JOURNAL OF DIVERSITY AND EQUITY IN EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Grant, D. (2025). Editors' Note. *Journal of Diversity and Equity in Educational Development*, *1*(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.5070/N5.48363

Conversations

Editors' Note

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Co-Editor in Chief, JDEED, September 2025

Abstract

In Conversations, the *Journal of Diversity and Equity in Educational Development* (JDEED) brings together educational developers with differing or complementary perspectives on a common topic or experience to engage in dialogue. Drawing on their experiences, identities, and professional practice, participants use conversation as a way to make meaning, explore complexity, connection, and dilemmas, not necessarily to reach conclusions. We have adapted this genre from a piece by Ladson-Billings et al. (2024) in the *Harvard Educational Review*. We welcome anyone to propose a Conversations article, and, as in the case of this article, JDEED editors will also facilitate conversations that we believe are of value to the field.

We are proud to include this piece in the inaugural issue of JDEED. The idea for this conversation came during a meeting with the JDEED Editorial Board in which we were discussing the purpose and aims of the journal. Board member Michele DiPietro eloquently noted that in an era in which diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is being defined by forces that would erase it, JDEED should aim to play a role in "telling the story of DEI." The editors thought, who better to tell a story of what DEI is, what it means to do DEI work, and the implications of dismantling DEI initiatives than educational developers who have been dealing with anti-DEI laws and sentiment since before the November 2024 election.

To arrange this conversation, we asked colleagues to connect us with educational developers in states that had already passed anti-DEI legislation or that were hostile to DEI efforts. Through that outreach, we met the three educational developers of color featured here—one from Texas, one from Utah, and one from Georgia—and asked them to reflect on their work while living and working in states with hostility to DEI initiatives and/or anti-DEI legislation. The conversation took place in April 2025. At the time, Texas and Utah both had state-level anti-DEI legislation that preceded the current presidential administration, while Georgia's legislature had considered, but failed to pass, such legislation. Speaking with candor, humor, and care, they shared their experiences of working to create meaningful teaching and learning experiences on campuses in which both DEI and the very existence of minoritized people are questioned, undermined, and erased.

In speaking with these remarkable and thoughtful educational developers, three themes stood out: first, the complicity of their colleagues in the erasure of DEI. The participants spoke with anguish when noting that the same colleagues who touted their allyship in 2020 (following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other unarmed Black people) were now the same ones preemptively erasing "DEI" terminology and programming from websites. Second, for these educational developers, DEI isn't a buzzword or empty phrase, it's essential to good teaching. For them, DEI signals attending to who is in the room; having high standards for all students, and particularly to those historically marginalized;

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The author has no competing interests to declare. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Derisa Grant, derisa@gmail.com

and interrogating systems that would deny that access and opportunity, as well as providing access to resources for full participation in the learning environment. Finally, I was struck by the labor, much of it unseen, that these three undertake, as they counsel and guide their faculty, staff, and students through these shifting political moments, while also working in institutions that can be isolating and, at times, hostile.

I was honored to speak with, and get to know, these three educational developers. I hope this conversation offers a powerful reflection on the community and resilience needed to do DEI work, especially when the work itself is under threat.

Keywords: anti-DEI legislation, educational developers of color, resilience, state-level restrictions, DEI

The conversation occurred in April 2025 via Zoom and has been edited for clarity and brevity by the editorial team. All participants chose to use pseudonyms to protect their identities, and the editorial team shortened those to first initials.

JDEED: Thank you for joining us in this conversation. I want to start with your role before state-level policies or restrictions. How did you engage with DEI?

P: I was at a large statewide school two decades before moving to a small private school, and I didn't really understand at the time why I moved, but probably within the third or fourth year that I was there, I understood … I began to understand that I had a calling; and the calling was to introduce DEI to my campus.

I told my boss that I was going to do that. And he said, "Okay, I think you should do that. But the one thing that you should probably stay away from would be issues of sexuality." Well, you know, somebody tells you not to do something, that's the very thing you want to do, right? And so that's what I did. I began introducing that [topic] to my faculty, just to see how digestible it would be with them, in the form of a research-based book [club]. There were all kinds of people, and they were highly receptive to it. To be honest, we have very few faculty of color at my institution. So, the vast majority of these people were white [but] they were ready. They seemed hungry, and again, I had planned to do this before COVID, [the] Black Lives Matter Movement, and George Floyd, and everything that went with that. So, I knew that that was my calling and that that's why I was there, and I needed to be, and had to be true to myself.

Now things are a little different. It has been devastating to see what has happened to my colleagues at [my previous institution], and the DEI programs that have been slashed. So many of my colleagues and friends have lost their jobs. You know, grants have been just stopped, halted right in the middle. It's really sad, and it's hurtful. It's disgusting. It makes me angry when I think about it. I'm disgusted, but I'm also a force of action when I want to do something.

L: I'm new to educational development, but I've been in higher education for over a decade. And whether it's a grant focused on diversifying health professions, or serving on national DEI boards, serving as a feature editor, writing papers, or protesting in the streets, I've done a lot of DEI-focused work.

I'd started working on grants right before the hammer came down, and all of them focused on diversifying different fields. So, whether it be physics or engineering, I was doing a lot of work on the idea that representation matters, in terms of disability, race, gender, sexual preference, whatever the case may be.

I literally worked with faculty on three different grants that were submitted over Christmas break, and they all had those buzzwords like *inclusion* and *underrepresented*. Think of all the words on that list. If

you look at the [grants'] original funding announcement, this is what they were looking for; that was the funding priority. But as of now, we haven't heard back on a decision. We followed instructions, but I don't know if I wasted two months of my life, or if [these applications] are going to be competitive. [My contacts at the agencies] don't know the answer, but the information on the website is the same as it was before the hammer came down.

JDEED: Okay, so you're feeling the impact, but there's a lot of uncertainty.

T: Yeah, it's been terrifying. In 2022, it was amazing because so many faculty [members] were reaching out to us. And they were like, "Please, we want to learn more. Come, give us presentations on anti-racism. We'll do workshops! What kind of initiatives can we do?" And it was really exciting. But then, fast forward about 2 years, and there's just terrible legislation dropping in Utah. There's been a lot of different bills that were pushed through. But one last year was what people consider the anti-DEI bill, and basically the words diversity, equity, inclusion had to be whitewashed from websites [and] everyone's mission statements. We're not allowed to use that language. It just blows my mind.

And along with that, there's so much fear. People are like, "What about my work? What can we say in classrooms?" And you have students who are filming professors. And of course, people are terrified, especially if you're teaching within fields like gender studies or talking about race.

So that was really scary. But at the time, I still felt like, "Okay, we can do something. Still, we can keep doing the work that we're doing. But we just call it belonging. Maybe [there are] ways we can continue with these initiatives." But I don't know now with the Trump administration and other bills that have emerged. We can't have pride flags in schools now, here in Utah. It's just—it's just suffocating. And I'm so scared for students. And there are so many faculty who are wanting to leave the school. The morale is so low.

For me, getting together with communities of women of color and friends who have similar beliefs, and trying to still create some kind of force—still trying to find hope in those places has been what's keeping me going.

JDEED: I appreciate you talking about, not only the work that you've been doing, but also how you've been feeling about it. I want to explore how folks have been feeling, but I first want to get an understanding of what you've experienced. So, what have the state-level policies been?

P: I'm at a private institution. We have a diversity division that was created after the Black Lives Matter movement. But I will tell you that it is a division in name only, in terms of reporting structure and work. Their work is primarily with students.

And so, while I haven't seen that much of a change at my own school, when we begin to talk about statewide implications, especially for public institutions, it's huge.

L: There are no policies that are statewide or at the institution, I'm sure. And things also haven't necessarily changed on campus, other than people being very reactive to that lovely letter (U.S. Department of Education, 2025) and making changes to their pedagogy. Or they're asking us questions like, "How do I address this research question but not use these buzzwords? And if [funders] are asking for broader impacts, tell me exactly what to say." And I'm like, "I can't tell you exactly what to say." Until we get a better understanding of the landscape, I can't [give that kind of guidance], and of course, they don't want

to hear that. It's not necessarily well-received, and I found that some faculty just keep asking that same question in different ways. And I'm like, "This is what I would do—think about first generation or rural versus urban, other ways to look at broader impact beyond the obvious, you know, [DEI] lens. If you still want to focus on [DEI], you're going to make a slight tilt. Maybe you will still get that population with this tilt. But if you use language you've customarily used, you can almost guarantee that this is not going to fare well for you if it's a federal funder." I know it's hard to hear, but it's just where we are.

P: I would add that the silence has been deafening. There's been nothing from [my institution's] administration. I've had a couple of faculty ask me about [policies]. [They] will come in and close the door and say, "What do you think? Do you think they're going to make us stop teaching these classes focused on [DEI-related topics]?" And so for me, the silence has just been so loud.

JDEED: What does the silence communicate to you? What does the silence mean to you?

P: Fear.

We began laying off faculty… so that makes it real. But you don't know if that's going to happen to you. We've seen it for people who are on tenure track, and [with] all kinds of folks, laid off. And I don't know what the formula is [for these decisions]. And there's nobody talking to us about that. It just seems like they call people in, and then faculty make a beeline from that announcement straight to me.

And when it first began, it was exhausting. I felt like I was taking in all of this toxicity. The crying, the Kleenex—male and female. We don't have a lot of people of color, so they were mostly white. And I didn't have a warning. Nobody said anything about this coming, and I was angry, but trying to remain calm and to reassure everybody else. You know, you lose your job [or] you hear you're going to lose your job—you don't want to hear that things happen for a reason. Bills need to be paid. You have—

S: Listen, you need to have health insurance!

P: Go ahead!

JDEED: There's silence, and yet actions—actions without clarity in policy?

P: Absolutely. And then you asked what the silence communicated. Fear, chaos, uncertainty, all of those things.

T: Oh! [L] said something, and I was just thinking about it. Our department has been pretty silent… I wish the Chair would say something. These issues are happening; and just talk to us about it; but my department's all white, so I think it's easy for people to ignore [this] on our campus. I mean, we have had really vocal faculty, and our academic Senate people have written letters. I think a lot of us have. I think we've just voiced concerns, but because it's the State of Utah, there's just nothing we can do.

It's wild with this bill. It's called HB 261, which prohibits any "discriminatory practices," and under that, it's a line that, within mandatory trainings, we cannot assert that meritocracy is inherently racist or sexist. We also can't assert that sociopolitical structures are inherently a series of power relationships. But this is all true! It's just that's true. Right? They basically don't want white people to feel guilt, so they've banned those kinds of conversations.

JDEED: What's the reaction by colleagues on campus? And does it surprise you? And I'm specifically talking about [T's] idea that in 2022, so many folks were reaching out to you, and [P], you were saying that this DEI office was created after 2020. It felt like there was this movement towards DEI. And now there's anti-DEI legislation and uncertainty in your states. What's been the reaction of your colleagues, particularly your white colleagues, and how have you felt about that?

L: My situation's a unicorn situation, because my colleagues, regardless of their race or sexual orientation, everyone I work with, is less than happy about [anti-DEI legislation]. As soon as the presidential election results came out, we basically had a day of silence in our center.

T: I think when some of the [anti]-DEI legislation came through, it was surprising how people were just like, "Okay, now these are the moves we have to take. These are the changes we have to make." They shifted immediately to implementation. But there was no recognition of what that meant for [minoritized] people's lives, until we had a whole town hall meeting, and people of color were able to talk about [their] feelings. But it was just wild, how there was no space for emotions whatsoever.

JDEED: Why is that wild?

T: Because the legislation and response were just so devastating. And I think that so many of us were feeling that to have absolutely no recognition from leadership was… I mean, I know in general, they're not going to support us for a lot of things—but I was like, wow! They really are heartless, and they really are not aligned with us whatsoever. They can say what they want about creating equity. But no, it's all a facade.

P: My college is very politically, quietly, politically charged. Like I said, it's ultra conservative. I mean, it's the State of Texas. And we have very few people of color now, but I would say by and large colleagues—many of them I didn't even know that they consider themselves to be allies, and I still don't know that they do, or that they are, but they felt emboldened enough to come to me and tell me how it made them feel after the presidential election. Now, since all of the federal anti-DEI guidance, I have heard absolutely nothing from anyone other than people of color on my campus. Even though we have that [DEI] division, that is just a name only. I think we all are aware of that. It has absolutely no power, [no] authority.

JDEED: How, then, does this all impact your work? You're still in these institutions. You're still in these spaces. To what extent are you able to do DEI work?

L: I don't think that this drastically changes my day-to-day work, but when it comes to writing grants, I am now trying to figure out ways to pivot—whether that be finding more private funding sources, or, just not using some of the buzzwords, but really being creative and thinking about, what can we say but still target [minoritized] populations without saying we're targeting this population? So, I'm looking up stats like rural versus urban first-generation. I feel like these are unnecessary hurdles.

T: Yes, I think that's true. Also, now I still talk about things like intersectionality. But I just really emphasize that this is good for all students. Everyone can use these things, and it'll improve the classroom for everybody.

P: And I wouldn't say it changes what I do day to day, either.

P: I used to do all kinds of training, and they were based in diversity, equity, inclusion, and focused on STEM. I'm going to continue doing that, and as an educator, I know our students need that. My classes are going to always have what's good for all students. I will continue to do that. I don't use those buzzwords anymore, but I will continue to talk about [DEI] practices. If this is good pedagogy, if it is good practice for all students, I'm not going to stop doing that.

JDEED: So, one question that I've been grappling with is this idea of the language. There are some people who say that if you want to be strategic, especially in the context we're in, you get rid of the "buzzwords." You find ways to be creative, but you keep doing the work, right? There are other people who say to do the work involves teaching the ways you teach, AND it also involves saying the words. That part of the transformation around DEI is being able to say, "*diversity, equity, inclusion*." I've been struggling with that tension. What do you feel about it? Is that a thing for you? I see, [T], you're sort of nodding, and [P], you're shaking your head. What are you thinking?

P: No, that's not a thing for me. A rose by any other name is still a rose. If it stinks, I'm going to tell you it stinks. If it's good for everybody, I'm going to tell you it's good. You call it whatever you want to. You can take those words. I'll replace them with new words.

JDEED: So, the work is separate from the words?

P: It's about the substance; it's about the substance and the meaning of what we do and what's important, and the impact that it has. That's what I want to focus on. You can have your little words.

JDEED: And nothing is lost?

P: For some people it is; they lament that. But I'm not going to. No, no, I've been around long enough to know that words are words. So I understand people's anger, but it's the substance.

L: I agree with everything said. I think everyone knows what time it is, if you will, and so there's no secret why we're switching up the language. And I don't think we need a translator for people to understand that. Yes, we want to focus on [DEI], but we know that we can't use these buzzwords. So instead, you know, we're making a sharp left and saying, "1st generation" or "belonging," or whatever the case may be, just to ensure the work still continues, because this administration won't be in place forever, and hopefully, things will change for the better.

JDEED: After this administration ends, let's just say the national and state [pendulum] swings back towards DEI. In that interim, has anything been lost by not saying these words?

L: Absolutely, absolutely. I think so. Something is gonna be lost. Because with this [current] administration, in my opinion, a lot of people feel more emboldened to say things that they would not necessarily say otherwise. And if you're in that type of environment, your overall well-being is going to be affected, your productivity, your ability to push this type of work [DEI] forward. If you're met with constant resistance,

your quality of life [decreases]. There are so many things that are going to be impacted. Diversity among student populations; DFW [rates]. Do I think it's going to ever bounce back exactly to where it was before? I think it's going to take quite some time. The wound happens quickly, but the healing process is much longer.

T: I totally understand where P and L are coming from. I mean, that's why I think we do have to make changes with some of the wording we use. But I struggle with it. I really struggle with it because it's the language piece, too. You know, part of fascism is taking away our language, and language creates realities for people. So, I do think that to have them control the language piece, it's very really painful. But I struggle with what to do, because I think honestly that there are ways that we could be more on the offense in terms of putting out different kinds of rhetoric [and] being thoughtful in that way.

I feel like on the Republican side, they're always coming up with these slogans right? And the slogans really catch on with their base, and I don't think that's [true for] the Democrats. For instance, with global warming, when it was renamed "climate change," it became more acceptable for people. I just think we could do more with language.

JDEED: So, it sounds like you're saying language is potentially, incredibly powerful, and that when something is taken away, a replacement needs to be offered, rather than an erasure?

T: Yeah, I think the erasure piece. I don't know that we can always replace what's erased. And so, that's what's scary. Because a lot of language is tied to identity right? And so, I don't know that there's an easy answer for it. It just—I struggle with it too.

JDEED: I was recently talking to a colleague in Texas at a public institution. She was doing a study, and unexpectedly, they found some differences among students based on race, and she noticed it. And then she said to herself, "I can't. I should not even notice this, because I'm not allowed to look at this." And so, for her, this [legislation] was impacting her thinking. The fact that she's not legally, not allowed to say these words began to impact what she let herself notice. She was forcing herself to ignore *data* in front of her, to try to ignore the truth, because of that. But again, as you're saying, P and T, the work also has to be done, and you have to salvage what you can salvage. So, I appreciate you talking that through, because I'm personally and professionally grappling with that.

P: And I also think, too, that times are cyclical. This will come back around. What this new administration has taught us is what has been done can be undone.

But I totally agree with what [T] said. It's disheartening. But I think about that idea of being the change you want to see, and being active, and coming together, making plans, and carrying those plans out. And I know that there's a lot of fear and trepidation that goes along with that. And there was a time when I didn't understand that. I think when I was a lot younger, I was naive about that, "I don't understand what the fear is. Why won't people just blah blah?" I do understand that now.

People will lose their jobs. If that wheel, you know, gets a little too squeaky, they're going to take that oil away.

L: Just to counter that, my friends and I have a political group, and we're tired. I am tired. And so, a lot of us are sort of trying to take a step back for our mental health with certain aspects of [politics], because I

can drive myself crazy, but what is actually going to change? And so, we need to refill our own batteries before we can step back on the front line because the last six to eight months have been [news, laws, and executive orders] every day. I'm tired. And it's not like the normal level of exhaustion, at least for me.

JDEED: And so, on that note, as we wrap up, I have a two-part question for you: [P] mentioned this idea of force of action, that you're feeling this exhaustion, but you still feel like a force of action. So, what does that mean for you to be a force of action in terms of the work you're doing or the commitments you have? And also, how are you taking care of yourselves? How are you refueling your batteries? How do you become the force of action?

L: I'll start with refueling. I literally deleted all the social media apps, which were my go-to distraction, my go-to escape, because I found myself getting angrier and angrier reading posts from people. And so, one day I realized it's not worth it. So, I deleted all the apps. And then, my partner, he loves to watch the news, he watches the news all day, and so I tell him, "You have to go to another room. I can't." And sometimes, he likes to have deep conversations about the news. I'm like, "not today."

Also, if I find that when I encounter someone and I feel their beliefs are antithetical to my well-being, I'll just remove myself.

JDEED: And what does it mean for you to be a force of action? What does that phrase mean to you?

L: Figuring out how to continue the fight. So, in my previous work, we had a "DEI how-to" guide. So, if someone said, "Oh, I don't know how to address these issues in my institution or my realm," it gave guidance. And so I'm thinking about, how do we [create a similar resource] for educational developers without necessarily calling it that, but it can have the same impact, so if people feel like they're in isolation, or they don't have support, they can have some sort of resource that can give them ways to rethink things, to continue the type of work they're doing.

T: I think community is the answer to both of those questions for me. I forget sometimes how incredibly invigorating—and just how much it fuels me—to be with my community. Because sometimes I just want to just draw myself in and just disappear from the world because it's so overwhelming, but it's being with the people who care, and who have the same values and beliefs—it's the only way, I think, we can keep moving forward: to just keep supporting each other.

P: What both L and T have said are the exact same things for me. A colleague asked me about what they can do to still give students an opportunity to know truth. And my suggestion is, and was, you can pose a question. You can even put data out there and let your students wrestle with that. And it's very empowering for students to moderate their own discussions about right and wrong. And I think, if we want to be the university that we are called to be, then we want to give students the opportunity to think and to wrestle.

Also, there are people whom I will choose to not be around if I'm feeling a certain way. But you know my mom taught me very early on that if somebody gives you their opinion, you can give them yours back. God didn't put a patent on it when He gave them one. And so, I've always operated from that. So, if you tell me how you feel, and especially if I disagree, I'm going to let you know that I disagree with that and why. We might hug and keep it moving. But we've shared our belief systems with each other. We're going to keep moving.

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