

# Doubling Down: Collective Racial Literacy Development

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**Abstract:** This paper chronicles the journey of how our educational studies department answered student demands for change and engaged in a departmental inquiry into antiracism and abolition that continues to this day. We conceptualize what emerged over this three-year journey as a framework and process for Collective Racial Literacy Development (CRLD).

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As the protracted anti-Black attack on all things Critical Race Theory (CRT) has continued to shape the national and state context, the question of how teacher education should be preparing teacher candidates to navigate these tumultuous conditions remains an enduring challenge. In a time when picture books are being removed from classrooms (Friedman & Johnson, 2022) and the curriculum is being gutted to support a racist conservative agenda, K-12 teachers now find themselves teaching in the public spotlight. Yet less often discussed are the teacher educators who must also navigate these untenable conditions and prepare student teachers to go out into the field.

In the midst of these attacks, the Pennsylvania teacher education community remained focused on mobilizing to enact groundbreaking statewide competencies for *Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education* (CR-SE), an amendment to Title 22, Chapter 49 of the Pennsylvania Code. Now official, these competencies require teacher candidates to reflect upon their own cultural lens, identify biases, and adopt practices rooted in equity, antiracism, and cultural responsiveness. The ideological tension between anti-CRT and anti-racist education has created an era of racial policy whiplash (Mayorga & Bradley, 2023) where educators at all levels are being pulled in opposing directions. We argue that in response to this moment, we as teacher educators must collectively double down on our antiracist and abolitionist pedagogies in the pursuit of justice.

This paper shares the story of how, in the wake of George Floyd's killing in 2020 and the centering of Black voices that

arose in the aftermath, our department<sup>1</sup> at a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania responded to our students' pain and call to action by engaging in a process of what we describe as Collective Racial Literacy Development (CRLD) that is driven by abolition as the aspirational "North Star." Our conceptualization of CRLD builds upon the literature on racial literacy and presents a collective process wherein we, as teacher educators, develop the skills needed to examine and combat racism, first within our own department and then with our students against broader systems of power.

Moreover, we contend that our approach to CRLD is shaped and propelled by our commitment to antiracist and abolitionist practices. Based on data we collected as part of a departmental self-study, we identify five elements at play during our emerging CRLD process. We then discuss how we moved from making changes in our own classrooms to engaging in broader advocacy efforts, and reflect on why we, as a department, are seeking to 'double down' rather than cowering in fear. In sharing our story, we offer one approach to grounding collective work as a department of teacher educators in antiracist and abolitionist praxis.

### **Background: @BlackAtSwat<sup>2</sup>**

Although critical pedagogy has anchored our department since its inception, in the final days of summer 2020, faculty in our department saw posts on the student-run @BlackAtSwat Instagram account naming the painful experience of several BIPOC and first-generation students in our most popular departmental course. *Pedagogy & Power:*

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<sup>1</sup> The co-authors identify as parent-educator-scholar-activists; one tenured male associate professor of Color and one non-Hispanic white, female (contingent) assistant professor who have each taught in the department together for 9 years.

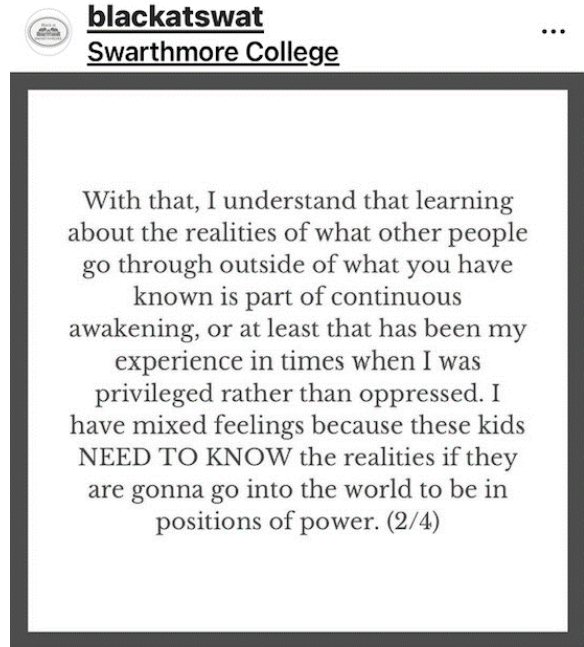
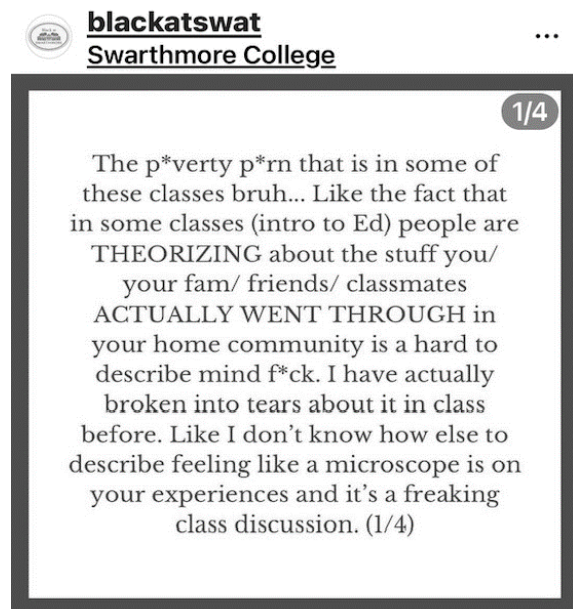
<sup>2</sup> Narratives from the @BlackAtSwat history & response have previously appeared in another publication.

Introduction to Education is a course designed to engage students in thinking about the intersectional injustices of the U.S. educational system, the limitations and promise of curriculum, the power of both people and policy, and the multiple perspectives that shape our experiences within and around education. It is a course that brings students from diverse backgrounds into our department, and it is a reason why many of them continue on into Educational Studies.

Yet when the @BlackAtSwat posts about the course appeared, we saw the pain, power, and truth in their words, because white supremacy is like that. It's constant work to uncover the layers, to fight against the bias of 'expertise,' and to really see the harm that even 'good intentions' cause. Even in collaborating with a wonderfully skilled and racially diverse group of colleagues over the course of several years, none of our recent investigations into the course led to what students so powerfully named in those social media posts (Figures 1 & 2).

**Figures 1 & 2**

*Original @BlackAtSwat post, slides 1 & 2*



These @BlackAtSwat posts are representative of how our students, our Black, indigenous and other students of color in particular, had experienced their own form of racial policy whiplash through the classroom, the institution, and larger society. As these students pointed out, as constructed, this course was an “aha” experience where students learned about the ways in which the educational system that most of them grew up in revolves around a hidden curriculum of systemic and daily injustices. For (mostly white, privileged) students who benefit from that system, this can be a powerful and long-lasting awakening. And yet, for students who are directly harmed by that system (mostly BIPOC, first generation students, rapidly increasing in numbers at the college), seeing their experiences laid out, researched, theorized, discussed, and positioned as an object lesson for others was, as the post suggests, a “hard to describe mind f\*ck.”

We gathered data for our department and found that the percentage of students who identify as Hispanic American, African American, American Indian/Native Alaskan,

and Hawaiian/Pacific Islander American students at the college has ranged between 21-25% over the last five years, and the percentage of these “underrepresented minority” students in our department in some of these same years was nearly twice that of the college. Yet the whiplash created from the contradictions of centering BIPOC experiences in our coursework while sustaining the exploitation of “black suffering” (Dumas 2014) produced deeply problematic learning conditions.

While we remain accountable to harmful conditions within our classrooms, we also want to situate these posts and the experiences behind them in a larger historical moment. As the *Black Lives Matter* movement spread across and through summer of 2020, the @BlackAtSwat Instagram page was one of many Black@\_\_\_\_\_ pages created by students around the country, motivated by the need for Black students to document and share the institutional harm they had been navigating over the years, which often ran contrary to institutional self-depictions as inclusive and justice-centered spaces. In short, the racio-cultural backdrop in which our story takes place was the primary reason that we as a department felt required to take coordinated and collective, rather than individual, actions towards change.

### **Theory: Collective Racial Literacy Development & Abolition**

Stevenson (2014) reminds us that “overcoming racism in schools requires more than rhetoric” (p.1); it requires direct action. As Stevenson states in his book on racial literacy, “while racial conflicts can be resolved, they cannot be resolved without knowledge or skill. The skill sets to resolve these conflicts constitute a literacy level of practice, but they can be taught within school curricula and family conversations”

(p.4). Price-Dennis et al. (2021) also consider a need for educators themselves to become ‘racially literate.’ They define racial literacy as “a skill practiced when individuals are able to probe the existence of racism and examine the effects of race as it intersects with institutionalized systems” (p.13). In our framing of ‘collective racial literacy,’ we borrow the terminology of racial literacy as well as the power of both conversation and the collective in constructing it. We contend that the very practice of working together as teacher educators to become antiracist or abolitionist is powerful, because even though we all hold different identities and positionality within this work, the strength of the collective at times helps us to be what Vygotsky (1967) refers to as “a head taller” than we might be as individuals.

Yet one of the questions that continued throughout our departmental work was, “how do we engage in the work of antiracism and abolition together without creating more damage?” How do we center the experiences, healing, and joy of BIPOC students and faculty who have been most impacted by curricular violence (Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2010) and white supremacy culture (Okun, 1999) while attending to the learning and unlearning that their white peers and colleagues need to do? In their critical investigation into white zones of proximal development, Leonardo & Manning (2015), grapple with similar tensions.

“For people of color who are relegated to the ‘zone of non-being’ (Fanon 1967), which is ultimately a white tool of exclusion, and who are already ahead developmentally of whites when it pertains to race understanding, another kind of violation takes place. Their ZPD is not what drives mainstream pedagogy, and they are not challenged in the

process. To their sensibilities, it is insufficiently radical” (p. 10)

How do we hold this tension between varying experiences of power, race, and racial literacy as we engage in this antiracist departmental work across both race and generations?

CRT is helpful here, as it demands that we shift our focus beyond interpersonal notions of racism and antiracism and look to the impact of the systems at play. We understand CRT as an academic field of “scholarship and praxis” (Stovall, 2005 p. 198) that evolved out of critical legal scholarship and radical feminism during the late 1970s (Alemán & Alemán, 2010). Central to CRT scholarship is the understanding that racism is endemic, institutional, and systemic, a regenerative and overarching force maintaining all social constructs (Bell, 1980; Harris, 1993; Valdes et al., 2002); and, central to CRT praxis is a commitment to “deconstruct laws, ordinances, and policies that work to re-inscribe racism and deny people their full rights” (Ladson-Billings, 2013).

Our definition of CRT uncovers the ways in which the anti-CRT movement intentionally misrepresents CRT as a radical agenda “forcing white students to see themselves as oppressors” and contributes to “tearing people apart” (Honea et al., 2021). Paradoxically, this misrepresentation has only further fomented fear, erasing diversity and the realities of racial and social inequality. Just as antiracist diversity/equity initiatives and abolitionist movements emerged in the wake of the murder of George Floyd, politically and socially conservative organizations were advancing a series of local and state-level “anti-CRT” bills and laws that would restrict teachers from discussing racism, sexism, and other controversial issues (Schwartz, 2021). These “anti-CRT bills,” position CRT as a

boogeyman that foments fear around engaging students in conversations about inequity and oppression, both historically and today. Many teachers and schools assert that they are “not even teaching CRT” in their classrooms (McCausland, 2021), which is important to consider. However, we see this as a defensive position that does not disrupt the misrepresentation of CRT. Instead, we assert that CRT aims to support student understanding of the sources and effects of structural racism in ways that are historically accurate as a means to working toward a more just society. To us, CRT is an essential tool for pedagogical practices that facilitate democracy and justice for all students.

In thinking of collective racial literacy development, looking at things more systematically, rather than at a solely personal level, CRT helps to stretch the individual (and thus collective). Chang and Viesca (2022) conclude that: teacher education researchers should focus on critical research that engages with a systems analysis, acknowledges the contextual complexities of learning to teach, and utilizes critical reflexivity to move toward a stronger practice/conceptualization of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Alim et al., 2020) that strives to “disrupt the inequitable status quo rather than reify it.” (p. 29).

To disrupt the racially unjust status quo and enact a culturally sustaining pedagogy requires that we view ourselves as learners engaged in a shared struggle. Yet there is a deep paradox around how often we in the academy so often avoid positioning ourselves as learners. As we worked to develop our collective racial literacy, we found that antiracist and abolitionist learning required a shared commitment, because abolitionist work is about world-building with people while holding relationships at the core. Though everyone in our department held a personal commitment to

antiracism in the abstract, engaging with the sustained struggle together across three years has meant really pushing at the edges

as we continue to peel back the layers of both collective and individual harm (Rienke Miller & Glass 2021).

**Figure 3**  
*Dimensions of Collective Racial Literacy Development*



One of the things we are working to learn as a department is, “Where is our collective north star?” And then, “how do we get there together?” We are all headed in the same direction, yet we acknowledge that whether by way of identity, academic knowledge, lived experience, or a combination of all of the above, we are individually in different places. Our excavation of both self and program highlighted the reality that doing this work as a collective was both challenging and essential, and intentionally examining our collective work against both anti-racist and abolitionist lenses was instructive in understanding what it might mean for us as a

department to ‘double down.’ In our case, ‘doubling down’ on antiracism and abolition led to the emergence of a CRLD process (Figure 3) that includes five dimensions: Committing to Action; Keeping our Ear to the Ground; Aligning Curriculum, Teaching & Assessment; Exploring Joy & Healing; and Organizing for Change. We explore each of these dimensions in more detail in the next section of the paper.

**Dimension One: ‘Owning it’ and Committing to Sustained Action**

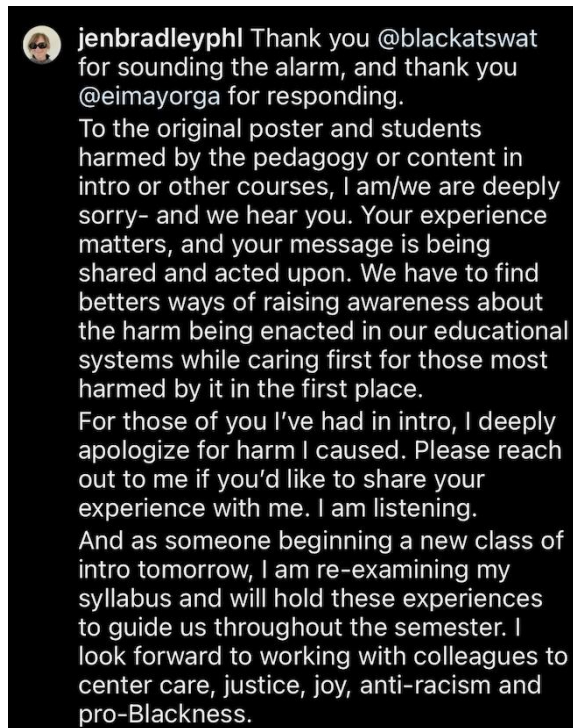
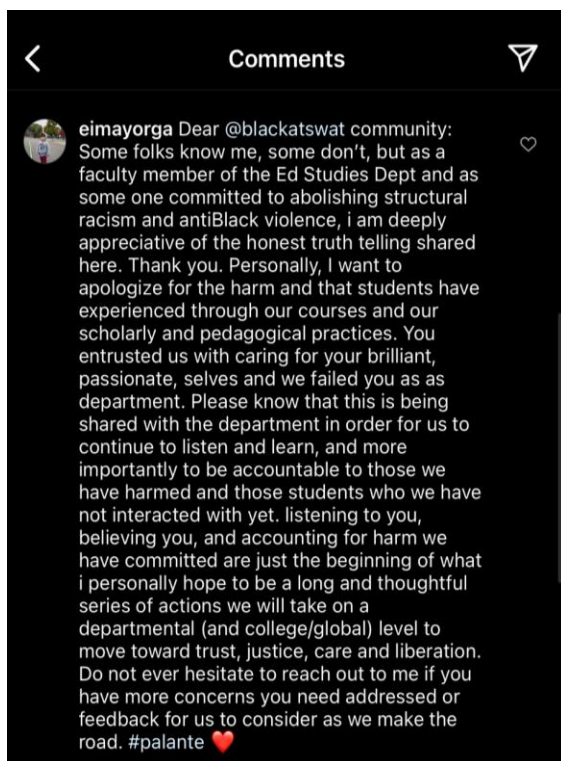
As faculty members, our immediate reaction to the @BlackAtSwat posts was



deep sadness and feelings of guilt that we had caused our students harm in this way. For some of our faculty members of color, it was a reminder of the “changing same” (Baraka, 1966) that some of us have felt in our relationships to higher education and teacher preparation, and that we too are continually implicated in maintaining institutional whiteness. We realized that due in part to the omnipresence of whiteness that occludes our capacities to see racism clearly, we had missed the very things we thought we were working to disrupt. Yet guilt is not restorative; we moved on to making amends, holding ourselves accountable, and committing to doing better. We (the co-authors) began by responding to the posts themselves (Figures 4 & 5), publicly acknowledging the pain and the harm and promising to address it as a department.

#### Figures 4 & 5

*@BlackAtSwat Instagram responses from co-authors*



As we were called to account for the harm, we as a department had caused, we realized some important things while we worked towards repair. Our students taught us that if we are not actively working to see, think, and dismantle white supremacy, we will fall back onto what we have always known.

One example comes in the re-writing of our departmental goals. While these goals had been revised by our faculty just two years before, using a more systemic and race-conscious lens, we could see how they could easily be read as race-evasive. Our existing program overview and learning goals (which our syllabi are aligned to support) were steeped in criticality and praxis, yet there was no mention of justice or race. As we met to examine them with a more race-conscious approach in the fall of 2021, we made our language, and therefore our work, more explicitly anti-racist.

“The Department of Educational Studies is committed to anti-racism, social justice, and sustainability in the pursuit

of liberation for all people. We believe children and youth deserve educational environments where they can experience joy as learners and thrive. Our mission exists in partnership with broader global struggles against anti-Blackness, anti-immigrant policy and practice, as well as structural racism and other intersecting systems of oppression. As a community of students, faculty, and staff, we aim to be reflective, innovative and collaborative in how we contribute to a more just and equitable world.” (Educational Studies Department Website)

“Learning Goal #2: Students will be able to use antiracist, liberatory, disability studies and critical race theory frameworks (among others) to think critically and generatively about key concepts in the field.” (Educational Studies Department Website)

These steps are at once both small and large. Small, as they were long overdue and can be seen as incremental changes. Yet at the same time, we know they are larger than they appear. We are collectively shifting the stance of the department, naming the unnamed, and centering justice and antiracism. This shift is structural, getting at the root of where the departmental work with students is grounded; it commits us to sustained and focused action that will serve as a baseline for where we orient our syllabi, our fieldwork, and our partnerships.

In the tradition of both critical race praxis (Stovall, 2005; Yamamoto, 1997), accountability, and abolition, during the #ScholarStrike on September 8-9 in fall of 2020, one of the co-authors offered the opportunity to meet with teacher certification students to discuss student harm named in the @BackAtSwat posts. Henry and Riddick were recent alums and current

student teachers who had already raised some of the issues they and other Black students experienced along the way, but they felt strongly that their concerns had not been fully addressed by the instructors or the department. They came to the meeting armed with receipts! Their departmental call to action was multi-faceted and ranged across courses, but specifically within the Power and Pedagogy course, they demanded that we address issues around how Blackness, bias, racism, and privilege were positioned within the course (Henry & Riddick, 2020).

Their work, paired with the #BlackAtSwat social media posts and the 2020 resurgence of the *Black Lives Matter* movement, sparked departmental conversations that led to a self-study and journey that is now a regular part of our departmental structure. For the next two years, our department spent two meetings per month working through the questions raised, the suggestions put forth, our orientation towards equity and racial justice, and how we’ve been complicit in sustaining precisely what we are trying to dismantle. The @BlackAtSwat Instagram posts and Henry & Riddick’s detailed notes served as guideposts for early discussions that lie at the heart of revised goals, syllabi, and mission statement in the department. We are incredibly grateful to our students for sounding the alarm, and we have a renewed agreement that this work must be explicit, collective, prioritized, and ongoing. These intentional and focused conversations about antiracist and culturally sustaining practices are now baked into our departmental structure. And now as we have moved into a third year of this process, we have turned our attention to better knowing and understanding student’s collective racial literacy development and finding ways to sustain the collective self-study work we’ve continued to accomplish as a department.



## **Dimension Two: Listening/Keeping our Ear to the Ground**

Some form of our department has existed at the College for over 50 years now, and one of our most indelible characteristics has been our commitment to “keeping our ear to the ground” being attuned to the larger social context and to emerging scholars who can help us navigate it by way of developing theories and practices that help us understand and respond to social reality. Our commitment to antiracism, and feeling the pull of abolitionist teaching, as we have articulated in our mission, did not come solely as a response to student Instagram posts. Rather our departmental stance is part of an ongoing process of attending to evolving social realities. The brutal killings of Trayvon Martin in 2012 and Mike Brown 2014 were unfortunate harbingers of antiBlack violence, and the emerging Black-led protest, including *Black Lives Matter*, in the years that followed. While teacher education has, at best, been uneven in responding to changing social circumstances, our department sought to introduce new materials through our courses and that eventually led to introducing the work of scholar-changemakers like Love (2019), Muhammad (2020) and Baker-Bell (2020) into both courses and our curriculum and methods course for our student teachers. With our collective ear to the ground, listening to both our students and the larger movements fueling their activism helped to shape our pedagogy and syllabi.

## **Dimension Three: Aligning Curriculum, Teaching & Assessment**

As we worked together as a department to examine our own practice and align our curricula and teaching with our antiracist work, we collectively reviewed

syllabi, assigned anchor texts throughout coursework, re-focused our student teaching seminar, and administered an antiracist concept inventory. These tools and practices allowed us to move beyond department meeting discussions and demonstrate our commitments in our work with students. What follows is a brief description of this work:

### **Syllabus Review**

During the 2021-22 year we turned our attention to examining our course syllabi and our instructional practice and began preparation for our assessment of student learning that we are conducting in the 2022-23 academic year (Year Three). In order to examine our syllabi, we developed a set of guiding questions to examine our syllabi focused on our antiracist approach to review syllabi of a number of courses we offered during the academic year. During department meetings over the course of the year, we had faculty members present one or two of their syllabi to the group. Included in the presentation was discussion of three areas: course goals, the selection and organization of course content, and pedagogy and practice. The latter included assignments and field experiences. Following the presentations, we would use the guiding questions to collectively reflect on how the syllabi aligns with the mission statement and learning goals and discuss how different aspects of the syllabi might be modified to better align with our expanding antiracist approach and how changes in our syllabi would impact student learning.

### **Texts**

As a collective of teacher education scholars, we began our work together by using texts to spark departmental discussions. While our first ‘texts’ in these conversations were the social media posts and feedback from students, we brought in

shared readings to guide our discussions. We have explored the characteristics of white supremacy culture (Okun, 1999), and read and discussed Kohli & Pizzarro's (2022) article on The Layered Toll of Racism in Teacher Education on Teacher Educators of Color, and these authors remind us that there is so much work to be done to undo and disrupt harm for both students and faculty of color. We plan to explore tools such as the "archeology of the self" (Sealey-Ruiz 2020) and "education journey mapping" (Annamma, 2018) in the future as ways to explore and acknowledge our positionality while helping us move together as a collective.

In addition to our work together as colleagues, one student-facing strategy has been to weave core texts throughout our teacher education courses. Love's *Abolitionist Teaching* is definitely an anchor text that appears throughout our department and program. Students first read chapter five in our *Power and Pedagogy: Introduction to education* course, but other chapters (or the whole text) are used in many other courses. Our program has also adopted Muhammad's *Cultivating Genius* (2020) as another core text across several teacher education courses. Rooted in the Black intellectual tradition, Muhammad's framework of skills, intellectualism, identity, criticality (and now joy) have helped both students and professors enact antiracist and abolitionist practices in the classroom. This revisiting and diving deeply into frameworks has shifted the foundation of our teacher education program: Muhammad's five elements serve as constant guiding questions for everything from classroom observations to lesson planning in our teacher education program. In addition to Love and Muhammad, teacher magazines such as *Learning for Justice* and *Rethinking Schools* and practitioner texts such as *Textured Teaching* (Germán, 2021), *En Comunidad*

(España, et al., (2020), *Lessons in Liberation: An Abolitionist Toolkit* (2021) and others are used throughout teacher education courses and have helped students make connections between antiracist and abolitionist theory and practice.

### **Refocused Student Teaching**

In summer of 2022, one of the co-authors collaborated with a colleague at a nearby SLAC to co-design and revamp our student teaching (and their pre-student teaching) seminar. Our goal was two-fold: to anchor our syllabi in abolition and antiracist teaching and to connect our students to real-world examples of what those things look like in practice. In addition to using many videos, curricular materials, and texts mentioned above, we also curated a speaker series for our combined classes. Over the course of the semester, we invited Ismael Jimenez from the School District of Philadelphia to speak about Resistance through the Black Historical Consciousness. We also hosted a panel of teacher-activists across the grades and parent and student panels from a diverse range of students and families. This allowed our students to make connections with leaders, educators, and students who were asking similar questions about what it means to be antiracist and abolitionist practitioners. We also challenged our student teachers to design 'Radical Morning Meetings' to teach and share with their peers. They were asked to bring back theories from earlier classwork that resonated with them and find ways to engage their peers with activities that could be used with their own K-12 students. Their meetings included a bilingual lesson on *Mad at School* (Price, 2010), an indigenous investigation into *Red Pedagogy* (Grande, 2004) and sense of place/connection to land, and a vision board activity connecting to *PAR EntreMundos* (Ayala, 2018), among others.

## Concept Inventories

We have developed and administered “Antiracism Concept and Practice Inventory (ACPI)” to help us examine student and student-teacher understanding of racism and antiracist practices. Often used in the Natural Sciences, Concept inventories (CIs) “are multiple-choice assessment tests ideally designed for two learner-focused purposes... to diagnose areas of conceptual difficulty prior to instruction, and evaluate changes in conceptual understanding related to a specific intervention” (Libarkin, 2008, p. 1). In our case we have piloted pre- and post-versions of our ACPI with our Pedagogy & Power: Introduction to Education students and our student teachers, where we ask them to respond to a series of questions to assess their understanding of the effects of structural racism on society and the classroom, and their perspectives on antiracist pedagogical practices in the classroom.

Taken together, the concept inventory, refocused coursework, texts, and syllabus reviews allowed us as colleagues to align our work with our antiracist goals and to do what we routinely ask of our students: put theory into practice.

### Dimension Four: Exploring Joy & Healing

When we, the co-authors, first began teaching Pedagogy & Power: Introduction to Education nine years ago, one of the first additions we made to the first-class session was a viewing of Adichie’s *Danger of a Single Story* (2009). In her Ted Talk, Adichie warns that when we tell only narrow versions of a group, we “rob people of dignity.” Shifting her lens to the classroom, Hoover (2021) echoes Adichie’s concerns, reminding us that, “It is imperative for children to know that Black

people experienced joy at every point in history.” Student feedback let us know that we were falling short of our goal of telling more complete (his)stories of marginalized groups in the U.S. educational system, and one area we came to identify as needing more attention was: joy.

In the early months of the pandemic and shortly after the 2020 release of *Cultivating Genius*, Muhammad began using her social media platform to add a fifth pursuit: joy. In response to both the need and the pursuits, we have asked students (and ourselves) to consider what it means to plan for both criticality and joy. In a program steeped in critical pedagogy, our students quickly embraced the identity and criticality as pursuits they felt skilled in designing curriculum around. And yet, though we all loved the idea of joy as a pursuit, they- and we- found it more difficult to pin down, to plan for, to ‘implement’ when we asked them to consider the 5 pursuits for unit and lesson planning. We wondered if it was because joy is more difficult to plan for, or if it was because we didn’t yet understand what joy means within the work of curriculum.

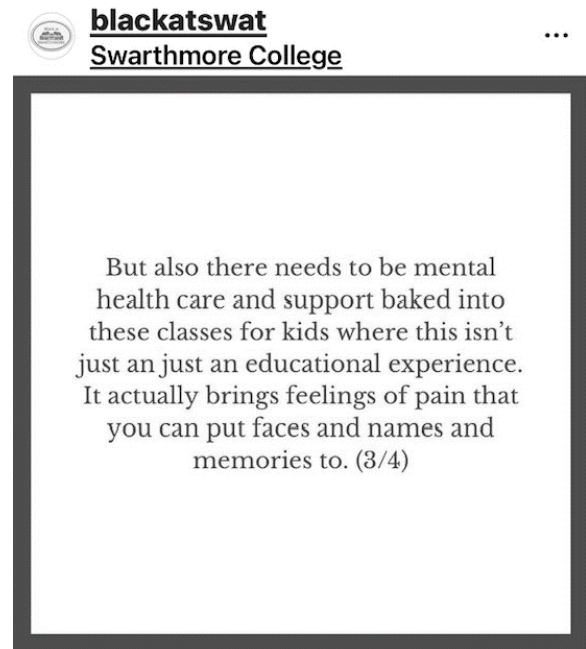
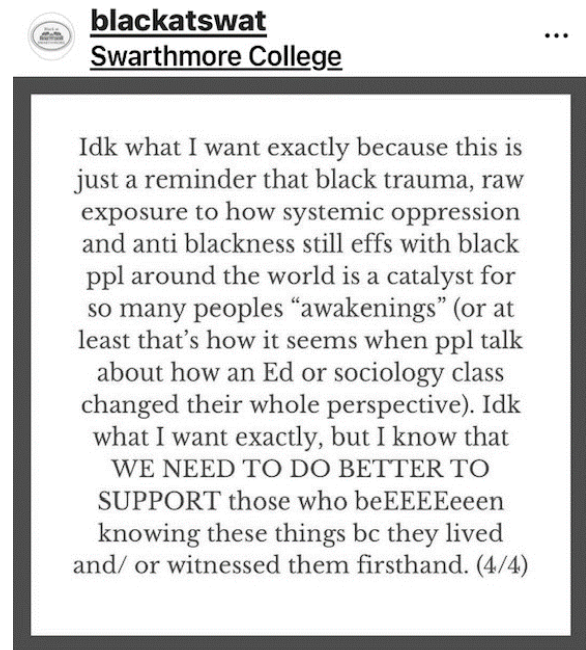
At the beginning of the fall semester of 2022 our student teachers did a jigsaw exercise using articles from the *Rethinking Schools* summer issue on Teaching for Joy. The editors quote Love and situate joy as part of the Black freedom struggle, noting that “joy is not an escape from the hard realities of our world, but a dive into them” (Recommitting, 2022 p. 5). We read these articles, pulling at the threads of the relationship between joy and struggle. We reflected on what brought us joy throughout our own education. Yet as student teachers planned throughout the semester, they frequently asked “is there joy here?” They admitted being unsure of how to capture something so ‘felt.’ Which is why, at the time of this writing, the co-authors feel

genuinely joyful to be able to browse the newly released *Unearthing Joy* (Muhammad, 2023). Like Love, Muhammad situates joy in relation to abolition and makes a case for why our search for joy is often so elusive. She argues that joy must be unearthed from systems and policies and curriculum that have been built to bury it, and we can feel this shift as we consider the framing of unearthing vs implementing joy. We see Muhammad’s call to ‘unearth joy’ as a next step in our antiracism journey, learning- and feeling joy- alongside our students, and we plan to incorporate it as a departmental read during the summer 2023.

While joy is essential, learning about educational harm and injustice often feels anything but joyful. Teaching about educational fugitivity (Givens 2021), and resistance does help us to right the narrative a bit, but our students reminded us of the need for healing and care in teaching and learning at all levels. The second set of Instagram posts (Figures 6 & 7) was a very clear demand for more support for students whose personal and familial experiences are so often mirrored when we dive into the inequities and injustices of the educational system.

**Figures 6 & 7**

*Original @BlackAtSwat post, slides 3&4*



As a department, our antiracist inquiry led us towards healing and somatic practices as ways to care not only for our students and their students, but also for ourselves. While our student teaching institute had long included a session on

trauma-informed instruction, in 2022, we piloted a more healing centered and somatic approach. We invited Nia Eubanks Dixon from Creative Praxis to work with the student teachers, but we also invited Nia in to work with us as a department. Under Nia's care, the focus shifted from a predominantly academic understanding of trauma-informed practice to a much more grounded experience in how the self, artifacts, and feeling we bring into the classroom deeply shapes the experience of all students, but particularly Black and Brown students. We took note that our students strongly requested (and received) more work with Nia in this area, and how our BIPOC students in particular reported feeling seen, nourished, and excited to apply what they learned in their own classrooms. We are learning how these embodied practices, so often absent, are so essential to authentic antiracist teacher preparation.

### **Dimension Five: Organizing for Change**

Another one of the simple yet powerful results of this work has been the realization that even as we (or especially because we) are situated within academia, working towards abolition requires that we think of ourselves as not just a department, but as a collective. We consider this work we do together as not 'just' teaching, but as organizing for change. That shift has emerged as a slow realization over several years. It's one we have yet to fully lean into, but both our public-facing work with students and our internal work as departmental colleagues is more intentionally and increasingly situated within larger movements and organizing.

In broadening our identity as a collective, we have built strong connections with the Sanctuary Movement, the *Black Lives Matter* movement, the ethnic studies movement, social justice union/teacher

education organizers, local teacher networks, and racial and disability justice collectives. We are active participants in the *Pennsylvania Educator Diversity Consortium* and the CR-SE Community of Practice, and we have convened a Building Antiracist White Educators (BAR-WE) faculty group at our college. We have nurtured these connections, and we are blurring the lines between our work as activists outside of the college and our work as teacher educators inside of it. This work in turn impacts the work we do and how we move together as a department. We view organizing as critical to both antiracist and abolitionist education, and we believe the same is true for the field of teacher education as a whole. We know that we cannot affect systemic change in isolation; it must be done in solidarity with others.

### **Conclusion: How and why we stay teaching**

Given the sustained attacks on CRT and the untenability of teaching within this context of racial policy whiplash, the question of how we stay teaching is central to answering the call to 'double down'. As record numbers of teachers leave the field, the sustainability of the job is critical. In her reflections on *Emergent Strategy* (2017), Brown contends that "small is good, small is all. The large is a reflection of the small." In this context, we take that to mean that what happens in our classrooms- both at the college and in the prek-12 classrooms we are working to support- IS both the work and the world. Classrooms, schools, and even colleges allow us to create smaller universes where we can live into the world we are hoping to see. As Shalaby (2017) reminds us, "school shouldn't be preparation for life. For young people, it is life" (p. 207). This is equally true for their teachers and professors as well. Holding each other with

care while holding each other accountable, learning and building together, is essential for our continued work. The north star is not just about realizing abolition, but that we live together right now, in the in-between, in ways that are both free and freeing.

What does this look like? It means that we “cast down our bucket where we are” and attend to solidarity building communities and practices within our teacher education programs that center joy, imagination, healing, freedom-dreaming and co-conspiracy (Washington, 1895, paragraph 7). As we reflect on our evolving and emerging framework, we see how committing to action, keeping our ear to the ground, aligning curriculum, teaching and assessment, exploring joy and healing, and organizing for change helped us to collectively grow ‘a head taller.’

We envision next steps on our departmental journey as ones where we circle back again with our students, more deeply unearth joy, explore the ‘archeology of self’ (Sealey-Ruiz, 2020), and closely examine and enact disability justice. We remind ourselves that while we are mostly directly accountable to our current students, our alums, and the students they have or will teach, we are also accountable to each other and to the larger historical struggle for justice. This requires that we work not just within the structures and syllabi of our teacher education program, but that we wade into the policy waters swirling around both preK-12 education and teacher education in this toxic moment. While it takes a lot of humility to sit with the fact that we are unlikely to experience the changes we have worked for, it is critically important to see the bigger arc of racial justice and our part within that. As Mayorga poignantly noted in our departmental review:

“I might not see abolition in my lifetime in the way that I imagine it in the world, but I think we can still

contribute. I’m deeply committed to contributing to creating the spaces for some of those abolitionist freedom dreams to take shape, whether it be in the classroom with my students, in my own life and my family and our collective dreams, or my own individual ones. I’m committed to continuing to create and help cultivate those spaces so that maybe not my generation, but maybe my sons, my 12- and two-year-olds, will see it, and if not them, that you all continue this work as well, long after I’m gone.”

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