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## Activist 101 Activities for Pre-Service Teachers

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# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

*Teaching Note*

## Activist 101 Activities for Pre-Service Teachers

by Heather K. Olson Beal, Lauren E. Burrow, Chrissy Cross and  
Amber Wagon



IMAGE BY JONATHAN KEMPER

**W**e teach in an educator preparation program in a regional comprehensive university in Texas where the overwhelming majority of our PSTs are white and female. Southern states like Texas are often connected with conservative traditions, which are characterized by a reluctance to challenge authority. Our personal experience as parents of school-aged children, as former teachers, and as teacher educators in a rural area confirm that many teachers do not participate in political activism or organizations; some actively avoid political engagement. Knowing that this is not true of Black women educators, who have a long tradition of organizing to advocate for their own and their students' rights and needs (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Dixon, 2003), we feel even more strongly the responsibility to support the few Black teachers by building up a workforce that is invested in activism.

Despite professional socialization and norms that may support avoidance of political engagement within the profession as a whole, there has been a sharp increase in the last two years in political organization and activism on the part of educators at the state and national levels, with educators from five states organizing walk-outs in 2018 (i.e., Kentucky, Colorado, Arizona, West Virginia, Oklahoma), a record number of educators running for public office across the country (Campbell, 2018), and educators in other states organizing and participating in marches to call attention to hot-button political issues, such as gun violence, Black Lives Matter, overemphasis on standardized testing, health care, educator retirement benefits, and immigrant rights.

It is our express goal, as teacher educators, to not only educate our PSTs about political engagement but also provide opportunities for them to practice political engagement with our guidance and with the support of their peers. We teach our PSTs that it is their responsibility to advocate for their students. In Texas, there is even a state teacher certification standard that explicitly states that teachers must "serve as an advocate for students and the profession" (Texas PPR Standards). While PSTs may genuinely want to fulfill this responsibility, educator preparation programs often fail to teach them how. And, unfortunately, they may not have models of teachers who undertake this important work from whom to learn and follow. We believe it is critical that educator preparation programs provide opportunities for PSTs to practice becoming informed citizens and engaged teacher leaders capable of effectively fighting back against those who devalue and dehumanize our PK-12 students from marginalized and minoritized populations.

We have experimented with methods for combating this all too common complacency and lack of knowledge about the role politics and activism play in education. We are seeking to embody the three commitments of the teacher activism framework delineated by Picower (2012), whose qualitative study explored how self-identified teacher activists defined and enacted their work. The three commitments are: 1) reconciling the vision, 2) moving toward liberation, and 3) standing up to oppression. In the first step--reconciling the vision--teacher activists described a vision of a world in which social justice is the reality and committed to regular action steps to bring about that socially justice world. For

the activists in Picower's study, this was more than a decision to act; it was a fundamental part of their identity. We are working, with our PSTs, to help them see both the reality of the unjust world *and* to see themselves as not just teachers, but as teacher activists. In the second step--moving toward liberation--teacher activists did more than act; they prepared their students in how to take action for social change. This commitment reflects our efforts to prepare our PSTs to act, as well as to teach *their* future students to do likewise. In the third step--standing up to oppression--teacher activists committed to stand up against oppressive educational practices, whenever and wherever they see them, that exacerbate existing inequalities outside of schools.

The following are several examples of course activities we designed to activate PSTs' natural inclination to support their students' diverse identities and realities by educating them on how to take simple, yet significant action to become teacher activists (before they even reach their future classrooms). The activities, assignments, and experiences are designed for undergraduate and graduate students in both face-to-face and online learning settings and take into consideration national, state, and local opportunities and needs for activism.

## Teaching Strategies and Activities

### Call Your Rep Assignment

In order to prepare for this assignment, we teach students about the importance of advocating for their students, for their families, and for the profession. We teach them how, where, and when to register to vote. We teach them about different ways to communicate with our elected leaders, including attending school board meetings (a course requirement), city council meetings, and candidate town halls, emailing or texting elected leaders (e.g., using tools like Five Calls, Resistbot, and FaxZero), and calling them on the telephone. Students have to research a particular issue relevant to education and contact an elected leader. To practice, we allow them to email or text the first time; the second time, they have to make a phone call and speak directly to the person who answers the phone. Afterwards, they reflect on how the experience went and how it made them feel, as well as share the response (if any) of the elected leader or spokesperson. It is quite common for them to say they were extremely nervous, sometimes even nauseated, to make the call, as it is something they have never done before. Many (though not all) say that they will continue to contact their elected leaders about issues that matter to them in the future and will encourage their coworkers to do likewise.

### Developing a Rubric to Evaluate Political Candidates

PSTs need to learn how to develop effective evaluation instruments, including rubrics. In an ordinary assessment and evaluation course, they would develop a rubric to evaluate a fake assignment or, possibly, an assignment they saw used in a local school. In our course, our students designed a rubric that they would use to evaluate aspiring

US Senators and Congresspeople from Texas and practiced using it at a town hall attended by 8 state-level candidates. This assignment had two primary objectives: (a) to help our students--future teachers--develop the skills necessary to evaluate the potential for political candidates to promote equity and to address the systemic inequalities that target their future students from minoritized populations, and (b) to help our students develop skills in creating performance-based evaluations (which, if used properly, have the potential to be much better assessments than the standardized tests which are known to be particularly poor measurements of minoritized students' academic growth). This process enabled them to learn more about the candidates' positions on important issues, to learn more about voting, and to have an authentic experience developing a performance assessment tool.

### **Investigating Mass Incarceration and its Impact on PK-12 Education**

Many of our PSTs come from racially homogenous rural and suburban communities and school environments; they have little personal experience with and are not familiar with the topic of mass incarceration. As professors, we want our PSTs to be able to connect the impact of mass incarceration on society and specifically children and their education experiences. For this assignment, students are assigned to watch *13th*, a Netflix documentary about mass incarceration directed by Ava DuVernay. After watching, students synthesize what they learned from the movie by creating an infographic about the movie that includes three visual components, five major points/facts/events of their choice, and an overarching theme they identified from the movie. Students present the infographic to the class, after which they--in small groups--complete a large KWL (Know-Want to Know-Learn) chart about mass incarceration and education. The discussion guides them in asking critical questions about this topic and how it will impact their future students. After identifying their questions, they research the answers on mobile devices and share their findings with the class. To conclude, students identify one action step they can take as future teachers to help disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration.

### **Conclusion**

In addition to these activities, we try to embed opportunities for them to take action throughout our courses. Students learn how to follow a proposed education law as it makes its way through the legislative process; they attend local demonstrations in support of marginalized identity groups (i.e., by attending the first-ever Pride rally in the oldest white town in Texas); they join a professional organization to expand knowledge base and networks for informed advocacy; and they begin to create and sustain a community of social media educators from whom to learn and follow.

In our experience, these assignments gently push the students to take responsibility for cultural problems as a tiny step in helping them realize that they can and, indeed, *must* be agents of social justice and education reform in their classrooms. We hope that these ideas will prompt readers to either support or enact changes in their current teacher education courses by integrating and/or improving on these examples to help develop PSTs into informed, participatory activists on the national, state, and local levels who seek to promote and ensure democratic spaces in and out of the classrooms.

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