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LEAVE POLITICS OUT OF IT: DIVERSE PRESERVICE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONALISM AND POLITICS IN A RED STATE

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ABSTRACT

Politicized discourse around what is appropriate in schools informs norms for professional behavior for preservice teachers, and professionalism expectations in teacher preparation have been proven to be exclusionary for preservice teachers from systemically marginalized groups. Therefore, it is important we understand how professionalism expectations inform how diverse preservice teachers see themselves as political actors in the field. As part of a larger critical comparative case study, this study explores how preservice elementary teachers describe their understandings and connections between professionalism and the political nature of the teaching field. Humanizing pedagogy in teacher education served as the theoretical framework, and the data included focus group interviews, participant-generated artwork, teacher preparation program policy documents, and open-ended surveys with participants. Data were analyzed Mullet's (2018) approach to critical discourse analysis in education research. Three findings were identified: 1) professionalism is respectful and politics are not; 2) teachers do not decide what is political; and 3) diverse preservice elementary teachers believe they must be apolitical. The study is significant because it reveals how the divisive political climate is informing diverse preservice elementary teachers' development, which has implications for the fields of teacher preparation and teacher education policy.

Keywords*:* preservice teachers; politics; professionalism, teachers' work

K-12 schools are a contentious space for anyone perceived as 'different.' United States designed compulsory education to be a mechanism for culturing American children, resulting in an 'othering' culture for students and teachers who are or may be people of Color, disabled, LGBTQ+, Muslim, or lower class (Goldstein, 2014; Gillespie-McRae, 2018; Spring, 2018). The field of education is experiencing a contemporary resurgence of dialogue surrounding who and what does and does not belong in school spaces, with teachers at the forefront of this battle (Jones & Franklin, 2022; Lopez & Hernandez, 2022; Tenarge, 2022). While schools are removing emblems of Black history and any mention of race from the school walls and textbooks, and LGBTQ+ teachers, students, and allies are required to de-rainbow their classrooms and libraries, it is imperative that we understand how this is impacting diverse preservice teachers that are just now entering the field (Heim & Rozsa, 2022; Kingkade, 2022; Steinberg, 2022). Much of the expectations around who does and does not belong in the front of the classroom is communicated around professional norms of how teachers are supposed to behave and what they are expected to look like (Bell & Busey, 2021; Tolbert & Eichelberger, 2016; Weber and Mitchell, 1995).

Teacher education programs work to communicate professionalism standards as they prepare preservice teachers for fieldwork and entering the classroom, which can be exclusionary for preservice teachers that are members of systemically and historically marginalized groups (Marom, 2019; Iskander, 2021; Tolbert & Eichelberger, 2016). Diverse preservice teachers' experiences with professionalism norms are largely understudied, and none of the studies examine them within the context of programmatic and state policies. As such, this study addresses these gaps through the following research question: How do diverse preservice elementary teachers describe the relationships between being professional and political in the classroom?

CONTEXT

In order to fully understand the context of how diverse preservice teachers view professionalism and politics in the U.S., it is important to consider the context of professionalism expectations in teacher preparation as well as studies that explore how preservice teachers discuss politics in the classroom. The sections below describe literature related to diverse preservice teachers' experiences with professionalism across a variety of intersecting identities, and how politics are discussed in teacher preparation.

Enacting Professionalism in Teacher Preparation

There are no uniform understandings of what professionalism means or how it has come to be in the field of teaching or otherwise (Creasy, 2015; Dillabough, 1999; Evetts, 2003; Popkewitz, 1994; Wilensky, 1964). Marom and Ruitenberg (2018) describe the discourse surrounding professionalism in teacher education as "a tool for neoliberalism" (p. 366). As such, teaching is considered a semi-profession because the professional roles have been reduced to a set of competencies and isolated skills that preservice teachers must demonstrate during their preparation programs (Marom & Ruitenberg, 2018). The authors also caution that the discourse around professionalism and teacher competencies is seemingly politically neutral but actually has underlying roots towards standardization and "quality control" (Marom & Ruitenberg, 2018, p. 374).

Within the context of preservice teacher education, preservice teachers are expected to enact preferred conceptions of professionalism (Steffes, 2012; Zemblyas, 2018). These preferred ways of enacting and performing professionalism in preservice field placements uphold dominant cultures and power structures, wherein the behaviors and ways of knowing of cisgender, heterosexual, Christian, white women are deemed the ideal (Bell & Busey, 2021; Kahn & Gorski, 2014; Marom, 2019; Goldstein, 2014; Steffes, 2012 Zemblyas, 2018). Preservice teachers are expected to behave in a way that upholds U.S.-centric ideals of nationalism, race, ethnicity, linguistic practices, gender, and sexuality (Bell & Busey, 2021; Creasy, 2015; Dodillet et al., 2019; Kahn & Gorski, 2014; Marom, 2019; Zemblyas, 2018). Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the word *diverse* refers to anyone who is not a cisgender, heterosexual, middle class, able bodied, Christian, white woman, and special attention is paid to the ways diverse identities are intersectional, leading to further marginalization and opportunities for collective liberation (Kahn & Gorski, 2016; Pugach et al., 2019; Zemblyas, 2018). Further, this paper focuses on the intersections of race, gender, and linguistic practices, and the complexities that the participants draw out between these identities, addressing identified gaps in teacher education literature (Pugach et al., 2019).

PSTs are also instructed on how to perform professionalism throughout their time in the program (Airton & Martin, 2022; Creasy, 2015; Iskander, 2021; Marom, 2019; Zemblyas, 2018). As professionalism requirements are enforced in teacher preparation programs – throughout content area methods courses and in fieldwork – the voices of systemically marginalized PSTs are ignored (Marom, 2019; Iskander, 2021; Sokal et al., 2017; Tolbert & Eichelberger, 2016). By requiring that all preservice teachers uphold the cultural expectations in content areas whether they align with the students' or PSTs' culture or not, hegemonic systems of power and oppression will continue to be upheld within the field (Brown, 2014; Fylkesnes, 2018).

Whiteness and Professionalism in Teacher Preparation

Teacher education is a racist system and a field that privileges and promotes whiteness and white supremacy (Bell & Busey, 2021; Sleeter, 2017; Tolbert & Eichelberger, 2016). In many ways, professional norms are a way to dictate and uphold white cultural expectations and performances in teacher preparation programs; even when the policies appear to be neutral at face-value (Marom, 2019; Mooney Simmie, 2022). These policies enforce expectations relating to dress and speech, which reveals a "racial grammar of teacher education" (Brown, 2014; Bell & Busey, 2021, p. 35; Marom, 2019; Tolbert & Eichelberger, 2016). In this way, teacher preparation programs focus on preparing "White, (upper-) middle-class, monolingual women," (Bell & Busey, 2021, p. 49).

The whiteness within professionalism policies in teacher preparation programs leaves racially diverse, non-white PSTs feeling isolated and dehumanized (Bell & Busey, 2021; Brown, 2014; Marom, 2019). Brown (2014) points out that PSTs of Color who are expected to disavow their cultural knowledge to conform to the expectations of whiteness in their programs felt isolated from their communities. PSTs of Color describe the programmatic policies as being more important to the teacher educators than individual student needs, especially in circumstances where the PSTs need to have jobs as a source of income during the program when they are required to not hold extracurricular employment (Bell & Busey, 2021; Brown, 2014; Tolbert & Eichelberger, 2016).

Diverse PSTs' cultural ways of knowing and being are not valued in their preparation programs and they are not seen as professional compared to their white counterparts (Brown, 2014; Iskander, 2021; Marom, 2019). Marom's (2019) study of Indigenous preservice teachers explores how professionalism is used to maintain whiteness in teacher preparation programs. Native PSTs in the study are not seen as equal to their white peers – their way of speaking and teaching about their culture and heritage is considered less academic and important than white ways of being and knowing.

Cisheteronormativity and Professionalism in Teacher Preparation

The literature shows that queerness is otherized and dehumanized in teacher preparation programs (Airton & Martin, 2022; Reimers, 2017; Iskander, 2021). Professional dress contributes to how queer PSTs are dehumanized through professionalism policies in teacher preparation programs. Many queer people express their identities through clothing; however, queer PSTs receive pushback from school administrators, wherein feminine dress for women is described as moral and gender expression must align with sexuality, which must uphold preferred cisgender and heteronormative professional identities in school settings (Airton & Martin, 2022; Brown & Diale, 2018; Gilbert, 2014; Iskander, 2021). In fact, studies show that even when queer PSTs do not receive pushback on their dress in their programs, they self-police their behavior and dress out of fear of retribution (Brown & Diale, 2018; Iskander, 2021).

As Iskander (2021) points out: "professional norms dictate that student teachers integrate themselves into the cultures of their host schools, not challenge those cultures" (p. 209). Many queer PSTs describe feeling isolated in their preparation programs because they are required to stay closeted (Paparo & Sweet, 2014). This means that professionalism is used as a discourse of power because some identities are not appropriate for teachers to discuss or disclose at school; which denies queer PSTs of their full humanity because they are not free to be themselves (Blount, 2000; Iskander, 2021; Paparo & Sweet, 2014; Reimers, 2017).

Overall, the literature suggests that teacher preparation programs do not recognize or value the experiences of PSTs that hold non-dominant identities in the field; and decisions around programmatic policies take a top-down approach. However, little is understood about how PSTs actually make sense of the intersections between professionalism requirements and politics.

Preservice Teachers and Politics in Schools

Most studies about PSTs and politics in school are focused on teachers' comfort with addressing controversial topics with students. In their study of PSTs' beliefs about political issues in schools, Estellés et al. (2021) found that 64.2% of their participants of the 1,335 Spanish teacher preparation students believed that political issues should not be discussed in schools. The authors posit that PSTs may hold these beliefs due to "deep-rooted beliefs about childhood, values education or the school curriculum" (Estellés et al., 2021, p. 92). Similarly, Keegan and Vaughan (2023) found that participants in their study of midwestern Gen Z PSTs' engagement with politics in the classroom described politics as *negative*, bias, and "too complex for young children to understand" (p. 9). Framing political topics in this way informed how the PSTs engaged with planning instruction for students because they felt several political topics were considered *unsafe* to talk about with their students due to current legislation around what can and cannot be taught in the classroom (Keegan & Vaughan, 2023). Further, participants described needing to be seen as politically neutral in the classroom (Keegan & Vaughan, 2023).

Conversely, in their study of elementary PSTs' socialization into the field, McCardle et al. (2022) found that while PSTs had internalized the idea that teachers are politically neutral, they still felt their place in the field was politicized and felt the need to participate in teacher-activism. While exploring how young adult literature can support shifts away from political neutrality, Falter and Kerkhoff (2018) found that changes in political stance are more subtle and occur over time. After class activities involving critical reflection, some participants did not want to engage in political discourse in their classrooms at all after the study, whereas others transformed their views slightly (Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018). Riley and Solic (2017) challenged white PSTs to engage with teacher and scholar activists with positive results. Participants found that meeting role models of teacher activists changed their entire perspective of being teachers in urban schools (Riley & Solic, 2017).

The studies that focus on political engagement of teachers are subject-specific –sometimes exploring how teachers engage with social studies and children's literature (Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018; Keegan & Vaughan, 2023). Many take place within methods courses at predominately white institutions (Falter & Kerkhoff, 2018; Keegan & Vaughan, 2023; Riley & Solic, 2017). However, this study occurs at a minority-majority institution and explores how diverse PSTs consider the connections between being viewed as a professional elementary teacher *and* political.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Freeman et al (2020) and Carter Andrews et al. (2019) describe teacher education as inherently dehumanizing because it centralizes subtractive, damage-centered, and deficit-based orientations to diverse preservice teachers (PSTs). Further, Carter Andrews and Castillo (2016) posit that critical reflection and problem-posing education (Freire, 1972) can humanize the teacher preparation process. While critical literature prioritizes transformational approaches to education (Freire, 1972) as the primary method for challenging traditional hegemonic paradigms, recent teacher preparation literature promotes humanizing pedagogy as the best starting point for revolutionary programs and teacher educators (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Freeman et al., 2020; Kitts, 2022). This is because humanizing pedagogy and critical pedagogy are inextricably linked, and in order for true transformation to occur, we must begin by humanizing the teacher preparation process (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Freire, 1972; Freeman et al., 2020; Kitts, 2022). Therefore, this study utilized aspects of humanizing pedagogy and humanizing research as the theoretical framework in order to understand how diverse preservice teachers conceptualize themselves as political and professional in the classroom.

Humanizing pedagogy recognizes that traditional banking models of teaching and learning that has teachers "deposit" knowledge into students' brains that they then regurgitate verbatim in assessments (Freire, 1972). Similarly, humanizing research emphasizes acknowledging the contexts that research occurs in as well as the relationships between the researcher and participants. The theoretical framework for this study drew from two areas of humanizing pedagogy and research: 1) critical self-reflection to understand socio-cultural and historical contexts (Bartolomé,

1994; Salazar, 2013; Yoon & Chen, 2022); 2) centering dialogue and community (Freire, 1972; Museus & Wang, 2022; Salazar, 2013; Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2022).

Critical Self Reflection to Understand Socio-Cultural and Historical Contexts

Educators must engage in critical self-reflection to recognize the socio-cultural and historical contexts that continue to marginalize systemically oppressed groups (Bartolomé, 1994; Salazar, 2013). Because schools are traditionally white spaces that privilege hegemonic identities, the socio-cultural and historical knowledges of students of Color and other systemically marginalized groups are often excluded or ignored (Bartolomé, 1994). As a result, educators and learners from oppressed groups feel isolated. Teacher preparation programs focus on preparing white preservice teachers, and rarely acknowledge the social and cultural assets that preservice teachers of Color bring to their programs (Villegas & Davis, 2008; Zeichner, 2017; Zemblyas, 2018).

Theorists in humanizing pedagogy posit that critical self-reflection and critical consciousness allow for educators and learners to become more aware of the contexts of educational content and their place and experiences in the world (Bartolomé, 1994; Salazar, 2013). Critical self-reflection is a practice of awareness of one's identities in relation to power, oppression, and privilege in society (Freire, 1972; Salazar, 2013). It allows people to realize their full humanity; and as Salazar (2013) further describes "Humanization is the process of becoming more fully human as social, historical, thinking, communicating, transformative, creative persons who participate in and with the world" (p. 126). Developing critical consciousness about sociocultural and historical contexts means becoming aware of social positions and one's role and agency in enacting social change (Freire, 1972; Salazar, 2013). In teacher preparation, critical consciousness provides opportunities for preservice teachers to recognize their agency and ability to enact social change (Carter Andrews & Castillo, 2016; Chen & Kim, 2010).

Centering Dialogue and Community

Humanizing pedagogy privileges relationships and community as the foundation of teaching and learning (Salazar, 2013). When relationships are built throughout the community, everyone works together for liberation (Freire, 1972; Salazar, 2013). By positioning all learners as subjects instead of objects, relationships between the learners in the community become a priority and knowledge is co-constructed through the dialogic (Salazar, 2013). Humanizing approaches to inquiry recognize that research is not a solo endeavor and requires researchers to be "always in relation to and with various communities […] as we envision the worlds we need and want" (Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2022, p. 9). Researchers that work in community with their participants have a reflexive understanding of their positionality's influence on their relationships with participants and the project (Museus & Wang, 2022). Museus and Wang (2022) propose that committing to reciprocity, collectivism, and mutuality helps center community.

In dialogic education, teachers and students learn from one another (Bartolomé, 1994; Salazar, 2013). Learning becomes a collective effort of the entire community (Salazar, 2013). As a learning community is established, relationships are built so that learners and teachers can recognize their full humanity (Salazar, 2013). In teacher preparation, taking a dialogic approach can mean that preservice teachers participate in democratic learning and discussion so that ideas are continually examined and revisited by the community of preservice teachers and teacher educators (Fernandiez-Balboa & Marshall, 1994; Stewart & McClure, 2013).

Dialogic allows for the experiences of systemically marginalized students to be part of the classroom discourse because knowledge is co-constructed throughout the community. It is also a form of action, "where theory informs praxis" (Carter Andrews et al., 2019, p. 15). Humanizing researchers look to the communities they partner with to determine the impact the project can and should have for the collective good; and continue to revisit the dialogue across the community as knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants (Kinloch & San Pedro, 2014; Museus & Wang, 2022). Research with systemically marginalized preservice teachers then becomes a process of connection building that strengthens relationships between researchers and participants (Museus & Wang, 2022; Tachine & Nicolazzo, 2022).

METHODS & MODES OF INQUIRY

As part of my dissertation work, this qualitative study was part of a larger critical comparative case study focused on understanding diverse preservice elementary teachers' perceptions and interpretations of a professionalism policy in their preparation programs for the author's dissertation research (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). This study addresses the following research question: How do diverse preservice elementary teachers describe the relationship between being professional and political in the classroom?

The study took place during the 2023-2024 school year within an elementary teacher preparation program at Municipal State University (MSU), a large urban university in the southwestern U.S. MSU resides within a conservative state with a CRT ban in P-20 settings and several anti-LGBTQ laws. Data included two focus group interviews, an open-ended survey, and participant-generated artwork. Programmatic policies regarding PST professionalism were used to triangulate findings. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used to ensure the widest variation in diverse preservice elementary teacher participants. Table 1 describes their demographic data.

Table 1.
Participant Demographic Data

Identity	Anne	Arely	Jessica
Race	Hispanic	Hispanic	Hispanic (White)
Ethnicity	Hispanic	Mexican American	Hispanic
Economic Class	Lower Class	Lower Class	Middle Class
Gender	Woman	Woman	Woman
Sexual Orientation	Straight	Bisexual	Straight

Analysis

Data were analyzed using Mullet's (2018) methods for critical discourse analysis in education research. To begin, the socio-political and historical contexts of the case were examined in order to more fully understand the elementary teacher preparation program at MSU (Mullet, 2018; Salazar, 2013). Next, the data were coded using open and axial coding to identify themes across the data (Mullet, 2018; Saldaña, 2013). The external relations were then examined in order to understand "social relations that control the production of the text[s]" (Mullet, 2018, p. 122). Then, the internal relations were analyzed to understand the aims of the texts, who is represented and how, as well as the speakers' social identities (Mullet, 2018). Finally, the data were interpreted to understand the meanings behind the themes and external and internal relations in the texts. The findings are discussed in detail in the next section.

Researcher Positionality

I am a white, queer, monolingual, femme person from Southern Appalachia. Many of my identities differ from the participants in this study. I recognize that my perspective as a white teacher educator, researcher, and graduate student limits my interpretation of some of the inter-group conversation between the three Latina participants. Therefore, centering dialogue and community played a significant role in the ways I made sense of the data in this study. I used the participant-generated artwork along with my own artwork to continue the conversation about my interpretation with participants to ensure accuracy.

FINDINGS

Three themes were identified in the findings: 1) professionalism is respectful and politics are not; 2) teachers do not decide what is political; 3) diverse PSTs believe they must be apolitical. Each finding is unpacked in greater detail below.

Professionalism is Respectful and Politics are Not

Overall, participants equated professionalism with respect. This was seen through the ways the teachers were depicted in the drawings, how the participants described the importance of boundaries and professionalism, and the ways that participants described discussing political topics as disrespectful to colleagues and students' families.

The participants' drawings of professional teachers in the present moment indicated that they viewed the business of teaching elementary students as politically neutral. All three drawings feature women teachers in brightly colored classrooms with colorful carpets and motivational posters on the wall. During the second focus group, all three participants noted that the three women in the drawings were dressed in pink and other brightly colored clothing and engaging in activities with students. For example, Arely's drawing features the teacher in a brightly colored vest and pink flowy skirt sitting in a rocking chair reading a book to the students, who are sitting on the brightly colored classroom carpet. The participants' written descriptions of their drawings corroborated this understanding. For example, Anne's description stated, "They make the classroom a welcoming and safe environment." Anne's writing indicates that teachers own their classroom environment because they *make* it welcoming and safe for students. While these drawings and their descriptions may seem typical for preservice elementary teachers, they are not politically neutral. Teacher education literature indicates that traditional imagery and required behaviors in preparation programs centralize Western-centric and white norms of schooling (Fylkes, 2018; Rios & Longoria, 2021; Sleeter, 2016; Tolbert & Eichelberger, 2016).

Participants also described being professional as being respectful of students, families, and colleagues in school. They describe professional respect as being aware of how they communicate with peers in class as well as with students and having clear boundaries with students. For example, during the open-ended survey, Jessica describes how professionalism requires teachers to monitor what they share with students. She states:

> I think when teachers show their professionalism in the first aspect in the means to have boundaries with students and keep your personal life personal and when educators are at work focus on work. […] knowing what is professional enough to share and not share is how educators show their professionalism.

Jessica's statement indicates that she believes professional teachers must keep their personal lives out of their classroom. Additionally, during the first focus group, Jessica also stated that being professional requires "knowing what your job is" and "knowing the material you're teaching." Taken together, Jessica's examples of teacher professionalism indicate that being a professional elementary teacher involves being aware of the expectations of teachers as well as how to be collegial and developing *respectful* relationships with students and colleagues.

Conversely, politics and being political were described as disrespectful of others in school, which could threaten relationships between parents and other teachers. In one instance, Jessica describes being limited to discuss in class: "you're very restricted. […] You have to watch what you say," referring to how bringing up politicized topics can be perceived negatively by students' parents. Similarly, in the second focus group, Anne describes the threat of stirring up the emotions of colleagues and parents: "It's going to be really hard to mention or even talk about certain topics in the classroom without it causing some type of emotion from parents. Like certain parents or even teachers." Anne's fear of ruffling feathers in her school placement reveals the threat she sees in political topics in school. The conversation continued during the same focus group, as participants talked about covering "real historical facts because it makes people uncomfortable" as Arely described. The phrase "some kind of emotion" revealed Anne saw families as potentially reactive when teachers covered complicated topics in their classrooms. Arely's point about "facts" making people uncomfortable indicated how suppressing politicized content in the classroom centered the comfort of conservative families over teaching children the truth. Both examples reveal that participants understand that covering controversial topics in the classroom is risky – especially considering their marginalized identities.

Participants also describe being nervous about retaliation from conservatives, and much of the language they use mirrors phrases used in right-wing media, such as *indoctrination*. Jessica describes being fearful of being seen as indoctrinating: "it does seem like you're indoctrinating kids […] If you had like a very Christian, like either right winged, and you're not very right winged, like of course you're going to see it that type of way." Her example indicates the threat of being perceived as pushing a political agenda on students and knowing the possibility of right-wing backlash. Both examples indicate that Arely and Jessica understand the socio-cultural contexts of being a professional elementary teacher in the current political climate (Salazar, 2013).

Teachers do not Decide What is Political

Participants described not being able to decide what is considered political in the classroom. These decisions are relegated to white teachers and pressure from conservative parents.

The participants also acknowledged learning about the political nature of teaching and social pressure to censor certain topics in the elementary classroom in their teacher preparation coursework. For example, in the first focus group, Jessica states:

> One of my professors […] she mentioned that teaching is a very political profession, even though a lot of people don't think it is, it is very political. And there's some things that, like the districts don't want you to say […] you're very restricted, or stuff like that. You have to watch what you say cause you know, you don't want […] a parent to say anything.

Jessica's point illustrates how her teacher education professors noted the constraints that teachers may experience when covering political content. It also illustrates that participants understand the power that parents have over districts and ultimately teachers' decisions. By stating the ways districts limit what teachers can say due to the potential of parent pushback, it is clear Jessica is aware of the power dynamics between schools and parents, and this will inform her behavior in the classroom.

Additionally, Jessica goes on to describe how the current socio-political moment informs teacher professionalism in schools. She states:

> We're at a very interesting time in the country we live in. There's a lot of stuff that's deemed political or stuff, that it shouldn't be political, but people make it political. […] you have to be respectful […] I feel that's something that is very important to being professional 'cause you can go into a district or a classroom and not know anyone, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't be held accountable for how you treat people. Regardless of the differences in ethnicity, gender, physical ability, and intellectual ability.

These two examples from Jessica demonstrate how she perceives that political topics in the classroom are unwelcome, and that teachers do not decide what is deemed acceptable in the classroom. Instead, external relations like "parents" and other "people" make these decisions for educators. Further, Jessica's questioning of what is politicized and how it connects to professionalism illustrates that she feels teachers must change their behavior to accommodate the external pressure to respect parents' pressure to only discuss topics they decide are appropriate.

Arely notices the ways that whiteness influences the culture of avoidance for politicized topics in schools. She adds, "Because of opposing views, and like the dominant culture that is in schools right now, like white teachers dominate the field. Like as soon as we start talking about it, it's kind of going against most of their beliefs." Arely's naming how whiteness dominates school culture because most elementary teachers in the country are white points to how whiteness informs the behavior of all teachers, regardless of their racial identity. This also aligns with teacher preparation literature, which positions programs as centralizing whiteness (Sleeter, 2016; Tolbert & Eichelberger, 2017; Zemblyas, 2018). Arely also positions families as having power to make complaints about teachers and wanting to make sure they approved of what their child is learning. Taken with Jessica's points, it is clear participants feel external pressure to avoid discussing political topics in their classrooms. Again, these examples illustrate the participants' knowledge of the socio-cultural and historical contexts in schools because they recognize how whiteness informs teacher behavior (Bell & Busey, 2021; Marom, 2019).

Diverse Preservice Elementary Teachers Believe They Must be Apolitical

In addition to naming the ways whiteness dictates teacher behavior; participants also describe how they must remain apolitical, and they describe being politicized for their systemically marginalized identities.

Participants point out that holding systemically marginalized identities means that diverse PSTs will be under greater scrutiny in their preparation program and fieldwork. For example, Arely points out the ways that she feels her identities are politicized, yet she cannot be a political actor in the classroom. When asked what it means to be political in the classroom, Arely describes:

> If you bring up any of those identities like we were talking about like being queer, Latino, like coming from an immigrant family then all of a sudden like the tone of the conversation changes. […] it just becomes political.

Arely's description of the sudden tone changes when bringing up systemically marginalized identities reveals how topics are subtly policed in education settings. No one needs to explicitly say politicized identities and topics should be avoided, instead, the conversation becomes tense. Additionally, Arely describes that she wishes she could discuss her systemically marginalized identities in school. She states:

> I definitely wish that we could be [political] I think, like not in the sense of like oh it's very painted as like you're indoctrinating the children. But it's more like, I want to be comfortable explaining to them what my identity is and then not feeling like my job will be on the line for them to understand me.

Arely's diverse identities in the elementary teaching field – being a woman of color, low income, a child of immigrants, and a queer person, makes her feel like she can't be herself in the school setting because she could stand to lose her job. Her point about the misconception of explaining identity to children being seen as indoctrination reveals how discussing systemically marginalized identities is considered pushing a political agenda. Further, her point about not being comfortable explaining her identity without her job being threatened indicates that preservice teachers with marginalized identities are not allowed to share who they are with their students. Arely's wish to stay politically neutral aligns with Keegan & Vaughan's (2023) findings that PSTs wish to stay apolitical.

Overall, the participants equate political neutrality with having greater social capital in their preparation program and schools. This is evidenced in the traditional depiction of teachers in their drawings, and how each person describes their trepidation for teaching political topics in their future classroom. Given their politicized identities, participants feel it is better to uphold the status quo as teachers rather than cover radical topics. The data points to how the current political climate encourages diverse PSTs to diminish their identities in the classroom in order to be perceived as *professional*.

DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

The participants tie being apolitical with professionalism, which also means a higher social status in the field. Prior literature about supporting preservice teachers as they learn to navigate the political nature of teaching suggests that PSTs need role models to help them envision what this work could look like (McCardle et al., 2022; Riley & Solic, 2017). Journell (2016) goes so far as to say that teachers and students benefit by being more politically outspoken in the classroom. However, these studies are from predominately white institutions with mostly white participants. They do not consider the implications of political disclosure for preservice teachers with systemically marginalized identities. As teacher preparation programs continue their efforts to diversify, it will be imperative to consider how to support diverse PSTs as they begin teaching political and complicated topics in their methods courses, field placements, and future classrooms.

Teacher preparation programs must contend with the political nature of the field and the contradictory goals of systemically excluding perspectives of diverse PSTs while also decrying their commitment to justice. As Souto Manning and Emdin (2023) point out, it is important for teacher educators to consider the ways that teachers of Color were historically pushed out of the field, which stands in stark contrast to the current programmatic aims of teacher

preparation programs that boast social justice and equity, when they ultimately uphold whiteness. Arely, Jessica, and Anne make these same assertions when they point out the restrictions they face in their urban teacher preparation programs. The participants describe political neutrality as a way for them to stay under the radar and in good standing with colleagues and parents. As such, teacher educators consider the identities of the teachers they are encouraging to engage in political conversations in schools during such contentious times.

Arely names the ways whiteness informs her discomfort in expressing her full (Latina, queer, low-income, and bilingual) self in the classroom, therefore, teacher preparation programs must find a way to "contend with the domination of Whiteness in course content and in student teaching placements" (Churvu et al., 2015, p. 259). This could begin with studies of programmatic content and policies and inquiring into how teacher educators' practices and beliefs may be upholding these norms.

The U.S. has seen an influx of anti-CRT and anti-equity policies in schools, and the participants of this study feel the effects of that kind of legislation while they are developing their professional identities as teachers. LoBue and Douglas (2023) describe this phenomenon as making schools hostile spaces to discuss race, and as the participants of this study point out, the phenomenon extends to discussing any systemically marginalized identity. This has implications for teacher preparation programs and policymakers in teacher preparation. First, preparation programs that tout social justice and equity must prepare diverse preservice teachers for the tensions they will experience in the field. While teacher educators often encourage PSTs to incorporate the ideals of justice and equality in their classrooms and curricula, we must also consider how the backlash diverse PSTs may experience in the current political moment is more substantial than their privileged peers with dominant identities. As we are in a second and even more conservative Trump presidency, future studies in teacher preparation should explore how systemically marginalized preservice teachers experience their program requirements amidst the rise of fascism in the U.S.

Further, policymakers in teacher education must consider how anti-CRT and anti-equity regulations inform preservice teachers' professional identity development. Standards for teacher preparation and preservice teachers' competencies must include training for PSTs and teacher educators to learn how to navigate discussions of systemically marginalized identities in the classroom in the current political moment. This is even more imperative under the current presidential administration, which has already brought more conservative limitations on teachers, curricula, and academic freedom (Waddington et al., 2024). Policy studies that address exclusionary teacher preparation policies that lead to racism, sexism, and classism in the field would help uncover some of the ways that these policies impact diverse preservice teachers.

This qualitative study has several limitations. First and foremost, the small and homogenous participant pool from one teacher preparation program in one red state limits the transferability of the findings. Future studies would benefit from having a greater, more diverse sample size across multiple politically conservative states. Second, the data from this study prioritized focus group data, open-ended surveys, and participant-generated artwork solely from preservice teachers. The teacher preparation program documents were used only for triangulation purposes. More robust studies on this topic should incorporate perspectives from teacher educators as well as teacher preparation program policies.

CONCLUSION

Tying professionalism to being apolitical in the current climate is especially telling of the circumstances for diverse PSTs in the U.S. Participants' positioning political neutrality as a way to uphold dominant identities poses a unique challenge for university teacher educators and teacher preparation programs. If teacher educators hope to embolden PSTs to teach justice-oriented and controversial topics in their classroom, we need to develop systems to support diverse PSTs who are interested in doing that work. As teacher preparation programs prepare preservice teachers of all identities, it is imperative that they consider the risks that diverse PSTs take discussing their identities in their methods courses and field placements. Therefore, teacher educators should take special care to elicit feedback from PSTs that includes the perspectives of diverse PSTs in their courses and program revisions.

Similarly, policymakers in education and teacher preparation should consider safeguarding diverse teachers and students alike so they feel comfortable sharing themselves with their students and peers. Scholars of education policy should explore the ways that teacher preparation programs exclude diverse perspectives. Policymakers should

incorporate systems that provide opportunities for diverse PSTs of all identities to provide feedback on how policies impact their experiences in preparation programs.

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