The value of process in racial equity work: Reflections from a faculty learning community

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Abstract

This article explores how one higher education faculty learning community engaged in reflective practices in pursuit of their commitment to the inclusion of anti-racist content and pedagogy across their multidisciplinary curriculums. As a key initial step in engaging in this collaborative, cross-disciplinary work, they set out to consider collective definitions of key terms that are deemed critical to anti-racist pedagogy. This group engaged in a collaborative exploratory process to explore definitions and understanding of the following terms: *whiteness*, *racism*, *race*, *racial equity*, *racial injustice/inequity*, *white supremacy*, and *anti-racism* and document the reflective process by which the determination took place. Themes among the definitions and dynamics within the group process are identified and analyzed. The discussion focuses on the challenges and learning within the reflective process and the implications for faculty learning communities and for the anti-racist preparation of professionals in education and mental health contexts.

Keywords: faculty learning community, anti-racism, racial equity, whiteness, higher education

1

Calls for equity and justice in education are not new; it's been over 25 years since Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) wrote *Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education*, critiquing the U.S. educational system for its insufficient attention to issues of race and inequity. Although higher education espouses goals of equity and inclusion, the gap between statements of commitment and action in higher education has often been difficult to bridge (Tate & Bagguley, 2017; Welton et al., 2018). Though there are many reasons for this gap, one may be a lack of familiarity with—or the existence of—the higher education structures and supports that faculty and administrators need to truly engage in the difficult, personal, and messy work of embodying socially just and anti-racist work (Varghese, 2016). In what follows we share our experience in a faculty research group that evolved unexpectedly into a faculty learning community to engage in this work, with the hopes of providing insight into the process and conditions that can support faculty development around equity-oriented work in higher education. Our learnings may inform others who are interested in supporting faculty to bring racial equity and social justice commitments from articulated goals through to action with the ultimate goal of real student learning outcomes and systemic change.

Over the past 2 years, the School of Education and Human Development (SEHD) at Fairfield University has been engaged in several efforts to actualize long-standing commitments to social justice education that had previously been siloed in the teaching and administrative efforts of a few individual faculty members. In 2019, the school established its first standing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) committee designed to formally consolidate efforts around equity, social justice, diversity, and inclusion. Through faculty dialogue in response to protests for racial justice including Black Lives Matter, we identified the need for understanding how well our graduate programs across the school—in education, school psychology, counselor education, and social work—incorporate anti-racist content and pedagogy into curriculum *and* prepare graduates to engage in racial equity practices in their respective fields. What began as a seemingly straightforward mixed methods study of our

graduates' preparedness for racial equity work quickly became increasingly complex as we started to unpack our diverse understandings of key concepts associated with this work: whiteness, racism, race, racial equity, racial injustice/inequity, white supremacy, and anti-racism.

Faculty learning communities (FLCs) bring faculty members together for a variety of purposes, including communicating and sharing ideas across disciplines, offering support to faculty with marginalized identities, increasing skills and interest in teaching pedagogy, and working toward institutional changes (Cox, 2001; O'Meara et al., 2019). FLCs have shown impact on faculty retention and promotion (O'Meara et al., 2019) and promoting institutional culture shifts (Richlin & Cox, 2004). FLCs show promise in engaging faculty in learning needed for "equity-minded institutional transformation" (Costino, 2018, p. 117), which aligns with the work our group has set out to engage in. As a group of seven White faculty members and two Black faculty members—including tenured, pre-tenured, and non-tenured faculty and administrators, two school deans, and a university faculty developer—in a predominantly White institution (PWI), we agreed that this reflection and engagement in "open, honest dialogue" (Welton et al., 2018) was necessary in order to avoid performing anti-racism efforts without truly embodying the work. It was also important to explicitly name and explore whiteness, which has often been denied or ignored in institutions (Matias & Mackey, 2016; Tate & Bagguley, 2017). As such, we decided to engage in self-study of our own understanding of these concepts. As this reflective work unfolded and highlighted the importance of honest dialogue, we realized we were functioning as a FLC, working in parallel alongside our racial equity research. Additionally, the fact that we didn't begin as a FLC—but evolved into one—is significant to understanding the intentional and emergent conditions that supported our development as faculty committed to racial equity work. Our hope is to share what we have learned from both our engagement in critical reflection and the conditions and processes that might support other faculty who are committed to social justice and racial equity.

Background

Contextualizing Our Process in Racial Equity Work

While we have been taught as academics to be content experts who turn to the peer-reviewed literature to understand and validate language and concepts, the work of racial equity requires us to examine our *personal* understanding and use of language, definitions, and values, interrogating where they arose and how they are sustained. A review of the literature suggests that this examination seems to live outside of traditional research models. Our self-study process, detailed below, was necessarily unstructured, transparent, and vulnerable; it was a departure from the linear, organized, controlled, and boundaried academic research project we had envisioned, as well as from the racial equity work in higher education that we've seen presented in journals and on institutions' public facing websites.

There are many prominent efforts to engage in racial equity work in higher education in the United States through examination of pedagogy, classroom experiences, content delivered to students, and administrative changes across all aspects of the institution (Brown University, 2021; Georgetown University, n.d.; Loyola University Chicago, 2021). However, we found less literature devoted to the idea and process of faculty (particularly faculty members who hold privileged identities at PWIs) reflecting on their own definitions and experiences of privilege and oppression as a key first step in authentically engaging in racial justice research in higher education. If this work is being done within institutions, it is not widely represented in the literature. While outcomes (such as the number of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color [BIPOC] students enrolled/graduated and course evaluations of racial justice content taught) are important, process is important as well, as process is where learning and transformation occur (Ritter et al., 2019). The unique composition of our group gave us access to knowledge about FLCs, as a strategy for faculty development and movement toward institutional change (e.g., Cox, 2001; Richlin & Cox,

2004). Teaching and learning centers have been central to bringing faculty together in learning communities around common topics of interest in higher education (Beach et al., 2016). However, our experience is with FLCs forming under the leadership of a center for teaching and learning (CTL), not unexpectedly in the midst of a research project. Thus, we hope to share what we have learned from the conditions and process of our unanticipated FLC to support other faculty to engage in the reflective process that is crucial to working toward racial equity.

Critical Race Theory and Faculty Development

Our decision to pause and engage in a parallel process to reflect on our own experiences and understanding of race and privilege arose in part from our familiarity with critical race theory (CRT). CRT, which emerged in the legal field and has subsequently been applied across education and the social sciences, posits that racial privilege and inequity is present in all aspects of American life (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016). The theory also takes an activist stance toward the importance of working for racial equity. This theory has been critical to our group's understanding that U.S. higher education functions as the place within which formal knowledge rooted in racism/white supremacy has been and continues to be generated, perpetuated, and used to maintain the status quo (Patton, 2016; Wagner & Yee, 2011). Stepping back to examine our formal knowledge-generation processes through self-reflection and "conscientious dialogue" with one another (Patton, 2016) is therefore crucial to try to avoid replicating a knowledge-generation process formed in white supremacy. As Wagner and Yee (2011) explain, "we must be prepared to interrogate how we know what we know to reveal underlying oppressive (sexist, racist) assumptions. . . . [S]uch exploration may serve as an initial means of excavating the underlying power relations implicated in knowledge production and dissemination" (p. 100). Interrogation has implications for teaching and scholarship. Our aim is to practice

anti-oppressive inquiry through shared meta-reflection (see Methods for additional details; Thorpe & Garside, 2017). In addition, it is important to explicitly acknowledge the work of other scholars of color who have researched, written about, and actively engaged in anti-racism and anti-oppressive pedagogical practices in the classroom (Emdin, 2020; Gay, 2018; Gonzalez & Cokley, 2021; Harris et al., 2021; Haskins & Singh, 2015; Haynes, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2021a, 2021b; Nieto, 2018; Varghese, 2016) and who have specifically written about the barriers to faculty development in these areas, including their own positionality, comfort level, and lack of formal preparation (Varghese, 2016; Williams et al., 2021).

Given that we are a multidisciplinary group, we initially set about exploring the literature from our individual disciplines (education, school psychology, counselor education, and social work) on professional preparation for racial equity work; each discipline has a body of work about addressing racism in education, professional preparation, and practice. In doing so, our literature review findings revealed two key areas of opportunity for further work that we discuss in the findings. First, the themes that emerged from these literatures—shifting/inconsistent terminology, primacy of accreditation language, and lack of faculty reflection as part of the work—became part of the context for our choice to "pause and reflect" as part of our self-study process. We saw a pattern across several fields (e.g., education and social work) in language and conceptualization shifting from "cultural competency" to "social justice," "anti-oppression," and/or "anti-racism" over time, in recognition of the importance of centering race in social justice/anti-oppressive efforts (Galloway et al., 2019). However, we did not find terminology to be consistent across literature in the same discipline nor across disciplines, with terms such as *multicultural*, *EDI*, *cultural sensitivity*, *anti-oppression*, *social justice*, *racial equity*, and *anti-racism* all being used. In some fields (e.g., counselor education; CACREP) it is notable that the dialogue in the literature is in response to accreditation standards and the language/terminology determined by the accrediting body (e.g., multiculturalism; Cates et al., 2007).

Second, in recognizing the need to foreground and document our process and reflective work, we realized there is a lack of guidance in the literature on how to engage in such a process with one another. Though faculty may be committed to racial equity work and translating this work to their teaching, there is an absence of capacity-building around how to do this well (Varghese, 2016). What is clearly documented is that this work does take a certain amount of personal commitment and reflection (Basham, 2004), especially since any group is a microcosm of larger society, and the values, assumptions, and beliefs held in larger society will replicate and play themselves out in group dynamics, including bias and ideals that reflect oppressor and oppressed dynamics. What is not well documented is the value of having shared language, shared understanding of group process and dynamics, and tools on how to respond to one another and interrupt the process when it plays out. The literature does not discuss faculty's reflection on terminology, including shared understanding (or not) and/or faculty's personal, lived experience of the concepts described by terminology. Adding our priority to focus on process and reflection was a natural occurrence that developed during the early stages of our research. We realized that in order to reflect on how we teach and engage students in anti-racist practice, we as faculty need to understand how to do this as well. Opening space for critical conversations among faculty can be a pathway to enhance learning and teaching about anti-racism.

Thus, midway through our research process, we found ourselves unexpectedly engaging in the practices of a FLC. As a group of faculty and faculty developers who have either participated in or facilitated FLCs, we were familiar with FLCs as a central vehicle for faculty learning (Cox, 2001). Our journey to the FLC is a deviation from the typical FLC model, where a center for teaching and learning (CTL) initiates and facilitates a yearlong program, typically with a curriculum focused on enhancing teaching and learning (Cox, 2001). Our FLC, however, emerged organically and accidentally from the complexities of our research project and is taking an uncharted path as we navigate our

learning together. Thus, in the pages that follow, we pivot from referring to our faculty group as a self-study group (SSG) to a FLC to mirror the process by which we evolved throughout this work. Despite our understanding of and experiences with the benefits of FLCs, we wonder whether we would have gotten as far into the important messiness of our conversations about race and privilege had we begun as a formal FLC, facilitated by a CTL. Was our knee-deep transition into our difficult conversations a necessary precursor to embracing the FLC? We think it's important to highlight the atypical aspects of our process as our experience may have the potential to inform new ways of supporting faculty as they engage in the difficult work of acting on their personal and professional commitments to anti-racism.

Research Questions

As a faculty group engaged in reflective practice alongside our equity-focused research, we were interested in exploring our own understandings of key concepts that are critical in this work and reflect on our own process while engaging in this reflection. Therefore, this manuscript explores the following research questions:

1. How do we as multidisciplinary faculty define the following terms: *whiteness*, *racism*, *race*, *racial equity*, *racial injustice/inequity*, *white supremacy*, and *anti-racism*?
2. What were the notable elements of our reflective process as we engaged in defining these terms through our learning group?

Methods

Given our focus on examining our process and reflecting on our own practice, we initially chose to use a self-study methodology with a qualitative foundation. "Self-study refers to teacher educators who in an intentionally and systematic way examine their practice in order to

improve it, based on a deeper understanding of the practices, as well as the contexts in which practice is taking place" (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015, p. 508). Our discussion of definition of terms provided the platform for this process of (co)meta-reflection (Thorpe & Garside, 2017), reflecting on our reflections to make meaning of our process and understandings and to develop new insights, ideas, questions, and next steps. This self-study evolved into our FLC as we began to reflect on our group conversations and dynamics.

Participants

Demographics of FLC Participants

Five participants were from education, including English education, social justice education, special education, and bilingual education. Two participants were from social work, one participant was from school psychology, and one participant was from mental health counseling. Four participants from education were tenured and included the director for the Center for Academic Excellence (CAE), and two serve as associate dean and dean for SEHD. Four participants were pre-tenure assistant professors, and one participant was a clinical faculty member. Years of teaching in higher education ranged from five to 26. Eight participants identified as cisgender females, while one identified as a cisgender male. Seven participants identified as White, and two identified as Black/African American. The associate dean, dean, and CAE director are experienced faculty developers.

Identifying our positionality highlights the social locations and power dynamics in our group based on social identity. It is critical to name our degrees of privilege and power (e.g., tenured faculty evaluate pre-tenured faculty, deans lead school-wide initiatives, the majority of the group is White) as both impact our experiences in the FLC. This is a concept we continue to explore as the group moves forward.

Data Collection and Analysis

In order to address our initial research questions, we set out to examine the ways in which we defined a range of terms related to anti-racist practices. We engaged in a process that involved a series of meetings and data analysis over the duration of approximately two months. First, we aimed to determine if our definitions of key terms related to anti-racism work (*whiteness*, *racism*, *race*, *racial equity*, *racial injustice*, *racial inequity*, *white supremacy*, and *anti-racism*) reflected a shared understanding. In order to accomplish this, each faculty member independently defined each term without referring to any academic or online sources. The selection of these terms emerged from a preliminary review of the literature and conversations among authors about how alumni across the professional disciplines engage in anti-racist work in K–12 classrooms and behavioral health and social service agencies. Each faculty member then emailed the individual documents to a graduate assistant who compiled the definitions in one document without identifying faculty names corresponding to each definition. The graduate assistant then shared the document with all faculty members of the FLC. Once each faculty member had the opportunity to view the collaborative document, the series of meetings proceeded. The FLC met three times to discuss the collaborative document, highlighting commonalities and differences in definitions. Each meeting lasted for one hour on Zoom, and the second and third were recorded for data collection purposes. A Google document and shared screen were utilized while one group member took notes in the document during the conversation among faculty. Following each meeting and activity, each faculty member journaled about their individual experience engaging in each meeting. Finally, a subgroup of three faculty members was formed and met to analyze the data including the meeting recordings, journal entries, and the thematic/shared aspects to the term definitions. The data analysis was conducted by three faculty members of the FLC from different professional fields, including social work, social justice education, and school psychology.

This subgroup included two Black women and one White-identified man. As a subgroup of the larger researcher team, the three members first met to discuss which data analysis method was most appropriate for the work of analyzing themes. They decided to use thematic and content analysis in the tradition of critical theories (Giroux, 1986) because it most accurately aligned with the content and the emphasis on process and narratives. Central to our current work, this method of inquiry is grounded in challenging assumptions, identifying values, and engaging in meaningful discussion with the ultimate goal of promoting greater justice. In order to ensure a method of consistency and inter-observer agreement, each form of data was coded by at least two faculty members in this subgroup (definitions located in a universal Google document, journal reflections, and Zoom video and audio of our process meetings). For example, two faculty members listened to the Zoom audio recordings and reviewed the Zoom transcripts to code and identify the themes, using words of the participants and summative statements. A coding process of identifying first- and second-level codes that were later collapsed into larger emerging themes of the data was used (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Saldaña, 2015; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In analyzing this data, we focused on coding the discussion to specifically capture the process of engaging around these sensitive topics. It was important to document how the group engaged as a racially diverse group of faculty. Additionally, two faculty members read the journal reflections and coded data, following the same process as described above. These journal reflections documented participant reactions, thoughts, and feelings regarding their experience participating in the larger group discussions. Lastly, two faculty members of this subgroup reviewed and coded the definitions of the terms we set out to study.

Following the completion of the coding, the subsequent meeting was a discussion about the first-level codes, subcodes, and descriptions. During this meeting the faculty members began to collapse, categorize, and create the first level of open codes. Each faculty member kept memos of the codes throughout the coding process and kept

a separate journal to document the emotional experience and reactions of revisiting the conversations around race, racism, equity, etc. A spreadsheet was created to establish and house the main codebook. Each faculty member used the codebook to code the remaining data and to begin to identify main themes. This group then came together to document their process and debrief after starting another round of coding. As a group, we identified the main themes that emerged from the coding process and provided explanations for each. It is critical to note that the identified themes represent both the content of what was discussed in the full SSG meetings as well as the subgroup dynamics present throughout the process.

Findings

Our engagement as a FLC provided a rich set of data about both the discussions we had about our racial equity research terms and the dynamics of these discussions. Analysis of the data resulted in three themes related to process-related dynamics and four content-related themes.

Process-Related Dynamics

Data analysis revealed three themes around process-related dynamics: *Affective Experience*, *Oppression: Always Operating*, and *Group Complexity* (Table 1). These reactions were described by faculty members in journal entries as well as observed by the data analysis team in reviewing recordings of the discussions.

Affective Experience

The dynamic of *Affective Experience* describes the unspoken, visceral reactions experienced by participants during the FLC discussions. Faculty members were attuned to challenging, heightened emotions.

Table 1. Process-Related Dynamics

Process-Related Dynamics	Sample Quotations as Examples
Affective Experience	* "Worried to offend anyone and when to move on" * "Felt guarded" * "Felt tension in myself and others"
Oppression: Always Operating	* "I am much angrier this time. [Will you] own more than your privilege? Own that you acted on your privilege?" * Definition of term as well as present within process
Group Complexity	* "Slow going at first. Everyone was polite." * "I came away from these meetings emotionally spent but excited about the discussion."

Some faculty members were guarded and purposefully "holding back" on their engagement with the process as a result of feeling discomfort. One faculty member remarked, "I feel tension in myself and others not wanting to say something offensive or say too much. Felt guarded." Another faculty member shared this question as part of their own reflection: "Will the very conversations we have in this group promote racism and white privilege?" Although the predominant affective experience of faculty members was of fear and worry, the subject matter associated with these feelings varied. The varied subjects included fear of being an imposter, fear of appearing ignorant or racist, worry of offending group members, and worry of promoting racism and white privilege resulting in harm to others.

Oppression: Always Operating

Oppression: Always Operating is defined as action-based practices of injustice that are embedded and ingrained in systems and structures, resulting in others being treated differently and that serves the purpose of maintaining subordinate and dominant attitudes. Members of the FLC noted that oppression operates on multiple levels and that power over another is necessary for an oppressive ideology to be maintained. Faculty members not only spoke about the experience of oppression as an exercise of defining the term but also noted how oppression played out and was operating within the dynamics of the

group during our discussions. There were also concerns raised as to whether the voices of colleagues of color were being heard and validated. Faculty members noted the violent nature of oppression, how it happens seamlessly and unknowingly, and ultimately how this was experienced in our work together. An example of this was seen with the difficulty in discussing this content, noticing which faculty members spoke first or often and which did not, noting in the journal entries the level of discomfort from White-identified participants and the level of emotional pain and labor experienced by Black participants.

Group Complexity

Group Complexity describes our group process, placing emphasis on the invisible dynamics inherent when groups of individuals from different racial identities discuss issues of racism. Some of the areas noted were certain faculty members speaking more than others, instances when White-identified faculty seemed to correct or explain something that a Black faculty member shared, and the ability for some faculty to access the conversation about oppression from their own experience of oppression but to distance themselves from other parts of the conversation. An additional main area highlighted under this theme was the desire to show oneself as knowledgeable about racism and worries that a lack of accurate understanding would be revealed. One faculty member remarked, "Am I putting information out into the world as an instructor that is you know, like accurate?" Another faculty member shared a reflection that captures the dynamics present in the working group's process:

> There were times in this discussion of definitions where I felt uncomfortable, worrying that I would provide a definition that was "ignorant" or not from an anti-racist lens. I felt I was hypervigilant about the space given for faculty of color in our group to speak and express points of view. I noticed that occasionally comments made by faculty of color

were reworded or summarized by white faculty, sometimes inaccurately. I wondered how those faculty felt about this (but did not ask them).

Content-Related Themes

Four themes emerged related to the content of our discussions (Table 2). Content-related themes were developed through analysis of written definitions of the terms *whiteness*, *racism*, *race*, *racial equity*, *racial injustice/inequity*, *white supremacy*, and *anti-racism* and group discussions of these terms. These themes represent key areas of content that emerged from faculty engagement with terms most closely related to anti-racism work.

Table 2. Content-Related Themes

Content-Related Theme	Sample Quotations and Findings
Maintaining Power	*much consensus/agreement in written definitions *visible and invisible power and privilege that can be viewed as potentially dangerous "much more than skin color, whiteness in our society is a status conferred upon people that grants them a range of privileges"
Ways of Othering	*much consensus/agreement in definitions and discussions *Participants described a system of categorization in the United States that determine social groups. "socially constructed category for grouping people in order to build and maintain a system that benefits some groups over others"
Barriers to Access	*Most definitions focused on equality over equity. This uncertainty raised several questions among participants. For example, can you have equality before equity? Is the confusion indicative of who has or who does not have access? "when all people are treated equally and race is not a factor in determining a person's success and opportunities a person is afforded"
Committed Action	*self-awareness and self-knowledge are important components "actively resisting and working to change racist systems, policies, and practices" *some connection to dynamics/teaching concerns: Am I living up to this in my professional/personal life?

Maintaining Power

This theme embodies both the visible and invisible power and privilege that can be viewed as potentially dangerous. It is characterized as an unearned automatic shield that protects those in power against discrimination. Although known to some, it remained unacknowledged by others (those who hold power) who seem unaware and ambivalent about knowing (a place of comfort). There were a number of phrases that were documented in the definitions of *whiteness* related to power and privilege. They include visible and invisible privileges that come with being White; the quality of privilege that comes from being part of the dominant "white skin" or "white skin passing" culture; the unearned claim of intellectual, social, political, and economic superiority and dominance as a function of being White; the norm to which all other things are compared; pressure not to discuss it; using this power to the advantage of said group and to the disadvantage of others. One faculty wrote:

> (Whiteness is) much more than skin color, whiteness in our society is a status conferred upon people that grants them a range of privileges. It can also be a worldview that develops as a result of one's positionality. Whiteness is an identity of privilege that develops in people with white skin in the context of the racist, white-supremacist society in which we live. I'm thinking that conceptions of whiteness differ depending on the society in which you live.

Ways of Othering

Members of the FLC described a system of categorization in the United States that determines social groups. First, individuals are labeled with social identities and then organized and placed into social groups. This information is then used as a way to determine social group status (e.g., dominant/non-dominant and privilege/marginalized). Once this juxtaposition is determined of who is the

dominant or non-dominant group, a powerful narrative is created to justify these statuses and rationalize one group's power over another to sustain the system of oppression. Examples of faculty language that illustrate this theme include "people divided into different groups based on skin color and/or shared ancestry," "a social construct that groups individuals together by a non-scientific organization based on historical beliefs about shared ancestry and geographical origins," and "socially constructed category for grouping people in order to build and maintain a system that benefits some groups over others."

Barriers to Access

Members of the FLC described *barriers to access* as unfair or differential treatment of persons that interfere with their ability to obtain opportunities such as education and employment that affect their trajectory in life and/or gain necessary resources like transportation or representation in government. However, there was uncertainty among faculty about the difference between the terms *equity/equality* and *inequality/injustice*. The data revealed that faculty responses were consistent about the need to "correct historical inequities," but most definitions focused on equality over equity. This uncertainty raised several questions among faculty and led to a secondary discussion. For example, can you have equality before equity? Is the confusion indicative of who has or who does not have access? Examples of faculty language that illustrate this theme include "when all people are treated equally and race is not a factor in determining a person's success and opportunities a person is afforded"; "those from different 'racial groups' have the same access and opportunity to resources"; "the idea that all races are provided what they need to be successful in society including in the areas of education, employment, transportation, law, government"; and "racial injustice [is] an imbalance of opportunities, resources, outcomes due to institutionalized racism and white supremacy."

Committed Action

The FLC responses indicated that social action must be a lived commitment that is purposeful and consistent. Additionally, the data revealed that faculty believed that in order for social action to take place, individuals must have some awareness about one's own biases or microaggressions. This process of increasing one's self-knowledge was described as a form of action. Reasons given for committed action were to actively promote equity in policies, procedures, and practices to end racism in U.S. institutions. For example, faculty used the following statements when defining anti-racism: "an advocacy approach that requires the combating of racist behaviors, beliefs, and systems on all levels of society and a correction of the effects of Western society's racist historical actions"; "the act of being aware of one's own biases against others who are of a different race from themselves including microaggressions that lead one to take action against racism, acts of, expression of, innuendos towards others who are non-white"; "actively resisting and working to change racist systems, policies, and practices"; and "actively working to achieve racial equity."

The summary of findings from the faculty learning community data highlight the importance of both content and process-related outcomes in discussions and research about racial equity. Scholars of social justice education (Adams, 2016) contend both are equally important and stress the need of acknowledging content and process-related dynamics in the classroom and other spaces where this process might take place. The three process-related dynamics—*Affective Experience*, *Oppression: Always Operating*, and *Group Complexity*—provide a picture of participants' experiences during our discussions. Heightened emotions, normalizing oppressive behaviors (e.g., correcting a Black faculty member), and fear of revealing one's own lack of accurate understanding of the definitions were a few of the examples gleaned from the data.

The data from the content-related themes *Maintaining Power*, *Ways of Othering*, *Barriers to Access*, and *Committed Action* revealed consensus across the written definitions except for *Barriers to Access*.

Specifically, under this theme, there was a lack of consistency between the terms *equity/equality* and *inequality/injustice* in faculty responses. Though the concepts are related, they have different meanings and processes in society and should be clarified when engaging in racial equity work. We examine the findings and implications further in the discussion section of this manuscript.

Discussion

The original purpose of this study was to explore and examine the research group's understanding of common terms used in anti-racist work while attending to group process. As our group engaged in preliminary discussions surrounding our research, it became clear that many of the terms frequently used to discuss early career professionals' preparation for racial equity work are not clearly understood or consistently used among the faculty. As a result, we determined that it would be productive for our own growth to discuss how to define key terms related to anti-racism work. As our reflective process unfolded, our SSG evolved into a FLC that reflected on both our understandings and our process. The challenges we faced early on while discussing these concepts together (e.g., fear of ignorance, imposter syndrome, people holding back, or worrying about promoting racism) point to the value of engaging in a FLC alongside equity-oriented research and practice. Ultimately, we see this emergent FLC as a beneficial model for professional development for faculty engaged in equity-oriented research or practice.

Value in the Process

While FLCs have traditionally focused on teaching-related outcomes, our experience highlights the need to take a few steps back when working on racial equity, even when teaching is ultimately the focus. When it comes to racial equity work, we first need to examine our own assumptions, biases, and understanding—as our group did while

exploring shared understanding of common racial justice–focused terminology. Using the FLC as a place to reflect on and examine our own experience and understanding is foundational to developing anti-racist pedagogical practices. Without shared understanding, common language, and well-developed personal and professional commitments to racial equity, an emphasis solely on pedagogy will yield little in the way of meaningful outcomes for teachers and students. The discussion that follows highlights the important learnings that emerged as we took this step back to examine our understandings.

Implicit in our faculty group's commitment to engaging in the work of anti-racism on every level is a commitment to engaging in a process of reflection. We have found it useful, necessary even, to make this engagement explicit. Our initial aim was to critically examine the terminology we were using related to anti-racism work. We were interested in understanding the (non-academic) definitions we were each operating from and determining if it was possible to come to shared definitions we could use in our work with one another and our students. We were interested in attending to the process, but the language was our original focus. However, through data analysis, we found that process, or "conscientious dialogue" (Patton, 2016), was the more compelling part of our work together. Following data analysis, we are no longer hoping for consensus around definitions and terminology. In fact, we learned that there are times in which a focus on language is a barrier to reflective anti-racism work (e.g., worry about saying the "wrong thing" or using "language that might offend" may have led to less engaging, less rich conversation about anti-racism work). Instead, we want to continue to have intentional, reflective conversations in which there is space to continue to reflect and learn from one another, similar to Ritter et al.'s (2019) call to create cultures of inquiry. As academics who are more comfortable with being in the role of "experts," this focus on process with its inherent vulnerability is both important and uncomfortable. To note, we did not unanimously agree or decide on shared definitions, but what emerged from the analysis was an emphasis on the experience and the outcomes of what happens when the

terms we sought to define are enacted (ways of othering, barriers to access, maintaining power). Our hope is that this type of dialogue will continue in formal and informal settings, influencing the culture of our school and departments such that dialogue (rather than consensus on the "correct answer") is the norm. Within our FLC, we have determined that we are most likely to advance our dialogue with an outside facilitator with expertise in dialogue around racial justice.

Reflection on Pedagogy

It is important to note that faculty continually discussed their concerns related to their teaching in each of the three data sets. For example, one faculty member expressed, "I worry that I'm not doing enough in my own teaching to advance these efforts, so I feel like a fraud/imposter." One faculty member questioned whether there is a true commitment to translating this to the classroom. Our group is predominantly White and uneven in terms of racial diversity—which influences discussions as well. These discussions emphasize the fear that arose around whether we understood enough to teach this content; whether we were teaching it at all; and, if so, whether it was taught in a way that reflected our commitment and that accurately informed students' ways of practicing in their disciplines. Confusion highlighted by individual beliefs that were reinforced by privilege, the need for establishing a shared understanding, and the importance of clarity and accuracy about concepts related to racial equity served as central discussion points. The question of whether the group's confusion reflected that of students' experiences was also raised, as well as whether we are teaching students accurate information. We plan to investigate these concerns further and engage in conversations that are central to the application of these terms in the higher education classroom.

We found it notable that there were some concepts for which there was a lot of agreement (e.g., theme of maintaining power; meaning of "whiteness"), whereas other concepts brought about more difference and uncertainty (e.g., theme of barriers to access). Despite our best

efforts and our aim to break down barriers, the very issues we worked to define were mirrored in our practice. For example, while we sought to define *white privilege*, our group dynamics at times exemplified the terms we aimed to define. These findings provide a roadmap for future reflective learning. If we have shared understandings of terms such as *privilege*, we might spend more time considering the nuances of terms such as *equity* and *equality*. This process (exploration of terms in which there might be differing views or points of uncertainty) might also provide a model for how we engage in discussions about anti-racism work in the classroom. As a result of the current work, we remain committed to continuing the conversation surrounding anti-racist practices. We also recognize that identifying our differences creates opportunities for greater understanding among us. Each faculty member joined this racial justice–focused research group because we were each looking to grow and learn from one another in the areas of anti-racism, racial equity, and justice. While we are a group of faculty of varied positions and roles, we exemplify groups that are traditionally part of FLCs. We acknowledge this work is a fluid non-linear process and one that will continue to take shape over time. Our commitment to learning as a community as well as with our students remains constant.

Power and Privilege in the FLC

Though this was mentioned before, it bears repeating that we found it notable yet not surprising that the very issues we worked to define were mirrored in our practice. This is indicative of group process and especially process that will play out when racial dynamics are involved. For example, dynamics around power and privilege and the theme that oppression is always operating were exemplified and illustrated in the ways group members interacted with one another. This was most apparent in the ways some members were able to make choices around how they would engage in the dialogues that emerged, whereas other members did not feel this was a choice based on their lived experience, and in the ways some members spoke for or rephrased the

statements and contributions of other members. Power and privilege was also demonstrated in the discussion of whether our process was something that should even be documented, with some members wondering whether this process was necessary in the beginning. Though we arrived at a consensus to document the process because of its value to the work we were attempting, the initial questioning of it can be understood through a power analysis regarding privilege and oppression.

Though intellectually it makes sense why and how the dynamics would continue to play out, the experience was difficult, and differentially so depending on who was the target and the aggressor. Nevertheless, this is the process the FLC committed to and found necessary to engage in parallel to our research that has proven beneficial to our overall work.

Limitations

It is important to mention the limitations of our FLC both in process and generalizability to further studies. We understand that there is no specific template for self-study methodology and that the process of examining ourselves can be challenging. The FLC represented one group of nine faculty members in the SEHD at Fairfield University. While the findings of this group are notable, they cannot be easily generalizable to other university settings and faculty within areas other than education and mental health. As a group of seven White faculty members and two Black faculty members in a PWI, a FLC at a more racially diverse university and a more racially diverse set of faculty may yield very different results. Additionally, with an increase in duration of process, richer data and clarification of group dynamics and content themes may occur. We are continuing this process in the months to come with an outside facilitator in order to explore the ways in which we relate to one another and how that may be reflected in our teaching.

Implications for Educational Developers

The educational development literature is rich with guidance for CTLs as they develop FLCs that are shaped by teaching-related themes or faculty interest. What is less clear, however, is what CTLs might need to consider as they work to support racial equity educational development more broadly for faculty engaged in the work beyond teaching. Though our experience as a group of nine faculty is unique and not easily replicated, some of our takeaways may be beneficial to CTLs and faculty and may provide some guidance to consider as FLCs focused on anti-racism are implemented.

First, we think it is important to note that our FLC emerged naturally from our engagement in equity-focused research. Because of the professional roles of members in our group (i.e., social justice educators, educational developers, counselors, social workers, psychologists), we were particularly attuned to the need for reflection and processing. In addition to the composition of our group, we had significant support within our school for anti-racism work, through a standing EDI committee, regular school-wide retreats related to racial equity and social justice, and significant commitment from the dean's office that included financial resources. In a sense, the faculty involved in this FLC were prepared to engage the difficult conversation because of their own personal and professional interests and experiences, as well as the work that was already happening school-wide. We realize that on other campuses, faculty or administrators engaged in equity-oriented work might not think to pause to reflect on process, assumptions, or understandings or have the support of their unit to engage in this work.

Given that not all faculty members have the resources we describe, CTLs can play an important role in educating members of the campus community about the value of engaging in reflection alongside racial equity work, be it through teaching, research, service, or leadership. It is important that colleagues within and outside of our university setting engage in anti-racist process and practice with support for the deep

and difficult discussions that surround this work. Through these conversations we can uncover our implicit biases and microaggressions and become more cognizant of the language we use and the beliefs that lie beneath them. We believe these practices can aim to normalize the difficulty of these discussions and, in turn, begin to break down the silences that so often surround us. CTLs can help to facilitate this reflective work by inviting campus members engaged in racial equity work to set up FLCs or other groups to support the reflective work and by offering to facilitate when requested. Providing just-in-time support for this reflective process is critical. Our group needed the pop-up FLC right when it happened midyear rather than during the typical offering of an academic year FLC. Thus, CTLs might offer their support on an as-needed basis.

With our FLC, we realized that reflective and conscientious dialogue are key to our ability to move forward as a group as we worked on surveying graduates of our programs about their preparation to promote racial equity. CTLs can play a role in helping these emergent FLCs to translate and transfer their reflections on their racial equity work to their teaching. One of our takeaways from our FLC is to mirror the reflective practices in our learning group in the classrooms in which we teach among our various professional disciplines. We recognize that process is most valuable, and we intend to implement a similar conversational and reflective process with our students. Through class discussions that promote honesty, transparency, and admitting where we fall short, we can begin to unpack the deeper issues surrounding racism that exist in our higher education classrooms and education and mental health systems. Although using terms such as *racial equity* and *inclusion* with our students is important and meaningful, we have learned it is critical to engage in reflective discussions around their meaning and definitions as well as with terms that may hold even more specific implications such as the ones we discuss in this article.

As we head into the analysis of the next phase of our research, data about our alumni's preparedness for racial equity work, we will lean heavily on our FLC to support the vital and necessary reflection on and

processing of the significant and difficult findings and questions about the work that lies ahead. We are hopeful that our parallel approach of researching and reflecting will inspire our colleagues at other institutions—both educational developers and faculty—to engage in and support this dual process.

Biographies

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Julie Berrett-Abebe, PhD, LICSW, is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at Fairfield University. Dr. Berrett-Abebe's career is at the intersection of physical health, behavioral health, and health equity. Her clinical practice as an oncology social worker has informed her teaching and research. Dr. Berrett-Abebe's research agenda is to work toward health care transformation through interprofessional education, collaborative practice models, and addressing social determinants of health.

LaTasha Smith, PhD, LCSW, CGP, is an Assistant Professor of Social Work at Fairfield University. As a practitioner-scholar, LaTasha has a passion for teaching clinical social work. Dr. Smith's teaching interests are clinical practice, research methods, field education, and clinical supervision. LaTasha believes that her teaching and research is deeply informed by her clinical practice and prioritizes a clinical, sociocultural, and anti-racism perspective in teaching. Dr. Smith's most recent

research integrates psychodynamic and sociopolitical theories to better understand the impact of internalized racism on one's mental health and functioning.

Stephanie Storms, EdD, is an Assistant Provost of Faculty Affairs, Development, and Diversity at Palo Alto University. Her research and scholarly interests include educational outcomes of social justice education, equity and inclusion issues in faculty mentoring and peer evaluation, and assessing students' readiness for social action engagement. She is a social justice educator and teacher educator who has taught courses in social justice education, teacher action research, differentiated instruction, and community-engaged learning.

Michael Regan, PhD, NCSP, is Associate Professor of the Practice of School Psychology at Fairfield University. He has more than 35 years of public school experience including as classroom teacher, bilingual school psychologist, Director of Pupil Services, and Director of Special Education. Dr. Regan is a state and nationally certified school psychologist who specializes in psychological and neuropsychological evaluation of English learners.

Jocelyn Novella, PhD, LPC, NCC, ACS, BC-TMH, is an Assistant Professor of Counselor Education at Fairfield University and Project Evaluator for a behavioral health workforce development grant through HRSA, Fairfield University Collaborates for a Healthier Connecticut (FCHC) Scholars Program. Her research interests include efficacy of telemental health, issues of the emerging adult, and best practices in wellness promotion. Dr. Novella is a licensed professional counselor, a nationally certified counselor, an approved clinical supervisor, and is board certified in telemental health.

Laurie L. Grupp, PhD, is an experienced faculty member and higher education administrator. Her research interests include bilingual special education, change leadership, educational development, and

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Emily R. Smith, PhD, is Professor of English Education in the Department of Educational Studies and Teacher Preparation and Director of Mentoring for the Center for Academic Excellence at Fairfield University. Her research and teaching interests intersect to include mentoring and faculty development for beginning teachers, faculty, and academic leaders.

Alyson M. Martin, EdD, is the Co-director of the Special Education Program, Fairfield University. Her teaching, scholarship, and service focus on enhancing pre-service education for special education candidates and collaborating with local schools and agencies to improve services for students and families with special needs. Dr. Martin's peer-reviewed publications and presentations center on special education teacher burnout, collaboration with professionals in the field and families with children with disabilities, co-teaching practices in higher education, pre-service education for special education candidates, and transition programs for individuals with ASD/ID.

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