

The 20 Minute Talk
Anti-Racism Vodcast Series
Dr. Tiffany Kyser, Dr. Nickie Coomer
with Dr. Chrishirella Warthen-Sutton,
Dr. Courtney Reed Jenkins &
Dr. Rev Hillstrom

TRANSCRIPTION

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: Hello and welcome to the Region 3 Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center, Anti-racism vodcast series entitled "The 20 Minute Talk". The region three, Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center, which I'll refer to moving forward, as a MAP center. Our anti-racism vodcast series, aims to advance anti-racist efforts and support anti-racist activity within school communities across and beyond the map centers 13 state region with a succinct 20-minute discussion led by antiracist practitioners.

Dr. Nickie Coomer: Thanks Tiffany, this anti-racism vodcast episode is focused on, hope, healing and harmony for anti-racism. Specifically, we'll be talking today about how we define harmony and who gets to define harmony as well as the cost of unity from historically and systemically marginalized people.

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: So, we are thrilled to have this final episode of our first season of the anti-racism vodcast Series. As you all now may be very well aware, but some of you may be new to the vodcast series, my name is Tiffany Kyser and I serve as the Associate Director of Engagement and Partnerships for the MAP center. And I have the distinct privilege of serving as a co-host along with Nickie Coomer. Who is a doctoral research assistant with the MAP Center.

Dr. Nickie Coomer: We're also thrilled to have three guests with us here today to lead our conversation. Those joined with us are Dr. Chrishirella Warthen-Sutton, who is the director of Family and Community Engagement for Racine Unified School District, as well as an Assistant Professor of Education at Concordia University in Wisconsin. We also have with us Courtney Reed Jenkins, who is the Assistant Director of Special Education for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. And finally, Dr. Rev Hillstrom, the Director of Education Equity for Osseo area schools in Minnesota. Thank you all so much for being with us today.

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Dr. Tiffany Kyser: So, I want to jump right in because I know this is going to be a rich conversation and want to ask Chrishirella to kick us off with the first reflective prompt of: How do you define hope, healing and harmony within the context of pursuing racial justice in schools? So, we'll have Chrishirella kick us off and then Rev and Courtney to extend any thoughts.

Dr. Chrishirella Warthen-Sutton: Thank you, Tiffany and I think it's important for me to say that I enter this conversation with the perspective and the narrative of a female of African descent. You know, a black child who was educated in public schools, whose parents were college educated, who are college educated at historically black colleges. And, you know, and then when I think about the ancestral connection, just as relates to help healing and harmony, it's important for me to really interject them into this conversation because all of those perspectives, their hopes and dreams, influences how I view these concepts and try to digest them. Because they have some ambiguity depending upon your perspective and your narrative. So, we know the basic definition of hope when we think about the historical context that goes along with hope, healing and harmony. Hope looks different depending on your narrative and your experience and your racial autobiography around this. So, you know, hope, you know this desire to always want, to want something, because you see a promise at the other end. The healing suggests some level of restoration. Harmony, this piece of working together, living in peace. So again, when I think about my life conditioning around understanding these terms in my experiences, what strikes me is, I have to lean on Ruby Bridges in 1960 at six years old. And what that looked like for her to be six and just want to be educated. And the trauma that surrounded her just to exercise that right of being educated. As I begin to even read Kendi's work, *How to Be an Antiracist* on the inside cover, the quote, "The only way to undo racism is to consistently identify, describe it and dismantle it." And that's the way that you can begin to dismantle it. So, I know those terms, I really struggle with that in preparation for this conversation because of, I think there's promise. I do believe there's a level of healing. I do think that there could be harmony, but for whom?

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Dr. Tiffany Kyser: I want to open it up to Courtney and Rev, if you have any responses to that or anything to build. And then also as we segue, Courtney, to the second prompt that you're going to have to kind of lead us with sort of wrestling with some ideas and your thoughts around this idea is, is the pursuit of hope, healing, and harmony for anti-racist different pending one's race. So, I want to have space, Courtney, for you and Rev to respond or build on anything Chrishirella said and then Courtney, you can lead us through the second prompt.

Dr. Rev Hillstrom: Chrishirella, I want to thank you for your story and for your humanity. Seeing you on some of those other MAP Center conversations and I was like, oh, that's a person to be reckoned with it. That's clear. That's true. So, thank you for giving to me today.

Dr. Chrishirella Warthen-Sutton: Thank you.

Dr. Rev Hillstrom: I was left with what I heard you talking about harmony for who? And, and as a lifetime musician, I went to the metaphor of harmony. And I'm wondering if you want to maybe expound on this or even add some thoughts. But harmony is something that's added to a melody, historically. And I'm wondering who's singing the melody and who's got to harmonize? And it still feels like so often that this harmonization is, is this still apply and ourselves to somebody else's melody? And I'm wondering when your melody, when your story, my story and others get to be the melody and what that would look like and how it might lead to some of the open and the healing that we're talking about. What would it look like for a different melody to be sang instead of me always harmonizing? And one thing I do know as a musician, it's really hard to harmonize with somebody who is out of key or not in pitch. So, I'm just curious again, any thoughts around that?

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Dr. Chrishirella Warthen-Sutton: I think, what comes to mind is this phrasing of "Moving to the beat of your drummer" you know? And when I think, and not too deep into this, but even, you know, we think, when I think about African ancestry in, with the drums, the calling of the drums, and how those beats connect. There's some level of spiritual connection that comes from that, that helps to sustain one to gravitate towards that, that sense of "it's going to be okay", regardless of what is going to be okay. And, and, and I think even though others may not hear, you know, or tune into it, there still has to be a level of, you know, that, that melody still helps folks to continue to march on. If you think about the Civil Rights Movement, you think about, you know, I think about Fannie Lou Hamer and it's just the egregious things that were done to her. She had to have some level of, you know, that there was a drummer. She had her own drumbeat, but she also was mirroring that beat with the people that she served. If that makes sense.

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: Courtney, I'll again, sort of turn it over to you to, to continue this conversation through this idea of how we pursue as education practitioners, as, as stakeholders in school communities, as parents and caregivers within school communities, or this idea of pursuing hope, healing and harmony. And it's the pursuit of that, of, of hope, healing and harmony towards and for anti-racism and anti-racist school communities, different pending one's race. So, this idea of positionality perhaps, or racial identity as we begin to pursue. Again, Courtney will kick us off and then Chrishirella and Rev, anything you want to build on to that.

Courtney Reed Jenkins: When I was reflecting on this question, I looked at the question in the context of the overall title of the series of these vodcasts, which is (re)claim, (re)vitalize, (re)imagine and (re)commit. And when I, and when I was reflecting on those words, I was thinking about the June Jordan poem that included "we are the ones we've been waiting for" which was picked up by Sweet Honey in the Rock and Alice Walker, Barack Obama and then more recently in Amanda Gorman's inauguration poem, which is, we, "there's always light if only

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were bright enough to be it." And I think about the question around, in the pursuit of hope, healing, and harmony for anti-racist school communities, is it different pending on one's race? And I would say the short answer is, yes. So, I'll speak specifically to what I feel called to do as a white educational equity leader and frame it around three specific ideas. One, my role as a white leader in dismantling white supremacy. Number two, my role as a white leader in centering and empowering the voices of people of color to define hope, healing, and harmony. And then thirdly, my responsibility as a white educational leader for my white colleagues and their growth. And when, I'll start with the ideas around dismantling white supremacy. And for that, the place I lean most heavily on when I think about that is Tema Okun's work and she relied, she articulated in an article entitled "White Supremacy Culture", some of the characteristics of white supremacy culture that show up in our organizations. And because they function as norms and behaviors, it creates two things, it creates a very strong sense of who belongs and who doesn't belong. And because these are often unspoken norms and values, it creates a culture that very actively pushes out folks of color and operates as a barrier. And so the characteristics that Tema shared in her article were things like perfectionism, sense of urgency, quantity over quality, defensiveness, worship of the written word, only one way, either or thinking, fear of open conflict, individualism, objectivity, and who has the right to be comforted in conversation and in conflict. And in the article, Tema offers what she calls antidotes or ways to interrupt or ways to re-frame those characteristics. So that the ways we operate or organize as an organization are better matched with our explicit values around equity and justice. And so I wanted to share very specifically some of the ways that I'm practicing how to disrupt white supremacy in my space, which is at the state education agency. And I want to offer three examples. The first is an invitation or offer to dissent in real time and not in meetings after the meeting. So, one of the ways that I see "midwest nice" play out in our educational agencies is that very rarely will dissent happen within an actual meeting but happen in a meeting after the meeting where decisions get made. And so, moving that space to the actual space of decision-making within the meeting by holding time on the agenda for active dissent and for actively establishing how

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we'll solve the decision without a meeting after the meeting. The second example that I want to share is that I believe it's fully within my power, whenever I get an invitation to lead or to work on something that I would call juicy or exciting or a challenge, a challenging growth, stretch assignment that I have full responsibility and I have full power to invite other folks to lead with that around me, to lead in that effort with me without asking. So as a white person, if I'm asked to do a presentation at a conference, and I'm the only white person, and I notice that, then I will co-present with someone, I'll share my time but not necessarily check back with someone. So, I'm disrupting the power hoarding structures that often exist within an organization. And then finally, I'm working, practicing on decentering the value or importance of the written word by calling in spoken word, by calling in stories. So, for example, the way I started today, for example, even when I have to do a written memo, which is sort of our protocol within the state agency, I'll start with a quote from a parent in the community that talks about why we need to be moving forward with it and focusing on anti-racism or a picture. So, pushing the boundaries of what is expected in small ways are ways of dismantling white supremacy. And to conclude this, I'll say that when I use the words, "I'm currently practicing", this is a practice. So, it means that there is a regular personal reflection on how I'm reinforcing white supremacy at DPI. That I'm identifying places where I need to grow and then I commit to that growth through practicing and holding myself accountable.

Dr. Chrishirella Warthen-Sutton: For Courtney, I definitely appreciated hearing the strategies in the bold approach, if I may, that you're taking to really recognize as a leader in a very bureaucratic setting to begin to dismantle some of that. Because I think as a state agency, I always view that that that was the model that does feel linked to our school districts to be able to build those structures themselves because it's greatly needed because a lot of the decisions that are made, are made without that, compass of we're going to make these decisions for those people will do this and we do it, but not looking around and, and bringing in the voices of those so that very perspective is there is always something that you hadn't thought of. And raising the

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awareness of those who definitely serve in those roles. That this is a way that you can begin to be more proactive in your, in your equity journey to begin to change a lot with that because I know the will is there but usually it takes a bold step, really stepping out you know, as they say really stepping out on faith to say, this is how, this is, this is the way I think we do need to do business if we are going to have some, um, if we're going to challenge those deficit ways that we have been operating.

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: Alright Rev, I'll ask you if, as we move to our final prompt and close out this particular episode of the vodcast, of how you think about this tension between those that are historically marginalized, being positioned to sort of temper their justifiable rage towards racial justice in the name of what some would call harmony or unity. I'm just interested in your thoughts on the ideals of what unity versus racial equity or racial justice is for you and in your particular school community context.

Dr. Rev Hillstrom: Well, I want to thank the learning that I have gotten from my colleagues on this call already. Just the, it was time well spent. Thank you for the medicine, thank you for the energy, the, just the wisdom that each of you provided me and it's changing my thoughts as I'm getting ready to speak here about this. But you use the term often in that question, if you will, Tiffany, and I will say it's never often, it's always. I rarely use absolute words. I don't know of, I have not lived that experience where as marginalized people, whether they're indigenous people of color or of the LGBTQ community or whatever scenario, able bodied, linguistic, I don't know of a time where are people who are facing injustice are asked to temper their experience. I don't know that I it's often asked to temper for the purpose of creating some form of harmony. But I think often it's, it's asked to be tempered because of just, honestly, control. And when I put that in context though, so as an American Indian and person who is of both indigenous and European descent, I can never remember a time where indigenous people are centered in the conversation around equity. I just don't know that, that as a system, I've experienced that where holistically that's true. There's moments of course. But the idea of tempering these things, I think

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really has a lot to do with this idea that we've heard about around fragility and how other people can interact with it. What I want to really say this about this work: Individual work is very different than systems work. And I've been given the three Cs of Change as a tool. And what I've learned and system changes: C1 is consciousness, C2 is conviction, and C3 is commitment. I can't take my consciousness and make it your commitment. That's not doable. We have to work through solidarity regardless of fragility or marginalization to create a collective consciousness, if we're going to change the system, that consciousness has to grow. And then once that consciousness has been developed, then we have to ask ourselves as an individual, where our moral imperatives land, and where our convictions are. And as those convictions move and change, then we're able to make commitments that create change. So, I'm not interested in tempering the work for the purpose of marginalizing groups further and silencing their voice. But I am very interested in measuring the level of consciousness, moving the level of conviction, so new commitments can be made in solidarity. The community is so fractured if for no other reason that colonialism has been the foundation of this country and those behaviors have been perpetuated throughout. All right? And so that isn't going to change until solidarity comes about.

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: Yea, the only thing I'll add before Nickie transitions to close us out is positioning solidarity as, as the focus because in the pursuit of anti-racism at the intersection of other forms of oppression, buoyed by dominant ideology is, we want to get to accompliceship and solidarity. So, I echo Chrishirella and Courtney's sentiments that pushing us to move toward solidarity requires us to take up the work necessary to realize solidarity. And so, I appreciate it even just the positioning solidarity as a unapologetic direction that we all must move. And it also, I think pursuing solidarity for me personally, as someone possesses multiple historically marginalized identities, but also identities where I am privileged, such as being temporarily abled allows me to extend and open up my learning and different types of ways where I need to concentrate on growing and learning and decentering in ways that I can de-center where I have more privileged identities and what does that mean to pursue solidarity in those spaces versus

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the other areas where I've been historically marginalized. And I think that creates, at least for me and my personal journey, a more robust trajectory that I must continue to commit to. But it also equips me in my role professionally to I think understand, recognize, value, and hopefully serve in a leadership role that is much more comprehensive and, or maybe not cogent, but comprehensive in considering the ways in which we all show up in this beautiful experience differently. And the ways in which because of intersectionality, some of us, our work is different than, as Courtney noted, the work if you have more dominant identity. So not conflating that the work is the same, that it's universal because it is not emphatically, right? but that we all have a very nuanced journey to understand how we get to solidarity, but we all must get to solidarity. I really appreciate it.

Dr. Nickie Coomer: We have new products on our website as of this recording, our weekly five-minute podcast series, "That's all Folx" is now published on our website at www.greatakesequity.org We have a second podcast available this week as well, published by one of our esteemed equity fellows, Dr. Terah Venzant Chambers who has coined the phrase Racial Opportunity Costs. In this podcast, she is talking with a panel of professors, parents, and students to discuss their experience with racial opportunity costs, particularly in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement. Last but not least, we have a newsletter written by graduate assistant Tammera Moore and edited by graduate assistant Erin Sanborn entitled, "Commit to Recommit: Making Equity Work Personal" in which they explore the need for educators to reflect on the personal impact of systemic inequity on students and re-establishing the need for transformative change. And if you are on social media, if you're on Facebook or Twitter, be sure to find us and follow us. You can find us on Facebook at the Great Lakes Equity Center/ Midwestern plains Equity Assistance Center, and on Twitter @Great Lakes EAC. If you would, please share with us what you learned today and don't forget to hashtag #mapequity.



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Dr. Tiffany Kyser: Thank you, Nickie. And again, I want to thank our special guests for their time, for their perspectives, for their insights. We deeply appreciate each of you and I just want to on behalf of the MAP Center say, thank you. Thank you. So, with that, we'll see everyone next time.

Dr. Nickie Coomer: This resource was brought to you by the Midwest and Plains Equity Center to find out about other Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance resources visit our website at www.greatlakesequity.org. To subscribe our publications, click on the "subscribe to our publication" link located on the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center website. The Midwest and Plains equity Assistance Center project of the Great Lakes Equity Center is funded by the United States Department of Education to provide technical assistance resources, and professional learning opportunities related to equity, civil rights, and systemic school reform throughout our 13 state region. The contents of this presentation were developed under a grant from the US Department of Education. However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the US Department of Education and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government. This product and its contents are provided to educators, local and state education agencies, and or non-commercial entities for educational training purposes only. No part of this recording may be reproduced or utilized in any form or in any means electronic or mechanical, including recording or by any information storage and retrieval system without permission in writing from the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center. Finally, the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center would like to thank the Indiana University School of Education, Indianapolis at IUPUI. As well as Executive Director *Dr. Kathleen King Thorius*, Director of Operations *Dr. Seena Skelton*, and Associate Director *Dr. Tiffany Kyser* for their leadership and guidance in the development of all tools and resources to support the region.

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