

BEST PRACTICES

**Book Clubs as a
Racial Literacy
Strategy**

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Abstract

In 2021, two Extension educators partnered to offer a virtual book club in their county. The book club was focused on racial literacy and took place over 11 months. Feedback from participants indicates that the book club was an ideal setting to learn about and reflect on historical and contemporary racial events and topics. Survey results indicated a substantial gain in knowledge as a result of book club participation. The success of the book club lends itself to be replicated in other counties, other states, and on other diversity, equity, and inclusion topics.

Book Clubs as a Racial Literacy Strategy

Professional development is needed both within Extension and within education at large to support existing efforts to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). University of California Extension professionals demonstrated that Extension professionals who develop intercultural competence are better prepared to meet the needs of multicultural populations (Moncloa et al., 2019). Fields & Nathaniel (2015) suggested that becoming more aware of social disparities can help Extension professionals work toward social justice in their communities. With this idea in mind, a group of Extension professionals at the Ohio State University offered a book club in 2021 to improve racial literacy among their peers (Lobb et al., 2022).

Book clubs are an effective method to strengthen a sense of community among readers in both professional and personal settings (Grenier et al., 2021; Kattapuram et al., 2019; Smith & Galbraith, 2011). Popularized by the Oprah Winfrey book club model, like-minded readers form groups around a common book (Fajardo, 2010). Different from academic book discussions, book clubs give readers a sense of control within their reading and learning, and this empowering model of engagement has many influential results (Petrich, 2015). The book club format encourages members to build relationships, learn together, and to engage in cultural change work (Grenier et al., 2021).

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to share how two county-based Extension educators organized, facilitated, and evaluated a book club to enhance racial literacy in their community. The efforts in the county were modeled after a statewide book club offered as a professional development opportunity to Extension faculty and staff at the same time (Lobb et al., 2022). The state- and the county-based book clubs were offered virtually and occurred simultaneously in 2021.

Method

Two county Extension educators, one in Family and Consumer Sciences and one in 4-H Youth Development, organized and facilitated a virtual book club for their community. Both Extension educators identify as White. The FCS educator is female and the 4-H educator is male. Both share a passion for DEI topics and believe in the importance of anti-racism efforts.

The purpose of the book club was to increase the racial literacy of participants, which includes building the knowledge, skills, awareness, and vocabulary needed to talk thoughtfully about race and racism, and to identify racism as a system in society (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). Participants read *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* and *Other Conversations About Race* by Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum (Tatum, 2017; see Stanton et al., 2022 for a book review) and used the Book Group Discussion Guide provided by the author (Tatum, 2020). The book club took place over the course of 2021, starting in February (Table 1) and meeting once a month for the remainder of the year. The General Guidelines for Productive Discussion outlined in Tatum's (2020) discussion guide were used, as well as guidelines from a respectful dialogue toolkit available through the Ohio State University's Office of Diversity and Inclusion (n.d.). Table 1

The book clubs were held virtually using the Zoom platform. All book club members started in the same room. After a brief icebreaker or check-in activity, participants were randomly assigned into two breakout rooms. One of the

Extension educators served as the facilitator in each breakout room. At the start of the book club, participants were reminded of Zoom best practices, such as staying muted unless talking, keeping video cameras on, and using the chat feature for questions and comments.

The book club was offered to residents of Warren County, a populous, suburban community. Extension partnered with the Martin Luther King Community Coalition of Lebanon, a local social justice community organization. The book club was marketed across multiple social media platforms and promoted across several email lists. Participants were required to register and could choose either a daytime (from 12–1pm) or an evening (7–8pm) book club meeting. When registration closed, 72 people had registered.

A public school in the county marketed the book club to their staff and many of the book club participants were teachers. When asked if the district wanted to have their own separate book club, the director of curriculum and instruction said the teachers preferred to mix with the community members. The combination of community members and educators was often mentioned as a strength of the book club experience.

During the registration process, people were invited to share their demographic information. Of the 68 who responded, the group was primarily female (91%) and White (88%). Three participants were Black (4%) and four identified as having two or more races (6%). No one reported being Hispanic or Latino. This demographic profile is representative of the county. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2020) show that the county population is 84% White alone (not Hispanic or Latino), 4% Black, 7% Asian, 2% two or more races, and 3% Latino. In terms of age, the largest age group ranged from 40–49 years old (34%) with the next largest age group consisting of those 60 years old and older (28%). The next two largest age groups were between 50 and 59 years old (18%) and between 30 and 39 years old (13%).

In addition to the two official book clubs (daytime and evening), “office hours” were held once a month during the first few months of the year at the request of several individuals who asked for additional time to talk and ask questions. To build community and connection, two open houses were scheduled, one in July and one in December. Both were in-person events, with the July open house taking place outside in a community park and the December open house

taking place at a local coffee shop. During each open house, the FCS Extension educator shared educational materials and resources including multicultural children’s books, multicultural crayons, and art supplies, as well as different skin tone band-aids. This was in response to many book club conversations when White participants shared that they were not familiar with what resources were available. The Extension educator was modeling the “windows and mirrors” framework (Style, 1988) and deliberately providing “windows” for the predominately White participants, so they could see new and different points of view and resources (Stanton, 2023).

As the year progressed, attendance slowly decreased. The highest attended month was February with 47 participants and November was the lowest attended month with 11 participants. On average, 25 people attended each month (daytime and evening book clubs combined). At the conclusion of the final book club meeting in December 2021, participants were sent an anonymous, online, eight-question evaluation by email. They were invited to provide feedback about their experience (Appendix). We received 24 completed evaluations.

Results

The evaluation data suggests that book club participants increased their knowledge of DEI issues. Before the book club, 38% of the respondents stated they had some knowledge of DEI information, 46% were fairly knowledgeable, and 17% were very knowledgeable. The knowledge rate shifted after the book club, when 38% of the respondents said they were fairly knowledgeable and 63% said they were very knowledgeable. Figure 1

After the book club, the majority of respondents stated they would use the knowledge they gained. Five individuals (21%) stated they would probably use the information and 75% said they would definitely use the information. Another highlight from the post-survey was a one-sentence statement: “My high respect for the extension system was increased by this program.”

A permanent and indirect result of the book club was the creation of a DEI resource webpage that was, and continues to be, housed on the Warren County Extension website (go.

osu.edu/Warren-dei-resources). Participants were encouraged to share helpful resources throughout the year. The webpage was updated throughout 2021 and is still active. It includes recommended websites, books, and other educational resources.

Discussion

The county book club took place during a unique period in history. At the time, Donald Trump was President and according to the Pew Research Center (2021), "racial tensions were a constant undercurrent during Trump's presidency, often intensified by the public statements he made in response to high-profile incidents." Furthermore, Trump's election was associated with a statistically significant surge in reported hate crimes across the United States, even when controlling for alternative factors (Edwards & Rushin, 2018). In May 2020, George Floyd was killed by police in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His death was one of several police brutality and death cases that year, and the event brought race into mainstream conversations. In addition to the heated social and political landscape, people were physically isolated from each other due to COVID-19.

It became clear that the monthly book club meetings provided a safe space for the mostly White participants to process and reflect on racism, their individual racial identity, and the role they could play in their personal and professional lives as community members in a rather conservative county. According to the Warren County Board of Elections (2020), 64.5% of the county residents voted for Donald Trump in the November 2020 general election.

After just three meetings, participants were informally asked what new information they had learned so far. One participant shared, "Encouragement is my answer. Knowing there is a group of people in our community, and specifically staff members of the school, who want to become aware of and know other people's stories is very encouraging. Specifically, the author's review of the last 20 years of racial inequity was eye-opening. Those were my young adult years, but the issues mentioned were mostly oblivious to me." Another participant responded:

I am gathering much from the book, but honestly have so enjoyed listening to others' opinions and experiences. I am a quiet member of the Zoom meetings but feel as if I am learning much more about this town I have lived in for 29 years (since I began teaching here). I also am feeling more adequate in responding or standing up to others and not falling into that passive racism category.

An unexpected and positive outcome of the book club has also been a stronger bond between the school district that marketed the book club, the teachers that participated, and the community. Both Extension educators were recently invited to teach about DEI topics at a professional development day for teachers and staff in the school district and continue to serve as community resources. The personal and professional relationships that have been formed demonstrate the value of the book club format highlighted by Grenier et al., (2021)- stronger relationships and a willingness to engage in cultural change work together.

As evidenced by the survey results and participant comments, information gained from the book club was valued and participants intend to use what they learned. The success of the book club lends itself to be replicated in other counties and other states, as well as on other diversity, equity, and inclusion topics.

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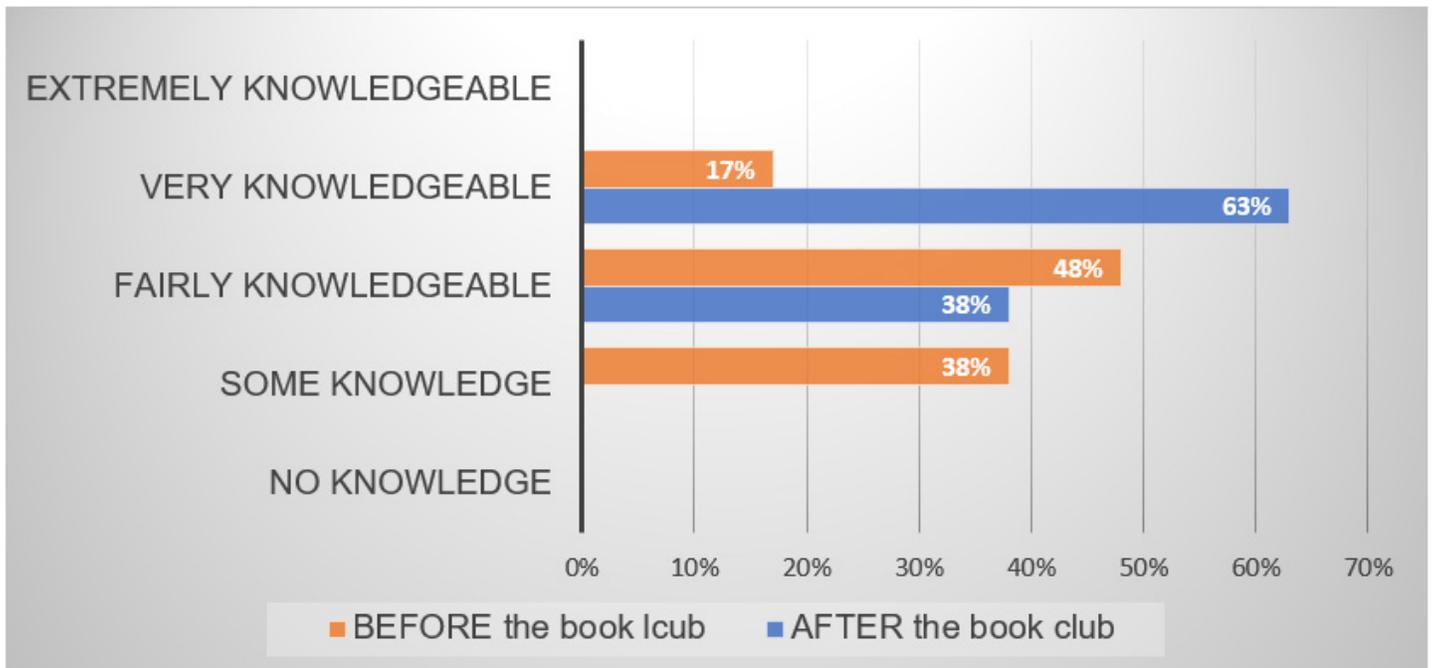
Table 1

***Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* and Other Conversations About Race (Tatum, 2017)
Book Discussion Schedule**

Month	Reading Assignment
February	Prologue and Introduction
March	Chapter 1: Defining Racism and Chapter 2: The Complexity of Identity
April	Chapter 3: The Early Years
May	Chapter 4: Identity Development in Adolescence
June	Chapter 5: Racial Identity in Adulthood
July	Chapter 6: The Development of White Identity
August	Chapter 7: White Identity, Affirmative Action, and Color-Blind Racial Ideology
September	Chapter 8: Critical Issues in Latinx, Native, Asian and Pacific Islander, and Middle Eastern/North African Identity Development
October	Chapter 9: Identity Development in Multiracial Families
November	Chapter 10: Embracing a Cross-Racial Dialogue
December	Epilogue: Signs of Hope, Sites of Progress

Figure 1

Self-Reported Knowledge Level of DEI Issues Before and After the Book



Note: Responses to the statement: *Please rate your knowledge level regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion...*

Appendix

Post Book Club Survey

1) Which book club did you join?

- Daytime
- Evening
- Both (a mixture of Daytime and Evening)

2) How many Book Club meetings did you attend?

- 1-5
- 6-11

3) Please rate your knowledge level regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) information before and after the book club.

- No knowledge
- Some knowledge
- Fairly knowledgeable
- Very knowledgeable
- Extremely knowledgeable

4) Please indicate your intention to use the information presented during the DEI Book Club.

- I will definitely use the information.
- I will probably use the information.
- I have not decided if I will use the information.
- I probably will not use the information.
- I definitely will not use the information.

5) Please tell us something that you learned as a result of participating in the DEI Book Club.

6) What was the best part of the DEI Book Club?

7) What is one area of the Book Club that needs improvement?

8) Our Team is interested in offering additional educational opportunities around DEI topics and issues. What would be helpful to you on your DEI journey? Are there books or topics that you would like to learn more about? We would love to hear your ideas and suggestions.