

Disrupting Racism and White Supremacy Culture in a Professional Development Organization

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Introduction

The Michigan Council for Teachers of English (MCTE), a professional organization propelled by volunteer leaders, was founded in 1922 to support the continued development of Michigan's educators. Consistent with trends in US education broadly, the organization has been overwhelmingly white (Boser, 2014; Sleeter, 2001)—in its demographic makeup, organizational culture, institutional practices, and who it has actually served. The leadership of the organization informally articulated a commitment to increase diverse racial representation within the organization over the past decade, particularly among the nearly 20 Executive Committee (EC) members. Between 2017 and 2019, five educators of color joined the EC, yet the organization made little progress in shifting its culture, arguably resulting in harm to these new EC members, many of whom left before their terms expired.

Over four days in early June 2020, in the wake of international protests over the murder of George Floyd and the raging COVID-19 global pandemic, at the urging of a few EC members, and with the

support of the organization's president, MCTE asynchronously and collaboratively wrote an anti-racist mission statement. Acknowledging our previous silence, and the organization's history of excluding educators of color, we outlined our platform "to advance antiracist programming to bring humanity and dignity to our colleagues, our schools, our state, and all our students" (Michigan Council of Teachers of English Executive Committee, 2020). In response to a challenge offered by one of the authors of this manuscript, herself a woman of color—"Sure, we can publish a statement, but what are we going to do?"—the statement closed with a list of action items. Among the action steps is a call for a "commit[ment] to doing a self-study of our organization that helps us to better understand our own systemic racism and whiteness" (Michigan Council of Teachers of English Executive Committee, 2020). See Limplamai et al., 2023 for process of collaboratively writing our antiracist mission statement.

In our previous positions as members of MCTE, we designed and facilitated the yearlong self-study described in this article. We identify as an Asian American woman who served as the previous diversity, inclusion, justice, and equity chair, and a white woman who served as a coeditor for the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*. Now, as coauthors, we analyze our intervention using Welton et al.'s (2018) framework for anti-racist organizational change. In what follows, we detail salient moments and outcomes. We close with implications and recommendations for engaging in anti-racist organizational change.

Literature Review

Defining Our Terms

An organization is an institution that has "a persistent structure or mechanism of social order governing the behavior of a set of individuals within a given community" (Ahmed, 2017, pp. 152–53). An organization's structure persists via its regular, consistent, and predictable routines or practices (Buller, 2015; Diamond & Gomez, 2023),

including social norms and interpersonal dynamics (Brooks et al., 2007). As these practices become recognizable patterns taken up by multiple members, they define and are defined by the organization's purpose (Feldman & Pentland, 2003). The mutually reinforcing interaction between an organization's purpose and practices often result in practices becoming taken for granted, invisible, and therefore resistant to change (Buller, 2015; Diamond & Gomez, 2023).

We use constructs of white supremacy and anti-racism to examine beliefs, or ideologies, underlying MCTE's purpose, structure, and practices as an organization. By *white supremacy*, we refer to a political, economic, and cultural system predicated on the socially constructed belief of white superiority in order to justify racist policies and ideas that oppress individuals who are racialized as nonwhite, resulting in racial inequities (Kendi, 2016). Within organizations, specifically in the United States, *white supremacy* is consciously and unconsciously reinforced (Diamond & Gomez, 2023), where "racial logic and practice becomes embedded . . . in such a way that White space becomes tacit and is naturalized" (Moore, 2020, p. 1954).

We use *anti-racism* to specify that all "racial groups are equals in all their apparent differences" and that "racist policies are the cause of racial inequities" (Kendi, 2019, p. 17). Pursuing *anti-racism* as individuals and organizations requires active and persistent rejection of taken-for-granted practices that reinforce racial hierarchies and *white supremacy* (Trepagnier, 2006).

Anti-racist Organizational Change

We integrate Welton et al.'s (2018) framework for anti-racist organizational change to examine MCTE's process of self-study as an intervention to disrupt racism and white supremacy. Welton et al. combine research on anti-racism and organizational change to construct an actionable framework for organizations to facilitate systemic anti-racist change (e.g., Aquino, 2016; DiAngelo, 2011; Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015; Pollock, 2008; Young & Laible, 2000). Included facets are *the role of leadership*, *the organization's context and conditions*, *the focus*

of change, and *the scale and degrees of change*, which we further describe below. We also integrate additional scholarship to highlight and extend the conversation regarding *the role of leadership* and *the scale of change*.

Welton et al. (2018) describe those who successfully lead organizational change as conceptual thinkers who (1) focus on the big picture and (2) center people and collaboration. They explain that those who lead deliberately and consciously establish anti-racism as the goal for organizational change. Organizational leaders must be willing to engage members in developing language and critical lenses to challenge taken-for-granted beliefs and practices, as individuals and as an organization, to shift toward anti-racism (Brooks et al., 2007; Buller, 2015; Welton et al., 2018).

Leaders engage members in collaborative change by cultivating buy-in and trust, embedding professional learning in the organization's context and coconstructing goals and strategies for change (Welton et al., 2018). One avenue is by "introducing and supporting democratic and ethical organizational processes" that are consistent with the aims of anti-racism and social justice (Brooks et al., 2007, p. 380). Doing so can move an organization away from hierarchical structures and processes toward decentralized and distributed approaches to making decisions (Buller, 2015). Distributed leadership is stretched across an organization and fluidly shifts over time (Brooks et al., 2007). Members may serve as formal or informal leaders or followers depending on the situation and context (Brooks et al., 2007).

According to Welton et al., consideration of the *context and conditions* involves evaluating the social, cultural, political, and historical dynamics to inform an approach to change. Members also determine whether the *focus of change* involves the organization's structure (i.e., policies, procedures, roles), processes (i.e., how members interact within the structures), or attitudes (i.e., members' belief systems and experiences interacting within the organization's structures and processes). Determining the focus of change also involves considering the *scale of change* at the individual, interpersonal, or organizational level and whether the *degree of change* involves more minor

and incremental first-order changes, broader second-order changes to the underlying culture of the organization, or third-order changes that shift core beliefs and ideologies with regard to intersecting inequalities (i.e., race, sexuality).

At the individual level, members of an organization must “examine their beliefs, views, and assumptions regarding racialized others before attempting to facilitate critical thinking and change” (Welton et al., 2018, p. 4). This requires deep interrogation of historical majoritarian narratives and members’ own racialized histories and positionalities as well as engagement with anti-racist counter-stories to cultivate beliefs and practices rooted in equity rather than taken-for-granted racial hierarchies (Gooden & O’Doherty, 2015; Grace et al., 2022; Welton et al., 2018).

Change must also be pursued within interpersonal interactions between members of an organization as well as within the systems and structure of the organization (Aquino, 2016). Engaging anti-racist change at the interpersonal level requires individuals, particularly those who hold racially privileged positions, to be vigilant in disrupting their own unconscious biases as well as the harmful words and actions within interactions. This vigilance is necessary for an organization’s purpose, structure, and practices to coalesce around anti-racism rather than white supremacy (Diamond & Gomez, 2023).

Anti-racist organizational change requires members to continuously reflect upon themselves and their interactions to propel structural and systematic change within the organization (Diamond & Gomez, 2023). To this end, Welton et al.’s framework includes a *continuous improvement cycle* as a reflective tool for accountability to ensure organizations “are not just sitting on a plan for anti-racist change, but are indeed taking action” (p. 13). In weaving together action and reflection, or what Freire (1996) called “praxis,” an organization and the individuals who compose it must reflect backward to “recognize and label activities and routines for change and improvement” and to reflect in ongoing action, confronting underlying beliefs rooted in *white supremacy* and the resulting harm in the moment (Diamond & Gomez, 2023; see also Grace et al., 2022; Swanson & Welton, 2019).

Method of Intervention

Below we integrate extant literature to elaborate on Welton et al.'s framework, considering three central components within MCTE's process of anti-racist organizational change: (1) beginning with the end in mind, or what is commonly called in education "backward design" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005); (2) distributed leadership (Buller, 2015); and (3) integration of action and reflection across multiple scales and degrees of change (Welton et al., 2018).

As noted above, strong leadership plays an integral role in initiating anti-racist organizational change (Welton et al., 2018). While MCTE's president in the 2021 to 2022 year expressed a desire to engage in self-study to surface, interrogate, and change policies, practices, procedures, and norms—an action item within the anti-racist mission statement written in June 2020 and intended to guide the organization's work—growing professional commitments outside of MCTE required her to step away from the organization. Two copresidents were appointed, who were not part of the organization when we wrote the anti-racist mission statement. Christina therefore volunteered to organize the annual retreat, which would set the tone and vision for the year. At the retreat, Naitnaphit and Christina facilitated an introduction to the self-study for the full EC (i.e., officers, section chairs, journal editors, and representatives-at-large), as well as a new workgroup structure for subsequent meetings. Naitnaphit and Christina also requested of the officers that time be dedicated to self-study and workgroups during MCTE's subsequent monthly meetings.

As Christina and Naitnaphit embedded self-study into monthly meetings, they drew on their experience as teachers to plan a curriculum using backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). They began with the first stage of backward design: identifying desired results, which draws on two key questions of curriculum-building: What should learners know, understand, and be able to do? What enduring understandings are desired? They used the action item from MCTE's

anti-racist statement to identify goals: “Commit to doing a self-study of our organization that *helps us to better understand our own systemic racism and whiteness.*”¹

The second stage of backward design involves determining acceptable evidence that desired results have been met. Naitnaphit and Christina agreed that decentralizing decision-making and program planning as well as using anti-racist language in that decentralization would be markers of movement toward desired results.

The final stage of backward design entails planning learning experiences and instruction. In this step, Christina and Naitnaphit met before each monthly MCTE meeting to review learning from previous meetings and to plan instruction. For example, during the August retreat, we introduced ways to surface and unpack our intersectional social identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Harro, 1997, 2013) and how those identities influence interactions within the organization (see Appendixes A and B). In reviewing EC members’ shared notes in Google Docs, we realized that we had shallow understandings of characteristics of white supremacy, so we planned to introduce these ideas in forthcoming meetings and facilitate activities that would connect these characteristics to the practices of the organization.

Grounded in backward design and taking on leadership roles, the coauthors served as informal leaders, hosting 30-minute teach-ins at each monthly EC meeting followed by 30 minutes of workgroup time to complete the member-facing work of the organization. EC members worked in Google Slides, Google Docs, and Padlet, allowing EC members and Christina and Naitnaphit to review the development of the self-study over time. (See Appendix C for a snapshot of shared slides used to facilitate group work.)

1. Emphasis added.

Key Findings

Redistributing Leadership

To challenge taken-for-granted policies, procedures, practices, routines, and norms, Welton et al. (2018) argue that anti-racist organizational change requires leaders committed to change, often through providing and/or adjusting organizational structures to ensure changes are possible. Prior to and throughout our collaborative self-study, MCTE's leadership redistributed leadership opportunities to those willing to guide the organization's shifting stances.

As discussed above, Christina and Naitnaphit saw an opportunity in the transition between presidents to share with the new leadership their strategic planning for the organization and to request time at each meeting to cofacilitate the self-study and engage the EC in the new proposed workgroup structure.

Within the previous meeting structure, initiatives were proposed and discussed among the full EC, leaving little time for collaboration to plan and deploy these initiatives. Tasks often fell on the shoulders of MCTE's officers, leaving the remaining members of the EC uncertain in how they could contribute to the initiatives. Thus, in developing workgroups for MCTE's many programs, the coauthors envisioned and enacted a new structure to more fully and democratically engage the entire EC. Conducting the self-study and restructuring programmatic planning from the hands of a few into the hands of many distributed leadership among EC members and challenged an organizational norm (Buller, 2015), an antidote to several characteristics of white supremacy. This also built community among EC members.

Furthermore, while Naitnaphit and Christina had been representatives-at-large and held other positions of leadership within the EC, they were not members of the Executive Board. Their positionality meant that leadership for organizational change was coming not from a mandate from the board but from members of the EC; they were willing to take on the design and implementation of the self-study. In facilitating collaborative self-study work, the coauthors found, asked for, and

made space, finding cracks in the systems and leveraging them for change.

Engaging Praxis at Three Scales

Naitnaphit and Christina's goal in advancing a collaborative self-study among MCTE's EC reflected an action item in the organization's anti-racist statement: to "[dismantle] racism within our hearts, actions, and institutions, whether overt or expressed through the everyday centering of whiteness through our curriculum, instruction, choice of texts, and institutional policies." Given that anti-racist organizational change "needs to be systemic and ongoing" (Welton et al., 2018, p. 13), Naitnaphit and Christina designed an inquiry-focused exploration into white supremacy that involved iterations of learning, reflection, and action among all EC members. This included building foundational knowledge and shared language to discuss white supremacy before tasking EC members with analyzing the organization's culture and proposing anti-racist changes with MCTE's structure, policies, and procedures. They also knew that reflection and action must go together (Diamond & Gomez, 2023; Freire, 1996). Following time in monthly meetings dedicated to self-study, EC members were asked to use their learning as a lens as they moved into workgroups where they developed MCTE programming.

While their focus was MCTE's organizational culture, Naitnaphit and Christina knew that the shifts necessary to achieve this would be incremental according to individual EC members' own ideological stances. Members of the EC varied in entry points to engaging in self-study: several were people of color who regularly experience acts of racial aggression while the majority were white; some members had extensive racial literacy while others were just beginning to develop critical consciousness of systemic racism and white supremacy. Thus, we engaged in cycles of self-study at three scales (Welton et al., 2018), weaving learning and reflection that (1) zoomed-in on the micro level through individual reflection, (2) zoomed out to consider macro-level ideological influences of white supremacy, and (3) integrated this

collective learning at the micro and macro levels to enact change within interpersonal interactions and the organization's culture.

In recognizing the varied entry points of EC members in engaging in organizational self-study of white supremacy as well as the vulnerable nature of the work, Naitnaphit, Christina, and another member of the EC designed initial activities to focus on the micro level. At the August retreat, they asked members to develop profiles of their individual strengths, interests, needs, and goals, or SING (see Appendix A). After an introduction to Crenshaw's (1991) theory of intersectionality and Harro's (1997, 2013) social-identity wheel, they reflected on how their SING profiles and intersectional positionalities influenced their interactions as a part of MCTE's EC (see Appendix B). Wanting to build a "container" that would allow for difficult conversations around race, racism, and white supremacy (Lakey, 2018; Menakem, 2017) later in the self-study, the goal of these micro-level activities was to foster community among EC members and mediate an avenue to recognize how our intersectional positionalities shape organizational interactions. At subsequent meetings, EC members revisited their profiles and set intentions for how they would collaborate in workgroups. Likewise, when Naitnaphit and Christina introduced Okun's (1999) framework for white supremacy culture, they asked EC members to take a survey to reflect on the extent to which characteristics of this culture shaped how they interacted within and beyond MCTE to build familiarity with the framework before using it to examine the organization's culture and practices.

While individual learning and reflection provided the foundation for self-study, Naitnaphit and Christina wanted to help cultivate among members shared language for studying the organization's culture that would result in actionable change. All three texts the authors introduced to members during the teach-ins (Crenshaw, 1991; Harro, 1997, 2013; Okun, 1999) involved consideration of macro-level ideological forces that shape power dynamics inclusive of racism and white supremacy. While members were first asked to reflect on the implications of each of these texts for themselves, this was generally kept private and anonymous (unless they elected to share) and was meant

to deepen their familiarity with concepts before applying them within the organizational self-study. Members then extended their learning to analyze the presence of white supremacy as a macro-level ideological force, upheld by organizational practices, interpersonal interactions, and individual beliefs. Naitnaphit and Christina maintained the focus of the self-study on MCTE, believing that shifts in individual EC members' ideological stances might concretize as shifts in the organization's structure, policies, and practices occurred.

Discussion and Implications

EC members demonstrated an increased awareness of our own intersectional socialized identities and how they influence how we collaborate as volunteer leaders of MCTE. Likewise, we expanded our capacity to draw on characteristics of white supremacy, developing "a shared vocabulary to identify and name what is happening" (Michigan Council of Teachers of English Executive Committee, 2020) to describe MCTE's organizational culture, policies, procedures, and practices.

As our self-study progressed, EC members became practiced in naming examples of white supremacy culture and identifying actionable steps to cultivate an anti-racist culture. One example reflected a shift in how the organization compensates speakers. Prior to the anti-racist mission statement and self-study, one coauthor recalled encountering resistance to pay webinar speakers, all of whom identified as Black, for their labor, based on the precedent that we had never before paid webinar speakers. After other EC members argued for their pay, citing the ways that we often draw on the free labor of Black bodies to educate white ones, there was begrudging agreement for compensation. More recently, however, the same coauthor proposed paying webinar speakers as much as lunch speakers at the annual fall conference, using questions of equity explicated in our anti-racist mission statement to justify the increase. The motion was quickly discussed, mostly affirming the existing inequity, and passed without fanfare.

Another example of disrupting white supremacy was in complicating how we value the written word. As English and literacy educators, the written word undergirds our professional senses of self. Within MCTE, decision-making conducted among a small group of board members via email excluded EC members and made it difficult to keep up when emails could not be read by all the leadership. Yet the written word in the organization's constitution and bylaws makes transparent the work of the organization and EC members' roles and responsibilities. In collaborative notes kept during the self-study, EC members also noted that "certain forms of writing are privileged and valued, which intersects with perfectionism and defending the way things are always done." The shared vocabulary and recognition of nuance helped MCTE's leadership identify how white supremacy culture showed up in the organization's practices and offered pathways to push against them.

While Christina's and Naitnaphit's leadership terms have expired, MCTE continues to value an anti-racist, anti-oppressive lens, continuing with intention to imagine how things could be and responding by cultivating new attitudes and approaches to the work. Following the lead of MCTE's diversity, inclusion, justice, and equity committee, time is dedicated in each meeting for continued self-study work, with Sealey-Ruiz's (2022) archaeology of the self serving as the current lens. The officers continue to ground MCTE's work in the anti-racist mission statement: offering space and support for self-study; hosting fall conferences with themes explicitly tied to anti-racist and anti-oppression efforts; setting up affinity spaces for teachers of color, queer teachers, and allies and coconspirators; offering scholarships for traditionally underrepresented teachers to attend the annual fall conference; and expanding the anti-racist and anti-oppressive lens to MCTE's journal, the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*. Finally, present and past leadership have connected with other state affiliates to share strategies, successes, and challenges and to offer support.

The organization continues to ask questions and reflect on how to facilitate and actualize change. From the 2021 to 2022 year-end synthesis and reflection, questions arose about how to engage in

anti-racist organizational change within the organization's boundaries and where EC members enter the work.

Questions that remain in the coauthors' continued study include: How do we get from recognizing that organizational change is required, that we as individuals sustain dysfunctional organizational practices, *and* that we can change those organizational practices? We also wonder about members' experiences of engaging in self-study. To what extent did iterations of learning about characteristics of white supremacy as it operated in the organization facilitate personal reflections on how it showed up for individuals? What were members' experiences of learning about characteristics of white supremacy and reflecting on ways they have shown up in MCTE into their work time in collaborative workgroups?

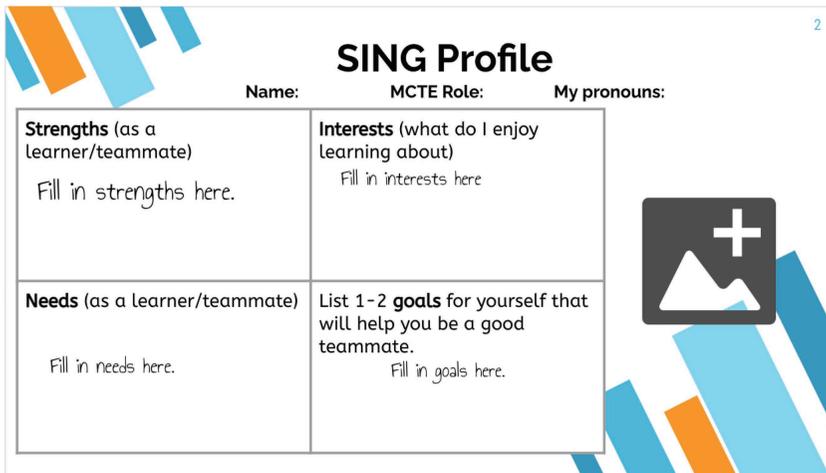
We remain curious about the role of leadership and implications for grassroots efforts: How can leaders be visionary, receptive to new ideas, and consistent and predictable (i.e., self-study work occurs each week, maintain monthly meetings)? How can the formal leaders make space for informal leaders? What would it mean for leaders to look for fractures within their organization and find avenues to work within or expand the fractures?

With our collaboratively constructed anti-racist mission statement, self-study has become a touchstone for ongoing decision-making and programming to ensure movement toward our commitment to anti-racism. Shifting an organization's culture away from white supremacy and toward anti-racism is ongoing. In making explicit our values, developing shared language, building ways to hold each other accountable, and continuing our study of whiteness, we move toward liberation.

Appendixes

Appendix A. SING Profile Template

At our 2021 August retreat, each member of the Executive Council (EC) was invited to create and share their SING profile in a shared Google Slides deck. We then used these profiles to reflect on our interactions with each other and assess how our interactions are shaped by our intersectional socialized identities (see Appendix B).

The image shows a slide titled "SING Profile" with a decorative background of blue and orange diagonal stripes. The slide contains a form with a table and three labels. The table has two rows and two columns. The first row is for "Strengths" and "Interests", and the second row is for "Needs" and "Goals". To the right of the table are three labels: "Name:", "MCTE Role:", and "My pronouns:". There is also a small icon of a mountain with a plus sign on a dark square background.

2

SING Profile

Name: MCTE Role: My pronouns:

Strengths (as a learner/teammate) Fill in strengths here.	Interests (what do I enjoy learning about) Fill in interests here.
Needs (as a learner/teammate) Fill in needs here.	List 1-2 goals for yourself that will help you be a good teammate. Fill in goals here.

Appendix B. Shared Google Doc Discussing Intersectionality

After building and sharing SING profiles (see Appendix A), we watched the two linked videos on intersectionality. Then, each member of the EC was invited to take a row of the chart and write out their reactions.

We then discussed the questions below the chart, first reflecting and discussing how our social identities function in an intersectional way, and then writing and discussing how our intersectionality and SING profiles shape our interactions with each other.

What is intersectionality?			
Crenshaw explains: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViDtnfQ9FHc (01:54)			
What is intersectionality? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXJ4Dbdm1ks (03:09): a little more about it			
Prior Knowledge	Key ideas	Questions / Need to investigate	I aspire to / I am inspired by

How do our social identities function intersectionality?

Examining our own social identities through the social identity wheel <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1w7yo6ljyS0pnevEO-BOrE7Aohmaa9n5Jf/view>.

Questions to reflect and journal on:

- Identify your most salient identities, the ones you think about most often (#1).
- Identify the identities that shape how others perceive you (#5).
- In what ways are your social identities in relationship with each other? With history? With communities? With institutions?
- In what ways do your social identities inform how you move about the world and how others perceive you?

How do we interact with each other in our organization?

Considering intersectionality and our interactions with each other.

Questions to reflect and journal on:

Consider your SING (strengths, interests, needs, and goals) profile. Then, reflect.

- In what ways do your intersectional social identities shape how you engage in work (your SING)?
- How might your intersectional social identities shape your interactions with colleagues and their intersectional social identities?
- How might the convergence of our identities shape our interactions with each other?

Appendix C. Self-Study Shared Slides Learning about Characteristics of White Supremacy

EC members were invited to discuss and jot down notes on a particular characteristic of white supremacy. The middle column references work done in previous self-study sessions on how characteristics of white supremacy show up specifically in the MCTE.

Group 1 - Perfectionism: Little appreciation expressed for others' work; criticism more common; criticism of person or their work in their absence even more common; mistakes seen as personal failings

How does this characteristic contribute to white supremacy culture?	Based on the self reflection data and Padlet data , how does this characteristic show up in MCTE?	What are other ways this characteristic might show up in organizational culture?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •

In the second round of small groups, EC members were jigsawed into heterogeneous groups to share what they discussed in the previous homogeneous groups.

Group A - Report Out
Perfectionism: Sense of Urgency: Defensiveness: Quantity Over Quality: Worship of the Written Word

How do the characteristics of white supremacy culture discussed today overlap?	What might be the "antidotes" to how the characteristics of white supremacy culture discussed today show up in MCTE?

Bios

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Christina M. Ponzio, PhD, is an assistant professor of literacy studies at Grand Valley State University. As a teacher educator and researcher, she is committed to cultivating among teachers and learners a sense of agency and efficacy to enact change from the bottom up to advance greater equity and social justice within language and literacy education. She served the Michigan Council of Teachers of English as a representative-at-large from 2016 to 2019 and coeditor of the *Language Arts Journal of Michigan* from 2019 to 2022. She can be contacted at ponzioc@gvsu.edu.

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