Leaning Into Reflections From Your Marigolds

As a part of the research for this book, I interviewed antibias, antiracist (ABAR) practitioners around the country—elementary, middle, and high school teachers; staff developers; consultants; and State Teachers of the Year from urban, suburban, and rural school districts. These educators are marigolds for me, and I hope that they will be the same for you. Please reflect on their accounts of challenge, persistence, and learning whenever you need a reminder that you are not alone in this work.

I asked them the following questions:

- *What made you begin teaching with an ABAR lens?*
- *What do you wish you had known before engaging in ABAR instructional practices?*
- *What advice do you have for teachers beginning this work?*
- *How have students benefited from this work?*

Question: What made you begin teaching with an ABAR lens?

Responses

"I don't know that it was a one-time aha! moment but rather a series of small moments that led to me to start working on ABAR practices. Some of it coincided with my own growing work around identity and understanding my place as a White man, and how my own identity and experiences formed and shaped me and my teaching practices. I sort of trickled into it until, a couple years into my teaching practice, I decided to go all out. I reframed my entire teaching practice to include ABAR work across all subjects, routines, and classroom systems. My wife has been a huge influence on me. She's also White and has fearlessly taken on ABAR instructional practices."

—Bret Turner, elementary educator and writer for Learning for Justice

"When reflecting on my work with students in my high school English classes, I noticed that my students, mostly juniors, had been together since elementary, and were only ever with one another. Toward the end of middle school, the district created a school within a school composed of primarily White students, except in electives. Sometimes students in honors classes in the main school, and the school within a school honors classes would be combined, and it sometimes came across like the White students thought their ideas were superior to the ideas of the Students of Color. I noticed an echo chamber during class discussions. I remember the faces Students of Color would make in response to some of the comments of White students. I wanted students to explore their own identities beyond what was manifesting as an echo chamber in their reading, writing, and discussion triad."

—Monica Washington, 2014 Texas State Teacher of the Year, a senior manager of Inclusive and Responsive Educational Practices and instructional coach with BetterLesson, and education consultant

"Naively, I thought I had been doing this most of my career, by actively disrupting stereotypes (especially around the fall and winter holidays) . . . but the wake-up call came after the 2016 election. We knew we had to combat all of the violent, racist, sexist, (and every other "ist") language and actions from our government . . . and sadly neighbors. My colleague Lina and I got together to create a professional development group of colleagues (across grade levels) to develop activities/lessons for kids, WHILE learning about our own biases and how to have difficult conversations together. Lina, Karen and I are currently active in keeping this work going.

"I first engaged my kids through denouncing the idea that Columbus "discovered" America and map studies. We wrote a grant and replaced our ancient inaccurate map and we titled the map after the book *All Are Welcome* by Alexandra Penfold . . . some rumbled about the title and felt like we were getting political. We listed all the origin countries that our families represented."

—Kerry Zagarella, kindergarten teacher at the Winthrop School in Ipswich, Massachusetts

Breathe and Reflect

When reflecting on why other ABAR practitioners began engaging in this work, what did you notice? What did you wonder? What resonated with you, and what differed from your experience? What questions do you have? As you read the interviewee's responses, what connections did you notice to the development of students' literacy skills? How can beginning this work support the development of your students' literacy skills? ■

Question: What do you wish you had known before engaging in ABAR instructional practices?

Responses

"When I was at Lesley University twenty years ago, I took an antibias education class and a class about diversity. They were incredible because they made us examine ourselves deeply as well as learn about historical things. In the diversity class the final project was to find a group that you have a prejudice against, interview ten people from that group, and then do a project on what you learned. That was terrifying, but it ended up being a very healing project for me, because my focus was on gay people. I had realized that my internalized homophobia was not good. It was absolutely transformative to have a chance to work on myself deeply. Most of the workshops you go to, you learn a lot, but you don't have to reflect afterward. But these two courses made me do work that was way beyond academic things. I think it was true for the other people I talked to in those courses. My dearest wish would be that no teacher could get through their training to be a teacher without experiences like that. I was teaching for ten years before I experienced those courses, so for the first ten years of students, I hope I did some good things, but they didn't get the best version of me."

—Jill Ferraresso, second-grade teacher at the Atrium School in Watertown, Massachusetts

"I wish I would have learned at a younger age in school how to critically think about a counter-narrative instead of being in my 40s when I really started to always think about the other side, or who's not here and who should be here. I started teaching at a reserve school. They trained us but they didn't train us well. So I even think back to that experience, and I would give anything to go back to when students asked, 'Why are all the teachers young and blonde and all the kids are Mohawk?' Those are important questions that they should be asking.

"Also, adults need to be okay with being uncomfortable about not having the answers, and learn to say, 'I don't know, but how do you think we should respond to that?' Have students do role plays, for example, about what would be some appropriate ways to respond to the challenges they see."

—Shannon Pitcher-Boyea, director of Instructional Support Services for Grades 3–4 with Franklin-Essex-Hamilton Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (FEH BOCES) in Malone, New York, and owner/operator of Breathing Room Mindful Personal and Professional Wellness, LLC

"I wish I would have known that not knowing is okay, that fumbling an answer to a tricky question is also okay (as long as you preserve the dignity of all students, all the time), and I certainly wish I would have known that my whiteness presented me with enormous blind spots.

"There was also parental pushback. This didn't happen often, but when it did happen, it was rough. I was berated by a parent for mentioning the problematic nature of Dr. Seuss's works, as an example. I taught at a racially diverse school by private school standards, but still majority White—and this would lead to those uncomfortable moments where we would talk about a particular story (say, Ruby Bridges), and the Black children in the room were put on the spot inadvertently. Protecting my most vulnerable students was something that was always on my mind, as I think they are the most at risk when a white teacher engages in this work, even with the best of intentions.

"I wish I had been prepared to constantly doubt myself. I wrote some articles and appeared on a podcast, which put me in the crosshairs of some right-wing blogs that accused me of indoctrination and worse. At the end of the day I knew what I was doing was right, but I still doubted myself constantly. The day-to-day challenges that doing this work with young children presents, are mainly that once you open it all up, the questions start flowing even more than they usually do in the early elementary years. Tricky questions, complex comments, and other moments that required a deft, loving, calm response from a teacher (me!)."

—Bret Turner, elementary educator and
writer for Learning for Justice

"Set protocols for how to keep the space a safe and brave space for students so that they know that it's okay to have an opinion that's different. Discussion time can be brutal if a student thinks that the teacher wouldn't be okay with what they think. We need to respect differing ideas. I called my class a learning family. I would say to my students, 'All of you are students, but you're also a teacher. I'm your teacher, but I'm also a student.'

"It's important to know not to expect students to share everything with you immediately. They need time to build trust, time to practice, for there to be tears, for things to go wrong, and to figure out how you'd respond to that. The process takes time, and sometimes I felt like it was hard to get to everything. And sometimes it's hard to shift mindsets. I tried to teach students that in writing, they need to divorce themselves from their beliefs, and to be objective."

—Monica Washington, 2014 Texas State Teacher of the
Year, a senior manager of Inclusive and Responsive Educational Practices and
instructional coach with BetterLesson, and education consultant

Breathe and Reflect

When reflecting on what other ABAR practitioners wish they had known before engaging in ABAR instructional practices with their students, how does that inform your next steps? ■

Question: What advice do you have for teachers beginning this work?

Responses

"The biggest thing any teacher of students of any age can do, and I can't emphasize this enough, is to remember that it's about relationships. No matter what books you have or don't have in your classroom, or what resources or support, I'm really getting to know children and having close relationships. Like when a kid comes over to you to show you their loose tooth that has to be really important to you. If you can't make it really important at that moment, you come back and you remember and say, "Now I have time. Can I look at that tooth?" Because all of those mini moments of love that students receive from teachers help them to be able to take chances and risks at school. That includes an openness to other people who are not like them.

"It allows you to do hard things if students trust you, and they cannot really trust you unless they know who you are. Sometimes teachers hide behind the teacher title, and don't share anything about their lives with their students as if they're blank, or just interested in students' reading. But you have to show up as a full person if you want them to show up as full people. It doesn't mean to tell them every little thing, but if you have a dog, for example, talk about your dog. Find things about your life that feel safe and appropriate to you that you can share in your space, and let them know who you are. Laugh at things with them. Once they know that you love them, they're going to be free to make mistakes and to open their minds to all kinds of different things.

"When kids feel seen and known, when you validate them, it means so much. I think this is true for all ages of children, but with young children it's critical because if you don't do that, no matter how brilliant your lessons are, they can't go deep, because they don't feel safe. Even if someone's new at doing this work, if they build these really trusting relationships, and they are willing to get vulnerable and be a real person in the classroom, it's so helpful, and that includes making mistakes."

—Jill Ferraresso, second-grade teacher at the Atrium School in Watertown, Massachusetts

"This is the work of a lifetime. You are not going to get results tomorrow. If you identify as White, you are most likely probably used to getting your own way. You might be a bit impatient, but this work takes patience, hope, and radical rest. And you don't have all the answers. You need to be quiet and listen for sure. Reading is not enough. You've got to take it slow too. If you were born and raised here in the United States, you have racialized trauma, even if you're White. I didn't know that, and that's something I wish I would have known. You can feel it, but we've been trained to not pay attention to our bodies."

—Shannon Pitcher-Boyea, director of Instructional Support Services for Grades 3–4 with Franklin-Essex-Hamilton Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (FEH BOCES) in Malone, New York, and owner/operator of Breathing Room Mindful Personal and Professional Wellness, LLC

"As teachers plan to do this work, discussion about critical topics has to become so normal so that when you make room for these discussions, it doesn't feel like an extra thing. My students knew that every day we were going to talk about something, and every day I wanted to hear their voices. Every lesson opened with discussions based on a question, analyzing a picture, argument drills, exploring multiple perspectives—all of which helped to prepare students for AP exams."

—Monica Washington, 2014 Texas State Teacher of the Year, a senior manager of Inclusive and Responsive Educational Practices and instructional coach with BetterLesson, and education consultant

Breathe and Reflect

How can this advice from other ABAR practitioners inform your next steps? As you read the responses, what connections did you notice to the development of students' literacy skills? ■

Question: How have students benefited from this work?

Responses

"We study about the Underground Railroad through the Civil Rights Movement, and I'm always aware of how it might feel if I'm engaging students with this content with Black students in my room. One of the things I've tried to do is talk to parents of Students of Color ahead of time and give them some of the picture books I'm going to read, in case the family hasn't talked about any of this with their children before. That way, they could read the books with their child first. When I pull that book out in class, the families have already read it, and the child has felt hopefully safe to talk about whatever they want and ask questions, and have a discussion with their parents. Parents can also ask me how I'm going to handle certain things in the books. I don't think I should be the first person who tells a Black child about this content.

—Jill Ferraresso, second-grade teacher at the Atrium School in Watertown, Massachusetts

"If we really teach students to think critically, how to ask the right questions, they will discover things on their own. My daughter is biracial. When Donald Trump was elected president, she looked at her arm and said, 'Mommy, I don't think the president's gonna like me, because I'm Brown.' That was heartbreaking. She was six then and trying to make sense of it. Children can feel the hate and the vitriol.

"Have students engage with primary source documents instead of spending half a million dollars on textbooks. I have a colleague who used to teach middle school social studies, and she set up a virtual trip to Thomas Jefferson's Monticello (monticello.org) in Charlottesville, Virginia. (Note: Clint Smith writes about his trip to Monticello in Chapter 1 of the *New York Times* best seller, *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning With the History of Slavery Across America*.) Students read a related nonfiction text prior to the trip, and when they went to the museum she told the curators, 'Don't hold back. You owe them the truth. You give it to them.' Students couldn't even believe what was happening and what had happened. They just asked why we would keep these things from them."

—Shannon Pitcher-Boyea, director of Instructional Support Services for Grades 3–4 with Franklin-Essex-Hamilton Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (FEH BOCES) in Malone, New York, and owner/operator of Breathing Room Mindful Personal and Professional Wellness, LLC

"I was able to successfully integrate ABAR practices throughout the curriculum rather than simply doing one-and-done lessons (which I also did!). Some individual moments stood out, like a student recognizing a microaggression in an old (and dated) picture book, a young boy gently calling out his friend for a sexist remark, and a project-based learning project we did on homelessness that covered every conceivable topic and ended in a powerful class play.

"I would like to think my students were given a more nuanced approach to discussing hard topics like racism, privilege, classism, etc. I also like to think they benefited from the everyday nature of ABAR work: being in an identity-safe classroom, learning about history through a more earnest and honest lens."

—Bret Turner, elementary educator and writer for Learning for Justice

"I engaged students in belief charting as they created pie charts of their identity. I would say, 'You believe x. Let's talk about why you have the beliefs that you have. Let's look at the percentage of your beliefs that come from what you read. What percentage comes from what your family says or who you sit with in the cafeteria?' Over time, students would make connections to the belief chart percentages of their classmates and think, 'I need to think about shifting my numbers.' For example, a student may realize that they are biased against immigrants because that's what they were taught. Our reading lists were all created by White teachers so I brought in authors and books that students hadn't studied like Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Black essayists. I created opportunities for students to really reflect, and engage in discussions that didn't feel like fluff, which helped students to feel respected. We had meaningful discussions and engaged in good, meaty work.

—Monica Washington, 2014 Texas State Teacher of the Year, a senior manager of Inclusive and Responsive Educational Practices and instructional coach with BetterLesson, and education consultant

Breathe and Reflect

How do you think your students have benefited or will benefit from ABAR instructional practices? If you've already started this work with students, how do you know that it's benefiting them? If you are about to begin this work, how will you determine if it's benefiting them? As you read the interviewee's responses, what connections did you notice to the development of students' literacy skills? ■