

EVERYDAY TEACHER INTERRUPTION: HEATHER'S STORY

Prelude: Wimba-Weia Opening

Pam:

How would you, not compare, but how would you articulate and frame Heather two years ago, Heather now, and where do you hope Heather is a year or two from now, if someone were to say the chapters of Heather's anti-racist education?

Heather:

I love that question. Okay, I am seeking approval less. I feel really grounded in my being in a classroom, what feels safe and good for me to feel good about my practice. I think that I'm sort of shedding this layer of doing what works. I work in a partner-oriented teaching structure, so less of really needing to prove to them that I'm competent and learning I'm an equal member to this team, and with that comes idea and insight and questions. So that's where I am now, I think, and sharing with confidence, bring my own ideas with my own processing of why I think we should try this.

[musical transition- “Wimba Weia” (music-only) artlist.io]

Pam's Voiceover (#1):

The voice you just heard was Heather Mohamed: a recent graduate of the Childhood Special and General Education Dual Certification program @ Bank Street College. Heather is originally from Bridgeport, Connecticut, and she now lives and works in Brooklyn, as a second grade head teacher at an independent school. Though we recorded this interview over a year ago, its contents are no less relevant today.

The focus of this episode is teachers as interrupters which begs the questions: *What does it mean to be an “interrupter” in the field of education? How can the everyday teacher interrupt racism in their classrooms and schools?*

We can start the task of answering this question by looking at the etymology of the word “interrupt”. From the Latin “interrumpere, from ‘inter’ [between] + ‘rumpere’ [to break], to interrupt racism (as an educator) equals actively and intentionally challenging policies, practices, and pedagogies that are racially (and otherwise) oppressive.

[musical transition- “Wimba Weia” (music-only) artlist.io]

A few *key questions* guide my exploration of what it means to actively interrupt racism in elementary classrooms and schools:

- What can interrupting racism (or other forms of oppression like ableism...) look like, on a daily basis, for the average teacher?
- How can each individual teacher's story help us understand what it means to interrupt?

- Does asking these questions move us closer to, or further away from, transformation and liberation in education?

Pam's Voiceover (#2): In the next hour, Heather helps us see that the path to becoming an anti-racist educator is multifaceted, nuanced, and shaped by an individual's experience. Seeking approval less, feeling grounded in herself and her values, and working within the team to become an anti-racist cohort are among Heather's greatest strengths.

Heather's interview was rich and as I reviewed our conversation, three themes emerged as the chapters for this discussion: (1) Staying True to Yourself; (2) Teaching to Interrupt is a Marathon; and (3) Navigating Power Structures. We will be keeping each of the questions I just named in mind as we dive deeply into each of these themes.

[Wimba-Weia fades into Bell Dings: School Bell]

Chapter 1: Staying True to Yourself

Pam: We started the interview by tackling the elephant in the room: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) as it shows up in education. My hope was that we would move well beyond this reductive construct but I thought it useful to assess Heather's thoughts on DEI (and anti-racism) as a point of *initial* departure...

Pam: So my first question for you, Heather, is when you hear the term DEI, or diversity, equity, and inclusion, what comes to your mind?

Heather: Right, I think it's a twofold. I think of people who are, I think you sharing the name of your podcast, interrupting comes to mind, there's a sense of care and devotion to work that matters related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. So when I hear that a place has that sort of built into their institution and their foundation of their programming, it sounds to me like that is a structure that makes sense. I think then the ladder of that is when some structure is built, how's it built? Who's involved in it and how do you uphold it so that it's actually making a difference or making a change? Related to DEI work, I think of people who are change makers and on the path of really trying to be involved in dismantling problematic structures that exist and interrogating that, and I think it's lifelong work.

Pam: Despite her young age, Heather is wise and understands that growing into a teacher-interrupter requires a life-long commitment. Heather also knows that amidst the systemic and institutional realities of racism in education, so much of this work *is located at the level of the individual*.

Heather: But in terms of diversity, equity, inclusion, I think it's self-work and it's work that you're engaging with others. Part of it is you're meeting people who are at different places, you're meeting children, but you're also working with adults and it's a pretty high turnaround job of who you're interacting with year-to-year. So you might have knowledge of something that someone else doesn't have yet, and you also might need to support them in redirecting, or them you, so it's

not fixed. I think you have to keep your eyes open to doing that work and staying present to it, I think. So you're never finished, I think.

Pam: Wow, staying present and you're never finished, such wise words about this work indeed. I'm going to come back to terminology again to loop it back, but I want to go to what you wrote in the email response, because there was so much to drill down on there. It was brief, it was pithy yet powerful, and I want to just ask you more about that. So you said, "I've worked in two independent schools, which both which have been working to become more inclusive, anti-bias, and anti-racist institutions. Uniquely as an associate teacher and a graduate student, I have seen how slow this process can be for some to take hold of, it means that I'm by no means an expert," neither am I, "Although I am committed to being actively involved in bettering my own practice."

Pam (Voiceover): It seems that seeing others *wrestle with* the work of interrupting racism in schooling, in successful and unsuccessful ways, has helped Heather strengthen her resolve to better her own practice.

Next, I asked Heather to bring me into her teaching world and offer some idea of what she would do—to whom she may go—when confronted with the everyday racism that shows up in elementary classrooms.

Pam: So one question I have for you is, you were talking about the small chunks, those were accessible, a baby step, but it was important. I agree with you about the digestibility and the manageability when doing this work. One thing that I wanted to ask you was, for example, if someone were to take exception with the direction of a unit because they're citing colonized aspects of it, or if they were to say that they feel that marginalized communities either are not being centered or that the framing is one that is deficit oriented, what would you do in that case? To whom would you go, would there be recourse for you, or would it be Catch as Catch Can, I don't know where to go, but something's got to happen?

Heather: This is such a good question, I hope I don't lose my train of thought. One thing that I'm learning is that I'm low on the totem pole as an associate teacher. I am so disposable. However, I am here and being paid to do my job, and so with that comes my responsibility to sharing, asking questions when I think that they're necessary. Why do you do it like that? Have you ever considered starting from this point? I think it's a gift to be at Bank Street while I'm working because my brain is constantly present with kind of the why and the reflectiveness of my practice and it's my being. But I think that's one thing I've learned a little bit of, you need to ask a question, a clarifying question, of why is this?

Heather: Something else that I've done that I think is just something I'm growing in is we read a book last year, or were asked to read a book last year, that I thought I did not want to read. I found a different book, and instead of having an argument or bringing to the attention where I fought that book, I knew it was coming. So when it was time to talk and go over what the lesson is around that book, I had a different book and my own idea prepared and offered from a place of, I have something that I want to share, this is from the perspective of this and I think it's a really important thing to just bring that to the conversation of what the kids are engaged with.

Pam (Voiceover): Heather talked about the importance of doing this work in community, which brings to mind Dr. Dena Simmons' words, "Learn with your crew." The crew that Dr. Simmons talks about is a group of critical friends with whom you engage in "collective work" and "learn together." When we move out of silos, we're more apt to understand what it means to do the work of anti-racist education.

Heather: In terms of an anti-racist educator, what does it mean? What it means to me is this is my sort of affirmation of the year, is my ego is not involved. I think my idea of being an anti-racist educator is I walk in every single day, I'm present to my children, I'm aware of who they are, I welcome them into my space. I ask them deep questions about what's important to them, I make space for that when there's conflict. I think we take time to be restorative in supporting each other and, when there's sort of conflict, it's taking time to make space to understand and repair.

Pam: Well, thank you for that. I really appreciate you kind of mining these examples and unpacking them, or dusting them off and just really illuminating them for us. A couple of final questions, one is in terms of Heather's past, present, and future lives as an anti-racist educator or aspiring... I think we're always aspiring, there's always an aspirational aspect to this work. How would you, not compare, but how would you articulate and frame Heather two years ago, Heather now, and where do you hope Heather is a year or two from now, if someone were to say the chapters of Heather's anti-racist education?

Heather: I love that question. Okay, I am seeking approval less. I feel really grounded in my being in a classroom, what feels safe and good for me to feel good about my practice. I think that I'm sort of shedding this layer of doing what works. I work in a partner-oriented teaching structure, so less of really needing to prove to them that I'm competent and learning I'm an equal member to this team, and with that comes idea and insight and questions. So that's where I am now, I think, and sharing with confidence, bring my own ideas with my own processing of why I think we should try this.

Pam (Voiceover): One way that Heather stays true to herself in the work of interruption is to seek approval less. She is developing the capacity to speak her truth (and to do so confidently). And, as you'll hear next, she wants to leave her classroom door open...

Heather: I think when you get siloed, you lose sight of what others are doing. It's kind of the question that happens when you leave graduate school, you're not reading as much and that's like, that's a choice. I think it's that. I think for me it's, okay, I got my degree and I'm finished now, and I have my own classroom, and closing that door and no one's coming in. I think that's a narrative I've heard a little bit before, you just close the door and nobody knows. I'm like, wait, I'm actually reevaluating that idea. I want my door open, but see what I'm doing. I don't know if I want to close it so much. I don't know if that's a naive thought, so there you have it.

Heather: I think teaching's a really interesting thing where you can just get so into your practice and just years can go by, and then all of a sudden I'm like, you've been doing that for this long? Have you ever thought about changing that? How do you do that? Also, how do you stay on top

of it so you don't fall into that trap? So I think that's my goal, I think it's just stay in the present, honestly.

Pam: I feel like presence has been very present in our discussion today, and I see the importance that you assign to presence in doing this work. Whether we call it DEI or anti-racist work, we really see the factor of presence as one of the more salient ones in this work. You've given me so much rich info, I'm just going back to see.

Pam's Voiceover: [Raider-Roth and Rodgers \(2006\)](#) define presence as “ Presence is defined as a state of alert awareness, receptivity, and connectedness to the mental, emotional, and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments, and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step.” (p. 265). Heather makes the point that the work of an anti-racist educator requires transparency—sharing who she is, where she is from, and how she locates herself in this world. In short, if she asks her students to bare their truth, she realizes it's important for her to model this first. *And this is one hallmark of a present teacher.*

Heather: I have one other thing that I think is just worth mentioning. I've been nervous, I think, a little bit in the past of my experience [inaudible 00:42:54], but how much I'm sharing with my kids. But I started the year sharing, this is who I am. So when we talk about our families, I talk about my father, where is my father from? He's from Egypt. Where is my mom from? She's American, she was born here. Lots of her relatives were born and raised in Connecticut. I just think that is huge for me, my kids, having conversations with each other, wanting to know who they are. I think just having language and giving kids language from the beginning, and welcoming them to share who they are, noting differences and talking about things that different people experience.

Heather: I've also noticed that in the eight days that I've been in school, the conversations around our opening weeks' curriculum about identity has really been so insightful for actually how much kids know and what they want to share and has been really, really powerful. Me and my partner teacher are having conversations with each other about, "I heard this today, we need to bring this back up. What should we do to facilitate that and make space for that?" That would not have happened if there wasn't a structure already in place of giving them that invitation to share or them feeling safe to share that. So I think that's something else that I've been really, really deeply thinking about this year and where the world is.

Pam: Wow, yeah. I mean, that's such an important thread to not just pull in, but to surface, the thread of identity and how do we affirm students' identity, students' and families' identities in this work on anti-racist education and how wonderful that, even at this early juncture of the year, even though it feels like it's well beyond September 24th, it's not, but it feels like it, but that you've already begun some of the deep work.

[Musical **Transition Here: Wimba Weia...**]

Pam's Voiceover and Transition to Chapter 2: We just learned from Heather that in staying true to herself in the work of anti-racist education, she reminds herself that this process is slow and life-long; that it's best when this work is done in collaboration with others; to resist the urge to seek outside approval; and to give your students a real picture of who you are (be transparent).

The life-long nature of anti-racist education began to surface in chapter one, and we address it in full-force here in chapter 2: Teaching (and interrupting) is a marathon

[Sound: Wimba Weia fades into School Bell Ding].

Chapter 2: Teaching (and Interrupting) is a Marathon

Pam (voiceover): In the foreword to the newly published text titled [*Teaching for Racial Equity: Becoming Interrupters*](#), by Katharine A. Smith, Steven Zemelman, & Tonya Perry, Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz wrote, "We live in a racist society. Our schools are heavily impacted by the concept of race, and the teaching and learning that happen in our schools can influence the agency individuals enact against the forces of racism." Among many other things, her words remind us that the work of interrupting the -isms in education (racism being chief among them), was never a sprint; it is a marathon. Heather gives us palpable glimpses into the micro steps required to develop the disposition of interrupter.

Heather: I think I've been an associate teacher, this is my fifth year and hopefully my last, I want my own room, I've worked with people who've come into this work with all walks and I've just encountered people who are so graceful in sharing and providing wisdom, and their knowledge, and their skillset, and others who are sort of rigid. I think teaching is a commitment to running marathons every year and you're a chameleon. So you're shedding layers, but you're growing and changing, and you're becoming wiser.

Heather: I think that educators that I've experienced, who I've worked with, it's not a resistance to change so much as it's a resistance that comes from not having tools to know how to do that self-work of taking a look at your classroom or feeling overwhelmed by how many things have to change and not knowing what's a safe place to start. Then there's this thing that I've noticed that lives in people, in teachers, is ego. Just dropping your ego, knowing how to actually build a supportive team grade level, lower school, middle, whatever, upper school, and knowing how to have conversations with your colleagues. We had a PD last year about this, how to engage in dialogue, and it lived for some and died in that PD. So there are people who are committed to it, and if everyone is committed to it, it makes the process feel like we are working on this, whereas others are like, I've engaged in that, I think I've done my job or I'm finished with that, or they're not taking it as their priority.

Pam: Well, you gave me so much. You gave me much to think about, to ruminate on, and to drill down on further. I thank you for that because I was getting glimpses of the work that was happening last year. I guess one of many possible follow ups to what you shared, again, you're talking about the slowness that comes, thinking about the slowest cog in the wheel. You talked about that initiative and you said, "It's not a resistance to change, but a resistance to not knowing how many things have to change, not knowing about a safe place to start." I guess one thing I

was wondering is what types of supports do you feel are in place to help, additional supports? You did name some, but what are some supports you feel are in place to help those who are in those meetings and in those discussions who are ready to go and put those into practice?

Heather: I think people I've known who've been teachers for a long time, I'm thinking specifically in social studies, I'm thinking through that domain in this moment, but it's sort of like, okay, I've been teaching about the Lenape people for 30 years, or 20 years, or a decade, and I've gathered so much information. So there is a level of people having knowledge and thinking that they're continually growing and thinking about, when I'm teaching this, this is the reactions of my students, this is their engagement, or their level of smiling, or results given. What's the product?

Heather: So I'm thinking that there's reservation in why I've been doing this and it's working and why change. So I think the piece with what supports are being given is, is there a conversation about redirecting something you've been doing, redirecting a piece of something you're doing, revamping it by starting at an essential question versus a fact, or just scraping it because we are done role playing, whatever it is. I think those are complications. What I've noticed in my school that seems to be working is I love an agenda, I love a focus. I like that we're engaging in work, naming from the beginning. This year we announced at our parent night that these are the topics that we hope to cover in social studies, this is an evolving curriculum. We just named that so that the families who are thinking of traditions that occur at our school that are product-oriented, we might not do it that way and we might just think about what are we engaging with? What are we thinking about? What questions are being asked? How are they being asked? What are we using? I think that's great.

Heather: One thing that my school did last year, we had a grant, and I thought it was a great start, was we focused on one unit and we thought about each person on our team taking an aspect of that. We had a deadline, which also works, I think, for people, me specifically, and saying, "These are the things that we're thinking of revamping with this. We want to create some questions, we want to create a new framework for what the engagement for this is that looks sort of like XYZ." It felt like a small chunk, it was very accessible. When that happened and we did the process of it, we realized we did one aspect of it and then the next year they're going to add on to it. I think that was a baby step, but in terms of a support, I think that works. My brain is going in a thousand places, but that's sort of what I'm thinking.

Pam (Voiceover): Focusing on “one unit” and dividing the work amongst the team makes the goal of crafting culturally sustaining curricula more possible. [Drs. Django Paris and H. Samy Alim](#) remind us that culturally sustaining pedagogies “sustain...linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for social transformation” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 16). This is one of the everyday moves that teacher-interrupters can adopt to do this work in earnest. Heather calls this move by her school a “baby step” but in terms of where this can lead, the possibilities are promising for effecting real change. And, of course, this work requires presence...

Heather: I think just the last thing that comes to my mind is I really appreciated in this PD, once the facilitator asked how present they were in the beginning and actually did a series of questions to help us be present. It took about 10 minutes of their presentation to finally get us to a place of,

I've welcomed you into the meeting so that whatever happened, you can be present or just a little bit more present, like two levels up, and invited people into that. I thought that that was a practice of really activating yourself to saying, I'm committed to something, and then thinking beyond. I think the slowness comes with just all of the said above, I guess. Did that answer your question? I hope.

Pam (Voiceover): Marathons are slow-going and slow-building. Same with this type of work. It requires patience and stamina, and it's certainly not for the faint of heart.

Pam: I wanted to ask you, if someone were to say, "Heather, you've mentioned interrupt and the importance of interruption in this work on anti-racism," I have two questions for you, so I'm going to layer them. One is, and you can answer them in any order that you feel makes the most sense, but what does it take? What are the knowledges, and skills, and dispositions required to be an interrupter of racism and oppression in school settings? Then my second question is, how would you define what it means to be an anti-racist educator?

Heather: Okay, what are the qualities? I think it goes beyond empathy. I think it's a real act of presence. I think that, in terms of being an interrupter, it's kind of moving beyond the literal of facts and understanding and knowledge. It's just sort growing and connecting, I think. In terms of me feeling like a really good interrupter and an educator that feels involved and actively engaged, and feeling proud of my work as an anti-racist and someone who's committed to being social justice oriented in my practice, I think that there has to be transparency.

Heather: Then you have to be able to question without feeling. I think a little bit of it is like, I'm hearing you say this and I'd like to know a little bit more, what is the thinking around, what is the process behind, what are we hoping to get out of it? Just really trying to understand and being able to offer, let's take some time to think about welcoming in, or bringing in, or trying this. I think it also takes a commitment to being beyond yourself a little bit, being involved in a community and recognizing the strengths of the people and advocating for that. I hope that makes sense.

Heather: I think it's also a commitment for me to be really aware of what I'm teaching, which is endless. I am really intentional about what I'm asking my kids and what my own... I can give you a very, very concrete example that is something that makes my bones itch, is asking kids to shush and asking kids to sit still. Those are things that in third grade, with a group of 23 kids, you have the urge to do because everyone is doing it and saying it. It's a practice that I'm really trying to remove from my being and asking kids to all be the same and think the same. I work in a school that has a clear focus of what they want the outcomes to be and I think the framework of that idea does not always align with what the mission is. So for me it's what is the mission? What is my own philosophy? What am I asking kids to do? It's really being aware of when something feels icky, naming it and working towards changing it. That's what I've got.

Pam (Voiceover): Shushing children is a practice embedded deeply within the fabric of the racial capitalist infrastructure of schooling. This type of policing can go unnoticed because adults expect children to perform in accordance with expectations steeped in white supremacy culture. Heather calls this, and other practices, out in the necessarily-slow process of growing into an

interrupter. She also states, unequivocally, that this type of teacher-behavior is *oppressive* behavior.

Pam: Again, such rich, robust answers. Thank you for being so deeply reflective in terms of that concrete example of asking kids to shush and asking kids to sit still and that making your bones itch, I really appreciated that. That just really drove home how deeply this troubles you. What about shushing and asking kids to sit still feels and makes your... I mean, you said what makes your bones itch about that. I wanted to just ask you to tie that even more directly to the work of an anti-racist educator, how have those been used?

Heather: Sure, so how is that related to being an anti-racist educator? Okay, well, I think one thing is that there's not one way of living, being, seeing, doing, behaving. Something that I was thinking about is, we didn't do it this year, but last year we did meet and greets and met all of the families on Zoom, because we started our year on Zoom. In a more norm traditional year we would meet the families in person. So it's a slow process this year, meeting families, with real connection other than pick up, drop off. Those interactions with families, either observing them with their kid or me, is really illuminating to that.

Heather: So we did a questionnaire where we asked, "What are some traditions, what are some customs, what are some daily ritual practices that you and your families do?" So we made space to talk about that in our third grade class and it's beautiful. So the contradiction of welcoming who you are and then the sharpness of, "You've shared, now sh, it's the next person's turn," or "I hear what you're saying. I hear that your family eats dinner on the floor on pillows and you don't wear shoes in your house," and what their practices are, and then in a room saying, I'm eradicating that I'm just taking everything and making it the same form is actually the opposite of welcoming kids, who they are, what they're being is, maybe their bounciness to their step, Maybe the way that they like to stand and listen, and maybe they sway or they're slow in their speech or they're long winded, and we just tell them there's certain ways to think and be.

Heather: That is the opposite of eradicating oppression. I think it's oppressive behavior, it's the opposite of working against oppression. It's just really oppressive, but in a form of what your expectation is. I don't want to be a dictator, I'm not a dictator, and it's really easy to say shush, but I don't know, it's really harmful. It's a very controversial thought I have that is not safe to share with my colleagues, but I'm sharing it with you, and I just don't do it. I take the backend of, "Miss Mohamed, you're allowed to, this is how you should manage or how you should do X, Y, and Z to get their attention." So I just have to actively do a practice that makes sense for me or take the heat of, "Thank you for letting me know that," just an acknowledgement and just demonstrating what makes sense for me, I think.

Pam (Voiceover to the Transition): ...In the marathon that is becoming a teacher-interrupter, one of the most important skills you need to acquire—and *hone*—is navigating power structures. This is what we will turn to next.

[Sound: Wimba Weia fades into School Bell Ding].

Chapter 3: Navigating Power Structures

Pam (Voiceover): Let's return to what Heather said earlier in the episode about her position as an associate teacher.

Heather: This is such a good question, I hope I don't lose my train of thought. One thing that I'm learning is that I'm low on the totem pole as an associate teacher. I am so disposable. However, I am here and being paid to do my job, and so with that comes my responsibility to sharing, asking questions when I think that they're necessary. Why do you do it like that?

Pam's Voiceover: Too often, teachers think that they have no agency when located "low on the totem pole" when in fact, there is a lot that can be done to fight oppression on a daily basis. Heather and I dove into this thread to see what we could unearth.

Pam: Again, so much to unpack in those just few sentences, so thank you for sharing that. So the first follow up is, can you elaborate first on when you said, "I have seen how slow this process can be for some to take hold of." You kind of elaborate a bit on that just now about the presence and it's a lifelong endeavor, it takes commitment, but I'd love to get some specifics as to what led you to that statement and to get some examples. So just can you give the listeners an example of how slow this process can be for someone to take hold of?

Heather: Great. I think what first comes to my mind is the school that I work in. So our school took a stance to actively reword our diversity statement, our mission statement of our school, and our sort of director of the DEI has been really actively involved in the faculty and staff taking a look at that, embracing it, and saying that it's a living document. I think that that is something in itself that I think demonstrates a spark, in that there's a process and the gears are working. Then I think that that has to do with powerful leadership. I think the slowness comes in when there's hesitation, nerves, reservation, and discomfort. I think discomfort is probably the gear that is the slowest cog in the wheel because what happens is there's an initiative, there's an ask, there's a professional development and follow-up or a book to read, or whatever sort of initiative that's taking place.

Pam's Voiceover: Taking a critical eye towards diversity statements is a step that all schools can and should take. As Heather notes, the slowness of this work comes with a deep level of discomfort. That is part and parcel of transforming a system intended to indoctrinate and miseducate. When positioned lower in the hierarchy in schools, teachers still possess the capacity to communicate their questions, hopes, and concerns with those in the upper echelons of the administration.

Heather: I've had conversations with our DEI director about, "Would you mind joining us for a conversation when we're doing our planning and just being an extra set of eyes?" Sometimes when there's an administrator or someone who is not as maybe close and comfortable with you, people are a little bit more thoughtful perhaps about what language is being shared or how. I think that's something that, in general, I think my personality is asking questions. In terms of thinking pretty quickly, I don't think that that makes a lot of sense or I'm trying to figure out why this is being taught this way and is it a lesson? Is it a unit? Is it the whole thing? I think,

depending on the framework of what's being asked or what the study is alludes to the direction of where I go. I think it's hard because there's a discomfort with interrupting people that occurs and it's someone that you were just talking about like, "I hope you have a great weekend," or "What are you doing?" and then you take a shift into redirecting something that needs greater care, I think, to have strong advocacy for.

Pam's Voiceover: This navigation also involves the dynamic of showing *versus* telling.

Pam: Yeah, so more showing as opposed to telling.

Heather: Yeah, and I think part of the telling comes with I'm working with a new partner and a new team, and I'm in a lower position than them, and I think it's going to come up, and when it comes up, I think that there's a line for me, I feel like, of conflict in how to bring something up. I feel a little bit more showing than being like, philosophically, this isn't a great match in terms of school anyway. So I don't know, I feel like I'm constantly navigating that, I think.

Pam: A constant navigation, that is a hallmark of this work. It involves constant navigation and course correction. So much feels like it's the work of AAA, truly, of anti-racist education, the cartography of it. You keep giving me such rich deposits that I keep having some follow-up, some compulsions to follow-up. So one is wondering about what in your estimation would it take for you to feel that you could voice this to and with your colleagues? So to not doff showing, but to do some telling or some direct questioning like, "I'd love to talk about the shushing and the sitting, and how I feel that as the work of an anti-racist educator." What would it take for you to move into the direction of addressing that?

Heather: I think that is a hard conversation. That sounds like a hard conversation for me. I'm thinking about my own experience and I think for me to feel like that conversation can be met with understanding and a level of seriousness to why I'm actually bringing it up and not just a passive, perhaps even aggressive response of some hokey answer is just more baby steps. I read an article recently and I had shared it with my partner teacher, and it was about just sort hokey teaching practices. I said, "Oh, I read this at Bank Street, it's so interesting. Would you like to read it?" I think it's offering that. I think there's space for me to have a conversation about something. Then we've now had some practice in what does it sound like for you to have a conversation? I guess that sounds a little like manipulation, but I really try to feel like we're creating a space to have these conversations.

Heather: I talk a lot about my graduate work and I think that that's also something that's a sounding board for here's something I'm processing and thinking about. I can give you other example, my teacher wanted to make up a behavior chart with sort of rewards, which I can't do. I just can't do it. If the reward comes from the family, then that's on them and their family practice, but I don't know if that's my place. So I took the stance of, "Can I try to show you something I'm thinking about?" which was just language based. So there is a chart, and so it's related to the child and how is it going? Did you catch the Pokemon ball? You did, and draw the Pokemon ball. It's sort of less restrictive and more, I think, question oriented. We talked a little bit about why that was something I was interested in doing versus what she had in place.

Heather: I don't know if I'm there with the shushing yet, just because of the role that I take on as an associate, and I'm learning from a mentor and you get to name yourself mentor before you actually feel like a mentor, but it's okay. So I think it's baby steps for me. Honestly, it sounds the way that you phrased it to me initially, like it would be something I'd bring to an administrator and we'd have a whole grade or larger space of conversing around that, or some more thought into the brain work behind it, versus a one-on-one conversation. Then it feels less pressured some, of this is me imposing on you. It's a thoughtful, deep question that we really need to consider. I think that probably would be safer and I'd be way more comfortable than just targeting someone or them believing that I've hurt their practice, and that's where the ego comes in.

Pam: Well, thank you for that. I really appreciate you kind of mining these examples and unpacking them, or dusting them off and just really illuminating them for us. A couple of final questions, one is in terms of Heather's past, present, and future lives as an anti-racist educator or aspiring... I think we're always aspiring, there's always an aspirational aspect to this work. How would you, not compare, but how would you articulate and frame Heather two years ago, Heather now, and where do you hope Heather is a year or two from now, if someone were to say the chapters of Heather's anti-racist education?

Heather: Then I'm trying to make space in my practice to have conversations with my colleagues that are more oriented around, how did your social studies lesson today go on that? What surfaced from it? I keep using social studies. Then debriefing with each other about what questions surfaced and what's next. So it's not just lost in a lesson. It's like, we're all thinking about, you had a much more powerful conversation, why did that happen? How can I get there? I think in the future, I think if I stay in working in independent schools, it sounds like it's the same with a partner. But if I wasn't and I was in a school that it was just me, I'd still work with people, and so I think I hope to continue to make space to not get siloed in my own locker but really be aware of what other people's practice is.

Pam's Voiceover: As Heather and I neared the end of our interview, we took a beautiful deep-dive into the area of identity. Why does this matter and make sense? It matters because seeing students in the fullness of their humanity is at the core of transforming into an interrupter.

[transition: Sounds of kids at school/in classroom]

Epilogue: Seeing Students in the Fullness of Their Humanity (One Hallmark of Interruption)

[Sound of bell dinging]

Pam's Intro/Voiceover: On the Tightrope podcast, co-hosted by Drs. Cornel West and Tricia Rose, one of their guests (Dr. Beverly Daniel-Tatum, author of *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*) said, "Fundamentally, all of us as human beings want to feel seen, heard, and understood. That's just foundational to who we are as human beings. If we think about the education system as deeply relational, we need to feel seen, heard, and understood in that educational relationship." All I want to do is shout "facts" when I hear this truth. With Dr. Tatum's words ringing in her spirit, Heather elaborated upon what seeing her students looks like

in her teaching practice. At this point in the interview, Dr. Tatum's words served as catalyst and frame (once again) for Heather's critical reflections. Another remarkable quote of [Dr. Tatum's from "The Tightrope"](#) podcast reads:

"But if we think about the fact that so many of our young people are stepping into school environments, that's like a big photograph, and they are looking for themselves in it and yet not finding themselves there. When you were in the room when the picture was taken, but you're not in the photograph that's been handed to you, you might first ask, what's wrong with this picture? But if it happens over and over and over again, you're going to start to ask not what's wrong with this picture, but what's wrong with me? What's wrong with me or people like me that we're always left out of the picture?"

Heather: So I am on a serious journey of... I will talk with you about my idea, untitled, the Rosebud Thorn Theory, which is basically what is your intention for doing something, and what surfaces, and what is the reality of what is felt? So something that was shared about the photograph, I was thinking entering this year about how I don't know what the parents or guardians or grownups of my children, I don't know what they look like, I don't know who they are. I often find that even when I do know who they are, I don't really know all the things. So I just asked every kid to send me a photo of their family. My partner teacher said it might take a really long time, sometimes it's really slow feedback.

Heather: So I put up the photos that I had and then the next day, everyone who didn't have it said, "Here's a photo, because I need to be on the wall." So we have a wall that will live forever in the classroom this year of all of their families. Then my partner teacher and I weren't on it and they said, "Where are you? Why aren't you on it? You're part of our class." It was a really small thing and not really a deep thinking thing, other than I just want to know who your parents are and who are your grownups at home.

Heather: But I wrote down that idea of what was said in the podcast about deeply relational, and I really believe that you can just get kids to do something because you want, and you can ask kids to be present in or to participate in something and you might feel successful, and that is a mediocre feeling. But if kids feel really invited because they're allowed to be who they are, because there's safety and confidence in that, then you get something way greater. So I connect with that, I think it's part of what I really hope my practice is. I hope my practice is, was it validating or affirming identity? I love affirming identity.

Heather: Knowing that you have moved to a new country, or that you have two moms, or that you live in a different neighborhood than the students in your school and that it takes you 40 minutes to get to school instead of your neighbors who walk and it takes seven minutes, and knowing that your relative died, or whatever it is, it's knowing who's in your class, building a space where your kids appreciate, and respect, and understand each other, teaching them what a community is like and what it feels like to be part of a full community, not a passive one, I feel like that's a memory that you'll have. Then you look at that picture and you find yourself, and then you look at everyone on the picture and you're like, but I have memories of all of these people in this time. It's like I found myself, but I knew who I was in that space. It's really cool and I love that, what you shared.

Pam: Oh, there's something that's both powerful and clarifying about the ways that Dr. Tatum-

Heather: I love it.

Pam: ...framed that, the ABCs, thinking about affirming identity, building community, cultivating leadership. The way she cohered around the photograph, who's in the photograph? If you knew you were there when it was taken but you don't see yourself, and how that goes to at least a part of the heart of anti-racist education is, I believe, how do we take photographs that honor the fullness of who was in the shot?

[transition: "Wimba Weia"]

CLOSING:

As we bring this episode to a close, we return to the questions we posed at the top:

- What can interrupting racism (or ableism...) look like, on a daily basis, for the average teacher? How can one teacher's story help us understand what it means to interrupt?
 - Heather's experience demonstrated becoming an interrupter is a *daily* commitment.
 - She emphasized the importance of staying true to yourself while acknowledging that this work is life-long. Heather's word choice was intentional and by using the term "marathon," she reminded us that teacher-interrupters are vigilant—taking a critical eye toward their daily (inter)actions with students to root-out policing moves.
 - Finally, Heather helped us see how teachers at all levels—even those lower in the school's hierarchy can speak truth to power and partner with colleagues to do this work daily.
- Does the discussion of teacher-interrupters move us closer to, or further away from, transformation and liberation in education?

In short, focusing exclusively on anti-racism is woefully insufficient, which means that aspiring teacher-interrupters (and their school administration) should adopt an analytical lens that faces racism *and* settler colonialism as they have shaped schooling. In a future episode, we'll tackle settler colonialism more directly so that we can grow our understanding as a community.

This question can make a teacher feel acutely vulnerable and convicted because it calls into question the value of anti-racist projects in schools. IF schools take up a rigorous project of anti-racism that widens the lens to include a critical unpacking of settler colonialism and imperialism, as they are implicated in the origins of the US educational system, then they are probably on a clearer path toward actual transformation. Leigh Patel reminds us of this in [*No Study Without Struggle*](#) when she writes, "I suggest naming the problem of racism in higher education is necessary but insufficient. Settler colonialism, an ongoing structure of many nations, including the United States, offers a more comprehensive framework explaining why marginalized populations experience distinct yet deeply connected forms of harm and barriers to higher education." While Dr. Patel was referring to higher ed specifically in this quote, her point is nonetheless equally pertinent to Pre-K through 12th grade education.

Musical Interlude: Wimba Weia (One Last Time)... :)

What I'm Reading...

It's time for me to share what I'm reading. To honor Black August, where we commemorated the struggles waged by Black political prisoners, I read the iconic text authored by [George Jackson, *Blood in My Eye*](#). It is a WORD, and I recommend it highly for those ready to engage in the fight to dismantle capitalism. As I noted above, I'm reading [No Study Without Struggle](#) (the text by Leigh Patel). Any and all groups of educators would benefit from reading this text in a group of critical friends. Finally, I'm reading the book [Mi Lenguaje Roto, by Quiara Alegría Hudes](#). Though lighter than the other two texts I'm reading, it's nonetheless equally compelling and takes the reader on a journey through the life of a young Puertorriqueña as she recounts many memories that shaped her life and that of her family in their Philly neighborhood. I highly recommend it!

As we're always engaging in a principled critique of the education system here in the U.S., I thought it fitting to end this episode with the wise words of [Dr. Robin D.G. Kelley](#):

“If you do criticism well, the most loving thing you can do is to critique. And the reason why I say that is, you don't critique to make someone feel bad. You don't critique to make yourself feel good. You don't critique to prove to everyone in the room that you know so much. You critique because our life depends on getting the right answers...”

With that, take care, keep interrupting oppressions in schools and remember, we gotta love one another. ☺

[“Gotta Love...” from Artlist.io]