



The 20-Minute Talk:
Episode 2- Antiracism in the Age of COVID-19
Anti-Racism Vodcast Series
Toia Jones and Perry Wilkinson



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-racism 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: This Anti-Racism Vodcast episode is focused on how leaders who identify as anti-racist leaders define anti-racist leadership and situate anti-racist leadership within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: My name is Tiffany Kyser and I serve as the Associate Director of Engagement and Partnerships with the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center which I'll refer to moving forward as the MAP Center and I have the privilege of serving as your host for today. Joined with me is Nickie Coomer, Graduate Assistant at the MAP Center.

Nickie Coomer: Thank you, Tiffany. We are also thrilled to have two guests who not only are tremendous 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 within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. So, joined with Tiffany and I today are Perry Wilkinson, Education Equity and Systems Data Specialist at the Southeast Metro Regional Center of Excellence within the Southeast Service Cooperative in Minnesota and Toia Jones, Principal at Boulder Hill Elementary within the Community Unit School District 308, located in Illinois. So, welcome Perry and Toia.

Toia Jones: Hi.

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Perry Wilkinson: Thanks for having me.

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: I'm super thrilled to have you both for this episode of The 20-minute Talk and I have two questions for the both of you and I hope Perry, you can kick us off with the first one. So, the first question is: *What are under—why are understanding, excuse me, the experiences of people of color, particularly African American and Asian Americans important to engaging in anti-racist actor—activity during the COVID pandemic?* So, just your thoughts there, we'll have Perry kick us off and then—and then Toia with any additions.

Perry Wilkinson: So, I think the biggest thing is just the recognition of the—the wide range of—of diversity within those two groups, right? Those two—those two racial identities and so, you know I always like to pull up on my own story of being a transracial Korean adoptee right, and being adopted at 18 months and—and coming to Richfield, Minnesota, right? And growing up in an upper middle—middle upper middle class, white suburb surrounded by—by white folks and really raised as a, I mean, I was raised as a white man. And so, I look at it that way is that—that's you know 30 years of my life, I'm now 45, for 30 years of my life I—I had very little recognition of racial difference or really understanding what it truly was. I did unpack, for much of my 20s, a lot of things that had a lot of self-discovery and so forth but difference to me was always a wrong thing, right? And so, as I—as I look at it now in terms of who I've been since, right, as spending 30 years as what I like to call an agent of the status quo, I look at now of you know especially during COVID, is just recognizing that my experience is vastly different from folks that are, you know, first generation Asian immigrants or, you know, things like that. But there are just so many different experiences there and access and how we're perceived, and stereotypes are just so incredibly different. And I don't know—don't—I don't know if we as educators have really done a good job of thinking through who actually is in our community and who—what stories are actually out there and how the multiple identities that we have really impact education, really impact the engagement especially during COVID right? And so, are we as leaders sitting down and considering those individual stories? Are we considering how our decisions impact groups that are not traditionally in white spaces right, or are not traditionally,

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you know, in dominant culture, right? I just feel like we always just sit in our own realities right, and we always just have our own perspectives and as educators we think that this is a great idea, but we don't really ask outside of our own great idea think tank right, or our own leadership teams.

Perry Wilkinson: And so, if our leadership team is the same six educators and it's the same educators for the last years why in the world will we ever be able to impact anything different, right? And so how are we bringing in those Asian American voices, very diverse Asian American voices, with so many different experiences? How are we bringing in those African Americans—those Black voices that need to be out there those—just all of our communities and—and all of our non-dominant cultures and all of our non-dominant identities? How are they coming into our space? Because realistically, if we ask, who is this working and how do we know? It's a struggle. And then if we ask who is this not working for and how do we know? Usually, we have some good deficit answers on some of these groups and we make excuses, or we push it out on them as they're deficient and it's their fault. And that's that anti-blackness coming right that's that anti-Asian American coming but it's like are we really recognizing the oppression and the barriers that we're putting up as really a white system, right? And so how are we really identifying our different racial groups, all of our different groups regardless of identity? How are we bringing those in to really consider these COVID-19 decisions? And how are we defining engagement? How are we defining respect? How are we defining attendance? How are we being flexible to meet those needs? Because one of the things that I've had to work with—with some schools is, “Well it's COVID, they're not on, it's okay.” But then, how are we supporting so they can actually get their education? So how are we supporting these marginalized families and not just dismissing and saying: “Oh it's okay they got—they got a lot going on”? Yes, everyone is and everyone's in a different—in a different situation but then how are we supporting our—our learners that need the most support? How are we supporting our families that need the most support, especially during this time with the traumas and the things that people are going through? It's—it's super important, I think that we're open to other voices and our realities are willing to you know we're making those things visible that aren't in our own

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reality our normal is not normal, right? And our—what we believe as normal is not the same for the four—three other people I'm looking at on my screen right now, right? My normal is totally different than yours. And how are we creating spaces and environments where we can actually hear those and then adjust and support everyone? So, I—I just think it comes into that widening of the circle and just how are we really making the invisible visible, right? So those below the line things that we talk about when it comes to the cultural iceberg or that white supremacy culture things, like what are those things that are—that are invisible, that we can start bringing to the surface? And I think that's our—that's our job as anti-racist educators during this time or all the time but especially during this time.

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: This is—no this is great and it—it—this connects to the question we're going to next: *What are key practices one can engage in to be anti-racist from your perspective?*

Toia Jones: I guess the first thing I want to start with is when you say the word anti-racist. And if we're gonna be honest that word in itself has been a word surrounded by a taboo. And—and no one really wants to engage in this, this thinking or this digging deep and analyzing of yourself and in your perspective when you attach the word anti-racist to it. So, I think for me some key points, and they may seem general but—but I think they lead to something else more specific was this whole idea of like: “What do you mean?” And so, if we're going to talk about the practices and we're going to start creating action plans and steps around them, we need to identify and define what we mean by anti-racist and—and what—define what anti-racist practices look like within our—our district. And I think that we are in this place now where diversity and equity is like a common term and every district is and businesses are tossing around and added—adding it to their handbooks and all that. But if you want to want to be really honest with it, we're throwing words around that we're saying they're interchangeable when they're not, they have completely different meanings, more critical meanings. So, one to me would be to kind of, for your—for your organization or your district or yourself kind of identify what—what I mean by when I say anti-racist. And then anything like this when you—I mean we're talking about impacting—unpacking and disrupting and the systems kind of, how do you

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equip yourself with approaching or addressing this and—and—and how do you equip yourself with kind of dismantling some of these systems that have been ingrained?

Toia Jones: Again, like myself, I know that some of these practices are, and—and through my equity work in these last years I—I had to dismantle and realize, you know, it was almost like an unshedding when I started realizing that some of these things that I'm perpetuating against individuals who I would have been the kid that—that—that I see now that that our teachers are struggling with, like that—that was my family I would have been that kid. And so, how do we kind of dismantle that? Well, some of that is that you know, we have to kind of prepare ourselves emotionally because this is a very emotional topic to deal with. But not only that, I think equipping ourselves kind of academically or intellectually. And so, I think about how in our district we're—we're centering student voice which is quite important quite important but it—it does not serve if they don't have the words to articulate really what we're talking about. I can say that three years ago I did not have the words to voice that I have now to—to think about. And so, that that whole idea of—of knowledge bringing power, bringing voice, I think is important. So, acknowledging that we have to empower people in a way that they can have, not only conversations, but they can think critically, and they can challenge some things within themselves or within the organization or their community or whatever, their family, whatever. And some of that knowledge, it doesn't have to be, you know going back to—to seek a degree. It could be watching a, you know, a movie, it could be a video, it could be TikTok. I don't, you know, there's a whole lot out there now in—in social media and all that has—being very careful though, has opened up some of that.

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: That's extremely helpful. I'll mirror back and then I'll hand it over to Perry if there's anything you want to add before Nickie closes us out. So, what—I what I heard Toia, some concrete practices to build on what Perry offered was being clear about how your school community defines anti-racism and defines anti-racist practice. As a component of that, I also heard once that's done assessing the extent to which anti-racist practices exist in your school community and position that assessment not as evaluative but rather as an opportunity for

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continuous improvement. So, having tough, hard conversations with that data to learn and to grow as opposed to positioning it as a form of accountability. Which you can but that's not what I heard from you, first, really use that as a way to sort of add to the richness of hopefully hard conversations. Another thing that I heard was being really intentional about examining and unpacking your practices and how you and who you are and how you've been shaped is connected to that. A little bit of what Perry said of unpacking himself., you use the term of sort of, "I was unshedding", developing the sort of critical consciousness and awareness. And some of the ways you talked about doing that is through the language you use or the language you begin to become exposed to through having those intentional conversations and seeking out intentional conversations that are going to be hard. To provide as a leader space, time, support and resources to support practitioners on their journey of anti-racism. To think about communication and all the myriad ways both among educators but also with youth and honoring different youth cultures of the different ways we communicate, and the different platforms used to communicate an anti-racist message. And authentic commitment, I heard you talk about this idea of beyond sort of pageantry to—to practices, beyond platitudes to policies, right? Those shifts of being really authentic in the commitment. And then leveraging partners, district partners, colleagues, someone to help support you and push you. And then the final two points I thought were great, be comfortable being uncomfortable is sort of what I heard. Always seek out within the context of anti-racist practice being uncomfortable, being pushed. And then finally anti-racism should be active, it's a verb and it's one that you have to commit to on a daily basis. So those are those are really great to build on Perry's. So, Perry I want to offer it to you anything else maybe we have missed that you want to offer in terms of anti-racist practices that you want to put out there before Nickie closes us up.

Perry Wilkinson: Yeah, I think the shared language thing is huge. The definitions, just you know what—what does that really mean here? And then who's leading that then and is it always the people of color or the most marginalized that are out in front of that? Because then if the most marginalized and the folks of color are the ones out in front of it, we know who's going to be let go first, right? And so, we have to have the right people leading that. And one of the big

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statements too is, it's not about you as individuals, you as the leaders, the individual the one that's been wronging the children for this long, right? This has been this is historical and understanding the history and understanding the system and then how are we going to work together to—to change that system to work for people right to work for everyone? We need to recognize folks developmentally that are ready to go and that aren't going to polarize either, right? So, there's a—there's a balance in that that we gotta get the folks, the allies, and the co-conspirators at the table that are gonna allow us to push colleagues and some we have to have different plans for, right? We have to talk—we have certain—certain ways to support.

Dr. Tiffany Kyser: Yeah, that's—that's really helpful. Thank you so much for—for sharing that and contributing that—that idea of being co-opted in one's own perceived racial identity as a person of color and if not tending to one's own critical consciousness being leveraged and being co-opted to present a particular dominant narrative. And I think that is a powerful—a powerful practice that for those that also identify as people of color to tend to. This idea of being aware of the many ways that we ourselves can be co-opted and our own racial identity or perceived racial or ethnic identity being appropriated to—to re-inscribe the status quo. So, I appreciate that. Nickie, I'll turn it over to you any—anything to ask Toia or Perry?

Nickie Coomer: No, I just want to say thank you so much both for sharing your thoughts and your stories and your own experiences.

Nickie Coomer: Alright, so we are—so before we end our conversation today, I just want to remind our viewers to stop by our online equity resource library at www.greatlightsequity.org for an array of resources and supports related to anti-racist practice. So, we have on our website links to our communities of care Virtual Coffee House Series, these are ongoing. We also have a great resource in our Virtual Library right now that—it was produced by Dr. Chelsea Gonzalez and Hunter Brown called, “A Virtual Little Library for Staying Connected.” And so, these stories feature folks that are reading children's stories to children. So, please check that out with your—your little ones and as well, our Equity Digest the title and topic of which is “Reimagining School

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Policy and Practice in Virtual Schooling”. And if—if you're on social media please follow us on twitter @GreatlakesEAC #MAPEquity. We're also on Facebook. We are not yet on TikTok but please follow us and share with us what you learned today again by tagging #MAPEquity

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