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## Doing the Work – Collectively Pursuing Anti-Racist and Equitable Teaching: One High School English Department’s Journey

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**O**ur district has long been heralded as a beacon school, one that delivers exceptional education in an exceptional community. Peeling back the layers, however, revealed a district that lurched toward the traditional, even with the hiring of DEI faculty and the step away from an historical Indigenous mascot. In a time where teachers are exhausted and afraid of community backlash, our English department dared to tear off the scabs of old wounds and united to push toward what is best for our community and for our students. Hard conversations, difficult topics, and months of legwork provided some clarity and unity, sentiments that had been missing in our department for decades.

As we dug into our curriculum and dug out of our individual comfort zones and passion projects, we realized that we had a long way to go to truly provide an education for our students that was representative of the students in the room and inclusive of all. Haltingly, we began to revamp our curriculum and unite in our goals. Along the way, we found ways to build bridges between old and new staff members, and ultimately joined together to write this article to submit for publication. This article unpacks our individual and collective journeys toward cohesion and inclusion, outlines our inquiry work to “stretch the field of literacy, language arts, and English” in our district, discusses the “tensions [that we] see in literacy education today,” and details our work to “best meet the needs of [our] students” (Current Call | Language Arts Journal of Michigan, 2021).

The work has been and continues to be difficult, but it is critically important—and worth it.

## Chapter 1: Why We Are Doing This Work

Our English department has written this article because we want to capture the journey that we are on. We have come together to write, because writing is at the core of what we do and who we are. But we also want to be transparent, using our real names and writing in the first person, to show how difficult this work is, and to outline some of our struggles and some of our successes. We are nowhere near done with this work; as we learn and grow, our work will never be done. But we are hoping that our collective narrative can provide a window into our own journey, as we attempt to answer NCTE’s call to “Identify and challenge individual and/or systemic acts of racism and other forms of discrimination and bigotry in educational institutions and within our profession, exposing such acts through external communications and publications” (2022).

Our English department is diverse in experiences but we are all White. In fact, even though our district has a 42% minority enrollment (USNews.com, 2022), our teaching staff at the high school is almost exclusively White.

Most of us in the English department have moved here after starting our careers elsewhere; a few in our department have spent their entire career right in this building; some even attended high school here. Sharon came here after spending 20 years in a neighboring rural district; Ben, Dawn, and Emily came here in their 4th year of teaching; Shelby was in her 11th year, and Pat came after 9. Gina arrived here in her 3rd year of teaching, left several years later to go serve in the Peace Corp and then in the private sector, and then returned. Some of us butted heads in our previous districts, fighting policies that

were misogynist, racist, ableist, or often just simply bad for students. As Ben says, “I was constantly being questioned by all stakeholders in the district about the best practices that I was implementing in my classroom that focused on critical thinking skills through reading, writing, and speaking.” He saw the “writing on the wall” his final year in that district, when he was beginning to explore and come to terms with the White supremacist ideals that occur in every educational setting by attending conference sessions on the matter and he knew that he needed to find a new teaching home in order to be the best educator possible for himself and his students. However, the transition to a bigger, more diverse school was still difficult. Sharon points out, “The first thing I noticed was how much freedom I had to push boundaries and teach with an anti-racist focus; this was such a breath of fresh air after beating my head against the walls of misogyny and racism for twenty years at my old district; the second thing I noticed was how traditional the teaching methodology and the curriculum actually was in this building.” And Ben “felt like the new kid on the block.” Despite having similar approaches to teaching English Language Arts, he felt isolated due to his gender identity as the only cisgender male for a handful of years... he felt like it was an uphill battle to feel comfortable and respected, so he usually closed the door to his room and kept his head down during department meetings.

Others came from more diverse teaching experiences, and struggled to find their footing as well. Shelby didn’t want to move to Michigan. She didn’t want to teach in a stereotypical White small town where everyone knew each other and they all looked the same. She explains, “I’d spent the last ten years teaching outside of Washington D.C. and had gotten used to being the only White woman in the room. I felt that I had come too far in challenging my own beliefs and checking my own privilege to go backsliding.” Her Michigan native husband assured her it wouldn’t be like that, so they moved. She reflects, “I spent my first week in my new school being astounded at how many White people there were. It took me a while to find my place.”

Pat used to be more comfortable discussing the impact of race on his classroom, his pedagogy, and his literature selection before he came here. He was established at his previous school and had built up enough of a reputation to feel comfortable as a community member rather than an outsider. “Perhaps most importantly,” he explains, “I knew that my place in those discussions was as a learner rather than an expert. I was typically one of a couple—or the only—White person in the room. I

knew my job was to pose questions and facilitate discussions, but my students spoke with conviction about their experiences that I knew my job was to lift their voices and help them hear one another. At times, I was probably the most uncomfortable person in the room. My White upbringing largely surrounded by other White folks meant I hadn’t had much experience in discussing race, so I hadn’t built up my level of comfort in the conversation. However, my students were happy to teach me about how much I’d been missing all these years. They were matter-of-fact about their experiences of structural racism and together we could piece together what to do about it.”

And Emily, who came here in her 4th year of teaching, brought a lot of experiences from multiple teaching situations, but then walked into a wall of professional and personal discomfort. She had taught in prison, a somewhat urban school, a charter school, a very small rural school, as well as a somewhat larger rural school. In all of these situations, she had been one of the teachers who were most focused on social justice, inclusivity, and making her students feel seen and heard. “I thought I was doing a great job at it,” she says, “although I knew I wanted to keep developing and growing. When I became a part of the English department [here], where all of my department members were on the same page with that, I realized just how much growth I still needed. There were many things that I had been pushing for in my other schools that were just common practice here. They were five steps ahead of where I was on my journey.”

She went from feeling like a leader in this area to feeling like she had no idea what she was doing. She realized that lessons she was proud of and had poured her heart and soul into, thinking they were forward thinking, inclusive, and solid just simply weren’t. They still had a long way to go. Emily reflected back to her teaching practices in her former classrooms and thought about how little she felt she knew, and the ways she felt had “failed” them. Her heart ached for those students who would continue to fail to be seen, heard, and appreciated.

Sharon echoes that thought. “With 20 years of teaching already behind me, how much harm have I inadvertently caused, under the guise of “anti-racist teaching?” How many times have I called someone out instead of calling them in (Ross, 2019)? How many times did I just simply get it wrong?”

Together, we – the authors of this piece and the other members of our department – stumbled into the 2020-21 school year with two new faces in our department of 13, and added 3 more new faces in 2021-22. That turnover created a strange tension, one where voices who were no longer in the

room still seemed to dominate the conversations, and where everyone was afraid to step out of line and step on toes. It would have been easier to just close our doors and teach. But Anthony, a first year teacher, sums up exactly why we all are still here, doing this work and writing this article: “to craft a space where all student voices are heard...[and] to provide the necessary tools for each individual to pursue their own versions of success.”

Our goal in 2021-2022 was deceptively simple: We would interrogate our curriculum and revamp it to better reflect the students in the room.

## Chapter 2: The Tensions and Stumbling Blocks We Faced

Although we were all on the same page, wanting to revamp the curriculum and allow our students to see themselves in what they were reading and writing, it was incredibly difficult to begin the conversations we had to have. First and foremost, we are all products of our own high school educations, where, as Dawn explains, “reading selections were stuffy, canonical texts and the class message was that these texts hold the gold standard.” As students, we never really understood why these texts were sacred. Nor were we provided the space to truly question and engage in conversation with the content. Not only were the readings traditional, our engagement with the texts was too. We read for content and were expected to understand what happened in the literature and acknowledge that it was a good work to read.

Now, as educators in a highly successful school (USNews.com, 2022) we have to acknowledge that how we were taught is not, perhaps, the right way to teach. And yet, there is an undercurrent of the “way that we do things in this district” that is based on history and tradition, and seemingly supported by years of practice that the new teachers in the building will never really understand.

Sharon pointed out in a meeting, early on, that everyone seemed to be afraid of speaking up and saying what they were really thinking. There was a palpable tension, an elephant in the room that wasn't being named. Perhaps, like Ben, some teachers felt isolated because of experiences in previous years. Perhaps, like Pat, teachers new to the district were just listening, not yet sure of their place. Perhaps, like Sharon, they were sensing this unspoken history of discord that seemingly broke the department at some time in the past.

And other tensions existed as well.

Although we all agreed that our literature needed to reflect the students in the room, we struggled to find an equitable

way to do that. After all, we know that students need to see themselves in the literature, but research shows that it's our Black students who are truly disenfranchised (“Still Stalled - State Of Michigan Education Report 2022,” 2022); yet, the minority majority at our school is AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander). We found ourselves quickly falling down the rabbit hole of trying to find texts that represented and empowered Muslim students, Hindu students, East Asian and South Asian students, LGBTQIA+ students, Indigenous students, students from Africa, students who are African American, students who are CisHet and White and Christian, students who are none of the above. There aren't enough minutes in a school year to provide texts to all of the students who need to be seen and need to see themselves, and there definitely aren't enough positive representations. It's not enough to teach *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Of Mice and Men* and say they check the boxes for representation of Black, disabled, neurodivergent, and female characters, when all of those characters in the text are marginalized. Canonical literature is inherently problematic when it comes to meaningful representation. But we also can't just abandon all canonical literature and jump exclusively to YA (young adult lit) and new publications, as college and community expectations still value exposure to the classics. And we recognized that a great deal of current YA is often not classroom appropriate, or continues to revisit the harms, traumas, and marginalizations that our students are facing.

Weeks of tense discussion culminated in frustration, with several teachers in our department voicing that we “haven't actually accomplished anything” and “we aren't getting anywhere.” Indeed, it felt like we were going in circles, piling up problems and never advancing toward solutions. We didn't want to just admire the problem. We wanted to get things done.

It was clear that we needed to clear the air and set some protocols.

## Chapter 3: The Protocols We Set and the Actions We Took

Ben describes one of the icebreaker activities we introduced that had us air out worries and past experiences. He took the risk to share what he was feeling from the past and acknowledge it with the group. After sharing, he felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. As others shared their experiences, we began to see each other in a different way as fellow humans who were here for students and to work together. Sure, we'd disagree at times, but we knew

that we needed to do it respectfully and with good intentions above anything else. Knowing this helped us...We continued to question curriculum choices that were made by prior colleagues, investigate more diverse texts to incorporate into our teachings, and grew closer as people and friends.

Pat introduced several protocols for discussion based on resources found at SchoolReformInitiative.org, such as “What? So What? Now What?” and the “Tuning Protocol,” and then together, our department set the following “team rules and meeting norms” that we revisited at the beginning of each meeting.

- Respect our team
- Honor the wisdom in the room
- Respect start and end times of meetings
- Support one another
- Collaborate
- Work toward solutions
- Move toward real work
- Assume positive intentions
- Own the impact
- Avoid “parking lot” conversations - bring concerns to Area Coordinator and/or teammates
- Respect “What is said here, stays here”
- Be prepared: Agenda in advance; let teammates

know if you cannot attend

- Remind teammates about meeting when you are headed to the meeting
- Be purposeful and intentional in department meetings

Once we had our meeting norms built, Dawn centered us with some helpful guiding questions, inspired from Emily Style’s “Curriculum as Window and Mirror” (1988) and Rudine Sims Bishop’s “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors” (1990):

- Why do we read certain literature in our classes?
- What literature “counts”?
- Whose voices are included? Whose are not included?
- What length and reading levels count in our English curriculum?
- How do we explore the role of authorship, character portrayal, content?

Dawn further explains that in our English department, we have been striving to incorporate engaging literature and diverse voices for a number of years. This isn’t a new task. But we wanted to move to work even more collectively and collaboratively on this throughout our courses.

We began conversations about how we truly felt about some of our work and where we saw places to improve. We

Figure 1

A Bias Review should consider the following elements		
Gender	Race	Ethnicity
Sexual Orientation	Religion	Socio-Economic Status
Gender Expression & Identity	Physical Disability	Age
Family Structure	Native Language	Occupation
Body Shape/Size	Culture	Geographic Setting

Source: Washington Office of Superintendent Public Instruction, 2009

developed a collective vision and rationale for why we as a team deemed this work necessary.

Together, we looked at data to explore our student population. Who are our students? Who is succeeding? Who is struggling? Who is represented? Which groups are falling through the cracks? Then we explored our reading offerings. As a team, we took a very close look at our current landscape and evaluated our texts for representation. We explored author background, character background, time period of the text, and what is represented in the text.

We studied. We explored tools for selecting diverse texts, evaluating bias, and creating a culturally responsive curriculum. We worked on protocols for discussion and though we put everything we wanted to do on the discussion table, we carved out one piece at a time to explore. We committed to team alignment to explore various texts.

Tools we explored included Learning For Justice's interactive "Reading Diversity" tool, located at LearningForJustice.org. "Reading Diversity" "considers four distinct—but interconnected—dimensions of text selection: complexity, diversity and representation, critical literacy, and reader and task" (2016, p. 2). We dug into Washington Models for the Evaluation of Bias Content in Instructional Materials (2009), which unpacks guidelines for text evaluation and a bias review.

We read through The Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools' "Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard" (2019). This resource defines culturally responsive education and presents a scorecard with guidelines, definitions, and scorecard calculations, so that districts can evaluate their curriculum's representation, social justice orientation, and teacher materials (Bryan-Gooden, Hester, & Peoples, 2019, p. 4-16).

During one department meeting, grade-level teams interrogated their curriculum on a spreadsheet, attempting to map representation in authorship and subject matter. This task is deceptively simple, because checking off authors and characters for representation is easy, but it isn't enough. Character agency needs to be at the core. As an example, the 10th grade team talked at length about *Of Mice and Men*. At a glance, the text has a diverse cast: Lennie is neurodivergent. Crooks is Black and disabled. Candy is elderly and disabled. Most of the characters are poor. And Curley's wife is female. But none of these characters have agency. They are all victimized. Our team debated at length: was the essence of the story and the craft of Steinbeck's writing important enough for

us to keep as a sacred text? Or was it time for *Of Mice and Men* to go? Ultimately, we decided to keep it for now, and frame it as a story about marginalization and disenfranchisement, asking students to envision what empowerment might look like for each marginalized character. In contrast, the 11th grade team decided that *Huckleberry Finn* no longer had enough merit to continue with it as a core text in American Lit. Similar discussions about the merits and weaknesses of *To Kill a Mockingbird* occurred within the 9th grade team. At the end of the session, we shared out with the "What, So What, Now What" protocol. What did each team discuss? What were our sticking points? Why is this important? And finally, What are our next steps going to be?

#### Chapter 4: Successes We Saw in the Classroom

Throughout the year, as we continued to invite our students into frank conversations in our classrooms and as we actively worked to teach with an anti-racist and fully inclusive lens, we cataloged some of the moments that rang true.

Shelby tells this story: "This past school year, I had been struggling to connect to one lone African American female student. I wanted to just tell her, "hey! I'm White, but I'm not racist, I swear!"

Shelby continues, "I don't even remember what we were talking about in class that day, but I went off on a tangent and got into talking about how it's important to see, recognize, and celebrate the cultural differences in the room, and "not seeing color" isn't the answer. Before the end of class, [the student] came to my desk to show me a picture on her phone. It was her, as an infant, sitting on Rosa Park's lap at a family reunion. They were cousins. In that moment, I knew I'd gained my student's trust. Even better, I gained faith in myself and how my experiences help me educate my students. I don't teach English. I get to teach life using English."

Dawn reflects on a moment in her senior level Creative Writers class, when students were thoroughly engaged during book talks with our teacher librarian. One student confessed to her that she never read an entire book in high school. This student was so excited that there were book offerings of characters that looked like her. Hailing from Puerto Rico, this student was surprised that after her 18 years of life and 12 years of schooling, that books with characters from Puerto Rico, like her, actually existed. And people talked about them and enjoyed them. She gladly signed out her book, read it, and returned to talk with our teacher librarian to find more books with characters that looked like her and that she could relate

to. And she found that our teacher librarian knew these books too...giving them more value.

Sharon remembers one specific moment when, on an end-of-the-week reflection, a student wrote these two sentences: “I really enjoyed the hyphen-nation videos (New York Times, 2017) that we watched and the Flipgrid activity that we did. This is the first time that I have seen myself and actually felt seen in school.”

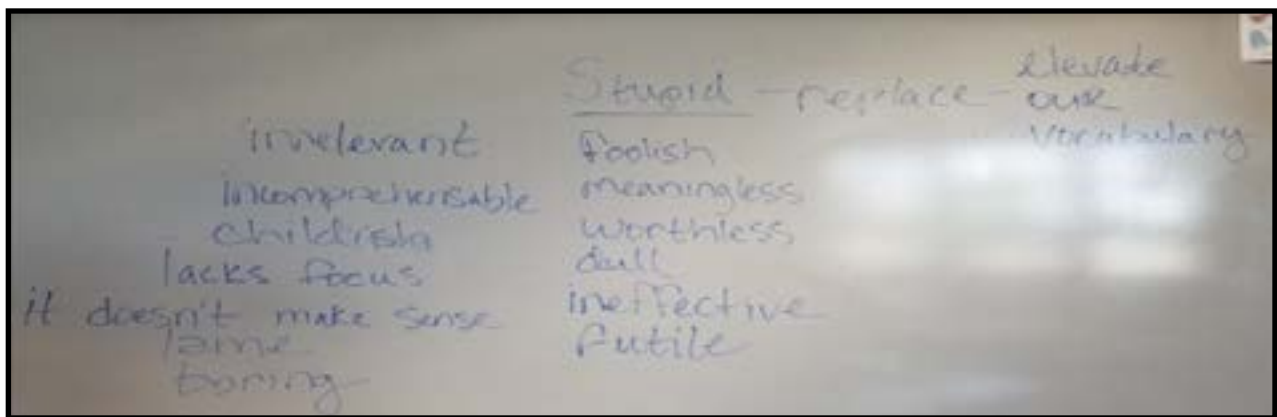
Pat, coming from a completely different teaching background, explains that when he came here, he noticed the conversations about race felt stilted by comparison with his old school. He knew *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was a required text for his American Literature class, and he decided to jump into it early in the year. He explains, “We spent several days exploring the controversy surrounding the novel—not just in language, but the impact of minstrel shows and the minstrelization of Jim as a central character of the novel. My students would engage in the material in writing, but when I asked questions for discussion at first, most of them found sudden inspiration in studying the pilling of the carpet. I knew I would need to help them grow in their comfort in acknowledging historic cruelties and their modern legacies if the reading was going to be meaningful. This was a new experience for me—my former students were quick to tell me

about the racism I had missed, but suddenly I felt like I had to be the one to shine this light.”

He deliberately slowed down his pacing on this novel and gave lots of chances to step into this type of discussion more slowly. He had to ask questions like, “If they get caught right now, how is the ultimate outcome for Huck different than it is for Jim?” before he could interrogate whether Huck is truly helping Jim, forcing him to be an accomplice, or even holding him prisoner. A few students spoke up at first, and slowly the willingness to ask these questions and consider alternative readings spread through class. Throughout their reading, they acknowledged Twain’s positive intentions, but also problematic depictions of a White savior and comparisons of a young White boy and a grown Black man as peers. The students raised points like the impotence of the messaging of this novel in a modern context when racial issues are less obvious but still present. By the end of the unit, several students told Pat that it was the most substantial analysis of racism they had ever had in their school experience.

In the vignette below, Gina walks us through a single lesson, and the impact that our department work has had on her teaching and on her classes. In a class where 85% of the students had an IEP, 504, or were receiving ELL services, she describes how her class found their voice:

Figure 2



Source: Farnelli, 2022



*Was this part of my lesson plan for the day? Not all.*

*Was I inspired by a supportive department committed to diversity and equity? Completely.*

*Was it worth taking the time for students to explore finding their voices? Absolutely.*

*Did students ask to do this again? Yes!*

*Sophomore students are discussing plot and character development for *Dear Martin* by Nic Stone. A student shares that a character's choice is "stupid" and a unison of heated responses follow. I pause, pull up our Conversation Agreements Doc on the Whiteboard, glance through my notes on calling in versus calling out I found during an English Department meeting, and decide to welcome an opportunity to explore denotation, connotation, and communication.*

*We delve into what we want to say, how to say it, and what words to use or not use in order for others to understand our point of view.*

*I ask why Stone made this plot move, its connection to the character's development, other ways to describe it, and why others might view the character in a different way. Silence follows.*

*I write 'stupid' on the board, add a synonym, and invite students to replace the word. I wait.*

*We review denotation, connotation, and synonym definitions. I wait.*

*The silence breaks and with encouragement, every student contributes to our list. We revisit the plot and character discussion. I silently thank my department for the knowledge they share during this challenging (imagine the word board for 'challenging') time in education.*

*Lesson closure approaches and we add the following to our Conversation Agreements Doc: know our audience, don't be afraid to share our thoughts in class, [recognize that] words are powerful, learn vocabulary [to communicate in a meaningful, respectful way], and we all have a voice.*

Bringing transparency to our teaching practice and sharing these moments with our colleagues helps us all better our practice and push our students and our school community out of their comfort zone and into challenging the status quo.

## Chapter 5: Where We Are Now

Our work is nowhere near done. We've barely scraped the metaphorical surface of what we need to do. But, we have been able, in one year, to begin to build a team that is driven to teach with diversity, equity, and inclusion as our three pillars.

Ben explains that the English department became a collection of colleagues and friends that he looks to for guidance, assistance, and care as an educator. We have navigated through the trials and tribulations of teaching in a

global pandemic, come together as a department with various experience levels in education, and began the arduous task of making our English curriculum more inclusive and diverse. He explains, "There isn't any other group I would want to work with than this one due to our strengths and abilities to make each other better teachers for the betterment of our students and the community we work in."

Anthony, fresh off his first year of teaching, reflects: "I honestly would not feel as confident in challenging myself without the support from my English department. My team has reinforced and furthered my knowledge of teaching with an intersectional lens. I feel most accomplished when a student participates more than they typically would because they feel comfortable. Or, when they are able to critically analyze the unique identities of characters from texts much older than them, connecting these newfound ideas to their own realities. These interactions, along with students' raw ability to think critically, would not be possible without honoring and valuing each individual's backgrounds and experiences. For me, this is the only way to ensure the next generation effectively grows toward shaping a brighter future."

Sharon describes a gut check moment at the end of the year, when a student responded on the end-of-the-year reflection: "I'm going to say exactly what's on my mind. Since you have never experienced the things you are talking about, maybe you aren't the right person to be talking about racism." Sharon reflected on that student comment all summer. "If I don't talk about it," she questions, "then who will? Every teacher here is White. If the White people don't do the work, how will it get done?" And yet, she knows that she still has so much more work to do, and so much more to learn. This student's comment is hurtful, but valid, and Sharon's going to keep it at the front of her mind going forward, to ensure that all students in the room feel seen, and heard, and that Sharon isn't the only person talking.

Emily explains, "While I am not an expert in this field, and still have a long way to go, I know that this is incredibly important, and difficult, work. I try to remind myself that it's ok to make mistakes, because as we tell our students, that's how we learn and grow. I remind myself that I'm a student too, we all are. If we focus on supporting each other the way we support our students, then we are doing this work the best way we know how."

Dawn adds, "We need to expand the voices represented in our classes, as we simultaneously face our current reality that's driving an increase in book banning. We need to intentionally move forward with curriculum conversations that recognize the many factors at play within our learning spaces as many

stakeholders are also involved and impact our educational landscapes.” She recognizes that this is messy and challenging work. We are working as a team of highly skilled English educators and considering many stakeholders in this work — including our students, their families, our community, and national discourse.

It still never feels like we’re moving fast enough, but we’ve started the conversation. We’ve built a space for conversation and investigation and creation to move forward. We’re discussing reading selections and exploring possibilities for what we can include and how to find balance with representation and content across our courses. We know it matters. Ghody Muhammad in *Cultivating Genius* (2020) has reminded us that “students need texts that restore their humanity and the true and diverse histories of the world. They need texts that teach them about themselves and equip them to face harsh realities of the world. Texts should innately new language, learning, and ways of thinking of the content” (pp. 151-152). Further, Muhammad asserts, “Culturally and historically responsive text selection has the potential to respond to students’ identities, skills, intellect, and criticality” (2020, p. 152). When we look at our work and recognize this truth, we know this is work that we need to do.

If we’re to truly offer a curriculum that represents our world and our student’s experiences or even quite simply offers content relevant to student lives today and in their future, we must reflect and revisit what is taught and how it is taught.

Pat circles back to his *Huckleberry Finn* student conversations, explaining how his previous approach was limited. Yes, he argues, “this unit showed me ultimately how much further we have to go in our work here. I can’t see it as an endpoint that some students acknowledged that issues of race affect people differently. That’s only the beginning.” He noted that many students were not able to make connections between the historical roots of racism and anything beyond the end of 1885. His goal is to get his current students to the point that they can challenge ideas and explore complex issues with meaningful connections between the world they read about and the one they reside in. He describes feeling unsatisfied that some students still struggled to extend their understanding of these issues beyond the first half of the 19th century and see how they might affect American society today. “This connects to NCTE’s belief that “that teaching racial histories and antiracist education do not constitute anti-Americanism but serve as one element in an education that supports the development of informed citizens who can work toward a more equitable society” (2022).

Pat speaks for all of us, as he explains, “The reason I have wanted to continue diving into this work with our department is that I’ve realized how far we have to go. I have to grow better at adjusting my instruction to the needs of my new community, and I’ve only scratched the surface there. My students need to get to the point that they can challenge ideas and explore complex issues with meaningful connections between the world they read about and the one they reside in. My class has to become inclusive to the point that all students feel comfortable sharing on sensitive topics. I’m hoping to lean on my department as we figure out how to do it together.”

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