What My Daughter Will Never Know: Researching Early Childhood Under Anti-DEI Policies

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I am an early childhood education researcher at Texas A&M. I study how immigrant families, families like mine, navigate systems that were never designed for them. My work focuses on how Chinese immigrant parents and grandparents create rich learning environments for young children despite schools that often fail to recognize their languages, knowledge, or caregiving practices. I want to document the racism, exoticism, and otherness these families face, the institutional barriers they encounter, and the sophisticated ways they resist and build belonging anyway.

But I cannot continue researching what I want to research. Not openly. Not safely.

In September of 2025, an instructor in the English department was fired for promoting "gender ideology" in a children's literature class. That same month, my daughter was born. In January 2026, the board of regents at Texas A&M implemented a new policy that prohibited advocacy of "race or gender ideology" and teaching of "topics related to sexual orientation or gender identity" outside of specifically approved courses (TAMUS Policy 08.01, 2026). The University has not defined what precise subjects fall under the purview of sexual orientation or gender identity; as many people have pointed out, being straight and cisgender is a sexual orientation and a gender identity.

I find myself torn, now, between my duty as a mother and provider – to ensure my daughter has access to quality child care, health insurance, and other resources conditional to my continued employment – and my duty as a researcher and educator. Every time I walk into the classroom or work on a research paper, I have to ask myself: Is this worth it? What if some administrator decides that my teaching has crossed the invisible line into gender identity? In a recent interview on KSEV AM 700 - The Voice of Texas (KSEV Radio, 2026), interim university president Tommy Williams suggested these new rules are clear and enforceable. This is not true. Across the country, new rules like system 08.01 at A&M have weaponized ambiguity with the aim of instilling the kind of nervous formations of risk and censorship that I, and thousands of other scholars and teachers, go through every day.

This essay documents how restrictive policies like 08.01 employ mechanisms of anticipatory self-censorship and compliance to suppress and chill research and pedagogy deemed ideologically inconvenient. Rather than operating primarily through explicit bans, these policies work by narrowing what scholars, educators, and institutions decide is safe to name. Across the United States, recent anti-DEI and educational gag order policies have introduced new forms of surveillance into higher education, producing chilling effects on curriculum, research agendas, and faculty behavior (PEN America, 2023; American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 2024). The consequences extend beyond academia, shaping what knowledge about children is produced, taught, and ultimately made available for advocacy.

轮回: Patterns Repeating Across Four Generations

Like many Chinese and Chinese American families, our household is multigenerational. My mother, who is in the process of immigrating from China, asked me to explain the controversy around 08.01. I told her that anyone, students, colleagues, community

members, can report faculty for teaching 'divisive concepts,' particularly those relating to race, gender, and sexuality. She listened quietly and seemed to immediately understand. Then she said:“像文革”(Like the Cultural Revolution).

Before I could process, she continued: “历史真是个轮回” (History is indeed repeating itself). She used “轮回”,a pattern that repeats across time.

She was not claiming equivalence between Maoist China and the contemporary United States. She was referring to something more familiar but much deeper: state and institutional mechanisms of ideological control. They work like this: a) identify certain knowledge as dangerous; b) create reporting systems; and c) normalize fear. The ultimate goal is to encourage people to police themselves before the state needs to intervene.

My grandmother lived through the Cultural Revolution. Her family's assets were confiscated. As a mother of four, she learned that safety required compliance and silence. That fear never left her.

My mother and her siblings absorbed these lessons as children. They learned early how state power operates through surveillance, watching how quickly legitimacy could turn into suspicion. They learned that 知识越多越反动 (the more you know, the more dangerous you become), that too much education could be dangerous, and that staying quiet was sometimes the safest option.

I grew up in post-Cultural Revolution China and later came to the United States for graduate school, believing deeply in the promise of academic freedom. I thought I had escaped that history. Intergenerational knowledge has a way to resurfacing. The embodied knowledge of how fear works, remained dormant until now. When my mother said 轮回, she knew as well that she carried it across oceans, languages, and political systems, through similar logics.

What My Mother Had Been Trying to Tell Me

During my dissertation work, my mother often cautioned me. “成王败寇 (history belongs to the victors),” she would say. I dismissed her words as a vague and unhelpful political defeatism – another way of saying “why bother?” I was wrong.

I didn't recognize her hard-won knowledge about how power protects itself. Her concern was not about the value of critical work, but about its risks. She understood, long before I did, that systems rarely punish dissent loudly at first. They rely instead on exhaustion, isolation, and fear.
In 2026, as I avoid words like “racism” in research proposals, I finally understand what she meant.

The Research I'm Not Doing

This spring, I must submit my first research proposal as a faculty member. I have been planning it for years: a participatory project with Chinese immigrant families about their children's early schooling experiences.

> Here is what I wanted to ask:
> How does racism shape your child's school experiences?
> What barriers do you face when advocating for your child?
> How do deficit narratives affect how educators see your family?
> Here is what I am actually asking:
> How do families support children's well-being and learning?

What strengths do families bring to school partnerships?
What practices help children thrive?

I know exactly what I am doing. I am engaging in anticipatory self-censorship—adjusting what I study and how I frame it before anyone explicitly tells me to stop. Often this feels to me like an ethical failure, that I have sacrificed my principles for my security. But I also know that it is a policy outcome. Scholars have long documented how power operates most effectively when constraints are internalized, producing self-censorship prior to direct enforcement (Foucault, 1977).

The families I want to work with need the research I am not doing. And yet, before I even begin, I am already choosing silence. What my mother called 轮回.

What Children Lose When We Cannot Name What Is Happening

When racism and linguicism cannot be named, they do not disappear. They are reframed as individual deficits, family problems, or developmental concerns, a pattern well documented in research on raciolinguistic ideologies and the deficit framing deficit framing of multilingual children in education (Flores & Rosa, 2015). Policies then respond to those misdiagnoses, further marginalizing the very children they claim to support.

The cost of silence is borne by children.

What my mother referred to as *轮回* helps make sense of how this cost travels across national contexts. Across countries, moments of ideological tightening often follow a familiar sequence: certain forms of knowledge are recast as risky or excessive, and professional norms are redefined around a fake neutrality. In these moments, race, language, migration, gender, and colonial histories do not vanish from children's lives. They become harder to name within policy, research, and training spaces. The cycle repeats not because contexts are identical, but because the underlying logics travel easily.

Intergenerational memory and transnational experience serve as early warnings. Families who have lived through earlier moments of ideological narrowing often identify these patterns before they are widely acknowledged within policy discourse. For them, these cross-country similarities do not arise from abstract comparison, but from lived encounters with how fear, neutrality, and silence are institutionalized over time.

The cycle does not stop at research. It enters the classroom, shaping how child development and early childhood education are taught. In many child development courses, discussions of race, gender, sexuality, and structural inequality are increasingly avoided or stripped of analytic language, particularly by early-career scholars navigating precarious professional conditions. Students learn stages and milestones, but not how racism, gender norms, or heteronormativity shape children's developmental trajectories. The result is not neutrality, but an impoverished understanding of development, one that leaves future educators unprepared to recognize or respond to the realities children bring into their classrooms. Critical scholars have long cautioned that presenting development as universal and apolitical obscures the ways power shapes developmental pathways (Burman, 2017).

If there is a possibility for positive change in this moment, it does not lie in immediate policy reversal or institutional reform. It lies in refusal. For early childhood researchers and educators, this refusal takes a specific form: continuing to document what policies attempt to make invisible: children's lived experiences, families' knowledge, and the institutional conditions that shape them. Documentation, in this sense, is not simply

record-keeping. It is a practice of care, accountability, and collective memory. 轮回 means cycles repeat. But cycles can be broken, when they are named early enough and resisted.

My daughter is sleeping as I write this. She does not yet know the histories her family carries, but one day she will.

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