

Examining Music Educators' Support for the DEI Backlash

Karen Salvador

Michigan State University (USA)

Abstract

Since 2021, legislatures and state-level actors in twenty-five states have enacted laws limiting instruction on race, gender, sexual orientation, and history in PK–12 schools and higher education. These “divisive concepts laws” (DCLs) are part of a broader backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). While some music educators and teacher educators report negative effects on curriculum, students, and professional wellbeing, about 25% support the DEI backlash, claim DCLs are not divisive, or state they are beneficial for students. Using qualitative content analysis, I identified six themes—bullshit asymmetry, [White] rage, DEI orthodoxies, antipolitics, diversity ideology, and anticipatory obedience—that contribute to and/or accompany this support. In this article, I define each and describe relevant discourses among music educators and teacher educators who support the DEI backlash. I conclude by suggesting communication strategies for preserving or advancing culturally sustaining, gender-inclusive, and ability-responsive practices in music and teacher education.

Keywords

Anticipator, obedience, antipolitics, bullshit asymmetry, DEI backlash, diversity ideology, divisive concepts laws, music education, music teacher education, White rage

Since 2021, state legislatures and other state-level actors in twenty-five states¹ have enacted dozens of statutes limiting instruction regarding race, history, gender, and sexual orientation in PK–12 schools and higher education (PEN America n.d.). Often called “Divisive Concepts Laws” (DCLs, Lu 2022; Pendharkar 2022), these policies affect more than half of the US’s fifty million public school students (Feingold and Weishart 2023). DCLs have been gradually subsumed within a broader “DEI backlash”² focused on limiting or banning diversity, equity, and inclusion programs (DEI)³ in K–12 schools, higher education, and other institutions and organizations through state laws and local policy actions (Alonso 2023; Hicks 2024; Johnson 2024; Leonard 2024).

Within weeks of taking office in 2025, President Trump had issued several executive orders expanding the DEI backlash (Federal Register 2025). For example, EO 14151 banned DEI positions and programs in the federal government and threatened to withdraw funding from institutions (including schools) that pursued DEI (Ending Radical and Wasteful 2025), while EO 14190 banned “discriminatory equity ideology” indoctrination in K–12 schools⁴ (Ending Radical Indoctrination 2025). As I write this article in April 2025, lawsuits, judicial injunctions, and cuts at the Department of Education make it difficult to predict what specific policies may arise from these executive orders (e.g., Associated Press 2025; Goldstein 2025).

Music educators and teacher educators report being affected by DCLs and the DEI backlash (Salvador et al. 2024; Salvador and Shaw 2025; Bylica et al. 2024; Taylor et al. 2025). Research findings indicate that some music teachers and teacher educators (a) are limiting their curriculum and instructional practices; (b) believe PK–12 students are feeling targeted and facing increased bullying and pre-service teachers are worrying about fieldwork and job placements; and (c) feel decreased job satisfaction or increased stress due to DCLs. However, about 25% of responding music educators and teacher educators agreed with DCLs, said DCLs were not divisive, or said DCLs were good for students or music education (Salvador and Shaw 2025).

DCLs and the DEI backlash arise out of and propel divisive rhetoric. For example, proponents of the DEI backlash would say that DEI, itself, is divisive, and that DCLs are therefore justified (Smith 2024). However, people perpetuating such rhetoric, such as Christopher Rufo, have admitted that their endgame is to discredit public education (Feingold and Weishart 2023). I wondered why music educators and teacher educators would support their claims. Accordingly, I examined

five sets of text data to identify discourses that may contribute to music educators' support of the DEI backlash. In this article, I present the results of this qualitative content analysis (Selvi 2019) and propose communication and persuasion strategies that music educators and teacher educators might apply to maintain or advance ability-responsive, culturally sustaining, and gender-inclusive practices in music education and teacher education. While a full discussion of the necessity of these practices is outside the scope of this article, I maintain that such instruction does not equate to "reverse discrimination," as some pundits claim (e.g., Guynn 2023). Rather, I am promoting education that views every student as whole, capable, and worthy and is therefore designed to meet individual students' needs. To contextualize this content analysis, I begin by describing the datasets, how I analyzed them, and my positionality.

Datasets

Dataset 1

Around 2020, Amy Sierzega and I observed that Music Education Professional Associations (MEPAs)⁵ across the United States were establishing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) positions and committees. We wondered about the professional backgrounds and qualifications of those assuming DEI leadership roles, so we distributed surveys to all U.S.-based MEPAs we were able to identify through online searches ($N=75$) (Salvador and Sierzega 2023). When an organization publicly listed a DEI leader, we sent the survey directly to them; otherwise, we contacted the MEPA's executive director and requested that they forward the invitation to their MEPA's DEI leader, if applicable. This approach yielded sixty-two survey responses. The questionnaire included five open-ended questions about respondents' formative experiences and preparation as DEI leaders. Although DCLs and the DEI backlash did not exist at the time of this survey, many participants described experiences with MEPA members (i.e., music educators) who opposed DEI. These experiences may offer insight regarding music educators who support the DEI backlash, so I analyzed all responses to open-ended questions for this article.

Dataset 2

In the summer of 2021, Amy and I sought to gain a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences in MEPA-affiliated DEI leadership roles (Salvador and Sierzega 2024). In the survey I described in Dataset 1, forty-six respondents indicated willingness to participate in follow-up interviews. We employed maximum variation sampling (Patton 2015) to select individuals representing a wide range of geographic regions and personal identity characteristics (i.e., content area, grade level, age, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation). We invited eighteen participants, sixteen of whom consented. Interviews ranged from twenty-five to ninety-five minutes in duration (M =forty-six minutes). We asked participants to elaborate on their previously submitted survey responses and react to themes from our initial analysis of survey data; I analyzed all transcripts for this article.

Dataset 3

Approximately eighteen months later, in early 2023, Amy and I contacted the same group of sixteen participants to request follow-up interviews, and fourteen participated. By then, we had begun to observe a growing backlash against DEI efforts in education, exemplified by DCLs, public controversies surrounding critical race theory (CRT), increased resistance to transgender rights, and the proliferation of book bans. In these interviews, we explored whether participants had continued their DEI-related work, how that work had evolved, whether the themes of our earlier (at that time unpublished) interview analysis resonated with them, and what additional insights or recommendations they might offer to MEPAs, PK–12 educators, and teacher educators regarding inclusive praxis. These fourteen interviews averaged thirty-one minutes each. We utilized this dataset to triangulate findings in Salvador and Sierzega (2024) and as the primary data for Salvador and Sierzega (2025); I analyzed all transcripts for this article.

Dataset 4

In the fall of 2022, I initiated a study to examine the impact of DCLs on music educators and teacher educators. The National Association for Music Education (NAfME) sent an online questionnaire to all active members. Questions included demographic items and one open-ended prompt: "In a few sentences, please outline how the divisive concepts laws in your state or district are affecting you and

your music teaching” (Salvador et al. 2024). For this article, I reexamined all 318 responses.⁶

Dataset 5

In the fall of 2023, Ryan Shaw and I developed a revised questionnaire informed by data from the previous DCL study (Salvador and Shaw 2025). This new instrument combined quantitative items with open-ended questions to inquire about participants’ perceptions regarding the impact of DCLs on (a) music education curriculum and pedagogy, (b) students enrolled in music education programs, and (c) practicing music educators. The questionnaire was disseminated to all NAFME members and yielded 645 usable responses. Although only approximately 20% of those respondents completed the optional open-ended questions, I analyzed all submitted narrative responses for this article.

Design

I was already highly knowledgeable about these datasets (Salvador et al. 2024; Salvador and Sierzega 2023, 2024, 2025; Salvador and Shaw 2025). For this article, I used qualitative content analysis (QCA, Selvi 2019) to examine support for the DEI backlash across the five datasets and then discourse analysis to name and describe the themes I identified (Hesmondhalgh 2006). I re-read all transcripts and open-response items, with particular focus on responses that indicated support for DCLs or opposition to DEI efforts. I open-coded phrases and ideas that recurred and kept notes on discourses that helped me both consolidate and name themes. As these groupings coalesced, I also identified exemplars. Scholars have suggested that mixing content analysis (concerned with the presence of words, themes, and concepts; Selvi 2019) and discourse analysis (concerned with how language is used to construct meaning and social realities; Talbot 2016) can be particularly useful to examine how ideas and trends influence education policy (Hesmondhalgh 2006; Saraisky 2016). Because the goal of this paper is to elucidate themes and discourses associated with support for DCLs and the DEI backlash, I did not try to curate a rich tapestry of voices. Instead, I selected excerpts that exemplify themes and discourses present throughout responses from people who supported DCLs or opposed DEI efforts.

Positionality and Lens

None of the material I read on QCA or discourse analysis mentioned researcher lens or positionality. However, as someone who is primarily a qualitative researcher, I feel compelled to situate myself in relation to this project. Knowing my current position, background, and viewpoints may help readers interpret my work.

I am a teacher educator in a state that does not have DCLs, and I work at a university that (so far) is standing up against President Trump's incursions into higher education (e.g., McCarthy 2025). As part of my job responsibilities, I conduct a children's choir and direct the early childhood music programs at our community music school. Sometimes, I consider retreating into that space—singing and dancing and playing with kids while hoping the current turmoil, division, and uncertainty in the United States will just pass. Withdrawing into a place of (relative) ease is a luxury people with my privilege sometimes choose to take. However, the people I teach and my belief in every human's inherent value and intrinsic musicianship are reasons I continue to investigate, talk, and write about difficult topics.

I grew up as the child of two teachers in a small conservative rural town, and my first job as an educator was teaching elementary general music in that same town. I love teaching and learning and schools. I think public education, though flawed, is worth fighting for. The increasing polarization of our society is evident in my home community and family. These people, whom I know and love, were not always this scared and angry. While I disagree with DCLs and the DEI backlash, I approached this investigation with a genuine desire to better understand why people might support those policies and how I could communicate in ways that might increase understanding and empathy. I think it is important to consider causes, not to cast blame or wallow in negativity or feel overwhelmed, but to create viable pathways toward bridging divides and (re)humanizing music educators and music education.

Themes

After conducting QCA of five datasets, I defined six themes and identified relevant discourses that may have contributed to the DEI backlash in music education and music teacher education. They are: bullshit asymmetry (Brandolini 2013); [White]⁷ rage (Andersen 2016); a phenomenon I named "DEI orthodoxies;"

antipolitics (Shaw 2021); diversity ideology (Mayorga-Gallo 2014, 2019); and anticipatory obedience (Snyder 2017). These themes were often intertwined within the data, with individual responses frequently reflecting discourses from multiple themes. To capture this complexity, I selected exemplar quotes that (a) represented common views among participants who supported DCLs and the DEI backlash, and (b) illustrated the interplay of multiple discourses. In the following section, I define each theme and offer exemplar quotes, building upon each definition and exemplar to describe how the themes and their related discourses intersect to explain music educators' support for DCLs and the DEI backlash.

Bullshit Asymmetry

In a 2013 tweet, the Italian programmer Alberto Brandolini asserted, “The amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude bigger than that needed to produce it.” This *Bullshit Asymmetry Principle* (also called Brandolini’s law) asserts that some people may easily accept mis- or dis-information as fact, but it takes considerably more effort to disprove mis- and dis-information. Even when experts present convincing evidence that something is not true, many people will not change their minds (Nickerson 1998; Priniski and Horne 2018).

In one relevant example, pundits, media, and politicians mobilize discourse about “grooming” in PK–12 schools (Anti-Defamation League 2022; Dale 2024; Lavietes 2024). Previously, *grooming* was a term for “the process used by sexual abusers to facilitate sexual contact with a minor while simultaneously avoiding detection,” often by building “trust with the minor and often their guardians ... to desensitize [them] to sexual and physical contact” (Winters et al. 2022, 933). In contemporary political rhetoric, however, the term “grooming” has been co-opted and is increasingly used to suggest that individuals—frequently educators—are encouraging or influencing students to identify as LGBTQ+ (Anti-Defamation League 2022). Some music educators who responded to the DCL surveys seemed to have internalized this mis- or dis-information: “The laws that are being passed or are under consideration [DCLs] do not affect me. We are in a sad place where legislators must do this to protect children and to protect free speech. Music educators should not be coerced into including and teaching political ideologies and human sexuality. Music educators should be teaching content only. Period. It is not the place for political indoctrination and sexual grooming” (DCL Survey 2022).

Scholars and educators with a variety of political views could have a nuanced discussion about aspects of this quotation. For example, it is reasonable to debate what should be included within music education curriculum. However, it is not accurate that DCLs protect free speech or that music educators were being coerced into teaching political ideologies or human sexuality. Although I am not aware of empirical research regarding indoctrination in music education, a comprehensive nonpartisan study in social studies education found that teachers use nonpartisan resources and want to provide multiple perspectives (American Historical Association 2024). It is also striking that the respondent, who identified themselves as a full-time music educator in PK–12 schools, believed “sexual grooming” is occurring in schools. Although rates of sexual predation among music educators are alarmingly high (Greer-Young 2024), those are not the “grooming” discourses that are most common among people who support the DEI backlash. It is more likely this person is using grooming in the “turning someone LGBTQ +” sense, but decades of research indicating that conversion therapy is ineffective makes such grooming unlikely (Andrade and Redondo 2022). Thus, bullshit asymmetry seems to aptly describe one set of discourses that teachers and teacher educators who supported DCLs frequently mobilized.

[White] Rage

Several DEI leaders identified the time just prior to our survey in 2020 as a critical moment of opportunity that might allow real progress toward racial equity. Even as they observed progress toward equity in their MEPA leadership, some participants worried this opening would not last:

When you think about how deep the roots are of systemic racism ... or as you're making connections between different organizations or different entities that are benefiting from being exclusionary.... It feels very overwhelming. You just go, “I don't even want to talk about anymore.” You ... take a little mental break.... But you have to get back in. Because while you may be tired of talking about it, you also realize as a minority, you're tired of living it.... But if we don't continue to have the conversation again, and move past the conversation and get to the work, then this is going to die out.... It's going to be a fad. It's going to phase out and it can't. (Black female MEPA DEI leader, 2021)

Given how history unfolded, these words seem prescient. Indeed, the broad movement toward equity did not last and was eclipsed by the DEI backlash.

In her 2016 book *White Rage*, Carol Anderson described a phenomenon that has occurred throughout American history: whenever African Americans gained

social power, there was a considerable (often vicious) backlash. Following the events of summer 2020, those driving the backlash expanded their attacks from their initial focus on CRT to add topics related to gender and sexuality (Feingold and Weishart 2023). Accordingly, the rage that participants shared was not limited to racialized anger; it extended to anger over increased freedoms for LGBTQ+ people. I therefore placed brackets around the word “White” each time I used it in [White] Rage, to signal that respondents’ rage was sometimes Cis Rage or Hetero Rage (for example).

Teachers who responded to both DCL surveys demonstrated [White] Rage in a variety of ways. Some attacked me as the person who designed the survey. For example, “Why in the world are you giving this survey to MUSIC teachers? Normally I ignore these, but this is so ridiculous I had to comment. Just. Teach. Music. The always-has-been-inclusive content in schools...” and “Why would you even ask this? This is such a blatant attempt to find or try to get data to support a vile viewpoint. You nor my students have no business knowing what my personal beliefs are.” While expressing anger toward me, these exemplars also illustrate additional discourses common among respondents who supported DCLs. In the first, the respondent invoked beliefs that music educators should only teach music content, which were also evident in the exemplar I selected to illustrate bullshit asymmetry.⁸ The respondent also stated that music education is automatically or inherently inclusive, a discourse I will discuss further below. Although the second respondent did not explicitly define what “vile viewpoint” I was advancing, their responses to other survey questions clarify that they are “considering leaving the profession due to political and gender nonsense” and they consistently drew on a discourse common among DCL supporters that teachers should not reveal their own gender or sexual orientation or teach about these topics.

[White] rage also manifested as participants responded angrily to question prompts, writing things like “These answers [multiple choice options] are stupid, I’m a man,” “Multi-Racial—and why do YOU need to know?? This is a survey skewed toward LGBTQ+ rights. What does color have to do with that?” and “none of your business” even when they could skip any question and response options included “prefer not to answer” and “I prefer another description [fill in text box].” Others wrote more expansively:

Liberals pretend that there's no way to teach in public schools without addressing sexuality and gender. That's a false narrative that needs to stop. There are way more important things to be working on ... like the number of migrants that

cannot communicate with the general public. Frankly, there are topics that have no place in the classroom and educators that intentionally try to perpetuate chaos and confusion in children have no place in this business.... There wasn't a child anywhere prior to the pandemic that questioned his or her gender. That was manufactured while they were at home surfing the internet and listening to adult perverts in the news spinning some twisted story to pollute the minds of youth who just want a sense of identity in the world. (DCL Survey 2023)

Although this response may also demonstrate bullshit asymmetry (transgender and genderfluid people have existed across times, cultures, and places; McNabb 2017), it more clearly demonstrates the respondent's nativism and Cis Rage. Similar [White] rage was present across responses from participants who supported DCLs.

DEI Orthodoxies

I coined the term *DEI Orthodoxies* to describe a process I had observed and participants across datasets described. As DEI work became more prevalent and visible, some DEI leaders seemed to assert that their way of talking about and implementing DEI was the right one. Sometimes, what they were suggesting was not evidence-based practice.⁹ Some DEI advocates publicly chastised or ridiculed DEI efforts that were different from theirs or that they believed to be subpar (usually on social media). DEI leaders related that they received criticism from “all sides”—MEPA members who believed they were doing too much, members who believed they were not doing enough, people who believed they knew the best way, and people who opposed DEI on principle.

Some teachers observed DEI leaders' public attacks on individual and organizational DEI efforts and pulled back from practices that might promote DEI, while others had their hands slapped and gave up. One discourse within this process could be identified as “calling out rather than calling in”.¹⁰ However, calling out rather than calling in only addresses the attacks and not the orthodoxies that motivated the attacks. The following quote is a good illustration of a music teacher affected by DEI orthodoxies:

I find it insulting that people involved in NafME, through the publishing of the various journals and articles, say that teachers, who do not agree or support these social/political agendas, do not have a place in our society. They then are labeled as racists, bigots, and “canceled” because [they] do not care for the students they teach. While an understanding of the troubles of African-American history is necessary when studying the music that came from that era, to tell all of our white students or students that are not African-American that they are racists and not important based on critical race theory is completely moronic and insulting to

those students. I teach at a majority African-American population school and find it insulting when people say I do not care for my non-white students. (DCL Survey 2022).

In this excerpt, the respondent's [White] rage is clearly evident. Their inaccurate views on critical race theory (CRT) may also indicate bullshit asymmetry, given the abundance of accessible resources that could counter the mis- or dis-information they've received.¹¹ This exemplar also demonstrates a theme present across anti-DEI responses, wherein anger and rejection of DEI stemmed from DEI orthodoxies. In this case, people like this respondent stated they were being called out as racist because they did not agree with (or perhaps did not understand) CRT. Other respondents rejected DEI orthodoxies about gender and sexuality, as in the [White] Rage exemplar on page 63 in this article ("Liberals pretend that there's no way to teach in public schools without addressing sexuality and gender..."). It is possible that educators who held similar beliefs may have been curious about or willing to try equity-oriented practices but encountered orthodoxies and gave up. What is clear across the data, however, is that responses rejecting DEI orthodoxies were common among participants who supported DCLs.

Antipolitics

Antipolitics was another reason that some music educators or teacher educators agreed with the DEI backlash. Antipolitics is the tendency for people to desire apolitical public institutions, which is often based on a populist belief that politics are corrupt and broken (Shaw 2021). In both DCL surveys, participants who were both pro- and anti-DCL mobilized antipolitical discourses. For example,

Q-anon school board members and legislators have made education extremely political, enough that I left the public school system in favor of a charter school. (DCL Survey 2022)

I believe that politicians should stay out of education. Period. But, since we've allowed our profession to become politicized for several decades, we have no choice but to engage. I understand where my state legislators are coming from with regard to "divisive topics laws." Topics such as CRT and others ARE divisive and serve to divide students based on race, economics, religion, political proclivities, etc. They have no business being taught in our schools. (DCL Survey 2022)

Antipolitics, while a common discourse about education policy (Shaw 2021), does not reflect reality. Entities that are explicitly political, like elected school boards, state legislatures, and state boards of education, determine many aspects of schools and schooling, including curriculum. Moreover, when supporters of the

DEI backlash use antipolitical discourses, they seem to forget that the DEI backlash is itself political. DCLs are state legislative directives to schools, and the backlash is fed and sustained by pundits and politicians sowing mis- and dis-information about schools to maintain or consolidate political power (e.g., Feingold and Weishart 2023). Nevertheless, DCL supporters often asserted that DCLs keep politics out of schools, as in this exemplar: “[DCLs] are good—trying to get education out of the hands of politics operatives and those with personal agendas.”

Diversity Ideology

Across datasets, much of the support for the DEI backlash came from self-avowed conservatives or people who used discourses rooted in homophobia or transphobia. Other respondents argued that DCLs did not affect them, their students, or their teaching. Although this was most often because (at the time of the survey) the respondent did not have a DCL in their state, other respondents who claimed no impact from DCLs frequently utilized discourses associated with diversity ideology (DI). Sarah Mayorga-Gallo (2014, 2019) theorized DI after examining discourses among White, liberal homeowners to understand how they justified their leadership of their predominantly non-White, renter neighborhood. Similar to how colorblindness furthers White supremacy (see Bonilla-Silva 2021), respondents’ use of DI upheld White [and cishetero] dominance in music education as well as implicitly supporting DCLs and the DEI backlash by painting them as innocuous. Here, I will briefly define the four tenets of DI (diversity as acceptance, diversity as commodity, diversity as intent, and diversity as liability) and illustrate how they manifested in survey responses.

Diversity as acceptance. The first tenet frames diversity as a celebration of differences: “Diversity as acceptance equates the presence of various kinds of people as a sure sign of deep inclusion and integration despite ongoing and underlying structural inequalities” (Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017, 895). Respondents utilized diversity as acceptance to rationalize assertions that DCLs did not affect their teaching.

I believe that music is inclusive of everybody, especially if one is focusing on higher quality classical and folk choral music, and contemporary pedagogical choral writings. We are dealing with universal concepts, like love, and honesty and confidence, not divisive issues. I think this is a pop culture issue that has become politicized, but that great music transcends these cultural trends and gives students a centering in themselves that is higher and more spiritual than whatever identity issues are happening in the present moment. Whatever their

race or gender, they can study and learn to find beauty in music. (DCL survey 2022)

In addition to antipolitics, this statement also illustrates how diversity as acceptance can support the DEI backlash by valuing diversity broadly but ignoring difference. More than simply assuming the presence of diverse people means a space is welcoming and equitable, diversity as acceptance blurs the distinction between idiosyncrasies and socially constructed identities: “By making personal preferences equal to structurally based identities, diversity ideology protects the systemic advantages and privileges of dominant group members” (Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017, 895). In the DCL data, some White, straight, or cis respondents discussed differences as personal preferences, as in this exemplar (that also showcases [White] rage and antipolitics):

[DCLs] are not affecting me at all. These laws are in place to prevent the manipulation/grooming of students at a very critical point in their development. Teachers are in positions to guide students not force their own political/social agendas on students. I find it troubling that our field that depends so much on expression is actively trying to silence those with differing views. I am always supportive of my students regardless of their life choices but I will not be forced to personally accept things that I do not support. My students know I will not treat them any differently than the way they want to be treated and we have open communication about that. However, outside of the band classroom what they do is up to them and no law is going to change that. While music is an emotionally connected art form, the sexual orientation of students and teachers is not a part of our curriculum. Also the grooming of students toward a political agenda is also not a part of the curriculum.

Although saying DCLs do not affect you is not the same as agreeing with them, diversity as acceptance discourses like those expressed above advance the DEI backlash because they promote difference-blind¹² approaches and actions, positioning DEI as creating division rather than racism, sexism, or (cis)heterosexism.

Diversity as commodity. The tenet “diversity as commodity” describes situations in which people of color are invited or valued primarily (or only) because they are resources for White people or organizations. Commodification discourses were somewhat common in the DEI leadership survey data. For example, one person wrote about “recruiting diverse communities into [colleges] so that you are not just interacting with one type of person.” In this scenario, the “diverse”¹³ person would be invited to provide dominant-culture students (and perhaps faculty) with opportunities to learn about the “other” and/or develop skills such as intercultural communication (Okuwobi 2021). However, participants who supported DCLs in

the surveys did not draw on diversity as commodity discourses, so I will not discuss this tenet further here.

Diversity as intent. Mayorga-Gallo (2014) identified diversity as intent in situations where people were feeling or displaying virtue related to an intention to foster inclusive relationships or organizations—even if nothing materialized. Thus, “diversity ideology only requires good intentions, not equitable outcomes” (Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017, 908). In the DEI leader interviews, one respondent of color pointed out, “there’s a difference between being invited and feeling welcomed.” Across the data sources I analyzed for this article, I noticed that White participants seemed to see themselves and their events as safe, universal, and inclusive (e.g., “Just. Teach. Music. The always-has-been-inclusive content in schools” from the exemplar in this article, p. 63). This discourse contributes to the DEI backlash because it perpetuates the notion that DEI efforts were never necessary in the first place. Participants of color, however, consistently described situations in which music educators, MEPAs, or music education events/curriculum were not safe, universal, or inclusive for them as teachers or for their students. In a more insidious manifestation of diversity as intent, several survey respondents stated homo- or transphobic views, but then said they still treated students with those identities well, as in the following:

Currently the laws you reference are not impacting my music teaching. Until any such laws are passed, our state is still encouraging teachers to teach a wide array of disturbingly explicit sexual curriculum to young students, to confuse children into thinking their gender could be anything they want it to be, and to portray racism as a defining characteristic of the American experience, which I refuse to do.

Additionally, there are other controversial laws that open the door for male students to share locker rooms, restrooms or potentially hotel rooms with females, which is a concern to myself and many families and students in my community, especially as we plan a music tour. I am grateful that my school district boldly allows teachers to teach in accordance with their conscience while abiding by state laws and teaching the full history of our nation.

As someone who holds traditional, biological views about male and female, I realize that it is possible that I could lose my job in the future if I don't compromise on my sincerely held beliefs, particularly if the Biden administration is successful in redefining key terms in the Title IX rules. It's a sobering thought. I care deeply about my students, who know that I will always treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve.

Diversity as intent furthers the DEI backlash by enabling people to still feel virtuous due to their good intentions even as spaces and organizations remain exclusive or unwelcoming.

Diversity as liability. The final tenet of DI describes a focus on tensions, problems or issues arising from diversity and controlling diverse spaces to maintain White comfort. Thus, “diversity as liability creates room both for love of diversity and the need to control diverse spaces and people of color for the sake of comfort, fairness, and high standards” (Smith and Mayorga-Gallo 2017, 902). Across the datasets, diversity-as-liability discourses most frequently manifested as preserving dominant comfort and policing quality. In one example of preserving dominant comfort, a respondent to the 2023 DCL survey wrote, “I have skipped what I believe to be valuable repertoire because of its perceived connection to so-called ‘divisive concepts,’ and I’ve had pushback from students about discussing the historical context of slave songs and spirituals or the lives of composers like Tchaikovsky and Benjamin Britten.”¹⁴ Diversity as liability in the form of policing quality was a common discourse when participants talked about contests/festivals, state conferences, or higher education recruitment practices. One Black male MEPA DEI leader was tasked with increasing the diversity of performing groups at his state MEA conference. He recalled receiving pushback on his suggestions to include bands from rural or under-resourced programs such as “Just because it’s a Black band or... whatever, doesn’t mean you get the privilege to come to the conference, it still has to be good” and wondering “good for what?” Diversity-as-liability discourses support the DEI backlash by foregrounding negative or uncomfortable aspects of diversity.

Anticipatory Obedience

Anticipatory obedience describes when someone changes their behavior in advance of a possible policy change or more than an enacted policy demands (Snyder 2017). While diversity as liability describes how liberal White people who claim to desire diversity still police difference for their own comfort, anticipatory obedience describes how citizens (including teachers) cede power in ways that are not required by policy. Snyder (2017) argued, “Most of the power of authoritarianism is freely given. In times like these, individuals think ahead about what a more repressive government will want and then offer themselves without being asked. A citizen who adapts in this way is teaching power what it can do” (17).

For example, a music educator might limit their repertoire even though they know it is legal, as in this response: “the law in Tennessee has caused me to rethink my use of certain African American Spirituals to avoid discussions that might be misconstrued to violate the law.” Similarly, music educators may also change their curriculum or pedagogy because of the DEI backlash, not in relation to a policy requirement. For example, “I’m not sure if my state or district have any divisive concept laws or policies, but just the fact that it has become such a big issue in the U.S has me second guessing song choices and lesson ideas.” Unfortunately, throughout the DCL survey open-ended responses, anticipatory obedience nearly always meant limiting musics that originated in Black communities, such as: “I took out my fifth-grade blues unit to avoid slavery discussion... no one told me to, I just did it.” Although anticipatory obedience does not necessarily mean that a teacher agrees with the DEI backlash, the results of anticipatory obedience are much the same as if someone alters curriculum and pedagogy because they agree with the DEI backlash.

Communication Strategies

For the remainder of this article, I describe communication strategies for music teachers and music teacher educators who are interested in preserving or advancing culturally sustaining, gender-inclusive, and ability-responsive instruction. I derived these strategies in relation to the discourses I identified in this article, but I do not think they should be applied axiomatically. Instead, I suggest that readers who are aware of the discourses I have identified in this article can flexibly apply these strategies in situations where they resonate. Specifically, I propose that music educators: (a) start conversations and listen; (b) cultivate networks and form coalitions; (c) offer ways forward, focusing on facts and ethics; (d) know the laws and get involved in implementation; and (e) (re)define freedom.

Start Conversations and Listen

Richerme (2025) argued that music teacher education can operate as an echo chamber and encouraged music educators and teacher educators to go outside of their familiar circle and listen to contrasting viewpoints. Richerme suggested specific ways music teacher educators can stop reinforcing echo chambers in preservice education and thus better equip young teachers to encounter diverse viewpoints in the communities where they eventually teach. Divisive rhetoric gains

power in part because people make assumptions about what other people think. These assumptions combine with bullshit asymmetry to shut down communication. Impaired or absent communication is not likely to be (re)established by arguing with people. Instead, educators can seek to build relationships, and that means trying to understand the other person's viewpoint and/or seeking common ground. Educators can foster these conversations by asking open questions, maintaining curiosity, and avoiding assumptions about what other people think, know, or value.

Teachers I talk with sometimes wonder why they must be the ones who reach out and build bridges. I understand their frustration, but someone must take the first step. I do not think educators should compromise on their inclusive ideals—I think they should seek common ground and build from there. In a school context, this common ground might be a shared desire for student success. Because [White] rage often arises out of fear combined with mis- or dis-information, starting conversations and listening might be a necessary first step. When beginning conversations with inflamed individuals, it may help to think about Hanlon's Razor, the idea that one should “never attribute to malice that which is adequately explained by stupidity”¹⁵ (Walmsley and O'Madagain 2020, 1430). Rather than being malicious, it is more likely people are not thinking about you or how their beliefs affect you; they may be operating out of fear or concerned about their own issues. Thus, Hanon's razor can help listeners be more empathetic. The point of starting conversations, at least initially, is to build relationships and trust, not to try to change anyone's mind. It may be helpful for listeners to cultivate humility about their own beliefs, recognizing that it is possible for both them and the person they disagree with to be mistaken or for each to see or understand part of the truth.

Cultivate Networks and Create Coalitions

In addition to starting conversations and listening to people who think differently, it may also be valuable to find people with similar beliefs to create supportive coalitions and even to take action. In my experience, music educators and teacher educators are generally conflict averse and busy, so they are hesitant to speak up about policies, even when the policies negatively affect them. Every DEI leader we interviewed (dominant culture, queer participants, and participants of color) spoke about how important it was that equity efforts be collaborative. One leader said, “When you're trying to defend yourself, it's very personal and it can be very

hurtful if you're not taken seriously. [That's why] it needs to be a committee of people and that committee of people needs to be as diverse as possible... it's an uphill battle and it requires courage." Cultivating networks and creating coalitions means many voices and many hands helping each person feel supported and keeping work sustainable.

Offer Ways Forward, Focusing on Facts and Ethics

Even given convincing evidence, people sometimes do not change their minds because they are preserving their ego—their sense of themselves as right or a good person. Arguing is likely to further entrench their beliefs, but offering a permission structure can be helpful, particularly when people have internalized DEI orthodoxies or are using antipolitical discourses. Permission structures “provide an emotional and psychological justification that allows someone to change deeply held beliefs and/or behaviors while importantly retaining their pride and integrity” (Model Thinkers n.d. paragraph 2). Model Thinkers (n.d.) offer examples of each type of permission structure and samples of how someone might use them in conversation. Many of these focus on reassuring someone that you can see where they are coming from, offering facts framed in a way the person might resonate with, and then suggesting a specific path to assimilating these facts into their worldview.

For example, in the datasets, some teachers who agreed with the DEI backlash mobilized parental rights discourses, suggesting it was a good thing for parents to have more control over their child(ren)'s learning and that they were glad to see parents involved in their child(ren)'s education. Using the social proof approach to permission structure, I could respond by saying that I agree that parent involvement is important, and that I am also glad when I see parents working constructively to ensure that education meets their child(ren)'s needs. However, as the parent of a lesbian child, my parental rights are not well-served by so-called “don't say gay” legislation, and I invite folks to consider that schools are for all the children and parents who are there.¹⁶ It is important to avoid being dishonest or manipulative in offering permission structures; the reason this approach may be effective comes from honesty or even vulnerability fostering connection.

When considering how to present facts and offer pathways forward, it may also be useful to consider Cialdini's six principles of persuasion: Liking, Authority, Scarcity, Consensus, Commitment, and Reciprocity (Cialdini 2007). Although Cialdini developed these principles for marketing, Cialdini and colleagues

(Wissler, Cialdini, and Schweitzer 2002) suggested how to apply each to dispute resolution in ways that may translate for conversations about the DEI backlash. These principles can also be useful as music educators and teacher educators consider how to frame their choices and create a curriculum-based rationale in case someone questions their choices. For example, the *Model Code of Ethics for Educators* (MCEE) might provide good authority and consensus rationales for educators' choices (National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification 2023).

Know the Laws and Get Involved in Implementation

It is important that music teachers and teacher educators take responsibility for knowing the exact language of laws and policies. Independently investigating policy language can reduce anticipatory obedience and ameliorate educator stress because pundits' interpretations often overstate the impacts of DCLs and the DEI backlash (Feingold and Weishart 2023). Moreover, teachers may have the most power at the local level, by asking questions like, "The law says x, why are we doing y?" or comparing local implementation to how laws are implemented in similar spaces. Local interpretation and implementation can have a buffering effect that protects students and teachers by enacting policy in the most humane possible ways (Salvador et al. 2024; Salvador and Shaw 2025).

(Re)Define Freedom

Many supporters of the DEI backlash assert arguments about free speech, individual freedoms, and parental rights in support of their agenda (e.g., Campana et al. 2024). Such views can create challenging situations in pluralistic settings like schools. For her work with PK–12 students, Carla Shalaby (2017) defines freedom as safely getting to be a whole, human self, in community with other whole, human selves, without any threats or assaults to anyone's wellbeing, with each person using their power to make sure that each person is taken care of. She argues that the practice of freedom is a responsibility that can be taught and learned and requires practice. (Re)defining freedom as a community responsibility that requires practice could help preserve or advance culturally sustaining, gender-inclusive, and ability-responsive pedagogies and schools.

Conclusion

The DEI backlash is a complex situation that arises from and propels divisive rhetoric. Awareness of the discourses that accompanied music educators' and teacher educators' support for the DEI backlash could help music educators and teacher educators communicate better with one another, students, families, and their communities. Marjorie Stoneman Douglas (1941) said, "Speak up. Be a nuisance where it counts. Do your part to inform and stimulate the public to join your action.... Be depressed, discouraged, and disappointed at failure and the disheartening effects of ignorance, greed, corruption and bad politics—but never give up" (Foreword).

Historical truths, the importance of human dignity and self-determination, and educational applications of equity, justice, and belonging have not become less important because of the backlash. Given the discourses that contribute to support for the DEI backlash among music educators and teacher educators (bullshit asymmetry, [White] rage, DEI orthodoxies, antipolitics, diversity ideology, and anticipatory obedience), I urge readers to be a nuisance: by starting conversations, forming coalitions, focusing on facts and ethics, knowing the exact language of the laws, involving themselves in local policy implementation, and asking tough questions to stick up for students and colleagues.

About the Author

Karen Salvador is Associate Professor and Chair of Music Education at Michigan State University (MSU), where she teaches coursework on early childhood music, elementary music, research, and psychology. Previously, she taught elementary music, choir, drama, and early childhood music in school and community settings. Dr. Salvador also currently teaches early childhood music, conducts the MSU children's choir, and directs MSU's Early Childhood Music Play Laboratory. She is a past president of the Michigan Music Education Association and NafME's North Central Division. Her research pertains to how music educators meet individual student needs, particularly in early childhood and elementary settings. This research extends into music teacher education, exploring both program practices for music educator preparation and the lived experiences of music educators who are working to become more inclusive and responsive educators. Recently, she has focused on divisive concepts laws and the DEI backlash.

References

- Alonso, Johanna. 2023, December 19. Texas colleges prepare for the end of DEI. *Inside Higher Education*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/diversity/2023/12/19/texas-institutions-prepare-anti-dei-law-go-effect>
- American Historical Association. 2024. *American lesson plan: Teaching US history in secondary schools* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 2024). <https://www.historians.org/teaching-learning/k-12-education/american-lesson-plan/>
- Anderson, Carol. 2016. *White rage*. Bloomsbury USA.
- Andrade, Gabriel, and M. Campo Redondo. 2022. Is conversion therapy ethical? A renewed discussion in the context of legal efforts to ban it. *Ethics, Medicine and Public Health* 20: 100732. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jemep.2021.100732>
- Anti-Defamation League. 2022, August 5. What is “grooming?” The truth behind the dangerous, bigoted lie targeting the LGBTQ + community. <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/what-grooming-truth-behind-dangerous-bigoted-lie-targeting-lgbtq-community>
- Associated Press. 2025, February 21. Judge largely blocks Trump's executive orders ending federal support for DEI programs. *National Public Radio*. <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/21/nx-s1-5305287/trump-dei-programs-executive-order-judge>
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2021. *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Brandolini, Alberto. 2013, January 11. Bullshit Asymmetry Principle: The amount of energy needed to refute bullshit is an order of magnitude bigger than to produce it. *Twitter*.
- Bylica, Kelly, Diana Hawley, and Sophie Lewis. 2024. “Walking on eggshells”: Music educator perceptions of agency in times of surveillance and divisive concept laws. *Arts Education Policy Review* 126 (3): 192–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2024.2357289>
- Calliham, Chancie. 2025, February 4. Calling In: Author Q&A with Loretta Ross. *Political Research Associates*. <https://politicalresearch.org/2025/02/04/calling>
- Salvador, Karen. 2026. Examining music educators’ support for the DEI backlash. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 25 (3): 56–83. <https://doi.org/10.22176/act25.3.56>

- Campana, Alexandra. C., Laurie Todd-Smith, and Julia Butch. 2024. Restoring parental rights in schools. *America First Policy Institute*. <https://americafirstpolicy.com/issues/restoring-parental-rights-in-schools>
- Chang, Edward H., Katherine L. Milkman, Dena M. Gromet, Robert W. Rebele, Cade Massey, Angela L. Duckworth, and Adam M. Grant. 2019. The mixed effects of online diversity training. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116 (16): 7778–83. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1816076116>
- Cialdini, Robert B. 2007. *Influence: The psychology of persuasion*. HarperCollins.
- Dale, Daniel. 2024, September 4. Fact check: Trump falsely claims schools are secretly sending children for gender-affirming surgeries. *CNN Politics*. <https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/04/politics/donald-trump-fact-check-children-gender-affirming-surgery/index.html>
- Dobbin, Frank, and Alexandra Kalev. 2016. Why diversity programs fail. *Harvard Business Review* 94 (7): 14.
- Dobbin, Frank, and Alexandra Kalev. 2018. Why doesn't diversity training work? The challenge for industry and academia. *Anthropology Now* 10 (2): 48–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19428200.2018.1493182>
- Douglas, Marjorie Stoneman. 1941. *A guide to Miami and Dade County* (Foreword).
- Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling. 2025, February 3. *Federal Register* 90 (21): 8853–57. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/02/03/2025-02232/ending-radical-indoctrination-in-k-12-schooling>
- Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing. 2025, January 29. *Federal Register* 90 (18): 8339–41. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/01/29/2025-01953/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing>
- Federal Register 2025. 2025 Donald J. Trump Executive Orders. *National Archives*. <https://www.federalregister.gov/presidential-documents/executive-orders/donald-trump/2025>
- Feingold, Jonathan, and Joshua Weishart, 2023. How discriminatory censorship laws imperil public education. *National Education Policy Center*. <http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/censorship>
- Salvador, Karen. 2026. Examining music educators' support for the DEI backlash. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 25 (3): 56–83. <https://doi.org/10.22176/act25.3.56>

Greer-Young, Hannah. 2024. *The call is coming from inside the house: Sexual misconduct in US band programs*. Master's thesis. George Mason University.

Goldstein, Dana. 2025, April 24. Judge limits Trump's ability to withhold school funds over D.E.I. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/24/us/trump-public-school-funds-dei.html>

Guynn, Jessica. 2023, December 26. DEI under siege: Why more businesses are being accused of 'reverse discrimination.' *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/careers/2023/12/20/dei-reverse-discrimination-lawsuits-increase-woke/71923487007/>

Harvard Diversity Inclusion and Belonging. n.d. *Calling in and calling out guide*. https://edib.harvard.edu/files/dib/files/calling_in_and_calling_out_guide_v4.pdf

Hesmondhalgh, David. 2006. Discourse analysis and content analysis. In *Analyzing Media Texts Vol. 4*, edited by Marie Gillespie and Jason Toyne, 119–156. McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Hicks, Maggie. 2024, April 15. Dozens of campuses shed or alter DEI efforts as political pressure mounts. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/dozens-of-campus-shed-or-alter-dei-efforts-as-political-pressure-mounts>

Johnson, Akilah. 2024, October 11. Racism was called a health threat. Then came the DEI backlash. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2024/10/11/dei-researchers-universities-attacked/>

Lavietes, Matt. 2022, April 21. "I cannot teach in Florida": LGBTQ educators fear fallout from new school law. NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-politics-and-policy/-cannot-teach-florida-lgbtq-educators-fear-fallout-new-school-law-rcna22106>

Leonard, Mike. 2024, November 26. DEI backlash: Companies are responding to diversity challenges. Podcast episode for *On the Merits*. Bloomberg Law. <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/business-and-practice/dei-backlash-companies-are-responding-to-diversity-challenges>

Lu, Adrienne. 2022, April 5. Education professors react to divisive-concept laws. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/education-professors-react-to-divisive-concept-laws>

Mayorga-Gallo, Sarah. 2014. *Behind the white picket fence: Power and privilege in a multiethnic neighborhood*. UNC Press.

Salvador, Karen. 2026. Examining music educators' support for the DEI backlash. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 25 (3): 56–83. <https://doi.org/10.22176/act25.3.56>

- Mayorga-Gallo, Sarah. 2019. The white-centering logic of diversity ideology. *American Behavioral Scientist* 63 (13): 1789–1809. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219842619>
- McCarthy, Owen. 2025, April 9. MSU president pushes back on Trump administration's student visa revocations. *The State News*. <https://statenews.com/article/2025/04/msu-president-pushes-back-on-trump-administrations-student-visa-revocations>
- McNabb, Charlie. 2017. *Nonbinary gender identities: History, culture, resources*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Model Thinkers. n.d. *Permission structure*. <https://modelthinkers.com/mental-model/permission-structure>
- National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification. 2023. *Model Code of Ethics for Educators*. 2nd ed. https://www.nasdtec.net/page/MCEE_Doc
- Nickerson, Raymond S. 1998. Confirmation bias: A ubiquitous phenomenon in many guises. *Review of General Psychology* 2 (2): 175–220. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.2.2.175>
- Okuwobi, Oneya F. 2021. How does it feel to be a commodity? How pastors, professors, and professionals experience diversity ideology in multiracial organizations. PhD diss., Ohio State University.
- Patton, Michael Q. 2015. *Qualitative research and evaluation methods*. 4th ed. Sage.
- PEN America. n.d. PEN America index of educational gag orders. <https://airtable.com/appg59iDuPhlLPPFp/shrtwub-fBUo2tuHyO/tbleHs5GeZ9dIgMe2/viw2DF6zmRF3n3VzZ>
- Pendharkar, Eesha. 2022, October 17. Legal challenges to ‘divisive concepts’ laws: An update. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/legal-challenges-to-divisive-concepts-laws-an-update/2022/10>
- Priniski, J. Hunter, and Zachary Horne. 2018. Attitude change on Reddit’s “Change My View.” In *Proceedings of the annual meeting of the Cognitive Science Society* 40.
- Richerme, Lauren Kapalka. 2025. Educating ungrounded values: Interrogating political versus academic epistemologies in music teacher education. *Journal of Research in Music Education* 73 (3): 265–80.
- Salvador, Karen. 2026. Examining music educators’ support for the DEI backlash. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 25 (3): 56–83. <https://doi.org/10.22176/act25.3.56>

- Ross, Loretta J. 2025. *Calling in: How to start making change with those you'd rather cancel*. Simon & Schuster.
- Salvador, Karen, Andrew Bohn, and Anne Martin. 2024. Divisive concepts laws and music education: PK–20 music educators' perceptions and discourses. *Arts Education Policy Review* 125 (4): 352–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2023.2286598>
- Salvador, Karen, and Jacqueline Kelly-McHale. 2017. Music teacher educator perspectives on social justice. *Journal of Research in Music Education* 65: 6–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022429417690340>
- Salvador, Karen, and Ryan D. Shaw. 2025. Music educators' perceptions of divisive concepts laws. *Arts Education Policy Review*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2025.2540777>
- Salvador, Karen, and Amy Sierzega. 2025. US music education professional association DEI leaders' recommendations for inclusive praxis. *Journal of Music Teacher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10570837251327343>
- Salvador, Karen, and Amy Sierzega. 2024. Lived experiences of diversity equity inclusion leaders in US music education professional associations. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 241: 7–29.
- Salvador, Karen, and Amy Sierzega. 2023. Formative experiences of DEI leaders in music education. *Journal of Research in Music Education* 71 (2): 133–54. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00224294221123076>
- Saraisky, Nancy Green. 2016. Analyzing public discourse: Using media content analysis to understand the policy process. *Current Issues in Comparative Education* 18 (1): 26–41. <https://doi.org/10.52214/cice.v18i1.11526>
- Selvi, Ali Fuad. 2019. Qualitative content analysis. In *The Routledge handbook of research methods in applied linguistics*, edited by Tim McNamara and Luke Plonsky, 440–52. Routledge.
- Shalaby, Carla. 2017. *Troublemakers: Lessons in freedom from young children at school*. The New Press.
- Shaw, Ryan D. 2021. The influence of anti-politics on arts education policy. *Arts Education Policy Review* 122 (4): 253–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632913.2020.1744054>
- Salvador, Karen. 2026. Examining music educators' support for the DEI backlash. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 25 (3): 56–83. <https://doi.org/10.22176/act25.3.56>

- Smith, Candis W., and Sarah Mayorga-Gallo. 2017. The new principle-policy gap: How diversity ideology subverts diversity initiatives. *Sociological Perspectives* 60 (5): 889–911. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121417719693>
- Smith, Erec. 2024, March 7. *Divisive, excessive, ineffective: The real impact of DEI on college campuses*. CATO Institute. <https://www.cato.org/testimony/divisive-excessive-ineffective-real-impact-dei-college-campuses#>
- Snyder, Timothy. 2017. *On tyranny: Twenty lessons from the twentieth century*. Tim Duggan Books.
- Talbot, Brent C. 2016. Discourse analysis. In *Music therapy research*, 3rd ed., edited by Barbara Wheeler and Kathleen Murphy, 510–20. Barcelona Publishers.
- Taylor, Don, Jessica Nápoles, and Evan Powers. 2025. Divisive concepts laws: The experiences of queer male choir teachers of color in Florida and Texas. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 244: 8–26.
- University of New Mexico. n.d. *Calling in: A toolkit for becoming an upstander*. https://hsc.unm.edu/medicine/education/leo/_media/quarterly-reports/leo-toolkit_calling-in-vs-calling-out.pdf
- Walmsley, Joel, and Cathal O'Madagain. 2020. The worst-motive fallacy: A negativity bias in motive attribution. *Psychological Science* 31 (11): 1430–38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797620954492>
- Winters, Georgia, Leah E. Kaylor, and Elizabeth L. Jeglic. 2022. Toward a universal definition of child sexual grooming. *Deviant Behavior* 43(8): 926–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01639625.2021.1941427>
- Wissler, Roselle, Robert B. Cialdini, and N. J. Schweitzer. 2002. The science of influence: Using six principles of persuasion to negotiate and mediate more effectively. *Dispute Resolution Magazine* 9: 20–22.

Notes

¹ As of November 15, 2025 the following states had DCLs: AL, AR, AZ, CA, FL, GA, ID, IN, IA, KS, KY, LA, MS, MT, NH, NC, ND, OH, OK, SC, SD, TN, TX, UT, VA, WV, WY (Pen America n.d.).

² The origin of the term “DEI backlash” is not clear. However, journalists consistently use this term to describe an ongoing phenomenon that began around 2022,

Salvador, Karen. 2026. Examining music educators' support for the DEI backlash. *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 25 (3): 56–83. <https://doi.org/10.22176/act25.3.56>

characterized by corporations backing away from DEI efforts and states adopting laws and policies that curtailed or eliminated DEI efforts on college campuses (e.g., Johnson 2024; Leonard 2024).

³ Scholars have justifiably problematized DEI as a term and as a concept (e.g., Okuwobi 2021). I prefer other terms such as justice and belonging, because I believe they are more humanizing and encourage attention to systemic change. I retained DEI in this article to reference DEI leaders, committees, positions, and programs (because authors and organizations used that terminology most frequently) and the “DEI backlash” (because that is what it is called).

⁴ Without any apparent sense of irony, this executive order also establishes a commission to promote patriotic education.

⁵ We defined MEPAs as membership-based nonprofit organizations focused on advancing music education through actions including professional development, policy, and advocacy. MEPAs can be organized around a pedagogy (e.g., American Orff Schulwerk Association), an instrument (e.g., Percussive Arts Society), a genre (e.g., Jazz Education Network), or a place (e.g., the Texas Music Educators Association) (Salvador and Sierzega 2023).

⁶ All data from this survey is available at the Qualitative Data Repository. <https://data.qdr.syr.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.5064/F6I9I1T1>

⁷ I placed “White” in brackets here because, as I will explain, respondents’ rage was not always explicitly racialized; sometimes it was *Cis Rage* or *Hetero Rage*.

⁸ In previously published articles, I already identified some of these same discourses as reasons that respondents said DCLs were not affecting their instruction (e.g., music educators should teach content only and music is inherently inclusive). However, not all respondents who held these views supported DCLs. In the current article, I identified these (and other) discourses as common among respondents who supported DCLs and therefore potentially contributing to the DEI backlash.

⁹ For example, many DEI leaders pushed for organizations to require DEI training. Empirical research on DEI trainings showed mixed and even negative effects, particularly when the training was required (Chang et al. 2019; Dobbin and Kalev 2016; Dobbin and Kalev 2018).

¹⁰ Ngọc Loan Trần proposed “calling in” as an alternative to “calling out” in a 2013 blog but after intense backlash they did not revisit it (Calliham, 2025). The term was taken up and popularized by social justice activist Loretta J. Ross (e.g., Ross, 2025) and many guides to calling out and calling in are now available. See,

for example, *Harvard Diversity Inclusion and Belonging* (n.d.), University of New Mexico (n.d.).

¹¹ CRT does not assert that non-African American people are automatically racist or unimportant.

¹² Salvador and Kelly-McHale (2017) proposed “difference-blind” as an analogue to Bonilla-Silva’s colorblind racism to describe when willful ignorance extends to more facets of diversity than race, including gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. While I think it is ableist to use the word “blind” in a pejorative way, I used both of these terms because colorblind racism describes a well-understood phenomenon that is important to name in this article.

¹³ Some DCL survey respondents used the word “diverse” as a synonym for people from nondominant or historically marginalized groups. That is, “diverse” meant people of color, trans people, gay people, etc.

¹⁴ Note that this response also clearly illustrates anticipatory obedience, which I describe next.

¹⁵ I think the word “stupidity” is overly disparaging for the phenomenon they investigated. I wonder if the terms “indifference” or “self-centeredness” might be more useful for promoting dialogue. It is also possible that people just do not know things that are outside their experience, and this thought may help cultivate dialogue.

¹⁶ I acknowledge that this is unlikely to change someone’s mind if they are highly entrenched in their beliefs. However, if people were not sure what to think and the rhetoric on parental rights was effective for them, they may not have thought to wonder, “which parents’ rights?” In such cases, this form of persuasion may be effective. Again, Hanlon’s razor can be effective here.