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# Democracy & Education

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## Moving Toward Critical Political Education with Elementary Preservice Teachers.

A Response to *The Impact of Polarization on the Political Engagement of  
Generation Z Elementary Preservice Teachers and Their Teaching*

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### Abstract

In “The Impact of Polarization on the Political Engagement of Generation Z Elementary Preservice Teachers and Their Teaching,” Keegan and Vaughan engaged with questions of preparing Gen Z, elementary preservice teachers (PSTs) in political education. Their much-needed study confirmed the continued call for social studies teacher educators to cultivate critical, civically active elementary PSTs who will intentionally attend to political education in the classroom. In this response, I situate Keegan and Vaughan’s findings in white discomfort (Zembylas, 2018) as a way to consider a path forward in elementary teacher preparation, moving from a centering of white PSTs’ individual responses to a pedagogy of shared responsibility (Zembylas, 2019).

### This article is in response to

Keegan, K., Vaughan, K. P. (2023). The Impact of Polarization on the Political Engagement of Generation Z Elementary Preservice Teachers and Their Teaching. *Democracy & Education*, 31(1), Article 1. Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol31/iss1/1>

**A**PPROACHING THE 2020 fall semester, many social studies teacher educators wrestled with how to engage preservice teachers (PSTs) with the 2020 presidential election. The election season was emotionally charged with wide-ranging partisan views and a heaviness around how the election results would impact citizens, particularly those historically and presently oppressed by public policy. Throughout the 2020 election season, the world experienced the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the United States, in particular, had moments of reckoning with its history of racial injustice as people took to the streets in protest of George Floyd’s, Breonna Taylor’s, and Ahmaud Arbery’s murders. Recognizing the unique factors surrounding the 2020 election and the need to investigate elementary PSTs’ approaches to political education, Keegan and Vaughan (2023) examined the ways in which elementary PSTs’ beliefs and understandings of politics during the 2020 presidential election

affected their development of K–6 civics lessons in the article “The Impact of Polarization on the Political Engagement of Generation Z Elementary Preservice Teachers and Their Teaching.”

At its essence, social studies education focuses on cultivating active citizens for a democratic society (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994), and as such, social studies teacher educators

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(SSTEs) must prepare PSTs to engage in civic and political education in the K–12 classroom (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). Civic and political education scholarship is well-established, with research describing how in-service teachers and PSTs view “good” citizenship (Fry & O’Brien, 2015; Martin, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004); ways in which to approach deliberation and teaching of controversial issues (e.g. Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Hess, 2009; Parker & Hess, 2001); how political ideologies affect teachers’ instruction (Knowles & Castro, 2019; Stoddard, 2009); and student responses to civic education (Gutiérrez, 2016; Johnson, 2019; Martin & Chiodo, 2007). Yet much of this research focuses on the secondary grades.

Keegan and Vaughan (2023) built upon existing research by considering the generational identity of their participants, all members of Gen Z, and drawing upon an “agonistic conception of the political,” highlighting the reality of conflict in the public sphere that can be mobilized to encourage civic engagement (p. 2). I commend the authors in conducting the study, as this is a needed focus in social studies teacher preparation (Payne & Journell, 2019), and their work confirms the continued call for SSTEs to cultivate critical, civically active elementary PSTs who will intentionally attend to political education in the classroom. In their case study, Keegan and Vaughan (2023) analyzed pre- and post-course surveys about the political beliefs and behaviors of the elementary PST participants and two course assignments: a video post about Gen Z voter characteristics and a reflection of an integrated civics unit they taught. The authors found the elementary, Gen Z PSTs: (a) were uninformed politically, in part due to their inability to use critical media literacy skills when consuming social media, (b) felt politics were “negative” and wanted to remain “unbiased” in their teaching, and (c) believed politics was too complicated for young children to understand.

At one point, Keegan and Vaughan (2023) asked, “If Gen Z youth see racial injustice, climate change, and LGBTQ+ rights as social problems in need of political solutions, how might this impact their teaching practice?” (p. 3). In my response to the article, I pose a related question: If research shows that Gen Z is more politically active (CIRCLE, 2020), then why is this in contradiction to the findings of the elementary PSTs in this study? Why were the participants resistant to agonistic forms of political education in the classroom when their Gen Z peers would more likely be in favor of it? Although the authors did not ask demographic information of their participants, they noted that the participants mirrored the U.S. teaching force, which is predominantly white women, more racially homogenous than Gen Z overall. The elementary PSTs’ desire to remain “neutral” in their political stances and to avoid conflict or “negative” emotion in the classroom is in contradiction to agonism and communitarian views of citizenship Keegan and Vaughan (2023) desired to promote. In the discussion, they noted how the elementary PSTs “largely adhered to traditional conceptualizations of the political” (p. 10).

Although Keegan and Vaughan (2023) explained the very real fears many teachers are facing in this moment, with legislation restricting the teaching of race, sex, and gender (Jones & Franklin,

2022; Schwartz, 2022), we must (keep) ask(ing), who is being protected by avoiding political conflict and emotion in the classroom? Who benefits from maintaining traditional approaches to political education, and who is harmed? Here, I pose that we situate Keegan and Vaughan’s (2023) findings in the context of white discomfort (Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Matias, 2016). Zembylas (2018) described white discomfort as “Whites’ unwillingness to scrutinize their personal advantages and privileges, demanding that race dialogue takes place in a ‘safe space’” (p. 87). Further theorization explains that white discomfort is not simply an individual surface response to the challenging of whiteness, but it relates to white emotionalities (Matias, 2016), which includes the recognition of how these discomforts are manifested and “why they are expressed in regard to the power structure of race” (Zembylas, 2018, p. 88). Reckoning with white discomfort is not solely an individual, internal psycho-emotional excavation, but it requires interrogating the “wider structures and practices of race, racism and whiteness that trigger such feelings in the first place” (Zembylas, 2018, p. 87).

Within the findings, the elementary PSTs showed white discomfort in a myriad of ways. For instance, several PSTs expressed an avoidance of politics and feelings of negativity as people formed divergent, conflicting opinions, and they preferred to steer away from these conversations. This avoidance is easier to do when one’s own identities are not personally at risk from political policies that benefit majoritarian culture. In a more poignant example, one elementary PST prepared a civics unit for a school with predominantly African American students. The PST intentionally avoided discussion of how the presidential candidates addressed topics of racial injustice because they felt the students “would have ‘already formed opinions about the candidates because of family or societal influence,’” and they chose to “[remain] neutral and positive about both candidates” (p. 8). These data excerpts exemplify how the PSTs’ white discomfort affected their individual decision-making during instructional planning, yet it also fell in line within the existing traditional political education structures that maintain the status quo of white supremacy.

Gutmann (1999) defined *political education* as “the cultivation of the virtues, knowledge, and skills necessary for political participation,” equipping citizens to “participate in consciously reproducing their society” (p. 287). Traditional political education in the United States is rooted in Eurocentric concepts of citizenship encouraging autonomy, reason, and personal rights and responsibilities (Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). In elementary schools, civics instruction centers character education (Lin, 2015) founded upon Eurocentric values and individual decision-making. If using Gutmann’s definition, then we see how schools continue to reproduce an educational experience and a citizenry for a Eurocentric, or white, norm. In essence, this type of political education maintains white supremacy, allowing for the continual harm of many BIPOC students. Considering the present U.S. political turmoil, Loza (2021) presented piercing examples of how white supremacy was accepted and encouraged at affluent suburban Ohio high schools. She analyzed 636 Instagram posts from three

accounts created to highlight the experiences of BIPOC high school students during the 2020 presidential election year. These posts illuminated whose “speech and freedom to exist is protected and whose is consistently dismissed” within the civic, political arena of public schools (p. 386).

Recognizing the harm of traditional political education and considering the findings in “The Impact of Polarization on the Political Engagement of Generation Z Elementary Preservice Teachers and Their Teaching,” what do we do to prepare elementary PSTs to teach anti-oppressive political education for justice? In working to address this question, I initially focused on the research of elementary PSTs’ lack of political and social studies content knowledge, more generally (Payne & Journell, 2019; Sanchez, 2010), yet I offer a personal cautionary tale with this approach. During the same time Keegan and Vaughan (2023) conducted their study with elementary PSTs, Murray-Everett and I (2022) engaged in a case study with elementary PSTs in a social studies methods course in an Appalachian region of the Northeast and one in the Deep South. As we planned for the 2020 fall semester, we personally felt responsibility for our PSTs to civically engage in this important election. We both approached our methods courses with a critical, anti-racist social studies lens, and our required readings and assignments portrayed this commitment. For the 2020 semester, we developed an Election News Group eight-week project that our PSTs completed in teams. Although I will not explicate the project in detail here, a majority of the project was built upon political liberal concepts of citizenship education, with a focus on PSTs becoming informed on public policies through research and peer deliberation, where each week the PSTs researched a policy issue and presidential candidates’ perspectives on the assigned policy. The PSTs considered how the policy affected them, people with identities other than their own, and historical connections to the policy.

Similar to Keegan and Vaughan’s (2023) findings, the elementary PSTs in our study initially felt they were unprepared and lacking content knowledge to truly engage in the political process (Murray-Everett & Demoiny 2022). Prior to the project, most PSTs avoided political conversations with peers and family. After participation in the Election News Groups, most of the PSTs felt they had become “active citizens” because they were informed of the candidates’ policy stances and confidently engaged in political discussions, and some cast their votes based on how candidates’ policies would affect others often marginalized in U.S. society. In the end, my colleague and I were encouraged to see the PSTs’ political knowledge and engagement increase—yet their civic participation remained centered on individual intellectualism, personal reasoning and deliberation of multiple perspectives. We asked ourselves, “Does critical thinking and critical dialogue lead to more than well-informed citizens who can empathize with multiple perspectives?” (Murray-Everett & Demoiny, 2022, p. 393). We wondered how PSTs could think more collectively, seeking justice and equity for everyone as opposed to focusing on their own rights.

In general, study findings by both Keegan and Vaughan’s (2023) study and my colleague and me are similar in that the majority of elementary PSTs approached political education with concerns of how they would be personally affected—their personal political content knowledge, their personal comfort level with political conversations, and the response they may experience to political lessons. The focus was on them individually. Research tells us that teachers’ civic ideologies shape the type of citizenship and political engagement they model and promote in their classrooms (e.g., Knowles & Castro, 2019); therefore, introducing and facilitating critical self-reflection with PSTs is imperative before they can take up critical conceptions of citizenship and/or to implement critical political instruction in a K–6 classroom.

With this in mind, SSTE can support elementary PSTs to dig deeper into the foundational responses of white discomfort associated with political education that is often displayed. A common form of white discomfort is guilt—whether this is a paralyzing guilt based on individually feeling bad yet not looking to structural and political causes of oppression or a defensive guilt that one is not individually responsible for an oppression (Todd, 2003)—neither is useful in producing a more just society. Zembylas (2019) proposed a “pedagogy of shared responsibility [that] is not focused on blame, guilt or fault, but rather it has the potential to minimize denials of complicity and instead encourage students to interrogate the conditions under which they are responsive and responsible to others” (p. 403). In “The Impact of Polarization on the Political Engagement of Generation Z Elementary Preservice Teachers and Their Teaching,” the authors noted how emotion is an integral part of political education, how it should not be avoided, and that emotions can compel one to become politically engaged in seeking change. As SSTE, we could use a pedagogy of shared responsibility to facilitate interrogation of the individual emotions of white discomfort that arise in political learning and dialogue, and then reframe emotions of guilt or blame into collective emotive action of wanting to make one’s community equitable and just for everyone. This pedagogy requires a lens of political education that analyzes how systems and structures perpetuate oppression and, in turn, how we are complicit within them.

This first step of critical self-reflection and reframing through a pedagogy of shared responsibility is necessary for elementary and secondary PSTs, as they must wrestle with their personal beliefs and ideologies before they begin teaching political education in a classroom. Yet, Keegan and Vaughan (2023) noted, a unique aspect of critical political education within elementary teacher preparation is a consistent belief that elementary students are unable to understand political ideals. Fear of parent backlash and the enactment of restrictive education legislation adds to the present-day avoidance of critical political education with elementary PSTs and reifies the narrative of elementary students’ innocence and inability to participate in critical political education.

Even when elementary PSTs have verbalized commitment to critical forms of citizenship education, they often feel it is not developmentally appropriate for elementary students (Marri et al, 2014). One way to challenge this notion is to show elementary PSTs

examples of critical forms of citizenship education and political dialogue within elementary classrooms through research and practitioner articles. For instance, Rodríguez (2017) and Falkner and Payne (2021) described fifth-grade classes where the teachers promoted and the students enacted cultural citizenship, as their cultural identities were affirmed and they studied the collective agency of minoritized groups in seeking justice in the past.

Providing PSTs practitioner articles to analyze is also useful to illustrate how in-service teachers have taught critical political education in an elementary classroom. Muller (2018) showed how third-grade students analyzed statues of people who supported slavery and/or segregation on their State House's grounds. The third graders researched, formed opinions, and wrote letters to legislators about the statues. This exemplified the ability of young children to discuss a current political issue. Other practitioner articles have highlighted teachers using historical examples of collective agency, pointing to ways in which communities have had a shared responsibility to seek justice. For example, Ferreras-Stone and Demoigny (2019) shared an inquiry unit on justice-oriented citizenship demonstrated through marches and protests of the 1909 shirtwaist makers' strike, the 1963 Birmingham children's march, and the 2000 Los Angeles janitors' strike. PSTs can analyze the practitioner articles by identifying the compelling and guiding questions that frame critical political elementary lessons while also aligning the lessons with their state social studies standards to justify this type of instruction.

Finally, as PSTs consider the current political climate, it is helpful to talk through the situations that they often fear. Rodríguez and Swalwell (2022) provided useful tools for this in their text *Social Studies for a Better World* with "What would you do?" scenarios. Each scenario briefly describes a possible situation with a question of how the PST would respond. For instance, a kindergarten student draws a picture of their family with two moms. Another student blurts out that families can only have a mom and a dad, and the scenario asks how the elementary PST would respond in the moment and then in the longer term (Rodríguez & Swalwell, 2022, p. 57). SSTE can facilitate discussion of these types of "What would you do?" scenarios as students consider their responses. These instructional activities not only require elementary PSTs to consider their instructional response, but the PSTs must also self-reflect on how their identities make them feel in the situation and their shared responsibility to students, particularly those consistently marginalized in our society.

Introducing and practicing critical forms of citizenship and political education not only cultivates belonging and communitarian values, but they prioritize critiquing structural and systemic oppression through collective action. The centering of critical political education in the elementary social studies methods course organically encourages a shift from white discomfort to a pedagogy of shared responsibility. If through a critical citizenship lens we interrogate a societal problem (i.e., political issue), we transition to asking questions about how we, collectively, can and should make it better, and the gaze shifts from individual responses, like white discomfort, to a centering of the communities experiencing harm by the political policies in which we participate.

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