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Published online: 02 Dec 2021.

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Linking arms across districts: Accountability and support in cross-district teacher collaboration

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ABSTRACT

The violent police response to uprisings in response to the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor unveiled who America is for our students. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the politicization of schools and exacerbated inequality in schools already segregated by class and race. Throughout the 2020–2021 academic year, students navigated our nation's deepest divides. Teachers engaged in antiracist and equity activism in schools experience teacher burnout, isolation, and ultimately heartbreak when not supported by their school community. In this article, we look at critical connections teachers made across districts in the same geographic area, across segregated schools to collaborate to investigate white supremacy culture in themselves, their schools, and the education system. We wonder, "How can educators, schools, and organizations leverage this moment of opportunity for change and critical mass of support without losing momentum as seen in the past?" We focus on the actions and practices of 2 teachers in central Ohio schools to answer this question with respect to their classrooms, schools, and communities.

Introduction

During the 2020–2021 school year, barriers to learning due to COVID-19 ranged from sickness, access to internet and technology, limited funds, and lack of social interaction. In an election that was somehow more contentious than 2016, teachers and students faced not only the "typical" barriers to learning in normal years, but a concentrated version of these barriers that heightened inequalities. The pandemic wasn't the root for some of these barriers, but it exacerbated every single one. In doing so, the pandemic exposed schools as bastions of white supremacy culture.

As the call for action moved toward implementation on the ground-level (in schools), the passion for change was deflated. After a summer of student-led activism for equity and justice in schools for all students, school boards silenced student productions that mentioned the words "Black Lives Matter." Angry white parents emailed about the imbalance of perspective in classrooms tackling issues of social justice. Just as there is a call for social justice in school curriculum, there is noise being made to cancel it. This is because social justice curriculum challenges the very structure and aim of schools: assimilation to whiteness.

The need for sustained collaborative effort between teachers to take action for student equity is on full display. Many of these efforts have been left up to the schools themselves, and usually dumped on teachers to address them with little time or resources. In this article we ask the question: How can networking and collaborating across school districts support teachers taking action in their own buildings? We examine how each teacher's individual effort in their classroom and school can be supported and strengthened through connections outside of their school site. Through this investigation we also explore the question: How do we address white supremacy culture in schools?

We begin through examining the shift made by the educational nonprofit Erase the Space from student-focused, cross-district writing exchanges to a cross-district, teacher-focused learning network. We focus on the necessary reflexive nature of Erase the Space to listen to student needs and respond to students' call to action. This is done through 2 vignettes of Erase the Space teachers in different school districts (urban and suburban) and their actions at their school sites. Lastly, we look at the community and school response to the teachers' actions and how these reactions are linked to white supremacy culture in schools.

Teachers in isolation

Teachers engaged in action for students usually have the pulse of the building and district, but they rarely have an idea of what is going on in surrounding districts. Their action for equity must extend beyond their classroom and their district because educational inequity and white supremacy culture are systemic. One of the main barriers to this cross-district collaboration is teacher isolation.

Teachers' time is at a premium, especially during the 2020–21 school year. As in-practice educators, we know we were asked to be frontline workers and still promote learning and growth in young human beings. Our time to collaborate–to link arms in our quest for educational justice–is extremely slim, and, as Johnson and Tsa (2018) claim, "teaching remains an isolated experience for many educators in the United States compared with teachers in high-achieving nations" (p. 2). In-building teacher collaboration has to compete with grading, difference in teaching philosophies, and contractual duties for time. With collaboration competing for time in teachers' own buildings, the opportunity to collaborate across districts in order to push against systemic inequities is fleeting.

The physical isolation of Americans across racial, socioeconomic, and geographic boundaries is replicated in the lives of public school educators who rarely interact across teaching contexts. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks argued over 20 years ago that "boundary crossing" was an essential component of transformative teaching practice,

> … it is crucial that critical thinkers who want to change our teaching practices talk to one another, collaborate in a discussion that crosses boundaries and creates a space for intervention … but we often have no concrete examples of individuals who actually occupy different locations within structures, sharing ideas with one another, mapping out terrains of commonality, connection, and shared concern with teaching practices. (hooks, 1994, p. 130)

In response to students' call to action and the need for teacher reflection and transformation, Erase the Space pivoted over the 2020–2021 school year to intentionally create time for teachers to share across contextual boundaries to look for commonalities across the profession in different school sites.

Developing a culturally competent citizenry requires that "all students (including white, middle-class students) broaden their cultural repertoires so that they can operate more easily in a world that is globally connected" (Ladson-Billings, 2017, p. 145). After reading student experiences on Instagram this summer, it is also evident that developing a culturally competent citizenry also requires that all teachers (especially white teachers) "broaden their cultural repertoires" so they can support a student population growing in diversity. The problem of getting "too isolated for accountability" remained a large issue for making these spaces a reality (brown, 2017, p. 100). In fact, it was only through our cross-district collaboration that Amelia and I were able to really see each other and connect. As we sat in a coffee shop and worked together on our writing exchange, the initial iteration of Erase the Space formed in 2017, we were able to see beyond the narratives of our schools.

As liberating as our collaboration was, we struggled with how to include more teachers into our productive, restorative coffee shop meetings. We booked meeting rooms at local libraries and invited our new colleagues to meet us there on a few Saturday mornings. We provided food and paid for local educators, but after 3 years of grant hunting to fund these sessions, we still found it difficult to get all of our teachers there. As practicing teachers, Amelia and I value teachers' time, but we also know the importance of learning and self-reflection for teachers in this process.

The student writing exchanges were canceled in spring 2020. Responding to the pandemic with curiosity and care for students, we also decided not to ask teachers to engage students in exchanges for the upcoming 2020–2021 school year. It wasn't safe. In addition, teachers were already dealing with figuring out how to teach during a pandemic (whether online or hybrid in-person), and we were grappling with the call of students to strive for courage and action in our schools.

Again, we turned to bell hooks (1994) and planned around her idea of creating a "setting for folks to voice fears, to talk about what they are doing, how they are doing it, and why" (p. 38). We asked teachers to go through the exchange process themselves. We moved our meetings to Zoom, and started connecting with more local educators to provide the space and support for teachers to process their role in these experiences voiced by students on social media. As teachers, we have to face, as Dinorah Sánchez Loza writes, that "these posts demonstrate how school environments serve to teach students about the kind of citizenship they can expect in society at larger: White students are not only allowed to hold White Supremacists beliefs, they are also able to play these out in violent ways within school" (this issue). Teachers can curate and transform the school environment on the ground, so we asked teachers to join us to investigate white supremacy culture in ourselves, our classrooms, and our schools. I remember saying to Amelia, "We want to go beyond saying, 'I'm teaching social justice,' and then living in a way that perpetuates inequality to 'I'm living social justice, period.'" We titled the teacher learning network "From 'Civil' Voyeurism to Civic Action" to refer to the proxy experience teachers can get pushing social justice agendas in class and still while recognizing the goal of moving into necessary civic action that transforms.

The pivot Erase the Space made in summer 2020 would not have happened if a student, a person of color and Erase the Space alumna, didn't call me in early June. I had this student all 4 years of her high school experience and had many conversations about life, school, and activism with her over the years. She asked me to grapple with the idea of 2 white teachers creating and leading Erase the Space. She said, "Really, I just want you to quit dancing

around the white people. Take your fire outside of your classroom." She called us to move beyond writing exchanges with students, our project that had been quietly picking up steam with like-minded teachers across districts. It was time for us to lead the charge against the systemic issues we taught in our classrooms.

As 2 white educators, we needed to find our lane. There are enough white people taking up space in social justice circles. In the end, we wrote a position statement and created "From 'Civil' Voyeurism to Civic Action [CVCA]." The move away from the word "civil"–a word we used when we started Erase the Space–was to create a space where experiences are felt and discussed. As Bettina Love (2019)writes, "Too often we think the work of fighting oppression is just intellectual. The real work is personal, emotional, spiritual, and communal" (p. 51). Personal discomfort is part of the process, and often the word civil is used to silence the experiences of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), hence students of color take to Instagram anonymously because we weren't getting the message before. In writing our position statement for CVCA, we found clarity in answering the call of students and responding to teacher needs. We'd found our lane, for now:

> As white educators, we believe that we have been called to model vulnerability and transparency for other white educators who make up over 80% of our profession. We do this through our social media channels and by modeling our learning processes for other educators in Erase the Space training. We are still practicing teachers and have committed to remaining in the classroom; therefore, we see ourselves as part of the learning community and not professional development providers or anti-bias, anti-racism experts. We now see our role through Erase the Space as connectors between teachers and community activists and fundraisers to pay for the time/labor of folks who are anti-bias, anti-racism experts. –*From Erase the Space position statement, June 2020.*

We created CVCA to be a sort of gap year for teachers before we engaged students in exchanges again. If teachers want to disrupt and reimagine the system-at-large, we need "a circle of people who can tell you the truth, and to whom you can speak truth" (brown, 2017, p. 100). This year of Erase the Space was meant to be a time of reflection, connection, and actionable response to students. Teaching about social justice isn't enough if we perpetuate the system in our personal lives.

Linking arms across districts

As we move toward challenging systemic inequality with our students, we are working toward transforming ourselves. The student exchanges aim at the larger systemic problem of school and metropolitan segregation. Transforming ourselves and our schools are "now" actions. Being brave for students means that we act now, in our buildings (or online). Through being in space with other teachers pushing against the white supremacist, patriarchal structures of education, even though and especially because they are in other buildings and other districts, we can "depend more upon critical, deep, and authentic connections, a thread that can be tugged for support and resilience" (brown, 2017, p. 14). It calls us to be accountable to each other across our divided districts, and to lean on each other for support as we face resistance to justice.

We suggest the need to work across districts is as important for teachers as it is for students–that networking for emergence in education "unleashes more of the power of each person" (brown, 2017, p. 57). Teachers create the space for engagement, and if they're not

prepared to really listen and guide students, Erase the Space can be harmful rather than the antiracist work we dream it to be. If we don't ask the teachers to go through the same process of self-reflection to investigate these complications in ourselves and our system, the entire weight of the process falls on the shoulders of students. It becomes too student-focused as it puts undue pressure on students to perform without support. If we want our students to be, as Mirra and Garcia so aptly frame it, "engaged in dialogue about social issues that mattered to them" and together dream about a civic future, we as teachers have do the same (this issue).

Our first CVCA cohort attracted over 30 teachers representing 8 different school districts across central Ohio. As we typically do with students, we paired teachers from different districts together to exchange reflective writing through the year. Janet and Tom[1] were partnered for this year's CVCA network. Both have faced plenty of barriers to teaching during the 2020–21 school year, and though both are veteran teachers, this year still doesn't compare to anything else. Janet is a Black woman teaching in a suburban district in central Ohio. Tom is a white man teaching in Columbus City Schools. Both teachers are active in their support of students and are leaders in their buildings. Janet taught online and in-person classes this year, while Tom taught most of his year online with (in-person classes started in March 2020). Whether in school buildings or as we zoom out to see the larger picture, white supremacy culture is still at the foundation of school.

Janet

On an individual level, Janet is very active in her school community. She has supported students during protests and works with the diversity club at school. Her individual action on which we will focus is the supervising and supporting of student work during her school's Black History Month curriculum. Janet reached out to me halfway through our CVCA year with a situation at her school.

Students created videos to be shown in "homeroom"—a period every Friday to provide space for discussion on issues of connection and student well-being. The administration gave the go-ahead for all classes to watch the videos during homeroom. There were actually multiple times that the same teachers refused to show the student-produced video, or claimed they were replacing it with something else. The first student-created video was to be played on Thursday and Friday homeroom (hybrid schedule) and was on implicit bias.

After her e-mail, Janet and I connected on the phone. She revealed:

> The videos were released the day before so teachers could go over the material before they address it. There is even a disclaimer that if the teacher is uncomfortable with presenting this material that they will be provided support. But after the first video on that Thursday, I hear 3 teachers talking loudly and criticizing student work. They are talking loudly in the hall as I'm walking by. This is during a class change, so this isn't a private conversation. Anyone walking by can hear their conversation, including students. I told them "I can't believe you're criticizing student work loudly in the hallway." They get really flustered and I walk away and go into my classroom, and the 3 of them continue to stand a stare in the hallway.

In the following weeks, the same teachers refused to play student-created videos for Black History Month. Janet told me details of a confrontation with one of the teachers after they had stepped out of his classroom and into the hallway:

> I told him, "I understand that you might be uncomfortable with the material, but it was approved by administration and it was student created, so if you needed help with that all you had to do was talk to myself or the other adviser." My colleague started to raised his voice and said, "Black Lives Matter is a leftist, terrorist organization, and I will not be playing it for my students." I said, "This is not your choice or my choice. This is not a you or a me thing. Homeroom was approved by the district to connect with the students. Our schedule was changed to have homeroom. This particular thing was created by students and was approved. So, you not playing it because you don't want to, this isn't a decision for you to make or for me to make, this is a decision we all made for homeroom. You made a unilateral decision to silence student voice." I walk away to end the situation, and he takes steps towards me yelling at me, "You don't know me, you don't know me!"

The following week, when the videos were being played during homeroom, a student teacher played the student-created videos, but turned the volume all the way down and taught while the video ran. In our phone conversation, she reflected:

> All of this is told to the principal. And the principal says, "This is terrible, we will look into it." Then a couple of days later he calls me in and tells me that these teachers feel that I was intimidating them, and that from here on out, administration would take care of it. "They're making it a you and them thing. And from here on out, you don't have to talk to them." They said they felt threatened because I asked them why they weren't playing the video. So, I stand up and I ask the question, they are basically insubordinate, and somehow, it's becoming a "me-them" thing and the administration is supporting it. I felt attacked, I feel like this is what happens when people stand up for different issues. My principal said, "Some of these people already felt uncomfortable because several students have come forward about them." And I was like, listen to what you said, "Several students have come forward about these teachers" and you want them to feel comfortable. They should not feel comfortable. When you have students coming forward about them before this situation even happened, this just confirms what the students were saying. Instead admin is like, that is what caused them to feel uncomfortable. So, you are giving them an excuse when this is just another example of their bias and their racism.

Teachers who perpetuate and enact white supremacy culture have a safe place to retreat after having done something to harm students. No matter where schools are, they coddle white supremacy. But, for her part in this experience, Janet received a follow-up e-mail about the conversation from the principal—a public record of a conversation without an actual write-up:

> I don't understand what the email was other than a written record. No one has ever addressed him hollering at me in the hallway. It's been, "Well, two teachers had a disagreement." But he's screaming at me in the hall. Check the video. Talk to the other people. And to me what's telling, he went to a [union] rep afterwards because he felt he was justified. This would have been another opportunity for administration to have people come together, but they did not address the harm. The district made the antiracism resolution. And to me this was the first real test of that statement. I feel like the district didn't live up what they said about ensuring action. This was racism. I feel silenced.

Though Janet was carrying out the anti-racist work that, ostensibly, the school district and school building wanted her to do, she finds herself isolated, then punished for doing what the socio-political moment demands (and what her students deserve). Here, doing "the right thing" quickly became "the wrong thing" when it challenged white supremacist norms

and beliefs. As a Black woman, Janet's isolation in this work and her treatment by administration and colleagues is particularly disturbing. Among many other structural changes, her story highlights teachers' need for a network of like-minded individuals when engaging in anti-racist pedagogy and action.

Tom

Our second teacher, Tom, is another 10+ year teacher with leadership roles within the school. In his school building, Tom is well-known and actively involved in the credit recovery program. But this year, there is no building. Tom taught online from March 2020 through March 2021.

The barriers to online learning, especially when it is this sustained, go beyond access. Columbus City Schools provided students with Chromebooks, but replicating the care and energy that takes place in a physical classroom is very difficult. That's why all the districts in central Ohio that had the means to do so moved to a hybrid plan. Tom regularly faced chronic absenteeism and apathy on-screen. In many cases, students choose survival over school, and Tom felt a similar constriction in his ability to reach students and take action on the ground for them when there is literally no one on the ground. The school building was empty. Tom reflected to me:

> I had this realization recently that I was kind of like a substitute teacher. It was constant non-stop busywork, because when I came up with assignments that required more rigor and were more time consuming, the constraints of online plus the variety of other barriers we're hitting, there is very little buy-in. Whereas when I'm in the classroom I can amp it up and I can say 'Hey, we're gonna read this, we're gonna write this, we're gonna talk about this together,' and I get huge buy-in.

While most American teachers would probably agree that teaching online is difficult, Tom was struck by the difference in reactions to his students' struggles by his building colleagues. Where he saw students struggling to survive and help their families, his colleagues saw students who had abandoned school. They blamed individual behaviors for poor grades and low attendance, rather than a system that failed to provide for the most marginalized students in the city:

> I think one of the areas that I know I can make a difference is by talking to other teachers in the system, specifically in my district. When we try something new, there is always pushback, but this year I'm pushing back against that negative narrative that exists when we're trying to give students more grace in this situation. Like if we lower the expectations we are setting them up for some sort of failure. What's more important? Due dates, and points, and expectations, or students not losing their damn minds in the world of virtual learning. So, I found myself in that space to advocate for students and provide grace this year.

I asked him, "What happens when you try to battle the narrative of the undeserving student?":

> All those battles are happening virtually, or in chats, so it is really easy to leave the chat or to ignore it, or turn off your camera. Ignoring it is what can and what most often does happen. We're all in it. We were raised in the system. It is the only thing we have ever known. Especially white teachers. Because if we don't interrogate, it will always just be the way it has been. It feels

like there was a missed opportunity by the school system(s) to do better. To rethink things. To reevaluate things. To do things a slightly different way. It feels like we are just backtracking all year long.

Tom is isolated philosophically and isolated online as well. In our conversation, it was important to reflect Tom's idea back to him and reassure him that what his students are going through is unjust, "Yeah, you're right. This sucks. And your students are bearing the brunt of it." Because we are networking outside of our building and district, we are both able to validate and affirm our experience and the experience of our students in a white supremacist structure that relies on dismissing these narratives and realities.

Conclusion

To combat both the school-based isolation endemic to the teaching profession, teachers first need time with other teachers and away from their students to collaborate, share, and reflect on their practice. Change is hard and there must be a "setting for folks to voice fears, to talk about what they are doing, how they are doing it, and why" (hooks, 1994, p. 38). Teachers need time to share across contextual boundaries to look for commonalities across the profession in different school sites. Previously, the intentional time for collaboration did not exist in most school buildings and teachers continue to work in siloed educational settings, furthering the isolated community experiences of Americans across the country.

Teachers must be given opportunities to reimagine the classroom space and reflect classroom learning out into the larger community. Alongside the curricular goals set forth by their individual school sites, teachers should be able to make space in their curriculum for democratic engagement. Currently, pedagogies that seek to sustain marginalized culture are implemented only in certain schools despite being practically relevant for all children while radical and boundary-pushing practice (where it exists) is largely contained within the classroom walls. However, by adopting digital tools like Zoom and cross-district collaborative professional development like CVCA, we are able to create time and space for like-minded teachers to meet, learn, create, and act.

Finally, teachers need the instruction and practice to develop the skills and confidence to walk with their students into uncharted territory. This includes a comfortable but ever-evolving fluency in discussions around race and privilege; a deep understanding of local and American history as it relates to systemic racism and oppression; and a reflective practice that acknowledges the inevitable missteps and mistakes that students and teachers will make while journeying together. These skills and stores of knowledge are not explicitly taught in universities, they are not developed once teachers enter the profession, nor is their mastery necessarily valued or supported in educational spaces. Yet these are skills and stores of knowledge that all teachers in all contexts at all levels of experience will need to develop and refine together, enhancing our collective intelligence and our professional solidarity as we march toward a better tomorrow.

Note

1. Both names are pseudonyms

Disclosure statement

Funding

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Additional resources

(1) **The Kirwan institute for the study of race and ethnicity**. (2021). *Kirwan Institute home page*. https://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/.
Kirwan has been a partner of Erase the Space since our beginning. The institute focuses on research surrounding racial injustice and economic inequality focusing a lot of their work on the Columbus, Ohio area. Their work ranges from implicit bias models, neighborhood opportunity mapping, to community agriculture projects. Though they are based at Ohio State and work locally, they are nationally recognized for their illuminating research.

(2) **Mosaic education network**. (2021). *Mosaic Education Network home page*. https://www.mosaiceducationnetwork.com/.
Mosaic Education Network provides learning sessions, workshops, and plenty of resources through their website. Mosaic focuses on creating change through arts education, research, reflection, and storytelling. Mosaic has been a partner with Erase the Space since we expanded our work to other teachers in order to support them in creating what Mosaic calls a "brave space" instead of a safe space.

(3) Groeger, L., Waldman, A., Eads, D. (2018, Oct 16). *Is there racial inequality at your school?* **Propublica miseducation**. https://projects.propublica.org/miseducation/.
This tool provides teachers and students with easily accessible and digestible information about the stark inequalities between schools in America. You can find your school district on this site with statistics about opportunity, punishment, and racial demographics. This site also allows users to compare similar districts and neighboring districts to provide context in terms of geography and capacity.

(4) **Erase the space**. (2021) *Erase the Space*. https://www.erasethespace.org/.
Erase the Space is the educational nonprofit written about in the article. The purpose of Erase the Space is to engage students in central Ohio in civic discourse across segregated school districts. We provide learning and collaboration opportunities for teachers involved and a specific student exchange curriculum. More writing about the program and the work of Erase the Space can be found on their website and on their Instagram: @erasethespace.