

Grappling with grief: Preservice art teachers' responses to the January 2025 U.S. DOE press release

Andrea E. Allen, PhD
Michigan State University

ABSTRACT

In January 2025, an executive order was issued to dismantle diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in U.S. public education, prompting an urgent discussion on its implications for preservice art teachers. This paper examines a discussion activity developed in response to this policy change, implemented in an art education undergraduate course at a Midwestern research university. Through qualitative analysis of student responses, key themes emerged, including shock, rationalization, anger, and considerations for moving forward. Framed within social justice art education, this discussion activity highlights the importance of preparing future art teachers to navigate socio-political challenges through critical dialogue and equity-oriented pedagogies.

KEYWORDS: DEI, social justice art education, preservice, critical dialogue, grief, public policy

January 2025 marked a critical moment in U.S. history as Donald Trump began his second term as president. As with any new administration, societal and cultural shifts were expected; however, the immediacy with which executive orders were issued, impacting immigration, the federal workforce, funding allocations, climate policies, and education, was particularly striking (Schapitl & Ordoñez, 2025). One issue of great concern to myself, as a teacher educator, was an executive order aimed at halting and actively dismantling diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts in public education (Exec. Order No. 14,151, 2025). While researching the implications of this policy, I came across a U.S. Department of Education (DOE) press release announcing its compliance with the order (U.S. Department of Education, 2025).

At this time, I was teaching an undergraduate art education course twice a week. On the morning of our first class for the week, as I reviewed my slides, I felt a need to incorporate a discussion about these recent events. Although we had only met three times before, I had already emphasized that this course aimed to prepare students to be informed, socially engaged artist educators. I emphasized contemporary approaches to art education, including social justice-oriented and student-centered pedagogies, and had structured the course so that the lessons students developed would center individual student needs and identities. To remain true to this vision, and to my own philosophy as a socially engaged art educator, I could not continue teaching about curriculum and instruction without addressing a policy change that would directly impact my students' future careers.

This paper describes a discussion activity I developed in response to the executive order and subsequent DOE press release about DEI in education. This discussion aimed to bring awareness to and foster critical dialogue around this major societal shift. An analysis of students' responses, ranging from shock and rationalization to anger and considerations for moving forward, illustrates how critical consciousness and civic engagement can be cultivated in preservice art education classrooms. The paper concludes with a summary of the conversation's key points and a discussion on the increasing importance of such dialogue in preservice training and implications for art education in 2025.

Context and Preservice Art Teacher Demographics

The discussion activity described in this paper took place in an undergraduate course at a large research university in the Midwest. The course had 11 students, all art education majors planning to graduate within the next couple of years. On the day of the discussion, eight students were in attendance, all of whom identified as female or non-binary. Of these students, all were White except for one Asian student. While they had completed general education courses prior to this class, this was their first dedicated art education course.

The first few weeks of the semester were intentionally structured to revisit foundational concepts and instructional strategies they may have encountered in previous coursework, such as curriculum development and pedagogy, and to contextualize these ideas within the art classroom. As the semester progressed, students were expected to apply these concepts by designing and teaching their own art lessons to K-12 students and community members. At the time of the discussion, we were reviewing curriculum development and differentiation strategies.

Framework and Significance

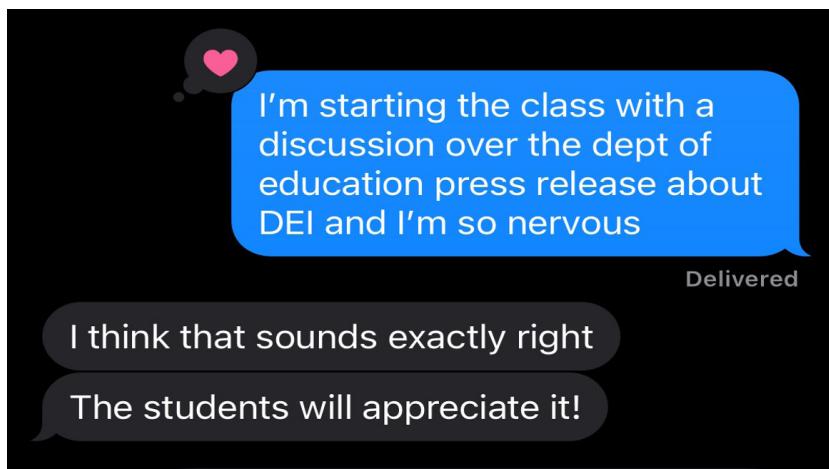
As a woman of color who, previous to this appointment, worked primarily with students of color, my teaching and graduate school experiences have deeply shaped my commitment to social justice art education. This commitment informed the development, implementation, and analysis of this discussion activity through a social justice lens. As Desai (2020) explains, social justice art education seeks to raise awareness of socio-political issues, challenge dominant behaviors, and mobilize civic participation. A social justice-oriented art program, therefore, extends beyond artmaking, fostering dialogue among students and teachers about issues and events that take place outside the art room.

To cultivate a justice-oriented art classroom, recent scholarship emphasizes the importance of preparing preservice art teachers to address issues of equity and access (Hafeli, 2022). Art teacher educators assert that preservice art teachers must develop the capacity to “engage students in reflection, dialogue, research, critique, and knowledge creation around race and racial events” to effectively confront inequity in their future classrooms (Acuff & Kraehe, 2022, p. 15). Furthermore, engaging in these conversations can encourage preservice art teachers to critically reflect on their internal biases, reconsider curricular content, and explore strategies for addressing social inequities in their teaching practices (Sions, 2022). Ultimately, a justice-oriented approach to art teacher education can result in art instruction that centers social justice.

The discussion activity I facilitated reflects this approach by encouraging students to examine broader societal issues and their impact on art education. Then, after learning about these issues, they reflected on their personal responses and discussed them with their peers. Through this process of learning, reflecting, and talking with their peers, the students began to recognize the connections between themselves, art instruction, and society. Connections that will inform their approach to curriculum and instruction throughout the course and into their future careers.

Despite truly believing in the value of this discussion, I was extremely nervous to bring this activity into my classroom. As a new faculty member at a large university and teaching primarily White students for the first time, I wrestled with self-doubt. Minutes before class started, I even texted a friend to share my fear (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Text to a friend, 2025.



Apprehension around bringing these topics into the classroom is understandably widespread among teachers, especially as the current political climate imposes tighter restrictions on what can and cannot be taught in the classroom. However, as supported in the literature, it is important to model resilience and strategies for navigating discomfort when engaging with these topics in the art room. Demonstrating how to facilitate uncomfortable conversations helps preservice art teachers move beyond theoretical understanding to the practical development and implementation of curriculum that addresses social justice issues (Kantawala et al., 2022; Willcox & Hamrock, 2023). The following section describes the discussion activity that was developed and integrated into my existing lesson plans.

Discussion Activity

Two slides were added to the presentation on art curriculum development. These slides introduced the discussion as an activity for students to work on at the beginning of class. I prefaced the activity with an explanation of why we were starting class this way, saying it was important to stay informed about current events in education and the criticality of having time to reflect on and discuss these issues with peers, especially as they begin to develop their own curriculum and teaching philosophies in this course.

For the first portion of this activity, I directed students to the U.S. DOE's press release, asking them to read it and respond through writing or drawing. To encourage deeper reflection, I provided question prompts but emphasized that they could respond in any way they felt was appropriate. Since this was only our fourth class meeting, I was unfamiliar with the students' political views and their comfort level with one another beyond my classroom. Therefore, in an effort to create a safe space for students to express themselves freely, I assured students that these initial reflections would not be collected, and students could choose to keep them private. I also included a note on the slides informing students that they could choose whether to participate in this activity at all and provided a link to an anonymous feedback form on our online course platform in case students felt uncomfortable speaking up in class. The details of the first slide for this discussion activity are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1
Discussion Activity Slide 1

Instructions: Read U.S. Department of Education Press Release from January 23, 2025, titled, U.S. Department of Education Takes Action to Eliminate DEI. Respond to this information visually or in writing.

Prompts:

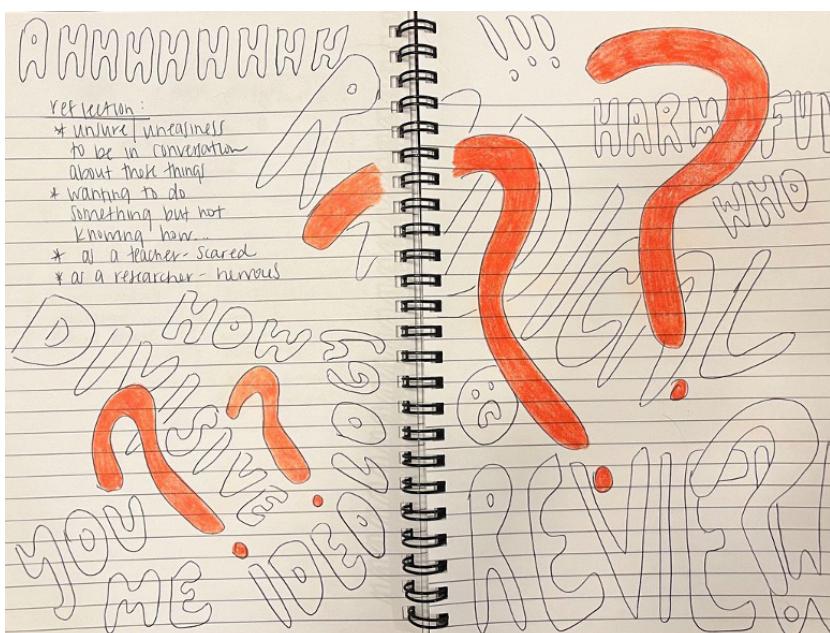
- What does diversity/equity/inclusion mean to you?
- What is your understanding of what any or all of these terms mean in the context of education and/or the art classroom?
- How does this make you feel as a student?
- How does this make you feel as a future art educator?

If you ever feel uncomfortable during a conversation, lecture, or activity in this class, please feel free to opt out at any point and/or provide feedback via the Anonymous Feedback Form linked on our course website.

Students had 20 minutes to read and reflect independently before we came together for a group discussion on the press release. While students worked, I also jotted down my reflections and doodled words and question marks to capture my confusion and emotional response to the statement. These notes and doodles are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

Instructor's initial reflections to U.S. DOE January 2025 Press Release about eliminating DEI, 2025.



The second slide transitioned us into the discussion and clarified my intention to document our conversation. I explained that this documentation could help others facilitate similar discussions and provide insight into how preservice art teachers were responding to this information in real time. The slide also reiterated that students could choose how and whether to participate and included the link for anonymous comments and feedback. Before we began, I asked for their consent to record the conversation. More information about informed consent is provided in the Methodology section. After all students agreed, we proceeded with the discussion.

We arranged ourselves in a circle so students could face and engage with one another rather than directing their comments solely to me, the instructor. I wanted students to guide the conversation, so other than the question prompts from the first slide, I had not prepared additional questions. I simply started by asking, "What do you all think?" As the discussion unfolded, I acted as a facilitator, connecting ideas and

posing probing questions to encourage deeper engagement. Several students spoke up, while others listened and silently reflected.

I did not impose a set time frame for the discussion, as I wanted to allow the conversation to progress organically. At a natural pause, after we had addressed multiple topics from the initial prompts, I asked if anyone had anything else to share. When no one responded, I concluded the discussion after 25 minutes. In total, this activity lasted 45 minutes.

Methodology

This activity is qualitative in nature and draws from decolonial data collection methods such as kitchen conversations (wilson et al., 2021) and *pláticas* (the Spanish word for “conversation” or “informal chat”) (Allen, 2025), to collect the stories of the preservice art teachers who participated. wilson et al. (2021) describe kitchen conversations as occurring in circles, enabling dialogue to flow non-linearly, with the kitchen table serving as a space for critical conversation and connection between participants. Similarly, *pláticas* as a methodology offer an informal and relational approach to storytelling, intentionally blurring the lines between researcher and participant. This approach emphasizes collaborative listening, co-constructed knowledge, and the privileging of participants’ lived experiences (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2013). Rather than taking a more traditional approach to interviewing, these methods can produce data that is less performative and more authentic to the participants’ experiences, values, and perceptions (Swain & King, 2022).

Aligned with the study’s social justice framework, these methods also call attention to questions of value, credibility, and power. Employing these methods cultivates a counter-narrative space where power and new knowledge can emerge from the collective voices of a minoritized population within this socio-political context (Bae-Dimitriadis, 2024). In today’s political climate, the stories of preservice art teachers, who are not typically positioned within dominant power structures, can be described as counter-narratives that offer different perspectives from within systems of oppression (Kraehe, 2015). As students and future educators, having the opportunity to learn about and respond to education policies imposed on them without their input helps shift power into their hands, helping them to better understand these changes and choose how they will respond and move forward with this knowledge.

To obtain informed consent from the students, in addition to the note on the presentation slides that enabled students to decide how, or whether, to participate in the activity, I also made it clear that partici-

pation was entirely voluntary, would not be graded, and would have no impact on their overall grade for the course. Furthermore, students were informed of my intent to record our discussion to facilitate the dissemination of the knowledge produced. I assured them that if I used direct quotes, I would omit their names and any identifying information, such as pronouns, that could link the quotes to any one individual. Only after receiving unanimous consent did I press record on my phone.

I recorded audio only and stopped the recording as soon as we stepped away from the circle and the conversation concluded. After class, I uploaded the recording to Otter.ai, a password-protected online transcription service, and then deleted the file from my phone. Once transcribed, I engaged in thematic analysis of the transcription where I reviewed, coded, and categorized the information to identify the themes presented in the findings (Saldaña, 2015). The transcription of the conversation was the only data source for the findings, as none of the students chose to use the Anonymous Feedback Form or share their initial journal notes or sketches.

Shock, Rationalization, Anger, and Moving Forward

Excerpts from the conversation are included below to illustrate the mood of the discussion, the authenticity of the exchange between students, and the ways in which one point of conversation led to another (Swain & King, 2022). These excerpts, along with brief interpretations and explanations of the dialogue, are organized under subheadings that reflect the four key themes that emerged: Shock, Rationalization, Anger, and Moving Forward.

Shock

The first thing students noted as we began the discussion was the language used in the official document. Terms like “wasteful,” “divisive,” and “illegal,” along with other negative descriptors, appeared in the very first paragraph and were interwoven throughout the text, which was fewer than 400 words in total, to describe DEI in public education. Although not everyone spoke up initially, the nods of agreement around the room made it clear that many shared feelings of shock and confusion about why the information was presented in this way.

Instructor: So, what do you all think?

Student A: I was a little stunned about how biased the language was. [The press release] was so obviously in support of getting rid of DEI and everything that comes with that... I've taken journalism

classes, and I just know, especially as the U.S. Department of Education, they shouldn't be leaning one way or the other. It should just be the facts.

Student B: Going off of that, I was also surprised about how they said, "ending radical and wasteful government..." like they could have said that in a nicer way. They also don't explain why it is wasteful or unnecessary, and honestly, I'm just left with more questions.

Student C: Kind of what like [Student B] said, I'm kind of just like, "What? Why?" Why is [DEI] considered wasteful, because DEI, those three words, all seem good. How could inclusion be bad? How can diversity be bad?

(personal communication, January 27, 2025)

Student B elaborated on her confusion, explaining that she had tried to look up the "Equity Action Plan" mentioned in the document to understand why it might be considered harmful but could not find any trace of it online. This drew attention to a statement in the press release noting that "over 200 web pages from the department's website that housed DEI resources" would be removed (U.S. Department of Education, 2025). In response, another student remarked, "I feel bad for all the people that did all that research and wrote all that stuff. It's just getting all deleted" (Student D, personal communication, January 27, 2025). This led us to discuss why some people may consider DEI harmful and want to "eliminate" access to such resources and information.

Rationalization

DEI efforts related to hiring practices, accessibility for disabled people, and queer rights were all mentioned as areas that could potentially be viewed as "divisive" or fiscally "wasteful," as described in the press release. As we talked through these claims, students shook their heads in disappointment but not disbelief. Although they disagreed with the framing of these efforts as harmful, they were aware that many people do view them that way. In trying to rationalize the language and intentions behind the press release, the students ultimately found its reasoning to be irrational.

Student D: I think one of the reasons why they may be saying that [DEI] is harmful is because with hiring more people of color, some people think that that's turning away White people. I think that's the worry that a lot of White people might have.

Student B: That's just not how it works.

Student E: People think that though, which is so crazy that some people think that. It just doesn't make sense.

Student B: All I can think of is, kind of what [Student D] was saying, it's fear. People not being around people that look different from them or have different opinions or different experiences, and it's foreign and scary.

(personal communication, January 27, 2025)

During this part of the discussion, some students really struggled to align their thinking with the different perspectives that were presented. For example, when considering the idea of opposing hiring initiatives aimed at increasing diversity in a workplace, Student A interjected, saying, "...how could that anger come from anywhere but a place of racism? It's so hard, sometimes, for me to have these conversations because I cannot think on that other side of the coin" (Student A, personal communication, January 27, 2025).

Recognizing their difficulty in connecting this issue to their personal perspectives, I encouraged them to reflect on their lived experiences by asking, "How does this make you feel as a student?"

Anger

From their responses, it was evident that students felt not only anger and disappointment toward the press release and executive orders but also frustration with how their university was responding.

Student C: I'm angry.

Student F: I feel very disrespected because I'm personally part of a group within DEI and seeing that [our university] backed out of all the [DEI-related] programs.

Student E: It just breaks my heart for people because there's just so many different ways to learn and get experience and just be more educated.

Student A: I feel thankful that I've already gone through most of my education up until now. Not that the education that I got before was super unbiased or anything but at least it wasn't what they're doing now.

Student C: Well, you know, we pay a lot of money to go to school here, and then to think that [university leaders] really don't care about certain people who are giving them money.

Student A: They don't care about anyone. They care about football.

(personal communication, January 27, 2025)

One of the DEI-related programs Student F referenced was the abrupt cancellation of a webinar on the future of DEI on campus (French, 2025). The students collectively viewed this decision as a sign that the university prioritized compliance with executive orders over the best interests of their campus community. Building on this discussion, Student D expressed concern that progress made by past DEI initiatives would be undone, and Student C shared an anecdote about their rowing club's DEI committee. They said this committee had dwindled from 15 members to just one over the past year, remarking that this rapid decline revealed where people's priorities and values truly lie.

Moving Forward

With their initial emotions laid out, the conversation shifted to how these changes might impact them as future art teachers. Interestingly, although we had previously discussed strategies for getting to know students and creating inclusive classrooms, and many had expressed a commitment to fostering creative self-expression, they struggled to define what diversity, equity, and inclusion might tangibly look like in their future classrooms. Even Student A, one of the more vocal participants in this conversation, shared:

“Personally, I’m still going to be teaching diversity, equity, and inclusion in my classroom... I guess I don’t know, necessarily, what that would even mean... like what I wouldn’t be allowed to do” (Student A, personal communication, January 27, 2025).

Going off this statement, I asked students to think about what activities or topics generally occur in the art classroom.

Student B: Learning about different types of art, learning about art, what art looks like to multiple cultures and how it looks around the world.

Student E: Self reflection, things that matter to you, and about your own culture. That’s what a lot of what artists include in their art.

Student D: I think also different topics from artists of color.

Student A: Just really getting to know your kids.

(personal communication, January 27, 2025)

This dialogue demonstrated the students' connection between racial and cultural diversity and DEI efforts in the art classroom, while also revealing their uncertainty about what might be considered DEI. Student F commented on the broader confusion around DEI, saying they wished people could understand how DEI impacts more than just one particular group, emphasizing that opposing DEI for one reason inevitably affects many others.

As we considered how to move forward, I brought attention to the importance of ongoing conversations and activities that allow both students and teachers to unpack the nuances of terms and perspectives, especially as seemingly benign terms become increasingly politicized. After this conversation, we fell into a reflective silence, and I asked if anyone had any final comments. When no one responded, I thanked the students for their participation, and we concluded the discussion.

Discussion

When reviewing the data and reflecting on the conversation, I was reminded of Dewhurst's (2010) claim that social justice art education does not have to be overtly political; rather it can merely serve as a vehicle for critical reflection and knowledge construction. In this discussion, students were given the opportunity to learn from one another, co-construct new knowledge, and build awareness around a complex topic. The co-construction of knowledge was evident in the ways some students readily shared their ideas while others stayed silent. This silence may suggest that some students were still forming their thoughts and learning through observation. Alternatively, it may indicate that some held differing viewpoints and opted not to voice them. Either way, the act of listening created space for the exchange of perspectives that might not have otherwise been encountered. In a time marked by difficult conversations, the interaction between the vocal and the silent reflects the kind of collaborative and equity-oriented learning environments needed for navigating challenging concepts (Broadus-Garcia, 2022).

As the themes emerged from the data, I could not help but connect the emotional tone of the conversation to the stages of grief. While Kübler-Ross' (1970) five stages of grief are often the most well-known, the shock, rationalization, anger, and forward-thinking expressed in the

discussion are more closely aligned with Bowlby and Parkes' (1980) four stages of grief: 1. shock and disbelief, 2. searching and yearning, 3. disorganization and repair, and 4. rebuilding and healing.

In this discussion activity, students read a document announcing major policy changes in education that would directly impact their lives as students and future teachers. In reading about these changes, reactions reflected the first stage, saying they were "stunned" not only by the content of the announcement but also by the language used to present it. Their feelings further aligned with the second and third stages as they questioned the reasoning behind these policies and became angry, disappointed, and heartbroken over both the immediate and long-term implications for their lives as students and educators.

As grief often follows a great and sudden loss, I considered what students might be losing. The phrase "eliminate DEI" used in the title and the students' note of the correlating resources that were being removed and erased brought to light the fact that information is being taken away or destroyed before their eyes. Subsequently, their sense of safety in engaging with materials that could be seen as related to DEI and their agency to make decisions about what takes place in their future classrooms is being stripped from them.

Although we concluded the conversation by focusing on reassuring ideas about what art classrooms can still include despite these challenges, it was clear that neither the students nor I had fully processed or accepted the magnitude of what had transpired since the 2025 inauguration day, just a week before this discussion. Through ongoing dialogue about DEI-related topics, I hope we can collectively move toward the fourth stage of "rebuilding and healing," where we reclaim a renewed sense of identity as socially engaged artist-educators who maintain agency over our classrooms and well-being (Tyrell et al., 2023).

Implications for Art Education in 2025

In 2025, a year destined for significant socio-political shifts under a new presidential administration, it is more important than ever to provide opportunities for preservice art teachers to apply critical thinking and develop awareness around public policy. Although this study focused on a small class, the students' narratives offer meaningful insight into the lived experiences of preservice art teachers navigating an era of political uncertainty. As the educational landscape quickly evolves, uplifting student voices and understanding their perspectives is essential to forming a more complete picture of both the current and future state of art education.

The discussion activity outlined in this paper offers one example of how teacher educators can facilitate these important conversations in the art education classroom. However, future iterations could incorporate artmaking as a tool for critical reflection and personal expression to deepen the dialogue and make it more personally meaningful for artist-educators. While students in this study were initially given the option to respond to the press release either visually or in writing, this option could have been extended throughout the activity. Speaking up in a group or finding the right words to articulate complex thoughts and emotions can be daunting, especially when the subject matter is emotionally charged. As art educators, we are uniquely positioned to empower students to communicate beyond words, and modeling this approach can help preservice art teachers learn how to implement similar strategies in their own classrooms. Additionally, integrating discussion of socially engaged artists and artmaking processes can elevate these dialogues into acts of activism (Chung & Allen, 2023).

For art teacher educators, engaging students in conversations and activities rooted in culturally responsive, justice-oriented, antiracist, and anti-ableist practices can feel risky in today's political climate. As previously mentioned, I was apprehensive about introducing this activity in my classroom, and that apprehension extends to writing this paper. I am aware that, as executive orders target the presence of DEI in K-12 classrooms, they also restrict teacher education programs from addressing DEI-related topics (Exec. Order No. 13,985, 2025). In response, many schools and universities have begun taking precautionary measures to ensure compliance with these mandates in order to avoid the risk of losing federal funding. This amplifies the fear and sense of surveillance for us educators, especially as administrators work to ensure adherence across campus. I also recognize that this pressure is particularly intense in states whose political leaders align more closely with the current administration, where the threat of being reported for incorporating DEI or social justice issues into the classroom is more real (Stone & Lieberman, 2025).

Still, the prospect of depriving my students, and by extension, their future students, of the chance to learn about themselves and others, to critically develop identities and perspectives, and to gain the confidence to question and challenge the world around them frightens me more than the threat of these implicit cease-and-desist messages. By modeling this activity, I am also modeling courage for preservice art teachers who will undoubtedly face fear as they enter the workforce. That fear will grow as decision-making power continues to shift from those within the classroom, students and teachers, to those outside of it. To support those inside the classroom, it is essential that we docu-

ment how these difficult conversations can be facilitated and share the processes with others.

In conclusion, at a time when compliance with oppressive policies may seem like the easier and safer choice, it becomes vital to hold space for these discussions, share information, and record these moments of resistance. Avoiding these conversations now will only worsen our situation later. Through these critical conversations, we can empower future art educators to take action, not only for themselves, but for the well-being of their students and the betterment of the field.

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