

## **Exploring the Nature of Teacher Educator Attitudes and Engagement Within an Anti-Bias Community of Practice**

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### **Abstract**

This study explored how members of a community of practice of teacher educators from a diversity of institutions across one state engaged in and expressed (dis)comfort during a two-day workshop on anti-bias teacher education. Using a qualitative, single-case embedded design, we found that there was a range of engagement with the workshop content that is consistent with how most people engage with anti-bias content: Participants who came into the workshop eager to reflect and adapt their practice were apt to do so, while those with initial hesitations tended to display some resistance. We also observed a shared desire to find common ground, support each other, and collaborate in service of professional improvement. This work has implications for the development of teacher educators who are prepared to teach anti-bias content to future teachers.

*Keywords:* anti-bias, teacher education, community of practice

Recent events such as the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement and the widespread misconstrual of Critical Race Theory have underscored the need for anti-racist teaching and learning. Anti-racism necessitates “persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination” (Kendi, 2019). Bias is at the heart of the kinds of discrimination that can damage teaching and learning, negatively influencing students’ opportunities and achievement (Kumar et al., 2015). In opposition to this, anti-bias education serves as an “underpinning perspective” (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2019, p. 6) in which teachers continually reflect about the impact of their instruction and work to combat bias in themselves and the interactions that take place in their classrooms (Derman-Sparks, 2016). By providing anti-bias teacher education

to pre-service teachers (PSTs), teacher preparation institutions (TPIs) have the opportunity to prepare teachers to enter the field better equipped to support all students and ready to grow into anti-racist educators.

Anti-bias teacher education is broadly defined as education for PSTs that builds “inclusion, positive self-esteem for all, empathy, and activism in the face of injustice” (Lin et al., 2008, p. 189). TPIs serve as a space where PSTs can develop beliefs, attitudes, and practices related to anti-bias education (Lin et al., 2008). Furthermore, PSTs tend to benefit from scaffolded, hands-on experiences facilitated by TEs in their TPI coursework that focus on anti-bias education (Devine et al., 2012). Nevertheless, there are often logistical, ideological, and cultural constraints in TPIs that deter TEs from teaching this content, including a reluctance to engage with topics that are uncomfortable (Ladson-Billings, 2015) or for which TEs lack training (Genor & Schulte, 2002). A promising first step to having a workforce of anti-bias educators is to prepare TEs to effectively train PSTs (i.e., through their TPI coursework). Previous studies have shown that communities of practice (CoPs) can be impactful sites in which TEs can do such reflective and innovative work (Anthony et al., 2018; Curcio & Schroeder, 2017).

### **Anti-Bias Teacher Education**

Anti-bias teacher education often appears within multicultural education courses and includes a focus on recognizing and confronting one’s own biases through connecting with students’ diverse families and communities in order to instruct more equitably. However, very few multicultural education courses focus specifically on family engagement. Successful family engagement instruction includes, but is not limited to, growing PSTs’ knowledge of diverse families (e.g., characteristics and historical context) and PSTs’ skills for engaging them (e.g., collaboration and communication; Gerich et al., 2017) and providing opportunities for PSTs to

be immersed in students' diverse cultures through tasks such as home visiting and role-playing (García et al., 2009). In other words, family engagement is an underutilized space for developing anti-bias dispositions.

PSTs tend to show discomfort or resistance around certain areas of anti-bias instruction. These include topics such as race, family, religion, and culture (Smith & Glenn, 2016). Additionally, PSTs often express discomfort during discussions wherein their views could be interpreted as biased (Smith & Glenn, 2016). Extant research provides instructional strategies that may decrease PSTs' hesitation to self-reflect and speak about their own biases. Reflection is key (Gerich et al., 2017); PSTs may reflect more openly when TEs give them opportunities to process privately through writing, share in pairs, and then discuss as a whole class (Smith & Glenn, 2016). Also, exposing PSTs to an anonymous third party's biased views can allow PSTs to distance themselves from those views enough to critique them (Genor & Schulte, 2002). Conversely, by providing PSTs with first-hand accounts of people from marginalized identity groups, TEs can allow PSTs to empathize enough with those sharing so as to rescind their previously biased views (Genor & Schulte, 2002). Successful anti-bias instruction of PSTs may also include directly addressing PSTs' self-efficacy beliefs and fears regarding family engagement (Gerich et al., 2017).

### **Collaboration Among Teacher Educators**

A limited number of studies have explored the ways in which TEs collaborate to reform practice. Occasionally, collaborative efforts involve intentionally-formed communities of practice (CoPs), which aim to reform practice in a group of participants (Wenger, 1998); however, many collaborations are not specifically CoPs and are instead formed more organically. Whether CoPs or not, these collaborative groups allow TEs to reflect on their practice (Curcio &

Schroeder, 2017), share ideas across fields or institutions (Kluth & Straut, 2003), and apply knowledge to practice (Au, 2002). Collaboration can have a strong positive impact on TEs' instructional and academic effectiveness (Anthony et al., 2018; Curcio & Schroeder, 2017).

CoPs and other forms of TE collaboration can increase instructional rigor (Anthony et al., 2018), lower isolation among TEs and PSTs (Curcio & Schroeder, 2017), and bridge practice across divergent fields (Kluth & Straut, 2003). Collaboration can also allow members at various stages of their careers to engage in continuous learning. Within collaborative TE groups, studies show that conflicts may not detract from the group's cohesion – in fact, dissension can be productive and help all of the members to grow stronger and more reflective (Curcio & Schroeder, 2017). However, some research also shows that strong group cohesion can result in “downward leveling norms,” where the majority discourages individuals from pursuing divergent perspectives (Portes, 1998, p. 17). Therefore, group awareness and intentionality are crucial: members need to be mindful of the potential for individuals to compromise the group's goals and must consciously uphold their collective standards.

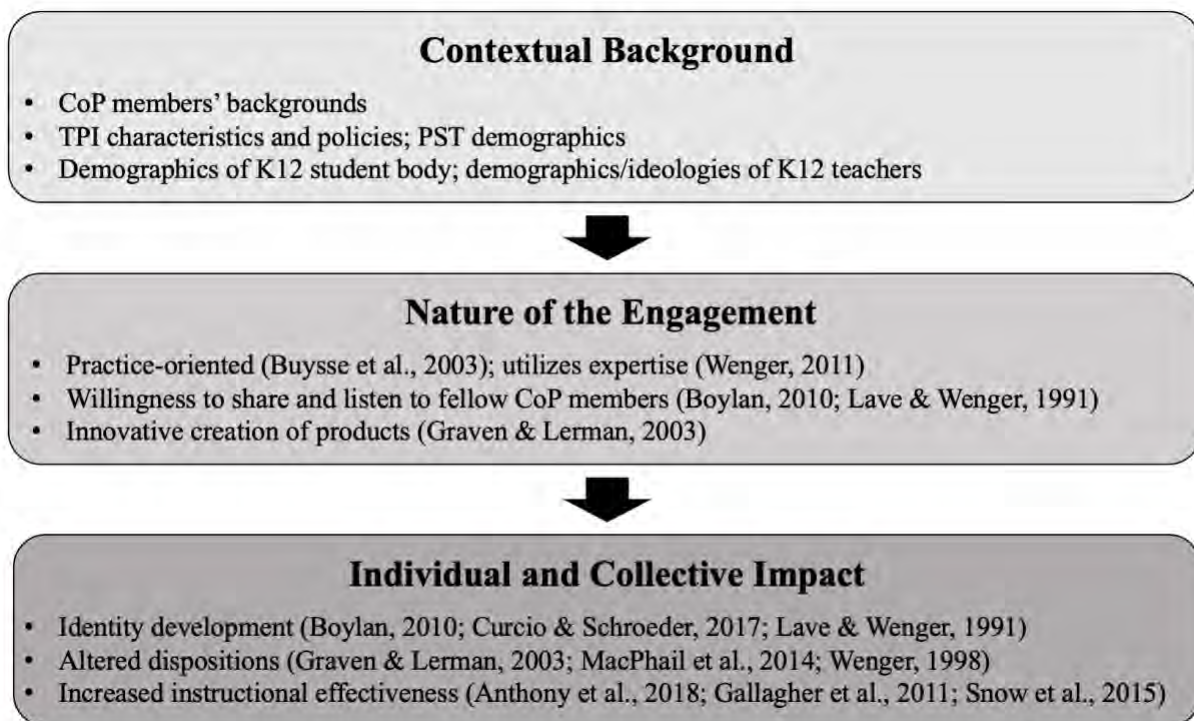
### **Conceptual Framework: Communities of Practice**

A CoP is a group of individuals who convene around a topic of interest to reflect on and collectively reform their practice. Members from varying backgrounds “share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 1998, p. 1). In CoPs, members draw upon their individual expertise to inform their mutual engagement through “joint activities and discussions, help[ing] each other, and shar[ing] information” (Wenger, 2011, p. 2). CoP members openly share their personal knowledge and experiences while also listening to that of their fellow CoP members (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This authentic communication allows for innovation (Buysse et al, 2003; Graven & Lerman,

2003) and for vulnerability in the face of new learning (Anthony et al., 2018). Scholars note that increased trust and support within a CoP can enhance the conditions for creativity as well (Graven & Lerman, 2003). As our framework shows (see Figure 1), the characteristics of participating TEs and their TPIs merge to influence the nature of engagement that occurs in the CoP, and this then impacts the individual members and the field at large.

### Figure 1

#### *Teacher Educator Communities of Practice*



### Methods

We employed a qualitative, single-case embedded design (Yin, 2017) to explore how participants engaged and expressed (dis)comfort in a two-day workshop on anti-bias teacher education in the summer of 2019. The ‘case’ for this study was the anti-bias education TE CoP, where the embedded units of analysis were the individual TEs from different TPIs. The goal of the workshop was to iterate an anti-bias module with CoP members that each TE would then

implement with PSTs in their Elementary Teaching Seminar (“Seminar”) courses. The module itself was intended to provide PSTs with opportunities to: a) explore their own cultural identities and articulate an expansive definition of culture (Hammond, 2014); b) understand implicit bias and reflect on their own biases (Milner, 2003); c) identify cultural assets in families and resources in communities (López, 2007); and d) engage in productive and positive relationship-building home visits with students’ families (Parent Teacher Home Visit Project, 2007) as well as conduct community resource visits. The workshop began with the TEs participating in the module as learners, themselves. We hired an external facilitator -- a Black woman who was an equity specialist, administrator, and former classroom teacher in a local school district -- to lead the majority of the workshop sessions with researcher support so that the researchers could participate as CoP members.

We explored the following research questions:

1. How do TEs’ background experiences with and expectations about module content (i.e., anti-bias education and family engagement) shape their engagement within an anti-bias TE CoP?
2. What module content provokes comfort and discomfort for TEs?

### **Researcher Positionality**

The three authors are white, middle-class women who have attended or served as a professor at a TPI in the same state as the other CoP participants. The first author is pursuing her Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree. She serves as a teaching assistant in a Seminar with the third author. The second author served as a teaching intern in the Seminar course with the third author while she pursued her Ph.D. The third author is an assistant professor and teaches a Seminar course.

**Participants**

In this study, we utilized purposive sampling to recruit four TE participants into the CoP (see Table 1). They work at four different TPIs: Red, Blue, Purple, and Yellow Universities. The following participant descriptions provide context for the interactions described in the findings.

***May Ordibehesht***

May is a Middle Eastern woman who completed her Bachelor of Science (B.S.) and Master of Arts (M.A.) degrees in school counseling in Iran. She obtained a Ph.D. in early childhood education. For a total of 13 years, May was a school counselor and pK teacher. She has been a tenure-track assistant professor at Red University since 2017. May was interested in participating in the workshop to add “new lenses and more comprehensive aspects” to her courses (Survey, 4/5/20).

***Lucy Evans***

Lucy is a white woman who received a B.A. in elementary education and religion as well as a Master of Education (M.Ed.) in reading. For a total of eight years, she was an elementary teacher. She has been at Blue University for six years and is currently an assistant professor and coordinator for the Bachelor of Science in Education (B.S.Ed.) program. Lucy was interested in participating in the workshop to collaborate with “colleagues at other institutions” (Survey, 7/27/19) because she wanted to learn “how other universities prepare students throughout their program.”

***Jane Davis***

Jane is a white woman who received a B.A. and M.T. in elementary education as well as a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction. For a total of five years, she was an elementary teacher. Jane has been at Purple University for ten years serving as Assistant Director and then Director

of Education Studies; now, she is a tenured associate professor. Jane was interested in participating in the workshop in order to connect with colleagues and promote anti-bias work: “Ultimately, it is a benefit to myself, my institution, my students, and their future students” (Survey, 7/24/19).

### ***Marian Lane***

Marian is a white woman who has a B.S. in elementary education (i.e., pK-6) as well as an M.Ed. and Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in curriculum and instruction. She was an elementary teacher for 18 years and then served for seven years as Yellow University’s assistive technology coordinator. She has been at Yellow University for the past 15 years and is currently a full professor and elementary education program leader. Marian was interested in participating in the workshop in order to learn “what others are doing and ways to improve [her] teaching and [Yellow University’s] pre-service program” (Survey, 7/29/19).

**Table 1**

### *TE Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym	Demographics and Personal Background	Professional Background in Education (pK-12 or Higher Ed)	TPI Location
May	Female, Middle Eastern, Muslim, Iranian, middle class, Persian/Farsi, 34 years old	17 years: school counselor, pK teacher, tenure-track assistant professor	Small city within a rural area
Lucy	Female, white, Christian, U.S.-born, middle class, English, 46 years old	15 years: elementary teacher, assistant professor, and program coordinator	Mid-sized city within a suburban area
Jane	Female, white, non-religious, U.S.-born, upper-middle class, English, 40 years old	16 years: elementary teacher, associate professor, assistant program director, and program director	Large city within an urban area



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Marian	Female, white, Christian, U.S.-born, middle class, English, 61 years old	41 years: elementary teacher, university assistive technology coordinator, professor, and program leader	Small city within a rural area
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### **Context and Data Collection**

We collected a variety of data sources. First, TEs completed a pre-workshop survey including 11 open-response questions. Then, during the two-day workshop, we collected detailed observational field notes on the TEs' interactions with the workshop content as well as with one another. The TEs completed two mid-workshop reflections consisting of several open-ended questions. They also completed a post-workshop survey containing three open-response questions about their experiences with the anti-bias workshop and their intentions for future anti-bias work. We followed up with participants at a conference held eight months after the anti-bias workshop to reflect upon module implementation as well as to gather updated participant information.

### **Data Analysis**

We analyzed the open-ended survey questions, observation field notes, and reflections with a grounded theory, iterative approach followed by open coding in order to develop categories and cluster topics (Merriam, 2009). We discussed areas of disagreement, refined the codebook, and re-coded in Dedoose until we reached 78% agreement. We used data triangulation (i.e., surveys, observation field notes, reflections) to develop larger themes and identify disconfirming evidence, which together informed our study's findings.

### **Findings**

We found that among our range of TEs' personal and professional characteristics there was a variety of approaches to the anti-bias work and collaboration itself. These differences

included how often and how vociferously participants chose to speak up and reflect during the workshop, as well as how and when participants demonstrated discomfort and vulnerability. We also observed a shared desire to find common ground, support each other, and collaborate in service of being better TEs. In this section, we present these findings.

### **Speaking Up Versus Listening**

The four TE participants engaged deeply throughout the workshop; however, the levels and types of engagement and the background experiences from which participants drew differed. Some TEs were more willing to share personal stories, whereas others only spoke about practical or theoretical facets of the work. For example, May shared about her experience both as a religious minority and a professor and stressed the importance of TEs “advocating for people without a voice” (Field Notes, 7/29/2019). Jane, who was once uncomfortable being a first-generation college student, shared that she had gradually developed self-acceptance. She tells her students, “Not only is it okay that these are your roots, but we *need* you in education” (Field Notes, 7/29/2019). These participants’ personal experiences allowed them to connect with the content of the workshop.

Participants’ ways of listening also differed throughout the workshop, perhaps related to their individual attitudes, experiences, and beliefs. At times, participants listened very receptively, eager to learn. During the workshop, May shared with Lucy about being Irani and Muslim and her experience living on the other side of the world from her family. Then, Lucy asked (with regard to the Trump-era travel bans), “Do you see your family?” Lucy listened intently to May’s responses, potentially curious about May’s first-hand experience of racism that differed from Lucy’s experience. Lucy and May had very different cultural backgrounds, and the

bulk of this partner interaction was spent with May sharing and Lucy listening, exemplifying a learner stance.

### **Sharing Discomfort and Vulnerability**

Across the workshop, participants shared varying accounts of discomfort and vulnerability. The external facilitator set the tone for the workshop on the first day with: “If it doesn’t make you uncomfortable, I’m not doing my job” (Field Notes, 7/29/2019). The group agreed. Soon after, Marian suggested “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas” as a norm for the group; this indicated a desire for discretion. She explained that she was still learning and processing anti-bias content. May responded that Marian might receive some push-back from the group, but push-back is part of the process. The group agreed that both discretion and risk-taking (i.e., challenge) were important.

One topic that seemed to elicit discomfort among TEs was whiteness and white privilege. In a discussion about aspects of identity associated with privilege, the facilitator noted that whiteness could increase access to educational opportunities. At this point, May slumped down in her chair, partially hid her face in her clothes, folded her arms, and looked away, showing physical signs of discomfort. Jane, on the other hand, shifted the conversation to the topic of socio-economic status rather than race as a lever for opportunity. She shared that, being a first-generation college student, she did not know she could ask colleges for additional financial aid. In these examples, it is clear that whiteness elicited discomfort and avoidance among participants.

### **Seeking Cohesiveness**

Participants consistently sought cohesiveness among the group. When one or more TEs vocalized resistance to new techniques, other members of the group chimed in to seek consensus

and accommodate differing views. For example, when Jane conveyed apprehension about training PSTs to *celebrate* diversity, since some PSTs were “not even *tolerating* yet,” May conceded, “Maybe you *do* have to get to ‘tolerate’ before you can get to ‘celebrate’” (Field Notes, 7/29/2019). At other times, the group was even more forceful in seeking accord. When the group began discussing having PSTs conduct home visits during their teaching internships, Marian was wary, saying that having PSTs visit some neighborhoods would “probably be okay,” but not other neighborhoods. In direct response to Marian’s resistance, May shared a strategy she used to prepare her PSTs for multicultural encounters and then directly countered Marian with, “I definitely support (home visiting)” (Field Notes, 7/30/2019). Regarding TPI approval for home visiting, Jane shared how she planned to “ask forgiveness and not permission” and offered a compromise: “Lots of kids have activities, like dance practice. Could I go to something like that?” (i.e., conduct a home visit in a public setting). Marian agreed that this was also potentially a good strategy for meeting more than one family at a time.

Later, as the group prepared to sort through materials and discuss the module, participants collaborated to craft the essential questions. There was discomfort and disagreement as the team collectively honed the questions. The participants negotiated the questions that they were each going to work on. Within a few minutes, each individual had been able to uniquely contribute to the module and the group as a whole.

### **Committing to Collaboration**

Prior to the workshop, Marian, Lucy, and Jane indicated that the collaboration itself was their main motivation for attending the workshop (Survey, 7/27/19). Marian expressed in her post-workshop survey that she appreciated being able to “learn [from colleagues] and wrestle with new ideas.” Lucy agreed, describing the first day of the workshop as particularly important:

“I appreciated the opportunity to collaborate and learn from other people's experiences.” Jane reflected on the comfort of doing this difficult work in an anti-bias TE CoP: “It was incredibly useful to spend two days with other [TEs] who struggle with how to help our [PSTs] understand issues of identity and bias. It is comforting to know that others face the same struggle.” While these participants were enthusiastic about the product, it was the process they were particularly eager for. After the workshop, the same three participants were hopeful that the group could continue to collaborate. Although May’s main priority in participating was to gather resources to use with her students, more than to reflectively collaborate, she did indicate that the work together had been useful: “It helped us to reflect on our biases and more about ourselves as a critical first step” (Survey, 7/29/19).

The collective desire to collaborate was notable given the variation across the contexts. The four TEs compared and contrasted the courses where the module would fit into, revealing stark contrasts in their contexts (e.g., levels of instructor autonomy and length and modality of courses). However, all TEs expressed challenges working at TPIs where the PSTs were largely homogeneous in regards to demographics (i.e., white and female) and had similar background experiences. Overall, the participants left the workshop eager to support each other in their work implementing the module and integrating home visiting, in particular, into their individual programs.

### **Discussion**

Consistent with prior literature, we found that there was a range of TEs’ personal and professional experiences and a range of engagement with the workshop content (Genor & Schulte, 2002); furthermore, CoP members sought cohesiveness and collaboration with one another when given the opportunity (Buysse et al., 2003; Curcio & Schroeder, 2017; Graven &

Lerman, 2003). In terms of TEs' expectations, participants who came into the workshop eager to reflect and adapt their practice were apt to do so, while those with initial hesitations tended to display some resistance and avoidance (e.g., with the topics of white privilege and home visiting; Snow et al., 2015). In other words, the TEs' interactions and engagement with anti-bias education and family engagement (i.e., module content) were consistent with those of PSTs. Therefore, professional development for TEs might benefit from similar goals as anti-bias work for PSTs, including considerations of the TEs' contexts, background experiences, and expectations.

### **Anti-Bias Teacher Education**

While prior studies (O'Hara, 2007) addressed PSTs' experience with anti-bias topics, the present study explored TEs' engagement both as participants and as future facilitators of an anti-bias module. TEs' willingness to be vulnerable as participants in the module can build their capacity to empathetically navigate this process with PSTs. For example, Jane was able to reflect on her own experience as a first-generation college student, and she could articulate how she planned to leverage her own experience to encourage PSTs (Field Notes, 7/29/2019).

TEs' capability to relate to PSTs' experience with anti-bias teacher education may be nuanced by the extent to which TEs share demographic identities with PSTs. Research suggests that when white PSTs are taught by a TE of color, they temper their openness during anti-bias reflections (Smith & Glenn, 2016). In the present study, while not a TE-PST interaction, when Jane (a white TE) interacted with a Black facilitator on the topic of racism, she avoided the topic of white privilege and changed the subject to socioeconomic status (Field Notes, 7/29/2019). All but one of the present study's CoP members were white women, and multiple of these white members expressed discomfort with pushing their PSTs to celebrate diversity and visit the homes

of families with marginalized identities. While not overt, this implies an ongoing need to address TEs' own biases towards marginalized PSTs, K-12 students, and families. More research is needed to explore how TEs implement anti-bias modules with PSTs of demographics that differ from their own.

This anti-bias module was consistent with prior research on home visiting as a promising method of family engagement (García et al., 2009; Lin & Bates, 2010). During the workshop, some of the CoP members expressed willingness to implement home visiting with their PSTs; others demonstrated resistance, including concerns with the logistics and policies surrounding home visiting. This resistance aligned with the literature on PSTs' perceived barriers to implementing multicultural curricula in their future classrooms (Van Hook, 2002), as TEs expressed concern about TPI and school district policies. This reveals the need to adapt the anti-bias module to match the diverse characteristics of TEs' TPIs (and the TEs, themselves).

### **Communities of Practice**

Overall, the aspects of a successful CoP that were productive within this group of TEs—professionals with a variety of experiences and diversity of contexts—were the space and time to share experiences and build resources. Our CoP members came from different institutional contexts across a single state, so they were able to compare and contrast their experiences and contexts and collectively strategize implementing parts of the anti-bias module. In particular, they discussed how to communicate with administrators within their TPIs and how they could work with largely homogenous (i.e., white, female) groups of PSTs. The differences between CoP members in their personal and professional backgrounds allowed for richer conversations among the group (Wenger, 1998).

The TEs also had differing levels of professional experience; newer TEs brought fresh ideas—like requiring relationship-building home visits—and more experienced TEs brought professional savvy from years of experience in teacher education (e.g., how to negotiate with administrators; Lave & Wenger, 1991). CoP members' different personal backgrounds enhanced individuals' experiences (e.g., Lucy learning from May's experience as an immigrant; Field Notes, 7/29/2019) and the CoP as a whole (e.g., agreeing on norms of discretion and risk-taking based on members' experience-based suggestions; Field Notes, 7/29/2019). CoP members were able to capitalize on the personal and professional differences they discovered because they shared a common goal of reforming their practice (Wenger, 2011), thus leveraging their differences to fuel their collective work (Buysse et al., 2003). Given this cohesiveness, even outright disagreement among CoP members provided an opportunity to deepen the group's thinking and strengthen the group's framing of certain parts of the anti-bias module (e.g., "tolerate" versus "celebrate;" Field Notes, 7/29/2019; MacPhail et al., 2014). However, while the desire to build consensus allowed for the group to continue the work, it is possible that cohesiveness also resulted in "downward leveling norms" (Portes, 1998, p. 17). The possible negative effects of group cohesion within anti-bias TE CoPs merit further study.

Based on this study's findings, a worthwhile next step would be to investigate the implementation of the anti-bias module in the Seminar courses of this study's participating TE CoP members. As this study found, TEs would need to adapt the content and logistics of the module to accommodate their individual TPI and PSTs' characteristics. Researchers could also explore how PSTs experienced the module, including in-depth interviews to gauge participants' nuanced understandings of and responses to the content. Additionally, future studies could explore TEs' use of anti-bias CoPs among PSTs in teacher preparation courses, perhaps



alongside implementation of the anti-bias module. TEs could set up small groups of PSTs who would meet regularly as a PST CoP to discuss the module's anti-bias concepts and their application. These in-class CoPs could provide PSTs with a candid, reflective environment within which to introspectively confront bias (both their own and institutional) and adapt their teaching practice accordingly (Gerich et al, 2017; Smith & Glenn, 2016).

### **Limitations**

The scope of this study did not include data collection regarding TEs' PSTs in their Seminars, their coursework, or their reactions to or implementations of the module. Additionally, because we wanted to create a secure workshop space in which participants could share candidly, we relied on workshop field notes collected by one of the researchers rather than recordings, which limited the level of detail collected in the data. Future studies could utilize video recording to capture the nonverbal and verbal interactions and reactions of CoP members with the anti-bias workshop and each other.

### **Conclusion**

The TE CoP in this study provided TEs with an opportunity to collaboratively expand upon their understanding of anti-bias topics (Wenger, 2011). This study's findings are an important starting point to explore how CoP members' expressed attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions carry through into their practice. The need for anti-bias work is increasingly crucial. Since the occurrence of this workshop, the U.S. has experienced a renewed call for the end of systemic racism and bias. Teachers must interrogate their own beliefs and attitudes to disrupt their own biases and move toward anti-racist teaching (Kendi, 2019; Lin et al., 2008). TEs are teachers, too; thus, a vital starting point for this work is with the TEs who train PSTs.

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