Research Article

Using Digital Book Clubs during the COVID-19 Pandemic to Minimize the Distance of Social Distancing

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INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that making the transition from in-person to remote learning has been challenging. From failed audio and visual connections to Zoom hackings, we have acclimated to social distance confines as we strive to support students, especially those from high-poverty environments. During this pandemic, our students and their families are experiencing a range of struggles, from accessing resources to navigating a world where racism, sexism, and homophobia, to name a few, have become the backdrop of a politically dense society. As educators, we must keep these challenges and contexts at the forefront of our minds, meeting students where they are while prioritizing their social-emotional needs and self-advocacy efforts. Committed to social justice, Anderson and Jody created spaces for vulnerable populations, specifically formerly incarcerated adults and young adults within alternative school districts. We define social justice as the act of advocating for people who have been marginalized in society. Thus, we curated safe forums where participants could discuss social justice issues that most impacted them while connecting with other readers during digital book club experiences.

Social justice also means creating opportunities for diverse populations to collaborate to increase their empathy and world perspectives. We attribute our understanding of social justice to Paulo Freire (1970), who defines praxis as action and reflection directed at the structures to be transformed. The structures transformed in society are the thought processes of individuals as they exist in the world. Since the pandemic, we have used technology to minimize distance by creating

online book clubs where participants could learn and grow from the characters in the text, harnessing the power of connection and imagination. In this way, book clubs became social justice incubators that allowed readers to explore societal conditions while brainstorming innovative solutions to combat inequities. Maxine Greene (1995) asserts, "Of all the cognitive capacities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions" (p. 8). Imagination is why we love to read; the characters do all the work, get into all the trouble, and make all the mistakes, while we can relax and note the outcomes of each decision while evaluating the probability of the result against our realities. Anderson and Jody created these imaginative spaces through digital book clubs, where readers could engage with the same texts online, asynchronously, or synchronously through smartphones, tablets, or computers. Building community is social justice as the processes we utilized were humanizing. The participants experienced equity and engaged in spaces where they chose topics to speak their truths and be heard. We also encouraged participants to apply these conversations to their own lives to develop collaborative practices for agency and advocacy. Thus, we used these forums to inspire imagination and promote social justice for our readers, providing them opportunities to use texts and their experiences to think about their lives and communities—and how they intersect.

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During these times of trauma, as social justice educators, we must create flexible spaces and respond to students' needs. Creating digital book clubs, where participants are free to discuss their most prominent issues, allows us to build their sense of agency and control, particularly when many feel helpless and hopeless. Thus, we used pedagogies grounded in culturally sustaining instruction that begins with our students' assets, interests, and diverse backgrounds and builds on those to best meet their needs in the current moment. Through conversations around social justice, especially related to our students' lived experiences, readers considered what inequities existed within the texts and how those played out within their communities. Ultimately, we imagined ways where readers could address systemic inequity and advocate for themselves and others. We divide this article into two digital book club approaches (asynchronous and synchronous), providing an overview of our processes and analyzing the kinds of conversations that ensued from these experiences. The following question guides our work: Using pedagogies grounded in social justice, how do adults experience digital book clubs during a global pandemic?

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES GROUNDED IN SOCIAL JUSTICE: TRANSACTIONAL THEORIES AND CULTURALLY SUSTAINING PRACTICES

As both authors are committed to social justice, our pedagogical frameworks are also. Thus, we grounded our digital book clubs in culturally sustaining practices and transactional theories. Based on the strength and asset-based approaches (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Paris, 2012), culturally sustaining pedagogies work

to sustain students' cultural diversities to ensure that all students experience academic success while they are also supported to become socio-politically conscious. Educators can use these approaches to help students develop their sense of social justice by integrating critical lenses for inequities in access, power, and privilege while valuing student-centered practices that affirm and sustain students' literacies and identities. Ladson-Billings (2014) urges educators to prioritize their understanding of students' intersectional and complex cultures and how these identities shift (Ladson-Billings, 2014). In doing so, we must be constantly mindful of our students' bi/multiculturalism and bi/multilingualism as it intersects with pop culture and current events to foster and sustain "linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (Paris, 2012, p. 95).

Transactional theory, situated within the field of literacy, is a powerful example of social justice pedagogies, specifically within the field of culturally sustaining instruction. Students' identities are centered and paramount to how they interact with texts and each other. Reader response or transactional theory considers individual identities and social practices in interpreting literacy events. Coined by Rosenblatt, transactional theory shifts traditional textual interactions of one solitary meaning to a transaction between the text and the reader's interpretations of that text (Twomey, 2007). Transactional theory informed our insights. Book clubs not only allow readers to transact with the reading but also with other readers (Fecho & Meacham, 2007). This transaction is a culturally sustaining approach and practice of social justice. The readers have the agency and power to construct meanings through the prism of their identities, values, and lived experiences.

Through the medium of words, texts bring into readers' consciousness concepts, sensuous experiences, and characters' interactions with others. The unique meanings and, more particularly, the submerged associations these words have for individual readers will largely determine what the work communicates to them. Thus, the reader brings to the literature personalities, memories, present needs and preoccupations, and particular moods and physical conditions of the moment. These and other elements in a never-to-be-duplicated combination determine readers' responses to the texts (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Students' identities and literacies are unique in that their sense of self can be influenced by reading (Rosenblatt, 1995); conversely, students' literacy engagements are influenced by their identities, affecting how they interact with different texts within different contexts (Ferdman, 1990). Literacies and identities are socially constructed (Moje & Luke, 2009). Identity construction and literacy practices are often not conducted in isolation and are renegotiated based on context and interactions. Thus, literacy and identity are fluid and interactive, open to changing, contradictory, and permeable readings and identity constructions. Some theorists in transactional approaches (Brooks, 2006; Twomey, 2007) emphasize that reader response should account for personal connections and the social and political dimensions of the readers, texts, and contexts. In this way, textual meanings are influenced by readers' cultural background (Brooks, 2006), social interactions, sociocultural conditions, and the contexts in which individuals engage with texts (Twomey, 2007). As social justice educators, we must understand that our students' social, linguistic, and cultural practices must be at the forefront of analysis when understanding their textual interpretations. In moving away from traditional approaches to literacy, our pedagogies intersect with social justice practices, giving readers the power to bring their sense of self to the texts and further develop those interactions through collaborations with others.

BOOK CLUBS AS SPACES FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Book clubs have long and rich histories within educational and community-based settings, mainly in how they can be used for social justice. For example, Jody has conducted research on in-person book clubs with young adults for over a decade, finding these forums as powerful spaces to enhance literacy and promote social-emotional development and agency (Polleck, 2010; Polleck, 2011). Her research demonstrates how book clubs mediate tools for marginalized youth to discuss critical issues in their lives. Readers use characters as catalysts to reflect on and develop solutions to their difficulties, from familial situations (Polleck, 2011) to peer relationships (Polleck, 2011). Most recently, she analyzed how young adults of color used book clubs to discuss social justice issues; specifically, participants discussed how race, class, and gender impacted the characters and their own lives (Polleck & Epstein, 2015). The readers then used the texts and discussions to share ways to dismantle inequities in their own communities and resist acts of discrimination.

Other landmark research has also emerged with marginalized populations and book clubs, demonstrating how these locations operate as spaces of social justice where participants can discuss inequities in ways that traditional classrooms often overlook or ignore (Boston & Baxley, 2007; Brooks, Browne, & Hampton, 2008; Fisher, 2006). By using texts that illuminate the experiences of people of color, book clubs have enabled readers to explore their historical legacies (Fisher, 2006) and enhance self-esteem (Boston & Baxley, 2007). Developing voice and building confidence are critical components of becoming engaged in social justice work. Book clubs can also help readers grapple with their own discrimination, particularly as it connects to racism and skin color stratification (Brooks, Browne & Hampton, 2008). Further, researchers have found that book clubs can help readers who live in diverse societies (Raphael, Florio-Ruane, & George, 2001) and those who experience identity duality (Vyas, 2004). Anderson and Jody's study seeks to build upon this research, examining how book clubs can function in remote spaces using pedagogies grounded in social justice, including focusing on culturally sustaining instruction.

ASYNCHRONOUS DIGITAL BOOK CLUBS WITH ADULTS WITH CRIMINAL CONVICTION HISTORIES

Anderson Smith has taught creative writing and spoken-word poetry in medium- and maximum-security prisons for over five years. Working with adults in and out of prison has been personal for him, since he has directly felt its impact on his sister and father. As an *insider*, aware of the effects of incarceration on the mind and family, he understands their pain because he's lived with it. Anderson has also seen how the system can break spirits and make people feel less than human. He identifies as a Black, cis-gender man who believes that the support of culturally sustaining communities can help reacclimate and empower people marginalized and estranged from society. Thus, he began his work in social justice research by creating digital book clubs with formerly incarcerated adults. These experiences started at the end of 2019 and unfolded during the 2020 pandemic. There were 11 participants, six males and five females; four identified as Black, four as White, one as Latinx, and one as Mixed Race.

Anderson used asynchronous methods as adults have a range of responsibilities, from child-rearing to day or evening jobs. Thus, many could not meet with a group at a regularly scheduled time. Shookey explained,

> I don't have time to sit down in a group setting, 'cause my life is so busy…with the digital book club, I got a chance to headigutr everybody's thought process about a similar thing that I'm doing or reading, and it made it so much easier. I could sit down anytime—one o'clock in the morning—if I can't sleep, any time of the day, and go back over and hear how everybody felt about the book.

> Comments such as these indicate that flexible approaches allow members to contribute to discussions without feeling tied down. Simultaneously, asynchronous book clubs maintain culturally sustaining stances. We can respond to readers' demanding lifestyles with the elasticity to transact with the reading, encoding the text with their unique understandings and contributing to discussions that are most convenient for them.

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Regarding text selection, Anderson used *The Alchemist* as the content touched on themes of self-rehabilitation and strength of character, both critical dispositions needed for modeling social justice engagements. Additionally, the novel contains elements of fate and free will; fear; warfare; dreams, language and communication; and love. Anderson assumed the role of observer, as an *outsider*, by facilitating discussions through open-ended questioning. The book club lasted for one month—with the novel divided into three sections over three weeks—and the last week was for focus group debriefing. Anderson provided participants with flexible reading schedules, which allowed them to read at their own pace. Each week he also provided participants with prompts connected to the text and the readers' lives, allowing for and encouraging transactional experiences. Part of being a social justice educator means relinquishing the power of the educational space, allowing participants choice in how they respond to the text and each other. Despite the pandemic, Anderson's questions remained focused on the book and post-incarceration rather than society's rapid changes, as Anderson sought to build community and connections around the shared experiences of incarceration.

Participants communicated through Flipgrid, an online application that records video. Each week, Anderson recorded his Flipgrid, explaining the assigned reading and corresponding opened-ended prompts. He asked participants to record a 90-second response and then respond to at least one other participant. Participants were given one full week to post their reactions to the text and respond to each other. Having time to review and revise comments provides freedom not afforded during a synchronous book club experience. Social justice conversations must happen in collaborative spaces, such as online book clubs. It's hard to find agency in solitude; however, we find that through the encouragement of actively listening and thoughtful feedback and comments.

Anderson began the book clubs to build community by encouraging participants to introduce themselves through Flipgrid. Readers could then comment on each other's posts, finding connections between each other's lived experiences. Anderson did not set any restrictions to avoid influencing their ways of engaging in the process. In this way, each participant's agency remains intact. Below is a snapshot of these responses:

> Orrin: I was locked up in Ohio for six years for an alcoholic-related drunk-driving accident. While incarcerated, I got involved with this group called HBC, based out of Columbus.

> Faerie: I'm sort of a gypsy, so right now, I'm in Boston, but usually, I'm in New York, but I tend to travel a lot, so I look forward to meeting other people in the group that are from all over. I was in jail once; it wasn't a really dramatic, long period of time, but it definitely affected my life, and I would like to start talking about it, because I didn't for a long time, and I hope that I can help other people talk about it, too.

> Dino: I was incarcerated for...too long. Anytime is too long for four years. I returned home, and I'm still working on my life, doing a number of things. Why I joined is [my] former career was a professional teacher and college professor; I love literature.

In keeping with culturally sustaining practices, Anderson considered the introduction foundational to the book club, where participants presented their identities and maintained their agency in what they shared. Most participants elected to discuss their experiences in prisons or post-incarceration. Building community is an essential act of social justice as it allows readers to connect and build trust with one another.

As to weekly routines, Anderson generated questions that would allow for transactional responses. Readers could organically and collaboratively begin to connect deeply with the text and each other. Below is a sample prompt:

> Once you have had an opportunity to read the Prologue and Part One, please share a comment on any of the following discussion topics: What do your shoes say about you? What would Santiago's jacket symbolize in your life, and why? What lines resonated with you from this section, and why?

Many participants selected Question 2, with Santiago's jacket resonating with each participant differently; many used the jacket to connect with their own experiences in prison. The statement below from Dino illustrates this type of agentic, transactional response:

> The jacket…he's young... he's a little immature, but he's kind of strategic, and while we were in prison, we need it to be that way; we re-purposed, redefined, something in new ways constantly. I mean, I remember cardboard, cardboard became the greatest thing in prison to me, I mean, I don't know how many different ways I used it…

Understanding the jacket's utility allowed Dino to reflect on his incarceration experience and how he was able to survive prison. From a social justice perspective, Dino's public reflection indicates that he felt safe sharing a moment of vulnerability, which ultimately leads to forming a strong connection with other participants.

Anderson often found that vulnerability played a significant factor in building culturally sustaining communities and enhancing social-emotional development. Through vulnerability, participants had opportunities to see and learn from each other through their shared histories of incarceration. Discourse in digital spaces allows readers to speak to one another in safe ways asynchronously. Shookey's transactional response as follows is such an example:

> Those 'aha' moments, which I think all of us experience throughout our life, we tumble, we fall down, we get back up, we fall back down again, into that second hole, get back up, and fall back down into the third and fourth hole, and then the light comes on, this, like, 'aha'…I think when we pay attention to the 'aha' moments, it makes us, it gives us a better positive outcome, and Santiago had a lot...of life 'aha' moments in the story.

In presenting Santiago's vulnerability and comparing it to his own, Shookey participates in a transactional and connective healing space of self-expression. Rosenblatt (1995) explains that when a person transacts with a text and makes a personal connection, it is inevitable that they will bring their "problems into the open to face them or seek the help of others without the embarrassment of explicit self-evaluation" (p. 196). As such, the book club became a space for social-emotional development and release by reading the text individually and connecting to one another digitally to " create a happier way of life for themselves and for others" (Rosenblatt, p. 262). Vulnerability is a significant step in social justice because readers demonstrate their agency in revealing private emotions and moments and share courageous ways in which they survived— and will survive collectively—in the future.

Moreover, in becoming more vulnerable, readers began building stronger communities and relationships with each other. Anderson found that participants began using words such as "we," "you," and "us." While none of the participants knew each other before the study—save for Vincent and The Mechanic—they all identified with one another because of their experiences of incarceration and current shared experiences in a book club. Words such as *we, you,* and *us* became synonymous, in many cases, with the singular *I*, but could also be understood to literally mean the collective unit *we*. This added layer is a model for social justice and the need for collective moments to connect and uplift. For instance, Breezey shares her take on the character Santiago:

> Santiago getting scammed… now that really just kind of stood out to me, and I'm glad you touched on it, because how many times are <u>we</u> in places or situations where <u>we</u> don't fully understand the language? Whether it be in writing, whether it be a physical or actual language... that barrier, that stands in between, you know, <u>us</u> and something, and <u>we</u> end up on the short end up. It makes you wonder if <u>we</u> ignored the things around <u>us</u> or the red flags that were put up; you know, to say, 'Hey, hold up, wait a minute.' I know for me, I've ignored a lot of red flags.

Dino also began using a communal *we* to form a connection with The Mechanic and James:

> You know, a lot of times, <u>we</u> want somebody to hold our hand or show us the way. Show me; tell me what it is that I need to do. I guess that's the planner in me, but, you know, for somebody that can just jump out there and not know where they're going, blindfolded, you know, I applaud you.

How participants responded to texts showed that they used the courage and strength that the protagonist, Santiago, displayed and began validating each other's thoughts and actions. Such engagements are acts of agency and advocacy. Confirmation of thought and experience within a digital setting allows the feelings to transcend the digital space into the participants' lived environments. Therefore, by fostering a space conducive to building confidence, trust, and community, a person may be empowered by their peers. The dialogue between participants developed a supportive community that increased their self-esteem by validating their unique contributions and enabled participants to reflect and consider outside perspectives. Social justice cultivated within an incubation space, such as the one created within an online book club community, can transcend the participant's lived experience for an imagined society by that participant in their own society.

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SYNCHRONOUS DIGITAL BOOK CLUBS WITH YOUNG ADULTS IN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

From March until June 2020, Jody facilitated three synchronous digital book clubs with young adults who attended various alternative schools in Amsterdam, Netherlands, and New York City. The first book club, the "Scythe Club," consisted of six students, ages 17 to 21, with four identifying as White females, one as a White male, and one as a Black female. The five White students attended an alternative special education school in Amsterdam; Jody had taught these students previously while researching book clubs for youth with autism. She also previously taught the sixth student, Daphne, in an NYC program that offered adolescents early exposure to college; currently, Daphne is 17 and has been homeschooled by her parents for the past four years. Concerned about the pandemic's impact, Jody reached out to these students, checking their safety and well-being. All students eagerly agreed to participate in book clubs and due to their shared love of science fiction, read *Scythe* (Shusterman, 2017).

Jody facilitated the other two book clubs for Horizons, an alternative adult education school for New York City students, where she has been an instructional coach for five years. The school serves students ages 17 to 21 who want to receive their high school equivalency diploma. During the early stages of school shutdowns, a Horizons school counselor reached out to students to see who wanted to participate in digital book clubs. Fourteen volunteered, and Jody co-facilitated the

sessions with the school counselor. The second book club, "Friends and Fire," consisted of seven young women, ages 18 to 21. Two identified as African American and were born in the U.S.; four were Caribbean American, one from Guyana, and three from Jamaica. The seventh young woman moved from Yemen to the U.S. two years ago and spoke Arabic fluently. This group read two books, including *How to Make Friends with the Dark* (Glasgow, 2019) and *With the Fire on High* (Acevedo, 2019). The third book club, "Stars," consisted of seven young men, ages 19 to 21. All identified as Muslim, with two from Senegal and the other five from Bangladesh; these young men were all emergent English readers and speakers who elected to read *Written in the Stars* (Saeed, 2016).

In addition to coaching at Horizons, Jody is faculty in literacy at an NYC college. She identifies as White, cis-gender, and as an anti-racist educator; she has taught young adults in urban settings for over 20 years. As Jody did not share the same cultural, linguistic, or religious backgrounds of her students, she often listened and asked questions. Part of being a social justice educator is ensuring that students' voices are centered. Additionally, she wanted to empower students, so she encouraged students to ask questions of each other and share their ideas and perspectives as they intersected with the texts they read. Jody kept field notes throughout the process, reflecting through memos, so as to uncover and disrupt any biases or assumptions she had about her students. She also checked in with them at the end of each session to see if the book clubs were facilitated in ways that were culturally sustaining, emotionally responsive, and student-centered. It was critical for her to assess and disrupt her own position of power and privilege as a White woman; thus, throughout this time, she read books on social justice in education, culturally sustaining pedagogies, Whiteness, and anti-racism (Kay, 2018; Love, 2020; Matias, 2016; Paris & Alim, 2017) to inform her practices while also engaging in conversations and webinars with biracial, indigenous, and scholars and educators of color to ensure her approaches were culturally sustaining to her students' diversities. The following analysis narrative captures her field notes.

The first critical step in adhering to social justice practices within a digital space is ensuring that Jody deeply understood her students' needs, interests, and current contexts due to the pandemic. Ladson-Billings (2014) reminds us that we must continually strive to learn about and connect with our students so that we can modify our approaches accordingly. It is through these connections that we can build trust with one another so as to begin the work of agency and advocacy. Thus, through Google forms, emails, and phone calls, Jody surveyed all readers to learn about their cultures, literacies, languages, reading preferences and dispositions, and needed resources.

To maintain culturally sustaining stances grounded in social justice, Jody gave students choices in the books they selected. Providing options in culturally relevant texts allows students to participate in powerful interpretations, as the books mirror their interests and diversities, allowing for greater engagement and connection (Lee & Giles, 2012). As an example, the "Scythe Club" wanted to read science fiction, and so, she provided students with options, selecting books that centered on social justice issues while also reflecting their neuro, sexual, gender, racial, and ethnic diversities. Some choices included *On the Edge of Gone* (Duyvis, 2016), *Dread Nation* (Ireland, 2018), and *Scythe* (Shusterman, 2017). While each book was fiction, they all integrated commentary on either societal inequities or systemic discrimination based on disability, gender, or race. As another example, the "Stars" book club preferred to read about arranged marriages, as many of these young men were at an age in which this tradition is done in their countries. However, due to their U.S.

immigration, familial separations, and the pandemic, for most, this process had been delayed—and so they requested texts that centered this topic.

Culturally sustaining and social justice approaches also required that Jody be flexible in terms of content and process—but also consistent to maintain a sense of safety for all participants. In terms of consistency, she established weekly routines for time and format, which was critical in helping readers establish safety and structure, which they often could not sustain due to the quarantine. At the same time, she had to be flexible to account for students' contexts. For example, Ramadan took place during the pandemic, and so she changed the meeting times to accommodate the Muslim men. Jody was also flexible in how students opted to engage in the process. Specifically, using Zoom, some readers chose to show their faces, keeping their phones propped up while they cared for their siblings or cooked food for their families. For others, they left their screens dark, putting up pictures of themselves instead. Jody taught students how to use Zoom backgrounds, in case they did not want others to see where they lived, which was a concern for many. She also checked in with students individually to see how they were doing—and how the book clubs were working for them. For the NYC students, Jody found that many lost their jobs, didn't know where to get food, were afraid to leave their homes, had to take care of family members, and they or someone in their family had to continue working in dangerous conditions that put them at risk for contracting COVID-19. So, when students did not read, but they came to group, Jody met them where they were. Often, their peers would summarize the readings to those who could not read, so that everyone felt included and could participate. The goal was to create nurturing communities that, while were about books and social justice topics—were also about forging connections during times of crisis. These flexible processes also empowered students, as despite the challenges of the pandemic, they could still successfully participate within the digital community.

Jody was also intentional about creating culturally and emotionally responsive online communities (Polleck & Shabdin, 2013) and thus always opened book clubs with relationship-building activities, to help readers connect and feel valued and supported. During one meeting, Jody started with, "Is there something in your home that gives you a sense of security during the pandemic?" Students then shared ways they used people or resources to establish a sense of security during times of fear and uncertainty. As educators, if we want our students to engage in social justice, we must first help them to feel safe and connected. Jody also used opening activities to directly address current events and social justice issues. For example, just after the video of George Floyd was released and the demonstrations began, all three book clubs talked about their perspectives and experiences with police brutality. These conversations were critical in understanding ways in which systemic racism and racialized violence impact biracial, indigenous, and people of color. The "Scythe Club," for example, gained a deeper perspective of race in the U.S., as Daphne and Jody shared their knowledge of historical and current racism; the Dutch students then shared their racialized perspectives and experiences in Amsterdam. These international perspectives also occurred in the "Stars" book club, as the men from Senegal discussed their experiences with police brutality, which differed greatly from their Bengali peers. Despite their differences, students used these spaces to strategize ways to advocate for themselves and others, developing collective critical consciousness as a way to understand, deconstruct, and confront injustices (Ladson-Billings, 2014). While none of these initial conversations focused on the books, they were critical, particularly during times of crisis and trauma. As facilitators for social justice, we cannot ignore what is happening in the world—and thus—our instruction must pause to allow for discussions

about ways we can contribute to our communities, because as Pitts (2016) reminds us, "We can no longer afford to be silent" (p. 46). Most importantly, these opening conversations offered readers time and space to brainstorm collectively ways they could be involved in movements such as #BlackLivesMatter to dismantle racist systems within their countries and communities.

Conversations around social justice also arose when readers discussed the texts themselves, as Jody was deliberate in probing questions, asking students to reflect on the textual sociopolitical events, and connect those to present time. The "Scythe Club," for example, discussed how having a computer-led government (as described in the novel) would lead to less chaos, particularly during the pandemic. Students shared how politicians used COVID-19 for politicking, arguing that artificial intelligence would more equitably distribute resources. These conversations led students to strategize ways governments could have better handled the pandemic, brainstorming methods for advocacy through phone calls, emails, and social media. For the "Stars" book club, the young men talked about women's rights—as they had not read a book before written from a Muslim woman's perspective. They shared their empathy for the main character Naila and discussed the inequities that existed between genders within their Muslim communities, offering diverse perspectives from Senegal and Bangladesh. They also talked about the differences between arranged and forced marriages and how the age marriage allowances for women versus men are inequitable worldwide. These conversations were critical because dialogue is the springboard for action, where students can collectively develop the means so that they can then independently engage in the actions. In this case, the young men shared how they advocated for the women in their families and how they planned to advocate for their own daughters in the future.

Finally, in centering social justice and culturally sustaining approaches, Jody also attended to readers' social-emotional needs. Being a responsive facilitator means centering love and connection, with hopes of ultimately developing students' sense of advocacy and allowing space for students to cope with their current and past trauma (Love, 2020). Therefore, many of the conversations were around self-care, particularly as they connected to the pandemic and other issues. With the "Friends and Fire" book club, for example, while reading *Making Friends with the Dark*, the young women discussed the character Tiger and her depression. The Horizons counselor helped students connect the text to their current emotions, discussing ways in which they could alleviate their stress by reading, taking walks, meditating, and calling friends. They also talked about bringing "light into the heaviness," meaning finding moments of joy to sustain spirits and cope with uncertainties and fears. This approach required every session end with a debriefing about how students were feeling and concluding with hope, specifically asking students to share something they learned or offer one goal they had for themselves. Social justice can be challenging work for us as educators and for our students as well; thus, explicitly discussing actions for self-care is critical if we want to sustain our students' momentum in advocating for change in their lives and their communities.

CONCLUSION

Asynchronous and synchronous digital book clubs have unique benefits, particularly as we work to infuse social justice into our educational communities. While asynchronous flexibility allows participants to contribute to discussions at their own pace and have more

time to consider other members' comments, the synchronous experience affords organic, unrehearsed, real-time responses. Despite the choices educators make, we believe that *both* alternatives offer critical moments for community connections, literacy growth, and social justice imaginings and collaborations. Further, both spaces afford transactional reading experiences, where the participants' interpretations of text and self can be nourished and developed through listening, integrating, and collaborating with others. Before deciding on synchronous versus asynchronous spaces, we urge educators to attend to the digital book club participants' contexts and the contexts of our current moment in time. For example, synchronous experiences may not be conducive for working-class adults who must subordinate personal and community development for their families' immediate needs. Ultimately, if we are to create culturally sustaining communities where participants can begin to engage in conversations centering social justice, we must take into consideration our participants' lives and families, their access to technology, their work schedules, and home environments. It is not about the convenience for us as facilitators—but what our readers' needs are—and the contexts of their communities and home lives. Further, as social justice educators, we cannot put our heads in the sand as the world continues to unravel. In this way, we need to simultaneously fold in and unpack the injustices of our world and connect those to the texts that we read so readers can imagine and discuss a different and better world.

As many of us are engaging in remote learning in the Fall and Spring due to the continued rise of COVID-19 cases and deaths in the U.S., we ask educators to think about their student populations and ways in which we can reach them through culturally sustaining approaches that center their identities, communities and lived experiences—while also providing flexibility and choice to empower students and increase participation and engagement. The importance of finding out the needs of adults becomes foundational in establishing direction and cohesion, which becomes the glue to culturally sustaining communities. The need for choice and flexibility recognizes that relationships with the members within the group and the text itself provide opportunities for social-emotional development and communal knowledge building. Thus, we suggest creating culturally sustaining spaces, like digital book clubs, that prioritize dialogue so that readers cannot only have their thoughts validated, but also be given opportunities to learn from others as a way of constructing identity, building agency, and reimagining ways to apply what they have learned to their own communities. We also believe that in creating such spaces, we can develop readers' critical consciousness in collaborative ways to develop strategies to advocate for themselves and others. Pitts (2016) explains, "Teaching as an act of resistance and teaching as an act of healing are not mutually exclusive" (Pitts, p. 49). Thusly, we ask educators to center both students' student-emotional needs along with their development of social justice. Specifically, we offer the following recommendations:

> *"Digital book clubs, through the texts that we read and through our interactions with one another, can evoke feelings that may transcend temporality in those that choose to read not just with their eyes, but through the hope that they share for an equitable and just society."*

- Survey adult readers to learn about their identities, communities, preferences, interests, and contexts.
- Consider how to balance social justice work with that of social-emotional support.
- Ask for and integrate readers' suggestions on improving the process so that the spaces continually and organically grow according to their needs.
- Empower students by offering choice and flexibility in either the texts or how readers can respond to one another.

This pandemic has provided stillness where imagination and technology can forge new pathways of engagements for those whom we serve. It has also taught us to recognize that although there is not a lot that we can control in our students' lives, we can create authentic, communal, and dialogic spaces that work to minimize the distance of social distancing. Books beg to be discussed. Through reading texts and sharing our understandings with others—whether in asynchronous or synchronous ways—we can create spaces that promote imagination and connection for healing and social justice.

Audre Lorde reminds us about the importance of engaging in spaces for healing and self-care: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (Pitts, 2020, para. 4). Digital book clubs, through the texts that we read and through our interactions with one another, can evoke feelings that may transcend temporality in those that choose to read not just with their eyes, but through the hope that they share for an equitable and just society. In doing so, we not only work to meet students where they are in the immediate—but to imagine a better, more nuanced, and inspired future reality that builds from the beauty of the words and the power of connection.

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