchers have the responsibility to elevate the voices of teachers who are inspiring pedagogues with much to share about how to engage in activism for social change. Research as activism should center the expertise and wisdom of activists in classrooms in an effort to promote "more dialogue, intentional strategizing, and multiple action plans to tackle the roots of oppression in education and across other institutions" (Eizadirad et al., 2024, p. iv). By highlighting the work of teachers who engage in pedagogies of resistance, we assert that these on-the-ground-activists have the power to "seize education as a tool" (Leonardo et al., 2023, p. 108) to dismantle colonial projects that dictate only dominant epistemologies, perspectives, and histories that are taught and learned in schools.

In this study, we learn from seven teachers in a graduate level program in Urban Education about how and why they enact activist pedagogies in their classrooms. What we learned from them is important since legislation in 18 states across the US, including our own, adopted from 2021-2024, attempts to silence histories of race by banning racial content and LGBTQ+ content in K-12 classrooms (Sachs & Young, 2023). Some of these gag order bills include subjective language, such as "no student should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his race or sex" (H. 4343, 2021-2022, South Carolina). Since it is impossible to predict what curricular tools (texts, materials, learning activities) might cause discomfort and anxiety to students, burgeoning research on this issue suggests some teachers avoid identity-conscious teaching at all (Kelly & Taylor, 2024; Lehrer-Small, 2023; Najarro, 2024; Sachs & Young, 2023). Yet, contrary to this growing body of research, the teachers in this study were armed with knowledge of legislation and a wealth of strategies for enacting activist pedagogies. Specifically, we draw on qualitative research traditions to

explore the following research questions: *In what ways do teachers across diverse educational landscapes enact activist pedagogies? How do activist pedagogues make sense of gag order legislation and its impact on their teaching?* Before briefly reviewing the literature to situate our study, we provide a small glimpse at how subversive practices have shaped our nation's history, particularly regarding Black education and LGBTQ+ literacies.

### **Subversive Literacy Strategies: A Brief Historical Overview**

Given the expansive and sophisticated use of literacies from ancient African civilizations (Braden et al., 2022), it is not surprising that many enslaved Africans use literacy strategies to engage in resistance efforts against enslavement in what would become The United States. For example, in 1739, an enslaved man named Jimmy Cato incited a rebellion along the Stono River in South Carolina by marching toward Florida with a banner that proclaimed *Liberty!* This signage served as a message to invite others for the purpose of collective engagement against the power structures that maintained white supremacy through the system of enslavement. While this rebellion is one of many that ultimately led to the enactment of anti-literacy laws in the South which prohibited enslaved people from learning to read or write, subversive tactics to use literacies for freedom ensued. Enslaved people learned to code messages into quilts, braids, and metaphors used in songs and other oral traditions. These coded messages were rooted in struggles for freedom and emancipation and helped nearly 100,000 enslaved people reach freedom via The Underground Railroad. After the Civil War, which formally ended slavery in The United States, efforts to prohibit the learning of Black history continued as over 600 Black schools were burned in the US South during Reconstruction to intimidate Black people away from formal education. These acts of terror were an overt attempt to control Black learning and maintain racial power structures. And yet, Black history remained vibrant and intergenerational through secret Literacy Societies, churches, and in familial spaces (Muhammed, 2020).

Likewise, subversive activism around the teaching of LGBTQ+ issues has also been a mainstay of historical and social life in The United States. For example, Queer activist and educator, Lillian Smith, ran a summer camp for girls in the 1940s in North Georgia where she exposed them to progressive views about race and sexuality. Despite her books being banned in multiple states, Smith and her partner ran Laurel Falls camp as an educational space where girls learned to engage in conversations about race and gender and sexuality through arts-based pedagogical strategies. Throughout history, we see examples LGBTQ+ educators and activists using art, literature, and music to challenge the oppressive norms of the day, particularly with young people (Kelly et al., 2024; Kelly & Doherty, 2017). While these tactics may not fall into what is commonly seen as activism (i.e., marches, political organizing, and boycotts), they nonetheless were a powerful way for individuals to covertly speak out against existing power structures. It is with this historical backdrop that we examine the literature about the ways teachers respond to existing book bans that seek to silence histories of Black and LGBTQ+ people today.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many teachers believe they have a responsibility to allow students to share their beliefs, knowledge, and backgrounds, and that students and teachers learn a great deal from these student perspectives (Bryson & Webber, 2024). However, teachers' fears of repercussions due to gag order legislation that restrict classroom discussions and activities around race and gender limits these possibilities (Kelly et al., 2023). At times, teachers are hesitant to have discussions around race or gender in the classroom to avoid potential push back from administration and community members (Woo et al., 2023). At times, vagueness around policies—including wording and expectations—shuts down discussion. Vagueness in this sense includes knowledge about what policies exist and what each of the policies truly mean. For example, Woo et al. (2023) found “More than one-quarter of teachers reported that they did not know whether their state or district had enacted a restriction... teachers find these limitations confusing or difficult to interpret” (p. 7). According to this study, teachers felt that the restrictions impacted their workplace in a negative way, stressing that messages and communication around restriction was oftentimes confusing and unclear. This vagueness caused teachers to over restrict, limiting topics out of fear (Kelly et al., 2023). Overall, policies around curriculum and restriction of curriculum limit teacher autonomy, creating incoherence and frustration (Dunn et al., 2017; Nolan, 2018), revealing the importance of teacher awareness surrounding policy and politics as essential to being effective educators (Majewska & Feeder, 2022).

Despite this important body of work, these studies do not address in what ways (if any) activist teachers are navigating such legislation or how teachers who already enact pedagogies that center justice do so in spite of gag order legislations. Moreover, in many colleges of education, there are no explicit attempts to address legislative impacts that may influence the ways that teachers can or think they can teach activist pedagogies in classrooms. While the reasons for this are multifaceted, fear of repercussion and a default to anticipatory obedience are cited as possible reasons for the ensuing silence among colleges of education to explicitly take up a response to legislative tactics to silence curricula (McQuire, 2025). This study examines how teachers across diverse educational landscapes enact activist pedagogies during a contextualized unit in a graduate level course in a college of education. The unit explicitly examines legislative texts using close and critical readings. By close and critical reading, we refer to asking students to carefully read texts using questions that encourage them to analyze, interpret, critique the relevance of their reading within a larger context. The course where the research took place has an explicit emphasis on countering anti-Blackness and exploring antiracist activism. The course is a mandatory course in a graduate degree program in Urban Education. The entire course, as well as this particular study, are framed by theories of decoloniality in education.

### **Decolonial Studies in Education**

Like Leonardo et al. (2023), we assert that education in the U.S. is fettered to an ongoing White settler colonial project and therefore we direct attention on “knowledge and epistemology as

central aspects of colonial subordination and superordination” (p. 103). Eurocentric, patriarchal education served colonial projects by reinforcing human hierarchies through curricular erasures and distortions that suppress the achievements, agency, and resilience of Black, Indigenous, and other people of Color (Hernandez, 2023). Such projects are not, of course, devoid of historical context and racial capitalism (Casey, 2025). Rather, they worked together: pedagogical projects dehumanized racialized others, which rationalized the racial genocide and exploitation of human labor, holding together a colonial matrix of power (Quijano, 2024) that required both oppressors and oppressed to participate. Perpetuating marginalized peoples as inferior worked in tandem with dominant narratives of whiteness as ideal, superior, and good (Fanon, 1963, 2021).

Globally, much is theorized about the specific ways colonial dehumanization occurred in particular contexts. For example, Said’s (2014) revisited theory of orientalism that exposes how marginalized people of the East are depicted on an oppositional binary as feminine, weak, and vulnerable to Western embodiments of all that is rational, masculine, and powerful. Fanon (1963, 2021) theorized that the Euro-constructed narrative of native Algerians as children devoid of emotion and rationality justified colonial oppressions. In the contemporary U.S. landscape, narratives that link Blackness with criminality (Alexander, 2020), indigeneity with drunkenness (Ehrlick, 2024) and immigrants of Color with barbarism *continue* to operate as baseline for political power (for a poignant example, see the Donald Trump’s reference to Haitian immigrants eating pets in the 2024 presidential debate with Kamala Harris). Lugones (2007) later expanded these ideas by braiding gender and heteropatriarchy with hierarchies of bodies and knowledge and suggest they continue to govern today. The emphasis on the *ongoing* nature of colonialism is important. Leonardo et al. (2023) refer to colonialism’s “architecture of power and knowledge” (p. 110) as a continuous renewal of subordination along lines of racial, gender, and sexual difference.

As powerful of a mechanism as education is for aiding White settler colonialism by controlling whose stories are told in schools and whose experiences and epistemologies foreground the curriculum, thereto lies viability for educators to serve as connoisseurs of resistance to such dominant narratives. Leonardo et al. (2023) name this *decolonial thought*, or a particular praxis that “interrogate[s] the ways Eurocentric systems of knowledge are intertwined with western modernity, colonialism, and imperialism” (p.109). Drawing on Fanon (1967), Leonardo et al. describe decolonial pedagogical projects as a process where educators and their students can dismantle colonial violence on multiple levels leading to “epistemic disobedience” (p. 103) or what Quijano might call “epistemic subversion” (Walsh et al., 2024, p. 6). While, certainly, this includes forwarding multitude of histories that provide counter-narratives to disrupt dominant “single stories” (Adichi, 2009), decolonial pedagogical projects are more than that. Decolonial pedagogical projects are also concerned with approaching ways of knowing from multiple epistemologies and intellectual traditions, particularly those that concern the body and land and that are dislodged from Western notions of individualism,

positivism, and rationality. To be clear, we assert that because decolonial projects involve dismantling the racio-colonial predicament, “anti-racism is anti-colonial” (Leonardo et al., 2023, p. 103).

The stronghold of White histories and epistemologies and the related repressions of non-dominant histories and epistemologies are a vivid example of the sheer power of education to revolutionize. As Tuhiwai Smith (2012) explained, “To hold alternative histories is to hold alternative knowledges...[which] can form the basis of alternative ways of doing things” (p. 34). We assert that cultivating critical awareness of the colonizer’s methodologies should include a study of how White, heteronormative power is enacted through ambiguous and confusing legislative tactics meant to scare educators by evoking fear that their lives—and/or livelihoods—are in danger. Clearly, these legislative tactics are not merely threats as teachers across the country are indeed being punished for not adhering to such mandates (Sachs & Young, 2023). And yet, even in these precarious times, educators are being called to engage decolonial educational projects.

## METHODOLOGY

### Context

The data for this study were collected during a typical iteration of a graduate course in an Urban Education MEd program in a Southeastern state of the US. The course in which this study took place, *Antiracist Activism*, is described as an “examination of the long and inspiring history of anti-racist movements and resistance to racist practices and policies among both people of color and White people throughout American history.” This study focuses on a newly developed unit on *Decolonial Resistance* that is a required unit of study in the course.

### Participants

Participation in this study was voluntary, although completing the unit was a regular and required part of the course. Seven students—Nolan, Erica, Justine, Jason, Brynn, Taylor, and Lola—agreed to participate in the IRB-approved study by allowing the researchers to use their regular course assignments in this unit as data, as well as participate in a follow-up Talking Circle. Unless the participants preferred to use their real names, pseudonyms were given. Below, we provide a brief description of each participant and their teaching context.

#### *Erica*

Erica is a 25 year old Biracial third grade teacher at an independent school in a Southeastern state. Erica is a first-generation college student. Despite the restrictive policies of her state, her school is committed to Diversity, Inclusion and Engagement efforts.

#### *Justine*

Justine is a 26 year old Biracial woman who identifies as cis-gender and “navigates the world as a Black woman.” Her professional role recently changed and she now serves as an educator liaison between the local school district and a higher education institution primarily focusing on mental and sexual health education. She works in a Southeastern state.

*Jason*

Jason is a White man and a tenth year Special Education teacher in a DC-based public charter school that serves predominately African American students. The founder of the school was closely linked to the Civil Rights Movement and the school is committed to cultivating strong Black identities among its students.

*Brynn*

Brynn is a fifth grade teacher at an arts-magnet public school in a Southeastern city that has one of the highest achievement gap ratios in the nation. She is a cis-gender White woman in her ninth year of teaching elementary school. Brynn has a great deal of support for her teaching from parent groups in the local area.

*Nolan*

Nolan is a middle school ELA teacher in a Southeastern state who recently stepped away from the classroom, but plans to return. He is a Black cis-gender male who is 38 years old. His experiences with a white-washed curriculum in high school led him to want to teach to do better for his students.

*Taylor*

Taylor is a White female and an ELA interventionist at a Title One school in a Southeastern state. She has 20 years of experience teaching elementary school and is a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

*Lola*

Lola is an accomplished educator and advocate for equity in education, with over 15 years of experience teaching in Title I schools in the Southeast. Her teaching experiences span Elementary Education and Special Education. Lola is also a doctoral student in Curriculum and Instruction at the same institution and took the class at the doctoral level.

**Positionality**

We used social identity mapping (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019) to consider the ways we positioned ourselves in relation to our study. We are both White, cisgender women who were former K-12 teachers now working as a doctoral student (Author 1) and professor (Author 2) in a Curriculum and Instruction program at a large, urban research university in a politically conservative Southeastern state. We were both enculturated in cycles of socialization (Harro, 2020) that relied on Western, settler-colonial ways of knowing (Patel, 2016). This necessarily means we will *always* run the risk of defaulting to ways of knowing that are rooted in epistemologies of oppression. Therefore, detailed attention to our reflexivity is paramount. We also maintain that our identities are complex, fluid, and shaped by a pedagogical ethos rooted in relationality, humility, and respect. We came to this work because we do not know how not to. We see the lives and histories of our students—and their students— as interconnected, deserving of honor, attention, and answerability. As educators for multiple decades, we have supported, led, or worked as allies in myriad anti-oppressive, activist projects. Moreover, we are committed to the affective dimensions of decolonial work, including the discomfort it brings.

As Zemblayas (2023), suggests, “privileged White academics have to sever their affective attachments to the practices of epistemicide and western intellectual superiority manifested in university curricula, pedagogies, and knowledge production” and channel discomfort in “critical and productive ways” (p. 311).

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected for this study in multiple ways, including through two Discussion Boards. The Discussion Boards bookended the two-week unit on *Decolonial Activism: Curricular Perspectives*. Prior to participating in the first Discussion Board, students read a case on same sex marriage representation in children’s books from Gorski and Pothimi’s (2013), *Case Studies on Diversity and Social Justice Education*. Then, using a series of analytical steps and critical questions provided by the text, the students brainstormed how they—as teachers and administrators—imagined equitable solutions to a story about a parent who complained to an administrator when her child’s elementary school teacher included a classroom library book about a child with two moms.

The purpose of reading this case study was to explore ideas around representation in children’s literature, consider whose family structures are often included or excluded in elementary school texts, as well as reflect on the role of parents, administrators, and teachers in book selections. This engagement with this text and subsequent seminar was not explicitly connected to current legislation, nor had the students yet been introduced to—at least in this class—decolonial concepts around epistemicide, or how attempts to repress marginalized identities from classroom spaces is an ongoing colonial project.

The second Discussion Board occurred after a focused exploration of how restriction or omission of knowledge is a part of colonial projects, as well as how resistance to such projects might arise from a study of historical activist pedagogues such as Carter G. Woodson and Tessie McGee. The students watched a recorded lecture on decolonial praxis developed and recorded by Authors 1 and 2. Then, they read Given’s text, *Fugitive Pedagogy*, which introduced them to activist pedagogical strategies. Following this reading, they completed a required close read of a contemporary legislation of their choice from PEN AMERICA’s 2024 report on censorship. We provided students with a worksheet to analyze the language of legislative texts using Comer and Simpson’s (2021) guiding questions for critical literacy. Then, students were asked to brainstorm how the tactics of the past could be utilized today in response to legislative texts. In other words, by taking on the role of a historical activist pedagogue, how might educators today maintain compliance with the policy at hand, without shying away from justice-oriented pedagogies? The purpose of the second Discussion Board was to connect past and present colonial projects and to discuss, identify, and learn from the tactics of historical inspirational teacher activists.

### **Talking Circles**

Using the data collected from the Discussion Board, we refined a series of open-ended questions to facilitate a subsequent Talking Circle (Wilson & Wilson, 2020). Talking Circles are an Indigenous method for data collection which encourage a sharing and respecting of ideas

through turn-taking as members make sense of, uninterrupted by their peers, their perspectives on questions posed by researchers (Chilisa, 2020). While these questions used in the Talking Circle were formulated at early stages of the research project, they were modified based on salient themes that emerged from the Discussion Boards. The Talking Circle was held outside of the regular class meeting schedule on zoom and was audio-recorded using Author 2's university Zoom account. This was also transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

Before we analyzed our data, we uploaded participants' Discussion Board posts and assignments to N'Vivo 14 on our individual laptops. We uploaded the transcribed Talking Circle, as well. Then, we used Braun and Clark's (2006) method for thematic analysis to make sense of the data. We chose this method of analysis because it provided a flexible, yet structured tool to render a complex account of the data corpus (Seidman, 2006). These individual coding sessions happened over two phases. First, we familiarized ourselves with the data through reading and rereading. Then, we used constant comparison techniques (Glaser, 2008) where we systematically compared data to identify patterns and labeled the data with codes.

During these individual coding sessions, we refrained from collaborating so that we would not influence each other's coding. Collectively, we determined 61 codes in the data that spoke to our research questions. After individually coding, we met to collapse and consolidate our codes using a process of iterative, dialogic inquiry (Wells, 1999). Using a whiteboard in a conference room on our university's campus, we created a network map (Kinchin et al., 2010) to visualize how the codes were connected to one another and the research questions, actively constructing knowledge through meaningful appropriations and modifications.

After network mapping, we consolidated, collapsed, and renamed our first 61 codes into 12 that we then individually reapplied to our data in a second round of coding. From these 12 codes, we ultimately constructed three overarching themes. The three themes we identified are: *Activist Pedagogical Strategies*, *Steadfast Purpose*, and *Leaning on Others*. We double checked to see if the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the data set (Level 2). Once we were confident our themes reflected patterns in the data in ways that responded to our research question, we collaboratively generated the findings shared below. In this particular manuscript, we share findings from one of our major themes: *Activist Pedagogical Strategies*.

### **Activist Pedagogical Strategies**

Armed with a clear sense of purpose and not intimidated by the gag order legislation enacted in the state many of the participants focused on their sense of purpose: activist teaching within the boundaries of the law. Activist pedagogical strategies are the tactics that participants currently use to center Black education and LGBTQ+ experiences in their classroom, despite the curricular restrictions that were legislated in the state in which many of them taught. Namely, these activist pedagogues used the following strategies in their classrooms to center Black education and LGBTQ+ experiences: *Conversations as Loopholes*, *Broadening the Conversation*,

*Standards and Resources as Tools*, and *Culturally Responsive Teaching*. Each of these strategies enabled the educators in this study to engage in activist pedagogies.

#### *Conversations as Loopholes*

One of the consistent ideas that came up in the data was that while a teacher might not be able to introduce certain topics to their students, if the students themselves brought up topics, it was fair game for the teachers to engage the students pedagogically in their inquiries. For example, Brynn explained: “If [my students] notice themes of racism and bring them up, then we have, if nothing else, plausible deniability.” Likewise, Jason suggested the importance of leaning in to student biases as an opportunity to engage in anti-bias work, “For example, instead of becoming overly defensive if a student makes a racial, sexist, or any other discriminatory remark, engaging them about that remark can be useful.” Justine agreed, citing that “open dialogue is prioritized.” Taylor elaborated and drew on her knowledge of Carter G. Woodson from the Givens (2021) reading to support her point:

We can still teach students to think critically without breaking the letter of the law. Asking open-ended questions and letting students explore issues for themselves is one way to introduce these important topics without putting ourselves at risk. Givens (2021) reminds us that Woodson believed “real education” is about inspiring people to change the world for the better (p. 137). That’s the mindset we have to keep—even when policies make it hard.

The teachers also stressed the importance of using discussion-based learning which “encourages students to ask critical questions.” Erica gave a poignant example of how she recently accomplished this in her elementary classroom:

Like we read *Hidden Figures*, and we talked about Katherine Johnson, but that wasn't written down [in my lesson plan]. It was kids saying, you know, why didn't she get recognition? Like, why did it take until 2015 when the movies came out, for, you know, us, to even know who she was? And that conversation brought up the idea of intersectionality. Did my kids write down the definition of intersectionality? Absolutely not, but we talked about the root word of intersect. And like, what does it mean that she was a woman and she was black? And like, How'd that further impact her life? So the kids will go on and they won't have it written in their journal that we talked about intersectionality, but they've heard that word before, so I think a lot of my resistance is planting seeds and not necessarily teaching lessons, if that makes sense, so just so they have that vocabulary... I'm not giving out textbooks that talk about critical race theory, but eight-year-olds bring up race and bring up, like, what they're noticing in the world.

Jason agreed with this strategy and explained, “You know, if students are, you know, asking those questions and talking about it organically, then again, you know, we can say, well, you know, this is not something that I imposed on them. This came up in, you know, organically. And you know, therefore we engaged students in critical thinking, which is what we want them to do.”

### *Broadening the Conversations*

Over and over, data demonstrated that one strategy to engage in conversations around race and gender without violating current legislation is to broaden the conversations and work from an umbrella topic inclusive of multiple ways of knowing and being. For example, in considering how the teacher, Ms. Ribiero, in the case study *Two Moms*, might handle a similar pedagogical conversation around same sex partnerships in the future, Erica suggested, Ms. Ribiero doesn't have to start with an LGBTQIA specific book. It can be a single parent household, a nuclear family plus live-in grandparents, or a general book about families. I think Ms. Ribiero needed to clearly introduce the book or series of books as an exploration of families. This way, she could give lots of family examples and not just a singular LGBTQIA example.

Similarly, and related to this same prompt, Lola expressed a similar strategy of broadening the conversation: "She might have also initiated a brief, age-appropriate discussion about different types of families, explaining that some families have two moms, two dads, single parents, and other configurations." Jason also noted broadening the conversation as a strategy:

It could be a discussion where students begin by describing who they live with. This would allow her to see if there are diverse structures aside from Denise's. After this determination, a share out by the students could help create organic conversation about how their home lives look compared to others, which would have included Denise's family. Additionally, even if the family structures weren't that diverse, I would imagine a lot of student families would have pets, which could be used as another way to show diversity.

### *Standards and Resources as Tools*

Another strategy participants used was relying on state standards, pedagogical resources, and laws *as tools* to support their teaching. For example, Brynn explained, "The [state] Standard Course of Study for first grade includes a standard that students will 'understand how culture, values, and beliefs shape people, places, and environments.'" It is telling that Brynn knows these standards by heart—her easy recitation of standards demonstrates how she uses them to support her activist teaching that centers Blackness. In her reflection of her mentorship of a novice teacher, Brynn explains that if "she is unsure about what to include, we always go back to the state standards and lesson objectives. Then, we ensure that the supplementary texts she wants to include are developmentally appropriate." Likewise, Justine not only relies on her knowledge of standards, but also her knowledge of the law. For example, she clarified, "Schools have a legal responsibility under Title IX to prevent and address discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression." She relied on this legal responsibility to foster conversations about sexual and gender identity, whereas it is the general consensus of the group that the gag order legislation intended to shut them down.

Jason discussed the importance of finding resources to supplement his curriculum, as well as his own knowledge, and bringing those perspectives into the classroom. For example, Jason explained how he, as a White man, commits to understanding Blackness to relate to his predominately Black students: "Anyone can add the BlackSky feed to their BlueSky account, for

example... these spaces, cultural expression and knowledge is actively shared and done so in a way that often encourages an unapologetic expression of Blackness.” Brynn reiterates the importance of connecting curriculum to her students’ lives to support her teaching, as well as her mentorship of other teachers in her building:

I recently learned that I will be teaching math paired with science next year, and I will have the opportunity to plan with the current science teacher to design a curriculum that integrates both content areas in meaningful and culturally responsive ways. Finally, we prepare how she will guide the discussion around the text and connect it back to the students' lived experiences.

To summarize, the participants in this study used their knowledge of accrediting standards, laws, and their access to resources outside of school to support and defend their teaching.

### *Intentional Planning*

Intentional planning emerged as a critical strategy for educators navigating the increasingly restrictive educational environments. Through discussion, the educators in this study reflected upon how thoughtful, proactive preparation is an essential part of maintaining rigor while also fostering an inclusive learning environment. Jason provided advice for new teachers, stating:

I would encourage a new teacher to be intentional about their planning with these issues. Be prepared and think through some common misconceptions or statements that might come about in a discussion on divisive issues. If a homophobic remark is made, be prepared for how you would handle that situation. Even better might be to have a pre-discussion activity about proper ways to discuss these issues. Regardless of the planning, making sure that there are plans is of the utmost importance in order to ensure that the discussion is academic rather than hostile and exclusionary.

Addressing sensitive topics in the classroom can be challenging, and structure and planning of how to handle these situations allowed the participants to feel more confident when navigating these discussions. By planning for these moments, the conversations will remain “academic rather than hostile and exclusionary,” ultimately supporting a safe and respectful classroom environment.

Participants also discussed methods of teaching critical thinking within legal and policy constraints. Taylor noted, “We can still teach students to think critically without breaking the letter of the law.” This statement suggests that open-ended questioning and student-led inquiry can allow important topics to be discussed and explored without teachers overstepping legal boundaries. Taylor also said, “Open-ended questions and letting students explore issues for themselves is one way to introduce these important topics without putting ourselves at risk.” The ability to guide classroom discussions intentionally is an important component of this work. During the Talking Circle, one participant reflected on this work by saying, “I have the ability to, I won't say, control the classroom, but to kind of steer the conversation into where, you know, kids can critically think for themselves.” This highlights the subtle but powerful form of

leadership that teachers have. They can steer the discussion in ways that empower students to draw their own conclusions while maintaining an academic stance.

Intentional planning at the curriculum level was brought up by participants, as well. They discussed efforts to ensure that historically marginalized perspectives are seen and heard in the classroom. In the Talking Circle, one participant shared,

When it comes to the actual like curriculum, you know, we've had conversations in my school about kind of what this could look like, and there does seem to be a pretty fervent idea that we're going to do our best to continue to serve our students who are Black and African American, students who have a desire and a need to understand the history of this country when it comes to them, right?

According to these activist pedagogues, providing a holistic view of topics within the curriculum was an essential aspect of teaching. In addition, this commitment to authenticity extended beyond the classroom walls. Within this conversation, one participant shared their view by saying they maintain an “effort to continue to, you know, teach our children about our history and when they ask questions, and, you know, answer those questions in an age-appropriate way,” with her personal children at home, as well. Moments like these show the importance of encouraging critical reflection both inside and outside the school setting.

Ultimately, the findings show that educators still have the ability to work within the restrictive policies. Taylor reminded us, “It’s a reminder that despite the barriers, we still have power in shaping what and how students learn.” Nolan added to this idea by saying, “These gag orders can be circumvented by resilient teachers who walk into classrooms with the desire to teach their students with accuracy and fidelity.” Intentional planning is not just about avoiding conflict, but rather about actively preserving the vision of education by promoting critical thinking and continuing to center all voices in the classroom, especially those that have been historically marginalized, even in restrictive political climates.

## DISCUSSION

Carter G. Woodson knew the power of education as a colonizing tool. In his 1933 classic, *The miseducation of the Negro*, he famously wrote, “If you can control a man’s thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions. When you determine what a man shall think you do not have to concern yourself about what he will do.” The sweeping gag order legislation across the US to repress the histories, identities and legacies of people of Color and LGBTQ+ people is a modern-day project of colonial subordination along lines of racial, gender, and sexual difference. Although it is yet to be seen what the psychological and educational effects of these current legislations will have on teachers, previous research in this area demonstrates that policy implementations lead to heightened teacher stress, insecurity, feelings of a lack of control or powerlessness (Pearson & Morrow, 2006).

Yet, it is this very narrative our research seeks to challenge. So often, teachers are positioned as passive puppets of the state—they are the “tools” with which public thinking is

controlled. By repressing, silencing, and fear-mongering teachers and determining through legislation which epistemologies and histories they can teach, subjugation through schooling is indeed a powerful mechanism of control. Yet, the participants in this study were a far cry from being passive puppets. They all engaged in “epistemic disobedience” (p. 103) or what Quijano calls epistemic subversion (Walsh et al., 2024, p. 6), meaning that they intentionally, if covertly, remained firm in their commitment to teach non-dominant histories and worldviews rooted in acceptance, inclusion, and truth.

They navigated ambiguous and confusing legislative tactics to engage decolonial educational projects. In their arsenal were clearly identified and confidently executed activist pedagogies. Through their savvy ability to critically read legislation mandated on their teaching for its scare tactics and political injustice, they taught and built relationships between the lines of colonial power. They are a counter-narrative to the research that demonstrates some teachers are being scared into silence by the types of educational legislation explored in this study (Kelly & Taylor, 2024; Najarro, 2024; Lehrer-Small, 2023; Sachs & Young, 2023). While we believe it is certainly important to research the impact of gag order legislation on teachers, it is equally important to research resistance.

In closing we summarize the strategies that can be extracted as lessons from these teachers as shared. Together, the strategies of using conversations in the classroom, the standards and resources as tools, and culturally responsive teaching demonstrate how educators creatively navigated institutional constraints to enact activist pedagogies. Each tool opened up spaces for challenging dominant narratives and centering students’ diverse experiences. For instance, leveraging dialogue can be implemented through open-ended questioning protocols, journaling prompts, or alternative discussions that invite students to explore critical issues beyond the mandated curriculum. Additionally, by bringing multiple perspectives through literature, guest speakers, or multimedia sources into the classroom extend dialogue beyond standardized content. Standards and resources become powerful when educators use curriculum mapping to align activist themes with mandated benchmarks, or when they curate openly accessible teaching resources that create critical inquiry. Finally, allowing students to engage in student-led projects, including culturally relevant text, and providing examples that affirm students’ lived experiences will honor culturally responsive practices. Collectively, these strategies highlight both the creativity and intentionality of educators’ activist pedagogies, demonstrating that meaningful change can be created through deliberate practice and thoughtful use of pedagogical tools.

## **CONCLUSION**

The teachers in this study are activist pedagogues. They are armed with legislative knowledge, subversive strategies, and political prowess. As armor, these qualities enable them to fulfil what they see as their responsibility as educators: to center resistance and liberation within the boundaries of the law. They are not cowering. They are not capitulating. They are shining

examples of what a public response to a repression of academic freedom and an assault on the professional autonomy of teachers could be. And, while none of the participants in this study said their work was easy, Taylor reminds of the fruit of such labor: “The reward is a more liberated, critically engaged student body.” It is easy to feel mired in hopelessness with the unprecedented assaults on public education that characterize our current moment in the US. But, these activist pedagogues are not thinking only about the current moment; they are thinking of our future and who will lead it. And so, they move forward in Justine’s vision to enact “good and necessary change.” Just as these activist pedagogues were inspired by Carter G. Woodson, they too will leave a legacy of courage and commitment for generations to come.

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