

# Perceptions of Political Literacy among Aspiring School Leaders in a Rural Mid-West University Preparation Program

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This case study investigates aspiring school leaders' perception of political literacy in educational leadership, offering critical recommendations for principal preparation programs, policymakers, and future research. As a qualitative study, the case addresses integrating political literacy policy, developing relevant professional development opportunities, and initiating future research to gauge the possible impact of political literacy as a practice and subject. Moreover, findings reveal the challenges and strategies for implementing political literacy in school settings through the lens of experienced teachers with aspirations to be school leaders. The research suggests that a comprehensive approach emphasizing political literacy may empower aspiring school leaders, improve school-community relations, and promote an informed citizenry. This study signifies a crucial step towards cultivating politically literate school leaders equipped to foster democratic engagement and critical thinking within school communities.

Keywords: political literacy, educational leadership, principal preparation programs, school-community relations, policy development

Public schools frequently grapple with a political milieu characterized by diverse opinions, which can pose challenges to the overarching goal of fostering an informed citizenry. This predicament is deeply rooted in Dewey's (1927) assertion about the imperative for the public "to find and identify itself" (p. 216). The persistence of this challenge is exacerbated by a discernible deficiency in what can be termed as political literacy. This deficiency is evidenced by polling and media reports indicating that students may graduate without acquiring fundamental civic literacy, lacking proficiency in the essential aspects of citizenship and constitutional knowledge (Fitzgerald et al., 2021; Shapiro & Brown, 2018; Weerts et al., 2022).

Compounding the issue, some argue that teachers often find themselves constrained by mandated curricula that historically prioritize individualistic ideologies at the expense of cultivating a citizenry empowered with democratic literacy (Apple, 1979; Carey, 2019; Dewey, 1916; Gutman, 1995; Levinson, 2018; Onosko, 2011). As a result, many graduates enter the public sphere with a deficit in the fluency necessary to navigate the choppy waters of democracy (Mickey, 2022; Nicoli et al., 2022; Trend, 2013; Warren, 2018). This systemic challenge, underscored by both historical perspectives and contemporary research findings, highlights the ongoing struggle to align educational objectives with the imperative of producing politically literate citizens capable of contributing meaningfully and fully to democratic societies.

The 2021 pandemic-era UK Shout Out report stated that political and media literacy education were "vital for fostering a generation of critically engaged and emotionally resilient citizens who can tackle misinformation narratives and safeguard our democracy" (p. 2). As a concern of citizenship and civic engagement, political literacy, however, is not only viewed as a future concern for students after graduation. It is presented as a critical and current need, one bearing responsibility for instilling and developing democratic attitudes amongst all people, including the key transferable skills. As the Executive Summary of the report asserted, the COVID-19 crisis emphasized an urgency for developing Political Literacy. The initial reaction of global governments, including in the US and in the UK, to the pandemic demonstrated that "politics fundamentally impacts every aspect of our lives" (p. 2). The authors indicate that this impact includes not only our health, but also our jobs and our social lives.

As a concept, political literacy prepares individuals to better comprehend how democratic institutions function. Political literacy equips individuals with the knowledge of diverse avenues through which they can contribute to positive societal change and enhance their personal lives by actively participating in the democratic process. This involvement may take the form of casting votes in elections, establishing connections with both local and national political representatives, or engaging in civic action. Furthermore, political literacy promotes the development of crucial skills such as fostering dialogue and engaging in respectful disagreement, which are essential in navigating a pluralistic society.

Political literacy has been a concern in the United Kingdom since the late 1970s. The Hansard Society report, "Political Education and Political Literacy," speaks to the prioritizing of literacy among future citizens in the UK. The report posited,

[The] political part of education is primarily, as in any possible moral education, an education in what differing viewpoints are held, who holds them, why, in what contexts and with what restraints. This may seem platitudinous. But how often is political education, if approached at all explicitly, approached primarily through a study of constitutional rules and institutional forms? The cart is put before the horse. (Crick &

Porter, 1978, p. 4)

Today, we are still asking if political literacy is being taught explicitly in school and if so whether the scope and sequence of most curricula still get the cart before the horse. Evidence indicates that political literacy is taught in countries such as Japan and England (Davies et al., 2013). However, the effectiveness (and the motives) of this teaching has remained in question (Breslin, 2023; Brocklehurst, 2015; Ljunggren & Ünemar, 2010). Additionally, although a long-discussed topic, there has been little work in providing a universally accepted definition of political literacy (Alexander, 2009; Dudley & Gitelson, 2002; Lockyear, 2008).

Regardless of the degree to which political literacy is currently embraced internationally, or the particulars of its nuanced meaning, it remains a *glocal* (a local and a global) concern (Fyfe, 2007; Hopkins & Coster, 2019; Milliken & Smith, 2022; Moodley, 2005; Moodley & Adam, 2004). Brooks and Normore (2010) identify political literacy as one of nine requisite critical literacies for being a glocally minded educational leader in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Likewise, Eriksen (2020) has called out a need for political literacy among experts and expert agencies.

With this in mind, we questioned both the place of political literacy in K12 curricula and in developing/preparing the school leader for their role as an instructional leader in ensuring the way in which it is taught and in modeling political literacy in decision making. In this study we examine data from a program-based case study at a university in the rural U.S. Midwest. We analyzed the reflections of 30 aspiring school leaders across 3 leadership preparation cohorts concerning how they conceptualize political literacy and what the concept might mean for public school leaders.

### **Research Questions**

This case study asks: *How do aspiring school leaders conceptualize political literacy in K12 schools?* This primary research question is explored through four secondary questions.

1. How important do aspiring school leaders think political literacy is to their future role as instructional leaders?
2. Do aspiring school leaders feel it is critical to encourage political literacy as part of the culture of the schools that they will lead?
3. Given the political division in the U.S., do aspiring leaders believe it possible to integrate political literacy into curriculum and pedagogy?
4. What are the obstacles that aspiring school leaders perceive in attempting to integrate and implement political literacy?

### **Importance of the Study as a Public Concern**

According to Cassel and Lo (1997), “because democratic governments attempt to teach political literacy in schools, our understanding of how it develops has practical implications for public education” (p. 317). More recently, Brooks and Normore (2010) asserted, “a politically literate educational leader is familiar both with various formal and informal processes by which people engage local and national issues and the outcomes and consequences of said processes” (pp. 55-56). They argued that “political literacy means developing an understanding of how to act as empowered participants in these processes that influence local, national, and international

decisions and policies” (p. 56).

As far back as the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Dewey (1909) reflected that education was a public business. As he articulated,

It is one of the complaints of the schoolmaster that the public does not defer to his professional opinion as completely as it does to that of practitioners in other professions. [. . .] Education is a public business with us, in a sense that the protection and restoration of personal health or legal rights are not. To an extent characteristic of no other institution, save that of the state itself, the school has power to modify the social order. And under our political system, it is the right of each individual to have a voice in the making of social policies as, indeed, he has a vote in the determination of political affairs. If this be true, education is primarily a public business, and only secondarily a specialized vocation. (p. vi).

Political literacy, then, is arguably integral to effective school policymaking, as it helps educational leaders understand how to engage with and respond to the needs of various stakeholders. As well, political literacy provides school leaders with a framework to analyze and shape policy decisions that benefit schools in the long-term, providing access to resources and support for their stakeholders.

### **What is Political Literacy?**

Political literacy is defined as skills and understanding regarding a given socio-political text (both content and context), including political messages and artifacts. Denver and Hands (1990) viewed political literacy as “the knowledge and understanding of the political process and political issues which enables people to perform their roles as citizens effectively” (p. 263). Cassel and Lo (1997) conceptualized political literacy as “the potential for informed political participation” (p. 317). They viewed political literacy as “virtually the same concept” as political expertise. Parallels of political literacy were also drawn among the concepts of *ideological awareness*, *political efficacy*, *informed citizenry*, and *civic competence*.

Perhaps the most extensive work on political literacy is Fredic Gale’s (1994) *Political Literacy*. Gale defined political *illiteracy* as “the failure of citizens to obtain justice because of their inability to understand what their rights are and, more importantly, how to express their demand for a transformative justice” (p. 2). Although Gale’s work focuses on legal theory and rhetorical philosophy, he presented political literacy as “a critical consciousness that will radically interrogate political and cultural institutions and relationships as a matter of course” (p. 156).

Kahne and Westheimer (2014) stressed that political literacy was “a commitment to equity and justice, engagement in local and global issues, and a belief in the capacity of individuals and groups to create change” (p. 34). They reasoned that political literacy should not be limited to mere understanding of an existing political system but should also foster a sense of personal agency, a connection to community, and one’s desire to advocate for and address societal challenges. Similarly, Hess and McAvoy (2015) viewed political literacy as “the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to participate effectively in political life, including an understanding of political institutions, processes, and issues” (p. 2). Political literacy, then, is more than mere knowledge of political facts. Like basic literacy, it relies on reinforcing critical habits of mind for decoding, comprehending, and interpreting meaningful political content. It

requires the ability to critically evaluate information and media, engage habits of civil discourse, participate in political processes, and make informed decisions.

Perveen and Awan (2017) extended the notion of political literacy “as an international dimension of citizenship education in the schools’ curriculum” (p. 188). They identify ten key elements of political literacy: (1) knowledge of human rights, (2) knowledge of national constitution, (3) knowledge of cultural and linguistic diversity of the society, (4) participation in the public debate, (5) participation in the forum of peaceful protest, (6) participation in interest groups, (7) participation in election/voting, (8) participation in services for community, (9) political efficacy, and (10) any experience of democracy at school level (Perveen & Awan, 2017).

Relatedly, Brooks and Normore (2010) listed political literacy among nine *glocal* literacies necessary in rethinking educational leadership for 21st-century schools. They argued, “Educational leaders must develop a working understanding of politics, a base of knowledge that can also be called political literacy” (p. 55). However, political literacy, as with one’s ability to read, may be more than only basic knowledge of governmental processes. Political literacy may be better described as a habit of mind (Costa & Kallick, 2000) or habit of thinking (Dewey, 1910, 1916). Political literacy enables citizens to overcome political limitations by reading situations and scenarios and making informed decisions relating to civic and political activities that relate to those circumstances. This includes but is not limited to decisions related to voting, ways of participating in campaigns and protests, advocating for candidates or stakeholders, and engagement in activism. It may involve the same habits of fluency as those implicated in reading automaticity. This may refer to an individual’s proficiency to reflect and act politically.

From a Deweyan perspective, political literacy may be more about developing habits for interpreting textual structures of policies and making important political inferences, drawing relevant and rational conclusions (Author 1, forthcoming). Although it entails the functioning of governments and other political entities and understanding issues facing a political organization or governing body, it also encompasses the ability to critically analyze political information. Therefore, the capacity to distinguish between factual and opinion-based assertions, to analyze the effects of policies on different stakeholders, and to recognize dominant and subtle power dynamics are implicit in political literacy.

### **Political Literacy and K12 Schools**

The Shout Out report (2021) indicated that political literacy in particular is critical to ensuring that students graduate “with a clear understanding of what politics is and how our society works” (p. 2). As a concern of citizenship and civic engagement, political literacy, however, is not only viewed as a future concern for students after graduation. It is presented as a critical and current need, one bearing responsibility for instilling and developing democratic attitudes amongst all people, including the key transferable skills.

The UK-based report operationalized political literacy as a means to equip “young people with the necessary knowledge of how our democratic institutions operate” (p. 6). The report framed political literacy as a set of diverse methods through which individuals can contribute to positive societal change and improve their lives by actively participating in the democratic process. This involvement may include voting during elections, establishing connections with local and national political representatives, or participating in civic action. Additionally, political

literacy encourages the development of essential skills such as fostering dialogue and engaging in respectful disagreement, crucial abilities in navigating a democratic society. However, political literacy, as a type of literacy, may importantly indicate a set of habits that allow the individual to read and comprehend political discourse, partisan messaging, propaganda, and perhaps even disinformation.

Political education and political literacy have been a concern in the United Kingdom since the late 1970s. According to the Hansard Report (Crick & Porter, 1978), political literacy was considered to be the knowledge, skills, and understanding necessary for individuals to effectively participate in and navigate the political landscape. It encompasses the ability to critically analyze political information, understand political processes and institutions, and engage in informed democratic participation.

Political literacy can be applied to K12 school settings by encouraging educational leaders to utilize their knowledge of the various stakeholders' needs to create effective policies. This includes policies that promote equitable access to educational resources, support for teachers and faculty, and engagement with the surrounding community. Educators can use political literacy to evaluate existing policies and explore new solutions that address the challenges faced by students, families, and those living in the community. By creating an environment where these voices are heard and supported, educators can foster meaningful and respectful dialogue between all members of the school community.

### **Educational Leadership and Political Literacy**

Political literacy is important for educational leaders because it helps them to be better informed, evaluate policies objectively and make decisions that are beneficial for their stakeholders. In particular, it enables them to understand the various power dynamics and how they affect their stakeholders, allowing them to develop more equitable policies and practices. Furthermore, having a better understanding of the political environment allows educational leaders to anticipate potential changes in the political landscape and plan for them, ensuring that their decisions are made with a long-term perspective (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). This improved level of knowledge and political acumen ensures that educational institutions are well equipped to respond to the needs of their students, faculty, and communities in an increasingly complex and interconnected world (Kahne & Westheimer, 2016).

The relationship between decision making and political literacy is critical for the development of effective strategies for educational leadership. By understanding and considering the changing political environment, decision makers can make informed decisions that will benefit the institution in the long-term, providing students, faculty, and communities with access to educational resources. Political literacy helps ensure that educational leaders are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to navigate the ever-evolving political landscape, giving them an opportunity to address the needs of their constituencies effectively and efficiently (Brooks & Normore, 2010).

With political shifts at the local level, such as seen in decisioning at the local education level regarding pandemic policies and book banning (Dunn, 2022; Oberman, 2022; Pomerance, 2020; Rehn, 2022), the connection between political literacy and how a school's stakeholders impact policy has grown more obvious. With this knowledge, educational leaders can develop

effective policies that address the needs of their students, faculty, and other stakeholders in the community (Westheimer & Kahn, 2004; Kahn & Westheimer, 2016). Political literacy provides educational leaders with the framework and necessary skills to inform and shape policy decisions that benefit the institution in the long-term, providing access to educational resources and support for their constituents.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a case study approach (Stake, 1995) to examine the reflections of aspiring school leaders enrolled in a graduate-level politics of educational leadership course. A single case study is a research design that uses a single case to study a phenomenon. Yin (2017) argued that single cases are relevant under certain circumstances, such as when studying a critical case. According to Yin, the purpose of case studies is to expand theory through analytical generalization, not statistical generalization. He also argued that case studies are only generalizable to theoretical propositions—such as political literacy—and not to populations. In this study, the case being studied is delineated by a principal preparation program in the College of Education of a research university located in the rural Midwest of the United States.

The case proposition rests on the idea that school leaders must have a deeper understanding of the implications and possibilities of political literacy if they are going to lead staff in implementing instructional initiatives (e.g., curriculum development, pedagogical strategies, etc.) that ensure students learn to be politically literate. The logic for linking data to propositions and criteria for interpreting the findings are aspects of the analysis.

By utilizing case study design, the inquiry aimed to gain insights into the perceptions and understandings of aspiring school leaders in a leadership preparation course regarding political literacy and its relevance for their work as instructional leaders. The analysis of the qualitative data sought to uncover obstacles that school leaders may face in integrating political literacy and explore potential strategies to address these challenges.

### **Participants**

The participants consisted of graduate students from three separate sections (i.e., three program cohorts) enrolled in a politics and policy of education course over a period of three years. The course in which the participants were enrolled was offered respectively during the spring semesters of 2020, 2021, and a summer session of 2022. These individuals were 30 aspiring school leaders who were K-12 practitioners with diverse backgrounds and experiences. Cohort members represented a range of professional educational backgrounds, gender diversity, and international perspectives. Their experiences as K-12 practitioners and their aspirations to become school leaders provided valuable insights for the research on political literacy in educational leadership.

### **Data Collection**

A researcher-developed qualitative online questionnaire was utilized as the data collection instrument. This questionnaire was administered to volunteering students in a Midwest university who were taking a graduate-level politics in education course for educational administrators. The study focused on collecting and analyzing written responses from 30 aspiring school leaders who provided reflections on the concept of political literacy. Data were collected over three years primarily during the COVID-19 pandemic when students were taking the course asynchronously.

Participants were asked to select and review three of six publications on the topic of political literacy (Figure 1). Hyperlinks were embedded in the options to access the articles. After reading their three self-selected articles, they were prompted by the online questionnaire to reflect on the concept of political literacy then to respond to the questions to openly discuss their reflections. The written responses provided by the participants served as the primary data for this qualitative study.

### Figure 1

#### *Political Literacy Readings*

1. Denver, D., & Hands, G. (1990). Does studying politics make a difference? The political knowledge, attitudes and perceptions of school students. *British Journal of Political Science*, 20(2), 263-279.
2. Cassel, C. A., & Lo, C. C. (1997). Theories of political literacy. *Political Behavior*, 19, 317-335.
3. O'Toole, T., Marsh, D., & Jones, S. (2003). Political literacy cuts both ways: The politics of non-participation among young people. *The political quarterly*, 74(3), 349-360.
4. Alexander, R. C. (2009). Political literacy as information literacy. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 3(1), 3.
5. Perveen, M., & Awan, A. S. (2017). Analysis of Curriculum about Political Literacy as a Dimension of Citizenship Education. *Bulletin of Education and Research*, 39(1), 187-202.
6. Tam, H. (2016). *Political literacy and civic thoughtfulness*. The Centre for Welfare Reform. [Read/review only a section of your choice from this document]

### Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using an inductive coding approach (Saldaña, 2021; Stake, 1995). Initially, open coding, using primarily in vivo codes, was employed to initially identify the data. Subsequently, axial coding was used to establish connections between these initial codes. Finally, selective coding was applied to identify code patterns and develop the final emergent themes.



During the process of coding, we followed Yin’s (2018) five phases of qualitative data analysis: compiling data, disassembling data, reassembling data, interpreting the meaning. Written responses were coded using inductive procedures, beginning with in vivo and open coding for the first cycle, followed by axial coding to make connections between initial codes. Finally, we used selective coding to identify code patterns (Saldaña, 2021). In this final phase of coding, integral to the identification of meaningful patterns which guided our logic for interpretation, categories were woven together into groups of codes and used to develop the final emergent themes (Patton, 2015; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018).

**Table 1**  
*Axial Coding to Selective Codes/Themes*

<b>Axial Coding</b>	<b>Selective Themes</b>
Importance of political literacy as a concept Must be the part of entire schools’ knowledge development/sharing process Supports good teaching and instructional leadership Hard to deliver in a time of highly mediated political divide	<b><i>Political Literacy as Essential</i></b>
Content/curriculum Pedagogical practices School policies & procedures Professional development	<b><i>Integration In Educational Processes</i></b>
Possible but must be thoughtful Social studies and related subjects Direct and indirect approaches Teachers’ neutrality and bias Collaboration with stakeholders Dialogues inside and outside the schools	<b><i>Political Literacy as Critical Thinking</i></b>
Highly Divided External Political Environment (Impeded democratic dialogue) Parental resistance	<b><i>Challenges and Obstacles to Teaching/Modeling Political Literacy</i></b>

Teacher competence and biases	
Respect of differences	
Open communication	
Critical dialogues	<b><i>Creating a Supportive Environment for Teaching Political Literacy</i></b>
Problem/Case analysis	
Involve multiple viewpoints (stakeholders)	
Conflict resolution	

### **Findings**

Findings speak to a common definition among aspiring leaders that can be stated as: Political literacy does not mean requiring students to take a stance on political issues or to force them to make a distinction between a conservative or liberal viewpoint but, instead, it requires educators to provide students with “the basic skills, understandings, and attitudes required to take an active and well-educated role in a democratic society” (New School Civics, 2013, para. 1).

The themes that emerged from the analysis were then aligned to the research questions to ensure that we could best address the questions driving the study. These thematic units were: 1) Political Literacy is Essential, 2) Integration of Political Literacy into the Educational Processes, 3) Political Literacy as Critical Thinking, 4) Challenges and Obstacles to Teaching/Modeling Political Literacy, and 5) Need to Create Supportive Environments for Teaching Political Literacy.

#### **Political Literacy is Essential**

Participants consistently viewed political literacy as a concept that was essential for all stakeholders, particularly themselves as future leaders. As one participant shared, “I would venture to say that political literacy is more than important but rather vital.” Another participant stated, “Political literacy is crucial for having an impact on society in any form.” Yet another participant asserted, “I believe that teaching political literacy to students is a responsibility to ourselves.”

Teaching and modeling political literacy as a critical element of education is essential for several reasons. It equips students with the necessary knowledge and skills to understand and engage in the political processes that shape their lives. By fostering political literacy, educators empower others to make informed decisions and engage actively as citizens in their school districts and democratic societies. An exemplary quote from one educator was, “The society in the United States is very passionate about politics, but as a whole, the society is lacking a passion for political literacy.”

Based on their selected readings, participants viewed political literacy as a phenomenon closely linked to civic competence, and they understood it as a concept that involves understanding political institutions, processes, and values. For them, being politically literate meant individuals were able to engage in informed decision-making, contribute to public

discussions, and actively participate in democratic practices. But they also connected political literacy to critical thinking, media literacy, and information literacy. Participants felt that political literacy encourages critical literacies, enabling individuals to analyze political information, media sources, and political messages. It equips students with the ability to discern bias, evaluate evidence, and form well-informed opinions.

Fostering democratic participation was seen as a major goal of developing political literacy in themselves and their students. Political literacy empowers individuals to participate in democratic processes effectively. It enables them to understand the importance of voting, engage in public discussions, and advocate for their rights and interests. Additionally, as indicated by participant responses, there is a consistent perspective that political literacy is instrumental in countering misinformation and diminishing polarization. Political literacy can perhaps help individuals navigate the complex information landscape, including developing habits needed for identifying disinformation. In turn, this holds potential, at least in the minds of the participants, to curtail some degree of polarization. In an era of heightened and overly mediated polarization coupled with the spread of fake news, political literacy provides a critical lens for assessing information sources, recognizing biased and sensational reporting, and differentiating between basic fact and opinion.

Political literacy is essential for enhancing social cohesion and cultural acceptance. Political literacy contributes to social cohesion by fostering understanding, empathy, and tolerance among individuals with diverse perspectives. It promotes respectful dialogue, the ability to engage in civil discourse, and an appreciation for diverse viewpoints. Modeling and teaching political literacy as a critical element of leading in the educational setting is essential for working with others to become informed, active, and engaged citizens. However, it is also necessary in both the preparation and practice of educators and school leaders. Political literacy fosters democratic participation, counters misinformation, and promotes social cohesion. This is as critical for school-community spaces as it is in the classroom domain. According to one study participant, “It is our duty as teachers to be politically literate and to prepare students to be active in the democratic process.” By equipping students and their teachers with political literacy a commitment can be made to the development and maintenance of democratic societies that thrive on informed and morally responsible citizenry.

### **Integration into the Educational Processes**

The integration of political literacy into educational processes of a school, such as curriculum development and pedagogical strategies, involves incorporating political literacy education vertically and horizontally—across various subjects and grade levels. Participants recommended this approach to ensure that students receive comprehensive instruction and exposure to political concepts, democratic values, and civic engagement. But they also hinted at the need for politically literate school leaders and educators as the means of making this possible. As one participant asserted, “I think as instructional leaders, it is very important that we not only encourage political literacy in our teachers and staff, but in the curriculum of the schools we lead.”

Political literacy can be integrated into multiple subject areas, such as social studies, history, government, civics, and language arts only when leadership and teachers are informed

in not only governmental processes but also in the way in which subjects have political significance. By taking an interdisciplinary approach, educators can reinforce political literacy skills and concepts through various contexts and perspectives. One participant shared, “I think given the division in the political landscape of the nation, it is imperative we integrate political literacy into various subjects.” However, another participant indicated that some schools may already be implementing strategies to integrate some aspects of political literacy into class discussion: “Teaching students how to disagree respectfully is a topic my school has been working on.” This integration allows students to see the connections between political issues and other disciplines, such as math and science, fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

It was also important to participants that school leaders stay abreast of current events and “read” those events for context clues. Integrating political literacy involves making connections between political concepts and current events. Teachers and leaders can employ complex case studies and real-life scenarios to increase understanding of the ways in which political decisions impact society. In turn this can influence how school principals make educational leadership decisions in their practice. By analyzing current events and engaging in discussions and debates, stakeholders develop a nuanced comprehension and make inferences of political issues.

Also acknowledged was the role political literacy has in principals’ external leadership. Their ability to engage their community was to a great extent viewed as something dependent on leaders’ ability to decode, comprehend, and infer political situations. Integrating political literacy into the educational processes of a school should involve fostering community partnerships, dialogues, and collaborations. Inviting local politicians, community leaders, and experts to speak to staff and students, organizing forums to better understand government institutions (locally and beyond), and participating in community service projects with a political focus provide all stakeholders, from principals to students, with firsthand experiences and opportunities to engage with the political sphere. This also included using one’s leadership position to create spaces for students to be involved in school-based decision making. This is supported by a participant’s reflection, “Giving students the opportunity to be involved in decision making in and around the school is preparing them for their lives in a democratic society.”

Incorporating democratic governance principles into decision-making processes at the school level also models democratic practices and reinforces the importance of political literacy. Creating a school culture that values political literacy and democratic principles is vital. This can involve establishing democratic practices within the school, such as student councils, mock elections, and opportunities for student voice and participation. For example, “Developing teachers and teaching students how to disagree respectfully is a topic my school has been working on,” and recognizing that leaders can “encourage stakeholders to be involved in a democratic organization and process in a school setting.” By integrating political literacy into the educational processes of a school, educational leaders can cultivate an informed and engaged citizenry. This approach prepares all citizens at all stages of life to actively participate in democratic processes, critically analyze political information and messages, and contribute to the betterment of their communities.

### **Political Literacy as Critical Thinking**

This theme developed from the idea that political literacy is closely related to critical thinking as it empowers individuals to engage in thoughtful analysis, evaluate multiple perspectives, and make informed judgments about political issues. Critical thinking is the ability to analyze information, question assumptions, and consider evidence to form well-reasoned conclusions objectively and systematically.

To be politically literate, school leaders need to develop the capacity to recognize bias and to evaluate pluralistic perspectives. A participant averred, “Leaders need to consider concepts globally and locally and how these are connected.” They went on to add: “One form of critical literacy that derives from this is political literacy.” Politically literate leaders encourage individuals to recognize and question biases in political discourse. By developing critical thinking skills, individuals can examine sources of information, identify potential biases, and evaluate the credibility and reliability of the information presented. This helps them navigate through conflicting viewpoints and make informed decisions. Also, politically literate leaders promote the exploration of diverse viewpoints and encourage individuals to critically examine different arguments and opinions. They create democratic spaces in which individuals assess the validity and reliability of evidence, evaluate logical reasoning, identify fallacies, and determine the soundness of arguments. Through exposure to a variety of perspectives, individuals can develop the ability to critically analyze, compare, and contrast different viewpoints, understand the underlying assumptions, and critically assess the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective. In the view of participants, this would better enable individuals to make informed judgments and form well-supported opinions.

Part of this work requires engaging stakeholders, including students, in purposeful and constructive dialogue. Political literacy encourages individuals to engage in respectful and constructive dialogue about political issues. Critical thinking skills foster the ability to listen actively, ask probing questions, and respond thoughtfully to different perspectives. By critically analyzing and synthesizing information, individuals can contribute to productive discussions and engage in meaningful exchanges of ideas.

Participants shared their understanding that political literacy was about applying analytical habits and skills to real-world contexts. Political literacy, as a critical thinking skill, enables individuals to apply their knowledge and analytical skills to current events and the social, cultural, organizational, and temporal aspects of those real-world events. Participants suggested a need for leaders to examine the implications of political decisions, to evaluate the impact of policies on different communities, and to assess the consequences of different political choices and policies.

Overall, political literacy and critical thinking are intertwined as they both emphasize the ability to deliberate, assess, and critically adjudicate political issues and dilemmas. Political literacy provides individuals with the knowledge and understanding of political systems, while critical thinking equips them with the skills to navigate complex political landscapes and make informed judgments. Together, they empower individuals to engage actively in democratic processes, challenge assumptions, and contribute to the shaping of society.

### **Challenges to Teaching/Modeling Political Literacy**

Of the challenges mentioned by participants divisiveness and partisanship were preeminent. The divisive nature of politics and the strong bi-partisanship standoffs that exist in many democratic societies today offer an inordinate deal of concern for educators. According to a participant, “The political divide and partisanship today make it everything but easy to teach political literacy.” These contentious and politicized issues make it difficult for teachers and school leaders to navigate political discussions relevant to the classroom without facing backlash from parents, families, and the community. As one participant put it this was an “obvious obstacle.” Participants noted having witnessed or experienced numerous newly emerging gray areas—particularly in regard to the subjects of social studies and literature. The fear of teaching a biased political agenda or facing opposition from those who hold opposing political views can hinder the integration of political literacy into the curriculum. In the words of one participant, “Differing biases and fear of teaching a political agenda will likely be two big obstacles for a school leader to overcome before the change in curriculum could occur.”

Another obstacle mentioned is the presence of pre-existing biases in students, parents, and educators. Participants stated that many students may already have formed political viewpoints influenced by their families or surroundings, which made it challenging to introduce new perspectives or foster open-minded perspectives. Additionally, school boards and some district level leaders may have their own implicit biases that make it “near impossible” to ensure a balanced and unbiased approach to teaching political literacy.

Resistance to political dialogue or the cultural taboo of discussion of politics (and religion) in public settings was noted by at least a few participants. It was stated that some colleagues in their schools held that controversy, confrontation, or politics generally simply should not be part of the classroom environment. But this challenge also was discussed in terms of a reluctance among some educators to engage in political discussions or teach political literacy out of fear that it would cause a confrontation or conflict that they wished to avoid. Overcoming this resistance and promoting the value of political literacy as an essential element of education was therefore viewed as a significant challenge.

Finally, community expectations and values in which their schools operated posed a challenge to the integration of political literacy. Many participants were educators in conservative areas, and it was suspected that their communities had specific beliefs, political affiliations, or preferences that differed from the content being taught. These disconnects between personal values and curriculum for a democratic society might lead to potential pushback or disagreements. Nonetheless, participants still felt it was crucial for educators and school leaders to face these expectations and find ways to involve the community in the process while ensuring a balanced and inclusive approach.

According to participant responses, addressing these challenges and obstacles requires a thoughtful and proactive approach. Providing professional development opportunities for educators to enhance their own political literacy, fostering an inclusive and respectful classroom environment, involving parents and the community in discussions, and promoting open dialogue about political issues can all contribute to overcoming these obstacles and effectively teaching and modeling political literacy.

### **Creating Supportive Environments for Teaching Political Literacy**

Participants suggested that school leaders should prioritize professional development opportunities for educators that focus on enhancing their own political literacy and understanding of effective strategies for teaching and modeling political literacy in the classroom. An example quote asserted, “School leaders need to provide teachers with appropriate training on how to notice their own biases.” Providing resources, workshops, and training sessions can empower educators to navigate political discussions confidently. Participants saw a need for school leaders, like superintendents, to seek out professional development that would improve their ability to guide “the school board in constructing a policy that provides students freedom to express ideas and questions respectfully without fear of discrimination based upon their ideas and concerns.” Without supportive school boards, changes at the building-leader level could be hindered.

Creating safe and orderly schools has long been an aim of educational leadership. Participants in this study saw it a responsibility of a politically literate leader to create safe and inclusive spaces. Principals can foster safe and inclusive environments within the school, places for open dialogue, policy debate, and respectful disagreement about politicized topics. This includes promoting a culture of tolerance, understanding, and respect for diverse perspectives. Creating guidelines or protocols that establish norms for constructive political discourse would be a prerequisite work for school leaders.

School leaders can work with the school board and relevant stakeholders to develop policies that promote political literacy and create guidelines for inclusive political discussions within the school community. These policies can provide clarity on expectations, freedom of expression, and ways to address potential conflicts or concerns. By offering support in these areas, school leaders can create a supportive and empowering environment for educators to teach and model political literacy effectively.

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This study sought to understand only the qualitative perspectives of aspiring school leaders (i.e., principal candidates in a leadership preparation program). Investigating perspectives on topics like political literacy can be challenging given numerous factors. The broad scope of political literacy and the complexity of the habits involved make it challenging to evaluate or even fully grasp at the individual level. In fact, it may be impossible to measure the level of political literacy as a subjective concept among school leaders due to its highly subjective nature. As Cassel and Lo (1997) acknowledged early on, “Like all abstract concepts, political literacy cannot be measured directly, but we presume that if people are politically literate, they understand party differences and know basic political concepts and facts” (p. 317). Furthermore, the ever-changing political landscape makes it difficult to assess the habits and knowledge bases necessary for shaping an informed opinion accurately and adequately. Additionally, there is lack of evidence or literature to indicate that preparation programs are working to provide aspiring leaders with the resources or access to political texts relating to decisioning, schooling, and education. This may impact one’s skill in properly decoding, comprehending, and synthesizing politics and policies. Therefore, there are currently insufficient means or metrics for determining a practicing or aspiring school leader’s political literacy or their ability to make in-depth political analyses. Finally, as political literacy includes attitude, assumptions, values, and opinions, it is difficult to

disentangle facts as truth and value-laden assumptions as an individual's reality.

## Discussion

In the globalized contemporary world, political literacy is becoming an increasingly essential habit of mind. Citizens of democracies are confronted with an array of media outlets and mediated messaging that are often misleading and frequently biased. Political literacy provides an individual with the capacity to evaluate information and make educated decisions about the political world around them. As a result, political literacy is often discussed in conjunction with information literacy.

In the context of school leadership, based on insights from aspiring administrators, a potential factor hindering the recognition of the importance of political literacy could be the limited ability of leaders to engage in moral discussions that extend beyond personal sentiments. The prevailing tendency is often to frame certain opinions as either right or wrong, with the perception that holding a *wrong* worldview, or an adversarial opinion, can be perceived by some as dangerous or immoral. Consequently, this inclination makes it difficult to embrace conversations involving divergent viewpoints. From the standpoint of aspiring school leaders, who were experienced teachers, they were able to draw from previously encountered situations where their own values posed challenges in approaching discussions with an open mindset.

For instance, one participant shared an instance when a father made a school-related request for his daughter that the teacher found morally and legally unacceptable to accommodate. Her refusal, based on her personal moral stance, clashed with the cultural expectations and gender roles of the father's family. It was challenging to balance her strong moral convictions with the father's academic request for his daughter. This particular situation speaks to the need for leaders to empathize with and comprehend the difficulties inherent in these types of circumstances. Aspiring school leaders must foster open dialogues that can lead to gaining deeper understandings of other's perspectives, even when they fundamentally challenge their own core beliefs. With this in mind, several recommendations and implications are considered. These recommendations focus on leadership preparation programs, policy making, and future research.

### Implications for Preparation Programs

Principal preparation programs should prioritize the development of political literacy skills and knowledge among aspiring school leaders. This can be achieved through dedicated coursework or internships that explore the role of political literacy in education and provide practical strategies for integrating it into leadership practices. Furthermore, preparation programs should encourage future school leaders to reflect on their own political beliefs and biases. This self-reflection can help principals become aware of their own perspectives and potential impact on creating an inclusive and politically literate environment within their schools.

Also, preparation programs can promote the importance of building collaborative partnerships and coalitions with teachers, parents, and community members to support the integration of political literacy into the school environment. Equipping aspiring principals to engage stakeholders in conversations about political literacy and involve them in decision-making



processes can strengthen community buy-in and support.

Finally, such collaborative efforts put emphasis on the obstacles and challenges acknowledged by participants. Principal preparation programs should address the challenges and obstacles that educators may face when teaching and modeling political literacy. This can include training on managing potential conflicts, addressing resistance, and navigating sensitive or controversial topics. Equipping future school leaders with strategies to overcome these challenges will better prepare them for effectively implementing political literacy initiatives. Regarding these challenges, principal preparation programs should provide opportunities for aspiring principals to apply their learning on political literacy in real-world settings. This can be accomplished through internships, practicum experiences, or case studies that allow future school leaders to observe and participate in political literacy initiatives within diverse school contexts.

### **Implications for policy makers**

This study on the perceptions of aspiring school leaders presented several implications for educational policy makers. Foremost would be to prioritize and support the integration of political literacy into educational policies, both in K12 school settings and in principal and school leader standards, like the NELP and PSEL standards in the U.S. or the General Teaching Council for Scotland's Standards for Leadership and Management.

There is a need, particularly given the divisive nature of today's political landscape, for education policymakers to promote the integration of political literacy across curricula and across all educational levels, including graduate level learning. This can be achieved by creating guidelines that explicitly include political literacy as a learning outcome and as a part of the ethics of the profession for educational practitioners.

The development of professional growth opportunities for political literacy is also needed. The allocation of resources for comprehensive and ongoing professional development opportunities for educators and educational leaders can help shift a focus on political literacy. This can include workshops, training sessions, or mentorship programs that equip educators with the necessary literacies, habits, and instructional strategies to effectively teach political literacy in the domains of advocacy, activism, and association. Likewise, policy makers should allocate funding and support the development of appropriate instructional materials, resources, and diverse perspectives for teaching political literacy at all levels. This includes providing access to current and unbiased resources, guest speakers, and community partnerships that enhance the understanding of political systems and issues for all stakeholders.

Finally, policy makers must support collaboration and partnerships to support school leaders in ways of navigating politicized conflicts, controversies, and crises. School leaders must be better equipped to address the discord and disruptions presented by crises (such as COVID-19 and the opioid epidemic), debates on curriculum conflicts (such as the place of creationism versus evolution or sex education), and school-based controversies (like those surrounding the transgender identity of students or the anti-CRT and Don't Say Gay movements). These issues exemplify ethical concerns and dilemmas that school leaders must activate literacy skills to navigate and negotiate in cultivating community relationships.

Ultimately, policy makers must encourage collaboration between schools, community

organizations, and government entities to foster political literacy. This should be done in the spirit of unbiased but accurate information. This could result in the creation of bipartisan and/or unbiased efforts and platforms for dialogue and engagement, facilitating conflict management and resolution, and promoting initiatives that encourage active participation in democratic processes focused on the needs of the local school-community region.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Research can potentially further our understanding of the impact and best practices in teaching political literacy, providing insights to inform educational policies, curriculum development, and instructional strategies that promote informed and engaged citizens in democratic societies. Therefore, we make a number of recommendations where future research is concerned. Though not exhaustive, we feel these recommendations represent a needed body of literature.

First, no longitudinal studies have considered the long-term impact of teaching political literacy or the impact of politically literate leadership approaches on school-community relations. We recommend conducting studies to explore the sustained influence of teaching political literacy on student civic engagement, political habits, and capacity for critical thinking. These studies could help us better understand the influence on students' political attitudes and behaviors as they become active members of society.

Additionally, research could explore innovative pedagogical strategies and instructional approaches that promote political literacy in diverse educational contexts. Studies are needed to examine the effectiveness of project-based learning, case scenarios and simulations, debates and dialogues, and other active learning methods in fostering critical thinking, empathy, community awareness, and individuals' understanding of complex political issues. These studies could focus on leadership and educator candidates in preparation programs.

School culture and climate are important considerations for educational leadership. Therefore, research is needed to investigate the relationship between promoting political leadership and school climate and to understand the relationship between politically literate leaders and leadership style. Research could explore the impact of supportive and inclusive school environments, leadership practices, and policies on teachers' willingness and professional ability to engage in both modeling and teaching political literacy. Such studies could consider the impact of the local, state, and national political landscapes on leaders', teachers', and students' engagement and attitudes towards political topics.

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