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Transforming Educators: A Framework for Developing Accomplices for Racial Justice in PreK-12 Schools

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This article aims to disrupt the manifestations of whiteness in educational spaces. With an understanding that white supremacy is endemic in our society, this article is framed by the manifestations of whiteness in the form of white privilege, emotionality, and shame present within our schools and argues for the adoption of authentic and critical caring, love, and hope in our educational institutions. Most importantly, this article addresses the importance of rejecting the manifestations of whiteness in favor of equity, justice, and antiracism amid resistance in schools and concludes with practical recommendations to better prepare educators for their adoption of equity and racial justice in schools.

Keywords: Educators, white supremacy, whiteness, antiracism

Introduction

Educators have the ethical responsibility to teach all students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, ability, and linguistic assets. In fact, teachers stand at the doorway of student creativity, discovery, innovation, identity development, and opportunity which is integral as they grow into their position as future leaders in our society. In schools and classrooms across the United States (U.S.), 82% of teachers are white\(^1\) (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), which is an overwhelming number given students of color are composed of over half of the PreK-12 population. Furthermore, as our schools continue to diversify, the number of white students is expected to decrease through 2024 (Kena et al., 2015) as the educator force remains predominantly white. In alignment with the purpose of this article, it is imperative for white educators to interrogate their whiteness in order to best serve the need of our diverse student population (DeMartino & Fetman, in press; Matias, 2016a). The time is now for educators to adopt a critical stance towards shifting districts, schools, and classrooms to an equity, justice, and antiracist lens (DeMartino, in press). Nevertheless, many educators resist the notion of white supremacy and the manifestations of whiteness in education (Carr, 2017; Crowley & Smith, 2015). Bonilla-Silva (2013) reminds us that in the post-Civil Rights era, white folks rarely identify themselves as racist and ignore the fact that racism is a structure that is interweaved in

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\(^1\) Though APA7 indicates to capitalize racial and ethnic identifiers, I stand in solidarity with my fellow critical scholars and choose not to capitalize “white” to raise awareness that white folks do not share the same histories and experiences as Black, Indigenous, Latine, and other (multiple) marginalized and oppressed identities. I see this as part of the movement to dismantle systems of white supremacy and present this as a call to readers to engage more fully in critical conversations around race, equity, and justice.
our social, economic, political, and educational spheres. They resist the notion of racism while simultaneously and erroneously claiming a color-blind ideology. In fact, this resistance and ignorance within educational institutions serves to uphold white-normed standards of teaching and learning in our schools which uncloaks itself as manifestations of whiteness, such as privilege, emotionality, and shame.

This article aims to disrupt the manifestations of whiteness in educational spaces. With an understanding that white supremacy is endemic in our society, this article is framed by the manifestations of whiteness in the form of white privilege (McIntosh, 2004), emotionality (Matias, 2016a; 2016b), and shame (Picower, 2009) present within our schools and argues for the adoption of authentic and critical caring, love, and hope (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021; Nieto, 2009; Valenzuela, 1999) in our educational institutions. Most importantly, this article addresses the importance of rejecting the manifestations of whiteness in favor of equity, justice, and antiracism amid resistance in schools and concludes with practical recommendations to better prepare educators for their adoption of equity and racial justice in schools.

The Insidiousness of White Supremacy and Color-Blind Racism

White supremacy situates white folks at the top of the racial apex where the manifestations of whiteness are normalized and capitalizes on unearned material, such as political, economic, and structural benefits at the expense of people of color (Matias, 2014). Because race is both socially constructed and often produces concrete systemic racism by normalizing these elements as invisible (Picower, 2009), “it is a key organizing category for inequality because of the permanence of racial ideology and white supremacy in American society” (Omi & Winant, 1986 as cited in Picower, 2009, p. 198). Further, Bonilla-Silva (2013) argues that many white folks contend that race does not matter and choose to explain racial inequity and lack of justice in non-racial manners, such as market advantages, social phenomena, and cultural biases. Due to this contestation by white folks claiming to live in a ‘post-racial’ society, white resistance first manifests in the systematic ignoring or rejection of notions of institutional white supremacy (DeMartino & Fetman, in press; Carr, 2017). In this way, societal resistance transitions into white resistance as the ignorance of structural racism persists and is maintained through the manifestations of whiteness.

Manifestations of Whiteness in Education

White Privilege

White supremacy opens the door to privilege. McIntosh (2004) defines white privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (p. 188). In other words, entitlements, like acceptance into a particular neighborhood, equal access to financial assistance through banks and mortgage companies, or equitable healthcare, are generalized under the guise of universality, or seemingly every day and for everyone, but this privilege is only afforded to the those who are white (Case, 2012; McIntosh, 2004). Further, white folks can rely on their privilege and avoid objecting to racial injustices because the invisibility of whiteness frees them to view themselves as
individuals rather than systematically linked with racial domination and unearned privilege (Case, 2012).

Additionally, white supremacy and privilege permeate ideologies, political affiliations, geographical boundaries, socio-economic statuses, and education. “And just as all white people have the ability to weaponize their whiteness, all Black people can be harmed by it. Black students aren’t exempt. Weaponizing whiteness happens in schools every day” (Dillard, 2020, para. 12). Since white folks and whiteness dominate the field of education, they play an important role in how education operates (Leonardo, 2009). As such, this is problematic as many educators resist the notion of white supremacy further perpetuating the weaponization of whiteness in schools rather than confronting the manifestations of whiteness in the form of emotionality and shame.

White Emotionality

Emotions are intertwined with social structures and can reify racism and normalize white supremacy, especially in schools. In addition to Bonilla-Silva’s (2013) work, Thandeka’s (1999) framework for understanding the emotional and mental investment associated with whiteness, where white parents teach their children to be and become white while further perpetuating white supremacy through a “color-blind” ideology. This framework informs white emotionality as a manifestation of whiteness because it is coupled with an understanding that their complacency affords them access to a beneficial community or they face ostracization (Matias, 2016b). These emotions, including love, disgust, hope, anger, pain, hate, and fear, are not expressed in isolation, instead they are expressed, felt, and understood through this racial power structure (Matias, 2016b).

Further, racialized emotions are demonstrated by white student resistance when learning about race, racism, and white supremacy, such as “I don’t see race!” or “Race is no longer relevant!” (Matias, 2014), but these deep emotional outbursts reveal white supremacy as manifested through white emotionality. Along the same lines, Matias and Zembylas (2014) argue their preservice teacher candidates’ emotionality manifests as “singled out” and “blamed” when they are merely learning about whiteness connected to larger historical, political, and social structures. In this way, white emotionality is most often expressed as guilt, defensiveness, and anger. Moving forward, white shame (Matias, 2016b; Picower, 2009) addresses the safety preserved by the manifestations of whiteness.

White Shame

White emotionality often manifests as white shame, where white people react with guilt when they both learn about racism and the role white folks have played in perpetuating white supremacy (Picower, 2009). Although white folks are socialized to deny the manifestations of whiteness, this denial offers comfort and a sense of innocence, resulting in feelings of white guilt that emerge when whiteness is named (Matias, 2016b). When taking a deeper look at white shame, protection and repression of shame emerges as white folks refuse to confront their vulnerability and acknowledge their shame.
In the classroom, when learning about race and racism, white students often exhibit resistance that can quickly turn into shame. This is because as white individuals become more aware of the operations of whiteness, guilt may develop as they recognize personal benefits that result from systemic racism (Case & Rios, 2017). In fact, there is evidence that diversity courses may increase white guilt among white students (Case & Rios, 2017). Additionally, Picower (2009) argues teachers might recognize that they were supposed to feel some sense of shame, but instead they reacted against it by denying their shame to protect their own innocence and maintain the cycle of racism. In other examples, feelings of white guilt may lead students to shut down, feel targeted, get defensive, and show greater resistance to learning (Case & Rios, 2017). In short, white shame serves as a manifestation of whiteness and yet another example of the protective pillows (DeMartino & Fetman, in press) of whiteness. For white educators, the biggest takeaway from this is the fact that there is a need to combat and dismantle whiteness in schools. This can be achieved by adopting authentic caring with the overarching goal of sustainable equity, justice, and antiracism in educational spaces.

**Critical Caring, Love, and Hope in Educational Spaces**

Educational research (Miller et al., 2011; Nieto, 2003) indicates emotional responses, such as caring, trusting, and loving, serve as the foundation for antiracist educators, but the difference resides in the critical authenticity (Valenzuela, 1999) of these emotions. According to Valenzuela (2005), “teachers expect students to care about school in a technical fashion before they care for them, while students expect teachers to care for them before they care about school” (p. 83). Relatedly, Curry (2016) recommends adopting authentic cariño that incorporates critical, familial, and intellectual caring, where she incorporates critical care with a nurturing element reminiscent of familial relationships interweaved with rigorous curricula and the proper individualized supports needed to help students raise their academic success. Similarly, Nieto (2009) states the caring of students is found in sensibilities related to love, engagement in the work, the hope of changing students’ lives, the democratic potential of public education, and the constant questioning of the conditions of public education.

Authentic care will look different across educational contexts. However, caring must be authenticated through the educator’s actions rather than performative claims of care, trust, and love. For example, instead of accepting household differences and providing alternative opportunities to engage the student in extended academic work, performative claims of care might look like a teacher verbally expressing a caring concern for their student’s academic success, but then continuing to penalize this student for not turning in their homework on-time, even though they are aware that their high school aged sibling is head of the household until the parents return home from work late into the night. See Table 1 for more examples of performative acts juxtaposed to authentic care, trust, and hope in educational spaces. In short, the aesthetic of caring must be replaced by more authentic expressions of caring in order to build genuine relationships between educators, students, and families.

Authentic care is strengthened and sustained in education by the adoption of critical hope. Critical hope in education centers the work of educators who exhibit fierce love for students demonstrated through actions rather than words (Duncan-Andrade, 2009). In fact, Duncan-
Table 1  
**Examples of Performative and Authentic Care, Trust, and Love in Educational Spaces**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performative Care, Trust, and Love in Educational Spaces</th>
<th>Authentic Care, Trust, and Love in Educational Spaces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The teacher verbally expresses a caring concern for their student’s academic success, but…</td>
<td>Rather, …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher continues to penalize this student for not turning in their homework on-time, even though they are aware that their high school aged sibling is head of the household until the parents return home from work late into the night.</td>
<td>The teacher accepts household differences and provides alternative opportunities to engage the student in extended academic work, like providing extra time within the school day to complete extension activities or creates an alternative activity where the student can verbally “show what they know” at the beginning or end of the day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher refuses to allow their student, who arrives at the morning bell, to eat their school breakfast in the classroom.</td>
<td>The teacher recognizes the student needs to eat their breakfast to have a good start to the school day and for continued nutrition and welcomes the student to eat their breakfast in the classroom while engaging the students in a breakfast chat to check-in with the students before initiating class content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher acknowledges (the same) students for achieving the status of honor roll, indicating their academic success.</td>
<td>The teacher acknowledges (more) students for being “on-a-roll,” acknowledging both academic achievement and growth.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Andrade (2009) argues critical audacious hope occurs when educators become critical of the state of education and become committed to serving as change agents in order to dismantle structural inequities in schools, instead of adopting a non-critical stance founded on unrealistic educational utopias. Along the same lines, Rivera-McCutchen (2021) advocates for the use of an ethic of radical care, which integrates the critical frameworks of care and hope with the Black principalship. More specifically, the ethic of radical care encompasses taking a critical stance on equity and justice in schools by “cultivating authentic relationships, believing in students’ and teachers’ capacity for growth and excellence, strategically navigating the sociopolitical and policy climate, and embracing a spirit of radical hope can lead to upliftment and success for historically marginalized students of color” (Rivera-McCutchen, 2021, p. 282). In sum, authentic care, love, and hope in education is crucial in the development of antiracist educators and pedagogies in schools, but it is equally important to move this crucial work from performative to substantive.
Becoming Educators for Racial Justice in Schools: Moving from Performative to Sustainable Equity, Justice, and Antiracist Work

Equity, justice, and antiracism in schools are not achieved by completing a culturally competent checklist. We must critically reflect, understand, and suspend our color-blind racism as adopted in many regular activities we see in schools, such as naturalized in curricula, teaching materials, policies and practices, attitudes, and assumptions of educators in the classroom. In tandem, we must check our manifestations of whiteness, including privilege, emotionality, and shame. However, in order to do sustainable equity, justice, and antiracist work rather than performative work, white educators must critically assess their whiteness in relation to their unearned power and privilege. As Ladson-Billings (2001) asserts, white “teachers have little to no understanding of their own culture. Notions of whiteness are taken for granted. They rarely are interrogated. But being white is not merely about biology. It is about choosing a system of privilege and power” (p. 81). Similarly, Matias (2013a) argues whiteness invisibly operates to a majority of white educators while it is visible to many students of color. Therefore, it is essential that educators are aware of how race, racism, and whiteness are perpetuated in schools and actively work to dismantle these systems of oppression. Self-interrogations coupled with adopting brave spaces for critical conversations are two ways to trouble whiteness in educational institutions.

Self-Interrogations as Foundational to Equity and Justice Work

It is imperative for white educators to perpetually examine their own whiteness and its relationship to systemic racism and white supremacy. Through this process, they also become accomplices for racial justice. When doing so, white accomplices in education must understand: (1) They are not in the place to designate who is and is not culturally relevant, this is determined by people of color; (2) They must reject whiteness everyday which comes with emotional burden and possible ostracism; (3) They must continue to understand what whiteness means and how it manifests itself in everyday interactions (Matias, 2013a). In fact, as a white antiracist educator myself, I am consistently self-reflecting, in conversation with, and acting to dismantle the insidiousness of white supremacy and the manifestations of whiteness within my role and context in education. I try to make personal connections to racism through white privilege causing me to leverage my privilege to challenge racism (Case, 2012). By interrogating my whiteness, I am moving towards becoming a better educator and community member for racial justice. This is not easy. In alignment with the advice from Patton and Haynes (2020), I recognize when I make mistakes, I wholeheartedly apologize, and I try to do better in the future.

According to Patton and Haynes (2020), white educators have the ability to (re)imagine their whiteness in schools, but it requires viewing themselves as capable of responding to inequities and injustices while engaging other white colleagues to do the same. Further, (re)imagining whiteness requires educators “to acknowledge operating under a woefully inadequate paradigm that is not simply about racism against minoritized groups but the benefit of white people” (Patton & Haynes, 2020, p. 43). White educators have the potential to offer valuable contributions to the fight for racial equity, but it requires (re)imagining whiteness to make what can already be seen evident in a different way (Patton & Haynes, 2020).
Adopting Brave Spaces for Critical Conversations

Educational institutions are often stifled by practices aimed at diluting or simply ignoring critical conversations on race and racism. Galloway et al. (2019) contend the naming and centering of antiracism in schools challenges educators to reflectively engage and address this evasiveness head-on by addressing racism, whiteness, oppression, and the systemic roots of these systems of oppression. In this way, educators are more prepared to fully embrace antiracist education rather than returning to the comfortability of their pillows of whiteness (DeMartino & Fetman, in press) and further perpetuating racism in education.

Also, educators for racial justice must fully commit to dismantling white supremacy and the manifestations of whiteness beyond the recognition that white people hold racial privileges in order to understand the overwhelmingly presence of whiteness embedded within our schools (Matias & Mackey, 2016). This process entails an understanding of historical racial injustices, like how white people accumulated material wealth, economic power, housing superiority, and the operationalization of whiteness through investment and claims of racial ignorance (Matias & Mackey, 2016). Once the process has started, educators must apply this new knowledge to the classroom. Similarly, Matias and Mackey (2016) suggest teachers must move beyond their own comfortability by pressing and deconstructing their own whiteness and emotionality and moving beyond discomfort, guilt, sadness, defensiveness, and anger. Furthermore, Carr (2016) argues that education is a fundamental function to critically combat the structural roots of racism through direct involvement, critical dialogue, and responsive action. To this end, educators must demand attention to the history of racism and racist practices which perpetuate the status quo. In order to begin this process, an understanding of the manifestations of whiteness is essential.

Because the teaching force is predominately white (Sleeter, 2017), educators for racial justice must recognize oppressive social forces shaping society, like the insidiousness of white supremacy, and act against them by interrogating their claims of caring and loving their students (Matias, 2013b). The authenticity of caring and love must be extended to all students, including students of color. As such, the following recommendations are offered to assist educators when transforming both colleges of education and PreK-12 schools to implement, improve, and sustain equity, justice, and antiracism within education.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Within Colleges of Education

Due to the insidiousness of racism and white supremacy embedded within institutions, colleges of education must commit to making sustainable changes for racial justice in order to make an impact on the future force of educators entering PreK-12 schools. These sustainable changes are essential for (re)imagining education as an equitable opportunity. Therefore, colleges of education must be dedicated to introducing their students to their field with the ability to critically examine their identity and how that impacts their future students. Because colleges of education often offer a limited number of courses on critical education in any form, Picower (2009) suggests multiple courses on critical multicultural education, critical leadership, or the equivalent as a mandatory part of the teacher and leadership programs in order to interrogate
their hegemonic understandings concerning race. Also, she argues that these critical understandings should not be housed in one solitary course but embedded within multiple courses offered within the program of study, like content and methods courses (Picower, 2009). Further, these courses must name race, racism, and white supremacy (Matias, 2016a) and offer opportunities for equitable emotional literacy. For example, Matias and Mackey (2016) developed an emotionally-based approach to teaching preservice teachers by encouraging them to look more deeply into their expressions of pity towards students of color to recognize and undo their simultaneous expressions of guilt, anger, and defensiveness.

Relatedly, faculty and staff must receive professional learning opportunities on issues of equity and justice. We can no longer assume faculty are prepared to both embed this work into their syllabi, develop antiracist policies and procedures, and engage in these courageous conversations. In alignment with effective professional learning, these workshops should be continuous, rather than a one-off professional learning opportunity, and facilitated by internal and external change agents in order to make sustainable changes within and outside of education.

**In PreK-12 Schools and Classrooms**

In PreK-12 schools, students of color are victims of color-blind racism coupled by the presence of manifestations of whiteness. Matias (2013b) argues, “only when society rightfully redistributes the burden of race off People of Color’s shoulders to those who benefit from our subjugation, can pain be alleviated” (p. 5). In order to achieve this, whiteness should be decentered in curriculum and pedagogy, but also in the procedures and protocols adopted by schools. For example, due to the misrepresentation of students of color referred for discipline, schools should review their discipline policies for implicit bias and equitable resources.

Also, white educators can leverage their privilege to challenge racism and white supremacy as a tool for societal change to provide such privileges to all members of society (Case, 2012). One way to leverage one’s privilege in the classroom is to engage students in conversations around race, equity, and justice. Ladson-Billings (1996) recommends the following strategies for educators: (1) Structuring seminars so that students can engage in conversation with other students they do not normally speak to; (2) Distributing note cards to solicit anonymous questions and comments about the readings based on race, racism, and white supremacy; (3) Arranging small group discussion and activities in order for students to have the opportunity to share with a smaller set of peers; (4) Journaling with the understanding that only the teacher will read the journals and offer answers, resources, or feedback; (5) Creating a classroom culture of inquiry where all comments and opinions are open for discussion. By adopting these strategies, it is important to remember good teaching is teaching to all students.

Lastly, white accomplices should be prepared for a multitude of responses to their equity, justice, and antiracist agenda in schools. This good and necessary work is emotionally draining, mentally taxing, and requires vulnerability (Matias, 2013a). Simultaneously, accomplices are activists in the cause to disrupt whiteness in schools. Further, by assuming the responsibility of dismantling whiteness in schools, white educators also accept the deep emotional disruptions that perpetually occur when exposing the insidious and destructive maintenance of racism in schools. In this case, in schools where racial justice might not be welcomed, accomplice circles may provide support
for educators to continue the interrogation of their thoughts, decisions, behaviors, and the racial implications of their choices (Case, 2012). As such, these accomplice circles provide a courageous space to draw on the experiences and knowledge across members to continue the reflective process for authentically adopting equity, justice, and antiracism in schools.

White supremacy and racism ravage our PreK-12 schools. In fact, these systems of oppression are acts of violence towards our students of color (Dillard, 2020). It is the duty of teachers to both protect and educate students in a safe and welcoming classroom through authentic love, caring, and hope. Through these acts coupled with an awareness of the manifestations of whiteness, teachers acting as accomplices for racial justice become advocates and activists in partnership with their students and families resulting in a more humanized school, district, and community.

Author Notes

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