Beginning With Self

The First Examination in the Preparation of Anti-Racist Educators

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Introduction

No other dehumanizing social construct has negatively impacted the realities and lived experiences of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in North America more than racism (Kendi, 2017; Solórzano & Pérez, 2020). No entity or institution of power established within any racialized context stands untainted by the horrid effects and dehumanizing impacts of racism (Jones, 2000). Teacher Preparation Programs (TPPs) are not exempt from this truth. Although there are many allies working both outside and within TPPs to ensure curricula, instructional practices, and pedagogies focus on *anti-racism*, the problem of effectively addressing microaggressions and internalized racial and implicit biases remain a concern in ensuring faculty members and K-12 teachers are *anti-racist* (Lopez & Jean-Marie, 2021; Ohito, 2019). Considering the resulting ramifications regarding racial tensions and civil unrest brought about by the murder of George Floyd, the pandemic, and the heightened acts of violence against members of the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) and Black communities, the need for educators and institutions of higher education to ad-

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dress and ameliorate the historical inequalities experienced by BIPOC through anti-racist practices, pedagogies, policies, and programming is at an all-time high (Kendi, 2019). This commentary chooses to focus on the field of teacher education and its collective response to impactfully engage in pedagogies and practices that promote anti-racism to refocus on what it means to truly be an anti-racist (Lynch, et. al., 2017).

In the Spring of 2021, the California Council on Teacher Education's (CCTE) Policy Committee released a research brief through the Race in Education Analytics Learning Lab detailing its memberships' "awareness, support, and integration of anti-racist principles" in their respective classrooms and teacher preparation programs (Jones, et.al, 2021). The membership of CCTE consists of pre-service candidates, in-service educators, community college faculty, and university teacher education faculty. The results were collected using a statewide survey distributed to the CCTE membership on the subject of anti-racist education. Of the 551 people surveyed, 50.6% identified themselves as pre-service candidates, 30.0% as in-service educators, 13.3% as college and university faculty, and 6.2% as other credentialed educators (Jones et. al., 2021). The survey consisted of 13 questions that focused on anti-racism principles and practices at both the individual and organizational level. One of the most interesting facts from the survey's results indicated that although an overwhelming number of participants (77.7%) have engaged in professional learning around anti-racist education and feel that identifying as an anti-racist educator is a core value (69.9%) for educators, they also reported feeling unprepared to engage with anti-racist pedagogical practices. Furthermore, participants also felt unprepared in instances requiring them to lead learning activities geared towards development, implementation, and practical application of anti-racist instructional practices (Reinke, et. al., 2021).

To further unpack the feelings of unpreparedness regarding engagement with teaching anti-racist practices 43.0% of the respondents felt somewhat prepared, 32.3% felt prepared, 15.9% felt well prepared, and 4.9% felt not prepared at all to teach anti-racist pedagogy and practices to pre-service educators (Jones, et.al, 2021). The researchers believed that the data presented within the brief points to an increasing interest on the part of CCTE's membership in professional learning around anti-racist practices and pedagogy. The survey participants also provided detailed and specified actions which they believe would result in greater preparedness to engage with anti-racist practices. The two greatest suggestions for action towards improving competency surrounding anti-racist pedagogy and practices were providing meaningful opportunities to observe experts modeling anti-racist practices

(48.6%) and a professional learning community to support them in trying new anti-racist strategies (37.9%) (Jones, et.al, 2021).

To adequately address the needs of the subjects surveyed the researchers suggested "policymakers and educators should draw upon research on anti-racist education to guide the development process" in the creation of a viable and functional anti-racist framework (Jones et. al., 2021, p. 4). This is exactly what must be done to help educators who believe anti-racist educational practices and pedagogies are essential for the future of education yet lack the necessary skills to enact those beliefs in tangible practical ways (Reinke, et. al., 2021). For policymakers and educators to create an anti-racist framework that, in essence, is non-traditional in scope and application, it is time for policymakers, curriculum developers, assessment designers, educators, and higher education faculty to look at non-traditional research outside of education to create a new anti-racist educational experience for students. The researchers attest that this need is an institutional issue that will require adjustments at the macro level to truly change for the better (Jones, et. al., 2021). Researching and observing institutions that have historically built their legacies and cultural capital on innovative anti-racist emancipatory pedagogies for BIPOC's in the past, and continue to do so in the present, is a great place to start.

The cultivation and building of students' social awareness, cultural competency, critical thinking, and analysis skills pertaining to racism and its pervasive effects within American society, educational institutions, and the world is one aim of anti-racist pedagogy and practices (Freire, 1970, 1998; Thompson, 1997; Troyna, 1987; Wagner, 2005). Another essential aim is to equip students to utilize those skills to both create and sustain systems of liberation that deconstruct racism and power dynamics which uphold its destructive influence over societal structures aimed at dehumanizing oppressed and marginalized people groups (hooks, 1994; Kandaswamy, 2007; López, 2008; Tatum, 2003; Thomas, 1997; Utt & Tochluk, 2020). A true anti-racist pedagogy must both educate *and* equip students for the purposes of liberation from oppressive institutions, ideologies, and intimations targeted at the marginalized of society towards emancipatory practices aimed at the rehumanization of all (Blakeney, 2005; Freire, 1970). However, to truly create and sustain systems that promote anti-racist education and pedagogies, the focus must shift from educating students towards a more concerted effort to educate and inform those who teach our students, *educators* (Arneback, 2022; Lynch, et. al., 2017).

Self-Examination: Back to the Beginning

According to Thompson (1997) anti-racist education is to be built on and enacted through a strong and developed pedagogical ideology consistent with the tenets of anti-racism (Arneback & Jämte, 2022). The purpose for anti-racist education must be educative! This is a distinct contrast from anti-racist education being used as a political vehicle for other measures which do not always result in equipping students to impactfully participate in a world system tainted by racism. Thompson elaborates on this idea by stating, "for education to count as education, it must provide for an enlargement and deepening of experience—for enhanced understanding of relations or implications not readily available to uninformed perception" (p. 15). Thompson (1997) acknowledges that education is a political endeavor, but only to the extent that its purpose is to prepare students and teachers to actively engage in a democratic society (Wagner, 2005). However, this democratic education must be both realized and contextualized by the reality of its learners being a part of a racialized and racist society. To this, Thompson (1997) offers: "if education is to be democratic it must be specifically anti-racist…" (p. 16).

To contrast Thompson's assertions, Wagner (2005) proffers that teaching anti-racism is a "political project" which undoubtedly presents many challenges, particularly within an epistemologically Eurocentric dominated arena like higher education (p. 261). Wager (2005) posits that the very nature and presence of anti-racist practices, challenges and confronts traditional Eurocentricity as being the "norm" for knowledge constructs, pedagogies, and ideologies within the field of academia (p. 261). In essence, the very presence of anti-racist thought or perspective creates a polemic political environment that heightens the emotions of students, where one must decide, inherently, what side of the political spectrum they will function and exist. I posit that for anti-racist practices and pedagogies to become the norm this must be true not only for students, but more so for faculty, administrators, and staff as well. Wagner's (2005) work highlights the necessary truth that when engaging in anti-racist education, both educators and students, will have emotional reactions to what is being taught—this is a part of the anti-racist educational discussion that cannot be left out.

> Too often, pedagogues enter the classroom with the intention of unsettling students by challenging them to critically analyze mainstream discourses, without adequate consideration of how they will prepare learners for the potential emotional consequences of such teaching. (p. 262)

This preparation must be evident in a lived praxis within educators' instructional, personal, and professional development (McManimon & Casey, 2018). The ongoing lack of preparedness for educators of anti-racist education's ability to navigate students' emotional reactions to anti-racist educational discussions and intellectual engagements persistently adds to the fear of implementing anti-racist practices into courses throughout both K-12 and higher education curricula across the board.

Another common misconception surrounding anti-racist pedagogy and practices, which adds to the stigma and fear surrounding appreciating and practicing this pedagogy, is the pervasive fallacy that the incorporation of racial content into courses, curriculum, and lectures is the most effective strategy to implement anti-racist pedagogy within a classroom setting (Kishimoto, 2018). The focus in anti-racist pedagogy is not solely on *what* content is being taught, but more so on *how* the content is being taught. There must be a move towards presenting the empirical truth of racism as a fact to be studied, not something to be proven! Kishimoto (2018) believes that to fully comprehend the fullness of this truth, faculty must begin not with the immaterial ancillary course materials e.g., syllabi, readings, learning activities, assessments, etc. but rather with themselves. This act of critical self-reflection is paramount in discovering one's positionality within the fight to end racism in all aspects of life. The determination and resolve for faculty members to peer inward, differentiating between the perception of anti-racism within a particular social location from the reality of being anti-racist on an individual level, is critical in the process of becoming anti-racist. Faculty determined to fight against acts of racism through an anti-racist pedagogy cannot solely rely on anti-racist work within the proverbial four walls of the classroom.

The work to be anti-racist begins within the individual. Moreover, commitment to the often-difficult process of radical critique of one's views through self-reflection permits faculty the opportunity to engage in the dialectical interconnection of their social location on a personal level with their professional environment at the institutional level. As Kishimoto states:

> It begins with the faculty's awareness and self-reflection of their social position and leads to the application of this analysis not just in their teaching, but also in their discipline, research, and departmental, university, and community work. In other words, anti-racist pedagogy is an organizing effort for institutional and social change that is much broader than teaching in the classroom, (p. 540)

Kishimoto (2018) posits three ways for faculty to engage and build their knowledge on anti-racist educational efforts which she believes will result in effective implementation of anti-racist pedagogy. Along with consistent critical critique and self-reflection on social positions, Kishimoto (2018) states that faculty should continue to: (1) provide students opportunities to engage with the topics of race and inequalities when crafting learning experiences; (2) persistently teach through a lens that is informed by anti-racist pedagogy; and (3) participate in both campus anti-racist organizing efforts as well as those found within the surrounding community. However, to do so with fidelity and fervor, faculty are tasked with doing the most foundational and essential work first: unearthing and discovering their own social positioning within not only anti-racist work, but within self-reflecting on the uncomfortable truth of their possible participation in institutionalized racism as well (Kishimoto, 2018). Before any work can be done to eliminate racism through anti-racist pedagogy and practices, each individual human must participate in the most crucial work of all: self-examination.

If there was a time to pause and reflect prior to continuing with engaging with anti-racist education and pedagogy, it is now. Before a remedy or actionable step can be proposed, the collective desire of all those who already participate in the fight against racism and anti-blackness, is for all who seek to embark on this journey with us, to take the necessary time to reflect on their own current positionality within this fight for freedom from oppression. Those who wish to align and engage with anti-racism must answer this question with fervent fidelity, free from fear and falsehoods: "Where do I stand?" Anti-racist work begins and ends with the individual. It is not enough to learn or teach anti-racism; one must live and be anti-racist! Self-examination is a key element that must be added to the practices of those who continue to pursue truth and fight against injustice through anti-racist principles and practices.

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