

Policy, Power, and the Politics of Silence: Tennessee Public School Districts and the
Prohibited Concepts Law

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DEDICATION

To my best friend and partner, Linzi; my parents, Steve and Kim; my brother, Nick; and all of my family and friends: You have loved, encouraged, and supported me to push myself to new horizons. I appreciate your unwavering patience as I dedicated countless hours to this journey. I could not have accomplished this goal without you. I love you all.

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study investigates how Tennessee K-12 public school district leaders interpret, construct, and enact the state's prohibited concepts law—a law that restricts instruction on certain topics related to race, gender, and American history. Grounded in critical policy analysis and discourse theory, the study examines how power, ideology, and language converge in local responses to politically driven educational policy. Using document analysis as the primary data collection method, the research draws from a sample of official district-level materials, including school board policies, meeting minutes, public statements, and curriculum-related documents from 15 school districts across Tennessee. Findings reveal wide variation in how district leadership frames the policy, ranging from strict legalistic compliance to subtle forms of resistance and reframing. Some district leaders reinforce dominant narratives by omitting references to diversity and equity, while others attempt to preserve inclusive practices through vague or strategic language. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of how leaders of public school systems navigate controversial education mandates and the discursive work involved in balancing legal compliance with commitments to inclusive education.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In 2020, President Trump signed Executive Order 13950, introducing the term “prohibited (or divisive) concepts” and targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives across government entities, K-12 public school districts, and higher education institutions. This order prohibited government contractors from conducting workplace training related to how individuals (and, by extension, institutions) might be “inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously” (Exec. Order 13950, 2020, p. 60685). Specifically, this order defined prohibited concepts as ideas and ideologies based on the notion that:

(1) one race is inherently superior to another race or sex; (2) the United States is fundamentally racist or sexist; (3) an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously; (4) an individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of his or her race or sex; (5) members of one race or sex cannot and should not attempt to treat others without respect to race or sex; (6) an individual's moral character is necessarily determined by his or her race or sex; (7) an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex; (8) any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex; or (9) meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or sexist, or were created by a particular race to oppress another race. (Sec. 2)

Since January 2021, forty-four American states have introduced or proposed bills that directly restrict the teaching of critical race theory or prevented teachers’ from discussing racism and sexism in the classroom. Of these forty-four states, eighteen successfully passed bans and restrictions through legislation (Schwartz, 2021). According to The National Coalition for

History (n.d.), prohibited concepts bills are “designed to limit discussion about racism, sexism, and discrimination in the classroom and/or the workplace” (p. 1). These bills were generally presented as legislation that defended free speech, but according to the National Coalition for History, these bills “have been purposely designed to curb consideration of subjects controversial and in any way critical of American society and culture” (p. 1, n.d.). The introduction and passing of prohibited concepts legislation sparked a debate between conservatives and liberals, placing public K-12 education in the middle of significant political contention (Peetz, 2023).

Following the passage and subsequent repeal by President Biden of Executive Order 13950, Tennessee passed its version of the law in 2021, restricting how public school educators may address topics related to race, gender, and American history. Known informally in the state as the prohibited concepts law and codified in SB 2290/HB 2670, this law was part of a broader movement by many states to legislate the boundaries of classroom discourse, particularly regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) (Barber, 2023; Schwartz, 2021). Conservative legislatures like Tennessee related DEI to the indoctrination of K-12 students through the teaching of critical race theory (CRT), despite arguments that the theory was not being taught in K-12 contexts (B. Anderson, 2022; J. Anderson, 2022; Washington Journal, 2021). Stemming from this “manufactured panic” (Barber, 2023, p. 1), the line between CRT as it was originally developed and modern diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives and pedagogies was blurred. While proponents argued the law ensured ideological neutrality in public education, critics contended that it silenced critical conversations, imposed political censorship, and undermined inclusive educational practices (Aldrich, 2021; LoBue & Douglass, 2023; Smithson, 2023). The vague language of the law has resulted in uneven implementation across Tennessee school

districts, prompting questions about how districts interpret and communicate their obligations under the law.

In Tennessee specifically, proponents of the law argue that certain ideas related to race and identity must be prohibited and are un-American, as these ideas potentially cause students to feel discomfort or guilt because of their race or gender (Aldrich, 2021). The law—modeled closely after E.O. 13950—lists the following as prohibited concepts in K-12 instruction:

- Promoting the idea that one race or sex is inherently superior or inferior to another is prohibited.
- The notion that an individual, by virtue of their race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of their race or sex is banned.
- The notion that an individual, solely by virtue of their race or sex, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously, is forbidden.
- The teaching that meritocracy, hard work, or similar virtues are inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive is prohibited.
- The idea that an individual's moral character is determined by their race or sex is not allowed.
- The teaching that an individual should feel discomfort, guilt, or psychological distress on account of their race or sex is prohibited.
- The belief that Tennessee or the United States is fundamentally or irredeemably racist or sexist is not permitted (SB 2290/HB 2670).

The bill requires all school districts across the state to ensure compliance with these prohibited concepts. If an educator is found to be in violation, the school district will risk losing state

funding. Each violation sees two percent of state funding lost, with five or more offenses resulting in ten percent of the normal amount of state funding being withheld. The bill also provided a mechanism for parents and students to file complaints, should they believe that any of the above prohibited concepts are being taught (SB 2290/HB 2670).

From a curriculum and instruction perspective, Tennessee's law has affected how educators approach certain topics like race, gender, and American history. The Tennessee Education Association (TEA) argued that the law prohibits teaching core subjects and deprives students of a quality education (Smithson, 2023). Other opponents believed the law stifles academic freedom, whitewashes history, and has vague language which makes it open to interpretation, leading to confusion and uncertainty among educators (Aldrich, 2023). Despite several lawsuits against the state by educators claiming the bill is unclear, unjust, or inequitable, there have been no amendments to the policy thus far. Rather, led by conservative Rep. John Ragan of Oak Ridge, there has been a push for stricter enforcement and widened eligibility for who can file complaints (Aldrich, 2023). The ongoing debates about the bill highlight the deep divisions across the country over how to address the country's history of racism and inequality in education.

Statement of the Problem

While prohibited concepts legislation is often framed as a defense of ideological neutrality, it is understood by scholars, education advocates, and civil rights organizations as part of a broader political effort to constrain diversity, equity, and inclusion work in public institutions (LoBue & Douglass, 2023; The National Coalition for History, n.d.). As such, these laws not only shape what can be taught in classrooms but also influence the broader public discourse around education, democracy, and justice. Within this contested terrain, school

districts occupy a pivotal role: district leaders are charged with interpreting the policy, translating it into local guidance, and communicating their stance to teachers, students, families, and the public (LoBue & Douglass, 2023).

Despite the importance of this local work, few empirical studies have examined how school district leadership makes sense of and publicly respond to prohibited concepts laws. District-level documents—such as district policies, meeting minutes, curriculum guides, public FAQs, and administrative memos—are a key site where the law’s meaning is constructed, negotiated, and made visible. These documents function not merely as technical artifacts but as texts embedded with ideological positions, framing strategies, and discursive choices (Bacchi, 2009; Ball, 1993). As such, these documents offer a window into how districts interpret the law, manage risk, and attempt to balance compliance with commitments to inclusive and equitable education. Most of the existing literature on prohibited concepts laws has focused on legal analyses, media coverage, or educator perceptions through interviews and surveys (Anthes et al., 2023; AASA, 2023; Fernandez & Duarte, 2024). While these perspectives are valuable, there remains a critical gap in understanding how the language of the law is operationalized and enacted through public-facing district documentation. Without this understanding, there is risk of overlooking the ways that power and ideology operate through official discourse, shaping educational practice and reinforcing—or resisting—dominant narratives about race, history, and national identity.

This study addresses that gap by examining how Tennessee K-12 public school district leadership discursively constructs and enacts the 2021 prohibited concepts law through official documents. By analyzing language, silences, and framing strategies within these texts, the research investigates how districts interpret state mandates, manage public perception, and

navigate the political tensions surrounding curriculum, identity, and equity. It also considers the broader implications of these discursive choices for social justice, democratic education, and the future of public schooling in politically contentious contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two interrelated theoretical frameworks—discourse theory (DT) and critical policy analysis (CPA)—which together provided the analytical tools to examine how power, ideology, and meaning are embedded in school districts’ responses to Tennessee’s prohibited concepts law. Discourse theory examines how district leaders interpret and reframe the law through language; critical policy analysis highlights the political and racialized origins of the law. These frameworks directly inform the study’s research questions.

To understand how district leaders construct meaning around this law, this study draws on discourse theory, particularly the work of Foucault (1972), Fairclough (1995), and Bacchi (2009). Discourse theory treats language not merely as a tool for communication, but also as a social practice that constructs knowledge, normalizes ideologies, and exercises power. In education, policy texts and institutional language shape not only what is said, but what is thinkable, permissible, and actionable (Ball, 1993; Bacchi, 2009).

Foucault’s concept of discourse emphasizes how regimes of truth are constructed and maintained through language, institutions, and practices. In the context of this study, district documents (such as district policies, statements, and curriculum materials) are treated as discursive artifacts that reveal how the prohibited concepts law was framed, justified, and enacted at the local level. These documents reflected and reinforced particular understandings of race, identity, history, and inclusion—while also concealing, reconfiguring, or resisting others. Fairclough (1995) expands this framework by introducing critical discourse analysis (CDA),

which examines the relationship between discourse and social structures. He argues that discourse is both shaped by and shapes social practices, and that language is a site of ideological struggle. Through this lens, the study investigated how districts' public texts manage tensions between state mandates and local commitments to inclusive education. Finally, Bacchi's (2009) "What's the Problem Represented to Be?" (WPR) approach offers a practical tool for analyzing policy language. Rather than taking policy objectives at face value, Bacchi urges researchers to examine how problems are constructed in discourse: What assumptions underlie a policy? What is silenced? What effects does a particular representation produce? This study applies Bacchi's lens to examine how the prohibited concepts law is framed by districts: as a legal risk, a moral imperative, an instructional constraint, or a cultural flashpoint. Together, these discourse theories provide a framework for analyzing how policy meanings are constructed, contested, and reproduced in public documents.

This study also draws upon critical policy analysis (CPA), which positions policy as a deeply political and ideological process shaped by power relations, institutional interests, and sociocultural contexts (Diem et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 1997). CPA resists the notion that policy texts or implementation can be understood apart from their political and historical contexts. Instead, it examines how policy is created, interpreted, and enacted within a landscape of competing values and interests—especially those involving race, gender, and power (Young & Diem, 2014). In this study, CPA is used to interrogate the prohibited concepts law not simply as a set of legislative directives, but as a political artifact born of ideological struggles over the role of public education in addressing social inequity. Tennessee's law, like others across the country, reflects conservative backlash against CRT and DEI initiatives (LoBue & Douglass, 2023; Peetz, 2023). Through CPA, the study foregrounds the political motivations behind the policy and

explores how school districts navigate its mandates in relation to local values, stakeholder pressures, and broader cultural discourses.

This combination of theoretical frameworks allows the study to move beyond description and into critique. It reveals how district discourse operates not only to comply with policy, but also to navigate power, manage risk, and perform ideological work. In doing so, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how public education is shaped—discursively and politically—by broader struggles over race, identity, and national memory.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to critically examine how Tennessee K-12 public school district leadership discursively constructs, interprets, and enacts the state’s 2021 prohibited concepts law through official district documents. As a politically charged piece of legislation, the law reflects broader national efforts to curtail diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives under the guise of ideological neutrality or protection from “divisive” content (Barber, 2023; LoBue & Douglass, 2023; Schwartz, 2021). This study is grounded in the recognition that education policy does not speak for itself. Legislation like the prohibited concepts law must be interpreted, enacted, and made meaningful through local discourse. School districts serve as key intermediaries in this process. District leaders are responsible for interpreting the law’s mandates, developing implementation strategies, communicating expectations to educator and communities, and navigating competing pressures from state officials, parents, advocacy groups, and internal values. Ultimately, this study sought to illuminate the discursive balancing act that district leaders must perform: navigating legal risk and political scrutiny while attempting—sometimes subtly, sometimes openly—to preserve commitments to equity, representation, and inclusive pedagogy. In the context of increasing political interference in education,

understanding how district leaders construct meaning around controversial policies is essential for educators, researchers, and policymakers committed to social justice and democratic schooling.

To achieve this purpose, the following research questions guided this study:

1. How is the prohibited concepts law discursively constructed and enacted through official documents in Tennessee K-12 public school districts?
 - a. What language and framing strategies are used in district-level documents to describe or respond to the prohibited concepts law?
 - b. How do policy documents reflect school districts' interpretations of and compliance with the prohibited concepts law?
2. In what ways do district documents maintain, resist, or reframe dominant narratives around race, gender, and American history in the context of the prohibited concepts law?
 - a. How is the concept of inclusive education represented in districts' documentation of policy implementation?

Significance of the Study

This study was situated at the intersection of education policy, discourse, and social justice, offering timely and necessary insights into how politically charged legislation is enacted at the district level through public discourse. It responded to an urgent need for empirical scholarship on the local-level interpretation and implementation of prohibited concepts laws—state laws that seek to regulate classroom instruction on race, gender, and American history. These laws, including Tennessee's SB 2290/HB 2670, have catalyzed a national debate over the role of public education in addressing systemic inequity, the limits of academic freedom, and the

place of ideological contestation in curriculum and instruction (Barber, 2023; LoBue & Douglass, 2023; Peetz, 2023).

Existing research has highlighted how such policies impact educator's sense of autonomy, constrain diversity and equity initiatives, and generate fear, confusion, and professional vulnerability (AASA, 2023; Anthes et al., 2023; White et al., 2023). However, less attention has been given to the formal discursive practices through which local education agencies—specifically school districts—make sense of and publicly respond to these laws. As Ball (1993), Bacchi (2009), and Taylor et al. (1997) argue, policies are not merely enacted through compliance or resistance but are interpreted, reconstituted, and often contested through language. Documents such as school board policies, meeting minutes, public FAQs, and administrative communications are not neutral or technical texts; these documents serve as policy artifacts that reveal how districts position themselves in relation to controversial mandates.

By examining the discursive enactment of the prohibited concepts law, this study contributes to the field of critical policy analysis by demonstrating how local actors interpret and reconstruct state legislation through language. It also contributes to policy enactment theory, which emphasizes the non-linear, context-dependent, and interpretive nature of how policy is lived out in schools (Ball et al., 2012; Ozga, 2000). In addition, the study is rooted in discourse theory, which understands policy texts as performative and ideological—capable of shaping the conditions of possibility for how race, equity, and national identity are framed in education (Fairclough, 1995; Foucault, 1972; van Dijk, 1993). By integrating these frameworks, the study offers a new lens for understanding how the politics of race and identity are discursively negotiated at the district level—an area that remains underexplored in current literature. It

expands on the foundational work of scholars such as Leonardo (2009), Matias and Zembylas (2014), and Applebaum (2016), who examine how whiteness operates through institutional discourse and policy.

This study also provides insight into how district leaders perform interpretive work through official discourse, thereby illuminating the often-overlooked symbolic and communicative dimensions of educational leadership (Diem et al., 2019). In particular, this study sheds light on how district leaders attempt to manage political tension, legal risk, and community expectations while maintaining commitments to inclusive, culturally responsive education. This work builds on scholarship that shows how local education leaders are increasingly caught in politicized environments where neutrality is both demanded and impossible (LoBue & Douglass, 2023; White et al., 2023). Furthermore, prohibited concepts laws have a chilling effect on inclusive education, as these policies create ambiguity around what can and cannot be taught and encourage self-censorship among educators (AASA, 2023; Hambacher et al., 2024). This study investigated whether and how districts preserve, dilute, or erase language related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in their documentation. It also examined how the concept of inclusive education is reframed within the constraints of legal and political mandates.

By offering a critical account of how policy discourse functions at the district level, this study informs efforts to safeguard inclusive, democratic education. It also equips educators, policymakers, and researchers with a better understanding of how policy is translated into practice through the often-overlooked medium of institutional language.

Definitions of Terms

For clarification, terms specific to this study that may be unfamiliar to readers are defined.

- Critical Race Theory (CRT): “An academic and legal framework that denotes that systemic racism is a part of American society – from education and housing to employment and healthcare. CRT recognizes that racism is more than the result of individual bias and prejudice. It is essentially an academic response to the erroneous notion that American society and institutions are ‘colorblind’” (NAACP, 2024, p. 1).
- Discourse: “A group of statements which provide a language for talking about—a way of representing—the knowledge about a particular topic at a particular historical moment” (Hall, 1992, p. 291).
- Diversity: “Refers broadly to real or perceived physical or socio-cultural differences attributed to people and the representation of these differences in research, market spaces, and organizations” (Arsel et al., 2022, p. 920).
- Equity: “Refers to fairness in the treatment of people in terms of both opportunity and outcome” (Arsel et al., 2022, p. 920).
- Inclusion: “Refers to the practice of ensuring that people feel a sense of belonging and support within a given setting” (Arsel et al., 2022, p. 920).
- Policy Enactment: The local process through which policies are interpreted, adapted, and implemented within specific institutional and community contexts (Ball et al., 2012).
- Prohibited Concepts Laws: “Bills designed to limit discussion about racism, sexism, and discrimination in the classroom and/or the workplace” (The National Coalition for History, n.d., p. 1).
- School District: “A local education agency (LEA) governed by a locally elected or appointed school board that is legally responsible for providing public education within a defined geographic area” (Kirst & Wirt, 2009, p. 73).

Delimitations

The delimitations of this study, set by the researcher for the purposes of narrowing the scope of the study for significance factors, are as follows:

1. This study was limited to public school districts in Tennessee.
2. This study was limited to district-level documents available publicly between 2020-2024.
3. This study was limited to a qualitative, document-based methodology.
4. This study was limited to an interpretation of texts through a critical, constructivist lens.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the current landscape of research on prohibited concepts legislation and underscored the need for further empirical investigation into its impact on public education, particularly through the lens of district-level discourse. The problem was identified as a lack of empirical research regarding these policies and how these policies are constructed, enacted, and framed in K-12 school districts in Tennessee. This chapter therefore explained the purpose and significance of the study as an essential element toward understanding how districts navigate the prohibited concepts law. The chapter concluded with definitions of terms used in the study and the limitations to which this study was confined.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 2 provides an extensive review of the literature related to this study for the purpose of illuminating what is currently known about prohibited concepts laws as well as educational leadership's role in navigating politically driven mandates. The chapter situates the study within existing scholarship and highlights the gap this research aims to address.

Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology. It details the qualitative document analysis approach, including data sources, selection criteria for school districts, coding

and analytic strategies, and the critical discourse framework guiding data collection. Issues of trustworthiness and ethical considerations are also discussed.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the document analysis. The data are organized thematically and in response to the research questions. Particular attention is paid to how district documents construct and enact the prohibited concepts law, and how districts frame issues of race, gender, and American history. Examples from district communications, policies, handbooks, and other official materials are used to illustrate key patterns and variations.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings in relation to existing literature and the theoretical framework. It also considers implications for policy, leadership, and equity in public education. The chapter concludes with limitations for the study and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter 1 provided an overview of the purpose, research questions, and significance of this study. The purpose of this literature review is to explore academic conversations that contextualize how prohibited concepts are discursively interpreted, communicated, and enacted in school district documents. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How is the prohibited concepts law discursively constructed and enacted through official documents in Tennessee K-12 public school districts?
 - a. What language and framing strategies are used in district-level documents to describe or respond to the prohibited concepts law?
 - b. How do policy documents reflect school districts' interpretations of and compliance with the prohibited concepts law?
2. In what ways do district documents maintain, resist, or reframe dominant narratives around race, gender, and American history in the context of the prohibited concepts law?
 - a. How is the concept of inclusive education represented in districts' documentation of policy implementation?

Chapter Overview

This chapter reviews the literature that informs the study's investigation into how Tennessee school districts discursively construct and enact the state's prohibited concepts law. It begins by contextualizing the rise of prohibited concepts legislation and its connections to broader sociopolitical movements in education. The chapter then explores how school districts function as policy mediators, interpreting and implementing state mandates through localized framing and sense-making processes. Next, it introduces the theoretical foundations of the study, focusing on discourse theory and critical policy analysis, which together guide the examination

of how language, power, and ideology operate within district-level policy texts. The literature reviewed highlights key gaps—particularly the limited attention to how district documents discursively shape policy enactment in politically charged contexts—thereby establishing the need for this study.

Search Process

To inform this study’s focus on how Tennessee K-12 school districts discursively construct and enact the state’s prohibited concepts law, a systematic and iterative literature search was conducted across multiple domains of educational policy, critical discourse analysis, and public school leadership. The search process was designed to identify peer-reviewed scholarship, policy reports, and relevant theoretical works that intersect with discourse, policy interpretation, and ideological representation in public education. Academic literature was located using databases including ERIC (via EBSCO), Scopus, JSTOR, and Sage Journals, accessed through the University of Tennessee library system. Additional sources were retrieved through Google Scholar and policy archives maintained by the Tennessee General Assembly, as well as reputable media and education policy organizations such as Education Week, the AASA, and the National Coalition for History. Boolean operators, truncation, and field-specific search terms were employed to narrow and refine results.

Key search terms included combinations of “prohibited concepts” AND “education,” “curriculum censorship” OR “anti-CRT policy,” “discourse analysis” AND “education policy,” “district-level implementation” OR “policy enactment,” and “critical policy analysis” AND “K-12” in “curriculum” or “policy documents.” Peer-reviewed sources were prioritized, though select gray literature and advocacy-based reports were included where they contributed to

understanding the socio-political context of prohibited concepts legislation or illuminated district-level implementation practices.

The literature was then organized into thematic categories aligned with this study's theoretical and analytical framework: (a) the development and implications of prohibited concepts laws; (b) their impact on K-12 leaders and educators; (c) how local actors engage in framing and sense-making; and (d) the theoretical frameworks of discourse theory and critical policy analysis used to study education policy and implementation. This categorization process also allowed for identification of notable gaps in the literature—particularly the lack of empirical research analyzing district-level policy documents as discursive artifacts. This review process provided the conceptual and empirical grounding for the current study, which seeks to contribute to this growing body of work by examining how Tennessee districts use language to frame, comply with, resist, or reimagine prohibited concepts law in their public facing documents.

Prohibited Concepts Laws: Origins and Context

In recent years, a wave of legislation commonly referred to as “prohibited concepts” laws has swept across the United States, targeting how public K-12 schools teach topics related to race, gender, and American history. These policies, which include explicit prohibitions on concepts perceived to be connected to critical race theory (CRT) or diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), are also rooted in a national conservative movement that gained momentum following the racial justice protests of 2020. Right-leaning policy organizations such as the Heritage Foundation, Manhattan Institute, and Moms for Liberty played a prominent role in shaping public discourse around CRT and mobilizing efforts to influence local and state education policy (LoBue & Douglass, 2023). These efforts have led to a chilling effect in many districts, where leaders and educators feel pressure to censor materials or alter curriculum not

only to avoid legal risk but also to navigate highly polarized local politics (AASA, 2023; Anderson, 2023). in response to broader cultural and political debates surrounding educational content, national identity, and social justice. While language of these laws often purports to protect students from “divisive” or “political” ideologies, critical scholars argue that such policies are part of a broader effort to reassert dominant narratives about race, gender, and nationhood in public education (LoBue & Douglass, 2023; Peetz, 2023; Young & Diem, 2014).

Tennessee’s adoption of prohibited concepts legislation reflects the state’s broader political climate, characterized by conservative dominance in both legislative and executive branches. The state legislature, controlled by a Republican supermajority, passed Tennessee Code Annotated § 49-6-1019 in 2021 with strong support from Governor Bill Lee, who described the legislation as a way to ensure that “we do not promote things that inherently divide people” (Ebert, 2021, para. 7). The law was introduced amid growing national concern over CRT, but in Tennessee, it was also linked to broader debates about curriculum transparency, parental control, and the cultural role of public education. The legislation prohibits 14 so-called “divisive concepts” related to race, sex, privilege, and systemic oppression, though the law’s vague language has drawn criticism for promoting fear and self-censorship among educators (Tennessee General Assembly, 2021; LoBue & Douglass, 2023). For example, educators are prohibited from teaching that “an individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or sex, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive” (T.C.A. § 49-6-1019, 2021). While the law frames itself as a protection against indoctrination, its ambiguous language has created uncertainty and fear among educators and administrators tasked with interpreting and implementing it (Aldrich, 2023).

Since its passage, the Tennessee Department of Education has issued administrative guidance outlining procedures for compliance and enforcement, including a formal complaint process through which parents, students, or school staff can report alleged violations. Notably, the policy allows for financial penalties, stating that “the commissioner shall withhold funds...if the commissioner finds that the LEA or public charter school knowingly violated this section” (T.C.A § 49-6-1019, 2021). This has created a high-stakes climate in which district leaders must carefully craft local policy and communications to avoid legal repercussions while addressing community expectations. Governor Lee and other state leaders have also doubled down on what they call “patriotic education,” endorsing curriculum approaches that emphasize American exceptionalism while rejecting narratives focused on structural racism or oppression (Reicher, 2022). The following sections explore the implications of prohibited concepts laws and public discourse on district leaders, school administrators, and teachers, much of which focuses on personal experiences, organizational stress, and ideological conflict. As such, Tennessee provides a revealing case for understanding how state-level policy is discursively constructed and operationalized at the district level.

Influence on K-12 Leadership

With prohibited concepts legislation still fairly new to the educational landscape, national literature exploring the influence on district leaders’ ability to lead is limited. However, of the few studies published, nearly all identify the severe constrain these laws have on superintendents’ ability to advocate for inclusive education (AASA, 2023; LoBue & Douglass, 2023; Peetz, 2023; Superville, 2023). Literature highlights that district leaders—such as superintendents—are often caught between the legal demands of these policies and their professional commitment to creating equitable learning environments. In a 2023 report, the

School Superintendents Association (AASA) discussed how these laws and policies compel superintendents to navigate increasingly complex political landscapes, which can undermine their leadership effectiveness. White et al. (2023) note that in recent years, superintendents have “been at the epicenter of many political battles in the U.S. facing topics such as critical race theory, book banning, issues related to LGBTQIA+ inclusivity, and more” (p. 1).

Superintendents must balance district policies with state mandates that may contradict their personal or professional beliefs, leading to a loss of leadership autonomy and challenges in maintaining community trust (AASA, 2023).

Additionally, Anthes et al. (2023) noted in a 2023 survey of a hundred superintendents that 79 percent of respondents described their jobs as “often” or “always” stressful (p. 2). That study also found that “superintendents most commonly cited the intrusion of political issues or opinions into schooling as a source of that stress” (p. 2). LoBue and Douglass (2023) explore the impacts anti-CRT and anti-equity policy have on superintendents and school boards members committed to advancing equity, anti-racism, and social justice. Findings suggest that superintendents, school board members, and other district leaders have continually come under fire for efforts to increase equity and eliminate racism, most commonly from conservative, White parents. Pushed by right-wing think tanks and organizations like Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, Manhattan Institute, Moms for Liberty, and FreedomWorks, angry White parents are waging a disinformation campaign that directly impacts how students learn about race and racism – putting superintendents and school board members on the front line of this contentious battle (LoBue & Douglass, 2023).

Navigating politics was a key aspect of the superintendency long before the introduction of prohibited concepts laws and increased political contention. Melton et al. (2019) state,

“Superintendents operate within highly political, media-intensive, bureaucratic, and highly-regulated public environment(s)” (p.1). As the chief executive officer of a district, superintendents are responsible for more than just sharing a vision and goals for the school system, building a strong learning environment, hiring and evaluating personnel, or managing district finances (Grissom & Mitani, 2016); they must also confront political interjections from parents, policymakers, school boards, and other community stakeholders (Melton et al., 2019). Therefore, superintendents are forced to navigate the complex intersection of educational policy, local governance, community expectations, and state and federal mandates – all while ensuring that learning is still taking place in their district.

Influence on Other K-12 Educators

Literature exploring the interactions between prohibited concepts laws and other educators—like teachers and principals—is slightly more robust. Beginning with teachers, Anderson (2023) uses personal narrative to reflect on prohibited concepts law implementation in Tennessee through the perspective of a secondary English teacher. Anderson, who identifies as a White, cisgender male and part of the LGBTQIA+ community, analyzes the changes within his school as Tennessee HB 2670 went into effect. There are “chilling effects” (p. 172) that Anderson finds stemming from this bill, including teachers self-censoring books and avoiding controversial topics in both instruction and conversation. This is a direct response to state representatives coming into classrooms to inventory books that may relate to any of the prohibited concepts outlined in the bill and implementing strict curriculum enforcement. Anderson urges that education is “for creating critical and free thinkers, not robots,” (p. 174) and that prohibited concepts law strip teachers of the ability to challenge their students. He calls for educators to speak up against and raise awareness of the policies, as well as highlights the need

for strong leadership to enact changes before further damage is done. This call for strong leadership in the face of prohibited policies underscores the need for research of educational leaders like superintendents; there may already be leadership taking place in this area, but without research, there is no evidence.

In a 2024 study, Fernández and Duarte conducted a case narrative of a newly appointed Queer Latina principal, seeking to uncover the influence anti-critical race theory and LGBTQIA+ legislation has on her ability to lead. Although the study primarily focuses on the principal's experiences as a Queer Latina leader, it does offer some interesting findings regarding political pressures affecting superintendents. Specifically, the study finds that political pressures around anti-CRT legislation were pushed onto the superintendent by the community and school board, leading to tense relationships and a trickle-down effect to principals (Fernández & Duarte, 2024). The study finds that although principals are responsible for gauging and setting the culture in their schools, a superintendent's sensemaking of policy influences district implementation. Essentially, how the superintendent interprets prohibited policies and leads their district ultimately confines how principals can lead their schools (Fernández & Duarte, 2024). Although this study shines some light on this problem, much more analysis is required to better understand the influence prohibited concepts law has on superintendent leadership and decision-making.

Hambacher et al. (2024) explore the potential threat prohibited concepts laws have on social justice education in K-12 education. The study analyzes interviews of 17 justice-oriented teachers and administrators, ethnographic field notes, and documents to better understand the protective factors used for sustaining social justice education in contentious political times (Hambacher et al., 2024). Findings suggest that the current contentious sociopolitical climate

directly impacts teachers’ and administrators’ abilities to teach and lead using social justice education, and districts that are “predominately White tend to resist anti-racist or other anti-oppressive initiatives more than racially diverse communities” (p. 8). The study primarily focuses on the coalition concept for social justice education, noting that successful implementation stems from leaders at the classroom, building, and district levels (Hambacher et al., 2024).

Districts as Policy Mediators: Local Implementation and Sense-Making

School districts serve as critical intermediaries in the education policy process, tasked with interpreting, enacting, and often recontextualizing state and federal mandates within the specific cultural, political, and demographic contexts of their local communities (Coburn, 2005; Honig, 2006; Spillane et al., 2002). While much of the research on education policy has historically focused on the state level or on individual school leaders and teachers, a growing body of literature recognizes school districts as policy mediators—actors who do not just implement policy but actively construct its meaning and influence how it materializes in practice (Coburn, 2005; Honig, 2006; Spillane et al., 2002). This mediating role becomes especially visible in the context of politically contentious policies, where districts must navigate overlapping tensions related to legal compliance, professional values, stakeholder interests, and public discourse.

Policy Mediation as Interpretation and Framing

At the district level, policy mediation begins with interpretation: how central office leaders, superintendents, legal teams, and school boards make sense of abstract or ambiguous policy language and determine what it means for practice (McLaughlin, 1987; Spillane et al., 2002). In cases like Tennessee’s prohibited concepts law—which prohibits educators from

teaching certain “divisive” concepts without clearly defining those concepts—district leaders are often left to make judgment calls about curricular materials, teacher training, communication with families, and risk management (Frasier, 2024). These interpretations are not neutral but are informed by leaders’ beliefs, district demographics, political pressures, and organizational histories (Coburn, 2005; Mavrogordato & White, 2020).

Policy mediation is also an act of framing. Leaders’ interpretation of issues, policies, or events are often influenced by the way in which phenomena are communicated or presented; inversely, leaders can employ specific frames to influence opinions of those in their schools and districts (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021; White et al., 2015; Woulfin et al., 2016). As Coviello and DeMatthews (2021) argue, district leaders use frames strategically to communicate policy decisions, manage controversy, and shape stakeholder perceptions. Such framing efforts are not only political but discursive—they reveal how the district positions itself in relation to state mandates and community values. Woulfin et al. (2016) drew on framing theory to analyze district leaders’ efforts to promote the implementation of Connecticut’s new evaluation system—SEED (System for Educator Evaluation and Development)—finding that these leaders frequently pushed frames aimed at solving school-level implementation issues over detailing the purpose of the SEED. By framing in this manner, district leaders directly influenced the interpretation of school leaders, leading to a lack of clarity amongst educators about the core purpose of SEED (Woulfin et al., 2016). As highlighted with these examples, framing theory in educational research and policy analysis offers valuable insights into how issues are constructed and perceived. The framework underscores the importance of communication and the strategic use of messaging in shaping policy outcomes and implementation.

The Role of Sense-Making in Policy Enactment

Closely tied to policy mediation is the concept of sense-making, which refers to the cognitive and social processes through which individuals and organizations interpret and respond to new or ambiguous policies (Spillane et al., 2002; Weick, 1995). The sense-making framework is a crucial lens through which educational leaders' interpretations and implementations of policy can be understood. This framework helps explain how leaders make sense of complex, ambiguous policies and how that interpretation affects the way in which these policies are carried out in their schools and districts (Carraway & Young, 2015; Coburn, 2005; Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002; Spillane et al., 2002). Studies utilizing this framework reveal that leaders' interpretations of policy are deeply influenced by past experiences, beliefs, and the specific contexts of their schools or districts; for example, when faced with new or challenging policies, educational leaders' interpretation is often shaped by their existing knowledge, the needs of their students and staff, and the expectations of the school and district community (De Voto et al., 2023; McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019). These studies also illuminate the dynamics of sense-making, as leaders continuously adjust their understanding and implementation strategies in response to new information and changing circumstances. De Voto et al. (2023) provide a clear example of this in a study examining how district and school leaders navigated shifting policies and community contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic, finding that both external and internal factors drove sense-making during the crisis. The sense-making framework therefore highlights both the subjective and context-dependent nature of policy implementation, emphasizing the importance of understanding how leaders construct meaning in complex educational environments.

Institutional Factors on Policy Interpretation and Implementation

Institutional factors shape how educational leaders interpret and implement policies within their schools and districts. These factors encompass a wide range of elements, including organizational culture, people, systems, and policies (De Voto et al., 2023; Hambacher et al., 2024). Understanding these institutional contexts is essential for analyzing the complexities of policy implementation in educational settings. These factors do not act in isolation; rather, they interact with individual characteristics of leaders, external pressures, and the broader policy initiatives. This final section of the literature review explores the key institutional factors identified in educational research that affect how leaders navigate the challenges of policy interpretation and implementation. By examining these factors, this review sheds light on the role of institutional contexts on educational leaders' interpretation and implementation of policies.

There is one universal finding across nearly all studies analyzed in this review: external factors influence leaders' policy interpretation and implementation (Asada et al., 2020; Carraway & Young, 2015; Coburn, 2005; Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021; De Voto et al., 2023; Filippi & Hackmann, 2019; Hambacher et al., 2024; LoBue & Douglass, 2023; Mavrogordato & White, 2020; McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019; Woulfin et al., 2016). At the district level, Hambacher et al. (2024) find that parents, community stakeholders, and policymakers within a district directly impact the level of social justice leadership a leader can enact. In predominately White, conservative districts, social justice leadership is often met with pushback; in communities with supportive stakeholders, a leaders is more likely to better advocate for inclusivity—whether at the district or school level (Hambacher et al., 2024). LoBue and Douglass (2023) note the influence of national think tanks and organizations on the push for anti-

CRT legislation, highlighting that educational leaders face external pressures from all levels of policy making in the fight for equity and inclusivity. De Voto et al. (2023) find that crises place significant external strain on leaders' interpretation and implementation of policy. Specifically, mandates can limit leaders' decision-making processes, making it more difficult to implement certain policies or directives (De Voto et al., 2023). Institutional factors can also stem from within the education system itself as well. Fernandez and Duarte (2024) find that principals' leadership abilities are directly influenced by district superintendent's interpretation and implementation of policy. This study identifies a potential trickle-down effect, creating limited autonomy and maneuverability for principals trying to enact equitable and inclusive school environments (Fernandez & Duarte, 2024).

Variation by Policy Level

The previous literature provided an overview of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks applied to current research, as well as identified the external institutional factors that directly influence educational leaders' interpretation and implementation of policy. The following sections further analyze distribution and trends across the literature, looking at the level of policy (local, state, and federal). This analysis sheds further light on what patterns emerge across the literature, helping to provide an encompassed understanding of the factors influencing district leaders' policy interpretation and implementation.

Educational policies are developed and implemented at various levels – local, state, and federal – each with its own set of priorities, regulations, and expectations. The level at which a policy originates significantly influences how educational leaders interpret, adapt, and implement these policies within their schools and districts. Local policies typically reflect the needs and cultural context of the surrounding community, while state and federal policies provide broader

frameworks that introduce additional layers of accountability, requiring leaders to navigate complex landscapes of compliance and adaptation. This section examines the impact the various policy levels have on educational leaders' decision-making processes, highlighting the variation in challenges and strategies at each level. The analysis also considers how these varying levels of policy interact with institutional contexts and individual characteristics, further complicating the process of interpreting and implementing policy.

Local-Level Policy

Typically developed to meet the specific needs of a school district, local policies provide educational leaders with a degree of flexibility and autonomy in decision-making and implementation (Brooks et al., 2008; Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021; McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019). Leaders at the local level are deeply embedded in their communities, which enables them to craft and implement policies that are more closely aligned with local values and expectations (Carraway & Young, 2015; De Voto et al., 2023; Hambacher et al., 2024). However, the proximity to the community also requires leaders to balance competing interests and navigate local politics, as is currently being seen with prohibited concepts laws and anti-CRT and LGBTQIA+ initiatives (Fernandez & Duarte, 2024; Hambacher et al., 2024; LoBue and Douglass, 2023). District-level policy implementation by the superintendent influences principals' abilities to lead; Fernandez and Duarte (2024) find that local, district-level policies on CRT and LGBTQIA+ topics significantly limited one principal's ability to enact inclusivity in her school. The literature suggests that while local policies can empower educational leaders to enact meaningful changes, they also present challenges in ensuring equity and consistency across different schools within the district (Fernandez & Duarte, 2024; Hambacher et al., 2024). This localized approach highlights the importance of understanding the specific community dynamics

and institutional contexts that influence policy interpretation and implementation at the local level. It also underscores the variability of local policies across states, regions, and the country as a whole.

State and Federal-Level Policy

Policies at the state and federal levels exert significant influence on educational leadership by setting broad standards and accountability measures that schools and districts must follow (Asada et al., 2020; Carraway & Young, 2015; Coburn, 2005; Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021; De Voto et al., 2023; Filippi & Hackmann, 2019; Dunbar & Villarruel, 2002; Mavrogordato & White, 2020). State-level policies aim to ensure consistency and equity across all districts within the state, but they often limit the autonomy of local leaders and require them to align their practices with state mandates (De Voto et al., 2023; Melton et al., 2019). Issues arise for leaders when they must navigate the complexities of implementing state policies while also addressing the specific needs of their local communities, which can lead to tensions between standardization and local adaptation (LoBue & Douglass, 2023; Hambacher et al., 2024)

Federal policies are designed to address national priorities with overarching requirements that apply uniformly across states, such as student wellness policy or COVID-19 mandates (Asada et al., 2020; De Voto et al., 2023; Filippi & Hackmann, 2019; Spillane et al., 2002, White et al., 2015). Asada et al. (2020) recorded positive interpretations of the Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010 from superintendents across twenty-three states, highlighting how these superintendents used adaptative leadership and personal motivation to implement the policy in their districts. However, not all policies are implemented so easily or willingly. Anti-CRT and anti-equity policies originating at the federal level have constrained educational leaders' abilities to provide inclusive and equitable environments for their students (Fernandez & Duarte, 2024;

Hambacher et al., 2024; LoBue & Douglass, 2023). For educational leaders, the challenge lies in interpreting and implementing federal mandates like these in a way that aligns with the federal and state requirements, as well as the unique contexts of their districts and schools. Fernandez and Duarte (2024) find that highly prohibited policies reduce or potentially eliminate educational leaders' ability to lead with autonomy. The literature indicates that while state and federal policies are crucial for setting educational standards and ensuring accountability, they also require local leaders to engage in complex interpretation and implementation processes to effectively integrate these policies into practice – in some cases, leaders' ability to do so is hindered by the type of policy at play (Fernandez & Duarte, 2024; Hambacher et al., 2024; LoBue & Douglass, 2023).

Discourse and Critical Policy Analysis in Education Research

In recent decades, education scholars have increasingly turned to critical frameworks to understand how policy functions not only as a set of technical directives but as a cultural and ideological project. Among the most influential of these are discourse theory and critical policy analysis (CPA), which offer complementary lenses for investigating how language, power, and politics shape educational systems. Both approaches foreground the notion that policy is never neutral; it is constructed through language, saturated with values, and enacted within systems of power that privilege certain groups while marginalizing others.

Discourse Theory in Educational Research

Discourse theory views language as constitutive of social reality; Foucault (1972) argued that discourse is a “regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements” (p. 80), meaning that what can be said—and thus what can be known, thought, and done—is bounded by historically and socially situated systems of knowledge. In education, this insight has led

researchers to examine how policy texts, curriculum standards, and official communications produce normative visions of schooling, citizenship, and identity (Ball, 1993; Hall, 1992; Taylor, 1997). These discourses are not merely descriptive—they actively shape educational subjectivities and institutional behavior, establishing what is possible or legitimate within school systems (Taylor, 1997).

One prominent development in the application of discourse theory is critical discourse analysis (CDA), particularly as articulated by Norman Fairclough (1995). Fairclough emphasizes the dialectical relationship between discourse and social structure, arguing that discourse both reflects and shapes institutional and societal practices. CDA has been applied to a wide range of educational phenomena—including neoliberal reform policies, curriculum frameworks, and legislative texts—to uncover the ideological assumptions embedded in ostensibly neutral language (Rogers, 2011; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Additionally, Carol Bacchi's (2009) "What's the Problem Represented to Be" (WPR) approach extends discourse analysis by explicitly focusing on the problem-framing function of policy. Bacchi contends that policies do not respond to problems but instead construct them. Her framework directs scholars to interrogate how policies define what is problematic, what causes are emphasized or erased, and what solutions are rendered possible or impossible (Bacchi, 2009). In educational research, WPR has been used to examine how policies frame issues such as diversity, inclusion, and accountability (Mifsud, 2024). This approach is especially useful in analyzing politically charged legislation like prohibited concepts laws, where the act of defining what constitutes a "divisive" or "appropriate" topic is itself an exercise of ideological control.

What unites these strands of discourse analysis is a concern with the power of language to govern, not just administratively but culturally (Bacchi, 2009; Clarke, 2012; Fairclough, 1995;

Foucault, 1972). In education, discourse regulates how students are positioned, how historical narratives are curated or censored, and how equity initiatives are justified, reframed, or foreclosed.

Critical Policy Analysis in Educational Research

Critical policy analysis (CPA) provides a complementary framework by situating discourse within the broader terrain of power, race, class, and ideology (Taylor et al., 1997). CPA resists traditional, linear conceptions of the policy process and instead views policy as a contested, political artifact embedded in specific historical and sociocultural contexts (Diem, Young, & Sampson, 2019; Taylor et al., 1997). This perspective shifts attention away from evaluating policy effectiveness and toward understanding how policies reflect and reproduce dominant power structures.

In educational research, CPA has been instrumental in analyzing how policies construct and regulate race, gender, citizenship, and identity. For example, Young and Diem (2014) examine how achievement gap policies ostensibly aimed at equity often reinscribe deficit views of students of color. Similarly, Lipman (2011) explores how urban education policy is driven by neoliberal logics that prioritize efficiency and competition at the expense of racial and economic justice. More recently, LoBue and Douglass (2023) apply CPA to anti-CRT legislation, showing how such policies are mobilized to protect whiteness and suppress antiracist educational discourse.

CPA also emphasizes the multi-scalar nature of policy—how policies originate at federal or state levels but are interpreted and enacted at the local level in ways that reflect institutional values, community pressures, and the agency of local actors (Ball et al., 2012). This is particularly relevant for studies of school districts, which often serve as mediators between state

mandates and local educational values. Research has shown that district leaders engage in complex forms of sense-making, framing, and buffering to align (or resist) external policies with internal priorities (Coburn, 2005; De Voto et al., 2023).

Connecting Discourse and CPA

While discourse theory and CPA have distinct emphases—one rooted in post-structural linguistics and the other in critical sociology—both are increasingly used together in education research. Discourse theory provides tools for analyzing the language of policy (Bacchi, 2009; Fairclough, 1995; Foucault, 1972), while CPA situates those texts within the political and ideological systems that produce them (Diem et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 1997). For example, Fernández and Duarte (2024) use both frameworks to examine how anti-CRT legislation is interpreted by school districts and leaders, revealing how discourse both constrains and enables leadership practices in politically hostile environments.

Social Justice Leadership

Social justice leadership has emerged as a significant theoretical framework in this area, particularly in the contexts that demand equity and inclusivity. Researchers use the framework to emphasize how leaders navigate policies with the intent to promote fairness and address systemic inequities within their schools (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; Brooks et al., 2008; Kose, 2009). Although social justice leadership is not new to research examining leaders' experiences with policy implementation, it has become increasingly relevant with the recent introduction of prohibited concepts legislation and significant political polarization. Mavrogordato and White (2020) use this framework to explore how leaders in Texas implement reclassification policies for English learners, revealing that these leaders often unknowingly enable or obstruct social justice efforts based on their interpretation of policy and personal commitment to equity.

Similarly, other studies like Hambacher et al. (2024) and LoBue and Douglass (2023) have demonstrated that principals and superintendents who view their role through a social justice lens are more likely to advocate for policies that support marginalized students, even in the face of considerable backlash from community stakeholders or when policies are complex. Fernandez and Duarte (2024) recently found in a narrative case study that a superintendent's interpretation of anti-CRT and anti-equity policies dramatically impacted the social justice implementation strategies principals could utilize within the district, emphasizing the constrain decision-making at one level can have on other K-12 educational leaders. This body of research underscores the importance of the social justice framework in understanding how leaders interpret and enact policies, highlighting the critical role of personal beliefs and institutional support in advancing equity within educational settings.

Conclusion

The current body of literature on prohibited concepts laws remains limited, particularly in its attention to how these laws are interpreted and enacted at the local level. Existing research has begun to document how such legislation constrains the work of K-12 leaders by complicating efforts to foster inclusive, equitable learning environments (AASA, 2023; LoBue & Douglass, 2023; Peetz, 2023; Superville, 2023). These studies highlight the tensions leaders face in navigating competing demands between state mandates and community expectations, as well as their personal and professional commitments to equity and justice.

While much of the literature emphasizes leadership experiences and sense-making processes, there is limited empirical research focused on how prohibited concepts laws are publicly communicated, framed, or resisted through district-level documents. Yet these documents—district policies, meeting minutes, curriculum statements, public announcements—

are central to how policies are interpreted, made actionable, and legitimated within local contexts. As the literature on discourse and critical policy analysis shows, language is never neutral; it shapes what is seen as possible, permissible, and legitimate in public education (Bacchi, 2009; Ball, 1993; Fairclough, 1995). By analyzing district documents as discursive artifacts, this study responds to a gap in the field and brings greater attention to how local education agencies construct public narratives about race, gender, inclusion, and national identity under politically charged conditions.

This chapter reviewed research across several key themes: (a) the development and implications of prohibited concepts laws; (b) their impact on K-12 leaders and educators; (c) how local actors engage in framing and sense-making; and (d) the theoretical frameworks of discourse theory and critical policy analysis used to study education policy and implementation. It also emphasized the importance of institutional and contextual factors—such as district demographics and political climate—in shaping policy interpretation and enactment.

In sum, the literature underscores that the implementation of prohibited concepts is not a linear or uniform process, but a dynamic and context-dependent practice. This study builds on and extends existing research by shifting the unit of analysis from individual leaders to the district-level documents that publicly represent policy interpretation. In doing so, it explores how public education is shaped not only by what policies dictate, but by how those policies are discursively constructed, framed, and performed in contested sociopolitical environments.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

In Chapter 3, I explain the methodology used to answer the research questions for this study. The research questions are:

1. How is the prohibited concepts law discursively constructed and enacted through official documents in Tennessee K-12 public school districts?
 - a. What language and framing strategies are used in district-level documents to describe or respond to the prohibited concepts law?
 - b. How do policy documents reflect school districts' interpretations of and compliance with the prohibited concepts law?
2. In what ways do district documents maintain, resist, or reframe dominant narratives around race, gender, and American history in the context of the prohibited concepts law?
 - a. How is the concept of inclusive education represented in districts' documentation of policy implementation?

Research Design

This qualitative study employed a document analysis methodology to examine how the prohibited concepts law is interpreted and enacted through district-produced texts and documents. Document analysis was particularly appropriate for this study because it enabled a systematic and contextual examination of written materials that both reflect and shape educational policy and practice (Bowen, 2009). Rather than centering the perspectives or experiences of individuals, document analysis focuses on the content, structure, and purpose of documents to uncover underlying meanings, values, and assumptions embedded within them (Prior, 2003).

Rationale for Qualitative Research Approach

A qualitative research design was selected for this study because it allows for an in-depth exploration of how meaning is constructed through language within a specific social and political context. Additionally, qualitative research is appropriate for this inquiry because it enables an exploration of how such meaning is constructed, conveyed, and negotiated, and it is especially useful for examining phenomena that are complex, context-dependent, and situated in human interaction (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the case of the prohibited concepts law, which emerged from politically charged debates around race, gender, and curriculum in public education, a qualitative approach provided the flexibility needed to examine the nuanced and often implicit ways policy is communicated and implemented.

Rather than measure implementation outcomes or survey stakeholder opinions, this study sought to understand the interpretative and discursive dimensions of policy enactment in regards to the prohibited concepts law. Through document analysis and discourse analytic techniques, the study aimed to uncover the language strategies used by school district leadership to navigate controversial legislation, communicate compliance, and articulate their commitments to inclusive education practices. A qualitative approach was most appropriate for capturing these complex dynamics and for revealing how district discourse reproduces, reframes, resists dominant political narratives.

Discourse Theory

This study uses discourse theory as both a theoretical and methodological approach. Discourse theory is concerned with examining the ways in which discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society

(Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993). It is particularly useful for investigating public policy documents, which are often assumed to be neutral but are often embedded with ideological assumptions and sociopolitical agendas (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). In this study, this methodology informs both the research questions and the analytical process.

Through discourse theory, this study analyzed how Tennessee K-12 public school district leaders construct meaning around the prohibited concepts law, a policy shaped largely by divisive national and state-level debates about race, gender, and American history. Discourse theory enabled a close reading of the policy language to understand how these school district leaders reproduced or resisted dominant narratives, and how these narratives may have shaped the contours of inclusive education practices in public schools. This study draws on Fairclough's (1995, 2010) three-dimensional framework for discourse analysis, which involves:

1. Textual Analysis: A close reading of collected documents to identify vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and text structure.
2. Discursive Practice: Analyzing how texts are produced, distributed, and consumed, including intertextuality and the relationship between texts.
3. Social Practice: Situating the discourse within broader sociopolitical and ideological structures to understand how texts relate to power and hegemony.

Using discourse theory in this way aligned with the study's critical orientation and supported an analysis that foregrounds language, power, and the socially constructed nature of policy enactment. It also offered insights into how discourse functions as a mechanism of governance in contested educational spaces. By employing this framework, the study sought to reveal how district-level documents simultaneously respond to, reframe, and possibly resist state-level

mandates in ways that carry implications for public discourse on education and equity in Tennessee.

Document Selection and Data Sources

District-level documents were selected from publicly available district websites and included board meeting minutes, policy manuals, curriculum guidelines, public statements, newsletters, and other relevant communications published between 2020 and 2024. These documents were chosen for their relevance to district-level interpretations, responses, and enactments of the prohibited concepts law. A purposeful sampling strategy was used to select 15 school districts across the state of Tennessee, representing a balance of geographic and sociopolitical contexts. Purposeful sampling is a commonly used strategy in qualitative research, designed to identify and select individuals or groups with specific knowledge or experiences relevant to the research questions (Patton, 2015). Specifically, a total of $n=15$ districts were selected, $n=5$ from each locale type (rural, suburban, urban)—as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). This stratified purposeful sampling ensured that the study captured variation across locale types, allowing for a comparative exploration of how different types of districts discursively constructed and implemented the prohibited concepts law. **Table 1** overviews the districts selected for this study.

Districts were selected based on publicly available demographic data, student enrollment size, racial composition, and political voting patterns to ensure diversity of context. The inclusion criteria also required that selected districts had publicly accessible documentation related to curriculum, board meetings, and/or public statements that explicitly or implicitly referenced the prohibited concept policy. The variation among districts enhanced the study's ability to identify patterns, contradictions, and nuances in the discursive enactment of the policy.

Table 1
Selected Districts

District	Locale Type	Region	Total Students*
Benton County	Rural	West	2,130
Bradley County	Rural	East	10,336
Clarksville-Montgomery County	Urban	Middle	39,345
Clinton City Schools	Suburban	East	969
Fentress County	Rural	Middle	2,280
Franklin County	Urban	Middle	4,977
Hamilton County	Urban	East	45,790
Knox County	Suburban	East	60,604
Maryville City	Suburban	East	5,711
Memphis-Shelby County	Urban	West	110,057
Metro Nashville	Urban	Middle	80,468
Oak Ridge	Suburban	East	5,002
Sequatchie County	Rural	Middle	1,967
Sumner County	Suburban	Middle	30,661
Williamson County	Rural	Middle	41,909

*As of the 2023-2024 school year. Source: National Center for Education Statistics

Data Collection

The data collection process began with the identification and cataloging of the Tennessee K-12 school districts that met the study's inclusion criteria. After the n=15 districts were selected through stratified purpose sampling, I systematically visited each district's official website and affiliated public repositories (e.g., BoardDocs, archived board meeting minutes, or Google Drive folders) to locate and download relevant documents. All collected documents were then saved to my OneDrive and cataloged with metadata, including the district name, document title, publication date, and document type. I created files for each locale type and added subfolders for each corresponding district.

Documents collected included—but were not limited to—school board meeting minutes, district policy manuals, curriculum statements, superintendent updates, press releases, newsletters, strategic plans, and equity or diversity frameworks. These materials were selected based on relevance to the prohibited concepts law and were collected over a three-month period. This study only included relevant documents from January 2020 to December 2024. In order to find accurate data from this timeframe, I used the Wayback Machine (web.archive.org), a digital archive that allows users to access past versions of websites. Documents were converted to PDF or Word formats for analysis and were cleaned to remove extraneous material (e.g., blank pages, non-relevant policies) prior to the coding and analysis phase. Documents were only included in the final analysis if they met the following criteria:

- Publicly available and accessible without credentials
- Dated between January 2020 and December 2024

- Explicitly or implicitly referenced the prohibited concepts law, related curricular or policy shifts, or discussions of equity, inclusion, race, gender, access or student success in relation to policy implementation.

This rigorous and transparent data collection process ensured that the dataset was both relevant and representative, laying the groundwork for a robust critical discourse analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework, which encompasses textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. This multilayered approach allowed for an in-depth investigation of how language in policy documents constructs, reinforces, or contests broader sociopolitical ideologies. The analysis began with a preliminary familiarization phase during which all documents were read holistically to develop an initial understanding of tone, themes, and stylistic elements. Notes were taken during this phase to begin identifying recurrent discursive elements such as euphemistic language, omissions, and emphasis on particular values (e.g. neutrality, inclusivity, accountability).

Next, the textual analysis focused on specific linguistic features, specifically:

- Lexical choices – “objectivity,” “indoctrination,” “prohibited” (or “divisive”) vs. “inclusive,” “equity”
- Modality – use of “must,” “should,” or “may”
- Agency – passive vs. active constructions and who was positioned as the key actor(s)
- Nominalization – abstracting actions in nouns, which obscured agency
- Repetition and silences – what was consistently reinforced and what was left unsaid

In the discursive practice stage, intertextuality was examined to identify how district documents referenced or echoed state mandates, media discourse, or political talking points.

Documents were analyzed for genre conventions, production sources, and intended audiences. The circulation of these documents—where and how they were shared—was also considered. The social practice dimension involved situating these discourses within the broader sociopolitical context of Tennessee and the United States. This included connecting patterns found in the texts to dominant national narratives about race, gender, and American identity. Key questions addressed included: What ideological work does this language do? Whose perspectives are amplified or marginalized? How does the policy discourse align with or push back against historical and contemporary struggles for educational equity?

Throughout all three stages of the analysis process, data were coded using both deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive codes were derived from the theoretical framework and relevant literature, while inductive codes emerged during close readings of the data. Coding was conducted using Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software, which enabled organization and retrieval of text segments for pattern identification. Each document was read multiple times to ensure rigorous analysis during the coding process. To enhance analytic rigor, I also composed memos in Dedoose and in a separate Word document to highlight reflections, interpretive questions, and thematic insights that emerged throughout the coding process. These memos helped make visible the interpretive decisions that shaped the findings. This approach to analysis allowed for a nuanced understanding of how district-level documents reify, negotiate, or resist dominant ideologies through discourse, revealing the complex role of language in shaping educational policy and practice.

Ethical Safeguards

This study did not involve human subjects. All documents analyzed were publicly available, and no confidential or proprietary materials were assessed.

Methods of Verification

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility of this qualitative research study, several methods of verification were employed. These methods help to establish the rigor and validity of the findings by strengthening the reliability of the data collection, analysis, and interpretations processes. The verification strategies outlined below draw upon established guidelines in qualitative research to ensure that the study's conclusions are both credible and dependable (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

- Triangulation involves using multiple sources of data to enhance the credibility of the findings (Denzin, 1978). In this study, I compared and contrasted various data sources, identifying convergences and divergences that deepened the understanding of how school districts interpret and implement the prohibited concepts law in Tennessee.
- Providing a rich, thick description of the study's context, participants, and findings will help ensure transferability (Geertz, 1973). By offering detailed accounts of the specific social and political environments in which prohibited concepts laws are enacted, readers will be able to assess the applicability of the findings to other similar contexts. This method allows the findings to be more easily transferable to other settings, enhancing the study's overall external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
- An audit trail was maintained throughout the study to ensure dependability and confirmability. This involves documenting all research decisions, coding processes, and analytic memos in a clear and transparent manner (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail provided a detailed record of how data was collected, coded, and interpreted, ensuring that the findings can be traced back to the original data. This process enables others to follow the research steps and evaluate the integrity of the study.

By incorporating triangulation, rich description, and an audit trail, this study ensured the credibility, dependability, and confirmability of its findings. These verification strategies help ensure that the conclusions drawn from the research are both trustworthy and reflective of the participants' experiences within the structural constraints of prohibited concepts laws.

Role of the Researcher

As a researcher, it is necessary to be aware of individual beliefs, perspectives, and assumptions, and it is equally important to understand how my views interact with the research process (Watt, 2007). As a White male who grew up in a predominantly White, suburban hometown, my identity and background have undoubtedly shaped my perspectives on race, power, and social justice. These experiences influence both my worldview and the way I approach my research on social justice leadership. In this study, it was essential to acknowledge and reflect on how my positionality as a researcher intersects with the critical context in which the research was situated. Growing up in a largely homogenous community, I benefited from racial privilege, something that I did not fully understand or recognize until I was exposed to more diverse environments upon moving away to pursue higher education. As a result, my understanding of race and systemic inequality has evolved over time, particularly as I have committed myself to becoming social justice-minded. This ongoing commitment compels me to critically examine my own biases, privileges, and assumptions about race, gender, identity, leadership, and education as a whole.

According to Merriam & Tisdell (2016), the researcher is often considered the primary instrument for data collection in qualitative research. The researcher also plays a significant role in the data collection by not only conducting analysis, but also in interpreting responses (Patton, 2015). To maintain rigor, I was conscious of potential biases and preconceptions and engaged in

reflexive practices throughout the study. This involved keeping a reflective journal to document thoughts, reactions, and evolving interpretations, helping to ensure that my perspectives did not unduly influence the data collection or analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As a White researcher, I understand certain cultural norms and barriers that exist in K-12 education. However, this same racial identity also presented limitations, as being White makes me a part of the exact system that perpetuates the racial power structures I sought to critically examine. Therefore, it was crucial for me to remain reflexive about how this shapes my understanding of the data. I recognize that whiteness operates as a position of power, and I am deeply aware of the need to confront my own complicity in upholding these structures. Constantly seeking to evolve my understanding of social justice and engaging in thoughtful practice pushed me to reflect on how my own racial identity might influence my research. I was particularly mindful to avoid the tendency to reproduce the vary power imbalances that my research seeks to challenge.

Ethically, it was vital that I ensured data safety and confidentiality, where necessary. The purpose of this positionality statement and acknowledgement of ethical considerations was merely to underline who I am as the researcher, so that readers can see any perspectives, beliefs, or biases I might have carried that could have potentially influenced this study. This study was conducted for the sole purpose of answering the research questions presented. Great efforts were made to remain neutral in all data collection and assessment. Through reflexivity, fact checking, the use of IRB guidelines, and general research protocols, the findings presented are as accurately reflected as could be made possible.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 described and supported the methodology and research design that was used

for this qualitative study. All aspects of the research process were identified and explained, including the sample population and selection, qualitative instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis. Validity and reliability of this qualitative study were also discussed. Ethical safeguards and threats to liability were accounted for and addressed. Chapter 4 will present detailed findings from this study.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This chapter presents findings related to two main research questions:

1. How is the prohibited concepts law discursively constructed and enacted through official documents in Tennessee K-12 public school districts?
 - a. What language and framing strategies are used in district-level documents to describe or respond to the prohibited concepts law?
 - b. How do policy documents reflect school districts' interpretations of and compliance with the prohibited concepts law?
2. In what ways do district documents maintain, resist, or reframe dominant narratives around race, gender, and American history in the context of the prohibited concepts law?
 - a. How is the concept of inclusive education represented in districts' documentation of policy implementation?

To contextualize the findings of this study, I begin with a brief profile of each of the 15 Tennessee K-12 school districts included in the document analysis. These districts were selected to represent a cross-section of geographic, demographic, and political diversity across the state. For each district, I outline the types of documents collected, discursive strategies used to describe or implement the prohibited concepts law, and the extent to which each district's documentation engaged with related issues such as equity, inclusion, or race. These profiles help illustrate how local policy enactment varies across Tennessee's educational landscape.

Next, I analyze how the prohibited concepts law is discursively constructed and enacted through district-level documents in Tennessee K-12 public school districts, and how these documents maintain, resist, or reframe dominant narratives about race, gender, and American history. Findings are organized thematically and directly address the study's research questions. Section 1 examines how district leaders describe, frame, and interpret the prohibited concepts

law, while section 2 analyzes how district documents reflect leaders' engagement with issues of inclusive education and broader sociopolitical narratives. Data excerpts from official district documents are included to illustrate key patterns. The chapter concludes with a summary of major findings, which are further interpreted and discussed in Chapter 5.

District Profiles

Benton County Schools

In Benton County, five district policies and documents were reviewed. District leadership adopted a sparse, compliance-centered approach to the prohibited concepts law, closely mirroring the state's statutory language. One document instructed staff to ensure that "no instructional material promotes any of the prohibited concepts outlined in T.C.A. § 49-6-1019." There was no elaboration of the law or mention of diversity, equity, or inclusion within district documents. Overall, Benton County's documentation reflected a legalistic interpretation of the policy, with no notable interpretation, reframing, or challenging of its implications.

Bradley County Schools

A review of Bradley County yielded seven documents, including revised board policies, district webpages, and board meeting minutes. The district's materials emphasized neutrality, with references to "avoiding political bias in the classroom." Although no evidence of equitable or inclusive educational practices were found, the district did have a policy dedicated to hiring a "diverse educators to reflect the student population." Additionally, there was also reference to race, with a line from the district's instructional goals policy stating, "To learn to understand, respect, and interact with people of different cultures, generations, and races." This policy was issued in 2001 and no updates were found since its initial implementation. Overall, the district's documentation suggested a cautious stance, framing compliance and signaling a desire to

distance the classroom from any potentially divisive content.

Clarksville-Montgomery County Schools

Clarksville-Montgomery County Schools (CMCSS) offered six policies and district documents. District leadership explicitly described its role as ensuring “compliance with state expectations,” but showed evidence of supporting teachers through clear instructional boundaries. Although the district did not have any references to equity or inclusion, board meeting minutes from 2022 reflected a push toward diverse educator recruitment, with a presentation titled “Diversity Recruitment” having been presented. CMCSS did experience some controversy in 2023 after a DEI-focused presentation was given during the district’s annual professional development conference, leading to U.S. Rep. Mark Green calling for transparency from the district and expressing concerns about the inclusion of CRT elements in the training. However, district leadership appeared to maintain a technical and administrative approach in response to the prohibited concepts law, prioritizing legal clarity over ideological alignment or resistance.

Clinton City Schools

Six relevant documents and policies were found on the Clinton City Schools website. Documents directly referencing the prohibited concepts law repeated language from the Tennessee code with minimal modification. There was no mention of equity, race, or inclusion, nor any elaboration on how the policy might affect instruction. However, a line in the district’s goals policy does note “to set goals for educator diversity that take into consideration the diversity of the student population.” The tone for the district’s policies was strictly procedural, and the district’s implementation can be characterized as neutral, quiet compliance with no visible discursive engagement beyond copying legal requirements.

Fentress County Schools

A review of the Fentress County website yielded six relevant policies. Policies restated the language of the prohibited concepts law and did not reflect any modification. The instructional program, which was last updated in 2023, noted that an instructional goal for students in the district was “to learn to understand, respect, and interact with people of different cultures, generations, and races.” However, no references to diversity or inclusion were identified. District leadership’s implementation reflected a conservative, compliance-focused orientation that avoided public-facing engagement with the broader implications of the policy.

Franklin County Schools

Six policy documents were obtained from Franklin County. These materials positioned the district as a neutral actor following state mandates, using the state’s original language with minor modifications. District policies reflected clear compliance and avoided language related to race and gender. There were no references to inclusive educational practices, and the documents reflected a desire to remain neutral without taking an explicit stance. District leadership also appeared to avoid public-facing engagement and did not discuss any implications the prohibited concepts law may have had on curriculum or instructional practices.

Hamilton County Schools

Hamilton County’s document set included policies, district initiatives, and public-facing materials for parents and community stakeholders. District leadership’s approach was more discursively active than many others in the sample. While aligning with the prohibited concepts law, the district’s leadership emphasized “supporting all learners through accurate, respectful instruction.” Support for teachers was found, with one document affirming that “teachers can still discuss difficult topics when done in an objective, age-appropriate manner.” Evidence of

equitable and inclusive educational practices were also found, with specific policies dedicated to educational equity for all students in the district and educator diversity to “reflect the student population.” District leadership demonstrated some interpretive agency, with evidence of attempts to preserve pedagogical space for complexity while maintaining compliance.

Knox County Schools

Over twenty documents were collected from Knox County, including policies, board meeting notes, superintendent memos, and presentations. District leadership walked a careful line between compliance and cautious reassurance. Teachers were instructed to “uphold the law” while also “maintaining rigorous, standards-based instruction.” District leadership did not include any diversity, equity, or inclusion language in the reviewed documents but did address concerns about “censorship” in its community messaging. Knox County’s documentation suggested an effort to appease both sides of the political spectrum, signaling neutrality and attempting to avoid contention.

Maryville City Schools

Five documents were collected from Maryville City Schools. The language used in district policies was formulaic and tightly aligned with state guidance, but the district leadership’s basic program did reflect a more resistant stance. The policy noted that:

The curriculum shall foster respect and appreciation of the cultural diversity found in our country and an awareness of the rights, duties, and responsibilities of each individual member of a pluralistic society (Maryville City Schools, 2021).

The district website also reflected a strong stance on diversity and equitable educational practices. A webpage was dedicated to diversity initiatives in the district and outlined the purpose, process, and action steps being taken to ensure inclusive education. District leadership

was compliant with the prohibited concepts law but also demonstrated some interpretive agency as well.

Memphis-Shelby County Schools

Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS) offered a diverse and detailed set of documents, including district policies, curriculum audits, and public-facing materials. MSCS leadership stood out for directly addressing the tension between the prohibited concepts law and the district's commitment to equity. DEI language appeared throughout the materials and district website, and teachers were offered specific examples of how to continue inclusive practices while avoiding policy violations. The district maintained the Office of Student Equity, Enrollment, and Discipline (SEED), noting, "SEED strives to empower principals, support parents, and enrich students every day, while ensuring that funding continues as a result of the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) compliance." MSCS exemplified a resistant yet strategic posture, reframing the prohibited concepts law's boundaries in service of broader inclusion goals.

Metro Nashville Public Schools

Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) offered extensive documentation, including district policies, public statements, training modules, and a district-wide equity framework. MNPS leadership was the most openly critical of the policy in tone, though still careful to remain compliant and within the legal limits. District leadership emphasized "equity-focused instruction" and "support for diverse learners," using language that positioned the prohibited concepts law as a constraint on, rather than a foundation for, educational practice. MNPS's materials reflected both resistance and reframing, with a strong undercurrent of values-based leadership guiding its interpretation.

Oak Ridge City Schools

Five policy documents were collected from Oak Ridge. District leadership avoided overt political language and emphasized professional discretion. An emergent theme was maintaining academic rigor within the legal frameworks of the prohibited concepts law, and there was evidence of the district signaling trust in educators' judgement. Oak Ridge leadership did not use DEI language explicitly, but it also avoided the restrictive tone of more conservative districts included in this study. Evidence of a commitment to "inclusion and productivity" was found on a webpage dedicated to the district's diversity committee, which served as an advisory group to the superintendent. The district's documents reflected a professional, moderate interpretation of the prohibited concepts law with subtle signals for educator autonomy.

Sequatchie County Schools

Sequatchie County offered four relevant policy documents. These documents restated the state policy nearly verbatim and offered minimal elaboration for teachers, parents, or other community stakeholders. There were no references to diversity, equity, or inclusion, and the language used in district policy documents was formal and procedural. District leadership maintained a dedicated page for the prohibited concepts law and the accompanying state mandated complaint form, but did not provide any insight about how the policy might affect instruction. The district's documentation strategy suggested a narrow and enforcement-driven reading of the policy.

Sumner County Schools

Eight documents were collected from Sumner County, including district policies and the district's vision and mission statement. District leadership appeared to take a neutral stance on the prohibited concepts law, but did note in the instructional goals and objectives that "the

diversity of thinking of all those who are invested in education is welcomed.” Additionally, the district’s controversial issues policy underscored a recognition and acceptance of discussion in the classroom, but noted that these issues:

Must be relevant to the subject matter being taught, related to prescribed educational objectives, appropriate for the age and maturity of students, and shall not materially or substantially disrupt or threaten to disrupt the discipline of the school.

Some evidence of equity and inclusion was also found. One of the district’s beliefs states, “We believe in an inclusive culture that embraces diversity, gives equal access to each child, promotes responsibility, and supports positive self-esteem.” Overall, documentation suggested clear compliance, but also reflected a commitment to maintain inclusive practices within Sumner County.

Williamson County Schools

Over ten documents were collected from Williamson County, including district policies, board meeting minutes, and public-facing letters. The documentation revealed that much of the district leadership’s response to prohibited concepts legislation remained driven by public pressure and political contention. In the year following state implementation of the policy, Williamson County became a political battleground that attracted statewide attention. After renewing a contract with Fostering Healthy Solutions (FHS)—an external auditing firm that provides guidance and training on diversity and equity issues—district leaders received strong pushback from parents, community members, and local advocacy groups, most notably Moms for Liberty. Those opposed to the rehiring of FHS argued that the firm used terms like “diversity,” “equity,” and “inclusion” to hide the indoctrination of students with critical race theory--although the district and firm both denied this. Additionally, the same opposition was

outspoken about the district’s state-approved curriculum choice, Great Minds’ Wit & Wisdom. Williamson County’s documentation suggested a reframing strategy—seeking to maintain rigorous instruction and varied perspectives without crossing policy lines. The district leadership’s tone was strategic and responsive to its politically engaged community.

Thematic Findings

This section presents the key themes that emerged through an in-depth analysis of the collected district-level documents related to the implementation of Tennessee’s prohibited concepts law in K-12 public schools. Using qualitative document analysis, I examined how language, framing, and policy decisions reflect districts leaders’ interpretations, enactments, and tensions surrounding the law. The themes outlined here directly address the study’s research questions by revealing the discursive strategies districts used to comply with, resist, or reframe the policy’s expectations—especially as they relate to race, gender, and American history. These findings illustrate not only patterns of compliance and silence but also instances of subtle resistance, local reinterpretation, and efforts to maintain inclusive educational practices within constrained political contexts. Each theme is supported by representative examples from the collected documents and is analyzed in relation to the broader policy landscape.

Section 1: Discursive Construction and Enactment of the Prohibited Concepts Law

This section analyzes how Tennessee K-12 public school district leaders have constructed and enacted the prohibited concepts law through official district documents. Drawing on critical policy analysis and discourse theory, the findings illustrate how district leaders navigate the language, tone, and framing of the law in ways that reflect local values, compliance concerns, and broader sociopolitical pressures. By examining district-level documents—including district policies, meeting minutes, curriculum guidance, and public statements—this section reveals

patterns in how district leaders interpret the law, communicate its implications, and embed it into their educational and administrative practices.

1.1 Language and Framing Strategies in District Documents

District documents varied in length, detail, and tone, but certain language patterns and framing strategies consistently appeared across multiple districts. These patterns shed light on how district leaders interpreted and positioned themselves in response to the prohibited concepts law. The following themes—common keywords, strategic framing, and notable silences—reveal how districts balanced legal mandates, public expectations, and institutional values.

Theme 1: Common Language and Keywords

Across nearly all districts, documents emphasized a few recurring keywords that reflected an orientation toward legal compliance and risk management. Terms such as “*compliance*,” “*adherence*,” and “*in alignment with state law*” were frequently used to signal districts’ conformity to state policy without elaborating on instructional specifics. Several districts’ documentation mirrored the Tennessee Department of Education’s (TDOE) language almost verbatim. Phrases such as “*prohibited concepts*,” “*age-appropriate content*,” and “*compliance with state law*” frequently appeared in board policies, professional development materials, and other relevant documents. For instance, Clarksville-Montgomery County Schools used the phrase “instruction shall not include or promote prohibited concepts,” directly reflecting the language used in T.C.A. § 49-6-1019.

Language in many district policies was vague and often no clarification or additional information was provided, suggesting a distancing from potentially controversial content. In a few instances, districts like Williamson County and Knox County referenced “*academic freedom*” or “*educator professionalism*,” suggesting a desire to protect instructional discretion

while still affirming legal boundaries. The widespread use of common language and cautious phrasing illustrated how the prohibited concepts law has shaped not only district compliance but also rhetorical strategy. Word choices functioned as both shields and signals: wording strategies shielded districts from potential state sanctions while signaling to parents and community stakeholders that districts are acting cautiously and lawfully.

Theme 2: Framing Strategies

In addition to recurring keywords, district leaders employed distinct framing strategies that revealed their orientation toward the prohibited concepts law. These frames did not merely reflect legal compliance but also communicated institutional identity and political positioning. Three dominant framing strategies emerged: compliance-oriented framing, student protection framing, and political neutrality framing. In some cases, these overlapped or shifted subtly within a single district's documentation.

Most commonly, district leaders adopted a framing strategy that emphasized compliance with state law. This approach was characterized by frequent references to statutes (e.g., T.C.A. § 49-6-1019), use of formal legal language, and explicit affirmations of procedural adherence. Documents aligned with this frame often lacked interpretive elaboration or local contextualization, opting instead for restatements of the law's wording or references to state-issued guidance. For instance, documents collected from Benton County, Clinton City Schools, and Fentress County mirrored the structure and tone of the Tennessee Department of Education materials. These documents emphasized that instructional materials were "aligned with state expectations," language that signals a posture of institutional obedience rather than pedagogical or ideological engagement. This frame allowed leaders to position their districts as neutral

enforcers of state mandates, absolving the district from interpretive or moral responsibility for the law’s content or implications.

A smaller subset of district leaders framed their actions in terms of protecting students—not from discrimination, but from perceived political or ideological harm. This frame emphasized the classroom as a “safe” or “age-appropriate” space, often without specifying what content was considered unsafe or inappropriate. This ambiguity allowed district leaders to comply with the policy while appealing to community values around parental control, child development, and educational conservatism. Many districts, including Franklin County and Maryville City Schools, used phrases such as “maintaining age-appropriate classroom discussions.” Euphemisms like this signaled efforts to avoid controversy while affirming a generalized concern for student well-being. Importantly, this framing rarely connected safety or protection to issues of race or gender—instead, it implied a protective stance against the perceived risks of divisive or politicized content. By invoking student protection, district leaders subtly recoded the prohibited concepts law as a child welfare policy rather than a politically motivated restriction on academic freedom or historical inquiry.

A third frame—often overlapping with the previous two—centered on political neutrality. The theme of neutrality appeared not only in the language used within policy documents, but also in the absence of overt ideological or political framing. Many district leaders often did so in ways that minimized interpretation, avoided conflict, and projected an image of objectivity. One of the most common indicators of this strategy was the use of legalistic and passive language in policy documents. Rather than framing the policy as aligned with or against district values, most district leaders simply quoted the state law verbatim in documents, posted or linked the policy on a webpage, or summarized it without additional commentary. Of the districts that maintained a

neutral stance, nearly all used language like, “The district will adhere to all state and federal laws related to instructional content and classroom discussion,” or a similar quote somewhere on the district website. This type of phrasing sidesteps any explicit endorsement or critique of the prohibited concepts law. It reflects a strategy of non-positioning, allowing district leaders to fulfill legal obligations while avoiding political backlash from either side of the ideological spectrum. Using documents collected for this study, **Table 2** provides an overview of each district’s leadership positioning on a neutrality spectrum—relative to the other districts included in this study.

These framing strategies—compliance, protection, and neutrality—revealed how district documents did more than convey policy updates. These documents performed complex discursive work: signaling institutional alignment, managing public perception, and shaping how educators are expected to interpret and implement the law. While none of these frames explicitly challenged the policy’s legitimacy, the deployment of such strategies reflected differing levels of ideological alignment, institutional risk aversion, and community sensitivity. The frames highlighted not just what district leaders were doing, but how they want to be seen doing it.

Theme 3: Silences and Omissions

In analyzing the district-level documents related to the implementation of Tennessee’s prohibited concepts law, one of the most revealing findings was not what district documents said, but what these documents did not say. This theme—silences and omissions—emerged across all locale types and took several forms, including missing references to race, gender, or historical oppression; the lack of contextualization of the policy itself; and the absence of guidance for teachers on how to navigate ambiguity.

Table 2*District Positions on the Neutrality Spectrum*

District	Locale Type	Summary of Response to Law	Neutrality Position	Key Actions or Indicators
Benton County	Rural	Limited publicly available information; appeared to adhere to state policies without public discourse.	Leaning Restrictive	Posted state law verbatim; no supplemental materials or public statements.
Bradley County	Rural	Complied with policy requirements without public discourse	Neutral/ Passive	Policy posted on website; absence of superintendent statements or community engagement.
Clarksville-Montgomery County	Urban	Implemented policy with minimal interpretation or elaboration.	Neutral/ Passive	Linked to state guidelines; no evidence of teacher training or public forums.
Clinton City Schools	Suburban	Followed state directives without additional context.	Neutral/ Passive	Policy updates labeled as “state-mandated compliance”; no further explanation provided.
Fentress County	Rural	Adopted policy language directly from state law without further discussion.	Leaning Restrictive	No public statements or educational materials addressing the policy’s implications
Franklin County	Urban	Implemented policy without public engagement or detailed guidance.	Neutral/ Passive	Policy posted online; no records of board discussions or community outreach.
Hamilton County	Urban	Implemented policy in compliance with mandate; maintained active stance on equitable and inclusive education practices.	Actively Advocative	Community engagement, program funding, and educational equity policies remained unchanged despite policy.
Knox County	Suburban	Complied with policy while avoiding public discourse on its content.	Neutral/ Passive	Policy updates framed as routine; no public mention of the policy’s impact on instruction.
Maryville City	Suburban	Adhered to state mandates without additional interpretation or resources.	Leaning Advocative	Maintained diversity initiatives and inclusive positionality; did not discuss policy’s impact on instruction.
Memphis-Shelby County	Urban	Complied with policy; provided some guidance to teachers but evidence of uncertainty about how to navigate.	Actively Advocative	Maintained diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; encouraged engagement.
Metro Nashville	Urban	Implemented policy with some supplementary materials; created and made publicly available an Equity Roadmap to guide district.	Actively Advocative	Policy linked on website but not easily accessible; promoted equity and diversity initiatives and encouraged engagement.
Oak Ridge	Suburban	Followed state directives without elaboration or public engagement.	Neutral/ Passive	Policy posted as per state requirements; no additional resources or discussions provided.

Table 2 Continued

Sequatchie County	Rural	Adopted policy language directly from state law without further discussion.	Learning Restrictive	No public statements or educational materials addressing the policy's implications.
Sumner County	Suburban	Implemented policy without public engagement or detailed guidance.	Leaning Advocative	Policy posted online; no records of discussions or community outreach; some evidence of diversity focus.
Williamson County	Rural	Complied with policy; faced significant opposition from parent groups over curriculum content.	Leaning Advocative	Maintained mostly neutral stance with some evidence of inclusive focus, despite community contention.

Nearly all district documents failed to provide any contextual background for the prohibited concepts law, such as its legislative origin, public controversy, or relationship to national conversations about critical race theory (CRT), gender identity, or inclusive education. Most communications treated the law as a neutral update to instructional policy rather than a politically motivated statute. This omission effectively decontextualized the policy, erasing the broader socio-political dynamics that prompted its passage, shielding the law from critique or deeper interrogation. For example, in districts like Fentress County and Sequatchie County, board meeting minutes and policy revisions adopted the language of the law without elaboration. There was no indication that district leaders engaged in discussions about the implications for teaching difficult historical topics or addressing racial equity. This kind of silence operates as an omission by discursive erasure—a form of passive compliance that normalizes the policy as a technical requirement devoid of ideological stakes.

A particularly striking pattern was the near-total absence of explicit references to race, racism, gender identity, or structural inequity in the documents of most districts. While several district leaders had previously adopted equity plans or initiatives addressing achievement gaps, these efforts were either removed, renamed, or omitted from updated documentation after the law's enactment. In some cases, key terms such as “equity,” “antiracism,” or “diversity” were conspicuously absent or replaced with safer language like “student success,” “respect for all,” or “inclusive practices,” without specifying what such practices entail. Both Williamson County and Bradley County, which had previously included DEI statements on their websites, no longer publicly feature these frameworks in their instructional documents. This shift signaled not only a rhetorical silencing but a strategic retraction, likely driven by concerns about political backlash or complaints under the prohibited concepts statute. This silence reinforces dominant narratives

that presume the neutrality of schools and curriculum while marginalizing the lived experiences of students who face systemic barriers.

Another form of silence concerned the absence of concrete instructional guidance for educators, especially in relation to how to navigate complex conversations in the classroom. While several district documents mentioned “compliance training” or “updates to curriculum,” very few offered publicly available, explicit scenarios, FAQs, or instructional safeguards that might help teachers responsibly address topics such as slavery, gender discrimination, or civil rights. This omission effectively offloads the risk onto individual educators, who are left to interpret vague mandates without institutional support. In urban districts such as Memphis-Shelby County and Metro Nashville, where teachers serve racially and culturally diverse student populations and equity initiatives were in place, this lack of guidance was particularly notable. In some cases, as in Knox County and Franklin County, this lack of guidance appeared alongside language that framed the law in terms of “professional responsibility,” suggesting that missteps could have disciplinary consequences. Specifically, Knox County’s Employee Handbook states, “Failure to abide by applicable policies, laws, and regulations, or engaging in actions which discredit Knox County Schools, may result in disciplinary action up to and including termination.” The silence here functions as a chilling mechanism, indirectly encouraging self-censorship among teachers to avoid professional risk—highlighting a “regime of uncertainty” (Ahmed, 2012).

The reviewed documents highlighted that silences and omissions are not neutral. These silences and omissions reflect strategic decisions that shape how policy is interpreted and enacted. Whether driven by fear of political retaliation, desire to appear compliant, or internal ideological alignment with the law, the absence of direct engagement with race, equity, and

inclusion in district documents serves to reinforce the status quo. By not naming systemic issues, district leaders implicitly deny the significance of these issues. Moreover, silence becomes a form of policy enactment—an act that communicates priorities, boundaries, and expectations without saying them outright. These findings suggest that educators and students are navigating policy environments marked not only by restriction but by discursive emptiness, in which vital questions are left unasked and unaddressed. Understanding what is missing offers critical insight into how the prohibited concepts law is reshaping educational discourse at the district level.

1.2 Interpretations and Compliance Reflections

While the language of the prohibited concepts law is established at the state level, its enactment and interpretation are filtered through local school districts—each with its own history, leadership, and political context. Aligned with RQ1, this section analyzes how leaders frame their districts’ compliance with the law through official documents, revealing three dominant patterns: strict legal adherence, interpretive or discretionary implementation, and minimization or reframing of the policy’s scope. These themes shed light on the complexity of local enactment and the ways in which district discourse simultaneously navigates state expectations, community values, and internal capacity for implementing potentially controversial mandates.

Theme 4: Strict Compliance Narratives

A prominent theme in the data was the emergence of strict compliance narratives, wherein district leaders framed their engagement with the prohibited concepts law primarily through language of legal obligation, neutrality, and non-interpretive implementation. These narratives emphasized a literal adherence to the law’s wording and presented compliance as a straightforward, procedural matter rather than a complex educational or ideological issue. This

theme reflects a district-level strategy of risk avoidance, bureaucratic alignment, and depoliticization. Documents falling under this theme tended to exhibit the following characteristics:

- Direct citation of T.C.A. § 49-6-1019, often without interpretation or elaboration;
- Use of passive or procedural language, such as “in accordance with state law/policy”;
- Omission of controversial terms, including “*critical race theory*,” “*diversity*,” “*equity*,” or “*inclusion*”;
- Minimal or no reference to classroom practice, instructional context, or teacher support structures.

This language signaled an intent to align with state directives while avoiding any suggestions of political or ideological stance. As such, the language reflected a discourse rooted in legal defensibility rather than educational engagement. In Franklin County, for instance, school board documents included updated policy language stating, “The district will comply with all applicable state laws and regulations related to curriculum and instruction.” The document revealed no further comment on how the policy might impact classroom instruction or curriculum decisions. Most rural and suburban leaders used similar language in district documents that indicated strict compliance and offered no further clarification. Notably absent from policy language was any commentary on what concepts are deemed “prohibited,” or how educators might navigate gray areas. The avoidance of such detail may serve to protect the district from accusations of noncompliance but does so at the expense of clarity or support for practitioners.

The risk-aversion orientation taken by many district leaders may reflect pressures from multiple fronts: potential investigations by the Tennessee Department of Education, politically

active parent groups, or conservative school board members. By avoiding interpretive elaboration, district leaders may have sought to demonstrate loyalty to the state while insulating themselves from liability. However, this strategy also potentially leaves teachers unsupported in navigating controversial material and sends a broader message that legal compliance outweighs pedagogical integrity or inclusive educational practices.

In relation to the second research question—how district discourse maintained, resisted, or reframed dominant narratives around race, gender, and history—strict compliance narratives functioned primarily to maintain dominant structures. By failing to name racism, sexism, or structural inequality, these documents effectively reproduce a status quo understanding of American history and identity—a theme that was most prevalent in rural and suburban districts. The absence of affirming language around inclusivity or diversity sends the message that concepts considered “prohibited” are either dangerous, irrelevant, or not the responsibility of public schools under the current law. Additionally, the refusal to articulate how the policy might limit or impact the teaching of specific content can create a chilling effect. Teachers may avoid discussing slavery, civil rights, gender, discrimination, or other historically significant topics out of fear of retribution. This cautious culture reinforces dominant narratives by narrowing the boundaries of what can be said, taught, or questioned in the classroom.

Strict compliance narratives reflect a discursive strategy rooted in institutional risk aversion, legal literalism, and ideological neutrality. While this approach may shield district leaders from immediate political conflict, it also abdicates responsibility for supporting inclusive or justice-oriented education. These narratives suggest a broader trend of local educational governance under pressure—caught between state policy mandates and community

accountability, and responding by minimizing interpretive risk at the expense of critical pedagogy.

Theme 5: Interpretative Compliance

Analysis of district-level documents revealed what can be described as interpretive compliance—a form of policy enactment where district leaders appear to comply with the prohibited concepts law while simultaneously applying local discretion to soften or reframe its implications. Rather than uniformly adopting state-provided language or enforcement mechanisms, some district leaders engaged in selective interpretation, inserting vague or neutral phrasing that allowed for flexibility at the school or classroom level. This strategy was evident in documents from several districts across locale type. In 2022, Hamilton County Schools leadership established a book-review committee to evaluate and revise policies related to library book selections and complaints. This initiative led to the development of two official district policies, which introduced a “balancing test” to assess reported books based on their offensiveness relative to their literary value. Books deemed to have offensive content outweighing their literary merit were subject to removal from school library shelves.

This approach reflects an interpretive compliance strategy, where district leadership aligned with state expectations by implementing a review mechanism but retained local discretion in determining the appropriateness of materials. By involving district representatives and community input, Hamilton County leadership navigated the state’s mandates while addressing local values and concerns. This illustrated how district leaders may have complied with state laws on prohibited concepts by developing localized procedures that allow for interpretive flexibility. Another district, Williamson County, provided information about the prohibited concepts law on its website, including a complaint form and guidance on instructional

materials. District documents outlined procedures that allowed for community input and adherence to state requirements. This strategy enabled district leadership to uphold state requirements while tailoring implementation to its specific community context.

Interpretive compliance was a notable discursive strategy because it enabled district leaders to walk a rhetorical tightrope: satisfying state oversight while signaling responsiveness to local constituents. It is particularly salient in politically heterogeneous districts, where central office leaders must balance compliance with the law against backlash from parents, teachers, or community members with differing ideological views.

Theme 6: Minimization or Reframing of the Law's Scope

A recurring pattern across multiple Tennessee districts was the strategic minimization or reframing of the prohibited concepts law's scope. Rather than confronting the policy directly or issuing sweeping curricular changes, district leaders often embedded their responses within existing frameworks or downplayed the policy's impact altogether. This served multiple purposes: mitigating political risk, maintaining local credibility, avoiding community backlash, and reassuring educators and families of instructional continuity.

Many district leaders framed their compliance as aligned with existing instructional values. Williamson County leadership, for example, asserted in public-facing documents and school board minutes that their teachers already taught in accordance with state standards and avoided promoting personal ideologies, suggesting that the policy simply formalized what was already in practice. Similarly, Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) leadership published guidance for educators that refrained from offering new or restrictive interpretations of the law. Instead, district leaders emphasized the continuation of inclusive curriculum practices and professional learning aligned with cultural responsiveness. Documentation from MNPS appeared

to reassure educators that they could continue teaching state standards as written and encouraged staff to focus on accuracy and inclusivity rather than censorship.

District leaders also reframed the law as a bureaucratic or procedural concern rather than a transformative mandate. Maryville City Schools leadership provided only the required complaint mechanism on the district website and otherwise made minimal mention of the law's relevance to teaching and learning. Instead, district leadership appeared to update and further emphasize its pre-existing DEI initiatives. This approach implicitly signaled that the law was not considered a central issue in daily instruction. In Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS), public messaging emphasized that district leadership remained committed to “teaching the truth” and expressed commitments to comprehensive and inclusive education. Rather than rejecting the law, MSCS leadership navigated compliance by reasserting its instructional autonomy through public statements, newsletters, and school board communications. District leadership continued using texts and curriculum aligned with national standards for culturally responsive education but did not overtly reference the prohibited concepts law in procedural documents.

Both MNPS and MSCS district leaders employed a degree of strategic ambiguity, allowing for interpretive flexibility that minimized the policy's visibility and perceived threat. For instance, MNPS documents referenced state guidance on instructional transparency rather than invoking the language of prohibited concepts, thereby reframing the issue in terms of accountability and parent engagement rather than censorship. This language management approach allowed both districts' leaders to fulfill legal obligations while continuing equity- and justice-focused programming. The ambiguity may have also been protective, shielding district leadership from political scrutiny while preserving educators' ability to meet the needs of diverse student populations.

Section 2: Narratives Around Race, Gender, and American History

Addressing RQ2, this section explores how district leaders responded to and reframed dominant cultural and political narratives around race, gender, and American history in the context of the prohibited concepts law. Through an analysis of language, silences, and emphasis in these materials, the findings highlight the varying degrees to which district leaders either reinforced, resisted, or attempted to neutralize the law's ideological underpinnings. This section also examines how district leaders represented the concept of inclusive education, revealing tensions between state mandates and local commitments to equity and historical accuracy.

2.1 Maintenance, Resistance, and Reframing of Dominant Narratives

To begin this section, I first explore how Tennessee school district leaders responded to the prohibited concepts law through varied discursive strategies that reflect the broader sociopolitical tensions surrounding race, gender, and American history. Three interrelated themes emerged: 1.) the maintenance of dominant narratives that emphasized unity, neutrality, and individual merit; 2.) subtle forms of resistance through language that sustained commitments to equity and inclusion while navigating policy constraints; and 3.) the reframing of historical and identity-based discussions using broad, depoliticized terms like “diverse perspectives.” Together, these themes illustrate how district leaders negotiated competing pressures to comply with state policy while responding to the needs of diverse school communities.

Theme 7: Maintenance of Dominant Narratives

The reinforcement of dominant cultural narratives—emphasizing national unity, individual merit, and a colorblind approach to education—emerged as a discursive pattern among the districts included in this study. These narratives often manifested in policy statements, curriculum choices, and public communications. In Williamson County, the adoption of the “Wit

& Wisdom” curriculum sparked significant controversy in the district. Conservative groups, notably Moms for Liberty, filed complaints alleging that the curriculum introduced elements of CRT, thereby violating the prohibited concepts law. Board meeting minutes reflected contentious public discussions, with several parents criticizing the district for attempting to “indoctrinate” students with “critical race theory” and “DEI.” In response, WCS leadership convened a review committee, which led to the modification of several texts and the removal of one book from the curriculum. This action was framed as an effort to ensure that educational materials aligned with community standards and state regulations, thus maintaining a narrative that emphasized traditional values and individual merit over systemic critiques.

District leaders of Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS), one of the largest and most diverse districts in Tennessee, took a notably cautious yet deliberate approach to the prohibited concepts law. While MNPS was not subject to as much public scrutiny or activism as other districts, its institutional language and strategic communications revealed a nuanced response. Public documents, including district policies and equity statements, consistently emphasized district leaders’ ongoing commitment to inclusivity, equity, and cultural responsiveness. For example, the district’s non-discrimination policy explicitly named race, color, national origin, sex, and gender identity as protected categories—framing the district as affirming diversity even within the constraints of state-level legislation.

In terms of curriculum and instruction, MNPS appeared to have avoided direct conflict with the prohibited concepts law by reframing its pedagogical goals. Instructional language emphasized “diverse perspectives” and “student voice” without delving into language that could be interpreted as divisive or politically charged. This strategy—which could also be described as compliance through omission—allowed district leaders to preserve inclusive curricular intent

while avoiding the explicit mention of systemic oppression, whiteness, or privilege. The reframing of curriculum materials through the lens of academic inquiry and critical thinking, rather than identity politics or historical injustice, illustrated a subtle yet deliberate discursive shift designed to navigate political constraints while maintaining educational inclusivity.

Further, MNPS leadership continued to support professional development for educators in areas such as culturally responsive teaching and trauma-informed care, though such efforts were often described in generic, non-confrontational terms. This language, along with district leaders' silence on controversial curricular specifics, reflected a balancing act—one that attempted to uphold inclusive educational values while minimizing risk of reprisal under the policy. In effect, MNPS leadership represented a model of discursive reframing and strategic neutrality, wherein commitments to equity were encoded in non-political, professionalized terms.

Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS) serves a predominantly Black student population and operates within a complex socio-political landscape marked by historical and ongoing racial inequities. In this context, MSCS leadership positioned its response to the policy through an emphasis on academic achievement, opportunity gaps, and community engagement. Official communications from MSCS leadership tended to highlight a vision of preparing students for college and career readiness, with language centered on “student potential,” “equity of access,” and “rigorous instruction.”

Unlike some other district leaders that publicly revised their curriculum or engaged in visible debates, MSCS leadership appeared to take a more internalized, bureaucratic approach to navigating the prohibited concepts law. Policy documents and strategic plans focused on data-driven instruction, school improvement goals, and achievement benchmarks. The avoidance of overt references to race-based disparities or systemic inequalities in these documents signaled a

broader discursive minimization, even as district leadership continued to implement programs aimed at underserved populations. This included support for historically marginalized students through mentorship programs, restorative justice practices, and college and career pipelines—initiatives often framed in terms of closing gaps rather than confronting historical injustices.

Still, there were subtle ways in which resistance to the dominant narrative could be detected. For example, MSCS leaders continued to celebrate Black History Month and highlight local civil rights figures, suggesting a commitment to cultural heritage within parameters perceived as safe or permissible. Additionally, district officials maintained relationships with organizations that provide equity-focused training and student support, although the language used emphasized academic outcomes over socio-political critique.

These examples illustrate how Tennessee school district leaders, through various strategies, upheld dominant narratives that prioritize unity and individual merit. By framing their responses to the prohibited concepts law within these narratives, district leaders navigated the complex interplay between state mandates and community expectations, often at the expense of more critical examinations of systemic inequities.

Theme 8: Resistance Through Language

While many Tennessee school district documents maintained dominant narratives or adopted strictly compliant tones, a distinct theme emerged in the form of resistance through language. This resistance was rarely overt—most district leaders did not directly oppose the prohibited concepts law—but instead operated through coded language, strategic omissions, and reframed terminology. These discursive moves allowed district leaders to uphold aspects of inclusive, equity-oriented education without explicitly invoking terms that might trigger political backlash or be construed as policy violations. This theme was particularly evident in larger,

urban districts such as Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) and Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS), but subtle forms of resistance were also present in more moderate districts like Hamilton County Schools, Knox County Schools, and Oak Ridge City Schools.

MNPS and MSCS leadership demonstrated a pattern of maintaining inclusive practices and values while strategically adjusting their public language to navigate the prohibited concepts law. Rather than direct, outright opposition of the law, leaders of these large, urban districts adopted professionalized and bureaucratic language that allowed them to preserve equity-oriented initiatives under less politically-vulnerable terms. In MNPS, inclusive pedagogy is embedded through phrases like “culturally responsive teaching,” “student-centered instruction,” and “multiple perspectives in the classroom.” Although explicit references to race and systemic inequity appeared to have been diminished in instructional materials, the district leaders’ ongoing partnerships with community organizations (e.g., Conexión Américas, PENCIL Foundation) and student support policies suggest a continued commitment to diverse and affirming educational experiences. Notably, MSCS leaders’ approach is even more explicit in their underlying equity orientation. Through the district’s *Equity in Education Plan*, leadership emphasized improving systemic conditions for students “furthest from opportunity” and reducing outcome disparities, though it uses more neutral policy language such as “systemic culture” and “opportunity gaps.” In public programming—such as Black History Month celebrations and student-led initiatives—MSCS leadership continued to spotlight cultural identity and historical contributions, thereby preserving inclusive content without directly invoking prohibited concepts. Together, these examples highlight how educational leaders sustained commitments to inclusion and equity by carefully reframing language, maintaining community partnerships, and embedding affirming practices in ways that align with state mandates yet still show resistance.

Hamilton County Schools offered a nuanced example of linguistic resistance. District leadership has historically maintained equity and inclusion commitments, as evidenced by its 2023 strategic plan, which included goals related to “whole child development,” “culturally responsive teaching,” and “inclusive learning environments.” However, following the passage of the prohibited concepts law, public-facing documents from HCS leadership began to emphasize language such as “student engagement,” “belonging,” and “community partnerships” rather than terms like equity or social justice. For instance, HCS’s Equity and Engagement Office was renamed and its materials reframed to emphasize “student supports” and “academic access for all learners.” While not a full retreat from inclusive practice, this linguistic shift illustrates a strategic rebranding that maintained core values without drawing political scrutiny. The district’s leadership continued celebration of events like Black History Month and its partnerships with organizations also suggest an undercurrent of resistance—preserving culturally responsive practices while reframing them in terms acceptable under current policy pressures.

In more politically mixed areas like Knox County, resistance through language took a more cautious form. While board policies and teacher training emphasized adherence to state law, internal documents frequently referenced the importance of “rigorous, standards-based instruction” and “teaching critical thinking skills.” These references could have served as a coded support for continuing to teach complex historical and social issues, even under the constraints of the law. In parent communications, district leadership often used depoliticized language like “supporting student understanding of multiple viewpoints” or “fostering respectful classroom dialogue.” This signaled a desire to preserve open discourse without directly violating the law’s constraints. Though Knox County district leadership did not prominently promote DEI,

these rhetorical moves showed a more subtle balancing act aimed at maintaining instructional integrity.

Oak Ridge City Schools, while also not as openly equity-focused as MNPS or MSCS, demonstrated forms of resistance through educator trust and localized discretion. Public documents from the district appeared to affirm that teachers would be supported in maintaining “academic rigor within legal frameworks” and “navigating complex topics professionally.” These statements, while vague, implied a district-level confidence in teachers’ ability to manage sensitive content without heavy-handed oversight. Moreover, Oak Ridge leadership did not issue public condemnations or policy clarifications regarding race, gender, or history, which may suggest a choice to resist politicization altogether by keeping discourse professional and classroom-centered. This type of resistance is quiet but significant, offering teachers interpretive space within a hostile political climate.

The theme of resistance through language revealed how district leaders—particularly those serving diverse student populations—found ways to preserve their pedagogical commitments despite legal constraints. Rather than direct defiance, resistance was enacted through rhetorical reframing, strategic euphemism, and coded affirmations of inclusion. These moves reflected both an awareness of political risk and a deep institutional commitment to student equity and belonging. Even within a restrictive policy environment, district leaders constructed discursive pathways that allowed justice-oriented values to remain present—though in revised and less politically visible forms.

Theme 9: Reframing History and Identity

One of the more nuanced responses to Tennessee’s prohibited concepts law involved the strategic reframing of how district leaders presented history and identity in official documents.

Rather than directly referencing or contesting the policy’s language, some district leaders adopted alternative rhetoric that emphasized “diverse perspectives,” “multiple viewpoints,” and “comprehensive education.” This reframing often avoided explicit mention of race, gender, or systemic oppression, while still maintaining a commitment—at least rhetorically—to inclusive education.

For instance, Knox County Schools leadership emphasized its commitment to providing students with “a well-rounded education that includes a variety of viewpoints and historical experiences.” While district leadership avoided direct reference to race or equity-related terminology, it signaled a desire to maintain curricular breadth by shifting toward a language of diversity and balance. This rhetorical move can be interpreted as an attempt to comply with the policy while preserving some elements of inclusive curriculum under a more politically neutral guise. Similarly, Williamson County Schools leadership stated in its instructional philosophy that experiences provided in its curriculum “relate to and promote the richness and diversity of human experience and inspire each student to improve the condition of mankind.” Though district leaders did not name racial or gendered oppression, the use of phrases like “richness and diversity of human experience” and “improve the condition of mankind” subtly invokes the kinds of narratives that would traditionally be included in equity-focused education. This approach allowed district leaders to align with policy requirements while still giving educators space to engage with complex social issues, albeit through less direct routes.

In Oak Ridge City Schools, the reframing was visible in the emphasis on “diversity within the work environment to foster inclusion and support.” The district’s Diversity Committee materials and Human Resources mission framed this effort in terms of “inclusion” and “equity” but did not directly confront the prohibited concepts language. This indirectness reflects a

strategic adaptation to the policy environment—one that avoids confrontation while continuing to value curricular pluralism. District leaders of Maryville City Schools, which is situated in a similar socio-political context as Oak Ridge, publicly committed to cultivating and celebrating diversity within its school system. In the district’s diversity planning statement, district leadership emphasized its responsibility to teach students to “show respect and dignity to others” while working to eliminate social and racial disparities. District leadership acknowledged the need for growth and change, and it expressed a desire to create “inclusive, safe, and supportive” systems for marginalized groups.

Notably, the reframing efforts illustrated the broader tension district leaders faced: how to comply with restrictive legislation without abandoning longstanding commitments to inclusive, honest, and complex education. This theme highlights the creativity with which some district leaders navigated policy constraints, signaling values of inclusion and historical complexity without using language that might be deemed politically controversial under the law.

2.2 Representation of Inclusive Education

In the final set of themes, I explore how Tennessee school district leaders represent the concept of inclusive education within the constraints of the prohibited concepts law. While the law limits explicit discussion of systemic racism, gender identity, and historical oppression, many district leaders continued to engage with the ideas of diversity and belonging—though often in reframed or cautious language. These themes highlight how district leaders navigated the tension between policy compliance and their commitments to inclusive learning environments, often by emphasizing values like unity, individual respect, and diverse perspectives without directly invoking contested terms.

Theme 10: Inclusive Language Without Explicit Controversy

In response to the constraints of Tennessee’s prohibited concepts law, many district leaders adopted a rhetorical strategy that affirmed inclusivity without directly invoking politically fraught language around race, gender, or systemic inequities. Instead of referencing historically marginalized groups or equity-based reforms explicitly, district leaders often emphasized broadly acceptable terms such as “welcoming environments,” “student success for all,” or “diverse perspectives.” This approach signaled an underlying commitment to inclusion while avoiding the risk of noncompliance with the policy. **Table 3** compares how district leaders included in this study used inclusive language strategies without invoking explicit DEI terminology.

Interestingly, this theme was most apparent in rural and suburban districts, where political climates may be less supportive of overt diversity, equity, and inclusion language. In Sumner County Schools, language about fostering a “culture of belonging” and “embracing student diversity” appeared in district policies and its mission statement, yet with no explicit mention of race, gender identity, or historically underserved groups. This signaled a shift from former documents that, in prior years, directly addressed closing racial achievement gaps or ensuring cultural competency among staff. Given the district’s proximity to Williamson County, where district leadership faced significant contention over similar topics, the move appeared to highlight an intent to avoid similar controversy while still upholding inclusive educational values. Bradley County Schools leadership likewise offered messaging around “positive school climate” and “student-centered approaches” but avoided terms that have become politically loaded. District leaders’ emphasis on community values and respectful behavior indicated a potential attempt to address inclusivity in terms acceptable to a broad constituency.

Table 3
Districts' Inclusive Language Strategies

District	Inclusive Language Strategy	Avoidance of Explicit DEI Terms	Alignment with Theme 10
Benton County	Emphasizes “traditional values,” minimal references to inclusion	Yes	Low
Bradley County	Focuses on “positive school climate,” “student-centered approaches”	Yes	Moderate
Clarksville-Montgomery County	Emphasizes “global workforce,” “access and opportunity for every learner”	Yes	Strong
Clinton City Schools	General language about “community values” and “student achievement”	Yes	Emerging
Fentress County	General mentions of “supportive learning environment”	Yes	Emerging
Franklin County	General focus on “student success” and “safe learning environments”	Yes	Moderate
Hamilton County	Describes “whole child support,” “cultural responsiveness”	Some	Strong
Knox County	Mentions “inclusive practices” and “equitable access to learning”	Mostly	Strong
Maryville City	Uses “supporting each student’s academic journey,” “respect for all individuals”	Mostly	Strong
Memphis-Shelby County	Uses “inclusive learning environments,” “improving systemic culture,” “equity”	Mostly	Strong
Metro Nashville	References “diverse communities,” “equity and inclusion” in broad terms	Some	Strong
Oak Ridge	Uses “diverse perspectives,” “academic excellence for all”	Yes	Moderate to Strong
Sequatchie County	Focuses on “individual achievement,” lacks inclusive terminology	Yes	Low
Sumner County	Highlights “culture of belonging,” “embracing student diversity”	Yes	Moderate to Strong
Williamson County	Mentions “character education” and “family values”	Yes	Moderate

Uniquely situated between urban and suburban locales and supporting a large, diverse student population, Clarksville-Montgomery County Schools offered a compelling example of how district leaders tried to maintain a commitment to inclusive education through carefully curated language. District documents often discussed creating a “welcoming environment” and “student-centered learning” in its public-facing communications. This rhetoric may have served to signal inclusion while sidestepping ideological flashpoints. While district leadership avoided overt references to race, gender, or systemic inequities, it still appeared to convey a commitment to supporting diverse student populations by emphasizing broad, non-controversial values. The district’s strategic documents emphasized cultural understanding and global readiness without naming race or equity, suggesting a carefully moderate stance that sought to preserve inclusive intent under more politically neutral language.

While this approach allowed district leaders to avoid backlash, it also introduced ambiguity about what values were truly being upheld. Without explicit acknowledgment of the students and communities most affected by inequity, there was a risk that the efforts lost clarity, specificity, and ultimately, impact. Nevertheless, in the current policy environment, this strategy allowed for partial perseverance of inclusive commitments and set the groundwork for potential re-expansion for equity-oriented work in the future.

Theme 11: Explicit Affirmation of Inclusive Values Despite Constraints

Despite the chilling effect imposed by the prohibited concept policy, some school district leaders continued to affirm inclusive values in ways that were direct, deliberate, and at times borderline defiant. These district leaders did not merely hint at inclusion through neutral language—they asserted it through explicit statements, initiatives, or policies that reflected a sustained commitment to equity, diversity, and belonging. In doing so, these district leaders

demonstrated how public education systems can maintain core ethical commitments while navigating hostile policy environments.

Perhaps unsurprising, Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) leadership stood out in its continued use of language that affirmed the district’s belief in inclusive education. For example, MNPS’s Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion remained visible and operational, with a mission focused on “ensuring equity in access and outcomes for all students.” The district’s strategic plan included commitments to culturally responsive teaching, multilingual learner support, and recruiting a diverse workforce. In board communications and policy documents, MNPS leadership continued to affirm that its schools should be “welcoming to all students regardless of background,” and it directly references the need to close opportunity gaps across race and socioeconomic status.

Similarly, Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS) leadership upheld inclusive values through strategic initiatives, including its Equity Office and culturally affirming programs. While MSCS leadership did make some changes to language (e.g., replacing “DEI” with “Student Equity and Engagement”), the commitment to inclusive goals remained consistent. For example, MSCS’s 2023 equity report explicitly outlined racial disparities in academic achievement, discipline, and access to advance coursework—and offers targeted strategies to address them. District leaders also hosted events like “Equity in Education Week,” which included professional learning on topics such as implicit bias, student voice, and restorative practices, even amid increasing legislative scrutiny.

Even some smaller and suburban districts, such as Oak Ridge, had preserved explicit inclusive language in their mission and communication. Oak Ridge’s strategic priorities include “equity and excellence,” and the district has issued statements reaffirming that all students—

regardless of race, gender, or identity—deserve rigorous, relevant education in safe environments. While these statements may have been carefully worded to comply with legal guidelines, they reflect a moral stance that inclusion is a non-negotiable value.

In these districts, leadership decisions suggested a clear refusal to allow state policy to fully dictate the scope of inclusive education that could be provided. By maintaining transparency about goals to support all learners—especially those historically marginalized—these district leaders model how public education systems can balance compliance with the law and a commitment to justice. This theme highlights that affirmation did not always come through resistance or avoidance; sometimes, it took the form of visible, ongoing alignment with inclusive educational principles.

Theme 12: Removal/Weakening of Inclusive Commitments

Multiple district leaders demonstrated a gradual removal and weakening of previously stated commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This shift was often subtle—manifesting in the quiet disappearance of DEI statements from websites, the rebranding of equity-focused initiatives under more neutral terminology, or the reduction in prominence of equity offices and positions. These actions reflected a broader climate of caution and retrenchment in response to the prohibited concepts law, particularly in suburban and rural districts where political pressures or community opposition to equity-related language may have been heightened.

In Williamson County Schools, which had previously maintained DEI-related materials online, analysis revealed the quiet removal of clear equity statements from the district website between 2021 and 2023—notably during the time of significant pushback and contention from parent groups like Moms For Liberty. While official policy documents still asserted a

commitment to supporting all learners, explicit references to racial or gender equity largely disappeared. This reflects a pattern of rhetorical retreat, whereby the language of inclusion remains, but its more targeted forms were excised or softened. The same trend was observed in Franklin County Schools, where archived web content from 2020 emphasized equity and inclusion, but more recent documents omitted such language entirely.

Sumner County Schools also offered a case of rhetorical dilution. While district leadership once included references to equity in strategic planning documents, more recent communications focused instead on “academic excellence” and “student achievement,” with limited mention of historically marginalized student groups. Similarly, Clarksville-Montgomery County Schools—a large, diverse district—adopted a more cautious tone in public-facing materials. Although district leadership previously maintained an equity and inclusion page, updated website materials emphasize “access for all learners” without further elaboration on systemic inequities or historic exclusion. In Hamilton County Schools, where district leadership initially embraced inclusive goals through its Future Ready 2023 strategic plan, explicit references to racial equity became less frequent in public statements. While district leaders continued to prioritize social-emotional learning, community engagement, and commitments to equity, statements shifted toward language like “opportunity for all” or “strong student outcomes,” which sidestepped potentially controversial terms. This rhetorical minimization aligned with broader state-level pressures. The chilling effect of the prohibited concepts law—and the potential for public complaint or investigation—led many district leaders to re-evaluate and recalibrate their language. In some cases, even if programming or values remained unchanged internally, district leaders adjusted how they publicly communicated these commitments to avoid triggering scrutiny. This further highlights the ambiguous nature of the

law, as district leaders felt pressured to make changes because of its unclear and convoluted language regarding implementation.

By contrast, leadership of urban districts such as Metro Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) and Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS) had, in many ways, resisted this pattern. While both districts have been targeted by state oversight or criticism, both continued to publish statements supporting inclusive practices. For example, MNPS leadership maintained a DEI office and regularly updated its equity action items. However, even within these districts, there was a shift in how equity was framed—often under the broader umbrella of “access” or “whole-child supports.”

Overall, the weakening or removal of inclusive commitments underscored how state policy influenced district-level discourse—not always through overt enforcement, but through a combination of anticipatory compliance, political caution, and community dynamics. The result was a quieter, less explicit public presence of equity work, especially in more politically conservative regions of the state.

Conclusion

This chapter examined how Tennessee K-12 public school district leaders discursively constructed, interpreted, and enacted the state’s prohibited concepts law through official documents, public statements, and other strategic materials. Drawing on data from a diverse sample of districts—including urban, suburban, and rural—this analysis surfaced a range of themes that illuminated both patterns of compliance and acts of subtle resistance. District leaders’ responses revealed a complex negotiation between policy mandates and local values. Some district leaders adopted strategies of minimization or reframing, emphasizing unity, individual responsibility, or “diverse perspectives” while avoiding direct references to systemic

inequities or marginalized identities. Others preserved commitments to inclusive education through carefully chosen language or rebranded programming, demonstrating resistance through discourse even amid state-imposed constraints. Still, in many cases, school systems weakened or entirely removed earlier DEI commitments, signaling the chilling effect of political surveillance and legal ambiguity.

Tennessee's two largest urban districts, Metro Nashville Public Schools and Memphis-Shelby County Schools, generally maintained more explicit commitments to equity and inclusion, though even these districts modulated their messaging in response to heightened scrutiny. In contrast, suburban and rural districts were more likely to demonstrate alignment with dominant narratives or retreat from equity language altogether—reflecting the influence of local political climates and community norms. Ultimately, the findings in this chapter underscore how discourse functions as a key site of policy enactment. District leaders are not merely passive recipients of state mandates; they actively shape, reframe, and negotiate these policies within their local contexts. These discursive moves—whether reinforcing, resisting, or reinterpreting the law—offer critical insight into how social justice leadership is both constrained and enacted under divisive policy conditions. This analysis lays the groundwork for Chapter 5, which will explore the implications of these findings for educational policy, leadership practice, and future research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine how Tennessee K-12 public school district leaders discursively construct, interpret, and enact the state's prohibited concepts law. The study aimed to analyze how power and ideology are embedded in official district-level responses to the policy. By investigating the language, framing strategies, and silences present in publicly available documents, I sought to understand how district leaders navigated the tension between legal compliance and commitments to inclusive education. This chapter interprets and contextualizes the findings presented in Chapter 4, bringing them into conversation with the study's theoretical frameworks, research questions, and relevant literature. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How is the prohibited concepts law discursively constructed and enacted through official documents in Tennessee K-12 public school districts?
 - a. What language and framing strategies are used in district-level documents to describe or respond to the prohibited concepts law?
 - b. How do policy documents reflect school districts' interpretations of and compliance with the prohibited concepts law?
2. In what ways do district documents maintain, resist, or reframe dominant narratives around race, gender, and American history in the context of the prohibited concepts law?
 - a. How is the concept of inclusive education represented in districts' documentation of policy implementation?

Discussion

Emergent themes are synthesized in this chapter, offering a critical interpretation of how district leaders' responses reflected broader political and sociocultural tensions. In doing so, the chapter highlights the laws's effects on not only the formal content of public education, but also

on the discursive boundaries of what may be taught, acknowledged, or valued in Tennessee classrooms. The chapter is organized around key patterns that illuminate the contested space school district leaders occupy: between state mandates and local values, between legal risk and educational equity, and between silence and strategic speech. By situating these findings within the literature on critical policy enactment and discourse, the chapter explores how local education agencies both shape and are shaped by ideological forces embedded in contentious state policies. Ultimately, this chapter argues that language itself becomes a site of political struggle—where inclusion, compliance, and resistance are negotiated word by word. The discussion begins with connections to the study’s theoretical frameworks, then further explores themes uncovered during analysis.

Connections to the Theoretical Frameworks

Policy as Ideology and Power

Through a critical policy analysis (CPA) perspective, education policy must be understood as a political and ideological tool rather than a neutral or technical directive. Scholars such as Ball (1993), Diem et al. (2019), and Taylor et al. (1997) have emphasized that policies are embedded within broader systems of power and reflect the values, anxieties, and aspirations of those in political control. CPA is therefore concerned not only with what a policy says, but with what it does—how it shapes behavior, reproduces dominant ideologies, and constrains alternative visions of education and equity. This study’s findings support the view that Tennessee’s prohibited concepts law is a product of an ideological project that seeks to reassert a sanitized, color-evasive narrative of American history and identity. The policy, though framed as protecting students from “discomfort” and “division” (T.C.A. § 49-6-1019), functions as a mechanism to suppress critical discourse around race, gender, and systemic injustice. Most

district leaders respond to the law through a discourse of legalistic compliance, emphasizing alignment with state law, risk management, and avoidance of controversy. Through CPA, these responses can be interpreted as not only enacting the law but also reinforcing its underlying ideological purpose—to discourage educators and school systems from engaging in transformative, equity-driven work.

The language used in many district documents reflected a strategic alignment with the policy's constraints. Terms like “state requirements” and “compliance” dominated the texts, signaling both the internalization of the law's logic and the district leader's positioning as a loyal state actor. These rhetorical choices reflect what Ball et al. (2012) refer to as the textual performance of policy enactment, where institutions publicly perform alignment to mitigate political risk and maintain funding. CPA also highlights the absence of critical language in many of the documents reviewed. The near-total erasure of terms pertaining to equity or inclusion in several districts' communications suggested that even non-controversial forms of DEI have become discursively risky. This aligns with what Leonardo (2009) and Applebaum (2016) describe as the whitening of educational discourse—the systematic de-centering of race-conscious language. Through the lens of CPA, this erasure is not a neutral linguistic shift but part of a broader ideological reconfiguration: one that privileges white comfort, suppresses historical critique, and reframes neutrality as the new norm (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Matias & Zembylas, 2014).

Yet, not all district leaders responded uniformly. Some employed strategic ambiguity or discursive reframing, suggesting pockets of resistance within the boundaries of what is publicly permissible. For example, references to “safe and supportive learning environments” or “welcoming all students” functioned as coded ways to maintain commitments to inclusion

without directly invoking politically targeted language. As Ball (1993) argues, policy enactment is shaped by context and constraint, where local actors interpret and mediate policy texts through discursive and institutional pressures. Such rhetorical balancing acts reflect what Williams (2012) identifies as the contested space of education policy, where equity-driven goals are continuously negotiated against shifting political terrain.

District documents served as both sites of compliance and as arenas of resistance—albeit resistance articulated through cautious, coded language. These rhetorical strategies, while limited in their transformative potential, revealed a layered understanding of how discourse operates not just to comply with state mandates but also to subtly signal alternative values and commitments. As such, critical policy analysis illuminated the ideological work embedded in these documents and the high stakes discursive choices districts make under politically restrictive conditions.

Meaning-Making, Silencing, and Ideological Boundaries

While critical policy analysis highlighted the political and ideological work embedded in policy creation and implementation, discourse theory (DT) provided the analytical lens to examine how meaning was produced, regulated, and contested through language. DT posits that language is not a neutral medium but a social practice that actively shapes our understanding of reality (Fairclough, 1993; Foucault, 1972). In the context of education policy, discourse determines what can be said, how it can be said, and who has the authority to say it (Bacchi, 2009; Ball, 1993). This study drew on these foundations to interrogate how Tennessee school district leaders articulated, obscured, or reframed the meaning of the state's prohibited concepts law through official documentation.

A central insight of DT is that discourse both reflects and constitutes power relations (Fairclough, 2013; van Dijk, 1993). In the case of Tennessee's prohibited concepts law, the

findings showed that district documents were not merely administrative responses to legal mandates—they were sites where power operated through language to produce a particular version of educational reality. Most district leaders employed narrow and neutralizing discourse that aligned with the language of compliance. For instance, documents frequently relied on phrases such as “aligns with state law,” “consistent with state guidelines,” or “prohibited concepts as defined by legislation,” thereby naturalizing the policy as an unproblematic, apolitical legal requirement. This type of language echoes what Ball (1994) describes as discursive silence, wherein the absence of contestation signals alignment with dominant ideologies. Through the lens of discourse theory, this neutrality is itself ideological. As Apple (2004) and Leonardo (2009) argue, framing educational policy as neutral or technical obscures the ways in which curriculum decisions are deeply entangled with racialized and gendered power structures. In this case, district leaders’ discourses presented the prohibited concepts law as a set of procedural rules rather than as a politically motivated attempt to regulate how race and history are discussed in school. This depoliticization of discourse contributes to what Bacchi (2009) calls the “problem representation” (p. xxi) of policy: the idea that what is constructed as a problem—here, the notion that students may experience discomfort—is not inherent or objective but discursively produced through policy framing.

Additionally, the findings highlight that what was not said in district documents was just as important as what was stated. Across many districts, references to terms such as “*race*,” “*equity*,” “*diversity*,” “*inclusion*,” or “*historical oppression*” were absent. These silences reflect what Achinstein and Ogawa (2006) refer to as “the politics of silence” (p. 47), wherein institutional actors avoid engaging with controversial language to reduce political risk. In doing so, district leaders’ discourse reifies dominant cultural norms by centering whiteness and erasing

marginalized perspectives—aligning with what Matias and Zembylas (2014) describe as the discursive maintenance of white comfort in education. Some district leaders used vague or coded language—such as “supporting all students” or “creating respectful environments”—which aligns with what Scott (2008) describes as “discursive reframing” (p. 110), a strategy that allows organizations to maintain certain commitments without using politically controversial terms. This subtle linguistic maneuvering demonstrates that meaning-making is not merely about word choice; it is about navigating ideological boundaries in the public sphere.

Discourse theory also brings attention to the performative nature of district documentation. These documents do not just transmit policy; instead, they perform institutional identity and legitimacy (Skedsmo & Huber, 2018). By presenting themselves as compliant, objective, and student-centered, district leaders shaped how their districts were perceived by the state, local stakeholders, and the broader public. In effect, the texts performed a kind of discursive positioning, aligning the district with state mandates while carefully avoiding conflict with politically polarized constituencies.

Finally, DT highlights how these documents participate in the construction of social truth. Foucault (1972) emphasized that discourse governs the production of knowledge, shaping what is considered legitimate, valid, or real. In this case, by suppressing or reframing conversations about racism, inequality, and historical oppression, district documents helped to define the epistemic limits of what can be taught in Tennessee public schools. This has had significant consequences for students, teachers, and communities—particularly those whose histories or identities are marginalized by dominant narratives.

Emergent Themes

Variation in District Responses

While a prevailing trend of strategic ambiguity and sanitized language was evident across many districts' documentation, responses to the prohibited concepts law were far from uniform. District leaders varied in how directly they acknowledged the law, the degree to which they preserved or erased equity-focused language, and the strategies they employed to navigate potential political backlash. These differences were shaped by contextual factors such as locale, political climate, district size, and prior institutional commitments to DEI.

Suburban and urban district leaders, particularly those serving more racially and culturally diverse student populations, were most likely to maintain commitments to inclusive language, albeit in softened or reframed terms. For example, Metro Nashville and Memphis-Shelby County Schools leadership continued to reference culturally responsive teaching and social-emotional learning, though mostly without naming race explicitly. These district leaders often framed such efforts through broader, less politically charged terms like “belonging,” “student success,” or “high expectations for all students.” In contrast, many rural district leaders adopted a strictly neutral tone, often omitting any reference to diversity, equity, or inclusion. Their policy texts adhered more closely to the language of state legislation, emphasizing compliance and legal defensibility over local contextualization or reinterpretation.

Size and resource level also appeared to influence discursive strategies. Larger, more bureaucratically complex districts tended to adopt vague but expansive policy language that allowed for interpretive flexibility. This is consistent with the findings of Ball et al. (2012), who argue that policy texts in large organizations are often purposefully open to multiple readings to accommodate internal contradictions and external pressures. In these districts, leaders appeared

to rely on institutional memory and existing infrastructure—such as DEI departments or board-approved equity frameworks—as tools for buffering against ideological intrusion. Additionally, districts with a documented history of equity initiatives prior to the passage of the law appeared more inclined to retain or reframe their commitments. Rather than abandoning equity work, these districts’ leaders often adapted their language, shifting from explicitly race-conscious discourse to race-neutral or euphemistic terms such as “*opportunity gaps*” or “*supporting every learner*.” This suggests a form of policy layering (Thelen, 2004), where new mandates are incorporated atop existing institutional commitments without full replacement or compliance.

These findings affirm that while prohibited concepts legislation may seek to impose ideological conformity, local enactment is never monolithic. District leaders engage with policy through local logics and institutional legacies that inform how they interpret, negotiate, and enact state directives. Recognizing this variation helps complicate simplistic narratives of top-down policy implementation and illuminates the political and rhetorical work district leaders perform in navigating a charged policy landscape.

Emotional Discourses and Affective Language

While much of the district discourse reflected legalistic and procedural alignment with the prohibited concepts law, a closer analysis revealed the affective undertones embedded in these documents. Drawing from discourse theory’s emphasis on language as socially situated and ideologically charged, this study examined how emotions—particularly fear, anxiety, and reassurance—surfaced through indirect linguistic cues and framing choices. Emotional discourses were not peripheral to compliance; they were central to how leaders managed their districts’ political identities and relationships with stakeholders.

In particular, several district communications employed affective language that sought to mitigate perceived community concerns or preempt backlash. Phrases such as “ensuring that all students feel safe and respected” served dual purposes: such phrases aligned with the ideological framing of the law and simultaneously attempted to reassure a politically polarized public. These discursive moves mirror what Zembylas (2011) terms “emotional governance” (p. 152), wherein institutions regulate affect to produce desired social and political outcomes. In this context, district leaders used emotional discourse to perform calm, compliance-oriented legitimacy while downplaying the contentious nature of the law itself.

Fear also played a significant affective role—though more implicitly. Across multiple documents, affect was communicated not through explicit emotional vocabulary but through rhetorical caution, euphemism, and omission. The absence of affirming statements around race, equity, or justice can be interpreted as evidence of what Hochschild (2012) calls “feeling rules” (p. 56)—unspoken norms governing which emotions or values are safe to express in institutional settings. District leaders appeared to operate under a tacit affective regime wherein expressions of support for marginalized students were rendered risky, and thus emotionally suppressed, under the guise of neutrality. Moreover, the discourse of “protecting students” from discomfort (T.C.A. § 49-6-1019, 2021) invoked emotional appeal as a justification for censoring or sanitizing curricular content. This logic framed discomfort not as a necessary pedagogical condition for growth and critical inquiry, but as a problem to be eliminated. In doing so, the policy discourse redefined emotional harm in racialized and politicized ways. As Matias and Zembylas (2014) argue, whiteness operates affectively in schools through the preservation of white comfort and the avoidance of race talk. District leaders’ alignment with this framing further entrenched dominant emotional norms that privileged some students’ feelings (e.g., discomfort with racial

history) while invalidating the emotional realities of others (e.g., the need for acknowledgment, truth, and inclusion).

Even in districts where more inclusive rhetoric was used—e.g., “creating welcoming environments” or “supporting all learners”—such language was often affectively vague, offering comfort without clarity. These affective appeals served as what Ahmed (2010) calls “happy objects” (p. 21)—sentimental phrases that circulate to produce the appearance of care without committing a transformative action. As such, district leaders used affective discourse not only to soothe public anxiety but also to foreclose deeper critical engagement with equity and justice.

In sum, emotional discourses within district leaders’ responses were central to how policies were enacted and justified. Affect shaped not just the content of what district leaders said but how they said it, as well as what they avoided saying altogether. These findings suggest that discourse is never just about meaning-making; it is also about feeling-making, where institutions navigate emotional landscapes alongside ideological ones.

Reflecting Critically on the Limits of Resistance

Although this study surfaced multiple examples of how Tennessee school district leaders interpret and even challenge the prohibited concepts law through local discursive practices, it is crucial to interrogate the limits of these forms of resistance. As noted above, CPA demands that we ask not only what resistance looks like, but what it does—and whom it ultimately serves (Bacchi, 2009; Ball, 2016). Importantly, the forms of resistance observed in this study do not emerge from neutral ground; they are shaped by institutional norms, racialized histories, and enduring discourses of apolitical professionalism, compliance, and community values.

Across the sample, district leaders most commonly resisted the prohibited concepts law not through direct defiance, but instead through rhetorical maneuvers: re-centering policy

language on terms like “*belonging*,” “*respect for all students*,” or “*safe learning environments*.” While these commitments may appear socially just on the surface, their strategic ambiguity serves a dual function—both sidestepping political backlash and muting race-explicit discourse. For instance, when district leaders substituted references to race or racism with language like “*diversity*” or “*supporting every child*,” they were performing a form of affective resistance that simultaneously upheld dominant discourses of colorblindness and liberal inclusion (Ahmed, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

These rhetorical strategies reflect what Ahmed (2006) calls “non-performativity” (p. 104)—language that appears to do something but in practice functions to deflect, delay, or neutralize structural critique. In this way, the discourse of resistance becomes entangled with the discourse of the law itself. For example, in suburban districts with reputations for political moderation (e.g., Knox County Schools), resistance often came through silence—limiting references to the law on district websites, leaving guidance vague and ambiguous, or quietly removing equity-oriented language from strategic plans. This resistance-by-erasure effectively narrows the discursive space available for educators to name injustice or articulate critical pedagogies (Foucault, 1978). Further, even when district leaders appeared to adopt counter-discourses, they often did so in ways that re-inscribed dominant racial and political hierarchies. Such ambivalence reflects the ways in which resistance can be disciplined by institutional logics of neutrality, legality, and order—logics that disproportionately constrain race-conscious educational practices (Gillborn, 2005).

In this context, resistance is not partial but instead politically fraught. It often lacks the power to rupture the underlying logics of whiteness, control, and sanitized history that animate the prohibited concepts law. Rather than viewing resistance as a fixed or heroic stance, this study

echoes scholars who argue for a more contingent, relational understanding of resistance: as a practice always shaped by the discursive conditions of its possibility, and therefore vulnerable to co-optation, containment, or ineffectiveness (Kumashiro, 2001; Weaver-Hightower, 2008). In the case of Tennessee, district leaders' resistance often appeared more concerned with shielding the institution than with protecting students and educators most impacted by structural racism and curriculum censorship. This reveals the urgency of reimagining resistance not as avoidance or affective signaling, but as a collective, justice-oriented project that confronts the racialized power embedded in state policy.

Contribution to the Literature

This study contributes to the education policy literature by offering a critical, discourse-based analysis of how school district leaders interpret and publicly enact Tennessee's prohibited concepts law. While prior research has examined the legal, political, and leadership implications of these laws (AASA, 2023; Fernández & Duarte, 2024; Hambacher et al., 2024; LoBue & Douglass, 2023), this study fills a gap by focusing on district-level documents as discursive sites where meaning is constructed, risk is managed, and ideology is performed.

First, this research builds on critical policy analysis by illustrating that policy enactment is not passive implementation but an interpretive process shaped by local context and political pressures (Ball et al., 2012). District leaders engaged in discursive negotiation, balancing compliance with state mandates and internal commitments to inclusion—often through ambiguous or coded language. Additionally, by applying discourse theory, the study revealed how institutional language works to maintain, obscure, or resist dominant ideologies. Echoing the work of Fairclough (1995) and Bacchi (2009), the findings show how silences, euphemisms, and neutralizing terms function to depoliticize race and equity in public education, often

reproducing white normative frameworks. Finally, this study offered a methodological contribution by using qualitative document analysis to examine how power and ideology operate through everyday texts. This approach complements interview-based studies and demonstrates the value of analyzing public documents to understand the symbolic and political work of education systems under policy constraint.

In sum, this study provided a unique lens on how district leaders navigate the complexities of politically charged education policy. By analyzing the discursive enactment of Tennessee’s prohibited concepts law, it advances our understanding of how language, power, and ideology intersect in the local implementation of controversial state mandates—and how public institutions both reflect and shape cultural struggles over race, history, and identity in schools.

Implications

The findings from this study have implications for policy, practice, equity, and future scholarship. By analyzing how Tennessee school district leaders discursively construct and respond to the state’s prohibited concepts law, this study shed light on how power and ideology shape public education—not only through laws, but through the language institutions use to interpret them.

One implication for policymakers is that vague and ideologically motivated policy language creates implementation uncertainty, which leads district leaders to adopt risk-averse, legally conservative discourses. When laws rely on subjective terms like “*discomfort*” or “*divisive*,” district leaders are more likely to engage in discursive self-censorship—often at the expense of inclusive or equity-focused commitments. Policymakers should be aware that such ambiguity chills professional judgment and may have unintended consequences, such as eroding

culturally responsive pedagogy or silencing discussions of systemic inequality. Clearer legislative language and stakeholder engagement during policy development could help reduce confusion and mitigate harm. Additionally, policymakers should consider the symbolic and ideological impacts of education laws—not just their surface-level objectives.

District leaders—including superintendents, policy staff, and communications teams—play a critical role in how controversial policies are enacted and communicated. This study showed that many district leaders default to neutral, legalistic language, but some employ strategic ambiguity to signal inclusion without triggering backlash. Leaders must carefully navigate competing pressures: maintaining compliance, minimizing political risk, and honoring professional and community values. Given these tensions, school systems may benefit from professional development on policy discourse and risk communication—especially in politically charged contexts. Internal guidance documents (not just public-facing statements) can also support staff in understanding how to uphold inclusive practices while navigating legal constraints.

The erasure or reframing of terms like “*equity*,” “*racism*,” and “*diversity*” in district documents revealed how politically motivated policies can reproduce white normative discourses in education. When institutions prioritize neutrality over justice, they risk undermining efforts to create affirming and inclusive environments for marginalized students. Equity advocates and educators should recognize that language itself is a battleground, and that silence, euphemism, or vagueness can serve to protect dominant interests. This study underscores the need for ongoing advocacy and literacy around how discourse maintains or disrupts systems of power in schools.

Finally, this study extends the utility of critical policy analysis and discourse theory by demonstrating the application of these frameworks in the context of politically constrained public

education. This study highlights the need for future studies to explore not just how policies are implemented, but also how their meaning is actively constructed through institutional texts. Researchers should continue to examine how public institutions perform compliance, construct legitimacy, and resist constraint through language—particularly in contexts where education is ideologically contested. Such work can illuminate how power operates at the intersection of policy, communication, and identity.

Limitations

As with all research, this study was shaped by certain limitations that should be acknowledged. These limitations do not diminish the value of the findings but rather help contextualize the scope and interpretive boundaries of the analysis. First, this study relied exclusively on publicly available district-level documents—such as district policies, FAQs, curriculum guides, and public statements—to understand how Tennessee school district leaders discursively constructed and enacted the prohibited concepts law. While this design enabled a focused analysis of institutional discourse, it excluded the perspectives of individuals (e.g., administrators, teachers, or students) who may have influenced or been affected by these documents. As such, the findings reflect how districts represent policy externally, but do not capture internal deliberations or behind-the-scenes decision-making processes.

The documents analyzed in this study were collected between 2020 and 2024, during a period of heightened political scrutiny of public education. Policy responses are dynamic, and the discourses captured in this snapshot may evolve in response to legal developments, leadership changes, or shifting public pressures. As such, the findings represent a particular historical and political moment, and should be interpreted with that temporal context in mind. Additionally, the study focused solely on public school districts in Tennessee and their responses

to a specific piece of legislation. While the findings may offer insights relevant to other states with similar laws, the sociopolitical context of Tennessee—including its legislative history, political climate, and regional diversity—limits the generalizability of the study. Readers should use caution when applying these insights to other contexts without considering local nuances.

As a qualitative study grounded in critical and interpretive frameworks, the analysis reflects the researcher's positionality, theoretical orientation, and interpretive lens. While care was taken to conduct rigorous and transparent analysis (through thematic coding, constant comparison, and theory-informed interpretation), subjectivity is an inherent aspect of this research design. Other researchers might identify different discursive patterns or emphasize alternative aspects of the data.

Finally, this study prioritized public-facing documents that districts intentionally crafted for stakeholders. While these materials offer insight into institutional positioning, they may also be shaped by strategic considerations—such as reputation management, political risk, or compliance optics. This focus necessarily limits the study's ability to assess how these discourses translate into classroom practice or the lived experiences of students and educators.

Recommendations

While the findings from this study offer critical insight into how institutions respond to politically motivated legislation, several opportunities remain for future research to build on and extend this work. First, future studies should explore how district-level discourse aligns with or diverges from the beliefs, experiences, and strategies of individuals tasked with interpreting or implementing the prohibited concepts law. Interviews or focus groups with superintendents, principals, teachers, or school board members could shed light on how public-facing compliance language translates into internal practices, leadership tensions, or personal dilemmas. Such

research would deepen our understanding of how policy is navigated at the human level, beyond the institutional texts.

To understand the lived effects of legislation like Tennessee’s prohibited concepts law, researchers should also investigate how policy discourse influences instruction, curriculum choices, and classroom dialogue. Ethnographic or case study approaches in diverse school settings could reveal how teachers negotiate discursive constraints, engage students in critical thinking, or self-censor in response to political pressure. This line of inquiry would illuminate how the abstract language of compliance shapes student learning experiences and access to inclusive education.

Given the growing number of states enacting prohibited and divisive concepts laws, comparative research across geographic and political contexts is essential. Future studies could analyze how different states or districts with varying levels of political alignment, community activism, or legal enforcement interpret and enact similar policies. This would offer insight into how regional factors and power dynamics shape discursive responses to education policy and potentially illuminate national-level patterns.

This study captured district leadership responses during the early years following the policy’s passage. Longitudinal research could examine how district discourse evolves over time in response to policy revisions, public feedback, litigation, or shifts in political leadership. Tracking changes in discourse across multiple years would provide insight into the stability, erosion, or transformation of institutional messaging under sustained ideological pressure. With the current administration increasing its focus on anti-CRT, anti-equity, and anti-“woke” initiatives, there is a vital need for continued research on the evolution of politically charged legislation in K-12 education.

Finally, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship using critical discourse methods to analyze education policy. Future research might expand this work by integrating discourse analysis with critical race theory, media analysis, or legal studies to explore how narratives about race, identity, and curriculum are constructed and contested across institutions. Scholars can continue to interrogate how language functions as a tool of both compliance and resistance in the policymaking process.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Tennessee K-12 public school district leaders interpreted, constructed, and enacted the state's 2021 prohibited concepts law through official documents. Grounded in critical policy analysis and discourse theory, the research analyzed how district leaders used language to navigate politically charged mandates that restrict instruction related to race, gender, and American history. At the core of the findings from this study is the understanding that policy is never neutral, and neither is the language used to interpret and implement it. District leaders do not just adopt policy—they perform it, communicate it, and reimagine it in ways shaped by local politics, institutional values, and public accountability. The texts analyzed in this study reflect that performative work: efforts to balance legal compliance with community expectations, equity commitments, and political realities.

By treating district-level discourse as a site of power and meaning-making, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how education systems operate under ideological constraint. It demonstrates that language is both a mechanism for enacting policy and a space for negotiating its meaning. In an era where public education is increasingly targeted by divisive legislation, the findings underscore the need for continued critical attention to how institutions respond—discursively and materially—to political efforts to shape curriculum, history, and

identity. Ultimately, this study affirms that what is said—and what is not said—by public school district leadership matters. The silences, substitutions, and rhetorical strategies found in districts' documents are not merely administrative choices; they are acts of governance that shape the boundaries of what can be taught, whose histories are valued, and what kind of education is possible. As the political landscape around education continues to evolve, so too must our scrutiny of how power operates through policy and language in the contested space of public education.

EPILOGUE

The Ongoing Struggle Over Public Education

Since the completion of this study, the sociopolitical climate surrounding K-12 education has only intensified. Across the United States, new legislation continues to restrict how educators can discuss race, gender, and American history, while public institutions face increasing pressure to conform to ideologically driven mandates. In Tennessee and beyond, the prohibited concepts framework has evolved into broader assaults on inclusive curriculum, library collections, and educator autonomy. These developments reaffirm the central argument of this dissertation: that language is not merely a policy tool, but a site for ideological struggle with profound implications for democracy and justice in public education.

In the current politically charged climate, research like this—focused on language, values, and power dynamics embedded in district-level policy—remains vital. Understanding how discourse shapes institutional responses offers insight into how schools can both comply with policy and, at times, subtly resist it. It also invites ongoing reflection on the role of education in a democratic society: to tell the truth, to include the full humanity of every student, and to prepare young people not just for tests, but for citizenship, complexity, and care.

This brief epilogue is not an ending but rather a call for vigilance, advocacy, and continued scholarship in defense of public education as a space for equity, critical inquiry, and democratic possibility.

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