

# In-school discussion about activism not consistent, research shows

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Recent research about how teacher education programs teach about activism revealed that discussions about protest, activism and advocacy are not being avoided, yet many schools are not overly proactive about

inclusion of activism within their curriculum.

Stephanie Schroeder, assistant professor of education (social studies education) in Penn State's College of Education, said with a wave of teacher strikes over the past few years, she and her collaborators wondered how [teacher educators](#) were approaching activism with their students.

She and two colleagues presented "Activism is Advocating: How Educator Preparation Programs Teach About Teacher Activism" at the virtual American Educational Research Association (AERA) conference in April and followed that with "Pandemics, Social Justice and Social Media: Antibias, Antiracist Edu-Influences Instagram Messaging During COVID-19." Her AERA roundtable discussion was "Technology's Role in Culturally Responsive Instruction and Antiracism."

The research on the first of Schroeder's two projects—conducted with Assistant Professor Todd McCardle and Associate Professor Stacey Korson from Eastern Kentucky University—focused particularly on states that experienced a high number of teacher strikes. Schroeder explained that the primary method of including discussions of activism they discovered was through discussion of current events.

They queried how—and if—these teacher educators include discussion of activism if it is not appearing in the news. They also questioned whether [social justice](#) teaching practices, professional advocacy (lobbying for change through lawmakers) and voting are adequate.

Data sources include transcripts of 10 interviews with teacher educators and survey data from 142 faculty members from 43 institutions across four states with high profile teacher activism, Schroeder said. Findings indicate that the participants recognized tension within their institutions regarding how to educate (if at all) future teachers to advocate for their

chosen profession.

"I think there was an absence of knowledge of how institutions sought to address teacher activism and advocacy. Many teacher educators who participated in the study independently addressed activism with their students, but they indicated that there was no coherent messaging from the institution or college or department regarding activism in general or specific protests and/or strikes," Schroeder said. "This, I think, is a problem given the increasing attacks on public education."

The methods by which teachers who were surveyed addressed activism with pre-service teachers, according to Schroeder, included emphasizing that activism is part of their duty to the profession; teaching about education advocacy at the ballot box and through representatives; discussing current events that involve teacher activism as well as local protests; and teaching about social justice teaching practices, suggesting that activism occurs through teaching.

Schroeder said she studied the [Opt Out Florida Movement](#), in which parents in Florida protested high-stakes standardized testing in 2016, while she was earning her doctorate at the University of Florida. That sparked her interest in her second project on how people use [social media](#) to organize and learn and how they take their online learning and networking and translate that into actual action to make their desired change.

During her research for "Pandemics, Social Justice and Social Media: Antibias, Antiracist Edu-Influences Instagram Messaging During COVID-19," she and three colleagues analyzed 551 publicly published Instagram posts made by 11 anti-bias, anti-racist (ABAR) edu-influencers over an eight-week period in spring 2020 as the COVID-19 pandemic and renewed [activism](#) for racial justice in the U.S. were unfolding. (An edu-influencer is an education-focused social media

influencer with established independent credibility on the topic of education.)

"My colleagues (Assistant Professor Catharyn Shelton from Northern Arizona University, Assistant Professor Shelly Curcio from the University of South Carolina and Associate Professor Jeff Carpenter from Elon University) and I have been studying education influencers on Instagram for the past two years, starting with a [teacher](#) collective called Teach Your Heart Out," Schroeder said.

"These edu-influencers did not have an explicit anti-racist stance, although certainly some posted about social justice and multicultural education. When COVID-19 forced schools to go remote, we wondered how influencers with an explicit anti-bias, anti-racist lens would respond, given the racial inequities that COVID-19 highlighted," Schroeder said.

She said they didn't set out to identify elements of culturally relevant pedagogy, but they watched the edu-influencers post about academic success, cultural competence and critical consciousness development—the three domains of culturally relevant pedagogy.

"We saw the edu-influencers posting in ways that we believe might educate their audience to support the academic success and critical consciousness development of their students," Schroeder said.

"While we are encouraged by the messaging of ABAR edu-influencers in terms of culturally relevant pedagogy, it's equally troubling that this messaging is commodified—and in some sense packaged—to be sold to teachers in a piecemeal sort of way, worksheet by worksheet or post by post," Schroeder added.

"Combining anti-racism and culturally relevant pedagogy with capitalist promotional content could lead some followers to believe that culturally

relevant pedagogy is something that can be bought or consumed rather than engaged with intellectually. The high level of promotional content is not a problem only with ABAR influencers on Instagram, but a finding many who study teachers on social media have found across platforms."

Schroeder believes social media will continue to play a vital role among educational activists and is "heartened" to see a theory of practice among edu-influencers that can potentially influence their audience to change their teaching practices to better serve historically marginalized students.

"I think those of us who educate future teachers should take note of how social media also educates teachers and think through ways we can teach about and through social media," she said. "At the same time, there is also a real need to critique the platforms: to teach future teachers how algorithms work, why influencers are constantly promoting companies and products, and how we can see through some of that promotional content to identify the posts that have real merit and ability to create change."

**More information:** Stephanie Schroeder et al, Education Activism in the Trump-DeVos Era: Opt Out Florida's Leaders Respond to the 2016 Election, *The Educational Forum* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/00131725.2020.1767248](https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2020.1767248)

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