

“I Can’t Sugarcoat and Do My Job” Oklahoma Teachers Explore the Relationship Between Learning and Discomfort in a Political Climate of Fear

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Abstract

This interview-based qualitative study examines how several participating teachers from the U.S. state of Oklahoma are experiencing the state’s “divisive concepts” education laws, particularly Oklahoma’s House Bill 1775 (HB1775) of 2021. Given that such legislation prohibits instructional practices that cause students to experience “discomfort, guilt, or anguish,” this paper focuses on one emergent theme: the relationship between learning and discomfort. We situate our participants’ reflections within two complementary and overlapping frameworks: Megan Boler’s (1999) conception of educational discomfort and Roger Frie’s (2023) discussion of the social necessity to confront historical trauma. Our findings indicate that many of the teachers we spoke with, despite the constraints of divisive concepts laws, regard discomfort as a vital element of the learning process. They view teaching difficult topics through inclusive and historically accurate lenses as a moral obligation and recognize the value of discomfort in cultivating students’ moral and civic development. This research contributes

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to understanding how teachers interpret and navigate divisive content laws while amplifying the voices of teachers who resist such laws. Through their descriptions of everyday classroom practices, our findings suggest that several—and perhaps many—Oklahoma teachers consciously resist compliance with legislation they consider unjust.

Keywords: Divisive concepts, educational discomfort, moral teaching, teacher resistance

Introduction

Inspired by the language and spirit of Donald Trump’s first-term executive order “combating race and sex stereotyping” (Executive Order No. 13950, 2020), the U.S. state of Oklahoma joined a host of Republican-led states to legally restrict or “demobilize” (Hornbeck and Malin, 2023) “divisive concepts” from being taught in the classroom. Oklahoma’s most prominent such restriction, HB1775 (2021), passed in May, 2021, prohibits, among other things, that “any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex.” Generous interpretations of the law suggest that it promotes a spirit of “harmony and consensus” for teachers and learners (Smith & Stitzlein, 2023, p. 35). Less generously, opponents argue that it is unconstitutionally vague, infringes on the rights of students to receive information, imposes impermissible viewpoint-based restrictions, and violates the First and Fourteenth Amendments (Black Emergency Response Team v. Drummond, 2024; Smith & Stitzlein, 2023). In this paper, we explore how several teachers from the U.S. state of Oklahoma describe their experiences with the law and characterize its implications in relation to learning and discomfort.

In Oklahoma, HB1775’s passage and ensuing enforcement have had a chilling effect on education across the state. Soon after becoming law, the Oklahoma State Board of Education (OSBE) downgraded the accreditation status of two schools for alleged violations—a preliminary step that could ultimately result in the loss of state funding (Korth, 2022). Additionally, OSBE charged an Oklahoma teacher with violating HB1775, ultimately revoking her license, when she shared a QR code that allowed students to access locally banned books (Korth, 2022; Murphy, 2024). By broadly restricting the teaching of certain forms of knowledge, the law has promoted widespread confusion and pusillanimity among educators as they attempt to navigate what is now legally permissible in the classroom (Bonilla, 2021; Knowles, 2021; Martinez-Keel, 2022; Piro, 2021).

Given this political and educational climate, we sought to under-

stand how Oklahoma teachers experienced and navigated the law in their own words. While several studies have examined the language, legal implications, and normative context of divisive concepts laws (e.g., Bronstein et al., 2023; Dee, 2022; Hill, 2023; Hornbeck & Malin, 2023; López et al., 2021; Stitzlein, 2022), few have centered the voices of teachers themselves—a gap which this paper seeks to address. This article draws from a broader study in which we interviewed seventeen Oklahoma teachers who had taught both before and after the law’s passage. During analysis, one theme emerged as especially significant: how teachers are experiencing and characterizing the law in relation to learning and discomfort. The prominence of this theme warranted a focused exploration, providing impetus for the present paper.

Framework

We frame participant responses using two complementary and overlapping frameworks: Megan Boler’s (1999) development of educational discomfort and Roger Frie’s (2023) discussion of the need to socially confront historical trauma. For additional context, we also succinctly characterize the political and educational climate of the state of Oklahoma. Each framework is developed in the sections that follow.

Educational Discomfort

In her seminal book, *Feeling Power*, Boler (1999) explains the practice of using discomfort to teach—what she terms a pedagogy of discomfort—as both an “invitation to inquiry as well as a call to action” (p. 176). In terms of inquiry, a pedagogy of discomfort encourages learners to tackle challenging ideas. This pedagogical approach invites both teachers and students “to engage in critical inquiry regarding values and cherished beliefs” (p. 176). Boler challenges oversimplified complexities and convenient narratives that can be shaped by the dominant culture and current political moment. Instead, her pedagogy of discomfort actively resists reductive Manichean binaries—us/them, good/bad, guilt/innocence—by urging educators to foster environments conducive to “honest and collective self-reflection and inquiry rather than closing off discussion” (p. 187). Such open-ended inquiries necessitate the possibility of discomfort in the learning process.

As a call to action, Boler’s (1999) pedagogy of discomfort invites learners to critically consider their embodied existence within ongoing “historical complexities” and to envision a world that transcends their current ethical and moral understandings. Central to Boler’s framework is the notion of *invitation*. Her pedagogy of discomfort invites

change from the learner; it never *demand*s it. Learners are asked to come to terms with ethical uncertainty and moral ambiguity. They are asked to question why particular understandings and explanations provoke their discomfort and why they may be emotionally invested in the suppression of knowledge they do not like. Ultimately, a pedagogy of discomfort facilitates the potential transformation of learners from passive spectators to active witnesses who engage with ongoing and emerging issues, particularly issues of indignation and injustice (Boler, 1999).

Drawing from Aristotle, John Dewey, Maxine Greene, and the American poet Minnie Bruce Pratt, Boler contends that both education and the discomfort it may entail are inherently political. Consequently, the discomforts associated with learning are shaped by politically constructed curricular frameworks that include silences, omissions, and erasures. Contentious topics like racism and homophobia are not naturally occurring curricular absences (when they are absent) but politically motivated exclusions. Accordingly, once excluded from the educational curriculum, their subsequent inclusion requires political action as well, as without it, they will not organically be added to the curriculum either. While one might argue that the inclusion or exclusion of topics like sexuality, morality, and God (or gods) are religiously motivated actions rather than political, the distinction between religion and politics erodes as religious ideology enters the public sphere. While we might debate what Habermas (2006) calls “the political role of religion in the state and the public sphere” (p. 3), the act of publicly (re)enforcing religious morality and theology is inherently political. That is to say that the inclusion or exclusion of religious material and/or religious context in public schools meets Boler’s criteria as a political act.

Since Boler’s 1999 book, numerous scholars have built upon and reinforced her framework, and we draw from a few to illustrate this point. Zembylas (2023) notes that the “widespread view in scholarly literature is that some degree of discomfort is not only inevitable, but also necessary to confront students’ unquestioned beliefs about social and political issues” (p. 194). Mayo (2004) argues that the uncomfortable space of recognizing our own ignorance is the starting point from which educational growth begins. Hinsdale and Ljungblad (2023) write that “it is only through discomfort and difficult relations that we can truly learn.” Likewise, Frie (2023) observes that confronting uncomfortable topics is vitally necessary to the health of a society. Similarly, Kumashiro (2021) notes that teaching that advances social justice and democracy requires the discomfort associated with “asking challenging questions, questioning conventional wisdom, examining different perspectives, and thinking critically” (p. 1). Kumashiro (2021) continues,

When education censors content that makes students feel uncomfortable rather than helping students to work through discomfort, it denies them the truth, withholds skills necessary for critical thinking, and may increase resistance to learning and change. (p. 1)

Educational discomfort, then, as Boler identifies and the subsequent literature reinforces, is something for teachers to embrace rather than avoid. When students are provided with the necessary support to engage with and navigate discomfort, they become more capable of meaningful learning. They become more critical thinkers, and they become more engaged in the social issues of the day.

Fundamental to Boler's argument is the debate of whether schools should engage students in social issues at all or confine their focus to developing workforce readiness skills. While economic self-sufficiency has become an important element of contemporary schooling, we contend that it exists within a broader commitment to social engagement. To this end, we offer two arguments. First, Boler extends a long-standing tradition asserting that social issues—particularly issues of social justice—lie at the heart of a liberal education, understood as an education befitting a free person. From the fourth century BCE, when Socrates posed questions about the nature of justice and the organization of a just society, educators have continually returned to these ethical inquiries. Thinkers such as Rousseau, Dewey, Greene, and Boler continue this lineage, each emphasizing that to be an educated member of society is to possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for critical engagement with questions of justice (Boler, 1999; Quantz, 2015; Ryder, 2022). Moreover, in a pluralistic, geographically disbursed, and democratically governed society such as the United States—where all citizens are ostensibly afforded a voice in their collective governance—the ongoing formation of “a more perfect union” is an inherently complex endeavor. Engaging students in such inquiries, particularly those involving uncomfortable or disturbing aspects of existing social structures, is essential to sustaining a vibrant democracy.

Second, issues of workforce readiness are inseparable from broader issues of social justice. Employment outcomes—who gets access to which jobs, how labor is valued, and how income is distributed—are fundamentally tied to the pursuit of a just society. Workforce preparation, therefore, must be understood within the social structures and value systems that shape opportunity. A narrow emphasis on employment preparation, divorced from the social conditions that influence labor markets and educational access, constitutes a form of educational avoidance—a refusal to sit with discomfort or to confront the ethical dimensions of social life. Education, by its nature, necessarily engages

students in the social issues of the day, of which workforce readiness is only one part.

Socially Confronting Historic Trauma

Building on the scholarship on educational discomfort, we also turn to literature that frames the confrontation of historic trauma as a collective social project. Roger Frie (2023), as a psychologist and historian, contends that the horrors of the past do not simply fade; rather, they persist as a lingering presence of “past atrocities” within the social psyche. Avoiding the teaching of an atrocity or injustice may obscure our understanding of it, but it does not diminish the atrocity’s ongoing effects. Instead, these histories—understood or not—become enmeshed in our daily lives (Frie, 2023). As Frie observes, “they keep reappearing, reminding us of their presence” (p. 7).

When it comes to engaging with disconcerting histories, Frie contrasts two educational approaches: Germany’s and North America’s, particularly that of the United States. Despite a recent rise in Holocaust denial and distortion (Defeating Distortion, 2025), Frie argues that Germany has, albeit imperfectly, assumed historical responsibility for its role in the Holocaust.¹ North America, by contrast, has largely maintained historic silences surrounding the settler colonialism that shaped the continent. Within this silence, traumas such as slavery and Indigenous genocide are subsumed into a national mythology of the United States as a progressive march toward freedom.²

Such silences deprive U.S. students of meaningful educational engagement with their nation’s problematic racialized and sexualized past and the ongoing effects of those histories in the present. These restrictions, epistemicides, or what Hornbeck and Malin (2023) describe as “demobilizations” of knowledge, turn us away from “richer, more nuanced understandings of history” (p. 9). Further contributing to this erasure, the voices of Black and Indigenous scholars, who might most powerfully interpret and contextualize the meanings of historic trauma, are often silenced, banned, or marginalized (Hornbeck & Malin, 2023; Teitelbaum, 2022; Yancy, 2012).

Turning to the specific historic traumas of genocide and racism, Frie (2023) argues for engaging from a place of discomfort precisely because these histories do not disappear.

We may not have had a part in creating the systemic racism that structures our society today. But we are all participants in a deeply racialized world that is marked by historical trauma—trauma that continues to shape us both consciously and unconsciously. (Frie, 2023, p. 7)

That is to say that, as a society, we will never escape historical traumas or correct historical injustices without confronting them.

Given Frie's perspective, it's reasonable, even desirable, to be uneasy with troubling histories. For anyone concerned with a more just society, the discussion of historic participation in injustice should be uncomfortable. Unjust pasts are by nature unpleasant; they are likely to create strong emotional reactions, and yet there is no getting around them. Historic injustices are vexatious, notes Pijanowski (2004),

because it means learning what may be unbearable to know about our selves. [...] it means coming to terms with the fact that wishes for freedom and progress coexist with racial, gender, and sexual hierarchy and exclusion, which reflect racist, sexist, and homophobic fears and desires that are "other" to democracy. (p. 109)

Historical truths involving injustice disturb us precisely because they give us glimpses into elements of our existence that we might prefer to hide or deny (Pijanowski, 2004). Given this understanding, then, a more concerning scenario is that students and educators are not disturbed by historic traumas and are not concerned about the lingering effects of those histories. Ongoing silences invite a learned sociopathy (i.e., a lack of understanding and empathy) which hinders the advance of justice associated with learning historic truths. Simply put, a society needs to know and teach unpleasant histories so that the future of its learners might be brighter.

Scholars widely affirm that engaging with discomfort is essential to fostering democratic participation and advancing a more socially just society (Boler, 1999; Frie, 2023; Hinsdale & Ljungblad, 2023; Mayo, 2004; Peters & Besley, 2021; Pijanowski, 2004; Stanley, 2024; Zembylas, 2023). Conversely, this body of literature warns that an absence of critical engagement and discomfort—the kind of suppression promoted by divisive concepts laws like HB1775—may contribute to a stagnated student growth, a diminished capacity for learning, and the entrenchment of authoritarian tendencies.

Oklahoma's Political and Educational Environment

We also feel it important to situate our participants' responses within the broader political and educational landscape of Oklahoma. As a region originally designated by the U.S. government for the forced relocation of indigenous Americans, Oklahoma's history and political context are distinct among American states. Opened to non-Indian settlement in 1889, followed by a turn-of-the-century oil boom, the state now embodies a complex blend of Southern, Western, Midwestern, and

Sovereign Tribal influences. While regional classifications fall short of capturing the state’s full complexity, Oklahoma’s growing adherence to far-right political ideologies reflects broader national and global trends (Azani et al., 2020; Carter, 2024b; Jones et al., 2020; Hamilton, 2024; Luneau, 2024; Ramos, 2024).

Far-right ideology, as explained by Peters and Besley (2021), promotes social hierarchies and inequalities as natural, normal, and desirable—particularly those hierarchies that favor nationalism and nativism. Within this framework, inequality is not viewed as a problem to be solved but as a necessary and even beneficial feature of society—concentrating wealth and power in the hands of those most deserving and most fit to use it. As a result, far-right ideology is often hostile toward efforts aimed at addressing historical injustice and promoting social equity, perceiving such interventions as threats. Rather than educationally confronting the structural and historical roots of inequality or social discontent, education becomes a key target for attack precisely because of its potential to challenge and disrupt these exploitative dynamics (Peters & Besley, 2021).

Oklahoma’s increasingly aggressive right-wing initiatives underscore the state’s ongoing far-right political shift. Phan and Sperling (2025) observe that by 2024, Oklahoma had introduced more anti-LGBTQ+ bills than any state, reflecting “entrenched societal efforts to regulate, marginalize, and erase queer and trans lives” (p. 2). In parallel, Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC)—a leading global promoter of far-right ideology rooted in anti-feminism, opposition to reproductive and LGBTQ+ rights, and Christian patriarchal nationalism (Jacobs, 2025; Sanders & Jenkins, 2023)—celebrated Oklahoma as having the second most conservative legislature in the country (“McCall touts latest CPAC rating for OK legislature,” 2023). The following year, state legislators established Oklahoma’s first Freedom Caucus, a coalition explicitly committed to advancing policies that push the state and the nation further to the right (Carter, 2024a; Green & Gawehns, 2024; Hamilton, 2024). Although these efforts are often framed through the libertarian language “limited government,” Stanley (2024) argues that right-wing libertarianism still leads us to the same outcomes: the reinforcement of class hierarchy and the dismantling of public goods, including public education. In practice, such far-right practices have eroded emancipatory positive freedoms—such as minority legal protections, public health care, and public education—that were once secured through state and federal oversight (National Women’s Law Center, 2024).

In this context, the passage of Oklahoma’s divisive concepts law

(HB1775) reflects a broader political agenda consistent with far-right resistance to social equity. A range of statistics and reports point to the consequences of this agenda for the state. As of this writing, for instance, the state ranks among the worst in the nation for education funding and, correspondingly, learning outcomes (Cobb, 2020; Best States, 2023; Hayes, 2024). It also ranks poorly in obesity rates, poverty levels, and health care systems (Elflein, 2024; Health Care, 2024; Oklahoma Policy Institute, 2024). Richey (2019) characterizes violence against Oklahoma’s women as “pandemic,” noting that in 2019 it was the only U.S. state where the life expectancy of women had actually declined. The lack of legal protections and social support afforded to Oklahoma’s women—coupled with the state’s recent restrictions on reproductive and voting rights—has led many organizations concerned with social justice to rank the state among the least desirable places to live in the U.S., particularly for women (Associated Press, 2024; Best States, 2023; Copeland, 2025; Oklahoma, 2025; Kajstura, 2018; McDowell, 2024; Mendelson, 2022; National Organization of Women, 2023; Richey, 2019). Apropos, the 2024 World Population Review ranked Oklahomans among the most unhappy people in the U.S. (Cameron, 2024). Although the state has long grappled with poverty and inequity, its current standings are not the result of historic inevitability. In 1962, for instance, Oklahoma’s teachers were among the most highly educated in the country, ranked first in U.S. teacher preparation (Kimberling, cited in Miller, 1964). Even as recently as 2011, the state held a respectable 17th place in national education rankings (Butler, 2022) before rapidly sliding to 49th in 2024.

As Oklahoma’s public education system is weakened through ongoing defunding efforts in the form of privatization, parental choice, and school vouchers, and as the state experiences the unprecedented exodus of professionally trained educators, its ability to resist extremist ideologies, from the left and right, becomes weakened as well. It is within the state’s general animosity toward public education that we orient our interviews with participants.

Methods

This paper emerges from a broader research project in which we interviewed several Oklahoma teachers to examine how divisive concepts laws, like HB1775, have affected them personally, professionally, and pedagogically. The overall research project was guided by the following research question:

How do Oklahoma’s teachers describe their personal, professional, and pedagogical reactions to divisive concepts laws, like HB1775, in and beyond the classroom?

To explore this question, during the summer and fall of 2023—approximately two years after the passage of HB1775—we contacted more than 140 potential participants representing each of Oklahoma’s seventy-seven counties through a combination of email, social media outreach, and snowball sampling. To ensure participants had a perspective on the law’s impact, we sought teachers with experience both before and after the passage of HB1775 (i.e., at least three years of teaching experience). Offering a \$50 gift card for participation in a one-hour interview yielded a response rate of approximately 12% ($n=17$).

Respondents (listed in Table 1) included elementary ($n=2$), secondary (middle or high school) ($n = 13$), and teachers with experience at both levels ($n=2$). While we primarily targeted educators in disciplines most likely to be affected by divisive concepts laws—particularly social studies, history, and English language arts ($n=14$)—teachers of psychology, biology, and mathematics also participated. The elementary teachers taught multiple subjects, all of which included United States

Table 1
Participants Cited in Piece

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Years Teaching</i>	<i>Level(s)</i>	<i>Subjects</i>	<i>Rural/Urban/Suburban</i>
Aliyah	5	Elementary and High School	ELA	Suburban
Bella	11	Middle	ELA	Rural
Clara	15	High School	Social Studies and ELA	Rural
Hayden	31	High School	ELA	Rural
Kennedy	7	High School	Social Studies and Ethnic Studies	Suburban
Opal	25	Elementary	All	Rural
Quinn	18	High School	ELA and Psychology	Rural/Suburban
Riley	14	Middle	US History, Gifted and Talented	Rural
Zania	7	High School	Social Studies	Rural

or Oklahoma history. Participants represented varied population centers—suburban, rural, and urban—and their teaching experience ranged from 3 to 31 years (14.6 average). Participants self-identified as “White” or “Caucasian” (70.6%), “American Indian” (11.8%), mixed race (11.8%), and “Hispanic” (5.8%). The sample included 12 women and 5 men. The participant pool reflected a wide range of political orientations, including those who self-identified as “conservative,” “Republican,” “Libertarian,” “Democrat,” “Democratic Socialist,” “independent,” and several who explicitly chose not to specify. In most cases, no prior relationship existed between the researchers and participants.

Semi-structured, open-ended interview protocol questions invited participants to discuss their familiarity with the law itself, their perceptions of its enforcement, and its personal, professional, and pedagogical impacts. Consistent with the semi-structured format, these questions served as a starting point for deeper explorations of teachers’ experiences and perspectives. Demographic questions were reserved until the conclusion of each interview. As researchers, we alternated between leading interviews and transcribing them. Each interview was subsequently reviewed, and a short analytic memo was written to serve as a second data source (Birks et al., 2008). These memos informed the development of emergent themes in accordance with grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Holton, 2004). We reviewed and discussed one another’s memos before and during coding to refine initial codes and strengthen analytic coherence.

Three primary themes emerged from our summary findings: (1) a reliance on state standards, (2) an environment of deprofessionalization and demoralization, and (3) an acknowledged relationship between teaching and discomfort. This paper focuses on our final theme—learning and discomfort—which itself emerged from three interrelated sub-themes: (a) teachers recognize the importance of discomfort as a learning tool, (b) teachers feel a moral responsibility to teach difficult topics through an inclusive and historical truth, and (c) the discussion of difficult topics provides moral and civic development opportunities. We explore each of these sub-themes using the participants’ words in the following section.

We feel it is important to highlight that the relationship between learning and discomfort, along with its associated sub-themes, was not an explicit topic of inquiry in our original interviews. Rather, it emerged in the data analysis stage as a salient theme among 70% (n=12)³ of participants. This does not suggest that the remaining 30% of teachers have no views on the matter, only that their open-ended responses did not lead in that direction.

Researcher Positionality

As educational researchers, we bring to this study distinct yet complementary expertise. Author 1 (a white male with no K–12 teaching experience) specializes in the social foundations of education with a focus on the historically political nature of education. Author 2 (a white female with 17 years of public-school K–12 teaching experience) focuses on social studies teacher education. Both of us have worked in academic settings in Oklahoma since the passage of HB1775. Author 1 arrived after the bill’s enactment and continues to work in the state; Author 2 lived in Oklahoma during the law’s implementation but has since relocated. Author 2 also conducted prior research on HB1775 as part of a content analysis examining how the legislation aligns with Oklahoma’s social studies standards at the time. Our shared interest in this legislation and its impact on teachers reflects our broader commitment to understanding education as a means of cultivating and sustaining participatory citizenship.

Findings: Themes & Sub-Themes

In this section, we examine the three aforementioned sub-themes as they relate to the larger theme of learning and discomfort. Our analysis indicates that teachers view discomfort not only as an essential component of student learning and development but also as a moral obligation inherent in their professional role as educators.

Sub-Theme 1:***Oklahoma Teachers Recognize the Importance of Discomfort as a Learning Tool***

Despite the language of HB1775, many of the teachers we spoke with emphasized the idea that discomfort is essential for learning and growth. They argued that education requires students to experience and work through discomfort to gain a deeper understanding and knowledge. Several of our participants noted that avoiding discomfort hinders the educational process and development of critical thinking skills. Many also explicitly recognized discomfort as an educational tool important to their practice, but one that is also under threat.

Aliya, who teaches ELA at a suburban middle and high school, perhaps most clearly voices these concerns:

...what worries me is the idea of...it being inappropriate in a schooling space for people to experience discomfort [...] they’re [Oklahoma legislators] trying to protect people by letting them not think.

Aliyah goes on to characterize classroom discomfort in terms of Vygotsky's zones of proximal development. In Vygotsky's model, three concentric circles represent (1) what the learner can do without assistance (the inner circle), (2) what the learner can do with guidance (the middle circle), and (3) what the learner cannot do (the outer circle). Applying Vygotsky's zones to student discomfort, the inner circle represents comfort (where the learner is unchallenged); the outer circle represents crippling anxiety/fear (what the learner is unprepared to accept); and the middle/liminal zone represents discomfort (where a teacher guides the learner to greater growth). For Aliya, adopting Vygotsky's model, discomfort is the necessary catalyst for growth, and the role of teachers is to help students through that discomfort:

...I mean, yeah, the rest of [HB 1775] is exhausting, but..., largely satellite to this concern about the uncomfortableness...And the reason that sticks in my craw specifically ... is that when you look at Lev Vygotsky... And you look at the zone of proximal development; what it requires is that we get a little uncomfortable.

Similarly, Quinn, a ELA and psychology teacher at a rural/suburban high school, reiterates the message of discomfort being critical to the learning process. Quinn shares her understanding that discomfort promotes moral growth and also that the process of learning is under threat in Oklahoma:

...part of a teacher's job is to teach kids how to be uncomfortable and work through that, and, ... [to] help them in this safe space of a classroom go, "Oh, I don't really like that"... and kind of unpack that with them and go, "Well, then, then, why do you study about it? Why are we gonna learn about it? So that we can be different and change."

Quinn continues:

... quite frankly, it's a life lesson that we need to teach these kids... We are supposed to be teaching them that things aren't fair, and things weren't fair in the past. And what did we learn from them... and how do we grow out of that situation... You know, we talk about growth mindset all the time, but ... we're gonna ignore it in our history? And,...I just think that [the classroom] is a safe space... to do that with kids... [with HB1775] we don't...we don't get to do [it].

Bella, Clara, Hayden, Reily, and Zania, all teachers at rural schools, likewise emphasize the importance of discomfort in exposing students to perspectives that extend beyond the insular norms of their local communities. Clara questions whether classroom instruction can still be considered "teaching" under such laws:

... I don’t think they [divisive concepts laws] allow you to teach. I think you can regurgitate material. You can, you know, tell your students what... your administration and your leaders want you to tell your students. But that’s not teaching. That’s, that’s not teaching. Teaching is digging deeper, and finding more, and finding ways to get your kids’ light bulbs to go on, and find interest in it. ... [As a teacher] you have to excite them. And I don’t think we can do that with these laws.

Similarly, Kennedy, who teaches in a suburban high school, suggests that under HB1775, even a teacher’s internalized threat of discomfort hinders their ability to teach; the inner debate of ‘should I or shouldn’t I teach this topic?’ interferes with the teacher’s preparation:

House Bill 1775 is a law designed to scare teachers into...not teaching about issues of race and gender, because they’re fearful of what exact lines will be used to... like, like, I’ve had friends who are like, “well, if someone feels uncomfortable about something, do they just get to say that? And then ‘I’m...out?’” So, I would say, it’s a fear-mongering tactic to basically make educators question teaching about important issues.

While we share more of these teachers’ voices in later themes, we close this section by returning to Aliyah, who most distinctively focused on the productive relationship of learning and discomfort.

Aliyah argues for a teacher’s and a learner’s ability to sit with the discomfort of not knowing, of being OK at being “disturbed” (Wheatley, 2002) by new knowledge. As Aliya and many other Oklahoma teachers recognize, however, teaching under HB1775 has taken a turn toward technical content delivery. Aliyah argues that the state’s teaching model has become more about knowing than about learning, more transmissive than transformational. That is to say that teachers are expected to deliver state-approved content rather than to model the discomfort of true educational growth (Mayo, 2004). Like many of our participants, Aliya struggles with the strangling constraint of creating only comfortable classrooms, noting that one student’s comfort is another’s discomfort, and that a teacher cannot possibly cater to both. In response, Aliya chooses to “teach” those who are willing to experience discomfort as “the discomforted,” in her words, “are the only students learning.” To put it succinctly, these teachers recognize and embrace the importance of discomfort as a means for learning.

Sub-Theme 2

Teachers Feel a Moral Responsibility to Teach Difficult Topics Through an Inclusive and Historical Truth

We also found that many teachers felt personally and professional-

ly obligated to address difficult and uncomfortable topics in their curriculum. To provide a well-rounded education, they believe it is morally essential to confront issues of racial and historical injustice. This responsibility is, they shared, crucial for fostering critical thinking and social awareness in students, and in preparing them to engage with and improve the broader society.

Pursuant, many of these teachers view HB1775 as a mechanism to protect white students from feeling uncomfortable about historical truths related to race and racism. Accordingly, many interpret the legislation as an attempt to limit a teacher's ability to provide a comprehensive and honest education, thereby perpetuating ignorance and white fragility. Teachers Bella, Opal, and Clara voice their rejection of "comfortable" racialized histories:

Bella: ... the bill [HB 1775] is there so that we make sure that we're teaching the history and we're teaching literature that does not make white children uncomfortable for being white.

Opal: These people were kidnapped. These people were murdered... because of their skin color, because of who they were, because of where they were born. ... we've wiped out entire generations of families, of brothers, of sisters, of mothers, of sons. And I try to make it more human, I guess, to say, "No, this is happening." ... *I can't sugarcoat and do my job* [emphasis added].

Clara: [Regarding HB 1775] ... it's a way... to perpetuate white fragility... I mean, the white people are the ones feeling bad about it... I mean, these other groups have felt bad about it for years, about, you know, being absent from the textbook, or not being able to tell their story, or being ignored or overlooked. I mean, that's been going on for years. And so... when we realize they need an opportunity, we're going to pass legislation to prevent that from happening because it makes us feel icky? That's, that's my layman's way to say "it's wrong."

Many of our teachers also placed a strong moral emphasis on the need to teach an inclusive and accurate history: one that acknowledges the experiences and struggles of marginalized groups. They viewed avoiding these topics as participating in an ongoing process of historical erasure and injustice. Rather than perpetuating the silence, they viewed it as their moral responsibility as teachers to present the full scope of history and to foster empathy and understanding among students.

Kennedy, a mid-career high school social studies teacher in a suburban district, shared her moral struggle with delivering uncomfortable content in the context of HB1775. In a state with one of the lowest educational attainment levels in the country (Educational Attainment, 2022), Kennedy understands that students who are not exposed to dis-

comforting histories in secondary schooling may never be. Specifically, Kennedy discusses her teaching of the *Casta* system.⁴ Kennedy notes that she has to be extremely thoughtful in her classroom explorations of racialized and sexualized violence when discussing such topics:

But what I will say is I still talk about it [the *Casta* system]. I don’t shy away because the unfortunate thing is *if I shy away from the history that they don’t want me to teach, I’m leaving out all of the people who literally have been left out forever* [emphasis added]. [...] and I’m doing the same thing for my students as what was done for me, which...until I got to the university level, I was not learning about these things. I was not learning about Native women’s experiences, or any sort of nuanced discussion about, um, like race. So, we can’t wait... until these students get to college. I feel like they’re able to understand it now.

Quinn shared that Oklahoma parents’ avoidance of educational discomfort has taken an extreme turn in recent years. Quinn relays an experience with a parent who wanted to shelter their child from reading *The Color Purple*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel and recipient of the National Book Award, which tells the difficult story of an African American woman’s journey to self-worth (1983 Pulitzer Prize Winners, 2024; 1983 Winners, 2025):

We’ve had parents trying to shelter their kids from uncomfortableness for years... but ... [HB] 1775 has made it scarier for teachers [emphasis added]. [...] I felt like I had a little more of a voice ..., prior to [HB] 1775, to say, “You know, you really ought to think about that, because I’m a safe place where she could talk to... watching or reading pretty difficult stuff”. And you know, the parents sheltering their kids isn’t necessarily a new thing, or wanting their kids not to be comfortable. But, um, it’s just gotten...it’s... it’s more extreme for sure.

For Quinn, helping students through difficult content like *The Color Purple* is a moral and professional responsibility.

These teachers felt that HB1775 sought to promote white narratives by silencing minority voices in the classroom, eliminating the teaching of traumatic histories, and distorting students’ education. For them, HB1775 was doing more than making decisions about curricular topics for inclusion and exclusion; it was promoting “wrong” (i.e., immoral) behaviors about what it means for them to be teachers. In response, each felt a strong moral responsibility to teach difficult topics through an inclusive and historical truth.

Sub-Theme 3***The Discussion of Difficult Topics Promotes the Moral and Civic Development of Students***

Many of our participating teachers also reflected on their role to not only impart academic knowledge but also to prepare students to be good citizens who can empathize with others, learn the principles of civil discourse and disagreement in a pluralistic democracy, and continue to work towards a more just society.

Quinn, who we heard from earlier, laments HB1775's erosion of civil discourse:

It's ... one of the main tenets of citizenship, right?... Being able to be like, "I don't really agree with you, but I'm listening." [...] and ... we're not teaching kids that, that valuable... civil discourse...that's just gone, you know?

Quinn's comments are evocative of Dewey's tenets for democracy. A robust democratic society, Dewey (1916/2016) argued, promotes interaction and communication across social groups; and a strength of Dewey's democracy can be determined by the "fullness and freedom with which it interacts with other groups" (p. 59). Conversely, for Dewey (1916/2016), "An undesirable society...is one which internally...sets up barriers to free intercourse and communication of experience (p. 59)." As Quinn notes, HB1775 fundamentally proscribes interaction with certain groups by putting guardrails around that group's story. The freedom and fullness of a Deweyan democratic society are, as Quinn states, "just gone."

Our participants shared that moral and civic development also involves teaching about the harsh realities of history to help students develop their civic consciousness. Reflecting on the sheltered nature of her small rural school, Hayden, who'd taught there for over 30 years, argues that the discomfort of the classroom is imperative for preparing rural students, living in a predominantly insular, conservative, white, Christian environment, for productive citizenship in the larger world. Hayden's comments touch on educational discomfort and the teacher's moral obligation to touch on the moral and civic development of students:

... [students] need to know that in order to be good citizens and good people when they leave our sheltered little community and go out in the real world and start encountering these things. So that they can be empathetic and understanding and not perpetuate that stereotypical hate. [...] And if it takes talking about tough subjects to teach them how to be... good citizens, that's what we need to do. Worrying about if I hurt someone's feelings...I try to avoid that. I sound so callous...I try

to avoid that. But, that can’t be my priority, you know... Your parents can worry about not hurting your feelings; *I’m going to tell you the truth* [emphasis added].

Hayden’s quote cuts across both sub-themes two and three, highlighting their interdependence; the teacher’s moral responsibility to tell the truth (sub-theme 2) is inescapably tied to the moral and civic growth of their students (sub-theme 3). Teachers like Hayden are not only talking about moral behavior, they are modeling it for their students.

Similarly, Zania and Bella continue the narrative of preparing Oklahoma students for a larger world by teaching a history that may create discomfort based on race and sex. Like Hayden, Zania’s comments cut across sub-themes, associating educational discomfort (sub-theme 1) with the student’s moral and civic growth (sub-theme 3):

...and I don’t think that we’re doing a service to our kids if we’re not, like, informing them of all... the ugly parts of history in a way that is informative, but not, you know, pushing any kind of agenda... and that way they can be the motivation [for] change. Like, I mean, *the only way to... create community and create... togetherness is to have everybody know what’s happened in the past and be aware of it, and accept it, and want to do better* [emphasis added],... to move things...in a better direction for all people. Like, ignoring that stuff is just kind of ignoring their story, and I don’t, I don’t like that very much.

Like Zania’s statement, Bella’s quote ties the students’ moral and civic growth (sub-theme 3) to the teacher’s morality (sub-theme 2) – or conversely, as Bella hints, it is the immoral atmosphere created by HB1775 that causes teachers to hesitate:

We’re not able to allow them [students] to try to step into somebody else’s shoes and become a better person. Because we’re afraid. Not that the laws even really tell us “no.” Like, that’s one thing that drives me crazy - it’s like the laws.. It’s the fear mongering..., the atmosphere..., that keep us from doing a lot of it. It’s like, almost like we’re self-censoring a lot of what we do, too.

Concerned about the educational experiences of her marginalized students, Riley recounts an experience of Black students in her classroom being subjected to the discomfort of what she termed as the State’s “white supremacist curriculum.” Her comments reference the Oklahoma Superintendent of Education (SSE) claim that the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre “wasn’t about race” (Krehbiel, 2023). Despite the SSE quickly recanting those remarks, Riley’s administration, in an act of self-censorship, canceled all school work and activities related to better understanding the massacre. When her administrators also failed

to address the use of racial epithets at school, Riley decided that she could no longer be a part of the silence:

I realized then and there that my kids, all my kids, deserve a well-rounded, truthful history. *I will fight for truth in the classroom* [emphasis added]. I will not speak falsehoods, and I will not white-wash history for any reason. If the SDE [State Department of Education] comes for me, then I will fight with what I can. If I fail and my teaching certificate is revoked, then I will find something else to do to support myself, but I will not omit history so some white men/women can feel better about themselves.

These teachers have drawn a strong line connecting the discussion of difficult topics to the moral and civic development of their students.

Discussion and Conclusion

The moral responsibilities of teaching weighed heavily on the teachers we profile in this article. That moral responsibility included teaching's ethical commitment to open and honest dialogue—including uncomfortable discussions about historic traumas that Frie (2023) deems so important for a society's growth. In the largely hostile educational environment of Oklahoma, codified in laws like HB1775, we found teachers who are defiant and yet struggling with how to maintain their ethical obligations to students (and hence society) in terms of Boler's (1999) pedagogy of discomfort. We found Oklahoma teachers who continue to promote and practice educational discomfort despite the language of divisive concepts laws like HB1775.

One approach to educational discomfort and teaching social trauma is flipping the script. Teachers like Aliyah are using the letter of the law to transgress the "master-script" (Swartz, 1992) spirit of the law. As she notes, one student's comfort is another's discomfort, and she cannot possibly cater to both. Aliyah argues that students—particularly minoritized students—experience discomfort when their racialized and gendered histories are absent from the curriculum and when historic traumas are denied meaningful representation. She cannot comfort those students who are unwilling to learn by discomforting others through intentional curricular omissions. Aliyah instead chooses to turn HB1775 on its head by teaching the students who are willing to learn through the discomfort. If HB1775 proscribes the discomforting of students, and yet students are going to be discomforted anyway, then Aliyah argues that professional teachers, who—unlike divisive concepts promoting lawmakers—know both their students and their curricular material, are the ones to choose the most educationally pro-

ductive discomfort. It’s not about discomfort per se; it’s about whose discomfort. Teachers, by the nature of their profession and the moral obligations that profession entails, are, in Aliyah’s view, uniquely situated to make that determination.

Other teachers we spoke with take a more direct approach to contravening divisive concepts laws. Several continue to include curricular material that challenges the limitations of HB1775. This approach is less about navigating around HB1775 (as with flipping the script) than it is about disregarding the law. These teachers continue to teach the most morally responsible curriculum possible because—in agreement with Frie (2023)—it is the socially and professionally responsible thing to do. When Opal argues that she cannot sugarcoat and do her job, she is acknowledging her moral and professional obligation to expose students to historically accurate social traumas that continue to resonate today. When Kennedy continues to explore the discomforting racial and gender violence of the *Casta* system, it is because ongoing violence against indigenous women continues at alarming rates (Murdered and Disappeared Native Women, 2023). Hayden prioritizes historical accuracy over student feelings because teaching demands she be a source of unsilenced truth. Opal, Kennedy, and Hayden argue that their students need to know the past to understand the present. In line with both Boler (1999) and Frie (2023), these teachers note a moral, social, and professional obligation to teach an accurate, if disturbing, curriculum.

Our study indicates that, despite divisive concepts laws, a contingent of the state’s teachers recognize that discomfort is a necessary, and perhaps fundamental, component of education. In line with Bolar (1999) and Frie (2023), they assert that experiencing discomfort in response to past and ongoing injustices and indignities is both a necessary and expected aspect of the learning process, particularly when learners come to recognize their own participation in, or benefit from, such injustices and are motivated to create positive changes. As a society, these teachers argue that we should not seek to eliminate educational discomfort but rather embrace it as an essential catalyst for intellectual and moral growth.

For those who recognize the importance of Boler’s (1999) educational discomfort, particularly as it relates to confronting the historical social traumas described by Frie (2023), the teachers profiled here offer a powerful source of inspiration. They demonstrate a principled commitment to responding to what they understand as an unjust law through what they regard as just action. Moreover, as far-right legislation increasingly seeks to normalize sociopathy by silencing uncomfortable voices, our findings suggest that some—if not many—Oklahoma

teachers refuse to participate in what they view as immoral pedagogical silences.

Notably none of the teachers framed their actions in terms of partisan political affiliation. Instead, they grounded their responses in a moral orientation toward truth seeking and truth telling. From John Locke to Martin Luther King Jr., legal scholars and social activists have long argued that the legitimacy of a law rests on its moral foundations rather than on political alignment alone. These teachers' pedagogical responses resonate with St. Augustine's claim that "a law that is not just does not seem to me to be a law" (King, 2010, p. 10) and with King's (1963) assertion that "one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws." In this spirit, the teachers profiled here challenge the moral legitimacy of divisive concepts laws through their everyday classroom practices.

Despite teaching in what has become one of the most repressive and anti-educational states in America, we found teachers who refuse to abandon a moral mandate to teach uncomfortable truths. They recognize the importance of discomfort as a learning tool; they feel a moral responsibility to teach difficult topics through an inclusive and historical truth; and they find that the discussion of difficult topics promotes the moral and civic development of students. Their practices challenge the law because the teachers feel a moral responsibility to create engaged, informed, and responsible citizens. Their refusal to enact a law they find unjust may present the most effective resistance to divisive concepts laws like Oklahoma's HB1775.

Notes

¹ While the rise of U.S. divisive content laws seems to parallel rising Holocaust denial and distortion (Defeating Distortion, 2025), a broader exploration of this relationship is beyond the scope of this paper.

² Particularly negative freedoms in the form of limiting a government's ability to intervene in economic injustice and social hierarchies.

³ Of these twelve, nine are cited in this paper.

⁴ Spanish and Portuguese colonization laws that promoted sexual violence against native women to create a mixed-race social hierarchy with Europeans at the top.

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