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From Critical Self Reflection to Cultivating Equitable Literacy Classrooms: Educators Creating PD as They Move Forward with Hope

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ELISABETH SPINNER, EMILY SOMMER, NAITNAPHIT LIMLAMAI, ANNA J. ROSEBORO, LYNNE LESKY, KIM STEIN, RICK KREINBRING, AND SHELLEY ESMAN

Every other Wednesday, in the late afternoon, as we have since June 2020, nine English Language Arts teachers and teacher educators from across Michigan settle in front of our computers and fire up Zoom to spend 90 minutes in conversation and collaboration around the ways our teaching can move towards justice and antiracism. Most of us have never met in person: we live hundreds of miles apart, from Harbor Springs to Rochester Hills. We teach at middle schools, high schools, colleges and universities, and for professional organizations. We come from rural communities, small towns, working-class and wealthy suburbs, diverse cities. What joins us is our shared interest in being more just teachers for students, being uncomfortable as we unlearn old practices and learn together new ways to teach.

While the pandemic has been unbelievably difficult, it has offered an opportunity to reimagine how we, as teachers, learn. We began our group with a modest goal, to collaborate on a book club format that we could use to offer antiracism programming for Michigan Council of Teachers of English (MCTE) members. But the challenges of the pandemic forced us to reframe and broaden this goal, and resulted in the creation of a professional community that helped us reimagine how to do professional development in ways that have crossed geographic and institutional boundaries. Our sustained remote conversation, centered on common texts, was some of the richest professional development we had ever experienced. This group has allowed us to **reconsider** our understanding of what it means to teach English, to **transform** our literacy curriculum and instruction while making connections to the racial injustices that have continued to occur over the past year and that have extended historically well before our time together. The group has allowed us to **discuss** our obstacles in providing equitable and literacy-rich spaces for students and brainstorm solutions that we put into action.

Making Online, Antiracist PD Work:

Emphasizing Love and Hope While Reading How to Be an Antiracist

The nine of us came together as a group because we had all attended the 2019 MCTE Fall Conference and had participated in a session organized by the MCTE Diversity, Inclusion, Justice, and Equity Committee (dije; pronounced dee-hay) chair, Naitnaphit Limlamai. We all signed up as being interested in learning more and helping out in some capacity in the future. At the time, we didn't know that a global pandemic would make this collaboration more challenging or that several high-profile incidents of systemic racism would make this work even more urgent. In the spring of 2020, Naitnaphit reached out to those who attended the fall conference session to see if we were interested in learning how to facilitate a statewide book club, and we soon found ourselves Zooming on those alternating Wednesdays.

In our first few meetings, we discovered that our group had multiple goals. We had volunteered to plan professional development programming for teachers across the state who felt, as we did, that there is an urgent need to learn more about antiracist language arts instruction. But we also needed to figure out how to facilitate that kind of learning for others, with all the constraints that the pandemic imposed, while being learners ourselves, coming to terms with our own elisions, weaknesses, and need for growth.

Before working to facilitate learning for others, we wanted to start with a book club for ourselves that would help us **with our own antiracist journeys and to develop community among our group**. We agreed that we wanted a text that would support three kinds of work: work on self, work with students, and work outside our classrooms (with parents, colleagues, administrators, and community members). We debated the merits of books designed for educators versus those meant for a general audience and

generated a list of candidates. For the work on self, Kendi's *How to be an Antiracist* (2019) appealed to us because we felt it would interest educators from many backgrounds and experiences and its structure, unfolding his development of antiracist literacy through the stages in his own life, giving us a framework for working on ourselves. We felt it was important to begin this journey by looking inward and doing self-reflection, and this text created an opportunity for this work. It also offered an introduction to key terminology and concepts while not centering whiteness.

So, after choosing a book, we ended up with an antiracist book club whose goal was, in part, to learn how to facilitate an antiracist book club. As we worked together, we ended up creating a professional community that existed in a space none of us had experienced before, one that not only fulfilled its professional development purpose but also helped ameliorate some of the isolation and loneliness so many educators felt during the pandemic.

Because of the pandemic and our geographic distance, our work was done online, which created an opportunity for effective professional development in an online learning space. Hogue (2003) writes that "Teachers must be supported by a network of content-area colleagues who will challenge us to grow" (p. 36). Hogue explains how she joined an NCTE-Talk and found "collective wisdom" and was "inspired" (p. 36). She experienced discussions that allowed her to meet colleagues in person and that prompted her to expand her literacy teaching practices. Her experience with online professional development communities prompted her to reflect that:

Being where I am now would not have been possible had I not stumbled into that electronic teachers' lounge where the wisest and the most inexperienced together talk about teaching English. I revel in the energy that exists on this list even after years of talking. It is as if no one ever tires of discussing good teaching or debating the best practices in teaching reading and writing. (p. 39)

This energy closely resembles the energy our dije group has created and, like Hogue's network, we do not tire of discussing antiracist teaching practices. The online environment was our only choice during the pandemic, but became a viable space for us; other teachers have used online spaces before and will likely use them even more so after the pandemic.

The benefits of the work we did and continue to do in this online space are evidenced in our schools, communities, and personal lives. As we read and talked together, we started reflecting on our own personal journeys to being more aware of racism in our country, white supremacy in our own spaces,

and how to be an antiracist. One of our first discussions was about from where and why we were entering this space (cf, Giddings, 1984). Our responses reflected the variety of our backgrounds and experiences. For example, Emily Sommer, a newly retired English teacher, entered the space as a white teacher from a 70% white district that has struggled to address both institutional and individual racism, wanting to be a better advocate for her students. Naitnaphit Limlamai, a doctoral candidate at the University of Michigan, an instructor of pre-service teachers, and the chair of our group, thinks about racism almost every day, partly because she has almost daily encounters with it. Beth Spinner, an English education doctoral student at Western Michigan University and high school English teacher, came from a place of limited knowledge of racism and wanted to learn more to do better for her preservice teachers to help address systemic racism in schools. Lynne Lesky, who teaches English III and IV at Petoskey High School, came looking for a space to be more "aware of diversity, inclusion, justice, and equity" because she felt that her teaching in northern Michigan often felt isolated.

We then began to think about how these realizations and knowledge we were creating would apply to our literacy teaching practice. Reading *How to be an Antiracist* created opportunities for our group to talk about our personal experiences and thoughts on antiracism, which were some of the goals we set for our professional development. Like others have done, we wanted professional development that would help us to use our voices and explore different viewpoints. Wells and Mitchell (2016) write that they wanted to "build a professional development model that allowed teachers to find their own voices and listen to the voices of others as they stepped beyond the borders of their classrooms" (p.36). They explain that instead of being lecture-based, professional development needs to be based on dialogue and value different viewpoints. Dialogue and differing viewpoints were key elements of our group. One member, Emily, pointed out the importance of working together during the pandemic: "because I was teaching mostly remotely for the 20-21 school year, this group became my community. Every two weeks, I had a funny, fiercely intelligent, and challenging cohort to check in with, people whose experiences and students were a lot different than mine. Seeing into other people's classrooms and teaching lives this way has been one of the most powerful and influential experiences of my career." Similarly, Beth wrote, "This group has shifted my thinking in many ways. Every member of the group has brought experiences to the discussions that have made me think about teaching in new

ways. One aspect that has made this happen is everyone's willingness to admit we have more to learn and want to learn." Our different experiences and discussions were essential to developing our professional development.

One of the closing recommendations Wells and Mitchell (2016) write about is to:

Fortify Freire's five conditions for successful dialogue: love, humility, faith in humankind, hope, and critical thinking. This kind of dialogic professional development depends on a great amount of trust and respect, which may not already exist in environments that use more traditional professional development models. While seemingly simple, hope is an important element in current educational environments that focus on student deficits in the face of high-stakes testing. These five conditions serve as the foundation for dialogic professional development. (p. 40)

Key to our group's work each time we met was an emphasis on love, humanity, faith in humankind, hope, and critical thinking. Amidst a global pandemic, racial injustice, education inequities, and political strife, the world around us felt hopeless. But we wanted to work together because we had hope for our students and belief in humankind and valued the importance of critical thinking. We came together and were willing to be vulnerable and take risks because of these ideals. We had an attitude of love and grace. We came alongside each other in our dialogue and created a community of learners that are growing in their literary teaching practice. Shelley Esman, a retired teacher and current English Education doctoral student at Western Michigan University, explained, "I hadn't recognized policies that surrounded me in my past" and "that racism and prejudice are taught by what we experience and read and watch. I have become more aware of my own actions and spoken words." These reflections demonstrate our work to see other viewpoints and engage in dialogue as we practiced self-reflection.

Importance of Reading, Asking Questions, and Applying Knowledge: Reading *Cultivating Genius* and Applying it to Our Classrooms

After this important self-work, we then turned to reading and discussing *Cultivating Genius* (2020) by Muhammad. This move allowed us to think about our teaching, classrooms, and students and to consider how our self-work could translate to creating a more equitable and literacy-rich learning space for them. The Muhammad text allowed our self-reflections and creation of knowledge about antiracism to continue. Reading her work also allowed us to make stronger connections to

our teaching practices and to interpret theory through the lens of our experiences and teaching. These regular meetings created opportunities to move from discussing antiracism to talking about concrete classroom practices that are culturally and historically responsive literacy (HRL), which Muhammad (2020) defines as "when teaching, learning, and leadership beliefs and practices authentically respond to: 1. Students' cultural (and other) identities, 2. The cultural (and other) identities of others, 3. The social times (historical and current)" (p. 48). We learned from Muhammed that one way to incorporate students' identities is to revise curriculum so that it represents our students, which several of us were able to do after our book study.

Participant Lynne Lesky reflected that the book club "has made me more confident in using my voice when things are not equitable for all students." She explained how the curriculum handed to her did not represent her students, writing that "many of my students are Indigenous and are citizens of local tribes, and I could see that the curriculum was lacking in representation for these students." One way that she addressed this was by inviting a guest speaker to her school to share with students from a BIPOC perspective. Lynne's guest speaker, Waganakising Odawa Anishinaabe kwe, Meredith Kennedy, Migizi doodem explained:

It is vitally important to include BIPOC voices in classrooms; we need to model to our students the diversity within our community while letting BIPOC students see themselves in guest speakers. I really appreciated the opportunity to share a piece of the Anishinaabe creation story with [high school] classes. *Chi Miigwech* (many thanks) to... them for showing how to add equity into lesson plans. My hope is that this demonstrated inclusion will become a model for their peers."

Lynne "will continue to look at lesson planning through an antiracist lens, being sure that what is presented to students is inclusive and representative of everyone."

Similarly, Kim Stein, who teaches English at Bridgeport High School, described another impact of our conversations:

[They] led to my making decisions to augment my curriculum to include more inclusive learning materials. This ensures that all students are represented in my curriculum in a meaningful way. Through discussions with book club members, I've become less apprehensive about tackling "uncomfortable" topics, both in my classroom and with colleagues. My students noticed this and appreciated it; they thanked me for 'telling the truth' about our country's racist history and speaking openly with them about social justice.

Rick Kreinbring, English teacher at Avondale High School, noticed something similar in his classroom. In a unit on *Night*, he encouraged his students to think about how they might use the techniques of a memoir to make changes in communities they care about. This helped bring in topics that students see as important as well as their identities. The approach made the text relevant to the present and students felt this connection was important. This approach is an example of Muhammad's framework. Students in Kim's and Rick's classrooms benefited from HRL and appreciated seeing themselves in the curriculum and why it matters right now.

In order to create a more equitable and literacy-rich learning space, we talked about ways our teaching didn't always center students who are traditionally marginalized, especially Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students and how to make changes to our teaching that would create a more equitable classroom. These discussions allowed us to make waves in our districts. Emily wrote:

I joined this group in order to put into action beliefs and values that I claimed to have but had not acted on for my students, feeling more and more that I was a teacher of lukewarm acceptance and shallow understanding. I wanted to do more but didn't know how to do that in my role as a classroom teacher.

Now, over a year after working together, her classroom experienced incredible benefits from our work, which also incorporates the HRL framework. She explains that joining this "group has helped me contribute to positive changes in my school district as well as my classroom. Because of the examples and support of my peers in this group, instead of quietly sharing my opinions in my district and then hoping someone would join me and give me permission to start the work, I pushed for the work to happen." She was able to make changes that helped to decenter whiteness and support traditionally marginalized students. Rick reflects:

Because of the input of the group I've been able to see and hear places in my curriculum, and in discussions with students where ideas and approaches I learned from the dije fit. My recent conversations with students have taken a better direction and I think that they are benefiting from this work. I was able to listen better, and therefore provide better opportunities for the students. I'm always looking for my students' strengths so that we can build on them and this kind of work lets me see those strengths more easily and build on them better.

These reflections demonstrate how we implemented a Historically Responsive Literacy framework in our classroom and how it benefited our students.

Inquiry as Stance: Reading and Discussing YA Literature in Our Professional Development

Perhaps one of the reasons why we were able to use our professional development space to make such waves was because of our willingness to generate new knowledge. Cochran-Smith (2004) describes *inquiry as stance*, a phrase she coined, to mean "the positions that teachers and others who work in inquiry communities take toward knowledge, its relationship to practice, and the purpose of schooling" (p. 14). She goes on to say that "taking an inquiry stance means new and experienced teachers and teacher educators working within communities to generate local knowledge, envision and theorize their practice, and interpret and interrogate the theory and research of others" (p. 14). Our professional development community took on inquiry as a stance as we worked to interpret theories and ideas through the lens of our antiracist work and then apply those conclusions to our own schools. A member of our group, Anna J. Small Roseboro, a retired educator and author, reflected that "we've come to the understanding that we, as educators, can be agents of change if we are willing to grow into what we know to be true. Education is the key." Our entire group valued the importance of asking questions to learn more as a way to create important professional development. Hunt and Hunt (2005) write that teachers often feel like professional development is not something that is being done for them and that taking the initiative to find professional development that is beneficial is important. In many ways, this describes the work our dije subcommittee has been doing: as a group that brings a variety of experiences and backgrounds, we have approached our professional learning space with an inquiry stance that has allowed us to ask questions, think about what we want to learn, read theory and research, talk it out, and think together about how we each are applying it to our practice.

One way we applied the research on antiracism that we were reading was by reading and discussing young adult (YA) novels. We began with *Dear Martin* (Stone, 2017). This book is a powerful example of the consequences of racism, white supremacy, antiblack police brutality, and classism from the perspective of high schoolers. We then read *Dear Justyce* (Stone, 2020), a sequel to *Dear Martin*. This book, about a Black youth in juvenile detention and the students and lawyers advocating for him, helps to showcase the injustices of the court system and systemic racism in communities of color. The books' content stretched us as we thought more about our literacy teaching practices and our own antiracist journeys through the lens of the text. These books also opened

windows (Bishop, 1990) for our group and led us to consider antiracist research and theory we learned while studying Kendi, as well as with our own reflections and realizations while reading.

Reading books our students were reading also helped us to think about how we might apply theory to our classrooms. These texts served as examples that reflect Muhammad's (2020) HRL framework because it portrayed diverse identities and strongly connected to the social times students are experiencing. Muhammad tells us that "textual lineages are texts that are meaningful and significant in our lives. These books become part of our histories and lineages" (p. 147). Stone's books added to our textual lineages by adding to "our thinking and understanding of the world and ourselves" (p. 147). Muhammad says that "Students must see themselves in the texts, including their cultures, identities, interests, experiences, desires, and future selves" (p. 146). We can now add these books to our classroom libraries as opportunities for students as to see themselves reflected in what they read.

Reading and discussing the young adult literature in our professional development was important for us as English teachers. Thompson (2014) writes about the importance of high school English teachers engaging in professional development that asks them to read and discuss literature. She argues that teachers need to be part of diverse reading experiences and literary communities, like teachers encourage their students to be part of. She recommends that teachers engage in "sustained ongoing reflection" in order to grow as a reader and English teacher as they take part in these communities" (p. 42). She provides examples of teachers reading texts not necessarily to talk about including them in the curriculum, but to talk about their meaning and to possibly have an experience that challenges them as a reader, mimicking the experience as an adolescent reader in English class. Hunt and Hunt (2005) write about something similar when they argue that teachers need to read not only scholarly material, but the kind of texts that students are reading. Our group implemented similar strategies in our book club meetings. We became a diverse literary community that sought to learn more about antiracist literacy teaching and how to practice these ideas in classrooms with students.

We didn't approach these books with the idea of teaching them necessarily, since none of us are in the same school or even in the same geographic location. Rather, the goal was to learn more as readers and as English teachers. We wanted to learn more about making antiracist meaning (Kendi, 2019) and reading in ways that engaged in culturally and

historically responsive literacy (Muhammad, 2020). While reading scholarly pieces and young adult literature, an aspect that benefited our group was our discussion and willingness to dialogue on topics that are sometimes difficult to discuss. Hunt and Hunt (2005) argue that while reading and taking notes is a great way to learn, it is essential to talk to others while reading texts. Our reading and discussion provided beneficial antiracist professional development that joined educators from many different backgrounds, experiences, and locations, becoming colleagues who joined together to support each other.

Conclusion and Next Steps

As we approached the end of our first year working together, we wanted to return to our original pre-pandemic goal and extend our work to collaborate with more teachers from around the state. This summer, we have been facilitating a statewide book club reading *Cultivating Genius*. We reflected on what made our experiences effective professional development and landed on the importance of talking and asking questions as well as the need to be vulnerable and create community. Those have been the driving forces as we develop and facilitate bi-weekly book club meetings where participants are gathering in an online space, discussing the book, and working to develop a unit plan that they might implement next school year. Even as facilitators, we are still learning from discussions with participants who add new perspectives. In addition to sharing our work around the state of Michigan, we also presented our work at the National Council of Teachers of English convention earlier this fall. We hope to encourage other affiliates around the country to take on antiracist professional development in order to create more equitable learning for all students.

The important and ongoing work of antiracist teaching that has been happening in our professional development has been powered by our focus on reading, learning, and asking questions. Our work is transforming literacy and language arts curriculum around the state and is spreading hope and empowerment to our students, the same hope and love that has been driving our group's work and allowing us to overcome challenges and transform our teaching.

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Elisabeth Spinner is a doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University. Her research focuses on supporting secondary English teachers as they implement reading and writing content and skills in their curriculum to encourage students to engage in activism. Before beginning her doctoral program, she taught middle and high school English.

Emily Sommer has taught high school English in southeast Michigan for 25 years and supervises secondary student teaching interns at Oakland University. Her areas of focus include creating effective mentoring programs for new teachers and informal team-building to improve school culture.

Naitnaphit Limlamai, a former high school English teacher, is currently a doctoral candidate in the Joint Program in English and Education at the University of Michigan where she is completing her dissertation on secondary English teacher preparation, how that work manifests justice, and how those ideas travel from university preparation course work to student teaching classrooms. She has additional interests in how writers develop as such and collaboration. She teaches secondary English methods courses; works as an editorial assistant for *Research in the Teaching of English*; and serves as the diversity, inclusion, justice, and equity chair of the Michigan Council of Teachers of English.

Anna J. Roseboro, wife, mother, educator and poet, is known for her work with groups like the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the Conference on English Leadership, and the California Association of Teachers of English. With 40 years experience in public and private schools, she is a National Board Certified Teacher vetted by the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards. Ms. Roseboro has mentored the NCTE's Early Career Educators of Color cohorts and currently mentors online and coaches new writers.

Lynne Kelso Lesky teaches English at Petoskey High School where she advocates for and actively promotes literacy while creating and nurturing a lifelong love of reading and learning in young people. She serves as her school's Diversity Club co-sponsor and as the teacher representative for the Title VI Indian Education Parent Committee.

Kim Stein is an English teacher at Bridgeport High School, an adjunct professor at Saginaw Valley State University, and a doctoral student at Oakland University. She is passionate about utilizing inclusive curriculum resources to engage students and raise achievement, as well as fostering collaboration among educators.

Rick Kreinbring works with the incredible English department at Avondale High school in Auburn Hills. He is currently teaching AP Literature, AP Language and Composition, English II and he heads the Writing Center. He has been privileged to work and learn with MCTE, NCTE and the National Writing Project.

Shelley L. Esman taught early elementary school for twenty years before becoming a middle school instructional coach for grades 5-8 at a high poverty school in Michigan for ten years. She is in the third year of her English Education Doctoral program at Western Michigan University. Her area of research is Holocaust Education. She teaches Children's Literature and Writing in the Elementary Classroom at WMU as well as developmental classes at Kalamazoo Valley Community College. In addition, she is the Elementary Chairperson of MCTE and an active member of DIJE.