

BECOMING ALLIES ACCOMPLICES:

PROBLEMATIZING THE INTERSECTION OF REFLECTION AND ACTION THROUGH PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' AUTOETHNOGRAPHIES AS PRAXIS

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Abstract

This paper explores the phenomenon of pre-service teachers becoming accomplices for racial justice. Using hermeneutic phenomenology, we examine the experiences of three white, female pre-service teachers navigating this terrain. A framework we are naming *autoethnography as praxis* emerged from this inquiry. Our research interrogates the notion of white allies and the intersection of critical dialogue and action in pre-service teacher education. Building off of perspectives in critical race and critical whiteness studies, this work is grounded in the reality of the material permanence of white supremacy that white teachers must acknowledge and develop tools to dismantle. Autoethnography as praxis moves students from simply analyzing and reporting their experiences (including their emerging understanding of white privilege) through autoethnography to examining how their experiences have shaped and will continue to shape their identities and practices as teachers. By reframing autoethnography as a dialogue between researcher and her texts, we hope to push beyond reflection to action. By engaging participants in reflection on their actions, autoethnography as praxis also addresses the flaw of white teachers acting as benevolent allies who set their own agenda and position people of color as “needing their assistance.”

Keywords: teacher education, social justice, praxis, anti-racist pedagogy, whiteness

Pre-service teachers are becoming educators in a historical moment punctuated by violence toward people and children of color, publicly displayed on social media. Hashtags like #livingwhileblack and #sleepingwhileblack trend as white people harass or summon the police on Black and Brown youth engaging in mundane activities (i.e., sleeping in a dorm common area, visiting a coffee shop, selling lemonade, entering their own home, and barbecuing in a public park), underscoring how white supremacy infiltrates our everyday lives. At times these aggressions are fatal, with murders by police appearing in real-time on Facebook and other social media sources. While violence toward people of color is not new, how white folks, particularly our white pre-service teachers, are bearing witness to these atrocities is.

Our students are hearing the demands for justice echoing from the Black Lives Matter, DREAMers*, and other contemporary civil rights movements, paired with the violent and discriminatory rhetoric evident in the policies put forward by the White House. They are hearing “Black Lives Matter” countered with “All Lives Matter.” This has culminated in a sense of urgency among ourselves and some of our pre-service teachers. Through the messiness of our rage, fear, and impulse to act, we ask ourselves and our students, “How can white teachers become accomplices for social justice?” This question moved us to invite three white pre-service teachers to engage in cycles of intensive reflection that could lead to direct action. Moving beyond simply discussing and recognizing privilege, the three pre-service teachers engaged in an iterative process of self-study through writing and dialogue. Through our analysis of their process, examination of our own histories as educators, and exploration of various theoretical perspectives, we developed a critical pedagogical framework we are naming autoethnography as praxis.

Our research interrogates the notion of white accomplices and the intersection of critical dialogue and action in pre-service teacher education. Building off of perspectives in critical race and critical whiteness studies, this work is grounded in the reality of the material

1 The DREAMer movement refers to the 2001 DREAM Act (Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors) and the continued action and advocacy for the educational and human rights of undocumented students.

permanence of white supremacy that white teachers must acknowledge and develop tools to dismantle. Our research also problematizes the notion of allyship and explores how educators fighting for social justice might more appropriately be named *accomplices* (Powell & Kelly, 2017). In this study, we explore the use of autoethnography as a critical pedagogical strategy for white teachers to examine their positionality and move toward more anti-racist teaching practices

Through autoethnographies of praxis, students engage in cycles of reflection that demand vulnerability and risk and enables them to discover direct actions to take in their lives, classrooms, and communities. In this paper, we begin by discussing the critical theories that provide the lenses for our analysis as well as the body of scholarship to which this study contributes. Next we will briefly discuss our methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology followed by a more detailed discussion of the pedagogical framework, autoethnography of praxis.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

PROBLEMATIZING ALLIES AND WHITENESS

As our participants prepared to engage in direct actions in the community, questions arose which problematized their whiteness and roles as allies. In particular, our participants experienced moments when their whiteness was challenged by colleagues of color, which focused their gaze on their role in and contribution to systems of white supremacy. Thus, although we acknowledge the importance of an intersectional lens, we intentionally centered whiteness in our reflections in an effort to become more than benevolent allies for racial justice and move toward becoming teacher accomplices. To do this, we turned to critical race and critical whiteness theories to provide a framework for this project.

Critical race theorists offer an important framework for understanding how racism is a permanent and material fabric in our institutions and society that has existed since the country's inception (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2004). Critical whiteness studies builds on the tenets of critical race theory, demanding that we center whiteness in order to challenge white

supremacy in our schools, communities, and lives. In our teacher education programs, critical whiteness studies challenges us to focus our gaze on how white hegemony infiltrates white pre-service teachers' lives as well as the lens through which they experience the world (Matias, Viesca, Garrison-Wade, Tnadon, & Galind, 2014). By doing so, we reject the normalization of whiteness and push ourselves and our students to interrogate our own ways of understanding and experiencing race, within our communities and education systems.

As more students, teachers, and community activists self-identify as allies in social justice movements, there is a need to interrogate this role. The term ally has largely been used to define those who are part of a privileged group committed to supporting members of historically oppressed communities (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2013). However, some scholars and community activists argue that the ally paradigm positions people of color as in need of assistance and whites as providing the support, maintaining hegemonic systems (Indigenous Action Media, 2015). For example, some self-identified allies may wear symbols of support or share posts on social media but fail to participate in any direct action. At times, allies may set their own agenda, choosing which issues to prioritize, or may participate in action only when invited by people of color. Similar to the white savior position, this form of white allyship is also described as “dysfunctional rescuing” (Batts, 2002). Dysfunctional rescuing occurs when a white person perceives a person of color as unable to help themselves and requiring the help of the oppressor. If the goal is to truly undo white supremacy, then this approach fails as it continues to maintain systems of power and oppression as white individuals continue to work solely from the position of superiority.

An accomplice, however, would “seek ways to leverage resources and material support...to further liberation struggles. An...accomplice would strategize with, not for, and not be afraid to pick up a hammer” (Indigenous Action Media, 2015, p. 40). At its core, what differentiates an accomplice from an ally is risk (Powell & Kelly, 2017). Acknowledging that people of color embody risk in their daily lives, teacher accomplices would take a range of risks to demand justice for historically marginalized communities. The risks that accomplice

teachers would take depends on their particular context. Teacher accomplices would critically reflect on intentions, center privilege and whiteness in their reflections, leverage resources when possible, risk vulnerability, learn when to listen and when to speak up, and build genuine coalitions with people of color (Powell & Kelly, 2017). To be clear, the work of an accomplice is complicated and messy. There will undoubtedly be missteps, and building trust in this moment is difficult. The challenge to establishing meaningful coalition is in part rooted in the practices of white liberal allies, who appear critical of racism, but are unwilling to truly give up power and recognize their location in our systems of white supremacy.

In his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (1963), Martin Luther King Jr. urged the “white moderate” to acknowledge how they have been complicit in systemic racism:

First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Council or the Ku Klux Klan, but the white moderate who is more devoted to order than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice... (pp. 9-10)

It remains true today that white nationalists aren’t alone responsible for forwarding systems of oppression. Rather it is the white allies who claim to be anti-racist, but fail to engage in anti-racist work that demands risk, vulnerability, and giving up power. This is particularly evident in the classroom space, where white teachers who claim to care about their students of color fail to embody the work of an accomplice (Sinclair & Powell, 2018).

REFLECTION AND AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

In thinking about how to support our students in becoming accomplices, we considered how reflection has been used in pre-service teacher education and began imagining how we might build on this tradition with the specific aim of embodying the role of an accomplice educator for social justice. Reflection has been central

to teacher education programs since the 1980s when Donald Schön (1983) as well as Kenneth Zeichner and Daniel Liston (1987), among others, argued for the importance of professionals thinking about and questioning their work. Over the past few decades, pre-service teacher reflection has taken on various forms, ranging from simply thinking about an event toward critically unpacking a problem (Loughran, 2002).

The Oxford English Dictionary (2009) defines reflection as “the process or faculty by which the mind observes and examines its own experiences and emotions; intelligent self-awareness, introspection” (II. 7 c). This definition of reflection emphasizes “self awareness” and individual perspectives of experience without considering the larger social structures within which the person is acting. Teachers implementing this form of reflective practice are in danger of becoming self-serving and unable to challenge hegemonic systems. While there are certainly benefits to simply reflecting on one’s pedagogical practices, a failure to complete the cycle with responsive action turns reflection into merely a rhetorical exercise. Without acknowledging the systems that influence one’s actions the potential for critical change diminishes. Reflection becomes only about the individual and lacks context in and conversation with the world.

Some scholars have challenged this self-focused view of reflection by offering models for more rigorous and critical reflection; these include problems in practice (Lampert, 2002), culturally responsive reflection (Gay & Kirkland, 2003), and critical reflections of whiteness (Matias et. al., 2014). Julie Pennington (2007) uses autoethnography as a pedagogical tool to help her pre-service teachers interrogate their whiteness; she argues for the value in asking pre-service teachers to engage in narrative storytelling as a means to examine the role of race in their work as teachers.

We, too, see the value of autoethnography as a critical pedagogical tool that holds a unique space for the work of interrogating race, privilege, and structural inequities in education. A process more commonly used as a method of qualitative inquiry, autoethnography as a critical pedagogical tool offers a means to integrate deep analysis with reflection. This occurs by placing reflective narratives in

conversation with larger systems of privilege and discrimination, other thinkers and texts, and the students themselves. Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p. 733). What makes autoethnography unique to other forms of ethnography and personal narratives or memoir is the positioning and analysis of the self in social and political contexts. Moreover, autoethnography invites others into our stories to take on new forms and meanings (Ellis, 1993).

What autoethnography brings to reflection is active inquiry and rigor. Because it is a research methodology, it invites an individual to engage her story with a critical and analytical eye, to examine how this story reads into and through other stories and systems. While autoethnography is a study of oneself, it is also a study that puts one in dialogue with others. Through autoethnography, our pre-service teachers explore, critique, and problematize their journeys toward becoming white allies in the fight for racial justice.

WRITING, REFLECTION, AND PRAXIS

Writing is a valuable tool in the sort of critical and analytic self-inquiry demanded by autoethnography. Max Van Manen (1990) describes writing and re-writing as key to making sense of experiences; it is the process of re-visiting and re-questioning through writing that leads to a description and interpretation of experience. Van Manen writes:

Writing fixes thought on paper. It externalizes what in some sense is internal; it distances us from our immediate lived involvements with the things of our world. As we stare at the paper, and stare at what we have written, our objectified thinking now stares back at us. Thus writing creates the reflective cognitive stance that generally characterizes the theoretic attitude in the social sciences. (p. 125)

Bleich’s (1978) subjective epistemology integrates the study of response and interpretation through examining previously written essay responses; the analysis is of both the base text and of the texts readers write in response to their reading. The physicality of this act

is important both in creating a text/document that can stand alongside the original text as equally legitimate and in being able to see the evolution of one's meaning-making process. It makes visible the spirals of reading and re-reading, writing and re-writing.

Both Van Manen and Bleich ask inquirers to engage in dialogue with their own texts (texts including written texts, transcripts of conversations, and memories and interpretations of experiences). Paulo Freire (2006) argued for the centrality of dialogue to human existence: "To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it...no one can say a true word alone—nor can she say it *for* another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words. Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (p. 88, original emphasis). Freire is clearly referring to the process of becoming, a process central to our project: "If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings" (p. 88). We become ourselves by claiming the word for ourselves, a process facilitated and mediated by interaction with others. To become accomplices, educators must take ownership of their thinking, evolution, and action.

Freire emphasized the fact that this naming of the world cannot occur through a simple exchange or the depositing of meaning from one person to another; becoming can only occur through praxis. Praxis—"reflection and action upon the world to change it" (p. 51)—is useful in considering how reflection and action are intertwined, as inseparable halves of a whole. To ignore action turns reflection into "an empty word, one which cannot denounce the world" (p. 87). Failure to reflect results in "activism. The latter—action for action's sake—negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible" (p. 88). Thus, praxis offers a corrective to both passive reflection and allyship.

Engaging in dialogue and praxis is central to the work of critical pedagogy. Our research builds upon the frameworks of critical pedagogy that urge educators to engage students in the practice of questioning and critique that disrupts systems of hegemony (Freire, 2006; Giroux, 1988) while moving toward a pedagogical practice of writing and reflection that centers race and whiteness. Critical

pedagogy traditionally emphasizes the transforming of oppressive systems through the work of the oppressed engaging in critical dialogue, action, and ultimately revolution. However, working with the oppressor to genuinely seek this transformation and join the revolution may not fit the traditional critical pedagogy paradigm (Allen, 2004; Allen & Rosatto, 2009). Critical pedagogy with white students requires an intention that moves beyond simply recognizing discrimination toward actually studying and naming their identity as oppressor. Allen and Rosatto (2009) propose a critical pedagogy for the “oppressor student” (p. 174). They suggest white (oppressor) students must develop a language to conceptualize systems of oppression, acknowledge their own location in that system, and participate in direct action.

In this paper, we describe a critical pedagogical framework we are developing, autoethnography as praxis, which holds a space for the oppressor student to grapple with their identity, critiquing both themselves and the political systems in which they orbit.

METHODOLOGY

Madeleine Grumet (2008) argues that curriculum research “involve[s] not only the social and ethical issues of gathering data but the relational character of thought and understanding” (p. 137). To account for this, she suggests that curriculum research must engage three strands of study of the curriculum object: through its cultural history, as an event, and in the perspective of the researcher. Our study explores the curriculum object (or phenomenon) of *becoming teacher-accomplices*. We used hermeneutic phenomenology as our analytic method.

Like other phenomenological inquiry, hermeneutic phenomenology is interested in lived experience; in this case, we are interested in the lived experiences (the curriculum event) of our participants as they wrestle with becoming teacher accomplices. We also consider the lived experiences and perspectives of ourselves as teacher educators and researchers as we support our students on their journeys while continuing on our own; Grumet notes that the researcher’s consciousness has also been shaped by curriculum and schooling

and thus must be acknowledged during the process. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows us to name these perspectives, bracket them from our observations of our participants, and use them to build interpretation of the phenomenon. Finally, we acknowledge that the phenomenon of becoming teacher-accomplices exists within a cultural history, a history we outline in brief in our theoretical framework above.

Van Manen (1990; 2014) describes hermeneutic phenomenology as inquiry through writing and re-writing. In this process, the researcher considers multiple forms of data, including her prior assumptions and knowledge. Through re-writing, the researcher arrives at some understanding of the phenomenon of interest.

OUR QUESTION

Van Manen (1990) writes that the phenomenological research question differs from the traditional research question in that it does not seek to lead to definitive answers; instead, the phenomenological research question “teaches the reader to wonder, to question deeply the very thing that is being questioned by the question” (p. 44). The overarching question guiding this inquiry—“**How can white teachers become accomplices for social justice?**”—is one that we have been wrestling with in our work as teacher educators for some time. How do we as white, cis-gender female, middle-class professors both embody the role of an accomplice within and beyond the walls of the academy while supporting our students to do the same?

Recognizing that supporting educators’ capacity for the critical reflection that leads to praxis is a first step, we began our inquiry with these questions:

1. How can autoethnographies hold space for pre-service teachers to engage in critical and iterative reflections that examine self and social institutions?
2. How can pre-service teachers engage in dialogue with their own texts and their communities of practice to take ownership of their thinking?

Our participants were three white, female, pre-service teachers attending a full-time undergraduate education program at a regional state university in a mid-sized New England city. The three participants were raised and currently reside in suburbs outside the city. All three were participants in an extracurricular urban education program, which focuses on supporting pre-service teachers who are interested in teaching for social justice; we are the faculty mentors for the group. This project emerged out of conversations with the participants. Like us, they were wrestling with how to become accomplices as white (future) teachers. Out of this interest, they agreed to participate in writing and conversation to probe more deeply.

DATA COLLECTION

Following Grumet's model, data for this inquiry comes from three intertwined elements: the writings and conversations our participants shared during the project (study of curriculum phenomenon as event), the theories described above in our theoretical framework (study of curriculum phenomenon as cultural object), and our experiences and perspectives as teacher-educators and researchers (study of the curriculum phenomenon in the perspective of the researcher). We invited our participants to engage in autoethnography to examine their journey thus far towards becoming teacher-accomplices and to reveal questions and areas for further growth.

Over a six-month period, our participants met monthly to engage in autoethnographic dialogue and share their writings. We asked participants to re-examine some of their prior writings, from the past four years, which addressed why they wanted to teach. Following David Bleich's (1978) suggestion to invite students to examine their own writing as a text worthy of further analysis, we asked them to look for themes in their prior writing and to consider how their thinking had or had not evolved. Through discussions of their process and drafts, we also encouraged them to identify what had triggered changes in thinking and spaces where they still had uncertainties. Those, in turn, became the next layer of analysis. The participants' autoethnographic inquiry was moved by the following questions, which were co-constructed with our participants:

1. How would you tell the story of your journey toward becoming an urban educator?
2. What does being an ally mean to you? How did you learn this? What does it mean to be a white educator fighting for social justice?
3. What were some pivotal moments that emphasize your journey?
4. What are enduring questions related to becoming an ally that remain for you?

In addition to sharing their autoethnographies with one another, they also decided to share them publicly with other educators and scholars at a regional meeting. This sharing of their narratives and the ensuing conversation led to yet another layer of growth and reflection moving them in the process of becoming accomplices.

DATA ANALYSIS

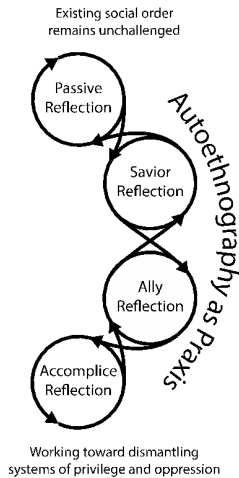
The task of the researcher in hermeneutic phenomenology is not to generate generalizable data or even a depiction of a particular experience as in ethnography or a case study; rather, it is “*to construct a possible interpretation of the nature of a certain human experience*” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 41, original emphasis). This possible interpretation in turn can provide the groundwork for further investigation.

We analyzed our participants’ written drafts of their autoethnographies as well as their conversations through a process of writing, reading, re-writing, and dialogue with one another. Through multiple iterations of this process, we discovered that the phenomenon of becoming teacher accomplices that our participants were experiencing could be captured in a pedagogical framework that we are naming *autoethnography as praxis*. This framework emerged as we met to discuss and write through the data from our participants, taking also into account our knowledge and experiences as well as the work of theorists who inform our understandings of the data.

CONCEPTUALIZING AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS PRAXIS

We imagine autoethnography as praxis as an iterative process of examining one's thoughts and writing in conversation with self and others, which moves participants beyond mere reflection to critical action. We offer it as a possible pedagogical solution for engaging white pre-service teachers in the difficult work of becoming accomplices by supporting their process of adopting a sensibility of ongoing inquiry.

Figure 1. *Cycles of Reflection Through Autoethnography as Praxis*



We conceptualize reflection for social justice for the oppressor as operating in four cycles (see Figure 1): passive reflection, savior reflection, ally reflection, and accomplice reflection. Each subsequent cycle represents an increased awareness of self, privilege, oppression, and action that is more intentionally and thoughtfully directed. Autoethnography as praxis facilitates movement towards accomplice reflections, the space where praxis and disruption of hegemonic systems are possible. We do not imagine these cycles as one way gates or planes; that is, students might find themselves operating in one cycle for a particular issue and on another for a different matter. There

is also the possibility of backwards movement; we recognize that this work is not tidy or uni-directional.

Before describing the process that enables movement through cycles of reflection for social justice (autoethnography as praxis), we first must define each cycle. We have chosen cycles as our model to indicate that reflection, even at its most basic, is necessarily an ongoing process and can either perpetuate the existing social order or disrupt it. Below we provide a brief description of each cycle in this process as well as a general example of what that reflection might look like. Table 1 summarizes these cycles.

CYCLES OF REFLECTION

Cycle 1: Passive Reflection.

This cycle represents the most basic reflective practice for educators. It examines thoughts and practice without acknowledging the social realm and therefore provides limited possibility for change. Reflection here is Freire's "empty word."

Example of Passive Reflection: *"I'm frustrated that my students' parents never come in for conferences. It's like they don't even care about their kids."*

Cycle 2: Reflection as Savior.

In this cycle, there is at least some acknowledgement of structural inequalities but little, if any, interrogation of one's own role in these inequalities; there is no attempt to build partnerships or acknowledge the contributions of marginalized groups. Savior reflections position marginalized groups as the other and the educator as the solution to structural inequalities.

Example of Reflection as Savior: *"I'm frustrated that my students' parents never come in for conferences. I just want to show them how to help their children succeed."*

Cycle 3: Reflection as Ally.

In this cycle, educators are beginning to acknowledge systems of oppression and their role in those systems. There's a desire to effect change, but this desire may still be driven by self-interest. There is a lack of authentic partnering with other stakeholders. Educators in this

cycle likely do not engage in personal risk taking in their efforts to change the system.

Example of Reflection as Ally: *“I’m frustrated that my students’ parents never come in for conferences. I get that the parents might have had their own struggles with schooling, but I want to partner with them. I think the answer might be offering alternative times to accommodate parents’ work schedules.”*

Cycle 4: Reflection as Accomplice.

This cycle offers space for reflectors to engage in critical action that disrupts systems of oppression. Educators who engage in reflection as accomplices acknowledge their identity as oppressor and problematize their participation in these systems while seeking to build coalitions with all stakeholders. There is also a recognition that learning is always ongoing (the educator does not have all the answers) and that risk taking is necessary for true change to occur.

Example of Reflection as Accomplice: *“I’m frustrated that our school is not working in coalition with families. I wonder how I’m responsible for these tensions. Maybe I can work to change the way our school positions families as uninvolved and problematic. I want to work with our community to rethink what we’re doing.”*

Table 1. *Characteristics of Cycles of Reflection*

<i>Passive Reflection</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reflection on practice does not acknowledge systems of privilege and oppression. ● No action taken to intentionally disrupt hegemonic systems.
<i>Savior Reflection</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Some awareness of inequality but no interrogation of hegemonic systems or their own role in the system. ● Some action taken, but sees themselves as a solution.
<i>Ally Reflection</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Developing awareness of systems of privilege and oppression and some interrogation of those systems. ● Some actions taken, but not taking risk, potentially acting within own agenda.
<i>Accomplice Reflection</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Deepening awareness and interrogation of systems of privilege and oppression. Awareness that reflection is iterative process. ● Identifies self as oppressor. ● Direct actions taken with awareness of positionality, risk, and the need for building coalition.

BECOMING ACCOMPLICES THROUGH AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS PRAXIS

Just as Freire (2006) argues that one cannot name the word for another, we acknowledge that we cannot, alone, transform our students into accomplices. Rather, our students' process of becoming accomplices must be driven by their own exploration and critical process. However, we have a unique opportunity to facilitate this reflective process in our teacher education classrooms. This requires us to move through the aforementioned cycles ourselves and explicitly model this process in dialogue with our students.

Part of the motivation to develop our framework of autoethnography as praxis was to challenge ourselves to continue becoming through a cycle of reflection and action. While it is easy to fall into a pattern of wise mentor—"I, too, have been in your shoes and found my way through..."—we have pushed against that by working to be transparent about our current struggles: What does it mean to be a white scholar/educator working toward racial justice? How do we as teacher educators engage our students in challenging and uncomfortable conversations? What does it look like to take risks as an accomplice in teacher education?

To recognize that these questions are enduring, we chose to describe this process as "becoming," emphasizing that this process is necessarily iterative and without finality; we are always engaging, always learning. Autoethnography as praxis demands reflection on action and action on reflection; there can be no final destination. While our participants are not yet engaging in direct action in the classroom, they are developing reflective sensibilities that are requisite for praxis; becoming is not a static moment.

To illustrate briefly what autoethnography as praxis might look like for a pre-service teacher engaged in this inquiry, we will share part of our student Catherine's* writing. The following is excerpted from the personal narrative Catherine constructed out of her examination of her prior writings and her experiences over the last few years of her teacher education program. Also important to constructing this

2 Participants' names are pseudonyms.

narrative were the conversations that we had with Catherine and the other students engaged in this work in which they shared their initial analysis of their writings and thoughts.

In one example of movement between the cycles of reflection, Catherine shares an uncomfortable moment she had after attending a national civil rights pedagogy training last summer. Eager to discuss what she had learned, she engaged her husband's best friend, a Black man, in conversation about her experience at the training. Catherine describes feeling taken aback when this encounter did not go as expected:

He was not at all inclined to listen to what I had to say, nor did he want to hear my explanation about why I felt like I belonged there. His main gripe with me was that I don't know the history, I'm not one of his people, and there's just no way that I can ever presume to understand or feel the things that they've felt... He told me that I could never presume to be able to teach or understand those things because I was never a real part of that culture, and that I need to respect that because it's true.

Catherine's initial response is to center herself in the situation, to focus on her desire to help and the fact that she felt rebuffed. In this moment, her friend of color is challenging her place, as a white woman, in the movement for racial justice. This fits in with the savior reflection cycle, a desire to help that is ultimately self-serving. However, her acknowledgment that "she needs to respect" the truth of her friend's perspective suggests she is beginning to problematize her perspective and move toward another cycle of reflection.

Because Catherine was engaging in an iterative cycle of reflection in constructing her narrative, she was able to take another pass at understanding this interaction and move towards a more critical reflection as illustrated in her next comments:

My perspective is a little different: I want to know, so why can't he teach me? If you think I don't know enough about the things that are important to you, then teach me. I want to know, I want to help, I want to do all those things that matter, but from the position of an ally, not a victim or a martyr or ever appearing

pretentious in any kind of way. However, would this mindset leave the responsibility in the hands of black Americans to teach white Americans how we should think and behave about this subject? That wouldn't be fair.

As she thinks through what motivated her initial response, Catherine is able to shift away from her self-interests and put her experience into dialogue with existing systems of oppression by questioning her desire to take up the ally role. She recognizes the complexities and is willing to problematize her initial impulse:

His wife later apologized to me when she heard about our little chat, and I had to tell her that I didn't want an apology, but that I just felt really taken aback because I never really thought about how a person of color might feel when a person like me is presuming to know things or wants to know things about the culture and what's important to it without ever having truly been a part of it. He was just having a really hard time understanding that, and respecting my choice in trying to be an ally during this movement at a time in our country when things are confusing and scary and uncomfortable for most of us.

Catherine's final statement above illustrates the messy, non-linear nature of this process. Even as she challenges herself to rethink her perspectives, she struggles with figuring out what it means to be white and work in coalition with people of color. Catherine's words demonstrate how autoethnography as praxis is not simply about analysis of a single experience; rather it is about adopting an awareness of one's metacognitive processes and intentionally engaging in iterative thinking while acknowledging the complicated nature of this work. In reflecting on the experience described above, Catherine states:

...one of the most important things that we need to remember is that the uncomfortable situations that we sometimes come across help form us into the people that we need to become.

Catherine's words show that she knows she is still evolving and still has much to learn, but also show that she is synthesizing her prior experiences to facilitate that learning; she is engaging in

autoethnography as praxis. Acknowledging the ongoing nature of this process of becoming an accomplice, Catherine ends her narrative with a question: “How do I, as a young, white, female teacher reach my students in a way that will form bonds and relationships that are genuine without appearing insincere?”

THE CHALLENGE OF DIRECT ACTION IN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS PRAXIS

American anarchist and feminist Voltairine De Cleyre theorized the role of direct action in social movements at the turn of the twentieth century. Cleyre (1914) describes direct action as asserting one’s right directly without appealing to representatives or authorities to accomplish social change. It is commonly seen in the form of protest and resistance in contemporary social justice movements.

We argue that direct action can occur in the public classroom. Teachers taking an ethical stance to resist oppressive practices and implement anti-racist curriculum (either independently or in collaboration with colleagues) without waiting for those in power to approve are engaging in direct action. We see an accomplice as one who is willing to take these risks in the classroom space. As a pedagogical approach, autoethnography as praxis is aimed at helping pre-service teachers reclaim their power to make direct change in their future classrooms without permission.

Given that our participants were not yet employed in the classroom, this analysis considers how autoethnography can provide a space for our students to challenge themselves and each other as they *move toward* the work of an accomplice. We acknowledge that their reflections did not unpack direct action in the classroom; however, we could see all three participants begin to grapple with the messiness of race work as white teachers and consider what direct action may look like. Autoethnography provides space for them to wrestle with and develop intention in their thinking, a form of praxis and necessary precursor to direct action. To further illustrate this, we share below some of Samantha and Heather’s autoethnographies.

Wanting to move from reflection to action, Samantha “put [her] money where [her] mouth was” and spearheaded a fundraiser to

purchase and donate to a local school brand new, high-quality books representing the perspectives of children of color.

We received nothing but support and had opportunities to connect and talk to many people in the community. One man came up to us and said, “I will gladly donate to buy books if that means these babies will have something else to do besides for drugs.” That is when it all became so real. It was more than doing something nice for the present, it was making a difference for these students’ futures. We were on a mission to show how love for education can ignite any flame to grow out of a poor situation.

Samantha’s narrative shows the bi-directional nature of this work. Even as she articulates action in the community—“to give these students culturally relevant books where they would have a chance to see themselves represented in literature”—she uses phrasing that suggests ally work or even saviorism—“to see the pure joy in the students’ eyes was amazing” and “we were on a mission to show how love for education can ignite any flame to grow out of a poor situation.”

Like Samantha, Heather began to draw a distinction between her identity as white savior and accomplice by considering her positioning and intentionality in her actions as an educator:

[I want] to be someone who knows better than to say I’m going to “save” this kid or that kid or this school full of kids as I said in high school. White saviors do charity work, real allies educate themselves about the injustices and then perform surgery—we advocate, we educate, we create paths to the opportunities and resources, and we give our students the quality education that they are often shorted...I didn’t realize that I was viewing these children and schools as “charities” or “victims” but as much as I wish I wasn’t, I need to confess that I was. I realized I need to center myself as a “white ally”—rather than that cringeworthy “white savior.”

Also like Samantha, Heather is still working through what it means to engage fully in accomplice action; although she recognizes that her

prior framing of children as needing “saving” was the act of a white savior, she still uses the language “center myself” as she thinks about what it looks like to be an accomplice.

Both Heather and Samantha demonstrate in their reflections the act of *becoming* accomplices. Key in becoming is questioning, working through discomfort, and cycling through reflection to greater awareness. Accomplices will still make mistakes and at times act on their own agenda, but they are able to notice and problematize their own actions, as well as remain open to being *called in*. As Heather says,

We need to approach the allyship with humility and know that we cannot always be perfect in all situations. We can't be afraid to make mistakes or receive feedback on our attempts at change. We can't always know what to do in every situation, but it is better to make an attempt that doesn't go so well than to sit back as a bystander and watch inequality build up in front of us.

Samantha's reflection demonstrates tension as she weaves between savior, ally, and accomplice reflection, questioning her intentions and the unintended consequences of her action (the book drive):

However, at the same time, I question myself: “What gives me the right to determine that these inner city schools need new books and that the kids don't have many other means to get the books?” I know that what we are doing is right and it truly has been an amazing experience, but knowing that there are people of color who frown upon this and call it an act of being a white savior makes me very insecure and often paranoid. That in it of itself, me saying it was an amazing experience makes me insecure at the fact that I can deem that as an amazing experience, an example of privilege. Sure the kids may not have thought anything of the donations, however, what did the other teachers of color and the families think when seeing the pictures taken by the school?

Samantha is beginning to question whether this work is truly in coalition with the community she is serving; she might be simply forwarding her own agenda—“I know that what we are doing is

right”—positioning children as requiring her help and needing saving from poverty and drugs. She also wrestles with both recognizing her privilege and feeling discomfort at being called on her privilege—being called “a white savior makes me very insecure and often paranoid.”

Heather also works to unpack being white in the fight for racial justice and echoes some of the same concerns Catherine shared about her responsibility to self-educate:

It’s hard to know my place in this movement. It’s important to know that it is not my place to take over on my own and I can’t make it my own fight. It is my job to stand by the others in this fight and show them that I am educated on the history, the importance, the value of everyone’s feelings and motivations. I realized that it is no one else’s job but my own to educate myself. It’s not my students’ job, my colleagues’ job, or the job of my friends of color to educate me...I need to educate myself.

Being an accomplice means troubling the ways in which one participates in direct actions. Accomplices navigate the liminal space between taking initiative to act in ways that disrupt white supremacy and acting within their own agenda while disregarding the demands and needs of communities of color. This is where missteps are likely to occur, but Heather acknowledges that while she needs to remain cognizant of this tension, she cannot allow it to immobilize her:

It’s hard when to know if we should take a stance or not, because we don’t want to step on anyone’s toes or come across as being too controlling on an issue that people might argue doesn’t really belong to us—but the responsibility to fix these problems belongs to all of us. I can’t be afraid and hold back, especially now when I see the pain and fear in not only student’s eyes, but some of my closest peers eyes after this election.

Even as she struggles to balance her will to act with the desires of those she seeks to stand in solidarity with, Heather owns her responsibility as the oppressor to dismantle white supremacy:

This question of when to act and at what extreme is really what puzzles me the most. How do I know when to sit back as support

for an issue? Or when I need to use everything I know to be an advocate both verbally and physically? Or should I just use my voice and not be too present? The degree of advocacy that is necessary and required in each situation is difficult. I struggle with if I should be afraid to be too much of an advocate or to be too timid of an advocate.

Catherine, Heather, and Samantha all engage in the sort of critical reflection that prepares them for direct actions. We view these critical sensibilities they are developing through their autoethnographies as the first step in praxis. They are becoming accomplices.

CONCLUSION

Like Catherine, Samantha, and Heather, we continue to have questions about our process of becoming accomplices, questions that we do not hope to definitively answer, but rather that we aim to continue to press as our understandings grow and evolve. In order to implement this pedagogical method, teacher educators must move through this process themselves, adapting the reflective sensibilities required by autoethnographies of praxis. Moreover, beyond simply moving through the cycles of reflection, the teacher educator should explicitly unpack their ethical dilemmas in dialogue with their students. This involves risking vulnerability, as well as the traditional image of “teacher as authority,” as the educator explores their own tensions aloud with their students. In sharing our own concerns about our role as teacher educators, we have sought to do just this.

While we believe that autoethnography as praxis holds exciting possibilities as a pedagogical strategy to engage students and pre-service teacher educators moving towards becoming accomplices, we recognize the limitations to this initial study. Here we were not restricted by the bounds of an existing course or program, allowing us more flexibility in changing the process to meet evolving student needs and interests. More significantly, our participants came to us eager to become accomplices and open to critical self-reflection; they were willing to problematize their whiteness and privilege and engage in discussions of other difficult topics. We recognize that in a classroom setting, this approach will likely be met with

resistance by some students as will discussions of race, privilege, and structural inequalities. We also acknowledge that this process may be experienced differently when implemented in a classroom that consists of both white students and students of color. Still we are eager to see how it can allow us to more formally engage pre-service educators in the deep and constructive reflection that is necessary to create accomplices for racial justice. We look forward to exploring these complexities through the next stage of our inquiry as we bring this pedagogy into our formal coursework with pre-service teachers.

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