



The 20-Minute Talk
Episode 5—Antiracist Imaginary for
School Communities
Anti-Racism Vodcast Series
Dr. Beryl New and Dr. Anthony Jones



TRANSCRIPTION

[Intro Music]

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: Hello and welcome to the Region III MAP Center Anti-Racism Vodcast Series entitled, The 20-Minute Talk. The Region III MAP Center's Anti-Racism Vodcast Series aims to advance anti-racist efforts and support anti-racist activities within school communities across and beyond the MAP Center's 13-state region with a succinct 20-minute discussion led by anti-racist practitioners.

Nickie Coomer: In today's episode we'll be talking about the social imaginary which can be defined as the abstract set of values that underlie our institutions and laws and work symbolically to represent how people imagine themselves in the social world. In short, we'll be talking about how assumptions, about how the world should be, and how we should live in it undergird the relationships we have in school through our school policies and practices.

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: So, we're also really excited, both Nickie and I, to co-host this podcast series. So, my name is Tiffany Kyser and I serve as the Associate Director and of Engagement and Partnerships with the MAP Center and I have the privilege of serving as our, again our co-host for today and I'm joined by my fellow co-host Nickie Coomer who's a Doctoral Research Assistant at the MAP Center

Nickie Coomer: Thank you, Tiffany. We are also thrilled to have two guests with us who are not only tremendous scholars and practitioners in educational equity work but also will lead us in affirming and deepening our understanding of anti-racism and engaging and leading anti-racist practices in our school communities. Joined with us today are Dr. Beryl New, the Director of Certified Personnel and Equity at Topeka Public Schools in Kansas and Dr. Anthony Jones, the

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Director of Equity for Ames Community School District in Iowa. Thank you both so much for joining us today.

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: Thank you. So, I'm gonna—I'm gonna kick us off on our conversation. We have two prompts and I want Dr. Jones to sort of lead us and then I'll ask Dr. New to—to build on Dr. Jones thoughts and then we'll move into a second prompt and—and do the—do the inverse where Dr. New will kick us off and then Dr. Jones will build on those comments. So, the first question that we wanted to pose and Dr. Jones really looking forward and Dr. New to your to your shares is this prompt: the social imaginary is commonly known as a set of values institutions laws and symbols through which people imagine their social whole. In short it is referred to as a collective understanding about how the world—excuse me—a collective understanding about how the world should be and how we should live on it. Given this: *What does anti-racist imaginary mean to you?* Dr. Jones if you can kick us off.

Dr. Anthony Jones: Yeah, so when I think about anti-racist imaginary and what it means to me it means to me is when we define success by being our authentic self. So, for instance, you know bringing your whole self into that space, you know, learning space, into your city, into your town that you live in. So, it's—it's defining success by being your authentic self and you are able to bring your whole self into that space. I heard this consultant say one time, I think the name was Pat Murray, a consultant and he said this—he said, “If you want to see someone in real pain watch someone who knows who he is and defaults on it on a regular basis.” I would—another way I would say it is this, “If you want to see someone in real pain watch someone who don't know who they are and are learning about someone else on a daily basis.” And we often see this a lot. I know in my world our Black students for instance, are constantly entering into a space where they're learning about someone else on a daily basis. So anti-racist imaginary to me is when you know who you are and whose you are. And so let me explain what I mean by that is that so knowing whose you are right. So as a person of faith I would define myself as—as a child of God and I learn what that means daily. And so for those who may not identify that way

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let's say if you're not a religious person or a spiritual person or you don't consider that to be a part of your identity you know, for me I would also say learning whose I am is also learning that you know, I'm Eileen's boy and Annie Lord Johnson's grandson and then I learn what that means so that means also learning about my ancestors, where I came from where I grew up learning, about the city my family is from and so when—when—when I'm able to know who I am and whose I am that's-that to me that is becoming—being successful. And so—so let me let me explain it another way is so when—when every individual has these two things together when they have these two things down, where they know who they are where they came from, they know who—who they are they bring their whole authentic self into a space, then knowing these things help someone bring their talents, abilities, skills, gifts into a space. And so even though you know, someone may fall into a protected class you have confidence when you know who you are. When you know who you are, you're able to be your authentic self then you also would know what you bring into that space so your talents, your abilities, your gifts, your skills those things that you bring into a space. Then you have, what I would call fellowship, or you will have community, you will have true community or another word that I would say or having all things common—having all things in common. So, what—what does that mean? When we—when we have community, we care for each other we, share our material good, we share our resources with those in need, equity right? We share our resources with those who are in need not because it's mandated or required but because of the love that we know for ourselves, we love ourselves right? We love ourselves first because we know who we are, we know whose we are, we know our ancestors and then we love others. So, when we begin to share our resources back and forth it's not based upon on because it's required or mandated or there's something in place but it's just the community that is made up of people confidently knowing who they are. And so, you know when I think in terms of anti-racist imaginary you know, I think about this community and where this community speaks to create an environment where everyone is valued and an important part of the community. And so, we all know through research that connection we desire, connection because we are hardwired for belonging and when we have



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that type of community where we bring our whole self into that space, we see success for ourselves and for others

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: Thank you, Dr. Jones. Dr. New anything to add?

Dr. Beryl New: Sure, and I can only speak from my experiences in Topeka and Topeka Public Schools. I think we've done, in our district a good job of the African American educators and others who are aware of the needs of students of color. We've done a good job of allowing them the freedom of learning how to be their authentic selves within a learning environment and be supported. I think the issue comes into play when there are teachers who are not used to the African American culture who don't know how to receive, affirm, acknowledge that level of authenticity among the students. When you look at the national statistics and 80% percent of elementary teachers are white females, and in our area are white females who also live outside of our district in many of the rural areas that surround Topeka, they don't have that cultural competence with them when they come to our district. They're hired but they don't always know how to work with students of color the way that many of our teachers of color understand because of their own lived experiences. So, I think, and Dr. Jones really summed it up very clearly about you know, the importance of honoring an individual's authenticity in the learning space because really that's what builds their emotional fortitude. When they know that, "This is me as a learner, but I'm respected I'm not, you know my abilities aren't negated simply by my skin color," you know that's what gives them the encouragement to continue to be a learner, a lifelong learner. But if it's not affirmed from people who don't look like them who may not have experienced what they've experienced, who didn't come with the same type of home training that they received then it can, I've noticed, that it has made some students feel like, "Something's wrong with me, something that I'm bringing to this space is erroneous in such a way that maybe I shouldn't demonstrate I, maybe I shouldn't display my creative abilities, maybe I shouldn't try to turn this lesson on formulaic algebra into a rap so that I can memorize it." So, you know, and now looking at it through a lens of you know, social imaginary I would hope that

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you know, we could get to a place where people leave those prejudices and you know, those implicit biases and the overt biases in their past you know. I won't even say at the door because if you leave it at the door you can pick it up when you go back out the door but leave it in their past and say as a human being living in Topeka, or living in Ames, or living you know in America today this I—this is what I should challenge myself to become and sometime that's not easy. As Dr. Jones said, “You can't legislate that.” You can hold people's level of compassion as such that they see another human being as they would their own child or their own grandchild or you know relative, but everybody doesn't do that and, in my experience, very few people have taken that step to do that. Because it's too easy to come in earn a paycheck and go home and not have to worry about those things unless you are a person of color who's being affected by it.

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: Our next prompt that we have is: *What is the most significant systemic shift and policy one can take to move towards an anti-racist imaginary in their school community?* And I would ask Dr. New if you wouldn't mind kicking us off on this share and then Dr. Jones if there's anything you would want to build.

Dr. Beryl New: Well, I would definitely reflect on where America has been and where we are right now because if we don't change the trajectory of our journey we're going to end up in a bad space. Our youth today are very aware of inequities, and they have no—no restraint at times it seems in sharing their—their thoughts, calling people out on what they see is being you know, two-faced or even challenging the institution of racism as it exists in education. So, I think that as we look at where we could move in the future, I question myself, is it a policy solution? You know, is it even something that can be legislated? Because again, you cannot legislate compassion, you can't make people look at other people and say, “You are just as valuable as a human being as I am and that's why with good conscience, I cannot treat you as anything other than a valuable human being.” And you know, we—living in Topeka, of course you know you have the *Brown* case that—the building, Monroe School is a symbol of how we should have made a turn as a nation and I attended that school but yet when I attended there—there was

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one Hispanic family and one white family and that was after integration. So, you know, there are just certain things that we've attempted as a nation to do on many levels but to really make a systemic shift I think it's going to take, as Dr. Jones talked about and as you both did as well Dr. Kyser and soon to be Dr. Coomer, talking about that mind-set shift you know, moving from that deficit mindset to one where we see that there is a possibility for doing better. And even with situations that have occurred across our nation that may have had nothing to do with education but had everything to do with how humans value other humans. I'm kind of moving away from the assumption that, "Oh yeah another *Brown v Board* decision could change everything," you know, "let's bring up round four you know, let's try to legislate how people should treat one another."

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: Thank you, Dr. New. I just had some follow-ups and then I'll open it up to Dr. Jones. So, I certainly can appreciate the context and being at the epicenter of *Brown v. — Brown*—all the sort of iterations of *Brown* I'll say, and the lived experience and attending within that school community at the epicenter of that historic legislation and the lack of incremental, from your lived experience, of all incremental authentic racially integrated school communities. and I certainly can appreciate that. I wonder though and I wonder if you could kind of let me know your reactions to that as we are at a point now to a realized anti-racist state in our school communities, I wonder if policy decisions may serve as structural disruptions that may signal or create conditions for more anti-racist practices.

Dr. Beryl New: You know, you're 100% correct and that all has its place. But I will say from my perspective here—here we are almost 60 years beyond that initial *Brown* decision and we are still having the conversation about how we can adopt a history curriculum that is totally balanced; it tells the story of the Native Americans who lived in Kansas who were at one time 100% of the population but are now 2% of the state population as well as you know African-American and—and the Hispanic individuals who came here to work on Burlington-Northern Santa Fe and who have been displaced in many ways even culturally displaced. Where many of

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their children who go through public schools do not even have Spanish as a second language because they were taught in order to move up in the ranks in the Topeka society whatever that might represent, you have to assimilate into the white culture. So, you know I've seen the—I've seen the legislative impact and the policy impact and definitely we are doing things currently that relate directly to policy after we got people in leadership positions who could navigate that. But and I—I've told some of my colleagues in surrounding districts if—if people of color do not feel welcome to join your district you need to look at how you're treating all people because the people of color don't feel welcome, people with a disability may not feel welcome, people who have different religious beliefs may not feel welcome. So, it's not about just getting people of color, it's about what are we doing as humans to make people know that they are important to us.

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: Thank you, thank you so much, Dr. New. I appreciate you surfacing other historically marginalized identities at the intersections because people of color aren't just people of color, they have other identities in addition to having stakeholders in their school community who have other historically marginalized identities as well and the ways in which you're creating a safe and inclusive space and the correlation of that in terms of your ability to recruit difference as an asset in your school community. I appreciate that. Dr. Jones anything to—to build in addition to the prompt around a suggested or an explicit policy to help support or continue the movement towards an anti-racist imaginary in our school communities?

Dr. Anthony Jones: I just really appreciate Dr. New's insight in terms of, “Okay this is where we are now even in this space of where we have a case that is known” and so I really appreciate that. Another thing that Dr. New mentioned was students in the sense of you know, who they are and what they bring into a space is that they are already challenging the institution, they're already asking the questions. Even what we just went through with the pandemic in the phrase that we have kind of nicely coined is this “racial unrest” right? We say racial unrest and the pandemic. But our students are seeing that they have witnessed you know, they witnessed the

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insurrection on January 6th. But then we bring them into a space where those conversations are not had. It's almost like they come into a space which is supposed to be neutral, and we don't bring those conversations in. And so, I've really been thinking about our policy in particular, is the teaching controversial issues that's a policy that that we have right now that has really come up to the forefront and I've noticed that even from the legislator they're now trying to write bills. It's almost like a chess game you know, "How do we get in front of educators bringing these particular topics into the classroom to teach students to hate America?" So, you may have heard that. And so, our or "How do we bring you know—how do we write a bill so—so educators can't talk about gender identity and especially do not bring it into the elementary." "How can we write a bill to make sure that that doesn't happen?" And so, for me, I you know—one of the things I've really been focusing on in my sphere of influence is the policy around teaching controversial issues. And so, our policy begins by saying, "the right to explore and discuss controversial subjects is at the heart of the American democratic way of life." And so, it begins for me you know—will we begin to—to sharpen that policy in terms of, "What do we mean by controversy?" Controversy does not mean I disagree with you, you know. Controversy does not mean you know, "it's an issue right now there's a hot topic right now and so we can't bring that space into it." And so, I've learned that teaching is about being an activist. I mean challenging the—the institution like Dr. New said, to be an educator is to teach our students to challenge the institution, question my learning as a facilitator in this classroom. Let's have a community where we can ask questions to get better answers to make our community better. So, I've learned that teaching is activism and that teaching, and teaching and activism should be one and the same you know because why? We want—we want to create an atmosphere and a school environment where we are—are free we are we are as identities as people become more bold—bold to advocate for themselves. We want to be able to remove those barriers so those individuals can be free. How does that happen? It happens in a classroom space. That—that—that part blows me away; it can happen in the classroom space.

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: So, thank you I thank you both so very much thank you.

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Nickie Coomer: As we bring our conversation to the close, I just want to remind our viewers to be sure to stop by our website at www.greatlakesequity.org for an array of resources and supports related to anti-racist practice. Some of the titles that you'll find are our Equity Dispatch Newsletter, "Virtual Realities: Equity Considerations for Online and Distance Learning." Another Equity Dispatch Newsletter "Leadership Practices for Transformative Change Toward Equity" and then also an Equity by Design Brief entitled, "Avoiding the Traps Identifying and Disrupting Six Paradoxical Habits of Equity Leadership" by Dr. Sharon Radd. And also, if you're on social media don't forget to follow us, we're on Facebook at the Great Lakes Equity Center/Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center and also on Twitter @GreatLakesEAC that's GreatLakesE-A-C. Feel free to engage with today's session by answering: *How are you going to use what you learned here today?* And don't forget to hashtag #mapequity

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

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[End audio]