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## **(Be)coming Critical Teacher Educators: Collaborative Self-Study Across Contexts**

Corresponding author:

Amy Tondreau, Ed.D.

Assistant Professor

College of Education, Department of Teaching and Learning

Austin Peay State University

[tondreaua@apsu.edu](mailto:tondreaua@apsu.edu)

ORCID iD: 0000-0003-4006-9697

Twitter: @AmyTondreau

Co-authors:

Wendy L. Gardiner

Associate Professor

Pacific Lutheran University

[gardinwl@plu.edu](mailto:gardinwl@plu.edu)

Kristen L. White

Assistant Professor

Northern Michigan University

[krwhite@nmu.edu](mailto:krwhite@nmu.edu)

ORCID iD: 0000-0001-8997-2903

Elizabeth Y. Stevens

Associate Professor

Roberts Wesleyan College

[stevens\\_elizabeth@roberts.edu](mailto:stevens_elizabeth@roberts.edu)

Tierney B. Hinman

Assistant Professor

Auburn University

[tbh0028@auburn.edu](mailto:tbh0028@auburn.edu)

ORCID iD: 0000-0003-3067-6282

Tess M. Dussling

Assistant Professor

Saint Michael's College

[tdussling@smcvt.edu](mailto:tdussling@smcvt.edu)

Sophie Degener

National Louis University

[Sophie.Degener@nl.edu](mailto:Sophie.Degener@nl.edu)

United States

Nance S. Wilson  
Professor  
State University of New York at Cortland  
[nance.wilson@cortland.edu](mailto:nance.wilson@cortland.edu)

## **ABSTRACT**

This collaborative self-study looks at how eight white literacy teacher educators worked together to re-center critical literacy and teaching for equity in methods courses. We used self-study methodology to interrogate not only our pedagogy, but also our own internalization of white supremacy culture and complicity in perpetuating the status quo. Our group met virtually on a monthly basis, discussed common readings, shared resources, and wrote journal reflections. Findings show that our collaboration helped us explore and evolve how we framed the work of critical literacy, delve into the discomfort of initiating and facilitating difficult conversations with students and colleagues, and develop concrete actions for re-centering and enacting critical literacy practices. Building upon the collaborative self-study work that guided our practice, we argue that our collaboration - across contexts and across time, attending to both our self-work and our pedagogy - provides a new way forward. As teacher educators, we found self-study to be a sustainable way to outgrow ourselves, and this research serves as a call to action for other teacher educators to take up this work, as well. Dismantling the status quo is a lifelong endeavor, our work is ongoing, and we find it is strengthened when approached both individually and collectively.

**KEYWORDS:** collaborative self-study, teacher education, critical literacy, methods courses

We became literacy teacher educators for many reasons, but common to us all was the desire to increase our sphere of influence and belief in the transformative power of literacy to contribute to human agency, social justice, and participatory democracy. In *We Made the Road By Walking*, Horton and colleagues (1990) discuss how they enacted change through their critical literacy work. Yet, as we walked the path of becoming (Braidotti, 2011) teacher educators, we found that our work was less focused on enacting change and more focused on upholding the status quo. More and more curricular (and mental) space was allocated towards addressing various standards, current pedagogical reforms, and the edTPA, a high-stakes teacher performance assessment required for certification in many U.S. states. While each reform's espoused intent is equitable learning for all students, we found that, in reality, the tenets of critical literacy, such as equity, justice, and social action, became de-centered in our methods courses. Critical literacy is essential in the recruitment and retention of teachers with the capacity to flourish in uncertain times and challenging circumstances (Pandya & Ávila, 2014). In short, we found ourselves "off the road."

We had this in common when we came together as eight white female teacher educators from across the United States at the annual meeting of the Literacy Research Association in November 2018. During this initial meeting, we realized we were individually and collectively grappling with a similar question, one posed by Loughran (2002), "How do I live my values more fully in my practice?" (p. 240). We identified collaborative self-study as a framework for inquiry and analysis (Dinkleman, 2003; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2015; LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras, 2011) for our joint work. While our work to re-center the tenets of critical literacy in our courses is ongoing, the research questions that guide this paper are: 1. What was the nature of our group collaboration as we co-constructed changes foregrounding critical literacy in our methods

courses? 2. In what ways did our collaboration allow us to align our commitments to critical literacy in practice?

## **Theoretical Perspective**

### **Critical Literacy**

Aligning ourselves with other scholars, we view critical literacy as a basic human right (Freire, 1970/2018; Luke, 2009). In this study, we understand critical literacy as a moral and ethical stance because it supports the development of agentic citizens who continuously analyze text. Text is conceived of as any material (e.g., textual, visual, embodied, spatial, gestural, digital) that is used to make or convey meaning. We contend that “critical literacy” is a (be)coming because it allows us to “outgrow our current selves” (Vasquez et al., 2013, p. 25). Borrowing from Braidotti (2011), we view (be)coming as a dynamic process that deviates from paths of hegemony to explore new ways of being. We see ourselves as always in relation, learning and (un)learning, and in the process of (be)coming. A critically literate individual, then, is one who analyzes and critiques texts to transform oppression and power (Luke, 2009). Thus, critical literacy is a stance and openness to (be)coming as we learn to outgrow our participation in and maintenance of the norms and rules that govern society.

Similarly, critical literacy in the context of school is a framework foregrounding justice and designed to challenge unequal power dynamics (Freire, 1970/2018; Janks, 2010). Critical literacy has the power to build student agency by identifying and naming inequitable conditions and then acting in ways to disrupt the status quo. Principles of critical literacy include helping students question and challenge issues related to power and privilege, questioning and disrupting dominant viewpoints to seek multiple perspectives, positioning students as active agents in their learning with bi-directional discourse (Freire, 1970/2018). Critical literacy is a powerful means

for helping teachers and students take ownership for working towards equity and justice (Driessens & Parr, 2019). In teacher education coursework, critical literacy can be a lens to help teacher candidates understand and critique the status quo regarding curriculum, instruction, and perspectives of students, and thereby position them to work towards and advocate for equity.

Building on these ideas, Pandya and Ávila (2014) suggest recasting critical “literacy” as critical “literacies” to acknowledge that the definition of critical literacies is not “straightforward” nor a “teachable skill set” (p. 2). Critical literacies depart from traditional notions of what literacy means, is, and can do. Likewise, in our collaborative self-study, we interrogated our reticence to define critical literacy in the teacher education methods courses we teach. We found that a critical literacy pedagogy is not linear or straightforward. Instead, we discovered that it is a process that entails the “outgrowing of ourselves,” disrupting our understanding of literacy as a set of predictable “skills” and “strategies,” and redefining it as a set of methods through which teachers and students can make themselves heard (Pandya & Ávila, 2014).

### **Collaboration and Learning**

Learning is an inherently social endeavor, one magnified through collaboration (John-Steiner, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). Collaborations let members lend and draw upon each other’s unique intellectual, experiential, and emotional resources (John-Steiner, 2000), accomplishing more collectively than they might individually (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998). Indeed, educational research (Feiman-Nemser, 2012; Darling-Hammond, 2006) and self-study research (LaBoskey, 2004; Loughran, 2005) affirm the importance of collaboration as a necessary condition for transforming the work of teacher educators, educational contexts, and education.

However, while collaboration can be generative, it is not always (Achinstein, 2002; Grossman et al., 2001; Wenger, 1998). Several factors are necessary. To begin, trust is the foundation of collaborative work. The presence of trust leads members to more honest and authentic dialogue and the willingness to take intellectual and emotional risks and share vulnerabilities (John-Steiner, 2000; Martin & Dismuke, 2015; O'Dwyer et al., 2019). Time is also an essential factor, yet Martin and Dismuke (2015) note that finding time is a perennial challenge. Collaborators need time to build and deepen trust and engage in joint work (John-Steiner, 2000; Martin & Dismuke, 2015; Wenger, 1998). Collaborators must also share norms for communication (Grossman et al., 2001; John-Steiner, 2000; Wenger, 1998); have the ability to analyze, deliberate upon, and evaluate complex ideas; and ways for holding each other accountable to the work (John-Steiner, 2000; O'Dwyer et al., 2019; Wenger, 1998).

Self-study research examining collaboration builds upon and extends socio-cultural (e.g., John-Steiner, 2000; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998) and K-12 school research (Achinstein, 2002; Grossman et al., 2001) on collaboration, emphasizing that both openness and interrogation are necessary (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2000). LaBoskey (2004) argues that collaboration is central to self-study, but takes an inherently critical stance, maintaining that outcomes must lead to educational justice and equity; thus, in transforming ourselves and each other, we can transform our students, their students, and the social and cultural contexts.

Collaborative self-study researchers emphasize the importance of time, trust, and authentic dialogue, but also centers critical friendship and critical co-reflection (LaBoskey, 2004; Martin & Dismuke, 2015; O'Dwyer et al., 2019). A community of practice can be a source of support for mutual learning and planning, as participants work across boundaries of their own knowledge, skills, and experiences to access and reflect upon others' knowledge, explore from

more than one perspective, and question individual understandings more critically (LaBoskey, 2007; Loughran, 2005; Martin & Dismuke, 2015). Self-study collaborators also offer guidance for evolving from colleagues engaging in a joint inquiry to critical co-reflectors whose interrogation into their “hauntings” (see Kuzmic, 2002) leads to transformation. O’Dwyer and colleagues (2019) describe their initial relationships as more friendly than critical. They explain that while the catharsis in sharing was valuable, it was insufficient; it takes time and intentionality to develop a critical friendship. They recommend going beyond setting norms for collaboration to also developing norms and language stems for critical dialogue such as “The questions that it raised for me are...” and “If I were going to be contentious, I might suggest...” (p. 308).

Similarly, Martin and Dismuke (2015) found that it took time for collaboration to develop, as well as a willingness to go up against institutional norms that value individual achievement over collaboration. They also acknowledge the challenge of developing collaborative relationships where risks are taken and teaching is transformed. They recommend role fluidity (where members intentionally step up and back based on experience and expertise), maintaining a collective vision with space for adaptations and innovations, and being creative with time and space to maintain continuity. Importantly, self-study research offers processes and foci for collaboration to become critical and for research to lead to action that works toward equity.

## **Methods**

Collaborative self-study allows us to work together systematically to study problems of practice (Dinkleman, 2003; Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2015; LaBoskey, 2004; Samaras, 2011) as we examine our instructional practices and learn about ourselves as teacher educators (LaBoskey,



2004; Loughran, 2005; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015). The value of collaborative self-study for teacher educators has been highlighted (Bullock & Ritter, 2011; Fletcher & Bullock, 2012; Petrarca & Bullock, 2014). Specifically, collaborative self-study offers an opportunity to disrupt the isolation teacher educators face (Martin et al., 2011; Snow & Martin, 2014) and ‘catalyse’ (Brown & Duguid, 1996) the development of a community of practice. Self-study researchers engage as critical friends to problematize practice (Samaras & Freese, 2009) and “move beyond the niceties” (Fletcher et al., 2016, p. 313) of education.

Self-study addresses our concern with both better understanding teacher education and immediately improving our practice. As LaBoskey (2004) emphasizes, we must be “guided in our self-study research by our moral, ethical, and political value and ideals (e.g. Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Hamilton, 1998). Equity and social justice are core values for self-study researchers” (p. 819). Collaborative self-study enacts a humane approach to educational equity, requiring constant vigilance, acknowledging that social justice is never achieved, but always a work in progress (Griffiths, 2002; LaBoskey, 2004).

Research has focused on collaborative self-study for academics within the same institution (Martin & Dismuke, 2015; O’Dwyer et al., 2019). This study builds on prior collaborative self-studies between two or three teacher educators to include eight teacher educators in both public and private institutions across the United States. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) argue, teacher education should “be understood not primarily as individual professional accomplishment but as a long-term collective project with a democratic agenda” (p. 296). More information is needed to understand how teacher educators can use collaborative self-study to improve practice across institutions. O’Sullivan (2014) argues that self-study must aspire to use more expansive formats, and our collaboration across institutions answers this call.

## Participants and Context

**Table 1. Participants**

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Years in Teacher Education as Professors</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>University Type</b>
Amy	3	Assistant Professor	Southeast	Mid-size Public
Elizabeth	7	Associate Professor	Northeast	Small, Private, Liberal Arts
Kristen	3	Assistant Professor	Midwest	Mid-size Public
Nance	17	Professor	Northeast	Mid-size public
Sophie	15	Associate Professor	Midwest, Urban	Private
Tess	5	Assistant Professor	Northeast	Small, private, Liberal Arts
Tierney	1	Assistant Professor	Southeast	Large, Public
Wendy	13	Associate Professor	Pacific Northwest	Small, private, Liberal Arts

The participant researchers are part of an ongoing special interest group related to studying literacy teacher education. Our self-study group came together around the shared aim of foregrounding critical literacy with greater intentionality in our methods courses. Participants committed to ongoing inquiry and mutual engagement. Participant researchers are white, middle class, cisgender female teacher educators from eight universities representing seven states (see Table 1 for participant demographics). We met monthly via Zoom, sharing critical incidents (Berlak & Berlak, 1981; Tripp, 1993) related to foregrounding critical literacy and re-centering equity. While this work is ongoing, our group worked together for six months previously (December 2018 - May 2019).

### **Data Sources and Analysis**

Data collection spanned from June 2019 to January 2020. Data sources include video recordings and transcriptions of eight monthly group meetings lasting between 60-90 minutes each, group meeting agendas and notes, our resource bank, and optional journal reflections reflecting upon our work to center equity at the end of the academic year (June) and the impact of our collaborative work after one year (January). Four participants wrote June reflections, and three participants wrote January entries.

We analyzed data using a priori codes related to our conceptual framework which included changing thinking, changing practice, addressing/avoiding conflict, mutual accountability, sharing resources, providing multiple perspectives, giving and seeking advice, and power/agency. Prior to data analysis, the first three authors collectively analyzed a 30-minute segment of one video of a monthly meeting to test and refine codes. Then, all eight participants met to practice analyzing another video of a monthly meeting. Afterwards, a

subgroup of four reviewed and coded each video, while another participant researcher reviewed and coded journals.

We created nine matrices, one for journal reflections and one for each Zoom meeting (Miles et al., 2013). Table-formatted matrices included codes on the vertical axis and participants on the horizontal, and data in the cells. The first three authors reviewed each Zoom meeting matrix sequentially, from June 2019 to January 2020, before reviewing the temporally organized journal reflection matrix. We met collectively to read and reread all data, co-constructing meaning as critical friends (LaBoskey, 2004; O'Dwyer et al., 2019). We consistently read from earliest to latest entries, applying constant comparison methods. We grouped codes by research question (nature of collaboration and aligning beliefs to practice), then into broader concepts from which the following interpretive themes were derived (Corbin & Strauss, 2014):

*Establishing a Collaborative Culture, Evolving as Individuals Together, Delving into Discomfort, and Taking Action Through Our Teaching.* To increase credibility (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), we asked each participant to review our drafted results to confirm that their words and ideas were expressed in ways that were consistent with their intent. We then discussed results as a whole group, drawing on our norms and language stems for critical dialogue (e.g., “The questions that it raised for me are...” and “If I were going to be contentious, I might suggest...”) (O'Dwyer et al., 2019, p. 308).

## **Results**

In this section, we describe the nature of our collaboration in response to our first research question: What was the nature of our group collaboration as we co-constructed changes foregrounding critical literacy in our methods courses? Then, we explore the second research question: In what ways did our collaboration allow us to align our commitments to critical

literacy in practice? We share three themes that illustrate how we utilized group collaboration to better align our beliefs and our practice: *Evolving as Individuals Together*, *Delving into Discomfort*, and *Taking Action Through Our Teaching*.

### **Establishing a Collaborative Culture**

Throughout our collaboration, we established a group culture and ways of working together that were reciprocal, focused on a shared commitment, occurred regularly, and expanded our perspectives and ability to act in deeper ways. These actions align with research on collaboration that fosters learning and impactful collaborative self-study (John-Steiner, 2000; Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009; Samaras, 2011). For example, all members, regardless of rank, came into the group acknowledging that we had much to learn and room to grow. As a result, we engaged as equals, though tenured members intentionally stepped back to let junior faculty take on the roles valued by academia (e.g. lead authors on proposals and articles). In addition, technology opened up possibilities for group collaboration in disparate locations, allowing us to grow and deepen relationships over time, despite the fact that we met in person only once. Because of our geographic spread, we all had different experiences, which fostered the freedom to share openly, without concern for institutional politics.

Sustained, dedicated time was imperative for us to create organic norms within the group, in terms of communication, and as critical friends (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2015). We met monthly, beginning with a personal and professional check-in before tackling a group agenda; transcripts demonstrate that there was parity in participation and agenda-setting. At the end of each meeting, we collaboratively decided on the readings, actions, and projects for the next month, drawing on our shared goals. Dividing responsibility for the group's work – whether

collaborative writing projects or implementing common assignments – meant that we were all accountable to one another, and this fostered collective efficacy.

Over time, as we shared more of our personal and professional lives with one another, we further established an environment that was both supportive and challenging. As our relationships deepened and our commitment was sustained over time, dialogue was more open, revealing vulnerabilities and uncertainties, while allowing us to accomplish more collectively. The consistency of the collaboration helped us move beyond professional friendships to build more authentic, personal ones, which fostered criticality. van der Walt and Meskin (2020) argue that “it is our personal friendship that gives the critical aspect its particular power” (n.p.). Reflecting collaborative relationship research (John-Steiner, 2000; Martin & Dismuke, 2015; O’Dwyer et al., 2019), our growing commitment to one another strengthened our commitment to the work, even when it felt uncomfortable or challenging; we didn’t want to let one another down.

### **Aligning Commitments and Practice**

The characteristics and practices described above allowed us to better align our commitments and beliefs about critical literacy to our practice. The nature and impact of the group collaboration was evident through the following themes: evolving as individuals while also evolving as a group, delving into the discomfort and vulnerability of identity work, and making concrete changes to our teaching.

### ***Evolving as Individuals Together***

Reviewing the data sequentially revealed changes in how we defined our work over time. Though we initially came together with the intention of focusing on critical literacy, we grappled with developing an agreed-upon definition. As Wendy indicated in her June journal, “This is difficult, ambiguous work. We are all seeking to find ways to put our values of critical literacy

(and we each seem to have our own interpretation of this construct) into our classroom practice with greater intentionality [and] depth.” Each of us brought our own experiences, contexts, learning, and perspectives to the group, and as we shared ideas, readings, and assignments, we drew on one another’s intellectual and experiential knowledge; simultaneously, we put in the time and intentionality to build critical friendships and co-reflection. We integrated learning from one another into our own beliefs and practices. For example, Tierney shared:

After our last Zoom meeting, I was so impressed by the kind of work many of you are doing in your classes. I spent hours poring through the resource bank assignments, watching relevant TED Talks, and thinking about how I could incorporate some of this into my practicum class.

As we kept learning from one another, our shared definition of critical literacy (and therefore, the definition of our work together) kept shifting and developing. Amy named this in our December meeting, saying, "As we do the work ourselves and offer each other new perspectives...through our interactions and consideration of all the incidents that are happening in our classrooms...the definition is kind of constantly evolving.”

One specific practice that balanced our individual growth and our progress as a group was selecting a common read. During June’s meeting, we decided to read *White Fragility* (DiAngelo, 2018) as a next step to grow our thinking. As teacher educators, we knew that it was necessary to learn together to continually grow our practice; Nance articulated this sentiment during our July meeting, explaining, “I’m reading it [*White Fragility*] to think and question myself, my background, the world in which I live in...to discover more about myself and to make me a better teacher.” We also knew that, as white women, this was personal work first; we needed to engage in the learning and (un)learning of excavating our own biases and white privilege (Sealey-Ruiz, 2020). This intentionality mirrored our methods courses, in which we asked pre- and in-service teachers to engage in and learn from the work they ask their students to do. Sophie

summarized the salience of this approach in our July meeting by explaining, “That’s a really important first step: understanding who you are and how that might impact...for us as teacher educators, how that impacts our work with teachers and how that impacts their work with kids.” We realized that we needed to provide a space for one another to grow in order to enact more critical literacy-focused work in our courses.

Between July through September, as we read and discussed, transcripts indicated increased focus on the internal work of interrogating our own whiteness (i.e., understanding whiteness as a construct and how it shapes not only our thinking and actions but broader harmful norms, policies, and practices), rather than on the external work of our teaching. Our conversations highlighted the impact of our own identity positions, disrupting the racist/not-racist binary, considering impact over intent, the need for increased transparency about our own (un)learning about race with our students, and the acknowledgement that (un)learning racism is lifelong work. We acknowledged our own shortcomings, such as when Sophie shared, “As I was reading these chapters, through the whole book actually, as much as I’d like to think that I’m further along the continuum than some, there were a lot of sort of ‘come-to-Jesus moments’ for me.” The space of our meetings served as an affinity space (Douglas, 2008; Michael & Conger, 2009) in which we grappled with complicated identity work, such as understanding the weaponization of white women’s tears while also being white women whose humanity sometimes resulted in tears, and interrogating the impact of those tears in different contexts and roles we inhabit. Our individual reading of the text was enhanced by our group discussions, which in turn informed our approach to our courses. As we finished reading, Tess articulated this connection:

It feels like the book was a huge learning process and it's a bit overwhelming at times. And it's why I feel so glad that I have this group to really talk about all these ideas...and



then really think about how it comes to play in our classes. Because if this is so hard for me to grasp and to begin to work through, then what does it feel like for some of the students in our classrooms?

By December and January, interview data showed that the way we framed our work together, as illustrated by our terminology, had changed significantly. Reflecting on our semester and the personal work that was necessary for each of us individually as a part of the work of the group, we also realized that focusing on our individual courses would not be sufficient. Our students needed time, intentional scope and sequence across courses, and consistent mission and messaging across their programs. In order to work towards this goal, we needed to be bolder in naming our commitment to critical literacy and asset-based pedagogies and identify concrete actions to effect change in our spheres of influence. While Sophie first named our work as anti-racist in December, Amy's January journal captures this evolution, "Our work is ant-racist – critical literacy is an important part, but not enough for us. We're getting more confident in claiming that." Similarly, Kristen summed up our shifting ideology, "We've evolved to realize that critical literacy is another way of getting around the issues that we're all committed to-- issues around equity, racism, justice, right? But I don't think we could really name it like that in the beginning." We also learned that being bolder and speaking up required us to acknowledge and accept discomfort - within ourselves, within our courses, and within our departments.

### ***Delving into Discomfort***

Critical literacy entails naming inequities, challenging dominant viewpoints, and raising questions about power and privilege to move towards justice. In practice, we raised and negotiated difficult conversations related to race and colorblindness, representation in curricula and children's literature, and deficit ideologies; in other words, our work required a shift from friendly collaboration to critical friendship (LaBoskey, 2004; Martin & Dismuke, 2015;

O'Dwyer et al., 2019). Over time, our inquiry into centering critical literacy expanded to include exploring our whiteness and our agency in re-shaping our courses and programs.

Data from June and July show that, despite our espoused commitments to critical pedagogy, we wrestled with if, how, and when to raise conversations about race with students and colleagues. During the June meeting, Sophie stated, "I didn't always feel equipped to handle conversations that came up in class. I sometimes felt that I didn't have the words or wished that I had better words to deal with...[that some] still think colorblindness is the way to go." This dilemma still weighed on her in her June journal, "My last reflection [May] was all about these types of conversations...and my own discomfort sometimes and worrying if I was handling it ok or not. I think that's just a huge learning process."

As a group, we recognized that working towards equity meant that discomfort and difficult conversations were necessary and required skills that we were still learning. At the same time, we found that our collective commitment became an emotional and moral resource. Amy explained, "I'm not sure that I handled it perfectly, but we certainly had a lot of conversations that I don't think we would have if I hadn't been focusing on this," indicating that the work of our group supported her efforts to initiate conversations she might not have previously engaged in.

In the July meeting, we continued to discuss our discomfort, specifically related to our ability and credibility in navigating discomfort with students and colleagues. But, we also began to explicitly note the role our whiteness plays in these experiences:

**Amy:** What does it mean for me as a white woman to be leading these conversations in a classroom? I have to be willing to be a part of the community that's grappling with this and figuring this out, rather than trying to be the person in the front of the room that has the "answers."

**Sophie:** I am still wondering how that conversation works if I'm leading it. If I have a class of students, that it's not just white students, I sometimes feel like I'm a faker. I'm a phony. If I try to have this conversation with Black people for whom this stuff is very, very real.

**Wendy:** I was talking to one of my colleagues saying, “I’m really uncomfortable because here I am some white lady talking about race and diversity and diverse books.” And so my colleague said, “Just name it. Just say here you are and you’re using the position that you have to be an advocate and you’re still, you’re still growing and developing.”

Early data reveal our increasing determination to name and disrupt dominant perspectives, matched with an uncertainty about how to facilitate those discussions and our credibility to do so.

Through our self-study, we were still trying to figure out how to navigate challenging conversations. We were still giving each other ideas, encouragement, and resources to do so. However, it was reading and discussing *White Fragility* that provided a perspective and shared framework that helped us to name and understand the role our whiteness and white supremacy culture (Jones & Okun, 2001) played in that tension between our desire to center critical literacy and our discomfort in fostering the dialogue necessary to enliven its principles. As we named and confronted our whiteness, we began to disrupt our socialization into how methods courses “should” be taught and grapple with the risks associated with deviating from dominant viewpoints:

**Sophie:** Debunking that notion that you’re either racist or not racist and racist equals bad and not racist equals good, that is certainly a first step...What is its role in a literacy class? We need to have a conversation about how these ideas cut across all of our classes.

**Amy:** [For me] the more constructive question is, “How am I actively seeking to interrupt racism in this context and how do I know?” [reading from DiAngelo, Chapter 5]. And I felt like that was a question that I could ask about my college. “What am I doing to interrupt racism in this context?” In honest reflection, I’m not doing enough. I just ended my first year, and so I’m not really in a position to start directing people to do stuff. But also, I feel like I need to do more.

**Tess:** I’m not really sure how to work those things together because I know that some of our faculty who do some of these things get a lot of pushback. And while the work that we’re doing here has helped me think about how to have these kinds of conversations more in the classroom, I don’t feel confident in myself on taking on that kind of pushback yet.

**Amy:** I've gotten pushback in my course evaluations at the end of the semester. One comment was that I didn't teach enough methods and that I was teaching "liberal feminism" . . . That was my first semester in my first tenure-track job and my course evaluations count towards me being retained. I think about our conversations around those critical moments in our classes and not feeling like we knew exactly how to handle them. And that's the decision that we're making: 'Do I push and do what I think I have a moral obligation to do here?'

September through January data reflect continued problem posing and solving: navigating challenging conversations with students and colleagues, questioning what "belongs" in methods courses and who decides, and exploring our whiteness. In journal reflections and meetings, we began to speak more about our relative comfort with discomfort, viewing ourselves as on a "journey." We also provided emotional and moral support that data indicate were essential in fostering both the confidence and the imperative to do this self- and professional work. Kristen shared how essential "finding community is, but it's not easy for teacher educators" as "so many do this work alone or not at all;" she compared this dilemma to her time as a classroom teacher, when:

I could go on to Twitter or Instagram or anything, any time of day and get great ideas...but as a teacher educator, I have to work a lot harder to find resources and ideas. When we talk, I get so many great ideas for my teaching that I don't get anywhere else. I'm at a smaller institution, so... if I didn't have this group, there's a lot of things that I've done that I wouldn't be doing. For me this group has really helped with all of that. I don't feel so alone all the time.

Our community not only shaped our ideologies, but also helped us reshape our teaching identities and sense of connection.

### ***Taking Action Through Our Teaching***

Sustained time was necessary for our collaboration to evolve from our identity work to taking action in our courses. We shared syllabi, assignments, and readings to foreground critical literacy. Yet, early data indicated that we often made excuses for why we were not centering critical literacy in our practice. The following examples from our June and July meetings

indicate the ways we explained the lack of alignment between our beliefs and our teaching, and avoided agency in making changes. For example, Tierney said:

I taught a practicum class as my only face-to-face class this semester so it was tricky to weave in a lot of this and so a lot of my reflections ended up being about, there's just not enough time to do everything that I want to do—how do we cover all of this?

Nance also noted:

I wonder where we start because I sometimes believe we try to put too much into our courses and don't give our students enough time to figure out who they are. They're just doing the assignments to get a grade and to make us happy, and do not necessarily go through what they need to go through to truly change as individuals. Because personally, oftentimes, things don't click in that 15 weeks.

Similarly, Kristen responded:

It's really impossible to do it in one or two classes—like I teach two literacy classes and I felt like at the end that maybe I had done more damage because my students thought it was just about diverse books.

Finally, Tess shared, “I just don't feel confident in myself and making sure that I'm guiding the conversations that we have in the right direction and not doing more harm in the process.”

While the nature of our collaboration supported group members in exploring critical literacy in our professional roles as teacher educators by questioning and challenging issues related to power (i.e., the curricular decisions we made in our methods courses), we did not yet recognize how our whiteness impeded our practice. Over time, however, as we intertwined an examination of our whiteness with our conceptions about critical literacy, our conversations shifted from explaining why critical literacy wasn't a focus to realizing that regardless of time constraints, we needed to operationalize our commitments.

As group members' trust with each other grew, we examined how our whiteness impacted our pedagogy. We began to make changes in how we approached our courses, not only in our curricular choices, but also in how we viewed conversations around race. This evolution is apparent in our discussions over time. For instance, during a conversation in August, which took

place after we had been meeting regularly for 10 months and while we were reading *White Fragility*, Sophie shared with the group:

I've always, until recently, said in my classes, when we have difficult conversations, that we should assume good intentions. I get it now. I really said that thinking I was saying the right thing. I wanted people to feel comfortable saying difficult things but, in a way, by saying that, I was basically saying people can say whatever they want and because we're assuming good intentions, we don't have to think about the impact of our words.

In this instance, Sophie was grappling with the ways in which her whiteness intersects with her pedagogical practices, developing her understanding that she needed to change her approach to challenging discussions in the classroom.

Over time, we learned to recognize and articulate how whiteness limited our understanding of and engagement with critical literacy, and how our own limitations impacted our students. Examination of our whiteness fostered our ability to actualize critical literacy in our courses with more intention and depth. We reflected on both successes and failures in our journal entries, such as Elizabeth's analysis of a new assignment:

Unfortunately, this assignment did not work as I expected...So the critical incident is: I need to do better next year. I think I need to be more explicit and provide more scaffolding around critical literacy and what that means for elementary teachers.

We also held ourselves and each other accountable to actualizing our commitments through our participation in honest and authentic dialogue. We reflected on the moments we fell short in our teaching, and how we could do better moving forward. For example, Wendy reflected:

I'm thinking about the term "failed" and that's such a binary term. That's probably not a good measure. Not to let you, me, or anybody off the hook and say, "It's okay, sweetie!" But I think it's important not to have such a binary perspective on it. We are on that journey and maybe even starting to become metacognitive in how we talk about our conversations: "As your professor, the one in charge of facilitating your learning, I'm going to take on this question. And it's going to come from my perspective, which is limited."

Interrogating our whiteness led us to action. We began to critically examine our courses, try new things, and share with the group. We developed a shared resource bank to house research articles, course syllabi, videos, podcasts, and assignments. Our ability to define critical literacy and examine our whiteness evolved our practice. As a result, we each made substantial changes in how we approached our methods courses. For example, Tess shared, “One of my favorite class assignments is because of this group,” describing how she asked students to revisit and revise lesson plans they had written to make them more culturally sustaining. Kristen expressed her plans to build on an idea Amy shared with the group during a monthly discussion. In this exchange, Kristen stated:

Amy, I really like your idea of the text sets. I think I am going to borrow it because I have students doing social studies units with fifth graders, even though it’s a literacy course...and the school textbook is just pitiful. So, we were going to go to our local public library to make text sets. I was going to be intentional about who wrote the text, but I never thought about making that connection to the “Danger of the Single Story” (Adichie, 2009).

Kristen had identified that the school’s social studies textbook did not provide accurate accounts of the genocide of Native Americans, and Amy’s suggestion gave her a way to extend this discussion. This example demonstrates how both Amy and Kristen had shifted from trying to define critical literacy to implementing critical literacy practices in their teaching.

In another instance, Wendy noted that “an unintended consequence” of adhering to pressure to maintain the status quo in teacher education is that:

Equity really gets pushed aside. So, I have really focused on re-centering equity with books that I use and texts that I bring into the classroom. I’m really pressing them to use multicultural literature or literature that positions people that have been historically marginalized in different way.

As the group’s collaboration evolved, Wendy’s pedagogy also evolved. While at the beginning of the study we dedicated time to defining critical literacy, and justifying why it wasn’t a focus in

our courses, data show that over time, we better aligned our practice with our definition and commitments, and recognized that such commitments were lifelong endeavors. During a conversation in December, Kristen commented, “another thing we talked about that hit home for me last week was when we talked about how it's a journey, and it's never going to be complete work.” This data illuminates how teaching centered around equity and justice is always ongoing. Trust, built over time among the group’s members, supported our willingness to be honest and vulnerable and to take action in our courses.

During the first year of the study, our whiteness prevented us from not only defining critical literacy, but also in effectively implementing it into our courses. The shift in our teaching happened through collaboration and self-reflexivity. An analysis of data over time shows that, while sharing activities was beneficial, our changes in practice were linked to evolving ideologies. We came to realize that it wasn’t a matter of needing to take particular content out, but approaching the content we were already teaching with a clearly defined ideology (For example, what does critical literacy look like in guided reading? What does critical literacy look like in writing conferences?). By the start of the 2019-2020 academic year, we developed new shared assignments built around the principles of critical literacy and revised our syllabi to address language steeped in deficit ideology and notions of whiteness. Thus, we mobilized our evolving beliefs to actions.

## **Discussion**

LaBoskey (2004) argues, “to influence teacher practice, we must transform teacher thinking” (p. 829). Our collaboration changed our thinking and ability to operationalize the tenets of critical literacy in our courses. We were able to have consistent and authentic interactions with others who shared our commitments, reducing the isolation that teacher



educators too often face; for some of us, we were the only literacy faculty in our college, while others were the only faculty with a critical orientation. Consistent meetings and evolving collaborative relationships fostered accountability to re-center equity and justice in our pedagogy, which was evident in revised course syllabi, readings, and assignments. In exploring uncomfortable moments and conversations with one another, we developed agency in identifying and naming the inequitable conditions that existed in our courses, our institutions, and in education writ large.

Sharing the intellectual and emotional load across our group made it easier to face and respond to the dual demands of building our knowledge of and capacity to teach content areas alongside the essential work of excavating our identities (Sealy-Ruiz, 2020) and working to dismantle whiteness in ourselves and our teaching, our individual contexts, and in our profession more broadly. By interrogating our own whiteness, we troubled our complicity in perpetuating inequity. The mutual accountability of our group fostered agency to push back against the status quo of our practice and our contexts; in particular, we questioned and challenged the prevalence of standards, reform efforts, and other requirements to make space for the equity work we sought.

Building upon both collaboration research and self-study research, this study indicates that this work is best undertaken in community with others. Our work adds to the literature as an example of utilizing self-study to interrogate one's whiteness, and specifically, internalization of white supremacy culture and complicity in perpetuating the status quo. Our group functioned as a racial affinity group (Douglas, 2008; Michael & Conger, 2009) an "assembly of people gathered with others who share a common element of identity in order to explore, celebrate, sustain, and process their experiences around that identity" (Michael & Conger, 2009, p. 56).

Such groups can help “white people approach Tatum’s fourth white racial identity path, that of a white anti-racist ally” (Michael & Conger, 2009, p. 59; Tatum, 2003). Given that approximately 80% of the teaching profession is white (Institute of Education Sciences, 2019), white teachers must do the work of recognizing and working against systems of oppression. A part of recognizing white privilege is understanding that it is an act of violence to ask people from marginalized communities to do the emotional labor of explaining racism and white supremacy culture to us (Belle, 2019; Delgado-Harris, 2020; Lasky, 2020; Love, 2020; Roberts, 2020). Rather, we need to put in the time and effort to educate ourselves. Doing so is more urgent work than ever, as the United States experiences the largest protest movement in its history (Buchanan et al., 2020), an uprising over racial injustice.

We have used self-study methodology as a tool of (be)coming (Braidotti, 2011; Vasquez et al., 2013) because it allowed us to learn and (un)learn and to break away from our previous paths to discover new ways of being (and teaching). Building upon the collaborative self-study work that guided us in our practice, we argue that our collaboration - across space and time, attending to both our self-work and our pedagogy - provides a new way forward in this work. We seek to push the boundaries of both self-study and collaboration literature to explicitly connect communities of practice to anti-racist and anti-bias pedagogy. As teacher educators, we have found self-study to be a sustainable way to outgrow ourselves, and hope that our work can serve as a call to action for other teacher educators to take up this work, as well.

We wish to be explicit about the fact that, while our group operated as a racial affinity group, all literacy teacher educators are immersed in white supremacy culture (Jones & Okun, 2001) and hegemonic ideas about literacy that must be disrupted. Consequently, the work of excavating our own identities and identifying opportunities for revision of our practice is not

limited to white teacher educators; rather, it is work that the profession as a whole must undertake to challenge and disrupt the dominant discourses of accountability, deficit, and white supremacy. LaBoskey (2004) identifies equity and social justice as “core values for self-study researchers” (p. 819); in our study, we are unequivocal about utilizing the methodology to further these aims.

### **A Path Forward**

In the interest of calling other teacher educators into this work, we provide the following suggestions for others who wish to join us.

*Include common readings.* As LaBoskey (2004) notes, texts are additional collaborators that expand perspectives. We recommend reading authors whose voices represent identities not shared by group members.

*Provide multiple spaces for reflection, dialogue, and action.* Monthly Zoom meetings provide one platform for exchanging ideas. These are necessary, allowing consistent time to forge and deepen community, explore and deliberate ideas, and support and challenge each other. In many ways, these are the heart of our collective work. Scheduling the next meeting before the meeting ends helps maintain continuity and increase participation. Record and share meetings for members who are absent.

*Develop a resource bank to extend the dialogue beyond meetings.* Action is facilitated by resources. The resource bank became a source of ideas that helped us build and extend our critical literacy practices. Organizing into subfolders such as the following made the resource bank impactful and easy to use: scholarly readings, accessible readings (credible readings that are not peer-reviewed), multimedia (e.g. videos, podcasts, websites), syllabi, and assignments.

*Use journals as a way to reflect and collaborate.* Initially, our journals were a space to reflect, yet those spaces remained private even if they were in a shared folder. Responses were inconsistent, written when an individual member felt moved to do so. Moving forward, we decided to renew our focus on journaling, with two main changes: 1. collaboratively develop journal prompts at the end of our meetings, and 2. read and respond to each other's journals. We will move from sporadic critical incidents to monthly prompts related to our readings and our shared goals for action. This step will provide a space to reflect upon the readings and how they inform our identities, thinking, and acting.

Journals will also become a space for additional collaboration at an individual level not possible during Zoom meetings. Each of us will read and respond to each member's journals in ways that feel authentic to ideas that speak to us. These journals are in Google Docs, and we will use comments features to respond, which will notify the writer that someone has responded to their thinking. Comments can provide a space to share resources, ask critical questions, and connect over similar experiences. In this way, we can better amplify, consider, question, learn from, and take up the ideas and actions that may not be voiced during meetings.

LaBoskey (2004) argues that this work is never complete. Our collaboration-in-progress compels us to center both anti-racism and critical literacy in and beyond our courses. We will continue to (be)come, and we hope that others will join us. Dismantling the status quo is a lifelong endeavor, one that is strengthened when approached both individually and collectively.

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