Living and Learning While Black: Navigating White Supremacy

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Abstract: Anti-Black racism shaped my life experiences in many ways. The pervasiveness of Whiteness and White supremacy in the United States required me to learn and unlearn specific lessons—some critical to my survival and others that hindered my ability to thrive fully—leaving me with an insatiable longing for freedom. This narrative describes some of the pivotal moments in my journey of living and learning under the yoke of White supremacy. I examine the coping mechanisms and *un*learning necessary to combat racial battle fatigue and strike a healthy balance of social activism and self-care. I use critical race theory to focus salient experiences of racism and counter-narratives that support my life process. While I recognize that people of all ethnicities can perpetuate anti-Black racism, my narrative is centered on living in relation to White people and White systems of domination.

Keywords**:** resilience, strategic learning, unlearning, white supremacy, whiteness

Early Memories of Race and Racism

One of my first memories of racism was the execution of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King by an act of the state in 1968 (Pepper, 2018). I was seven years old, and I feared for my life listening to the panic and alarm in the voices of my elders, who, with their eyes glued to the TV, bellowed, "They shot King! They shot King!" A feeling of devastation, doom, and gloom lingered in me and our household for weeks as we watched the rioting and the burning of buildings, the demonstrations, and the massive memorial services that took place afterward. I remember the uncertainty in the air, and I can still feel the fear I felt in the pit in my stomach like it happened yesterday. I don't know how we returned to some semblance of normalcy in our lives after that, but I do remember the belief that "people who look like me are not safe in this country" became seared on my psyche. Throughout my life, several experiences continually reinforced that childhood insight in a way that I believe has become an irreversible core creed for me. The other unspoken truth that I instinctively understood was that the "they" that my elders were referring to through their heart-wrenching revelations were White people. Forever afterward, I always knew who "they" were whenever my elders felt that life necessitated that they guide my comportment in any way to shield me from the racial hatred and mayhem of White people generally, or the disregarding and discriminating behaviors of specific White people, to ensure my survival.

Another early memory I have does not completely belong to me, but it influenced my life and self-image profoundly. It was conveyed to me in greater detail by my mother as I tried to piece together the fragments of memories I have about my sister riding her little red tricycle around the house. My mother remembers my sister riding her tricycle around the basement once while my mother was down there doing the laundry. At some point, my sister stopped circling the area on her trike, looked up at my mother inquisitively, and asked, "Mommy, what are *colored* people?" My mother said, "That's what you are, honey, you are *colored*." My sister started crying and told my mother, "I don't want to be *colored*." My mom tried to console her, explaining that

"everyone in our family is *colored* and it's not bad to be colored—that's just what 'they' call us." I don't remember if my sister felt any relief from that explanation or not, but what I do remember is that experience got paired with riding the little red tricycle around, and it didn't feel so enjoyable and free anymore to roam around the house on that little three-wheeler.

As an adult, I would learn about the famous Clark and Clark (1940) doll experiment, where preschool Black children overwhelmingly chose the White doll over a Black doll as the one they would prefer to play with and the one they believed to be nicer. The racial trauma (Comas-Diaz, 2016; Williams, Printz, et al., 2018) and indoctrination of White supremacy seeps into the pores of the subconscious like a poisonous invisible gas. I am grateful that my sister and I eventually learned, through the persistent and unwavering love and efforts of my elders and community, that the White racist world that we live in is the problem, not our skin color. While I learned in some ways not to adopt that White hatred of myself, my family's efforts unfortunately did not totally protect me from internalizing racial stereotypes about Black people. This is something I have had to unlearn through consciously and consistently reflecting on the impact of the steady, unrelenting stream of negative imagery I witness about our lives as Black people.

The K-12 School System

> White supremacy affects every element of the U.S. education system. (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2021, front cover)

My relationship to the formal education system in this country is linked to the historical legacy of the time of chattel slavery in the lives of Black Americans, when learning to read and write was a crime punishable by death (Rodriguez, 2007). Jim Crow laws and racial discrimination in the North continued to ensure that, if educated at all, Blacks would receive an inferior or otherwise substandard formal education in the public school system (Edwards & Thompson, 2010). With the passage of the civil rights legislation known as *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the American school system was effectively desegregated. However, the systematic ways in which Black children are disparaged and targeted for racially biased practices and policies within the school system have persisted (Horsford, 2018; Marrus, 2015) despite federal legislation designed to eliminate racial segregation and discrimination. This is particularly true in predominantly White schools. Facing racial injustice within the school system, Black students must continue to find ways to resist racism and create counter-stories (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004) that challenge dominant White narratives. For example, while learning to excel educationally using a host of strategies from many sources, Black students must also contend with racial stereotypes, White myths of meritocracy, whitewashed historical accounts, and untrustworthy claims of race neutrality.

As soon as I could hold a pencil in my hand correctly, my mother taught me how to spell my name. In that "pay attention, this is serious" kind of tone of voice, she explained to me, "When you start school, they are going to try to shorten your name to *Val*. You tell them your name is not *Val*, it's *Valandra*, and you tell them how it's spelled; do you understand?" I was around four or five years old, and my mother was right. At least one teacher in every grade I attended from kindergarten through college attempted to shorten my name. I attended predominantly White schools throughout my formal education, and all my teachers were White except for a

Black female math teacher I had in the seventh grade and a Black male biology teacher I had as a senior in high school. Constantly having to assert my right to be called by my name was only the beginning of a long educational career of navigating Whiteness (Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003) to achieve my academic and career goals.

I did not like school, and I was an average student. I hated the feelings of alienation and isolation I experienced regularly sitting in a sea of Whiteness every day for so much of the day. No one was particularly mean to me, but the absence of Black students and teachers was so constant that I often felt stifled emotionally and psychologically. I felt like I had to hold my breath and always stay on guard just in case something happened—in case "they" decided to enact their hatred, prejudice, or violence against me without warning. I would have no recourse or hope for support in an educational system that only begrudgingly tolerated people—*colored* people—who look like me learning to read and write in the first place. The feelings of isolation and loneliness were most pervasive for me during history and world geography classes. In history classes there was never anything taught about the history of Black people, except when the lesson got to the Civil War and the teacher would utter the words "...and Lincoln freed the slaves," and that was the only reference to Black people I ever heard which did not garner feelings of pride but just the opposite. I felt shame and embarrassment sitting in a class all year long with White students learning about the many grand contributions of their ancestors, when the only thing I learned about my people was that I come from slaves and Lincoln freed us. The other thing I learned in history class is that these slaves were brought from the "uncivilized" continent of Africa, which made world geography another dreaded class for me. I was taught nothing about Black history to be proud of from the formal education I received in elementary, junior high, and high school. During this whitewashed racist formal learning, I was required to stand up every day in elementary school and pledge allegiance to a flag and a nation that erased the existence and contributions of my people, dehumanized us, and exploited our bodies and minds regularly. Talk about cognitive dissonance! I hated it – and having to perform that act of allegiance and patriotism everyday with my hand over my heart was another betrayal of myself. Jones (2020) refers to what I experienced as "curriculum violence." She explains that "curriculum violence occurs when educators and curriculum writers have constructed a set of lessons that damage or otherwise adversely affect students intellectually and emotionally" (Jones, 2020, p. 2). Inaccurately representing or omitting historical narratives of groups of people is one form of curriculum violence that can be repeated throughout a student's school experience. Other examples include teachers requiring students to engage in staged reenactments of slavery such as slave auctions, along with students dressing up as enslaved people, plantation owners, Ku Klux Klan members, etc., and referring to this "instruction" as Black history.

Thankfully, I had lived experiences which offered counter-narratives (Miller et al., 2020) to the whitewashed racist history I was subjected to in school. I learned about Black history within my family, community, and church, especially when I spent my summers with my grandparents in a Black neighborhood attending a Black church. I was able to see the accomplishments of enterprising Black leaders firsthand and learn about important historical Black pioneers from the oral histories shared within my extended family and community. Black parents, grandparents, relatives, and neighbors have a long legacy of devising ways to help their children learn, sharing books, oral histories, and other resources within their communities (Norris, 2010; Williams, 2005). I am also grateful that we also had a Black newspaper that published a Black History

spread every February and illuminated the accomplishments and events of the local Black community regularly.

I appreciate initiatives like the Pulitzer Center 1619 Project in school curriculums (Pulitzer Center, 2020). It offers teachers of all grade levels free curriculums, guides, and activities for students, and it "supports students and teachers in using the 1619 Project to challenge historical narratives, redefine national memory and build a better world" (Hannah-Jones et al., 2019, p. 99). It's time White people stopped perpetuating myths and lies about the birth of our nation, the consequences of slavery, and the roles that Black Americans played in the growth of the country, among a list of other fabricated constructs intended to perpetuate White supremacy and suppress Black progress.

During my senior year in high school, it was my Black male biology teacher, not the White academic guidance counselor, who helped me prepare applications for college. He was also the assistant track coach, and he and his wife gave me an enormous brown cloth hardcover Merriam-Webster dictionary and an alarm clock as graduation presents to help me in college.

Black Studies and College

As a first-generation college student, although I was prepared academically, I was not ready for the social culture I faced attending a predominantly White college. Unlike my siblings, who also attended White universities, I did not live on campus in student housing. Instead, I lived with my grandparents. I was the first in my family to attend college (my sister followed the year afterward), and my parents were concerned for my safety but wanted me to get a good education; so, I was strongly encouraged to live in a familiar city with close relatives. In retrospect, this was the best decision for me, because the alienation, isolation, racial stereotypes, and whitewashed education continued into college. It was part of my survival to be able to retreat to my home community and not have to stay in that environment 24/7 like those who live in student housing.

A few major things *did* change for me compared with my experiences in K-12. I was able to take Black Studies classes and formally learn about the rich and diverse history of Black people in the United States and the African diaspora. I was also able to learn the true history of Africa and its colonization and independence. I loved my Black Studies classes and, although I was a declared business major, I took every Black Studies class offered during my four-year college career. It was the first time I sat in classes in which Black students were in the majority, and many of my instructors were Black and from all over the world, including the United States! I was elated. I walked around that campus feeling 10 feet tall every day, even when I was in my business courses with no Black instructors and very few Black students. The Black Studies department was my home away from home, my therapeutic intervention for the 12 years of educational misery that I had to endure. The Black Studies professors encouraged me academically, while some of my business professors were still trying to call me *Val* or not paying me any notice at all—with the exception of one White male accounting instructor that was very impressed with my analytical abilities and encouraged me to consider a career as an accountant.

Graduate School and White Allies

Forty-seven years after surviving a predominantly White educational system, when I was completing my doctorate, I would run into White racial bias (and paternalism) again regarding my name. An editor of an academic journal refused to publish an article I submitted to the journal after I had successfully completed the peer review process and my article had been approved and accepted for publication by the co-editor of the journal. Because my name did not fit the editor's White American cultural frame of first, middle, and last name, he required me to use an arbitrary letter as a first name and use my first name like it was my last name; otherwise, he would pull my article from the scheduled publication. I was furious but knew that I needed that publication to improve my employment opportunities as I sought a tenure-track academic appointment at a research university after I completed my PhD. I conceded to his arrogant, racist, paternalistic demand and threat, betraying myself and compromising my values in the process. In effect, I changed the name I used for that article so that it would be published. The implications of changing my name for that specific publication included the strong likelihood that it would NOT be included in a literature search of my published articles using my given name. For career purposes, this could have implications for tenure and promotion and for any other consideration in which publications are prioritized in assessing my scholarship, contributions to the field, and so on. Some scholars describe this experience as an example of the "Black tax" that African Americans must pay to participate in White spaces. Black American students attending White graduate schools are routinely subjected to the Black tax in several ways. Burrows (2016) identifies four "defining characteristics of the Black tax" that Black graduate students can face:

> (1) [P]resenting an acceptable [White] form of blackness to the white world; (2) appreciating the generosity of white society for being allowed into their institutions; (3) representing the [Black] race; and (4) recognizing that the African American subject is an intrusion to white institutions. (p. 16)

My approach to graduate school was, pretty much, "keep your head down and focus on your studies." I learned very early from my elders that "getting a good education is something that 'they' can't take away from you, and it is the key to getting a good paying job." I wanted a good paying job, and I believed a "good education" was my ticket, although I also knew I would have to deal in the workplace—just like I did in school—with the myth of Black inferiority that permeates our society. The price of my good education ticket meant that I would have to continue enduring racial isolation with even fewer Black students and professors in the graduate school programs that I attended. Nevertheless, I saw a graduate education as the road I had to travel on the way to my destination—the workforce. When I started college, my grandparents told me, "You are there to get a good education; you need what 'they' have to be considered half as good in their eyes, so focus on your studies, nothing else, do you understand?" With my marching orders as clear as they could be, I approached higher education with two specific goals: Get that degree and get a good job. Consequently, I did not look for a "sense of belonging" in graduate school. And after all, whether it was a fair assessment or not, I did not expect much in the way of meaningful interpersonal academic experiences or exchanges with White peers or professors. Therefore, it was a complete and somewhat unnerving surprise when a few White female professors took an interest in me academically and started informally

mentoring me—I didn't know at the time that this was what they were doing. As an undergraduate, I had experienced Black professors in the Black Studies department supporting me academically and emotionally in navigating racism, but they never referred to it as mentoring—in retrospect, I think I just assumed this was what Black professors do for Black students. As noted by Duncan (2020), "one group that has consistently worked to help Black students navigate a society in which they are perceived to be problems is Black teachers" (p. 1). They are often the unsung heroes who must navigate their own race-based stressors in the academy while supporting Black students and often students of other ethnicities who seek them out as mentors. They are truly in a class of their own (Fairclough, 2007).

While I continued to receive support and was introduced to meaningful opportunities from the White female professors I had as a graduate student, it was a Black female professor who continually guided me in navigating the pitfalls, twists, and turns of the White academic culture, from how to approach publishing, to presenting at conferences, as well as teaching. One of only two Black faculty in the program, this professor was new to the university when I approached her and asked her if she would mentor me. She said yes and has continued to serve in that capacity and as a friend ever since. I feel like I had the best of two worlds with the support and guidance of some White female professors and having a Black female mentor, too. Over time, I began to experience a sense that I *did* belong in the academy because of them, and I sought their emotional support and guidance when I was betrayed by the silence of my White peers in one of my graduate classes. It was the relationships with the professors that helped me navigate my feeling of being ostracized, and the disappointment, alienation, and isolation I felt at the students' refusal to provide critical feedback on my proposal after I had watched them in previous classes encouraging each other, making suggestions for what a White student presenter might do differently in the future, sharing resources, etc. But when it was my turn to present my proposal and benefit from critical student feedback, I was met with stone-cold silence. You could hear a pin drop in that classroom. By this time, I had developed what I thought was genuine friendships with some of these White students who looked at me like I was their worst enemy. Even after the professor raised a question about the silence, not one student in the class was willing to say anything. Nothing! Nada! I experienced their collective persistent silence as a form of White hostility. The experience unfortunately reinforced one of my many childhood lessons from my elders; they had told me, "White people are not your friend, and they cannot be trusted. They have the power to smile in your face and stab you in the back... and they will." It would be several years later when forging friendships with some of my White colleagues that I would realize the need to unlearn this lesson to some extent. However, from that point on in my graduate program, I distanced myself physically and emotionally from my White peers. I declined their invitations to study together, and I dismissed the private individual attempts some of them made to rationalize and excuse what they had witnessed in that classroom and participated in themselves.

Weaponization of Whiteness and White Fragility

> [J]ust 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. 7)

One of the things I remember from that experience beyond my hurt and disappointment is what the professor—who was one of my White female faculty mentors—said to me afterward. She told me that, unfortunately, I was getting a glimpse now of what I would likely face in the academy, and she described their silence as a form of passive-aggressive hostility. She was right. I witnessed this phenomenon happening in a variety of ways and circumstances with some frequency to other Black students, faculty, and staff in the White academy. Some years later, after accepting a tenure-track faculty position, I would see a similar dynamic unfold during a faculty search. After her job talk, a White woman candidate received what I and some of my White colleagues experienced as friendly, encouraging feedback by the all-White (except me) and majority women faculty department. The White candidate was also given some suggestions and resource recommendations for thinking about her topic differently and finishing her doctorate. In fact, she was given so much feedback that she pulled out a piece of paper and pen to write down all the helpful suggestions she was given, and off she went. In contrast, the Black woman candidate experienced a rapid-fire interrogation, with no suggestions or resources; some of the faculty openly and aggressively questioned her ability to achieve the goals she presented for completing her studies to join the workforce. The hostility was palpable. Talk about a jarring contrast! I was shocked and dismayed. I was angry and felt helpless. I also empathized with the Black woman candidate, having recognized this scenario myself so many times. This collective anti-Black, White power phenomenon results in a barrage of harm but is often cloaked as White individual innocence, or unconscious bias, or fear, better known as "White fragility" (DiAngelo, 2018). Coshandra Dillard (2020) also lays out scenario after scenario of how this pattern of what she calls the "weaponization of whiteness" harms Black children in our school systems daily. Dillard explains that the weaponization of Whiteness can occur when White people perceive their entitlement to power and authority to be challenged and is demonstrated through "anger and a need for retaliation, feigned fear and, finally, white fragility" (para. 9). This time, I said something to my White colleagues; and, thankfully, the few that *I* consider as allies challenged the way things went down, and it resulted in the program taking some concrete steps to systematically confront racial bias and work to stop the patterns and practices that perpetuate anti-Black racism within the program. Their efforts are not always successful or effective, but "they" are on the path—at least some of them are.

Recommended Solutions

> Education is indoctrination if you're white—subjugation if you're black.
>
> — James Baldwin

I was annoyed when I read in the call for these manuscripts that they "must include recommendations for solutions in the context of the narrative" (Gibson, 2020, para. 3). I thought, "Here we go again! Leave it up to the people who are the victims of anti-Black racism to come up with the solutions for ending White supremacy." Upon further reflection, I realized that first, anyone can submit a manuscript, not just individuals who have been victimized by systemic anti-Black racial injustice. Secondly, the call states, "...in the context of the narrative" (Gibson, 2020, para. 3), which gives me more room to step out of the constant role of having to teach White people how to fix the racist system that they created, they benefit from, and they perpetuate. I appreciate it when White people are willing to do their own work in dismantling racism, and when they are willing to hold each other accountable whether I am present or not.

In the context of my narrative, four basic tenets of critical race theory (CRT) offer a framework for addressing anti-Black racism within the educational system, including 1) the recognition of racism as commonplace in U.S. society; 2) the critique and challenge of dominant ideological claims of race neutrality, objectivity, meritocracy, colorblindness, and equal opportunity; 3) recognition of the legitimacy of the experiential knowledge of racialized persons; and 4) a commitment to social justice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). I agree emphatically with Coshandra Dillard (2020), staff writer for *Learning for Justice*, that it is the responsibility of educators to recognize and examine how Whiteness operates in schools and to take actionable steps to dismantle the White supremacist educational system that harms Black students, instead of simply engaging in performative allyship statements and gestures (Davis & Fields, 2021) that essentially maintain the status quo. I also believe that social workers interested in supporting racial equity also have a role to play. Dismantling anti-Black racism in education requires recognizing, critiquing, and confronting White supremacy and anti-Black racism directly.

Recognition of Racism as Endemic of U.S. Society

Anti-racist educators and social workers can critically examine the pervasiveness of White supremacist ideology, policy, and practices within the K-12 school system and its impact on the emotional, psychological, and physical well-being of Black families and children. Racial trauma scholars have provided ample evidence that Black children are at greater risk of race-based stress and trauma within the school system—perpetrated by teachers, administrators, staff, and other children—than their White peers (Anderson et al., 2019; Dumas, 2016; Henderson, 2017; Henderson & Lunford, 2016). For example, according to data released by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (2018), despite making up only 15.4% of students during the 2015-2016 school year, Black students constituted 31% of referrals to law enforcement. Black students in the public school system continue to be suspended at higher rates than their White counterparts, and they are more likely to be referred to the child welfare and juvenile court systems (Horsford, 2018; Marrus, 2015). These statistics are even more alarming when I consider the fact that over 80% of public school teachers, administrators, and school boards across the nation are White (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Structurally, White supremacy is operating exactly as it is intended—to maintain a racial caste system of policing and restricting Black bodies with power and privilege concentrated in the hands of White people at the top of the education hierarchy. White school officials need to find the courage to see racism, commit to examining their complicity in perpetuating structural racism, and challenge the mechanisms that keep the anti-Black racist engine humming. Black children and youth deserve nothing less.

Likewise, within higher education, the research on anti-Black racism within predominantly White universities and colleges is pervasive and revealing about the cultural climate in which Black students are expected to learn and achieve academic success while routinely resisting anti-Black racism (Jones & Reddick, 2017). Studies document anti-Black racism across all facets of campus life (Bourke, 2010), including the classroom (Morales, 2014), student housing (Harwood et al., 2010; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017), Greek life (Daly, 2014), academic affairs (Wallace et al., 2011), student services (Garibay et al., 2019), campus security (Jenkins et al., 2021), etc., as well as the myriad strategies Black students use to confront, to resist, to educate

the ignorant, and to maintain their comportment to achieve their goals and aspirations (Fleming et al., 2012; Hollingsworth et al., 2018; Torres et al., 2010).

Ongoing exposure to racial discrimination has been linked with race-based trauma and stress (Carter et al., 2017). The potential for long-term negative effects include post-traumatic stress disorder (Williams et al., 2021), hyper-vigilance, depressive symptoms, and anxiety (Ponds, 2013; Williams et al., 2019). Mental health clinicians propose the use of the Developmental and Ecological Model of Youth Racial Trauma (DEMYth-RT) for acknowledging, recognizing, and addressing racial trauma developmentally and contextually among children and adolescence (Saleem et al., 2020). Additionally, the UConn Racial/Ethnic Stress & Trauma Survey (UnRESTS) offers clinicians with an interview instrument to assess racial trauma within a DSM-5 framework for children and youth (Williams, Metzger, et al., 2018). Clinical social workers and other mental health clinicians can utilize these assessment tools to support Black students in coping with racial trauma and to challenge widely held beliefs that racism in schools occurs rarely in isolated instances.

Critique and Challenge Dominant Ideological Claims of Race Neutrality, Objectivity, Meritocracy, Colorblindness, and Equal Opportunity

In a 2021 policy brief advocating for the support of Black students in schools by understanding and addressing racial trauma, the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA, 2021) recognized the well-established practice of "teachers and school administrators often perceiving Black children as being older, more aggressive, and more culpable, even when they exhibit the same developmentally-appropriate behaviors as their White peers—a phenomenon known as 'adultification'" (para. 9). Adultification bias leads to Black children experiencing disproportionately harsher treatment, higher standards, more referrals to school police, law enforcement, child welfare, and juvenile detention, and higher rates of expulsions, suspensions, and arrests at school than their White peers (Dillard, 2020; Epstein et al., 2017; IDRA, 2021). The IDRA (2021) offers several concrete recommendations for reducing racial trauma in schools, including getting police out of school buildings, requiring training in trauma-informed educational practices for all staff, and using a racial equity lens to review school district and campus codes of conduct.

It is especially the responsibility of White educators and administrators who are disproportionately overrepresented in positions of power to stop the weaponization of Whiteness. White educators and administrators can consciously harness their White positional power to effect change. It requires some level of risk to challenge White supremacy, but think about the risk Black children and students live with daily when they walk through the doors of a White supremacist education system. School-based social workers are in a unique role to support these efforts in collaboration with White school officials. Additionally, White educators should seriously consider upgrading their curricula to teach the truth about Black history. The 1619 Project (Pulitzer Center, 2020) I mentioned earlier is a good source to use, and the Southern Poverty Law Center's *Learning for Justice* (formerly known as *Teaching Tolerance*) is another good resource (check out the resources for K-12 and higher education on their website at www.learningforjustice.org).

Recognition of the Legitimacy of the Experiential Knowledge of Racialized Persons

White school officials often misinterpret, mislabel, or dismiss racially traumatic events, despite numerous studies that provide ample evidence of Black students' experiences with—and resistance to—daily racial microaggressions within and outside the classroom. For example, in a study examining the experiences of Black high school students, Grinage (2019) found that students reported that they are routinely silenced, dismissed, and ignored by teachers and administrators when they attempt to discuss race-related issues. Students in the study also reported feelings of frustration and annoyance with their White peers expressed indifference to, or dismissal of, their experiences with racism.

While Black children and their families can and do engage in self-advocacy, legal recourse, and activism to address racial inequities experienced within the school system, the onus is on school officials to develop policies and practices that create a climate to support ongoing and normalized conversations with students about race and racism, to validate and affirm Black students' experiences with race-based discrimination, and to provide Black students with effective avenues for reporting their experiences and getting effective assistance. Additionally, accountability and consequences beyond mild reprimands for race-based infractions would send a signal that school officials take anti-Black racism seriously and are committed to creating a school-based culture and climate in which all students can reach their full potential with minimal stress and full support.

Commitment to Social Justice

The responsibility and commitment of social workers to promote social justice and social change to end systems of oppression is clearly articulated in the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2021). White supremacy and anti-Black racism are structural forms of oppression that shape daily interactions across all sectors of society, including the system of education. The trauma-informed movement has garnered national attention as a comprehensive multi-tiered approach to help school administrators, teachers, and other school staff understand the impact of trauma on student behaviors and outcomes (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016) and facilitate the creation of a racially safe educational culture for all students. Key features of trauma-informed schools include school-based mental health services for students offered in collaboration with community agencies or on campus; training and education of school personnel (teachers, administrators, staff) on the impact of trauma exposure on students; and the development of trauma-informed policies and practices that support positive social-emotional learning, positive behavior, and restorative justice interventions (Treatment and Services Adaptation Center for Resilience, Hope, and Wellness in Schools, 2021).

According to a 2017 report by the *Huffington Post*, 23,000 out of 132,000 schools have adopted a trauma-informed approach to education and have witnessed significant positive outcomes including increased test scores, graduation rates, significant reductions in suspensions and expulsions as well as a drop in bullying, truancy, and drop-out rates (Stevens, 2017). Notable to the successes experienced in these schools is a change in the behavior and attitudes of the adults: "[T]he secret to success doesn't involve the kids so much as it does the adults: Focus on altering the behavior of teachers and administrators, and almost like magic, the kids stop fighting and

acting out in class" (Stevens, 2017, para. 7).

A transformation in how White teachers and administrators see and value the dignity, worth, and humanity of Black children is a critical part of the trauma-informed approach for long-term effective change. Anti-racist social workers can collaborate with school administrators to promote trauma-informed school systems that provide education and training, prevention and early intervention strategies, and mental health services to reduce the incidence of race-based trauma in schools. These are the social justice and social change efforts necessary to advocate for and promote the creation of positive nurturing school environments in which all students—and especially Black students—can feel safe and thrive emotionally, socially, and educationally.

Conclusion

The other thing that challenged me about this call for manuscripts is the statement that "helping professionals are uniquely positioned to develop and champion effective change strategies" (Gibson, 2020, para. 2). In my experience, helping professionals who do not regularly reflect on their own racial biases are not uniquely positioned to do anything except continue to perpetuate racism. I believe that educators are helping professionals. To this end, I would recommend that White helping professionals start seeing their White privilege and complicity in perpetuating racial injustice and White supremacy and stop hiding behind the tired old useless good/bad binary. If I had a quarter for every time I heard "she's not a racist; she's a really nice person," I would be rich and retired. As a Black citizen, educator, and helping professional, I work to create a world, nation, community, and an educational system where all people are recognized and supported within a climate where racial equity is the norm. If White educators choose not to do their own work to address their racism and utilize the abundance of resources available to help them create a racially equitable world and racially safe environment for Black student learning, perhaps it is time for them to retire.

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