WORKPLACE
A JOURNAL FOR ACADEMIC LABOR
ISSN 1715-0094

#37
2026

Aronson, B., Kheirkhah, H., Boveda, M., & Hernandez-Mats, K. (2026). Unionized Teachers of Color's interpretations of the silencing of diversity discourse in Florida: An intersectional qualitative study. *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, *37*, 6-27. https//doi.org/10.14288/workplace.v37i1.187153

UNIONIZED TEACHERS OF COLOR'S INTERPRETATIONS OF THE SILENCING OF DIVERSITY DISCOURSE IN FLORIDA: AN INTERSECTIONAL QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This intersectional qualitative study seeks to unpack how public school teachers of color in South Florida make sense of efforts to silence Florida educators and prohibit teaching "that individuals share responsibility for others' past actions by virtue of their race, sex or national origin." Drawing on Black feminist theories, (also identified as problematic by Florida policy makers), this study examines not just diverse identities, but also how public schooling is implicated in perpetuating multiple and interconnected systems of oppression (e.g., racism, classism, ableism, patriarchy). Unlike the remainder of the country where the teaching profession is overwhelmingly white, teachers in South Florida are predominantly culturally and ethnically diverse (e.g., 56.7 self-identify as Hispanic (56.7%), and 24.9% as Black non-Hispanic, 24.9%). In this study, education researchers collaborated with the union president of the fourth largest school district in the United States to ask teachers about their interpretations of "anti-Woke" legislations. Moreover, the teachers were asked to explain how they and other educators are enacting, resisting, and/or subverting the intentions of these legislations.

Keywords: urban schools, teacher's unions, critical race theory, anti-Woke, anti-LGBT, intersectionality

INTRODUCTION

In the current landscape of educational policy, marked by contentious debates and legislative actions, the voices of teachers are often marginalized (Ellison et al., 2018). This is particularly true for teachers of color who navigate the complexities of identity, cultural responsiveness, and systemic inequities within the classroom. This intersectional qualitative study aims to amplify those voices by focusing on unionized public school teachers of color in South Florida. Amidst a backdrop of legislation in the state aimed at silencing discussions of race, gender, sexuality, social and emotional learning (SEL), and systemic oppression, this study seeks to understand how these teachers interpret and respond to these policies. By centering their experiences and perspectives, we hope to shed light on the ways they navigate these challenges, resist censorship, and advocate for their students. Informed by Black feminist theories (Collins, 1990/2000; Davis, 1981; Crenshaw, 1991), this research explores the intersections of race, gender, and power within the educational landscape, contributing to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of teachers of color and the implications for educational equity.

Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) serves as a critical focal point for this study because it represents one of the most racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse teacher workforces in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; Niche, n.d.), standing in stark contrast to national demographics where the profession has remained historically white (Ladson-Billings, 1999). This diversity, combined with the district's large size, positions M-DCPS as a consequential site for understanding how teachers of color experience and respond to restrictive educational policies. Moreover, the district's educators are uniquely situated within an increasingly hostile political climate in Florida, where recent legislation seeks to curtail discussions of race, gender, sexuality, and systemic inequity—issues that directly shape the professional and personal lives of teachers of color. The role of the United Teachers of Dade (UTD), the sole bargaining agent for M-DCPS employees, further underscores the significance of this context. As UTD faces unprecedented threats to its existence through union-busting legislation such as Senate Bill 256 and well-funded opposition groups, the district becomes a pivotal case for examining how unionized teachers of color mobilize collective power, draw on shared identities, and leverage organizational networks to navigate censorship and defend public education. By situating the study in M-DCPS, we illuminate how teachers of color confront these intersecting pressures, including demographic, political, and institutional, and how their union affiliations shape their strategies of resistance, solidarity, and advocacy. Specifically we asked:

1. How do unionized teachers of color draw on personal, professional, and collective experiences to navigate the challenges of Florida's restrictive educational policies?
2. How do these teachers understand and respond to censorship, curriculum restrictions, and broader attacks on public education?

Unlike the remainder of the country where the teaching profession is overwhelmingly white (Villegas & Irvine, 2010), teachers in South Florida are predominantly culturally and ethnically diverse (e.g., 56.7% self-identify as Hispanic and 24.9% as Black non-Hispanic). Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics reported that in the 2017–18 school year, 69.4% of U.S. teachers were "members of a union or employee association" (National Teacher and Principal Survey, 2018). In Florida, that percentage was only 52.5%. As of November 2023, UTD had a membership of 58.4% of teachers in Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS). 43.6% of these teachers are Black, 39.6% are Hispanic, 13% are white, and 1% are Asian.

UTD is the exclusive bargaining agent for Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS), with approximately 25,150 employees who are full and part-time teachers, paraprofessionals, school support personnel, and office employees. Those numbers are now under threat after a union-busting law, Senate Bill 256, was signed by the Republican Governor Ron DeSantis in May 2023. This law imposed restrictions on most public-sector unions and required 60% of registered teachers to be dues-paying members of their workplace's union for their union to remain certified. As a result of this effort, UTD, the only teachers union in M-DCPS history was directly challenged with an election that took place October 2024 giving teachers the option to keep UTD as their representation, to replace it with a new organization called Miami-Dade Education Coalition, or to have no union representation at all. The Miami-Dade Education Coalition is heavily funded by the national conservative group the Freedom Foundation that also took credit for supporting Senate Bill 256. Despite efforts to disband UTD, 83% of teachers voted to keep UTD as their bargaining representative.

In light of this context, this study investigates United Teachers of Dade (UTD) affiliated teachers of color and their responses to anti-Critical Race Theory (CRT) and anti-LGBTQ legislation in Florida and explores how connections to their teachers union can be a powerful network of support. This is an empirical study that helps us understand how responses to attacks on public education are diverted through collectives and generate solidarity amongst educators.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The ongoing legislative and policy-based attacks on justice-focused curricula across the United States (Miller et al., 2023; Cao, 2021; Muñiz, 2024; Cowden & O'Brien, 2025) underscore a deep-rooted conflict between educational practices and political ideologies. Recent scholarship further situates contemporary anti-CRT legislation within broader projects of racial formation and nation-building, in which education functions as a key site for defining belonging, citizenship, and acceptable knowledge. Comparative analyses demonstrate that curricular suppression in the United States parallels global patterns in which state power is mobilized to regulate racial discourse and discipline justice-oriented educators under nationalist political conditions (Lee et al., 2025). From this perspective, Florida's anti-CRT and anti-LGBTQ policies are not isolated reactions but part of a transnational pattern of using schooling to reassert hegemonic racial and national narratives.

Recent anti–Critical Race Theory (CRT) measures, including Florida's Stop W.O.K.E. Act, classroom restrictions enacted across multiple states, and earlier federal actions such as Executive Order 13950, are not isolated policy interventions but part of a longer historical trajectory in which public education has been leveraged to uphold White supremacy and limit challenges to dominant racial narratives (Miller et al., 2023). Empirical research further demonstrates how these legislative efforts operate through epistemic exclusion, as so-called "divisive" education laws marginalize justice-oriented educators by excluding them from policy formation, constraining knowledge-sharing practices, and intensifying precarity and surveillance within schools (Rodriguez et al., 2025). Anti-CRT discourse creates a chilling effect on instruction, marked by self-censorship and heightened surveillance of teachers, particularly teachers of color. In these "dangerous times," educators often alter their pedagogy out of fear of retaliation rather than instructional concern (Kheirkhah & Aronson, 2025).

The origins of contemporary anti-CRT sentiment can be traced back to the 18th century, where ideologies of racial superiority provided a rationale for the subjugation of African and Indigenous populations (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Rodriguez et al., 2022). Conservative critiques continued into the 20th century, with a narrative emerging that accused public schools of undermining American values by promoting a "dangerous" curriculum enriched with diverse historical and social justice perspectives (Rana, 2023). Since 2020, widespread movements for racial justice and greater curricular equity have prompted a renewed backlash, resulting in a surge of legislation designed to limit conversations about race and racism in classrooms and reflecting broader societal struggles over identity, power, and belonging (Eden, 2021; López et al., 2015). This has only worsened since the re-election of Donald Trump. Legislation has characterized CRT as a form of indoctrination, placing significant obstacles in the path of educators who endeavor to promote critical dialogue and inclusive curricula, thus perpetuating existing racial hierarchies and narrowing public education to primarily white-centric narratives (Furrey, 2023; Grice, 2022). In navigating this challenging landscape, educators are increasingly becoming frontline advocates for academic freedom and social justice, contending with the far-reaching impacts of anti-CRT laws on their teaching practices and the educational journeys of their students (Matias & Liou, 2015; Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024).

In response to Florida's anti-CRT and anti-LGBTQ legislation, which restricts classroom discussion of both racial justice and LGBTQ+ topics, teachers' unions have had to navigate complex legal and ideological landscapes to protect educators' rights, maintain academic integrity, and support teacher agency (Moe, 2011; Cao, 2021; Cowden & O'Brien, 2025; Muñiz, 2024; Jayakumar & Kohli, 2023; Kheirkhah & Aronson, 2025). These unions stand at a crossroads, balancing advocacy for teachers' academic freedom with compliance under restrictive state mandates (Eberts, 2007; Moe, 2001, 2011). On the other hand, public school teachers in Florida are at the forefront of the debate surrounding anti-CRT legislation, directly experiencing the effects of state-imposed restrictions on classroom discussions about race and identity (Tresvant, 2024). These teachers, as primary curricular creators and pedagogical decision-makers, bear the responsibility of adhering to controversial topics including racism, sexism and policies while attempting to meet students' educational needs (Bissell, 2023; Tresvant, 2024).

Recent studies reveal that teachers of color are deeply concerned that anti-CRT policies diminish students' access to culturally relevant representation and inclusive discussions, which in turn undermines their overall well-being and learning experiences (Cowden & O'Brien, 2023; Tresvant, 2024). Many educators note that students often lead discussions on race, gender, and identity, seeking guidance from their teachers; however, these policies stifle vital conversations, leaving students' questions unanswered and diminishing their cultural representation (Miller et al., 2023; Tresvant, 2024). Tresvant (2024) reported that teachers working with majority–students of color expressed concerns that such legislation could diminish representation of their students' cultural identities and negatively affect their overall well-being. In a related analysis, Miller et al. (2023) showed that anti-CRT discourse often employs tactics such as gaslighting, which can delegitimize the lived experiences of students of color and pressure them to question their own realities. Some educators also noted that these policies are often driven by groups resistant to acknowledging aspects of U.S. history that complicate narratives of ancestry or national identity. Therefore, to foster a more inclusive environment, policymakers must reevaluate anti-CRT measures and provide teachers with the necessary resources to address social issues effectively (Tresvant, 2024). Ultimately, these initiatives highlight the intersection of education and political ideology, raising questions about public education's role in perpetuating or challenging systemic inequalities (Kokka, 2018; Tresvant, 2024).

Recent educational policies, such as Florida's *Individual Freedom Act,*' exemplify a growing trend of anti-intellectualism in the U.S., by restricting the use of established scholarly frameworks and recharacterizing critical academic inquiry, particularly Critical Race Theory, as "indoctrination" rather than legitimate knowledge production (DeSantis, 2024; LoBue & Douglass, 2023).These measures not only reshape public education discourse but also limit educators' capacity to engage students in discussions on race and social equity, posing challenges to fostering critical, reflective learning environments (Apple & Au, 2009; Giroux, 1988). This landscape underscores the urgent need for teachers' unions and professional organizations to advocate for educators' rights and protect the integrity of academic discourse, ensuring that public schools remain spaces for critical engagement and social justice (Kokka, 2018).

The proliferation of anti-CRT and anti-LGBTQ legislation in Florida exemplifies complex interplay between education and political ideology, placing educators in precarious positions as they navigate restrictive policies. Teachers' unions are central in defending academic freedom and supporting educators' ability to address sensitive topics related to race, identity, and equity (Moe, 2011; Cao, 2021). Research shows that these legislative pressures disproportionately affect teachers of color, who face heightened challenges in enacting inclusive curricula and fostering student engagement (Tresvant, 2024; Cowden & O'Brien, 2023). Collectively, these dynamics highlight how restrictive policies can constrain teacher agency, limit curricular possibilities, and reduce students' access to diverse perspectives and culturally relevant representation (Miller et al., 2023; Bissell, 2023). By situating these challenges within the broader political and policy context, this study contributes to understanding how educators navigate contested educational environments and the crucial role of union advocacy in sustaining spaces for critical learning and social justice.

METHODS

This study engages an intersectional qualitative inquiry (Collins, 1990/2022; Crenshaw, 1991; Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022), which is grounded in Black feminist thought and critical race theory. Intersectionality here is understood not simply as the sum of multiple identity markers but as an analytic framework for examining how systems of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, classism, xenophobia, and heteropatriarchy) converge to shape the experiences of teachers of color. Through this lens, teachers' narratives are not treated as isolated experiences but as situated within broader power structures that discipline and constrain educational practice. Our study centers unionized educators of color and considers the ways their experiences are shaped by and respond to the restrictive policy contexts of southern Florida. To guide our inquiry, we asked:

1. How do unionized teachers of color draw on personal, professional, and collective experiences to navigate the challenges of Florida's restrictive educational policies?
2. How do these teachers understand and respond to censorship, curriculum restrictions, and broader attacks on public education?

This orientation also aligns with critical qualitative inquiry (Denzin, 2017), which seeks to interrogate and disrupt inequities in an ethically responsible manner. Rather than aiming for neutrality, we acknowledge our own

positionalities and recognize that research is a political and relational act (Smith, 2019). We conceptualize positionality as a pedagogical stance through which educators' lived experiences generate knowledge and shape practice (Kheirkhah Abkenari, 2025). Our use of counterstorytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) further situates this project within CRT traditions, as participants' stories function as a challenge to dominant narratives about public education and "anti-woke" policies in Florida.

Typically, counterstorytelling is done by centering People of Color's narratives. Furthermore, Berry and Cook (2019) explain:

> Narrative research for intersectionality (1) focuses on multiple inequalities embedded in identities and intersecting forms of oppression, (2) avoids hierarchies of oppression, (3) articulates experiences are at least one of the three forms of intersectionality, (4) centers of voice(s) of multiply burdened, and (5) uses counter-storytelling to provide alternative realities to debunk the master narrative(s).

Given that the majority of teachers and teacher union members in the United States are white, the narratives shared by participants serve as counternarratives.

Research Setting & Participants

Participants included nine teachers of color who were members of the United Teachers of Dade (UTD) working in the Miami-Dade Public School System (MDPSS). They participated in two focus groups held at union offices in Miami in the Spring of 2024. Teachers were purposively selected to reflect varied school levels, subject areas, and racial/ethnic backgrounds (see Table 1 for detailed participant descriptors). While the sample is not intended to be representative, small qualitative studies allow for the illumination of lived experiences and the identification of patterns in how teachers navigate the sociopolitical context.

Table 1.
Participants' Demographic Profiles (CRT/ CRE Language)

Pseudonym	Background Summary
Shawntay	Shawntay is a Black woman educator whose social location reflects intersecting identities of race, gender, social class, religion, and professional status. She brings over two decades of experience teaching in urban public schools in the U.S. South, primarily in social sciences and literacy education. Her positionality as a veteran educator in racially and economically marginalized school contexts informs her critical perspectives on equity, access, and institutional power.
ReRe	ReRe is a Black woman educator from an economically privileged background whose professional identity is shaped by intersections of race, gender, leadership preparation, and long-term engagement in suburban secondary education. With nearly three decades of experience, her work spans vocational and magnet school contexts, positioning her at the nexus of schooling, workforce preparation, and organizational leadership.
Lola	Lola is a Cuban American woman educator whose experiences are shaped by ethnicity, gender, migration history, and sustained work in urban Title I schools. With extensive experience in secondary social studies and educational leadership, her teaching is situated within racially and linguistically minoritized school communities, informing her critical understandings of policy, power, and curriculum.

Jada	Jada is a multiracial (Black and Indigenous) woman educator whose identity is shaped by racial hybridity, gender, and long-term professional mobility across content areas. With experience spanning science, mathematics, civics, and STEM-related fields in suburban settings, her work reflects an intersectional negotiation of race, knowledge, and institutional belonging.
Duende	Duende is a gender non-conforming, two-spirit educator of Indigenous and Latinx heritage whose positionality reflects intersections of race, Indigeneity, gender, sexuality, class, and political consciousness. Teaching science in urban schools serving predominantly marginalized communities, their work foregrounds resistance, survivance, and culturally sustaining pedagogies within STEM education.
Spicygurl	Spicygurl is a Black woman educator whose professional identity is shaped by race, gender, care labor, and long-term service in early childhood and elementary education. With extensive experience working with unhoused and highly mobile student populations, her teaching reflects a critical commitment to relational pedagogy, literacy access, and educational stability.
Jackie	Jackie is a Cuban American woman educator whose work in urban elementary schools is shaped by intersections of ethnicity, language, immigration, and class. With nearly three decades of experience serving recently arrived immigrant communities, her teaching is grounded in culturally responsive and linguistically sustaining approaches to early literacy and schooling.
Big Guy	Big Guy is a Black man educator whose identity is shaped by race, gender, and long-term engagement in urban mathematics education. Teaching middle grades, his positionality highlights the racialized dynamics of discipline, authority, and representation within STEM-related learning spaces.
Amazing	Amazing is a Black woman educator whose nearly five decades in urban education reflect intersecting commitments to race-conscious pedagogy, arts-based learning, and spiritual leadership. With advanced training in music education and theology, her work bridges formal schooling and community-based knowledge traditions, emphasizing culturally relevant and sustaining educational practices.
Penny	Penny is a woman educator whose teaching is grounded in authenticity, relationship-building, and inclusive classroom practices. Her approach emphasizes affirming students' identities and addressing inequities through care and critical awareness.
Omar	Omar is a veteran educator with over three decades of experience in public education. His approach to teaching is shaped by lived experiences during the Civil Rights era, reflecting an experiential understanding of equity and multicultural education rather than reliance on contemporary academic frameworks.

Note. Demographic information is self-reported by participants.

The focus groups were semi-structured in nature and averaged for about 1 hour 45 minutes (see Appendix A for interview protocol). Brittany and Haniyeh were the primary data collectors who conducted the focus groups in Florida. Mildred and Karla contacted the participants and organized the focus groups. Mildred was instrumental as well in the data analysis providing important nuance as a former MDPCS teacher. The purpose of these focus groups was to understand the impacts of Florida's 2023 anti-CRT & anti-LGBTQ legislation on teachers.

The MDPCS system is responsible for a large and diverse student population. serving more than 330,000 students across over 400 schools (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; Niche, n.d.). The district's student population is predominantly Hispanic, with substantial Black, Caribbean, and multilingual communities, and more than half of all students are classified as economically disadvantaged. This demographic complexity makes M-DCPS an especially significant context for examining how restrictive educational policies shape the work of teachers of color. Because the legislation in Florida targets curriculum areas related to race, gender, sexuality, and social and emotional learning, understanding its impact requires perspectives from educators who teach in culturally diverse settings and who themselves reflect that diversity. For this reason, the study intentionally curated a heterogeneous group of participants, considering factors such as regional variation across the county, school level (elementary, middle, and high), subject areas most directly affected by the legislation, and teachers' racial and cultural identities. By drawing from educators who work in different communities and professional contexts, the focus group captures a wide range of insights into how teachers of color experience, interpret, and respond to these policies within one of the nation's most diverse urban school systems.

The goal of this diverse selection process was to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the legislation impacted different aspects of education. By including teachers from various backgrounds and school settings, the research aimed to capture the nuances of how the laws affected educators and students differently based on their unique contexts. This approach allowed for a deeper analysis of the legislation's effects on educational practices and teachers' experiences in Miami-Dade County, particularly in relation to socio-economic factors, racial and ethnic demographics, and community environments. The insights gathered from this diverse group of educators will be crucial in understanding the broader implications of the legislation for the future of education in Florida.

Data Analysis & Coding

We approached data analysis through an iterative process informed by critical/intersectional qualitative inquiry and holistic coding (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022; Saldaña, 2016). As Saldana emphasizes, "multiple minds bring multiple ways of analyzing and interpreting the data: 'a research team builds coding and coding builds a team through the creation of shared interpretation and understanding of the phenomenon being studied'" (Weston et al., 2001, p. 382) (p. 36). Our unit of analysis was teachers' narratives about navigating legislation and censorship, rather than isolated phrases or sentences. Following the transcription of the two focus groups, we engaged in close, line-by-line reading of the transcripts, generating initial descriptive codes that captured teachers' experiences with censorship, preparation, and union membership. These codes reflected both the challenges of navigating Florida's anti-education legislation and the ways teachers of color drew upon personal and professional resources to sustain their practice.

As we developed these initial codes, Brittany and Mildred of the research team independently analyzed segments of text, then met to reconcile differences and refine a shared codebook. This collaborative process allowed us to identify a set of recurring codes such as *union as protection*, *fear of retaliation*, *positionality as pedagogy*, and *life experience shaping practice*. These codes were then organized into broader categories that illuminated teachers' responses to the political climate.

Through constant comparative analysis, we moved from categories toward thematic interpretation. For example, codes such as *collective solidarity*, *union as shield*, and *courage to resist* were synthesized into the theme Teachers' Perceptions of Support, while codes related to *personal upbringing* and *alternative teacher preparation gaps* informed the theme Life Experiences and Preparation Shaping Perspectives. This iterative process emphasized not only what teachers said but also how their narratives collectively revealed patterned responses to restrictive educational policies.

Throughout analysis, we maintained a shared spreadsheet that documented codes, analytic categories, exemplar quotes, and researcher memos. This served as both an audit trail and a site of collaborative reflection, where we interrogated how our positionalities as researchers influenced interpretation. Our analytic stance was explicitly guided by CRT, which centers counterstorytelling and the experiential knowledge of people of color, and by intersectionality, which allowed us to see teachers' narratives as shaped by overlapping systems of race, gender, class, and professional status.

To enhance trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we engaged in regular team discussions to reconcile interpretations, wrote reflexive memos throughout the process, and selected representative quotes to provide thick

description. Rather than claiming objectivity, we embrace researcher reflexivity as a hallmark of critical qualitative work. While quotes are used in the findings to highlight participants' voices, they are always accompanied by analytic commentary that situates individual statements within broader patterns. In this way, our analysis sought to illuminate not only what teachers of color reported, but also the larger structural dynamics shaping their work in Florida's contested political landscape.

POSITIONALITY OF RESEARCHERS

Brittany self identifies as a multi-racial white-passing Latina who grew up in South Florida, previously teaching in the adjacent county- Broward County, Florida- to Dade County. After teaching elementary school for several years, she became interested in preparing teachers to work in diverse school settings, much like she had experienced and earned a doctorate in cultural studies in education. Now a tenured faculty member at a predominantly white institution (PWI) in the Northeast, she draws on her experiences as a former public school teacher in South Florida as well as a professor in Critical Race Theory to inform this research project.

Haniyeh is a Middle Eastern Persian woman and scholar whose work is deeply informed by her experiences navigating intersectional identities. As an international woman of color, she has experienced the complexities of positionality in both her home country and U.S. academia. This journey has shaped her commitment to examining how social justice, multicultural education, and critical race theory can inform equitable teaching practices. Her research focuses on understanding how intersecting identities influence teacher educators' experiences and pedagogical approaches, with the goal of amplifying diverse voices and fostering inclusive educational spaces that honor the lived experiences of all learners.

Mildred self identifies as Black and Latina. She was initially socialized into the special education profession at an Hispanic Serving Institution in South Florida. Today, a tenured faculty member at a predominately white, research institution, she draws on her experiences as a student and teacher in MDPCS to inform her research and praxis. In relation to her positioning in this research project (Boveda & Annamma, 2023), Mildred is a childhood friend of Karla and was a UTD member prior to Karla's s leadership role in the Union. Moreover, Mildred, while not at the focus group, had previously engaged with two of the nine participants.

Karla is serving her third term as the president of the UTD. The daughter of Honduran immigrants, she is the first Latina to be elected union president. She serves on the FEA (Florida Education Association) Governance Board, the FEA Cabinet, the State AFL-CIO Executive Board, and serves as the Chairperson of the American Federation of Teachers Women's Rights Committee and as a Vice President of the AFT. Most recently, Karla was the Democratic Nominee for Lieutenant Governor of Florida in which Governor DeSantis won the race. Karla coordinated the selection of participants for this study.

FINDINGS

We created four interrelated themes that illustrate how these nine unionized educators of color are navigating restrictive educational policies, drawing on personal and professional resources, and responding to censorship (positionality, life experience, and collective support). These themes speak directly to our two guiding research questions: (1) How do unionized teachers of color draw on personal, professional, and collective experiences to navigate the challenges of Florida's restrictive educational policies? and (2) How do these teachers understand and respond to censorship, curriculum restrictions, and broader attacks on public education?

In presenting our findings, we intentionally include extended participant quotations to provide thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) and to center the counterstories of teachers of color in line with our intersectional methodology (Esposito & Venus-Evans, 2023). While we offer analysis and interpretation of the themes, we also invite readers to engage directly with participants' voices and consider how these narratives illustrate the lived realities of educators in Florida's contested sociopolitical landscape. In this way, our analytic approach foregrounds teachers' experiential knowledge while situating it within broader patterns identified through our coding process (see Appendix B for a sample of our codebook).

Taken together, these themes presented in the findings highlight how participants make sense of and respond to censorship, curriculum restrictions, and broader attacks on public education. The teachers highlighted the crucial role of their union in providing support, advocating for their rights, and offering a collective voice in educational policy discussions. These findings highlight the complex realities and concerns of union teachers of color in today's educational landscape.

The Importance of Positionality and Experience in Teaching: "I'm the teacher, but I'm human."

Extending RQ1, teachers underscored the significance of positionality and authenticity in their practice, highlighting how their identities and lived experiences informed the ways they connected with students and enacted culturally responsive pedagogy despite external constraints. Through an intersectional lens, this theme illustrates how teachers' pedagogical choices are shaped by the convergence of racial identity, cultural background, professional role, and political surveillance within Florida's restrictive policy context. Teachers' lived experiences functioned not only as personal resources but as strategic tools for navigating and resisting curricular and relational constraints imposed by state legislation. For example, Duende described how his identity as a Native teacher not only makes him aware of how he shows up in the classroom, but also informs the way he teaches science concepts:

> I'm Native American. (Uses Native Language). And, so, you know, oftentimes if I'm in a space, I'm the only Native American in that space. Even in some cities, when I'm traveling with my friends, I'll be the only Indian. Right. And so, and, and we know that, but we're quite aware of that. And so when I go to school, and I'm teaching, sometimes, you know, I like to teach them from our point of view, you know, like what we call Everglades [states Pahayokee in his Native tongue]. It means (shimmery grass), right?

This excerpt illustrates how Duende's positional awareness operates pedagogically, at the intersections of race, linguistic turns, epistemology, and curricular authority as he draws on Indigenous knowledge systems to reframe dominant curricular narratives in science. In a policy climate that privileges "neutral" or depoliticized content, Duende's teaching represents an intersectional form of resistance, where cultural identity and professional practice are inseparable. Similarly, Jackie shares how her background from an immigrant family has impacted her own cultural pride, and the ways that she advocates for her students to have pride in themselves.

> I am Cuban American. And if my daughter laughs at me because she says, Why do you have a flag in your house? I have a little Cuban flag in my house. That means that even in my classroom, I have a little table with every country that is there. Argentine, obviously Haitian, Dominican, Puerto Rican … I was taught to be proud of where I came from, and I don't want my students to understand that yes, you're living in the United States, yes, you may have just migrated here. But this is your country as well.

Jackie's narrative demonstrates how immigrant identity, language, and national belonging intersect within classroom practice, particularly in a sociopolitical context that often frames immigrant identities as suspect or marginal. Her pedagogy actively counters deficit-based and exclusionary discourses by positioning students' cultural identities as assets rather than liabilities. These quotes emphasize the importance of teachers being culturally aware and inclusive in their classrooms and embody a sociopolitical disposition. Across the focus groups, the teachers displayed vulnerability and relational teaching as ways to foster student confidence and inclusion. Spicygurl believed that this is an essential part of connecting with students:

> So it's more when I share with them, they know I'm human. I'm the teacher, but I'm human. I make mistakes. I'm in life like you're in life. And we share, and I think it's better, a communication with my students and my parents … Let me be okay to say I'm not okay. You know, and that we're held mentally, even though they're 5 and 6 years old, they don't even know I'm helping them mentally, and I am.

For teachers of color, such vulnerability is not neutral; it operates within expectations of professionalism, emotional labor, and racialized scrutiny. Spicygurl's account highlights how authenticity becomes a relational strategy that resists dehumanizing norms while sustaining student trust. Penny and Jada also focused on empowering students to recognize and use their voices to tell their stories, promoting self-awareness and strength. Penny shared:

> I like to say that I have really great relationships with my students because I am authentically myself ….I also see bits of myself, as far as [our] experiences are concerned. So I'm very sensitive when I hear a colleague tell a student, 'you're very smart for a Black kid' or, 'oh, I didn't know athletes were you know like.' I'm very sensitive to certain things like that, and I insist that students bring all of themselves to the classroom.

Penny's sensitivity to racialized microaggressions reflects how her own positionality as a Black educator heightens her awareness of intersecting systems of racism, linguicism, and institutional bias operating within school spaces. Jada claimed to be a "warm demander" (Ware, 2006), stating, "authenticity is a really important trait to bring into the classroom." To be a warm demander, there must be a sense of relationship building between teacher and student in an environment that feels "safe" for students to thrive in. Shawntay gets to this point when she asserts:

> But just finding a way, where it's still professional, but as you hear, building relationships and being connected with your students. Because one, they need to feel safe to be in the classroom, right? Because if they're not safe. If they're not provided for, like having breakfast for lunch in school, because that may be their only meal, they're not gonna want to do your work. And they're gonna not really want to do anything for you because you don't care.

These accounts illustrate how care is employed to disrupt racism, classism, and other intersecting oppressions. These teachers' understanding of student engagement challenges narrows definitions of professionalism that ignore students' lived conditions.

In addition to making connections with students with whom they shared similarities, they also leveraged their own marginalized experiences to demonstrate intersectional consciousness (Author, 2019) across their diverse sociocultural identities. Teachers leveraged their stories of multiple marginality to demonstrate intersectional consciousness across differences. Duende, for example, invited students to connect cultural relationships to water across racial and national contexts, while Jackie encouraged multilingualism by affirming Haitian Creole alongside Spanish. These practices reflect an intersectional approach that resists linguistic hierarchies and racialized norms of assimilation. Finally, Lola advocated for an empathic view of how teachers can be accomplices across sociocultural differences:

> You know, you don't have to be Black to say that Black Lives Matter, like to understand, to try to understand some of these conversations that are happening. You don't have to be gay to understand why gay rights are important. Like you have to learn, you know, to just see our community.

Her statement reflects an intersectional understanding of solidarity that recognizes that struggles against racism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression are interconnected rather than isolated.

Ultimately, by foregrounding positionality, authenticity, and lived experience, teachers demonstrated how intersectionality operates as a pedagogical orientation, shaping how they resist restrictions, sustain culturally responsive practices, and navigate Florida's legislative limitations on teaching about race, gender, and social justice.

Teachers' perceptions of support: "I see the Union as like a Village."

In response to RQ1, teachers emphasized that the union provided a crucial source of solidarity, protection, and collective strength in navigating Florida's restrictive policies. Through an intersectional lens, this theme illustrates how union membership mediates multiple marginalities with the professional and political risks teachers of color face under heightened surveillance and censorship. Union affiliation enabled them to exercise agency in the classroom, access institutional guidance, and mitigate potential legal or administrative consequences associated with teaching controversial or culturally responsive content..

Of the nine teachers across the focus groups, four of them grew up in union households. The others expressed their additional desire to be part of unions due to their familial backgrounds (i.e., Duende being part of an Indigenous community that is culturally communal) or just out of a belief in collective action (i.e., Big Guy sharing that it makes more sense to do things collectively in large numbers). Regardless of their entry point, teachers consistently framed

union membership as essential in the current political climate, particularly as educators of color navigating intersecting systems of racialized labor, state power, and educational control. They discussed how the union offered tools for navigating difficult situations. For example, Jackie shared:

> But I feel that the union has helped me become a little bit more courageous as well. In my classroom, I read books. I made sure that the ABCs on Black History that were banned in another school were not banned in my classroom. It's only banned [in some schools] … and people need to become informed. There are certain bans that are not for the whole district, for certain schools, because the parents said they didn't want it there.

Jackie's account highlights how union support emboldens teachers to challenge overgeneralized interpretations of book bans and to continue offering culturally relevant materials when policy allows. This exchange highlights how misconceptions about book bans circulate at the district level. While some regulations are mandated districtwide to ensure compliance with state policy, other restrictions stem from localized challenges, often driven by individual parental objections at specific schools rather than districtwide mandates. Spicygurl elucidated on some of these tensions:

> But they are [teachers] put in a situation where they have to do what the governor says because people are getting paid directly from there, and with United Teachers of Dade, they don't have to be in that same situation. So they can speak out, they can educate us, and they educate our communities. And all of that so that we know what's going on. So we can understand what's going on. And that's why I love my union. We educate. That's, that's our theme, and that's what we do. We educate, and we can be the loud mouse. We can stand on the front line with no fear. Because we know we have a good background. Which is UTD. Whereas the school board, that's why they have all those letters and forms and say okay, you can send them along with the parents to sign, and that's why we have to be careful.

Spicygurl's narrative illustrates how union affiliation mediates the impact of state-level legislation, providing both informational clarity and institutional backing that allows teachers to act with greater confidence. She is referring to District-wide initiatives that recently started by sending home letters to caregivers, allowing for students to read certain texts or participate in Book Fairs. Teachers repeatedly emphasized that union affiliation mediates the impact of restrictive legislation by providing both the confidence and institutional protections necessary to continue teaching culturally responsive material, including maintaining classroom libraries despite circulating misinformation about banned texts.

Duende, a Native American teacher, emphasized this collective support, likening the union to a "village" that protects its members while allowing them to contribute meaningfully:

> Okay, so I'm new to the profession, but I did come from a family where our point of view is very communal. So, for example, a lot of my money goes back to my family to support the tribe. And so in general, I just always had that mentality of like, oh, whenever I work, join a unit just because, maybe, I would say like a village, right? And that's why I see the union as like a village that's gonna protect me, just like I'm gonna be a productive member of the village.

Duende's framing positions the union not only as a site of protection but as a reciprocal collective rooted in cultural values of mutual responsibility and care. This perspective illustrates how teachers draw on personal and cultural experiences to navigate professional challenges, positioning the union as both a protective and empowering collective that supports them in responding to censorship, curriculum restrictions, and broader attacks on public education.

Additionally, as a group of teachers of color, positionality played a prominent role in decisions to join and remain active in unions, as Spicygurl shared:

> Because they [her parents] were a union family, and they always told us why. So, I joined the union, and I've been in it, in every sense. Oh, very important lives and. You need to pave the way. For African-Americans, I feel like the majority of us in the classrooms and we would be the real workers. And if we

> didn't have a voice, which is the union to stand up for us, as backup. Yeah, so much more the union brings for people.

Spicygurl's account underscores how racialized labor histories shape teachers' understanding of unions as essential mechanisms for voice, protection, and collective power. Throughout the data, it was evident that the teachers felt a strong focus on the importance of cultural pride and the responsibility to educate students about their identities and histories, underscoring the union's significance in enabling advocacy, professional courage, and community engagement under restrictive policy conditions.

Preparation and Life Experiences Shaping Teaching Practices: "I was able to relate to that aspect."

Also addressing RQ1, participants described how their life histories, higher education experiences, and professional trajectories shaped their approaches to teaching and equipped them to navigate restrictive policies. Through an intersectional lens, this theme highlights how race, class, generation, and pathways into the profession converge to shape teachers' pedagogical decision-making under Florida's restrictive policy context**.** More than half of the teachers attended either a Historically Black University/College (HBCU) or a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). With this in mind, their personal upbringings as well as academic preparation had an impact on their perspectives on teaching.

Big Guy and Jackie emphasized empathy and understanding of students' diverse backgrounds and challenges. Big Guy sought teaching alternative teacher certification after pursuing a career in criminology. He did not find the preparation he had to be a teacher very meaningful:

> Well, I would say that the preparation I had to be a teacher was nothing like what actually happens in the classroom. Like when I was going through the classes and stuff, I was already in the classroom, and it seems like everything they try to do to prepare you comes from a completely different world. Like the classroom management and how to perform the lesson plans, what your administrators expect from you, etc. All of that stuff seems like a fairytale that doesn't really exist. So you can say it's preparation, but it just feels like they're just checking a box so they could cover their own, but they thought somebody in a room doesn't know what to do, and you just gotta figure it out because nothing.

Big Guy's reflections illustrate how empathy and understanding can emerge not from formal teacher preparation but from lived experience and self-awareness as a Black man navigating oppressive systems. At the intersection of race, criminalization, and alternative certification, his pedagogy reflects a critical awareness of how schools often discipline rather than support marginalized youth. Although he described his alternative certification program as "a fairytale that doesn't really exist" and felt his coursework offered little meaningful preparation for classroom realities, he emphasized how his lived experiences shaped a pedagogy grounded in empathy for students navigating similar systems. Big Guy explained that his experiences growing up provided him with compassion for students who acted out in ways often pathologized in schools. Rather than reading student behavior as disrespect, he viewed it as an expression of unmet needs and systemic neglect:

> And now it makes me, as a teacher, able to identify with the least of them. Yeah, because if you can identify the least of them, you look past them, em talking. You look past them playing, you look past them acting like two-year-olds when they are 15. You want to know why you are doing this because you don't have a father who pays you attention … I've been there. I understand that, and I'm not gonna write your referral every time you say something crazy. I'm not going to mistreat you because they do this. After all, I understand that you're not doing this to disrespect me, you're doing this. After all, you don't know how to react to the life that you have limited experience with and are living.

Big Guy's lived experience allows him to interpret and navigate policy restrictions creatively, prioritizing student needs even when curriculum or administrative mandates conflict with culturally responsive teaching. In doing so, he positions himself against the reproduction of punitive practices that feed the school-to-prison pipeline. His emphasis on "identifying with the least of them" reflects a critical refusal to criminalize students of color, opting instead for compassion and understanding. In this sense, his narrative illustrates the kind of empathy that emerges from counterstorytelling, one rooted not in abstract training modules but in lived knowledge of systemic marginalization and the desire to disrupt its reproduction in schools.

Empathy also emerged in the ways teachers expressed understanding of students' situations. Jackie shared her own experience of being a Cuban immigrant who, while having attended a private school, was not wealthy. She knows that just because a student attends a certain school, or things appear in a certain way, this isn't always the case.

> Maybe that meal may be that child's only meal all day, not because their parents are being abusive or because they're on drugs, but because they really can't afford to pay rent, car, and take care of one or 2 kids. So I empathize with them, and sometimes we can't just assume that these kids have what they have because they don't.

Each of these examples highlighted the important ways that the teachers' life experiences shaped how they engaged with students in their classrooms.

For others, such as Jada, her college experience did have a profound impact on her after attending an HBCU:

> I went to an HBCU, and I heard these terms. I heard social justice, multicultural, and culturally relevant. I've heard all of those. When I was going through my work. At [school], but I also heard it when I attended. And this is, this is so interesting because I was just having this conversation with one of my friends. I think for me going to an HBCU was the best decision I made for myself and the reason why I say that is because throughout my educational experience, like elementary, middle, and high school, I didn't realize that I was used as a token until I got to college. And that was really a mind-blowing for me that took a lot of that took a lot out of me, but going to [school]. They built me up. So when I went to a PWI, the things that I dealt with, if I had not have gone to [school], they would have broken me …

Interestingly, we noted a generational gap amongst the teachers with respect to contemporary academic language around social justice and critical pedagogy, particularly with Omar (teaching 35 years) and Amazing (teaching 49 years). They both told stories, sharing how their embedded experiences in earlier political and educational movements shaped their pedagogical practices. Omar told stories demonstrating aspects of what we might call "multicultural education" in academia, but stayed far removed from the language of critical race theory. He stated:

> And for the multicultural one, there was no discussion. Back then, they didn't call it culturally relevant pedagogy and critical race theory, which didn't exist. No social justice. We already lived that through the Martin Luther King Era … It's been a fact of social justice. So we were riding that wave into a multicultural platform, and that was the focus. I'm going back to the mid-eighties, approaching the 90s.

Omar's narrative highlights how, for veteran educators, commitments to social justice were deeply experiential rather than theoretical. Having lived through the Civil Rights Movement, he framed equity not in the academic terminology of CRT but through a lived "fact of social justice." His description underscores how teachers with decades of experience may resist or feel disconnected from scholarly jargon while still engaging in practices that resonate with critical and culturally relevant pedagogies. This distinction invites consideration of how language evolves and how educators' lived experiences may align with or exceed what academic frameworks later theorize.

In addition, despite Amazing speaking about addressing racial slurs and discrimination in the classroom between a white teacher and teachers of color, or new requirements for evidence of 'culture' in the special education classroom, her comments also revealed a contradiction with the concept of "colorblindness".

> Where I teach, I don't see; I stopped seeing color. I don't see color. I see a heart. I see a soul. It doesn't matter what's in here. Then I see. It doesn't matter. So social justice?. Oh, where was that high school? We had. African American classes, you know, we had classes there that taught African American history … So all of my culture, about multicultural experiences, occurred in high school, college, and beyond. And that at the college, I do not see color. So I do not see color. We can be together for a long time.

Although contemporary frameworks critique "colorblindness," or race evasiveness, for erasing racial realities, Amazing's account reflects how generational discourses once framed "colorblindness" as progressive within specific historical contexts. Her narrative highlights how veteran teachers navigate restrictive legislation using experiential knowledge rather than academic language, even when that language no longer aligns with current equity frameworks.

Taken together, Omar's and Amazing's reflections reveal that the generational dynamics shape both language and practice, while contemporary frameworks such as CRT, culturally relevant pedagogy, or social justice education provide critical tools for naming inequities. Veteran teachers often describe their work through lived experiences rather than scholarly terminology. At times, this translated into expressions such as "I don't see color," which today are recognized as problematic for erasing the salience of race in shaping students' lives. Yet, when situated historically, these statements can be read as emblematic of a particular era in which the ethos of colorblindness was promoted as a progressive alternative to overt racism. While insufficient by contemporary understandings, such expressions nonetheless point to the ways teachers attempted to affirm their students' worth within the discursive frameworks available to them at the time.

Overall, the teachers' experiences and perspectives underscore the complexities of teaching for social justice and the need for ongoing reflection and professional development. They emphasized the importance of understanding and empathizing with students' backgrounds, recognizing that many face significant hardships outside of school. The concept of social justice and advocacy emerges as a vital part of their roles as educators, with several mentioning the influence of their educational experiences, particularly at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

Teacher's responses to censorship: "There's been a muzzle that's been prepared for us."

In relation to RQ2, teachers described the challenges of censorship, book bans, and curriculum restrictions, sharing strategies of subversion, resistance, and resilience as they worked to protect students' access to inclusive education. Our fourth and final theme was directly related to our last interview question, in which the participants discussed the challenges of navigating controversial topics, book bans, and curriculum restrictions, while striving to provide students with a comprehensive and inclusive education.

The teachers expressed deep concerns about the current political climate's impact on public education, particularly for Black and Brown students who rely on public schools. Jackie and Spicygurl elaborated on the damaging consequences of Florida's policies, connecting today's restrictions to historical practices of denying education and rewriting racial history:

> **Jackie:** But what I wanted to say was that the current political and social climate, which is related to multicultural education to me. And I'm speaking as an individual. I feel that the political system is trying its very best to destroy public education, which means that those who would be hurt the most would be our Black and Brown children. These parents cannot afford private schools. And a lot of the charter schools are not on the same caliber, education-wise, as public schools. A lot of students and charter schools come back to public schools, and they're so far behind. Because of the difference in curriculum and speaking it as an individual, I feel that he's trying to take us back to a place where, culturally speaking, the rich stay rich, and the poor stay poor. And where it's against the law to teach slaves to read, and also, they felt that slaves that wanted not want to be slaves, they thought they had mental problems. That it was good for them. Oh, what was this one said that, want us to believe that?
>
> **Spicygurl:** Slavery was beneficial to Black people.

Teachers perceive this legislation as a structural effort to distort or erase history, particularly in ways that disproportionately harm marginalized students. Their responses combine defiance, subversion, and creative pedagogy, underscoring how current censorship efforts are understood as attempts to return to forms of racial control that erase Black history. Spicygurl's statement is not her own belief, but a direct reference to rhetoric advanced by some political leaders in Florida, where recent policies have promoted the claim that enslaved people "benefited" from slavery through acquiring skills (Pendharkar, 2023). By invoking this language, teachers illustrate the extent to which state narratives are being weaponized to justify book bans, restrictions on curriculum, and the erasure of systemic racism from classrooms.

Teachers like Jackie and Spicygurl framed these policies as part of a broader effort to dismantle public education and widen inequities, especially for Black and Brown children whose families cannot access private schooling, revealing both outrage and fear at how official narratives normalize historical revisionism while undermining access to truthful, inclusive education.

Similarly, Amazing brings up the issues of public vs. charter schools, arguing that the attacks labeled as "anti-woke" are in fact part of a broader political project to defund and destabilize public education. She explained:

> And this is where I see he's [DeSantis] trying to take public education. If you can destroy public education, he will, and the only entity that is standing between him and destroying public education is them [the union]. This is it. We are, we are the entity that's fighting back. For public education, because not every parent can. And so what does he do? He diverts the money from public education, and he sends it into private and charter schools that some of these private schools do not need. So, that question concerning your current political and social climate policy? The climate that you're in right now. He is trying to destroy public education, and destroying public education means that he's taken us back to a place that we refuse to go to. Because we are not going back.

Amazing's narrative connects censorship policies to broader structural efforts aimed at undermining public education, framing bans on "woke" content as an isolated curricular issue, but as a calculated strategy to shift resources from public schools, which disproportionately serve Black, Brown, and working-class children. Her warning that "he's taken us back to a place that we refuse to go to" situates these policy shifts within a longer history of racialized and class-based attempts to deny marginalized communities access to education. Amazing's insistence that "we are not going back" illustrates how teachers frame their resistance not just as a professional duty but as a moral and historical imperative. Together, these narratives reflect a sense of defiance and determination among teachers to resist restrictions and continue advocating for their students, even when doing so requires subversive practices. Duende shares how the policies don't really have a hold over him because he knows DeSantis would never even come to his school:

> And like, the thing is, the almost comical thing was that he's too scared to go to some of these schools. He has no idea what's going on … I kind of ignore what he's doing at my school because I know he's too scared to go to my school.

Here, Duende used humor to downplay the reach of state policy, illustrating how some teachers cope with restrictive laws by reframing them as less powerful than their own classroom practices. His comment reveals a form of defiance that minimizes the authority of policymakers and reasserts teacher agency at the local level.

Others describe how they close the doors and keep teaching their curricula, but not without caution, as Jada warns: "And there's a lot that should be taught that now there's the muzzle that's been prepared for us." The teachers discuss the challenges of teaching culturally relevant history and addressing sensitive topics in an environment increasingly hostile to discussions of race and identity. Jada's metaphor of a "muzzle" captures the affective dimension of censorship, revealing how teachers feel silenced and constrained, yet still find ways to subvert these limits to protect students' access to diverse perspectives. This sense of surveillance and fear aligns with prior findings that teachers interpret anti-CRT policies as signals to self-police their pedagogy, producing a chilling effect that reshapes everyday instructional decisions even in the absence of direct enforcement (Kheirkhah & Aronson, 2025). Duende expanded on this theme, reflecting on the risks of teaching history honestly:

> It kinda scares me, but then I see online with the government, what the government is trying to do. Like, try not to teach the real history, and I asked myself … Am I not even allowed to say that 'Columbus was evil'? You know, what in the classroom, I get fired for that, you know. So those are things I do ask myself. Well, I try my best to kind of, you know, teach them the history from our point of view, and the textbooks can say this, it's up to you really to do your own research.

Here, Duende's commentary illustrates the metaphorical tightrope teachers of color walk. Ultimately, they recognize the risks of naming oppression but use classroom time to offer counternarratives, urging students to critically examine textbooks and seek knowledge beyond the curriculum. Similarly, Amazing stressed that while policies may seek to erase history, they cannot erase lived heritage:

> You know, the person who's the government's manager now doesn't want us to have the true history. But hey. You can't take away my history because I was taught this stuff at home. So you can't take that away from me. Can't take, you can't take my heritage away from me.

Her words show how teachers draw strength from their own cultural grounding, framing resistance as both personal and pedagogical. For Amazing, the attacks on curriculum are not only political maneuvers but assaults on collective memory — and refusing to "go back" becomes both an act of teaching and of survival.

Additionally, Jackie, Big Guy, and Spicygurl openly mocked the absurdity of being labeled "groomers" or accused of "turning kids gay," highlighting how these narratives function as distractions that vilify teachers while eroding trust in public education. Their banter demonstrates how collective humor and shared critique become small acts of solidarity in an otherwise hostile landscape. Taken together, these narratives reveal multiple dimensions of teachers' responses to censorship, including defiance that dismisses policymakers' authority, cautious subversion to continue teaching diverse perspectives, heritage-based resistance that refuses erasure, and collective critique of politicized attacks. While the strategies vary, the throughline is clear: teachers remain committed to protecting students' right to learn the truth, even under conditions of surveillance, risk, and fear.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of this study illuminate the multifaceted experiences of teachers of color within a teacher union, offering valuable insights into the complexities of their roles and how they navigate restrictive educational policies and political pressures in Florida. The identified themes underscore the significance of union support, the influence of personal and professional backgrounds on teaching practices, the importance of positionality and cultural identity in fostering inclusive classrooms, and the challenges posed by censorship and curriculum restrictions.

These experiences shared by these teachers of color demonstrate the profound impact of the current political and social climate on public education, particularly concerning multicultural education and the teaching of diverse histories in the State of Florida (Miller et al., 2023; Tresvant, 2024). Teachers expressed a shared concern that this legislation contributes to the efforts to undermine public schooling, disproportionately impacting marginalized communities, particularly Black and Brown children (Cowden & O'Brien, 2023; Tresvant, 2024). Additionally, there is a palpable tension among educators regarding the teaching of critical topics such as race, history, and identity. Consistent with prior research on the historical roots of anti-CRT sentiment, participants noted that political rhetoric surrounding CRT is often vague, mischaracterized, and used to delegitimize discussions about systemic racism and inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Miller et al., 2023; Rodriguez et al., 2022). Many teachers, like Duende, acknowledge the absurdity of the political discourse surrounding issues like CRT which they believe lacks clear definitions and is often mischaracterized. This creates a chilling effect, where educators feel compelled to censor their curricula to avoid repercussions. Jada's commitment to subversive teaching practices illustrates the resistance among educators to comply with potentially harmful mandates, prioritizing their responsibility to provide comprehensive education over compliance with restrictive policies (Matias & Liou, 2015; Racelis & Parkhouse, 2024).

Of importance to us as teacher educators was the awareness and need to have ongoing professional development that addresses equity talk and discourse. The focus groups highlighted generational gaps in how academic jargon might be an obstacle to creating connections for *some* teachers. While veteran teachers like Omar and Amazing reflected generational understandings of "multiculturalism" shaped by the Civil Rights era, younger participants more readily embraced contemporary discourses such as critical race theory and culturally relevant pedagogy. This generational variation underscores the evolving nature of "equity talk" (Gist, 2017) and highlights the need for professional development that bridges linguistic and ideological gaps among educators. This does not mean veteran teachers are not using culturally relevant practices within their classrooms, but it does make it harder to communicate across generations of teachers, or to truly understand how the attacks on CRT or LGBTQ issues do still impact them despite using different language. Teacher preparation and ongoing professional learning must move beyond surface-level "diversity" to engage intersectionality as praxis. Programs should help educators reflect on how their positionalities influence pedagogy and equip them to resist dehumanizing policies. Just because they are a teacher of color does not mean they are automatically equipped with knowledge of "equity talk" or that they inherently will be culturally responsive (Gist, 2017). Teacher educators, school administrators, and union leaders should create intergenerational spaces for dialogue on equity, language, and activism. This can help translate theory into practice and strengthen solidarity across generational differences.

Overall, this study contributes to a growing body of literature demonstrating that restrictive legislation and political pressures significantly shape teacher agency, curricular content, and students' access to culturally relevant and

inclusive education (Bissell, 2023; Cowden & O'Brien, 2023; Miller et al., 2023). Teachers of color draw on their lived experiences, positionality, and union support to navigate these challenges, highlighting the ongoing intersection of education, political ideology, and social justice in public schools. These findings underscore the need for policymakers and educational leaders to consider the broader implications of restrictive legislation and to support teachers in fostering inclusive, reflective, and socially just learning environments (Apple & Au, 2009; Giroux, 1988; Tresvant, 2024). Teachers' reflections, particularly Amazing's claim that "we are the entity that's fighting back," reveal the political consciousness that frames teaching not only as labor but as resistance. Through counterstorytelling and critical praxis, these educators defy attempts to render them silent, thereby reaffirming their agency and humanity amid state surveillance and fear.

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APPENDIX A: TEACHER’S UNION FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Tell us about your journey to becoming an educator? Did you go through traditional teacher education programs? Alternative licensing, etc. What is your current teaching/educating position?
2. What background did you gain in your teacher preparation and/or certification programs about any of the following: social justice, multicultural education, culturally relevant pedagogy, or critical race theory?
3. How do you think your personal social identities impact your pedagogy as a teacher?
4. What do you see as your role in addressing diversity and equity, such as race, class, gender, sexuality or disability, in the classroom?
    a. Are any of you familiar with the term intersectionality? If so, can you share a bit about this?
5. Describe your knowledge of the current political and social climate's policy related to multicultural education, culturally relevant teaching, diversity, equity, & inclusion (DEI), and/or Critical Race Theory (CRT)?
    a. To what extent has the current political climate around education impacted you, your pedagogy, or your classroom?
    b. Has the political climate around education had an impact on your school, your administration, your coworkers, your students, your classroom, your community, etc.?
6. Has your school district had any discussions related to “divisive concepts” and/or mention of Critical Race Theory and other anti-LGBTQ policies?
    a. What are your understandings of critical race theory?
    b. *If applicable:* What have been your experiences in the classroom since legislation/district policies have passed?
    c. Are you able to teach the curriculum in a way that aligns with your pedagogy?
7. Do you believe a teacher holds any sort of responsibility when it comes to addressing issues such as systemic and institutional racism?
8. Why are you a member of the union? How is the Union addressing this political climate?

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE OF OUR CODEBOOK

Code	Category	Theme	Example Quote
Union as protection	Collective solidarity	Teachers' Perceptions of Support	"I see the union as like a village… it's the only place where I feel safe to speak openly about what's happening."
Fear of retaliation	Navigating surveillance	Teachers' Perceptions of Support	"There's been a muzzle that's been prepared for us… I'm afraid of losing my job if I say the wrong thing."
Personal upbringing	Lived experience shaping practice	Life Experiences & Preparation	"Because of my own struggles growing up, I can relate to my students and understand what they carry into the classroom."
Alternative prep gaps	Inadequate teacher preparation	Life Experiences & Preparation	"In my teacher program, we never talked about race or equity… I had to learn that on my own."
Positionality as pedagogy	Authenticity in teaching	Positionality and Experience in Teaching	"I'm the teacher, but I'm human… my students need to see me for who I really am."
Collective resistance	Strategies of resilience	Responses to Censorship	"We still teach the truth, but sometimes it's about how we frame it — you find ways to say it without saying it."
Union as shield	Union-based resistance	Responses to Censorship	"When they come after us, the union is the one that pushes back. Alone, I couldn't do it."

AUTHORS

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