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# Democracy & Education

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## Preschool as a Wellspring for Democracy

### Endorsing Traits of Reasonableness in Early Childhood Education

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#### Abstract

Traits of reasonableness are necessary characteristics of successfully engaged citizens within pluralistic liberal democratic societies. Given the evident unlikelihood of the spontaneous development of these critical characteristics, pedagogical effort ought to be exerted towards ensuring that this goal is realized. In what follows, we argue that preschool presents a unique and compelling opportunity for supporting this worthy pedagogical aim, such that, despite purported prohibitions entailed within arguments for the political neutrality of curricula, it ought to be promoted within this area. In the service of illustrating this point, we provide four examples of promising beginnings for this work.

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#### On the Moral Necessity of Reasonableness

**P**OLITICAL CONFLICTS, MANY of which derive from the alternate values and perspectives held among citizens, regularly arise within modern pluralistic liberal democracies. For example, conflict may ensue from discordant and irreconcilable “religious, philosophical and moral doctrines” to which members subscribe (Rawls, 1993, p. 47). As such, these disagreements can be considered a typical byproduct of diverse societies and do not necessarily stem from selfishness, ignorance, or partiality (Callan, 1997). As these conflicts can easily become grounds for sustained upheaval, unraveling the very fabric of a diverse society, citizens have a moral obligation to resist the temptation to single-mindedly advance their own faction’s agendas or subvert procedural standards for the mutual pursuit of a *common good*. Therefore, in recognition of the difficulty of fully reconciling diverse value systems and accounts of the good, it is

imperative that all citizens within pluralistic liberal democracies sufficiently exhibit *traits of reasonableness* in their engagement with their fellows.

Though our concern with the cultivation of reasonableness for the common good is global, we focus much of our attention on Western democracies, with specific consideration devoted to the United States of America. Given that, as a society, the U.S. is more divided with respect to political ideology than at any other period in the past twenty years (Pew Research Center, 2014) and that

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similar patterns are true of other Western democracies (Silva, 2018), children's indoctrination into a staunch political mind-set is both plausible and morally problematic. Such indoctrination can be considered harmful for many reasons; however, with respect to reasonableness and the common good, indoctrinated beliefs can serve to halt or substantially slow intellectual growth and, in turn, societal progress by preventing individuals and/or groups from considering the possibility that more equitable ways of tackling common societal problems exist (Callan, 1997; Hand, 2018). Take, for instance, the inability of a polarized U.S. government (itself representing a polarized U.S. populace) to legislate in a bipartisan manner even on those issues both political factions agree to be in need of attention for the well-being of individuals, communities, and the nation as a whole; immigration reform, for example, has yet to be seriously taken up by Congress, though both Democrats and Republicans claim reform to be a top priority (Diaz, Barrett, & Mattingly, 2018; Frank, 2017; Sakuma, 2017).

While serious action remains to be taken, families and communities continue to suffer. In U.S. farming communities, for example, innocent children are abandoned when immigrant parents are imprisoned or deported, and the larger community is left grieving the loss of long-time contributing members, fearing the loss of additional members, and struggling to replace much needed farm workers (Frank, 2017). The community suffers from society's (as represented by elected government officials) failure to work collaboratively toward a better system. The lack of bipartisan action on this issue and others (e.g., school shootings) is arguably in part due to each side's shallow (assuming one exists) commitment to compromise for the greater good. Taking into account congressional legislative failures like the one just described, which we believe to be symptomatic of the country's extreme political polarization, we maintain that sustaining a pluralistic democracy may well require that citizens come to exhibit traits of reasonableness. Furthermore, as we will explicate in sections to come, we believe the cultivation of traits of reasonableness should begin in preschool.

As a concept, *reasonableness* can be interpreted in accordance with numerous definitions. Rather than prioritizing a defense of one of these definitions above others, we employ the term in a broad sense, providing opportunities for further conversations regarding the cultivation of traits of reasonableness. That stated, we draw heavily on the work of Rawls (1993) as a means of emphasizing the relationship between reasonableness and the common good. Specifically, Rawls identified a fundamental difference between being reasonable and being rational; despite the views of rational persons being logically grounded, he argued that merely rational persons "lack a sense of justice and fail to recognize the independent validity of the claims of others" (p. 52). Put another way, one who assumes only a rational position fails to think in terms of the common good. In the previously relayed example describing the resulting fallout from the U.S. government's inaction specific to immigration reform, one could feasibly argue that contemporary U.S. partisan legislative approaches are rational in that both sides strive to accomplish reform in line with polarized party values; however, it can also be argued that the parties are not

acting reasonably. To wit, Rawls described a society composed of a reasonable citizenry as one in which all members as equals "have their own rational ends they hope to advance, and all stand ready to propose fair terms that others may reasonably be expected to accept, so that all may benefit and improve on what everyone can do on their own" (p. 54); citizens of liberal democracies must demonstrate rational *and* reasonable thinking when determining which rules they should uphold in order to live well together. As such, it follows that if political factions remain wholly unwilling to bend toward one another on public policy, matters will remain unimproved by their shared civic action.

In alignment with Rawls (1993), we hold that citizens should demonstrate reasonable thinking and associated actions in their political dealings with their fellows as a means of realizing better (as compared to a single person's or faction's interests prevailing) outcomes for all. We refer to these throughout this paper as traits of reasonableness and maintain that a citizen exhibits *traits of reasonableness* if, when faced with the fact that others hold rational views dissimilar from one's own, the citizen (a) is willing to genuinely consider those views, (b) desires the realization of good outcomes for all involved participants, and (c) is open to compromise in the processes of shared deliberations toward that goal. Consequently, persons exhibiting traits of reasonableness demonstrate their willingness to seek out, carefully consider, and debate alternative perspectives in conjunction with the critical examination of their own as a means of envisioning solutions to problems that promote the common good; reasonableness requires resisting the temptation to press for solely self-interested results. In sum, we suggest that traits of reasonableness encompass adaptive habits, skills, mind-sets, values, norms, and attitudes that guide one's engagement with other persons as moral and social equals in a process of shared political life.

### **In Favor of Reasonableness in Early Childhood Education**

Rawls (1993) maintained that reasonableness must be modeled and practiced often to be realized, and Callan (1997), building on the work of Rawls, argued that the schools were an ideal place for nurturing individuals' capacities for reasonableness. We, too, hold that reasonableness is unlikely to spontaneously develop; among other requirements, such development requires one to be exposed to alternate perspectives, to examine one's own views, to have sufficient examples demonstrative of respectful exploration of differing perspectives in relation to one's own, and to have ample opportunities for guided practice. Like Callan (1997), we view the schools as a setting equipped to offer these fundamental components of reasonableness—and in doing so, as a potential safeguard for liberal democracies.

One might question this position (i.e., in favor of intentionally cultivating reasonableness in schools), suggesting instead that reasonableness can be sufficiently nurtured within the home. While we acknowledge the efforts of more progressive homes in exposing children to a range of worldviews and promoting the common good, we maintain that such homes are not the norm and, therefore, seem unlikely to reliably produce a largely reasonable citizenry. As Callan (1997) underscored in recommending that the

schools cultivate reasonableness, it becomes increasingly more difficult to critically examine our own values and the values of others “when the associations that dominate our lives during our formative years filter out the perspectives of those who are not like-minded or reduce them to mere imagined alternatives to our own” (p. 178). Within, say, the home, children are generally exposed to the worldview(s) of their caretakers. A child whose guardians subscribe to a strong political affiliation is likely to observe many instances of adults conversing in rhetoric in line with caretaker perspectives, tuning in to media outlets that further confirm these understandings, and maintaining friendships with likeminded individuals. We see no compelling evidence to suggest that children who are not presented with or encouraged to seek out diverse perspectives engage in open critical dialogue, carefully consider ideas from multiple viewpoints, and work collaboratively and peacefully with others through complex problems will become likely to do so in the future, even though these traits are required for reasonable cooperation in citizenship.

Acknowledging that many, if not most, children in the U.S. reside in a home with a dominant polarized worldview (as evidenced by the Pew Center, 2014), which can serve as an effective intellectual and social filter, another institutional context (i.e., one beyond the unintentional experiences of living within the home) can serve as a safeguard against this myopia, providing children with alternate ways of understanding in conjunction with methods for critically inspecting new and established beliefs. A separate place of inquiry is required within which unexamined views can be critically deconstructed and debated alongside new ideas in pursuit of a common good. Callan (1997) deemed the common school to be “an obvious way” for children “prior to assuming the duties of citizenship” to observe and practice the behaviors; they can observe that “citizens with conflicting beliefs and ends can join together to ask how they might live together on terms that all might endorse on due reflection” (p. 177). We, like Callan (1997), view the schools as an adequate place for studying and practicing traits of reasonableness. That said, we also recognize (as did Callan) that schools are limited by the range of diverse perspectives represented within them and that some schools are far more limited in this way than others. Small rural schools, for example, may have a much smaller range of diverse perspectives readily available for examination than, say, large urban schools. However, though it takes considerably more effort, less diverse schools can invite in (either physically, via text, or via audio and/or video communication) additional perspectives for consideration. Regardless, the views represented within even the least diverse schools are likely to involve more perspectives and, as a result, offer a greater amount of ideas to examine than those residing solely within the home.

Furthermore, national and state civics education standards serve to support the development of reasonableness in elementary, middle, and high schools. Specifically, in the U.S., civic education as prescribed within voluntary national standards (e.g., National Standards for Civics and Government, Center for Civic Education, 2010) recommends that students intentionally consider what may be best for themselves *and* others (pluralistic debate is one known

way schools address this standard). With respect to elementary students, the National Standards for Civics and Government, Center for Civic Education (2010) advocates within the subsection titled “What Are the Basic Values and Principles of Democracy?” that students leave grade four with an understanding of the benefits of diversity in relation to democracy. Standards like these serve to encourage thinking in terms of the common good.

However, the National Standards for Civics and Government, Center for Civic Education (2010) do not offer guidelines for preschool education. This may be due to preschool not being mandatory in the U.S. Or it may have been an intentional omission stemming from a belief that preschool children are limited in their abilities to engage in civic-minded conversations. Callan (1997) advised that due to its role in safeguarding a democratic way of life in combination with the substantial amount of rehearsal required for future civic responsibilities, reasonable dialogue should be practiced in the schools as soon as “an age is reached at which the task might be appropriately initiated” (p. 178); though he largely relied upon the rationale of stage theorists to recommend that future citizens begin assuming an active role in such conversations by 11 or 12 years of age, Callan (1997) retained the possibility that civic-minded dialogic practice might begin sooner, suggesting that if emerging research determined younger children to be capable of participating in such discussions, it might be advantageous for all if they do so (p. 240). Put another way, if younger children are able to participate in civic-minded, pluralistic dialogue and schools accommodate such capabilities, future political actors might be better positioned for later civic dealings due to increased opportunities for practicing reasonable thought and action and for realizing the communal benefits associated with these behaviors (Callan, 1997).

### **Young Children Can Participate in Civic-Minded Discussions**

Contemporary qualitative collections (e.g., Sharkey, 2018; Vasquez, 2004, 2017; Winograd, 2015) have evidenced the capabilities of three-, four-, and five-year-old children to critically engage with multiple perspectives on civic issues (e.g., the destruction of habitats for natural resources, age-based exclusion from school events). The participation of children ages three through five in civic-minded discussions across the U.S. has also been showcased within various Children Are Citizens (CAC) initiatives (<http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/children-are-citizens>) supported by the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Project Zero; in teaming with Project Zero, preschool children in cities including Boston and Washington, DC, have consulted with city officials to identify aspects of their city that might be improved and to consider a variety of approaches to improvement. Furthermore, a handful of states (e.g., Massachusetts, Colorado) have extended civics standards to include preschool students. Collectively, empirical evidence and state standards suggest preschool-age children can participate in pluralistic civic-minded discussions. In recognizing that (a) there is value in offering an intellectual space separate from the home in which to intentionally cultivate reasonable thinking for the benefit of individuals and society writ large and (b) young children can participate in civic-minded

discussions, we maintain that traits of reasonableness should be endorsed from the very start of schooling.

### ***On the Unique and Compelling Opportunity Afforded by Preschool***

Beyond this endorsement, we further understand preschool to present a unique and compelling opportunity for supporting this worthy pedagogical aim for two main reasons.

First, we view preschool as providing a place for children to gather regularly as a diverse community at a critical time; it is, for many, a first public meeting space dedicated to collective learning about the world (Allen, 2004). Within this public meeting space, children come to initially understand how best to function on a daily basis within a larger social group or how to live well together. For this reason, preschool has been described as a “natural cradle for democracy” (Rothschild, 2015, p. 1). In this context, normal disagreements and tensions arise, and children gain experience with novel ways of dealing with difference. It is in contemplating authentic problems and divergent ideas that children are provided the invaluable opportunity to engage in critical pluralistic dialogue; these early experiences launch children into their first democratic dealings with others. As such, these initial lessons ideally ought to highlight the utility of a reasonable democratic process. A more skilled facilitator (i.e., the classroom teacher) can better support children’s recognition of the benefits of such a process for the common good.

For example, a child who does not initially believe he should share a favorite toy might carefully consider the feelings of others once they are brought to his attention and decide that sharing is good both for himself *and* for the community, as it can lead to increased opportunities and happiness for *all*. One might rightfully claim that it is rare to find a preschool classroom that does not discuss the importance of sharing; however, we are advocating for a deeper investigation than that which commonly occurs in most preschools as evidenced by available state civic standards. Specifically, Massachusetts preschool civics standards (e.g., Massachusetts History and Social Science Framework, <http://www.doe.mass.edu/candi/StandardsReview/hss.html>) emphasize the following of classroom rules and the listing of reasons why rules should be followed. As such, we can imagine a preschool educator reminding a student of the classroom rule that directs her to share with others and then scaffolding the child to articulate a reason why sharing is important. The preschool teacher might suggest that the child consider how she would feel if another child refused to share a favorite toy with her. Preschool civics standards guiding classroom dealings like this one do not convey the depth with which we believe young children should come to understand rules, such as the directive to share, to be justified by an appeal to the common good. A deeper investigation of the benefits of sharing among preschoolers might involve a critical examination in which each community member explores (in drawings, with play, with dictation, or through another developmentally appropriate mode) what that person enjoys most about a special toy and how that person feels when a peer who is using that toy offers and then refuses a turn to play. Such an internal examination might then be

followed by a more external examination in which all or smaller groups of students share their unique perceptions, consider those of their peers, and discuss what they wish for themselves and others to feel and experience when playing in the classroom. A preschool program emphasizing the cultivation of traits of reasonableness would invite children to thoughtfully examine that which is best for the classroom community in conjunction with that which is best for the individual relative to classroom rules. In sum, preschool programs endorsing traits of reasonableness can highlight from the start of schooling the individual and communal benefits to be had from participating in the civic-minded practices of sincerely considering and examining the perspectives and wellbeing of others in conjunction with one’s own.

Our second reason for considering preschool to be an opportune place for civic-minded discussions involves the attributes shared among members of this demographic group. Taken generally, research suggests that young children, in comparison to older children and adults, display more openness to trying new activities (e.g., Schiefele, 2009; Wigfield et al., 2015). Specifically, because young children are typically less concerned with their performance in said activities and their interests are more general and less refined than those of their older counterparts, preschool children can be described as “more willing” to attempt new activities (Wigfield et al., 2015). In thinking specifically about learning to share, a preschool-age child might therefore be more willing than an older child to experiment with handing over a favorite toy with the teacher-scaffolded objective of exploring firsthand how it makes *both* children feel. Preschool children’s willing involvement in intentional guided investigations of thoughts and behaviors like this one aimed at focusing their attention on the way(s) reasonableness benefits themselves and others increases the likelihood (due to sheer exposure) that future citizens will have opportunities to understand the benefits of such traits; furthermore, such early investigations could bring about this understanding sooner, which, in turn, might lead to more adaptive future outcomes for both the individual and society writ large.

Additionally, studies (e.g., Gopnik, Griffiths, & Lucas, 2015; Lucas, Bridgers, Griffiths, & Gopnik, 2014) have suggested that younger children generally pay more attention to available evidence when drawing conclusions and, as such, are more flexible in their thinking than are older learners; older learners tend to rely more heavily on prior assumptions to draw conclusions. For example, Gopnik et al. (2015) found that four-year-old children more seriously considered available evidence (e.g., a doll approaching a diving board; a doll avoiding a skateboard) when predicting what fictitious characters would do in specific situations than did even six-year-olds. Six-year-old participants tended to rely heavily on established prior assumptions (e.g., the belief that younger children are usually timid; the belief that older children are braver than younger children) to make predictions about the fictional characters’ actions even when the evidence did not support their inferences. The four-year-old children were observed to exhibit far less prior assumption bias, which led to more accurate inferences about characters’ actions. As a result, the researchers suggested that because young children have fewer

prior assumptions to rely upon in comparison to older children and adults, they pay greater attention to available evidence to make decisions and are, therefore, at times better positioned to understand how and why things occur. We recognize these findings have implications for what classroom adults can learn from children with respect to the development of reasonableness; however, due to space limitations, we focus our attention on the promise this research holds for children as future political actors. Young children's heightened attention to available evidence in making determinations provides another compelling rationale for why it might be wise to nurture traits of reasonableness in preschool.

Recalling the sharing example previously discussed, we might imagine an older child relying on previous experiences to hastily determine that sharing is not a mutually beneficial activity. This older child might presume rather dogmatically, without considering the evidence directly in front of him, that the peer is like his sibling (serving as his primary frame of reference) and, as such, wishes only to deny him the opportunity to play with the toy. The older child might refuse to share the toy, concluding that neither he nor the peer would experience joy directly from the toy if he were to hand it over. In light of situations like this one, there appears to be an advantage in adults encouraging regular civic-minded examinations at the start of schooling—when a child is more willing to consider available evidence and rely less on prior assumptions. Plainly put, regular focused investigations informed by children's recognition of situational evidence might serve to more accurately shape children's assumptions. In sum, young children's openness to new experiences, coupled with a heightened attention to evidence and a minimally dogmatic adherence to their own emergent viewpoints, is especially promising for lessons in reasonableness. We maintain that these developmental characteristics increase the likelihood that young children will willingly participate in civic-minded explorations and come to value examining their own views in conjunction with others, which in turn, could serve them in their future political interactions with others. In essence, preschool provides an attractive and developmentally appropriate wellspring for democracy in promoting the common good via the cultivation of traits of reasonableness within children's first public participatory sphere.

### **What Might Be Entailed: A Response to the “Political Neutrality” Critique**

Building upon these arguments (i.e., that there is merit in facilitating the development of traits of reasonableness in young children and that preschool provides a setting ripe for exerting such pedagogical effort), we next turn our attention to considering the content and practice of the promotion of reasonableness in preschool and suggest how these can be carefully navigated so as to avoid one potential strand of criticism against our claims.

Authentic civic-minded questions and/or problems arising in the day-to-day classroom and/or community life of young children have been evidenced in qualitative collections (e.g., Sharkey, 2018; Vasquez 2004; Winograd, 2015) to be opportune sources of content when striving to engage preschoolers in critical consideration and debate of divergent views. For example, young children have

exhibited genuine interest in examining alternate perspectives related to being excluded from school and/or community activities (Vasquez, 2004), about gender messaging conveyed through mail catalogues (O'Brien, 2015), and about cultural differences represented in picture books (Erickson, 2018). Utilizing subject matter that is both interesting and relevant to students' lived experiences appears to be important for maintaining children's sustained engagement in such initiatives. In each of the previous examples, teachers supported a context in which authentic pluralistic civic discussion could occur by carefully considering students' innate curiosities and by modeling how to engage in critical discussions. In our view, this pattern is representative of work supportive of the traits of reasonableness. Acknowledging that the issues to which individual children are drawn greatly depend upon their aforementioned interests, perspectives, and lived experiences, we next consider the methods by which such problems are brought to the fore and framed in a way that invites critical pluralistic analysis; careful inspection of one's own beliefs in conjunction with the inspection of others' understandings may serve as a step toward reasonable action for the common good.

As stated previously, we subscribe to the position that students develop the capacity to enact reasonable processes, such as the thoughtful examination of new and old ideas, by observing adults repeatedly model and scaffold these processes (Callan 1997; Shannon, 2015). As such, children require ample opportunities to witness adults engage in respectful, insightful discussion of issues of importance and to take part in guided practice. As the intentional and critical examination of new and old perspectives are typically hallmarks of preservice and continuing education teacher preparation programs, certified early childhood educators are, in theory, well positioned to assume this responsibility. As evidence of this training, we invite you to consider the common children's literature course often required as a part of preservice teacher preparation programs. In our experience across institutions, this course typically involves the critical analysis of diverse works specific to issues of power and the marginalization of peoples. Broadly speaking, in introductory children's literature courses, preservice educators are poised to explore in addition to their own perspective, the author's perspective, the perspective(s) of the individual(s) represented within the pages of the book, and the perspectives of class members. Given this training, it is not a rare occurrence to observe early childhood educators engaging children in critical text-based discussions. This strength of prevalent early childhood educators serves as a natural bridge to a more concerted pedagogical effort to involve children in civic-minded pluralistic discussions outside of text-based stories; we can infer that certified teachers are, to some degree, able to model and scaffold the type of civic-minded pluralistic dialogue of authentic issues we have described.

Despite these relative strengths, early educators may have little cause to consider this work as within their professional ambit or to view themselves as efficacious in this domain. Growth in both these regards may be pursued by explicitly reframing professional expectations and intentionally preparing educators for the applications of these skills. Considerable professional development

would likely be required to accomplish these goals on a larger scale. That said, for the sake of argument, let us assume that these educators do perceive themselves as capable and responsible for modeling reasonable thinking in their preschool classrooms. They might then begin by bringing to students' attention a multitude of perspectives relative to a child-centered debatable question, idea, or classroom problem.

For example, suppose several preschool students express discontent in not having had the opportunity to hatch chickens like the adjacent kindergarten class. The teacher might assemble students for a class meeting on the subject where all members of the classroom (e.g., students, teachers, and instructional assistants) are invited to voice their opinions on the issue. Children might be invited to speak, draw, or act out their opinion(s) on the issue. The teacher might take notes, photographs, and/or create sketches to represent the community's ideas and then post them (along with child-created visuals) around the room so that all might continue to consider the classroom conundrum in the coming days. Voices in favor and against hatching chickens from the adjacent kindergarten classroom (e.g., students, teachers, instructional assistants) might be invited to join the dialogue. For example, one kindergarten child might explain how excited she was to both see the chicks emerge from their shells and take one home to live on her family farm. A second kindergarten child might share feelings of sadness due to being absent the day the chickens hatched. The teacher might then invite additional perspectives to join the conversation; a veterinarian might suggest that it is not in the best interests of the chicks to be born and reside even temporarily in a classroom, while a naturalist might argue that hatching butterflies better illustrates a complete life cycle. School custodians might want to offer their input. These ideas could also be represented visually and hung around the classroom to be contemplated. After all community members have had ample time to consider the multitude of perspectives represented on the classroom walls, the teacher could reassemble the class to further discuss whether hatching chickens is best for their community. She might ask students if a vote on the issue should culminate the community's complex analysis—or, conversely, the group might recognize their lack of consensus and opt to adjourn.<sup>1</sup> In sum, there is a wide range of political outcomes that might be regarded as successful results of students' reasonable engagement with one another.

Though we have presented a case for the intentional development of the traits of reasonableness within preschool, we recognize that one strand of criticism regarding our offerings might perceive this project to be inappropriately politically contentious, such that it is necessarily in breach of norms of political neutrality within educational contexts. Though expressed in various formulations, that argument's basic form is as the political neutrality critique:

Claim One: In a pluralistic democracy, educators ought to avoid contributing to the political indoctrination of their students.

Claim Two: That obligation often requires educators remain relatively politically neutral in their curriculum and pedagogy, especially in relation to those students who are least able to defend their views and values against the persuasive and institutional power of their educators.

Claim Three: Young children are (on average and as compared to older children) among those least able to defend against the educator's power.

Claim Four: Traits of reasonableness are too politically contentious to be endorsed by all parties within a democratic society.

Claim Five: As such, an education aimed at developing traits of reasonableness is wholly inappropriate for young children.

While we agree with the spirit of claims one, two, and three, we find claim four to be false and, as such, do not accept the conclusion of claim five.

A pluralistic democracy can be characterized by, *inter alia*, normative ideals regarding a freedom from passively received dogma and orthodoxy (Flathman, 2005). Generally, citizens have a right to form their own values and perspectives about political matters, such that coercive educational activities that limit this freedom may well be illegitimate. Taking this standard into consideration educators are frequently obliged to take great care in their work with students, balancing their due educational influence against the possibility of an overreach. This is, perhaps, most acutely felt regarding politically contentious subject matter.

Arguably, our earlier example of a discussion regarding hatchlings in a kindergarten classroom represents a less politically charged (in the traditional sense) exploration of ideas; however, it is important to note that we recognize that no space or discussion is fully politically neutral (Hart, 1964). The most charitable interpretation of claim two serves as a general guide to *relative* neutrality in the spirit of supporting an open future for young children (Feinberg, 1980). In instances in which the dogged pursuit of political neutrality would disserve those or other worthy goals, it ought not be prioritized. Of course, there are foreseeable instances in which classroom investigations might involve obviously controversial political themes. For example, the first author witnessed a kindergarten child in an urban elementary school voice concern during morning meeting about the possibility of a family member being deported due to immigration status under the current administration. The child was quite clear in articulating both his concern for those impacted and his desire to further discuss the larger societal issue. His comments immediately sparked remarks from others who shared in his concern and/or wanted to know more about the issue. Utilizing such a topic to develop traits of reasonableness might intimidate some educators, representing a longstanding uneasiness and calls for schools to remain as politically neutral as possible (Hart, 1964). However, we

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1 In this regard, one might consider the model set by many democratic free schools of the 1960s and '70s. That these schools are experiencing a (limited) resurgence suggests a recognition of the salience of their focus on democratic education for even the youngest among us (Kavner, 2012).

maintain that avoiding such topics is ultimately harmful to a liberal pluralistic democracy.

Specifically, research (e.g., Hess & MacAvoy, 2014) has indicated that contentious political issues capable of provoking strong emotions provide an opportune vector for teaching children how to critically evaluate evidence and divergent perspectives and to formulate logical arguments. In other words, discussion and debate of “hot topics” facilitate the development of traits of reasonableness (Robertson & Zimmerman, 2017). Therefore, it is our view that relevant political issues should be explored in developmentally appropriate ways in preschool classrooms whenever possible.

To be clear, we *are not* advocating that educators share any/all information with young children that is likely to induce political or social fear or otherwise determine specific political action. We *are* advocating that educators ought not immediately dismiss out of hand those prickly political issues raised by students. Instead, educators might carefully consider the ways in which such conversations contribute to democratic aims and strive to explore them in developmentally appropriate ways, if at all possible. For example, in thinking of the kindergarteners who feared the deportation of loved ones, it might be suitable to explore students’ understandings of events within their immediate social and/or geographical area. This conversation could provide an opportunity to acknowledge students’ anxieties and rectify misunderstandings. From there, additional information specific to what children are interested in knowing more about could be sought out, and a pluralistic discussion centering on what ought to be done when people live in this country without formal permission might ensue. In line with our views on the freedom that educators ought to be working to support within their students, whether and (to some degree) how children decide to act on their position(s) should be determined by them.

Stemming from these points, we hold that it is entirely possible to endorse traits of reasonableness with young people in ways that do not run afoul of the aforementioned moral guidelines for educator activities. While there is (as we described before) a welcome and appropriate place for the careful study of contentious political content, the traits of reasonableness themselves, which might serve as skills and standards for that engagement, should not be categorized as politically contentious content. Traits of reasonableness are necessary for a well-functioning democracy, such that an education toward them is a precondition for engaging politically contentious material (in the classroom as well in as the wider democratic society). In a best-case scenario, critics who claim that the traits of reasonableness are too politically contentious to be widely taught within a democratic society are either (a) mischaracterizing basic features of the shared social processes of democracy or (b) initiating a largescale critique of democracy itself (and the educational systems that maintain it). In either case, absent additional arguments, we are inclined to deny claim four.

We must also underscore that in advocating for the place of contentious political discussions in the preschool classroom, we are not promoting the idea that educators, as classroom leaders, overtly push partisan affiliations or endorse persons as political

candidates or officeholders. In pursuing the cultivation of traits of reasonableness, educators (or others in positions of relative power) ought not outwardly and uncritically promote a political affiliation or representative (e.g., Democrat, Republican, Trump, Obama, etc.). Hess and MacAvoy (2014) described this distinction as classrooms being *partisan* instead of *political*. A political classroom investigates issues from many perspectives; a partisan classroom coerces children into aligning their thinking with a political figure and/or party. Again, though the traits of reasonableness might align with the explicit views and/or public representations of one or another political faction, we hold that they, nonetheless, transcend partisan divisions.

Given that the fresh ideas and insights born of the natality of children are necessary to advance society (Arendt, 2003, 2006), it is imperative that adults exercise carefulness in encouraging students to further develop the traits required for this aim. Recall, we agree with the spirit of claims one, two, and three; pushing students to fully conform to our ways of interpretation works against the project’s stated goal. Censoring political dialogue in the classroom not only would likely prove incredibly difficult (if not impossible under the politically divisive contexts within contemporary Western democracies), it would also arguably undermine the established democratic system and stymie societal progress, especially if future citizens are not equipped with the basic traits necessary for norms of democratic participation. For these reasons, though we agree with some parts of its spirit and intention, we find the political neutrality critique of educating young children for traits of reasonableness to be misguided and, ultimately, unpersuasive.

### Examples of Success in Early Childhood Settings

Examples of child-centered, pluralistic, critical explorations of complex social and civic issues in early childhood educational settings are well-established within the literature and as such, provide evidence of teachers and young children (preK–first grade) collectively cultivating the democratic quality of reasonableness. For example, Vasquez (e.g., 2004, 2017) has dedicated much of her career to promoting and studying civic engagement in early childhood. In a reflection specific to preschool, she wrote of a child named Lily who arrived at school one day eager to discuss with her peers a newscast she had seen. It relayed the plight of beluga whales in the St. Lawrence River; the report indicated that pollution was killing the whales. Seizing upon Lily’s deeply seated interest and the class’s newfound curiosity, Vasquez facilitated a pluralistic discussion and debate in which, in addition to students’ ideas, the class investigated different ways beluga whales were depicted in song (Raffi’s famous “Baby Beluga” children’s ballad), media (i.e., television, internet), and books. The students, scaffolded by Vasquez, became aware of stark binary representations of belugas represented within the text set; beluga whales were portrayed as “safe,” “free,” and “happy” in some sources and “endangered” and “sick” in others. Upon debating and deciding what students perceived to be happening in their geographic location, the class wrote a new song to represent the local belugas and to share with the community. Furthermore, students decided

to help the area belugas by raising money for a wildlife fund dedicated to saving these white whales. This example embodies several curricular aspects previously considered important for cultivating traits of reasonableness. Specifically, Vasquez directly drew from students' authentic interests and curiosities in determining subject matter. Additionally, she modeled reasonable thinking and scaffolded students to seek out and critically consider varying perspectives. Vasquez's depictions of early childhood civic initiatives typically have emphasized children taking some form of problem-solving action toward the end of their analysis. While this culminating action may be empowering for some students and beneficial for one or more groups, we argue that such action is not required by the more minimal aim of promoting traits of reasonableness in early childhood settings and may even be a premature effort that works against the novelty and optimistic possibility of children's ideas by pressuring them to participate in others' initiatives.

More explicitly, it seems unlikely that an entire group of children wholeheartedly felt compelled to generate a new version of a song and/or raise money for a wildlife fund. It is certainly plausible that some children held differing views regarding whether and how to act in response to the situation and/or maintained no sincere feelings or opinions toward the topic. In cases such as these, premature action in which students are pushed into jumping on the proverbial bandwagon could lead to shallow civic engagement (Thompson, 2012). This is not to say that children should be kept from acting or observing others acting; however, we maintain that students' actions resulting from these exercises in the traits of reasonableness should be their own—most especially if the goal of this work is oriented toward the common good. Stated differently, expanding children's thinking to recognize the existence of multiple perspectives on an issue and that careful consideration of each perspective benefits all involved is, by itself and without specific immediate action outcomes, a powerful first step in developing one's capacity for exhibiting the traits of reasonableness. In what follows, we point to examples of early childhood educational experiences that might be construed as supporting traits of reasonableness. In this, we specifically acknowledge the ways in which these examples showcase an awareness of moral complexity and epistemic humility (forwarded as potential, but not here defended as necessary, traits of reasonableness) in developmentally appropriate ways.

Shannon (2015), in line with this mode of facilitating traits of reasonableness in early childhood education, relayed a vignette depicting kindergarten and first-grade students' dialogue at a thematic summer camp for "struggling" readers. Specifically, the students were invested in the creation of a museum exhibit depicting a rainforest habitat. It was within this authentic work that students became interested in how the rainforest birds might be impacted by the logging that was reportedly happening there. Though the selection criterion for the texts used by students to complete this project was not specified, it is apparent that diverse views were conveyed through them and/or sparked students' own diverse understandings, as a critical pluralistic dialogue between students resulted. Some students advocated for the birds, claiming

that the logging was destroying their habitat and would result in the birds disappearing. Others advocated for farmers who required the wood from logging to sustain their farms and way of life. Although these students did not necessarily suggest or plot a course of political action outside the inclusion of their understandings within the exhibit, they cooperatively came to know some of the benefits and detriments associated with logging in the rainforest by investigating diverse perspectives (e.g., that of the bird and that of the farmer) in part because such thinking and discussion was modeled, facilitated, and encouraged by camp and school leaders. In sum, rather than resting in easy conclusions regarding the "right" and "wrong" perspectives to hold on the issue, they became better aware of the moral complexity of the situation.

Similarly, Erickson (2018) relayed a critical pluralistic discussion among a small group of U.S.-based first-grade students for whom English was a second language; these children were closely examining a multicultural picture book portraying the business of being a child in different places around the world. Seizing upon the classroom teacher's invitation to notice and discuss similarities and differences between images depicted in the global photobook and students' own lives, one child criticized the quality of the clothing a Guatemalan mother wore, suggesting it to be inferior to American clothing. Another student questioned how the mother was able to wear the earrings she sported in the photograph, as the student believed there to be no shopping malls in Guatemala in which to get one's ears pierced. Several students presented differing opinions on both subjects. One girl drew upon her past international travels and maintained that in other parts of the world, people had different ideas about what was fashionable, and another student insisted that there had to be places that pierced ears in Guatemala. The classroom teacher took note of the children's interest in the topic and complex thought processes and invited students to further expand their understandings through additional research of Guatemalan culture and everyday life. By way of this entry point, these young children chose to engage in thoughtful, pluralistic, critical dialogue largely supported by the classroom teacher. In sum, the students were awakened to a sense of epistemic humility, recognizing that, in situations of disagreement, they may need to seek additional sources to justify and/or expand their views of the world and the lived experiences of others therein.

In the logging and photobook examples (i.e., Erickson, 2018; Shannon, 2015), children carefully considered the views of others in relation to their own understandings; it is precisely this respectful and curious process of critical inquiry that serves to bring people together around issues that otherwise might further divide them. Students' conversations centering on divergent opinions and understandings and the new conversations that are likely to follow, not only further develop students' capacities for traits of reasonableness but also familiarize students with key benefits of the democratic process; namely, children become more aware that disagreement is commonplace and perhaps even desirable, as it leads to new insights.

Another potential approach to promoting traits of reasonableness in early childhood is evidenced in the work of Kim (2016).

Kim closely studied how the gendered thinking of preschool children in a Korean-English bilingual class in middle America changed throughout a thematic unit dedicated to the depiction of gender roles in picture books. Children's lived experiences were explored and compared to texts that portrayed mothers and fathers, princes and princesses, and boys and girls. Children's understandings specific to gender were elicited through ongoing literary discussions of books that included *What Mommies Do Best/What Daddies Do Best* (Numeroff, 1998), *The Paper Bag Princess* (Munsch, 1980), and *The Princess Knight* (Funke, 2004). Though the books were selected by the classroom teacher in conjunction with Kim, connection to students' lived experiences was evident in their pluralistic critical dialogue. For example, though Tae Kwon Do was not mentioned in any of the texts, a male student suggested that the princess character in one of the texts should fight back against her cruel brothers with Tae Kwon Do. A female student immediately expressed skepticism about a girl performing defensive Tae Kwon Do, to which another female student contributed to the conversation by offering proof that girls can do Tae Kwon Do; specifically, she referenced a television show that featured a girl performing the martial art. Several students then concluded that since girls can do Tae Kwon Do, princesses can, in fact, fight back against oppressors who include cruel siblings and dragons. In this example, students' diverse views were again encouraged by the classroom teacher and considered alongside views emerging from gender-themed texts. Several perspectives were thoughtfully explored, and through this process, students gained familiarity with the tension(s) that often results from entertaining opposing views. Furthermore, the four-year-old child participants in Kim's study did not decide to take a specific political action in response to their reshaped understandings; rather, their educational experience might (or might not) serve as a foundation for their future active engagement with the substantive topic of their study. In sum, in our view, students' civic engagement as evidenced in this example can constitute a developmentally appropriate step toward encouraging traits of reasonableness in early childhood.

Collectively these examples suggest that young children can and eagerly do choose to engage in pluralistic, critical examinations of ideas and issues that matter to them. Skillful educator facilitation of such inquiries appears required both to ensure a multitude of perspectives are represented and thoughtfully considered and to demonstrate and scaffold respectful discussion of diverse ideas in light of inevitable tension(s). Additionally, we suggest that educators refrain from immediately shying away from facilitating the investigation of hot-topic political issues that interest young children; instead, we encourage them to aim to expand students' understanding of such issues in developmentally appropriate ways. Lastly, we maintain that it is not necessary and is possibly even disingenuous to expect that such explorations necessarily result in political action; children's careful consideration of conflicting perspectives relative to matters that deeply concern them is a powerful first step toward developing the capacity to be reasonable.

## Conclusion

Traits of reasonableness, which is to say those that express a willingness to seek out, carefully consider, and debate alternative perspectives as a means of envisioning solutions to problems that promote the common good rather than some exclusively self-beneficial alternative, are required for civic engagement within a liberal democratic society. Within the confines of this paper, we have articulated why and how preschools need be involved in the development of a reasonable citizenry. We maintain that preschools, as one of the first public meeting spaces for young children, present a unique and compelling opportunity to expose individuals to the benefits of partaking in reasonable discussions of the ideas, issues, and problems that matter to them. Specifically, we have underscored that preschools can positively expand students' thinking and previous understandings when early childhood educators facilitate developmentally appropriate pluralistic critical discussions that involve a multitude of perspectives culled from text-based sources, the community, and/or the larger society. Additionally, we have highlighted the uniqueness of young children's willingness to engage with such pedagogical approaches as well as their less-dogmatic thinking, and conclude that children who witness and partake in respectful, critical pluralistic dialogue of sensitive issues at a young age will, generally speaking, have greater experience with the continuum of reasonableness than those who are exposed to such experiences at a later time. As such, children privy to observing and actively participating in civic discussions in preschool are better equipped than they would be otherwise to intentionally promote the common good through reasonable processes later in life.

Although we presume that certified early childhood educators have had some exposure to scaffolding reasonable thinking within teacher preparation programs and are therefore better positioned to assume this role, we recognize that they may not view promoting the development of reasonableness in young children as their responsibility nor may they feel efficacious in providing such instruction. As such, we understand that considerable professional development may be required for educators to regularly involve children in civic-minded, critical, pluralistic conversations. Regardless, we consider investment in such professional development a worthwhile endeavor, as we view early childhood education for citizenship as a viable means of combatting the current state of extreme political polarization that threatens to undermine our liberal democratic way of life. Furthermore, we advise that educators refrain from promoting partisan views but not immediately shy away from discussing hot-topic political issues with direct relevance to students' lived experiences. We maintain that such issues offer rich opportunities for expanding students thinking and for learning how to engage in respectful pluralistic dialogue when tackled in developmentally appropriate ways. Lastly, we underscore that children's political actions that may or may not emerge from classroom civic discussions should be entirely their own, as societal progress relies upon the preservation of the originality of students' ideas.

As many modern pluralistic liberal democratic states continue to experience trends of expanding diversity within and

among groups owed to immigration, sociopolitical developments, and increased access to novel information and perspectives, it should be expected that such groups will often disagree about matters that impact the daily lives of other citizens. However, entailed within a commitment to liberal democracy, which maintains that all citizens, regardless of race, gender, religion etc., ought to be treated as moral equals, is a responsibility to promote the common good. In light of the political divisions that appear to limit a citizenry's abilities to empathize across diverse viewpoints and, in turn, promote the common good, we conclude that children's capacities for reasonable traits of thought and action should be nurtured and developed as early as possible.

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