

**Weaponizing Neutrality:  
The Dismantling of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) and Its Consequences  
for Climate Education**

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**Abstract**

The removal of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility from United States education policy undermines fairness and weakens students' preparation for the climate crisis. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (House Bill 1, 2025) and Executive Order 14173 present themselves as neutral reforms, yet they restrict the use of demographic data, reduce DEIA initiatives, and limit attention to marginalized communities. Drawing on ecofeminism, posthumanism, and critical race theory, this analysis demonstrates that without DEIA, climate education becomes narrowly focused on technical solutions and excludes Indigenous knowledge, feminist ecological perspectives, and the lived experiences of populations most affected by climate change. Climate literacy requires an approach that integrates sustainability with justice, equity, and cultural diversity, making DEIA essential for preparing learners to confront global environmental challenges.

**Keywords:** Diversity, Equity, Climate Education, Anthropocene, Education Policy

## Introduction

In the Anthropocene, human decisions shape the conditions under which future generations will live. Climate literacy therefore requires an approach that connects sustainability with justice, equity, and cultural diversity. Diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility policies support this goal by ensuring that climate education includes a wide range of perspectives and critical knowledge traditions that have historically been excluded. UNESCO affirms that sustainable futures depend on integrating human dignity with environmental responsibility, making equity frameworks essential for meaningful climate education (UNESCO, 2016).

Recent developments in the United States are moving in a different direction. During Trump's second term, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (House Bill 1, 2025) and Executive Order 14173 were introduced as neutral reforms aimed at restoring fairness. In reality, these measures restrict or eliminate DEIA programs across education and federal institutions (Rosa, 2025; U.S. Office of the Federal Register, 2025). Although presented as efforts to reduce bias, the idea of neutrality hides how structural inequality still impacts women, minorities, and other historically marginalized groups. By banning the use of demographic data and limiting equity goals, these policies weaken schools' ability to recognize and address disparities.

The dismantling of DEIA also impacts climate education because understanding climate change requires acknowledging the unequal distribution of environmental risks. A climate curriculum without DEIA becomes narrow and mostly technical, excluding contributions from Indigenous, Black, and other communities whose ecological knowledge is vital for sustainability and resilience (Scherrer and Jules, 2025). When demographic, cultural, and historical contexts are removed from teaching, people's understanding of how inequality shapes climate impacts diminishes.

The rhetoric of neutrality often repeats long-standing patterns of exclusion seen during earlier periods of segregation. This leads to the key research question: How does dismantling DEIA, under the guise of neutrality, reinforce human-centered education and limit students' preparation for the climate crisis in the Anthropocene? Ecofeminism and posthumanism offer the conceptual tools to examine how neutral language downplays structural inequities, ignores non-human actors, and weakens collective efforts to respond to climate challenges.

This analysis asks the following question: How does dismantling DEIA under the language of neutrality restrict educational responses to the climate crisis in the Anthropocene? Understanding these policy changes is important because they influence how schools address climate literacy, civic responsibility, and equity at a national scale. Federal decisions that restrict DEIA reshape instructional priorities, limit access to diverse knowledge traditions, and redirect educational planning away from global sustainability goals. Clarifying these effects is essential for informing educators, policymakers, and stakeholders concerned with justice-centered climate education.

## Methodology

This study takes a qualitative approach, using a document-based policy analysis. In other words, the analysis closely examines key texts to understand how they are written, what they emphasize, and what they leave out. The main documents considered to achieve the goal of this study are the One Big Beautiful Bill (House Bill 1, 2025) and Executive Order 14173, supported by civil rights laws such as the Civil Rights Act, Title IX, the ADA, and IDEA. Scholarly literature that critiques both meritocracy and DEIA frameworks is also included.

To guide the analysis, three perspectives are applied: Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, and Ecofeminism/Posthumanism. These frameworks help reveal how so-called neutrality can conceal inequality, how overlapping identities shape access to education, and how human-centered models

restrict responses to the climate crisis. The purpose of this approach is not to measure policy outcomes but to better understand how policies are framed, the values they promote, and the consequences they may have for education in the Anthropocene.

### **Limitations**

This analysis focuses on policy language and theoretical implications rather than empirical outcomes. Because these federal directives are recent, their long-term effects on schools and climate education have not yet been fully measured. The goal of this study is therefore interpretive and analytical rather than evaluative.

### **Policy Context and Overview**

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (House Bill 1, 2025) marked the beginning of these policy shifts. Introduced as a major federal reform, the law prohibits the use of demographic data in the design, evaluation, and oversight of public policy, including education (Rosa, 2025). Although framed as an effort to reduce bureaucracy and restore fairness, the removal of demographic information prevents institutions from identifying inequities across race, gender, age, and socioeconomic status. This restriction limits the ability of schools and agencies to design programs that meet the needs of diverse populations. The bill also presents itself as promoting merit-based opportunity, yet the concept of meritocracy has historically obscured structural inequalities by suggesting equal opportunity where persistent barriers remain (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017).

In the same year, Executive Order 14173 extended this logic across federal agencies by mandating neutrality in all federal programs and explicitly banning references to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (U.S. Office of the Federal Register, 2025). The directive reaches into education by restricting federal guidance and funding that once supported DEIA initiatives. Programs created to expand access for historically marginalized communities are now compelled to operate as if identity-based disadvantages do not exist.

The bill and the executive order rely on the rhetoric of neutrality and efficiency. Their language implies that they correct bias and restore equal treatment. In practice, the appeal to neutrality functions as a mechanism of exclusion, removing the tools needed to identify and address inequity. Bonilla-Silva (2018) demonstrates that claims of color-blindness frequently conceal deeper structures of racial and social inequality. These federal actions follow that pattern by erasing equity considerations while presenting themselves as objective reforms. The deployment of neutrality as a policy instrument reshapes education in ways that narrow its ability to address both social justice and the climate crisis.

### **Historical and Legal Foundations**

The development of DEIA in education emerges from a long legal and historical trajectory. A major turning point occurred in 1964 with the Civil Rights Act, when the federal government prohibited schools from receiving federal funds while maintaining racial segregation. This legislation marked the formal end of legalized segregation in public education (Civil Rights Act of 1964).

Further progress followed. In 1972, Title IX transformed access to higher education for women at a time when restricted academic programs, limited athletic opportunities, and unequal treatment were widespread. Title IX made gender discrimination illegal and required colleges to provide equal access to all students (Walker, 2020). In 1975, Congress expanded protections again by passing the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, establishing the right of students with disabilities to a free public education. This law evolved into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, with subsequent revisions strengthening services and procedural safeguards. During the same period, the

Americans with Disabilities Act broadened protections for individuals with disabilities across public life, and amendments in 2008 expanded the definition of disability to include a wider range of conditions.

Although these laws advanced equity, they also revealed their limitations. Many students encounter multiple, overlapping barriers; for example, individuals who face discrimination based on both gender and race. Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality brought attention to these compounded forms of exclusion and became foundational to the development of contemporary DEIA frameworks.

By the 1980s and 1990s, educators recognized that legal equality was only one part of the challenge. Scholars such as James Banks (2006) advanced multicultural curriculum reform, while Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) developed culturally relevant pedagogy that affirmed student identities and promoted academic success. These approaches broadened the scope of educational equity by emphasizing the importance of representation, cultural context, and student experience.

This progress prompted a counter-movement. Critics began advocating for "colorblind" approaches, which Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2018) characterizes as color-blind racism, a framework that presents neutrality on the surface while perpetuating inequities beneath it. This way of thinking parallels current attempts to dismantle DEIA under the language of fairness.

The historical context has direct implications for climate education. Although the federal government does not mandate climate change instruction, agencies such as the National Science Foundation, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration support related programming, and several states, including California and New Jersey, have incorporated climate education into their standards. Without DEIA, climate instruction becomes incomplete. It excludes Indigenous ecological knowledge, the lived experiences of marginalized communities, and the justice considerations necessary to understand who bears the greatest burden of environmental harm.

UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 underscores that climate literacy must integrate sustainability with justice, equity, and cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2016). Inclusive frameworks such as those described by Sleeter and Carmona (2017) are not optional enhancements; they are essential for preparing learners to navigate the social, cultural, and environmental challenges of the Anthropocene.

### **Theoretical Framework**

To evaluate how the removal of DEIA affects both fairness and sustainability, this analysis employs three principal theoretical frameworks: ecofeminism, posthumanism, and critical race theory with intersectionality. Together, these perspectives reveal that claims of neutrality often function as mechanisms that obscure inequality and protect existing power structures.

Ecofeminism highlights the connection between the treatment of women and the treatment of the natural world. Vandana Shiva (1988) demonstrates that the same logic that positions women as less valuable also frames the environment as something to be controlled and exploited. Hooks (2014) further explains how gender, race, and class interact within systems of domination. From this viewpoint, removing DEIA from policy represents more than an administrative shift. It silences the voices of women and marginalized groups who have long sustained ecological knowledge and traditions of care. Without these contributions, climate education loses essential pathways for linking justice with sustainability.

Posthumanism expands the critique by challenging the assumption that humans exist apart from the rest of the natural world. Haraway (2016) argues that education should emphasize the interdependence between humans, animals, technologies, and the planet itself. This framework critiques

climate education that centers solely on human needs. When DEIA is eliminated, instruction tends to revert to a human-centered model, overlooking the broader relationships that shape ecological realities. Posthumanism therefore reintroduces nonhuman actors into the conversation and reinforces the idea that justice must include the natural world.

Critical race theory and intersectionality provide an additional analytical layer. Crenshaw (1989, 1991) demonstrates that systems of oppression overlap and must be understood in relation to one another. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) show that claims of neutrality often obscure racial hierarchies by implying that inequality has disappeared. Similarly, scholarship by Ladson-Billings and others (Taylor, 2009) illustrates how colorblind educational policies reinforce these hierarchies beneath the surface. Within this context, policies that present themselves as neutral erase the historical and social conditions that make certain populations more vulnerable to climate change. Critical race theory also exposes the limitations of meritocracy, revealing how apparent equality often conceals long-standing advantages for particular groups (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

Taken collectively, these frameworks demonstrate that removing DEIA undermines both equity and sustainability. Ecofeminism identifies gendered patterns of exploitation, posthumanism challenges human-centered instructional models, and critical race theory with intersectionality reveals how neutrality conceals racial hierarchy. Together, they show that education in the Anthropocene must integrate justice and ecological understanding to prepare learners for the challenges ahead.

### **Policy Analysis and Educational Consequences**

The policies that dismantle DEIA directly shape how schools and universities teach about the climate crisis. One of the most immediate effects appears in curriculum design. By prohibiting demographic data and banning references to diversity and equity, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act and Executive Order 14173 limit the ability of educators to address how climate change affects different populations in unequal ways (Rosa, 2025). Without DEIA, climate education becomes incomplete. Rather than examining how low-income and minority communities often bear the greatest environmental burdens, a DEIA-free curriculum risks presenting climate change solely as a technical or economic issue, or omitting these topics altogether. Research illustrates this pattern clearly. The water crisis in Flint, Michigan disproportionately harmed Black and low-income families, revealing the close link between environmental hazards, race, and class (Pulido, 2016). Without DEIA frameworks, examples of this kind would likely disappear from classroom discussions.

These policies also reinforce a narrow conception of humans as separate from the natural world. Taylor (2009) notes that education often privileges economic growth over ecological responsibility. Federal reforms framed as neutral push climate instruction further in that direction. Students may learn about renewable energy or carbon reduction, but without DEIA they lose the opportunity to understand climate change as a justice issue that intersects with people, cultures, and ecosystems.

Another consequence is the exclusion of entire knowledge traditions. Indigenous and feminist ecological perspectives have long offered insights into sustainability and community resilience. Shiva (1988) demonstrates how women and local communities have developed practices of ecological balance that challenge dominant models of industrial exploitation. When DEIA is removed, these perspectives are erased, leaving students with fewer theoretical and practical tools for imagining sustainable futures.

The result is a weakened form of climate literacy. Instruction that ignores marginalized voices cannot adequately prepare learners for the Anthropocene, a period defined by human impact on the planet. This also contradicts global expectations such as Sustainable Development Goal 4.7, which calls for climate education that connects sustainability with equity and cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2016).

By dismantling DEIA, the United States risks educating a generation of students who lack the knowledge required to understand and respond to the full scope of the climate crisis.

### **National and Global Implications**

The removal of DEIA from recent federal policies carries significant consequences for schools in the United States. At the local level, teachers now face restrictions on how they design lessons and respond to student needs. DeMatthews and Izquierdo (2020) note that equity policies provide educators with essential tools for creating inclusive classrooms that meet the needs of diverse learners. Without these policies, teachers lose the ability to draw on approaches that connect instruction to students' identities and lived experiences. As a result, climate education risks becoming abstract and detached from real-world contexts, leaving students less prepared to consider fairness and justice as integral components of the climate crisis.

Internationally, the landscape is markedly different. UNESCO (2016) emphasizes that global sustainability requires education systems to integrate environmental knowledge with equity, cultural diversity, and respect for local contexts. Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 establishes a clear expectation that learners everywhere should gain the knowledge and skills necessary to support sustainability, global citizenship, and cultural diversity. Many countries have adopted this vision, incorporating Indigenous knowledge, feminist ecological perspectives, and justice-centered pedagogies into their curricula. By moving away from DEIA, the United States diverges from these global efforts and distances its education system from widely accepted international standards.

Several examples illustrate more comprehensive models of climate education. In states such as California and New Jersey, climate change is taught alongside equity goals and supported through teacher training, community partnerships, and local initiatives. Internationally, countries such as Scotland and Costa Rica link sustainability directly with social justice and community knowledge. These systems rely on demographic data to identify disparities and allocate resources, demonstrating that climate literacy extends beyond scientific understanding to include civic action and community engagement. Compared with these models, the United States' rollback of DEIA weakens its alignment with the goals set by SDG 4.7.

The implications extend beyond national borders. Climate change is a global challenge that requires cooperative, inclusive responses. Without instruction grounded in equity, students in the United States will be less prepared to participate in international collaboration. Policies that erase race, gender, and cultural perspectives also silence the communities most affected by climate disasters. This diminishes local resilience and undermines the collective capacity needed to confront global challenges.

More broadly, the rhetoric of neutrality embedded in these federal policies does more than limit instructional content; it signals to the international community that justice and inclusion are no longer national priorities. In the context of the Anthropocene a period defined by shared vulnerability and interdependence this message is particularly concerning, as effective climate action requires shared knowledge, shared responsibility, and a commitment to equity.

### **Conclusion**

The removal of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility from United States education policy undermines both fairness in schools and the preparation students receive for the climate crisis. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act and Executive Order 14173 are presented as neutral and merit-focused reforms, yet in practice they eliminate demographic data and diminish the visibility of marginalized groups. The rhetoric of meritocracy often conceals structural inequality, creating an appearance of fairness while limiting meaningful opportunity.

Without DEIA, climate education becomes narrowly framed and omits perspectives essential for understanding the full scope of environmental challenges. Indigenous knowledge, feminist ecological insights, and the lived experiences of communities most affected by environmental hazards are excluded. The absence of DEIA also removes attention to nonhuman actors such as land, water, and ecosystems, all of which are central to climate understanding and have been recognized by many communities as integral to education and survival. Separating equity from sustainability produces an incomplete framework and leaves students less prepared for the realities of the Anthropocene.

Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 emphasizes that climate literacy must integrate sustainability with equity, cultural diversity, and global citizenship (UNESCO, 2016). Many countries are advancing in that direction, whereas current federal actions in the United States move in the opposite direction, weakening domestic readiness and diminishing international cooperation.

Future policy decisions offer an opportunity to reverse this trajectory. Ecofeminism, posthumanism, and critical race theory demonstrate that appeals to neutrality often obscure inequity and that effective preparation for climate challenges requires inclusive, justice-centered education (Shiva, 1988; Haraway, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991). These frameworks underscore the need to understand climate issues not only as environmental concerns but also as social and structural ones.

Ultimately, this discussion extends beyond policy to a broader call for action. If education is to prepare learners for the future, DEIA must be preserved and strengthened so that climate education integrates justice, fairness, sustainability, and respect for the more-than-human world. Only through such an approach can students develop the knowledge and capacities needed to navigate the challenges of the Anthropocene.

### Policy Recommendations

Several steps can strengthen climate education while restoring equity considerations:

1. **Reinstate the use of demographic data** to identify inequities in climate-related educational access and outcomes.
2. **Restore DEIA language and programs** across federal and state education systems to ensure inclusive curriculum design.
3. **Integrate Indigenous and community-based ecological knowledge** into climate literacy initiatives.
4. **Align national climate education standards with SDG 4.7**, ensuring that sustainability is taught alongside justice and cultural diversity.
5. **Support professional development for educators** that links climate instruction with equity-focused pedagogies.

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