

What Happened When My School Started to Dismantle White Supremacy Culture

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White Supremacy Culture. White Supremacy Culture. White Supremacy Culture. Now that the shock of reading these words has worn off, let's explore what it is and why we need to dedicate more time to exploring its dehumanizing effect in our schools.

At Visitacion Valley Middle School (VVMS), in the San Francisco Unified School District, our brave staff spent a majority of the 2018-19 school year unpacking White Supremacy Culture (WSC). This took the form of discussions, watching short video clips, annotating readings, and doing some deep personal introspection. We needed to go deeper than our previous conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Like most groups of educators, we had spent a few years dancing around topics of racism and struggled to make lasting change. Some conversations fell flat, and others were superficial. At times, it appeared that we weren't clearly aligned philosophically and did not have a focused call to action. Therefore, it was necessary to create shared understandings and subsequent commitments, which was facilitated by exploring a framework of White Supremacy Culture.

What is White Supremacy Culture?

It is the water we are swimming in. The trouble is we don't even see it. [The Standing Up for Racial Justice coalition](#) defines White Supremacy Culture as "the idea (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to those of People of Color." Don't be confused. One does not have to be a white supremacist to hold these beliefs, because we have all been conditioned through exposure to media, parenting, schooling, and our interactions with power structures. Even I, a black educator who has studied ethnic studies and critical race theory, still perpetuate tenets of White Supremacy Culture. I like to think of myself as a recovering perpetrator of WSC. This has included making decisions about curriculum, school partnership, and hiring, without authentically involving teachers or students in the process. As a leader, it is easy to [hoard power](#), claim objectivity in decision-making, or believe that there is only one way to fix education. For a more complete list, see the [15 WSC characteristics](#) from Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones in the 2001 *Dismantling Racism Workbook*. If I can be vulnerable and honest, white educators can and must do the same.

3 Reasons We Need to Dismantle White Supremacy Culture in Schools

The work to address racism in schools has been called cultural competency, diversity training, and equity. This work has gotten co-opted and watered down, leading to many people talking the talk, without much walk. We can have equity missions plastered on walls and front that we are about closing the opportunity gap, but we don't go deeper than diversity trainings. With respect to race, the foundational issue is White Supremacy Culture, and we must attack the problem head on.

1. WSC dehumanizes people of color. White Supremacy Culture is the silent killer flowing throughout classrooms and school hallways, like carbon monoxide gas. It is

invisible and it is toxic. It is time that we detox and make the invisible visible. Dr. Bettina Love writes in her book, *We Want to Do More Than Survive*, "To even begin to attack our destructive and punitive educational system, pedagogies that promote social justice must ... help educators understand and recognize America and its schools as spaces of Whiteness, White rage, and White Supremacy, all of which function to terrorize students of color." (Love, 2019) It is imperative that we examine these deeply held beliefs—both conscious and unconscious—to build on top of a new set of habits, behaviors, and systems.

These beliefs lead to actions that are dehumanizing to all races of people; however, they have a more drastic effect on indigenous, black, and people of color (IBPOC). They simultaneously tell us that we are not good enough and keep us to the bottom rungs of racial hierarchy if we do not assimilate. White Supremacy Culture also tricks us into thinking that if we change to fit a white model, we can be more valued but still never be white. This change comes at the cost of detaching ourselves from ourselves, which also is dehumanizing. This is true for our staff as well, contributing to racial fatigue and staff sustainability for IBPOC.

2. WSC shuts down learning. For students of color, characteristics of White Supremacy Culture similar to microaggressions hijack the amygdala. Consequently, "all other cognitive functions such as learning, problem solving, or creative thinking stop," (Hammond, 2015) activating our fight, flight, or freeze response. This can create power struggles, a learning opportunity gap, and as the scholar Monique Morris writes, students being pushed out of schools. Therefore, unexamined behaviors of White Supremacy Culture are preventing students from being comfortable or supported enough to learn and flourish. For example, pushing students to work independently or write before processing verbally can lead to stress and isolation. Another example might be superficially speeding through content or discouraging interruptions for questions. Due to stereotype threat, this is especially problematic when students of color are a numerical minority in a classroom or school. It is imperative that we examine our actions to see if they are further harming students of color, disempowering them, and creating a psychologically hostile learning environment.

3. Dismantling WSC unites staff to work toward being anti-racist. We have seen attempts at creating buy-in fail for initiatives like ethnic studies, mastery-based grading, or [project-based learning](#). This is because we are starting with the branches of the tree instead of the roots. This leads to resistance or failure to follow through, maintaining a status quo of disproportionate outcomes for students based on race. However, when we name oppression, racism, and more explicitly White Supremacy Culture, folks have to determine where they stand, what they value, and why they work in education. This prompts staff to reflect and ultimately declare, "I want to be an anti-racist teacher, but I don't exactly know how." This has the power to unite folks at the foundational level, setting the stage for deeper commitments to learning new strategies, practices, and routines. Thus, we are building a collective purpose and a commitment to learning.

Ready to Go Deeper Than Diversity

At VVMS, we were able to get past defensiveness and excuses and get to the heart of the matter. Our courageous educators got personal, thinking about how White Supremacy Culture shows up in their personal lives and between colleagues. This might include wanting to win an argument, not making space for others to talk, and rushing through meetings. Discussing WSC gave us more impetus to make changes, because

we now knew what was happening if we refused: microaggressions, dehumanization, widening the opportunity gap, and producing disproportionate outcomes. As a result, staff were curious to take action to be anti-racist and promote a learning community that did the same. Specifically, this pushed on us to think about and change how we work together: We worked to create [norms](#) that encourage people of color and women to contribute, we shifted the relationship between teachers and administration so that teachers had more input in budget and hiring decisions, and finally, we adjusted the pace of our professional-development plans to emphasize quality over quantity. One teacher, Mary Chirichella added, "Some teachers had the courage to approach others to have tough conversations about microaggressions. We are continually navigating the phases of a '[call out to call in culture](#)' with each other." Further, staff moved to thinking about how our school practices perpetuate WSC and send negative messages to our students. For example, we looked at how our implicit bias when responding to student behavior leads to racially disproportionate discipline incidents and we organically identified restorative practices as a focus for the following year. Lastly, this work connected well with our concurrent work of racial affinity groups, social-justice teaching, and revising our school mission statement. The work of exploring White Supremacy Culture gave our staff a new framework to define our North Star, being an anti-racist school. Consequently, this allows for us to align our purpose with our pedagogy, curricula, policies, decision-making processes, and adult structures. Now our previous work on Culturally Responsive Teaching, use of rubrics, and adding student voice had a theoretical underpinning. This coming year, we are looking at how to build more community in the classroom, how to unify our students across cultural differences, and how to reduce bias in our discipline systems. Now we can get to the work of promoting anti-racism, liberation, and achievement at our school, by looking through the lens of White Supremacy Culture.

Pitfalls and Prerequisites

Racial-equity work is like trying to defuse a bomb and cutting the wrong wire. It can result in white rage, broken relationships, grievances, and further harm to oppressed students. I saw this personally at VVMS, as situations got awkward, uncomfortable, and uncertain. This pushed some folks to identify who they could be safe with, be it for comfort or growth. But this messy middle is precisely when we need to stay curious, be vulnerable, and innovative. Racial-equity leaders must be both intentional and responsive when doing this anti-racist work. Here are two pitfalls to avoid.

The first pitfall is failing to scaffold for white privilege and white fragility. We must name, define, and plan for white fragility, the defensive response by whites when discussing racism. This includes emotions of fear, anger, and guilt, as well as actions of argumentation, silence, and withdrawal. It's important to note that these responses work to maintain current consciousness and white supremacy. ([DiAngelo, 2018](#)).

We should be planning for the righteous rage of IBPOC (Indigenous, Black, People of Color), but 82 percent of our teaching force is white, so we will also [plan for white fragility](#). Once white fragility is defined and debriefed amongst a team, we can begin to talk about racism, anti-racism, and White Supremacy Culture. Otherwise, white fragility will shut the anti-racist party down; it's an equity consciousness buzz kill, for real.

The second pitfall I will offer is avoiding the tendency to externalize the work of dismantling White Supremacy Culture. Yes, this is built into our systems of power, structures, policies, and rules. Yes, it is exhibited by leaders at all levels, including me. But to start, we must go inward. Specifically, we must look at how it shows up in our own lives, in our personal relationships, in between school staff, and in our histories. Further, we must look at how it has affected us and how we have perpetuated White Supremacy

Culture. We are the operators of some piece of the education machine, and therefore, if we change our actions, we can change the larger system.

Dreams of Anti-Racist Schools

In my dream, I imagine that educators can become comfortable talking about race and how it informs the work of educating children. For instance, we might see folks making eye contact, leaning into conversations about racial identity, and asking probing questions. Also, we might hear phrases like, "That comment triggered me, it was a microaggression," "I think we can do better for our Latinx students," or "This is not consistent with our commitment to anti-racism." I imagine we might even see white folks redirecting their white colleagues and carrying their weight of racial conversations. Ultimately, we are here to help students empower themselves through education. In my dream, I imagine that [Culturally Responsive Teaching](#), restorative practices, and deeper learning are all alive in classrooms across the United States. In addition, we might see curricula that affirms and engages students of color. We might also see students connecting their identities to their learning and applying it back to their communities to manifest social justice.

In order to build this ideal structure, we must start at the base and engineer for equity. This requires dismantling White Supremacy Culture and building a new foundation for an anti-racist and empowering education. Imagine that.

Photos, courtesy of Joe Truss, from the top:

- *VVMS staff match examples of White Supremacy Culture to the definition of each characteristic.*
- *Visitacion Valley Middle School in San Francisco Unified school district*
- *Prompts for reading a White Supremacy Culture article*
- *Staff watch a clip about white fragility during a staff meeting*
- *Personal Commitment graphic organizer used in professional development*

15 Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture

- Perfectionism
- Sense of Urgency
- Defensiveness
- Quantity Over Quality
- Worship of the Written Word
- Only One Right Way
- Paternalism
- Either/Or Thinking
- Power Hoarding
- Fear of Open Conflict
- Individualism
- I'm the Only One
- Progress is Bigger, More
- Objectivity
- Right to Comfort

Tema Okun and Kenneth Jones,
Dismantling Racism Workbook, 2001