

**HOPE THROUGH VULNERABILITY:  
DISRUPTING WHITE FRAGILITY IN EDUCATION**

by

Diane Coddling

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education

Summer 2021

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DISRUPTING WHITE FRAGILITY IN EDUCATION**

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my advisor and committee chair, Dr. Elizabeth Soslau, thank you for being a constant source of support, encouragement, and joy throughout my graduate studies. Thank you for helping me “find my people” and my place in academia. I would also like to thank my committee members, Drs. Robert Hampel, Rosalie Rolón-Dow, and Deborah Bieler, for their guidance and support. Thank you for believing in me.

To the teachers who participated in this study, I extend my heartfelt thanks and gratitude. This research would not have been possible without your kindness and vulnerability. I would also like to thank the BARWE core team members for their commitment to promoting racial justice and building antiracist white educators.

To the University of Delaware Anti-Racism Initiative, the School of Education, and the Graduate College, thank you for generously supporting my dissertation research. To Drs. Chrystalla Mouza and Lori Pollock, thank you for your endless support and mentorship. I would also like to thank my sister scholars, Drs. Brianna Devlin, Anastasia Purinton, and Daniela Avelar, for their loving friendship.

To my family, thank you for your endless love and support. I would especially like to thank my mother, Jean Franklin, for always believing in me and inspiring me to be an educator. A special thank you to my sister, Dr. Jennifer Coddling-Bui, for being a source of inspiration and encouragement. To my father, David Coddling, thank you for always pushing me to work hard. To my dog, Redford, thank you for being my constant companion. Finally, I would like to thank my partner, TSgt Thomas Burkhart, for being by my side every step of the way.

## **DEDICATION**

*To my grandparents, Marjorie Jean and Isaac Bradley Franklin, whom I dearly miss.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Whiteness is a pervasive problem in education. Through supporting institutional hierarchies and systemic racism, whiteness limits access to high quality learning experiences for students across the United States. Research has shown that whiteness, color-blind ideologies, and white fragility work to obscure racism by making white privilege and institutional racism invisible. One of the ways teachers and education scholars are seeking to disrupt whiteness and white supremacy is through antiracist teaching practices. To combat the negative impact of whiteness in schooling, white teachers must take personal responsibility to engage in learning opportunities that enable them to disrupt white supremacy and explore their own necessary role in reforming schooling practices and policies that disadvantage BIPOC students. White fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) is one manifestation of whiteness among white educators. This dissertation offers an empirical examination of Barbara Applebaum's (2017) theory of vulnerability as the antidote to white fragility by exploring how teachers are expressing white fragility and vulnerability while engaging in critical conversations about race and racism.

Using qualitative methodology, this dissertation presents a multiple-case study bounded by three white teachers in a Mid-Atlantic middle school with a primarily Black student body. Data were collected over eight months of prolonged engagement through observations of monthly affinity group meetings, initial interviews, monthly focus groups and individual interviews, final interviews, and document collection. Informed by Critical Whiteness Studies, this work examines how white classroom

teachers, working with racially minoritized students, express vulnerability and white fragility while engaging in critical conversations around race and racism. Additionally, it explores how antiracist affinity groups can disrupt white fragility by fostering vulnerability and preparing white educators to engage in antiracist praxis.

Findings reveal a more complex relationship between enactments of white fragility and vulnerability than previously theorized. Vulnerability does not prevent moments of racial discomfort or white fragility from occurring. Instead, vulnerability leaves white educators open to learning in the discomfort rather than descending into the discursive practices of white fragility that leave them invulnerable to change. This study suggests that white educators express both white fragility and vulnerability during critical conversations about race and racism. Vulnerability can be described as an antidote to white fragility, in that expressions of vulnerability can successfully keep white educators engaged in critical conversations and promote antiracist praxis. Through prolonged vulnerable engagement, white teachers are able to express white fragility less frequently during antiracist inquiry. In addition to being an antidote to white fragility, vulnerability functions as a catalyst for antiracist praxis by keeping white educators engaged in the process of antiracist inquiry, even after experiencing instances of white fragility. Finally, this dissertation discusses how specific features of white antiracist affinity groups, such as critical conversations and cultivating space for brave engagement, can foster vulnerability and promote antiracist praxis.

Understanding how we can foster vulnerability among white educators has the potential to offer essential insight into creating effective spaces for antiracist inquiry and promoting antiracist praxis among white educators. This scholarship contributes to ongoing efforts in the field of education to promote equitable and antiracist teaching

practices, driven by a desire to improve schools and better prepare educators to address racial inequities and push for systemic change. This study was limited by social distancing restrictions during COVID-19 and a homogenous group of participants. Future research should test the conceptual framework put forward in this study by examining a demographically diverse group of white educators who are at various stages in their antiracist development to better understand how expressions of vulnerability influence engagement in antiracist inquiry.

## PREFACE

My dissertation research began in the midst of a global pandemic, heightened racial tension, and political unrest. When the Washington Post asked readers to describe 2020, the top three responses were *exhausting*, *chaotic*, and *lost* (Goren et al., 2020). As one reader put it, “Every day seemed to debut some new, previously unimaginable disaster.” In this preface, I try to capture the ways in which the chaotic and exhausting events that took place between March 2020 and May 2021 intersected with my research topic.

### **Racial Inequity and the COVID-19 Global Pandemic**

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) a global pandemic and everything began to change. In the following weeks, stay at home orders went into effect, nonessential businesses closed their doors, schools transitioned to virtual learning, and stores ran out of pandemic essentials like toilet paper, Clorox wipes, and hand sanitizer. Life had come to a sudden stop, but we remained hopeful that these changes would be temporary. As the pandemic raged on month-after-month, it brought issues of racial justice and equity to the forefront of public health: “It has highlighted that health equity is still not a reality as COVID-19 has unequally affected many racial and ethnic minority groups, putting them more at risk of getting sick and dying from COVID-19” (Center for Disease Control, 2021a). When compared with white people, Black people were 1.9 times more likely to die of COVID-19, Latinx people were 2.3 time more likely to die, and

Indigenous peoples were 2.4 times more likely to die (Center for Disease Control, 2021c). The pandemic exposed inequities in our healthcare system that have always been there due to social determinants, such as “the conditions in the places where people live, learn, work, play, and worship that affect a wide range of health risks and outcomes” (Center for Disease Control, 2021a). The pandemic changed the way Americans thought about the intersections of racism and public health. In April 2021, over a year into the pandemic, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) Director declared racism a serious public health threat, dedicating money and resources for developing and implementing solutions (Center for Disease Control, 2021b).

Racial inequities were also exacerbated by the sudden shift to virtual learning during the pandemic. Although schools scrambled to provide computers and even internet hot spots for families in need, learning from home was far from ideal. At the same time, unemployment hit a record high and families struggled to meet their basic needs on a daily basis (Groeger, 2020). Students, especially young students, needed adult supervision during remote learning, which low-income households struggled to provide (Povich, 2020). Even as schools began to transition to hybrid models that allowed some students to return for in-person learning, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students were more likely to continue learning remotely than their white peers (Dorn et al., 2020). It is not yet possible to understand the full extent to which the pandemic impacted educational outcomes and we will continue to research the effects for decades to come, but one thing remains clear—BIPOC students were disproportionately and negatively affected by virtual learning.

## **No Justice, No Peace: Black Lives Matter Protests**

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered by a Minneapolis police officer and thanks to the bravery of a teenage girl, Darnella Frazier, the world bore witness. In the days and weeks that followed, protesters took to the streets to demand justice for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, who had been shot by police in her home on March 13. While this was not the first time the nation had stopped to demand justice for the Black community, something felt different. More white people were suddenly willing and eager to learn about systemic racism; however, their efforts were often misguided and insincere. My inbox filled with emails from every company I had ever patronized declaring their support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, but few companies moved to enact systemic change. Streaming services highlighted lists of movies and TV shows that depicted Black history. However, many of these films were in fact depictions of white saviorism such as *The Help*, which became one of the most watched movies on Netflix during the protests (Aquilina, 2020). I was naively optimistic that this round of BLM protests would lead to a real shift in public discourse, but this hope was short lived. Although the vast majority of protesters were peaceful, news coverage focused instead on instances of rioting and looting. The public discourse became about what white people considered to be acceptable ways of protesting, rather than engaging with the actual demands of the protesters.

The BLM protests helped push racial equity to the forefront in conversations about schools reopening and the need for systemic changes in order to root out racism in education. At City Charter Middle School, the setting for this dissertation research, educators participated in antiracist book groups over the summer and the administration finally agreed to bring in a company for antiracist and anti-bias training. BLM protests continued throughout the duration of this study with people

taking to the streets following the unjust killings of Walter Wallace Jr., Daunte Wright, and far too many others. Their names came up frequently during data collection and the ongoing BLM protests across the nation were a constant reminder of the urgency of antiracist work. In April 2021, as I finished collecting data, the officer who murdered George Floyd was found guilty on all three counts of second-degree murder, third-degree murder, and second-degree manslaughter (Wamsley, 2021). Yet even while the verdict was being read, another Black child lost her life when she was shot by a white police officer (Vigdor & Pietsch, 2021). Antiracist work has always been important, but this study took place against a backdrop of heightened racial tension that demanded immediate systemic change.

### **Racist Dog Whistles and the 2020 Election**

This dissertation also took place in the midst of the 2020 election, which was filled with racist dog whistles and propaganda. Throughout the pandemic, then President Trump referred to COVID-19 as the “Kung Flu,” an unsubtly racist reference to the first known cases of the virus in Wuhan, China (Nakamura, 2020). His rhetoric helped fuel a steep rise in anti-Asian hate crimes, which increased by nearly 150% during the pandemic (Yam, 2021). Trump also poured gasoline onto the flames of racial tension when he retweeted a video of a supporter shouting “white power” (Shear, 2020) and told the Proud Boys, a known far-right extremist group, to “stand back and stand by” during the first presidential debate (Frenkel & Karni, 2020). His words and actions came up frequently during data collection, specifically pertaining to the ways in which he used his platform to increase racial tension and deepen the political divide.

In September 2020, Trump called race-related training “un-American propaganda” and sought to stop federal agencies from participating in any training that referenced “white privilege” or “critical race theory”—two theories central to this dissertation research (Dawsey & Stein, 2020). Two weeks later, Trump announced the Patriotic Education Commission and publicly opposed critical race theory and the Pulitzer Prize-winning “1619 Project,” calling them “toxic propaganda” that will “destroy our country” (Wise, 2020). While this was initially reported as political posturing, nine months later in May 2021, state lawmakers across the country were enacting legislation to ban teaching critical race theory in schools (Adams, 2021). The political unrest reached its peak on January 6, 2021, when a crowd of pro-Trump rioters stormed the United States Capitol in an attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 election. This insurrection was fueled by Trump’s “Big Lie” that the election had been stolen by the Democrats, despite producing no evidence to support this claim.

The year I wrote this dissertation was unlike any other. It was an exhausting and chaotic year, filled with loss and languish (Grant, 2021). Since I began this research, more than 3,710,000 people have died worldwide of COVID-19, with more than 596,000 deaths in the United States alone. Participants in the study lost family members and friends to the virus, as did I. Due to social distancing restrictions, I never met my participants in person, but I am grateful for the time we spent together virtually throughout this study. Together, we reflected on the weight of the COVID-19 global pandemic, mourned instances of police violence as they occurred in our communities, and processed the impact of political unrest on antiracist teaching.

## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

We must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness.

– Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children*

Calls for antiracism come in waves. Each newly publicized atrocity is a catalyst for change, but the outpouring of public support inevitably fades and the waves of change subside. Following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of police, Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists and supporters took to the streets to protest in all 50 states and more than 60 countries around the world (Buchanan et al., 2020; Cave et al., 2020), bookstores sold out of antiracist literature as people began to engage with issues of police brutality and systemic racism (Schwedel, 2020), and students confronted school districts with lists of antiracist demands (Gewertz, 2020; Smith, 2020). Yet, even as the country seemed ready for change, questions remained regarding *how*: How can we channel public outcry into systemic change? How can we effectively engage white<sup>1</sup> allies in disrupting whiteness

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout my work I refrain from capitalizing derivations of the word white in order to “reject the grammatical representation of power capitalization brings to the term ‘white’” (Pérez Huber, 2010, p. 93).

and dismantling white supremacy?<sup>2</sup> How can we foster dispositions that can turn performative allyship into meaningful antiracist action?

### **Background and Context**

The fight against racism in America is not new. Activist organizations and scholars across the country are continuing the work of abolitionists and civil rights leaders that began centuries ago (see Kendi, 2016; Love, 2019; Tatum, 2017). In 1979, Angela Davis declared, “In a racist society it is not enough to be non-racist, we must be antiracist” (as cited in Kendi, 2016, p. 429). Forty years later, authors such as Ibram X. Kendi and Bettina Love continue to call for antiracist action. According to Kendi (2019), there is no middle ground between racist and antiracist, which means there is no such thing as being non-racist. In the face of injustice, there is no middle ground. Such attempts at neutrality support racist policies and ideas, which Tatum (2017) describes as *passive racism*. Antiracism requires radical reorientation of consciousness, persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination (Kendi, 2019). To be antiracist is to support antiracist policies that promote racial equity, engage in antiracist action, and espouse antiracist ideas.

Engaging in antiracist work often requires changing worldviews, especially for white people as they continue to benefit from white supremacy and systemic racism. This dissertation examines the ways in which white antiracist affinity groups are fostering dispositions that support antiracist action among white educators. I explore

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<sup>2</sup> Drawing from the work of bell hooks, I use the phrase *white supremacy* to describe systems that “support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression” (hooks, 1989, p. 113).

the idea that vulnerability is an important, and perhaps even necessary, part of changing worldviews. For Delpit (2006), vulnerability is what leaves white educators open to changing their beliefs, and thus changing the way they see and understand the world: “We must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness” (p. 47). Antiracist work requires more than kindness and good intentions, as racial oppression can easily arise from warmth, friendliness, and concern (Massey et al., 1975; Milner, 2012b). It is time for white people to join the fight and push back on the need for interest convergence (Bell, 1995a) in order to achieve lasting systemic change.

### Rooted in Racism

Racism is deeply rooted in American society. Built on stolen land through the forced labor of enslaved Africans, this country was designed to benefit those deemed to be white at the expense of BIPOC<sup>3</sup> (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) peoples. As a result, racism has been internalized and institutionalized in American society and governing systems (Bell, 1991). Critical race scholars tell us that these systems are continuing to function as they were intended, upholding white supremacy through the oppression of racially minoritized people and cultures (Leonardo, 2016). Critical Race Theory (CRT) centers race as a key factor of inequity due to the long-

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term BIPOC throughout this dissertation as an inclusive term that also highlights the experiences of Black and Indigenous people (Garcia, 2020). While the term “people of color” has been widely used as an inclusive term to refer to non-white communities, it has been criticized for erasing the experiences of the Black community (Widatalla, 2019).

lasting effects of racial ideology and white supremacy in American society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn 1999; Omi & Winant, 1986). CRT scholars have cautioned that to ignore the realities of racism “is to belie the history of this nation entirely” (Lynn, 1999, p. 622). Racism is an ordinary part of American society and instances of racism are not abnormal (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Racism penetrates and shapes all of America’s systems, such as our systems of justice, policing, banking, housing, healthcare, and education—the focus of this dissertation.

### Whiteness in Education

Whiteness is a pervasive problem in education. Through supporting institutional hierarchies and systemic racism, whiteness limits access to high quality learning experiences for BIPOC students across the United States. With a history of colonization and segregation (Hays, 2007; Leonardo, 2016; Love), American schools are continuing to fail BIPOC students and communities, even after decades of reform. Theories of education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006a) and the opportunity gap (Gorski, 2018; Milner, 2012a) detail the ongoing disparity in access to quality schools. As historically segregated spaces, schools continue to be governed by racist policies and a culture of power that benefit and prioritize white students, while BIPOC students are often characterized as a problem to be fixed (Delpit, 2006; Gillborn, 2005; Howard, 2013). The systematic privileging of white students can be seen in how schools make decisions about disciplinary policies, curricular materials, instructional approaches, course tracking, and family engagement (see Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Love, 2019; Tatum, 2016). Racial inequity and white supremacy are central features and fundamental characteristics of our education system.

While unexamined whiteness has an especially dire impact on BIPOC students, it also serves to indoctrinate new generations of white students to uphold the status quo of white supremacy. In American public schools, teachers are overwhelmingly white, making up 80% of the teaching force despite the increasing racial diversity of students (Taie & Goldring, 2020). These white teachers have little exposure to BIPOC communities prior to entering the classroom (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018) and lack preparation in racial literacy (Evans-Winters & Hines, 2019), leaving them underprepared to address racial inequities, systemic racism, and the oppressive structures of white supremacy in education. Whiteness, color-blind ideologies (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), and white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) work to obscure racism by making white privilege and institutional racism invisible. One of the ways teachers and education scholars are seeking to disrupt whiteness and white supremacy is through antiracist teaching practices. However, white liberalism limits antiracist work by insisting on making small changes over time, rather than embracing the need for sweeping antiracist change (Crenshaw, 1988). Disrupting whiteness and white supremacy can create a path for engaging white educators in antiracist work, as these barriers exist internally as well as systemically.

#### Antiracism in Education

Antiracist teaching requires intentionally working to disrupt white supremacy, centering BIPOC voices and experiences, and taking actions to promote racial equity. Antiracist teaching practices are built on a foundation of activism. With no middle ground, educators are either engaging in antiracist teaching practices that promote racial equity or racist practices that fail to disrupt white supremacy in our schools and communities. Schools are racialized institutions that require antiracist action to create

racial and educational equity. Educators cannot disrupt white supremacy without taking up antiracist ideas, policies, and practices in their daily lives. Teaching to disrupt white supremacy requires action—daily action, intentional action, antiracist action.

It is the responsibility of all educators, but especially white educators as complicit contributors and benefactors of white supremacy, to implement antiracist teaching practices. There are numerous ways to engage in antiracist teaching. In her book *Everyday Antiracism*, Pollock (2008) presents a collection of essays that propose specific antiracist approaches and actions that educators can take every day to promote racial equity and address racism in schools. Pollock calls on educators to work against racial inequity and racism in society by centering antiracist principles, such as acknowledging the lived experiences of BIPOC students and rejecting false notions of racial superiority. In her work on abolitionist teaching, Love (2019) calls on educators to fight injustice in their schools and communities through critical reflection and antiracist action. According to Love, “Education is one of the primary tools used to maintain white supremacy and anti-immigrant hate” (p. 23). For this reason, educators cannot disrupt white supremacy without taking up antiracist ideas, policies, and practices in their classrooms daily.

### Building Antiracist White Educators

There are select groups of white educators engaging in professional learning communities to disrupt racism and white supremacy in schools. One such group is BARWE, which stands for *Building Antiracist White Educators*. BARWE was founded by teacher activists in Philadelphia as a space for white educators to hold each other accountable as they take up the burden of fighting against racism and white

supremacy. On their website, BARWE names white educators as beneficiaries of white supremacy and calls on them to join the fight against racism and white supremacy:

It is not the responsibility of people of color to challenge white supremacy. It is the responsibility of those of us who benefit from white supremacy every day. This is one small way to work to fight white supremacy in your school and community, and to overcome your own racial biases. (<https://barwe215.weebly.com/>)

To this end, BARWE provides a race-based affinity space in which white educators gather to engage in antiracist work. White antiracist affinity groups provide a space to explore what it means to be a white person living in a racist society, to support emotional processing, and to learn the skills needed to participate more fully in antiracist work (Michael & Conger, 2009). Affinity groups provide a safe (yet critical) space for deep reflection.

The affinity group structure and curriculum created by BARWE appear to draw from the tenants of Critical Race Theory (CRT) by centering race and contextualizing their pursuit of antiracism in America's long history of racism and white supremacy (Bell, 1995b; Crenshaw, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). During monthly inquiry meetings, BARWE groups use the materials provided via the BARWE website to engage in critical conversations around issues of race and racism. These critical conversations are social justice-oriented dialogues that acknowledge race as socially constructed, recognize oppressive systems, and seek to disrupt the status quo of white supremacy. Descriptions of BARWE group discussions and conversational norms are available on the BARWE website (<https://barwe215.weebly.com/>). Further, research by scholars such as de Novais' (2019) work on Brave Community and Singleton's (2015) work on Courageous

Conversations also serve to describe the types of critical conversations that take place in BARWE. Critical conversations, like CRT, have the end goal of bringing about change that will promote social justice (Crenshaw, 1995). As a white antiracist affinity space, BARWE positions teachers to engage in critical dialogue in order to learn and change their worldviews. However, it is important for teachers to take up dispositions that allow them to engage fully and openly during critical conversations. Without such dispositions, these conversations are ineffective at changing worldviews.

### **Problem Statement**

White teachers are continuing to struggle with shifting from well-intentioned non-racist educators who go along with the inequitable status quo to antiracist educators who actively work to dismantle white supremacy and ensure racial equity in education. Such a change requires a shift in worldview. While scholars and activists have worked for decades to engage white educators in antiracist work (see Kendi, 2016, 2019; Love, 2019), racial inequities persist. To combat the negative impact of whiteness in schooling, white teachers must take personal responsibility to engage in learning opportunities that enable them to disrupt white supremacy and explore their own necessary role in reforming schooling practices and policies that disadvantage BIPOC students. Organizations such as BARWE are working to create spaces where white teachers can engage in critical conversations around race and racism. However, when white teachers engage in these conversations, they often experience an “emotionally charged” reaction (Garrett & Segall, 2013, p. 301). These moments of feeling and expressing anger, fear, discomfort, or guilt represent enactments of whiteness (Ohito, 2019). Studies show that white educators often experience these emotions when they find themselves confronted with manifestations of whiteness

within themselves and their classrooms (Juárez & Hayes, 2015; Matias & Mackey, 2016; Ohito & Deckman, 2018).

These emotional and resistant reactions are performances of what DiAngelo (2011) refers to as *white fragility*. White fragility is one aspect of whiteness that causes white teachers to close themselves off from learning new information about race and racism, preventing them from changing their “hearts and minds” while simultaneously attending to racist policies (de Novais, 2019). DiAngelo (2011) articulates her theory of white fragility as the lack of psychological stamina, as well as the cognitive and affective skills white people exhibit when faced with racial stress. White fragility manifests as defensive moves, such as anger, fear, guilt, argumentation, silence, or leaving the racially uncomfortable situation (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018). Such responses are triggered by challenges to the structures and norms of whiteness. White fragility is inculcated by segregation, universalism, individualism, entitlement to racial comfort, racial arrogance, racial belonging, freedom from racial stress, and constant messaging that white people are more valuable than BIPOC peoples (DiAngelo, 2011). White people claim they don’t feel safe (read “comfortable”) when confronted about racism, trivializing the violence perpetuated by white people against BIPOC communities throughout America’s past and present. Thus, white fragility functions as a way to maintain the current racial disequilibrium.

White fragility as a barrier to self-exploration and self-development for white educators needs to be explored to better understand how teachers learn to circumvent or dismantle these particular interpersonal and intrapersonal barriers to racial learning. This dissertation emerged as a result of my ethnographic pilot study (Coddling, 2020), which examined how white teachers are grappling with race and equity while making

decisions in their classrooms. I found that in order to promote equity, further work needed to be done to disrupt whiteness in education. Whiteness normalizes white supremacy, and when white people are complicit in whiteness, they help to maintain white supremacy and racial inequity. This study continues my examination of whiteness by exploring one theory of how we can disrupt the barrier of white fragility and create opportunities to engage white educators in changing their worldview.

According to DiAngelo (2011), stamina counters white fragility by helping white people endure prolonged engagement with the topic of racism. However, increased stamina and thus prolonged engagement with antiracist ideas is not enough, in and of itself, to foster a shift from non-racist to antiracist beliefs and action. Prolonged engagement without a willingness to be affected by what one is engaging with can still result in expressions of white fragility. Applebaum (2017) rejects DiAngelo's assertion that developing stamina is enough to disrupt white fragility. She argues that white fragility is the "performative practice of invulnerability" (p. 866) and thus stamina is an insufficient counter to white fragility. Applebaum presents white fragility as an enactment of whiteness, which maintains complicity in systemic racism, prioritizing white comfort and marginalizing BIPOC voices. Building on Gilson's (2011) theory of vulnerability, Applebaum argues that expressions of vulnerability, as opposed to prolonged engagement, can lead to a change in worldview. Thus, Applebaum presents vulnerability as a possible antidote to white fragility.

While white fragility is a form of racial violence, vulnerability is a form of support that does not comfort, and thus does not maintain the status quo by silencing BIPOC voices on issues of racism and white complicity. Vulnerability leaves us open to being affected by new perspectives. When white people express vulnerability, they

position themselves as willing to engage in the prolonged process of engaging with new perspectives and ultimately changing their worldviews. As the beneficiaries of white supremacy, white teachers need to play an active role in dismantling white supremacy in education. Understanding how we can foster vulnerability among white educators has the potential to offer essential insight into creating effective spaces for antiracist inquiry and promoting antiracist praxis in education while combating the barrier of white fragility.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The goal of this dissertation is to explore Applebaum's theory of vulnerability as a possible antidote to white fragility and to examine the relationship between expressions of vulnerability and white fragility, and how these expressions are related to antiracist (in)action. To this end, I conducted a multiple-case study to examine how three white educators experienced vulnerability and white fragility in response to the racial stress they experienced during critical conversations with colleagues in a white antiracist affinity group (BARWE) and how such expressions related to antiracist (in)action in their schools and communities. Through an empirical examination of Applebaum's theory of vulnerability, I explore the behaviors, emotions, discourse moves, and actions associated with expressions of vulnerability and white fragility, which have allowed me to make claims about the benefits of taking up vulnerable stances in antiracist work. White fragility, which has been thoroughly examined and documented with preservice teachers (DiAngelo, 2011; Matias, 2016; Picower, 2009), served as a countermeasure, allowing me to contrast instances of vulnerability with the known discursive practices of white fragility. My inquiry was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between white teachers' self-perceptions of their role as antiracist white allies and their interactions during antiracist inquiry and praxis?
2. What do expressions of vulnerability and white fragility look like and what is the relationship between these expressions?
3. What is the relationship between these expressions and teachers' antiracist (in)actions?
4. In what ways does the BARWE structure support, or hinder, expressions of vulnerability, white fragility, and antiracist (in)action?

### **Research Design Overview**

This dissertation uses qualitative methodology to examine Applebaum's (2017) theory of vulnerability by researching how white classroom teachers, who work with racially minoritized students, express vulnerability and white fragility while engaging in critical conversations around race and racism. Qualitative methodologies were chosen for this study in order to "illuminate the meanings people attach to their words and actions," which would not be possible without qualitative strategies such as prolonged engagement, thick description, and member checking (Lareau, 1996). More specifically, I chose to conduct a qualitative multiple-case study, because this methodology is well suited for investigating a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life, bounded context (Yin, 2018). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) define a qualitative multiple-case study as an "intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single, bounded unit" (p. 232). This study presents three case studies, each bounded by the context of an individual white teacher as they engage in antiracist work in their local BARWE inquiry group. Within each case, I examine expressions of vulnerability and white fragility, which serve as the unit of analysis. Data collection included initial and final interviews, observations of the monthly BARWE meetings, monthly individual

debriefs and focus groups, and document collection. Within-case and cross-case analysis were guided by interpretive analysis (Hatch, 2002), explanation building (Vaughan, 1992; Yin, 2018), and theoretical orientation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldaña, 2016; Vaughan, 1992; Yin, 2018). Within the bounded context of each case, this study examines how white teachers are expressing, or not expressing, vulnerability and white fragility while engaging in critical conversations during the BARWE inquiry group.

### **Layout of the Dissertation**

In Chapter Two, I provide a discussion of the relevant literature related to antiracist inquiry among white educators, white antiracist affinity groups, and the theories of vulnerability and white fragility in the context of antiracist inquiry. I also discuss how Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) guides this research by providing a lens for critically examining racism and antiracism. Finally, I present my conceptual framework based on the literature for understanding manifestations of vulnerability and white fragility in response to the racial stress during critical conversations about race and racism.

Chapter Three provides an overview of the methodology and rationale for conducting a multiple-case study. Additionally, this chapter provides a discussion of the research context and participants and a summary of the procedures used for data collection and analysis. Finally, I discuss the ethical considerations, measures taken to ensure trustworthiness, and the limitations of study.

In Chapter Four, I present the findings from the three case studies organized to address each of my four research questions. First, I present case studies for each of my participants to explore how their self-perceptions of what it means to be antiracist

allies shape their interactions during inquiry and praxis. Second, I present a series of vignettes to explore the relationship between participants' expressions of vulnerability and white fragility. Third, I reexamine my conceptual framework in light of the current study and present vignettes to illustrate the effectiveness of this framework. Fourth, I examine aspects of the BARWE structure as they relate to expressions of vulnerability and white fragility, as well as antiracist action and inaction.

Chapter Five begins with a discussion of the findings from this qualitative multiple-case study in relation to the literature, organized to address each of my four research questions. Next, I reexamine the guiding theories of vulnerability (Applebaum, 2017; Gilson, 2011) and white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) in relation to the findings. Finally, I address the implications of this research for the field of education and make recommendations for future research, before discussing the limitations of this study and concluding with a brief summary of the scholarly contributions of this work.

### **The Researcher**

This dissertation is affected by whiteness. I am a white researcher studying white educators as they address whiteness and white supremacy in education. While this dissertation offers a critique of whiteness, the nature of this work inadvertently recenters the very thing I have sought to disrupt. To address this tension, I have tried to center the voices of BIPOC scholars, as this work would not be possible without their foundational scholarship. In addition to data collected from my participants, I kept a reflection journal throughout the study to capture my own experiences with vulnerability and invulnerability as a white researcher. In this journal I reflected on how my desire to critique whiteness was frequently in tension with my own identity as

a white education researcher. Throughout the work, I sought to be transparent regarding this tension. Excerpts from my reflections and a more detailed discussion of my experience can be found in the Epilogue.

### Positionality

As a qualitative researcher, I must acknowledge that I am a part of the culture and context I am studying. My research addresses the problem of whiteness, which is a problem I inherited and a problem I continue to wrestle with as an educator. Like my participants, I am a white woman with a middle-class background who taught racially diverse populations of students. I believe that as a white educator and education researcher, I have the responsibility to scrutinize and disrupt whiteness in my work. I also acknowledge that my white identity affords me additional access to my white participants. According to Gallagher (2000), “One’s whiteness becomes a form of methodological capital (white) researchers can use to question whites about the meaning they attach to their race” (p.72). I have seen this play out in my own research. For example, I have found that my white participants often relate to me as a natural confidant, frequently interjecting phrases such as “you know” when recounting their experiences with race.

I grew up in a small town in New Mexico, where I was immersed in a sea of well-meaning white people. As Coates (2015) writes, “There are no racists in America, or at least none that the people who need to be white know personally” (p. 97). Growing up, I was sure I did not know any racists. However, I have come to understand that well-meaning white people are not free of racism, but rather embedded in whiteness and white supremacy. Applebaum (2010) asks, “What can it mean for white people ‘to be good’ when they can reproduce and maintain a racist system even

when, and especially when, they believe themselves to be good?” (p. 5). When I went into teaching, I saw myself as a good white person, one who didn’t know any racists and had gone into teaching with the best of intentions (and just a dash of white saviorism). I was drowning in a sea of whiteness and white privilege, completely unaware that I was the one who needed to be saved. As Jensen (2005) writes, “The world does not need white people to civilize others. The real White People’s Burden is to civilize ourselves” (p. 96).

Whiteness and white supremacy run deep in our school system, often cloaked in good intentions and colorblind racism. As a teacher, I had to realize that I couldn’t love my students out of poverty and my good intentions were not enough to redress systemic racism. Even years into this work, I still experience moments of white fragility when I encounter previously unrecognized forms of racism within myself. Qualitative research is a dialectical process that will affect and change both my participants and myself (Merriam & Tisdell, 2019). To help manage my own emotions and behaviors related to this research, I kept a reflexive research journal throughout the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used this journal as a space to record my reflections to the BARWE reading materials and discussion questions each month, which helped me position myself as a participant in this antiracist work. This study represents a deeply personal endeavor, because, like my participants, I am also a white educator engaged in antiracist teaching and self-reflection. The research journal was a tool for prompting insights and helping me systematically attend to my emotions and experiences throughout the research process. Over the course of this study, I wrote a total of 30 journal entries that were an average of 302 words in length. Excerpts from these journal entries can be found in the Epilogue of this dissertation.

## Critical Perspective

My understanding of race and racism is informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT), which centers issues of race and contextualizes racial equity in America's long history of racism and white supremacy (Ladson-Billings, 2016; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). First, I acknowledge that racism is an ordinary part of American society and instances of racism are not abnormal (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Racism has been a permanent and central feature of the American education system since it began, and issues of race cannot be ignored when addressing inequities in education. Second, I acknowledge that liberalism limits antiracist work by insisting on making small changes over time, rather than embracing the need for sweeping antiracist change (Crenshaw, 1988). Third, I acknowledge the role of interest convergence in limiting progress toward antiracism and equitable education by only accommodating changes that are in the interest of white people (Bell, 1995a). Like Bergerson (2003), I believe that white educational researchers should use CRT strategically by using "our experiences as whites to increase awareness of how racist actions, words, policies, and structures damage the lives of our students, friends, and colleagues of color" (p. 59). According to Harper (2012), "ongoing attempts to study race without racism are unlikely to lead to racial equity and more complete understandings of minoritized populations in postsecondary context" (p. 15). Race cannot be sidelined in educational research; instead, race needs to be central in the theorizing and asking of critical questions (Pillow, 2003).

## Assumptions

Based on my experiences as an educator, I made four assumptions regarding the context and content this study. First, teachers enter the field of education with

good intentions, wanting to be successful and do right by their students. This assumption is based on the high demands placed on educators without adequate financial compensation and the idea that teaching is a public service. However, like Milner (2012b), I argue that good intentions are not enough to disrupt white supremacy and racial inequity in schools. Second, we are all capable of becoming antiracist. This assumption is based on the premise that we are all capable of change, as evidenced by the conversion of David Duke's godson, Derek Black, from a white supremacist groomed to become a leader in the KKK to an antiracist advocate (Saslow, 2016). Third, individuals are capable of both racist and antiracist actions, performed simultaneously. This assumption is based on my understanding that being antiracist requires beliefs and actions (Kendi, 2019), and that we do not always live up to our antiracist ideals. Fourth, critical scholarship is not an assault on white people, but an assault on whiteness and white supremacy. This assumption draws from the work of CRT scholars, such as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) and Gillborn (2016), who acknowledge that white people are capable of taking an active role in dismantling whiteness and white supremacy.

### **Definitions of Key Terminology**

**Antiracism.** The policy or practice of supporting the idea that racial groups are equal; an ongoing process of internal reflection and external action that seeks to root out racist ideas and disrupt racist policies; requires radical reorientation of consciousness, persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination (Kendi, 2019).

**Antiracist Praxis.** The combination of antiracist reflection and antiracist action, based on Freire's (2013) definition of praxis: "Human activity consists of

action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action” (p. 125).

**Critical Conversation.** Social justice-oriented dialogue that acknowledges race as socially constructed, recognizes oppressive systems, and seeks to disrupt the status quo through antiracist praxis. My definition grew out of the descriptions of group discussions and conversational norms on the BARWE website (<https://barwe215.weebly.com/>) and the work of CRT scholars, such as Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), Crenshaw (1995), and Bell (1995). My understanding of what takes place during such conversations has also been informed by de Novais’ (2019) work on Brave Community and Singleton’s (2015) work on Courageous Conversations. I use the term critical conversation to capture elements from each of these theories while also acknowledging the decentralized and informal nature of antiracist affinity groups.

**Racial Stress.** I use the term racial stressor to refer to interactions that interrupt white racial comfort, causing racial stress that can lead to instances of white fragility and vulnerability. According to Stevenson (2014), racial stress is the “emotional overload or shock to an individual’s coping system before, during, and after racial interactions” (p. 28). DiAngelo (2011) argues that “racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar” to white individuals (p. 57). Racial stressors are the interactions that lead to these disruptions of racial comfort, racial familiarity, or whiteness.

**White Fragility.** The quality of being closed off from being affected or changing one’s opinion, perspective, or worldview, characterized by an intolerance of

racial stress that triggers defensive moves, as well as displays of privilege and power that maintain the status quo of white supremacy. My definition is inspired by critical scholarship on white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011), white emotionality (Matias, 2016), tools of whiteness (Picower, 2009), and invulnerability (Gilson, 2011). Throughout the study, I have chosen to use the term white fragility when referring to instances of invulnerability, because this is the term my participants used throughout the study when describing their own experiences with invulnerability.

**Whiteness.** A structure that produces white privilege, protects white supremacy, and maintains systemic racism. A way of understanding and engaging in the world that functions to uphold white supremacy and maintain the position of power that white people continue to claim for themselves (Allen, 2001; Frankenberg, 1997; Leonardo, 2009; Lipsitz, 2018).

**Vulnerability.** The quality of being susceptible to learning and to changing one's opinion, perspective, or worldview and a willingness to risk emotional exposure. My definition draws from the work of Gilson (2011), who defines vulnerability as "a condition of openness, openness to being affected and affecting in turn" (p.310). I also draw from the work of Brown (2015), who defines vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure" (p. 34), and Applebaum (2017), who describes vulnerability as "encompassing an openness to change, dispossession, and willingness to risk exposure" (p. 870).

## **Chapter 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This study aims to explore the ways in which enactments of white fragility and vulnerability affect white teachers' preparation for engaging in antiracist praxis. White teachers continue to be underprepared to engage critically with topics of race and racism (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018b; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2019; Picower, 2009; Sleeter, 2001, 2004), often leveraging the discursive practices of white fragility to disengage from antiracist work rather than expressing vulnerability, which would allow them to remain engaged in the reflection and action of antiracist praxis. A more complex understanding of how to foster and promote vulnerability in white antiracist affinity groups would support efforts to keep white teachers engaged in critical conversations of race and racism, even after experiencing white fragility.

In this chapter, I present a review of literature in the field of education to examine how antiracist work with white educators is shaped by the concepts of race-based affinity groups, white fragility, and vulnerability. I also explore how these concepts have shaped the field's understanding of antiracist praxis and how my research will add to that understanding. First, I begin with an overview of how critical and antiracist professional development has been used to engage white teachers in antiracist work. I then review the key features and beneficial outcomes of successful white antiracist affinity groups, as well as their challenges and limitations. Second, I examine how white fragility functions as a barrier to antiracist praxis and parse out the discursive practices associated with enactments of white fragility. The review

continues with a critical examination of vulnerability as a possible antidote to enactments of white fragility in white antiracist affinity groups. Third, I present an overview of the critical theory guiding this work and a detailed discussion of my conceptual framework. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of the literature reviewed.

### **Engaging White Educators in Critical Professional Development**

Educators regularly engage in professional development (PD) to improve their teaching practices. However, traditional forms of PD often rely on the banking model of education (Freire, 2013), which seeks to bestow knowledge on educators without engaging them in a critical examination of education. Kohli et al. (2015) refer to this form of prescribed PD as antialogical, because it is an oppressive and anti-liberatory form of professional development. After examining three critical PD groups, Kohli et al. (2015) put forward a framework for critical PD that is built on Freire's four tenets of dialogical action: cooperation, unity, organization, and cultural synthesis. First, teachers work cooperatively to co-create a learning space that meets the needs of their school and community. This allows teachers to have a voice in designing and implementing the PD, which moves them away from a banking model and toward critical engagement. Second, critical PD is unifying, in that it brings everyone together to work in solidarity against oppressive structures. This tenet focuses on building a critical community with a shared purpose. Third, critical PD organizes in order to share power with the people they are serving, which includes students, communities, and other educational stake holders. They found that this type of organizing gave teachers agency through shared leadership and ownership over their professional growth experiences. Fourth, teachers critically examine the issues and needs in their

own community and act upon them. Kohli et al. (2015) found that this model for critical PD creates space for critically analyzing and acting on issues of inequity and oppression in education. They also found that critical PD often emerges outside of the formal school setting.

Critical PD is especially important for white teachers, who need to develop their teaching practices, as well as equitable attitudes and knowledge, in order to become equitable educators (Cochran-Smith et al., 2016; Coddling, 2020; Gorski, 2018; Sleeter, 2008; Warren, 2015). White teachers regularly come into teaching with misconceptions, fears, and biases, often having experienced socialization that reinforces belief in white superiority and colorblind perspectives (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Sleeter, 2008). According to Sleeter (2008), “Race, culture, and social class are highly potent filters through which teachers and students interpret each other; the intensity of classroom life wears quickly on shallow good intentions” (p. 574). Sleeter (2008) identifies four important features of PD that focus on preparing white educators to work with diverse students: 1) engaging teachers in deep reflection, 2) supporting teachers while pushing them beyond their existing beliefs and understandings, 3) facilitators who are committed to and knowledgeable of BIPOC communities, and 4) maintaining focus on developing white teachers to work with diverse students.

Smith and Redington (2010) further examine the effects of critical PD on white educators, specifically focusing on antiracist workshops. They found that participating in these workshops can be a transformative experience for white educators. Their participants reported engaging in antiracist action following the PD, which fell into three categories: taking on leadership roles in antiracist groups, ongoing membership

and engagement with antiracist groups, and purposeful communication about racism in their daily lives. Participants also highlighted the importance of maintaining balance between taking on leadership roles and being accountable to BIPOC leaders and communities. Smith and Redington (2010) also found that participants came to antiracist work following a “turning point” that initiated their interest in critically engaging with racism and drive to take some form of action. Finally, they emphasize the long-term nature of antiracist work and the importance of helping white people connect with groups for long-term support.

### **Antiracist Professional Development for Inservice Teachers**

In reviewing the literature, I found only three studies that focus on outcomes of antiracist PD with inservice teachers (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997; McManimon & Casey, 2018; Schniedewind, 2005). In the earliest study, Lawrence and Tatum (1997) examine whether white teachers were able to put their antiracist knowledge into action after participating in an antiracist PD. The PD focused on helping educators recognize various manifestations of racism and take on a proactive role in responding to racism in education. Of the 84 white teachers who participated, 48 reported engaging in specific antiracist actions following the PD. This study shows that participating in antiracist PD can help educators go “beyond just verbalizing good intentions” and actively engage in antiracist praxis (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997, p. 175). They attribute their success to the fact that participation in the PD was voluntary, organizers made their goal of addressing racism explicit, and teachers participated in regular meetings over several months. According to Lawrence and Tatum (1997), by repeatedly engaging they were able to problem solve and make action plans collaboratively, in addition to raising antiracist awareness. In between meetings, participants engaged in

emotionally processing challenging information and began engaging in antiracist actions at school. The format of the PD allowed white educators “to internalize new ideas and begin to reconceptualize themselves as change agents in ways that briefer interventions do not allow” (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997, p. 176).

In the second article, Schniedewind (2005) presents the stories of five inservice teachers who participated in a 30-hour antiracist PD. Of the five teachers, three identified as white, one identified as Black, and one identified as biracial. Schniedewind found that teachers were able to take what they learned in the PD and put it into action. These actions included supporting students of color, challenging stereotypes and white privilege, and confronting institutional racism. This study echoes the value of long-term professional development opportunities that engage teachers in extended critical reflection over time.

In the third article, McManimon and Casey (2018; see also Casey & McManimon, 2020) present an overview of their antiracist PD for inservice teachers, which they studied using practitioner inquiry methodology. Their PD model used a similar format to antiracist affinity groups, meeting with a small group of white educators repeatedly over time to critically address whiteness and racism. Their PD centered around antiracist praxis, which is a combination of antiracist reflection and action (Freire, 2013). McManimon and Casey (2018) identify vulnerability as an aspect of this work, which they connected with teachers acknowledging that they were still struggling with antiracist work: “As facilitators, we modeled sharing our vulnerabilities and the questions we were wrestling with” (p. 401). The model emphasized relationships and accountability within the PD group as they collectively engaged in antiracist praxis. McManimon and Casey (2018) also found that the format

helped foster antiracist action: “Creating spaces for this becoming offers untold possibilities for teachers to develop their own senses of accountability and to act on their worlds in the struggle for justice” (p. 404). If white educators are always in a process of *becoming* antiracist, then long-term antiracist communities are needed to facilitate continued engagement and growth.

### **Race-Based Affinity Groups as a Tool for Antiracism**

Affinity groups<sup>4</sup> are a form of critical professional development that is grounded in the need for social change. Michael and Conger (2009) define an affinity group as, “an assembly of people gathered with others who share a common element of identity in order to explore, celebrate, sustain, and process their experiences around that identity” (p. 56). Affinity groups are places where people come to affirm and explore their identities, find guidance and support, and collectively reflect on their shared realities. Affinity groups provide a place for educators to critically examine and seek to understanding themselves as racialized beings (Milner, 2010; Sleeter, 2008, 2016; Varghese et al., 2019). Beginning as early as the 1960s, companies like Xerox and Pepsi began successfully leveraging affinity groups to promote diversity within their companies (Douglas, 2008). These affinity groups were a place for people who faced similar challenges to come together for mutual support. Douglas (2008)

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<sup>4</sup> In the literature reviewed for this study, the terms “affinity group” and “race-based caucus” are used interchangeably to refer to groups of people with a shared racial identity (e.g., Black, non-Black BIPOC, white) coming together to discuss issues of race and racism. While affinity groups can be defined by any shared identity (e.g., gender identity, sexual orientation), race-based caucuses are a type of affinity group that is defined exclusively by a shared racial identity. My participants in this study refer to themselves as an affinity group, which is why I have chosen to prioritize the use of *affinity group* or *race-based affinity group* to describe this form of critical PD.

identified four phases that professional affinity groups go through as they evolve: promoting awareness within and about the group, building community affiliations, increasing access through networking and mentoring, and advancement through professional development and leadership training. Although these groups often begin at the corporate level, they were successful in promoting diversity and serving as a catalyst for developing an inclusive culture (Douglas, 2008).

Race-based affinity groups have been used to meet the needs of BIPOC and white educators (Kholi, 2012, 2018; Michael & Conger, 2009; Pour-Khorshid, 2016; Strong et al., 2017). Race-based affinity groups fill a void in teacher education by creating racially homogenous spaces that support and retain BIPOC educators and critically engage white educators in antiracist work that prepares them to disrupt racism (Michael & Conger, 2009; Strong et al., 2017). In their examination of two affinity groups for educators in New York City, Strong et al. (2017) found that BIPOC and white affinity groups came to antiracist work with very different needs. The BIPOC affinity group sought a space to connect, learn, struggle and heal in community. However, the antiracist white educators group sought a space to critically examine and discuss race and whiteness with fellow white educators. The BIPOC group created a space free of the white gaze (Yancy, 2008) and white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011), where they could experience a sense of belonging and ownership. The white educators group created a space for critically addressing whiteness as a barrier to antiracist work. Although the groups met separately, they worked collaboratively toward antiracist educational change. Strong et al. (2017) found that antiracist affinity groups can improve relationships between BIPOC and white

colleagues and bring white educators into authentic race dialogue without centering whiteness.

Race-based affinity groups are an important part of teacher education because race continues to be a salient issue in systems of education in the United States (see Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2006b; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). According to Varghese et al. (2019), race-based caucuses help teachers critically examine themselves and how they fit into the broader systems and structures of power. In their study of preservice teachers, Varghese et al. found that even though race-based caucuses can be chaotic and disruptive, they are a necessary structure for supporting and challenging teachers to critically consider their relationship to race and racism while developing their teacher identities. For BIPOC candidates, the caucuses focused on disrupting the “overwhelming presence of whiteness” by reassessing their contributions and value as educators using an asset-based perspective (Varghese et al., 2019, p. 12). For white candidates, the caucuses provided a space to explore and address the consequences of whiteness in education and reflect on their identities as future white teachers.

### **White Antiracist Affinity Groups**

Like other race-based affinity spaces, white antiracist affinity groups are designed to be racially homogenous and cater to the needs of participants. However, these groups remain open to BIPOC colleagues who wish to join them in the work. According to Tochluk (2010), white antiracist affinity groups are a space for building a “radical white community”—a community that helps white people understand race, racism, and privilege more clearly, motivates them to take up antiracist work, and supports them when they fall short. As Michael and Conger (2009) explain, “The only

requirement is white people who want to take an anti-racist stance in learning about race and whiteness, and who are willing to face their discomfort, uncertainty, or anger in the process” (p. 56). However, white people who choose not to participate in such groups are often skeptical, dismissive, and even offended by the formation of antiracist affinity spaces (Blitz & Kohl, 2012).

White antiracist affinity groups create space for white people to talk about white privilege with other white people (Wise, 2004). This racially-homogenous space is important because white people are underprepared to engage in productive interracial conversations about race and racism (Michael & Conger, 2009; Tatum, 2017; Tochluk, 2010; Varghese et al., 2019). This lack of preparation causes racial discussions to benefit white participants while patronizing BIPOC participants. Interracial dialogue too often centers whiteness and caters to white participants, allowing them to leave the conversation with their worldviews unchallenged and unchanged (Leonardo & Porter, 2010). Participating in race-based affinity groups can help white participants learn to recognize privilege, hold themselves and their white peers accountable, and maintain accountability to their BIPOC colleagues (Blitz & Kohl, 2012). In the following sections I will discuss the important features, beneficial outcomes, challenges, and limitations of white antiracist affinity groups.

### **Key Features of White Antiracist Affinity Groups**

White antiracist affinity groups primarily emerge as informal learning opportunities and their specific format reflects the context in which they were formed. However, research has identified several shared features that contribute to successfully engaging white educators in white antiracist affinity groups. First, white antiracist affinity groups are designed as safe (yet critical) spaces in which white participants

can confront whiteness in themselves and society over an extended period of time. Second, these groups engage white participants in context-specific, critical conversations that focus on personal reflection as a form of antiracist action. Third, successful white antiracist affinity groups hold themselves accountable to their BIPOC colleagues and seek critical feedback on how their work is contributing to the larger, BIPOC-led antiracist movements.

### Safe Space for Confronting Whiteness Over Time

One key feature of successful white antiracist affinity groups is their commitment to creating a safe space in which white participants can confront whiteness repeatedly over an extended period of time. Antiracist work requires a long-term commitment and cannot be accomplished with a one-and-done training session (McManimon & Casey, 2018; Schniedewind, 2005). Research has shown that even a semester-long course is not enough to develop equitable white educators (Sleeter, 2008). However, before an affinity group can stand the test of time, it must first establish itself as a safe space for critically engaging with issues of race and racism. Creating a space in which white participants feel safe without centering white emotionality (Matias, 2016) and white supremacy can be a challenging task. White participants often experience feelings of guilt, failure, fear, defensiveness, confusion, and disappointment while engaging in antiracist work (Case, 2012; DiAngelo, 2011; McIntyre, 1997; Michael & Conger, 2009; Picower, 2009, 2015; Varghese et al., 2019). The goal of antiracist affinity spaces is to provide a safe, yet critical, space for white people to process their emotions around race and racism (Michael & Conger, 2009). For Kohli et al. (2015), striking this balance means intentionally building a supportive community that creates a balance of love, support, and challenge.

Creating a safe space also involves building trust within the affinity group (Blitz & Kohl, 2012). In a qualitative study of a white antiracist women's group, Case (2012) found that creating a safe space supported the development of antiracist consciousness and strategies. Part of building trust with affinity group participants is by protecting their confidentiality. Two of the participants in Case's study compared their antiracism group to an Alcoholics Anonymous support group, because group members understood the importance of practicing deep confidentiality while engaging in a lifelong process that requires vigilance, self-reflection, and continued dedication. Michael and Conger (2009) worked with their affinity group to co-create group norms in order to safeguard confidentiality and keep the focus on whiteness. These norms reminded participants to speak from their own perspective, embrace discomfort, and listen thoughtfully. They also found that setting norms helped participants overcome their feelings of inadequacy and intimidation.

It is important for white people to take the first steps in identifying and addressing racism in a group setting that can provide support, accountability, and critical feedback throughout the learning process (Tatum, 2017; Utt & Tochluk, 2020). In their study with white teacher candidates, Varghese et al. (2019) found that white antiracist affinity groups were able to provide a supportive environment that helped the majority of the candidates learn through critically reflecting on their emotionality. For these teachers, anger, resentment, and resistance gave way to deep self-reflection, awareness, and allyship. However, a few candidates experienced such intense emotionality that they shut down entirely and "completely avoided engaging with the racist ideologies and assumptions behind such feelings" (Varghese et al., 2019, p. 22). Varghese et al. suggest that with more time and adequate support, they might have

been able to help the extremely resistant white teachers critically engage and learn from the experience. Antiracist affinity groups help white teachers build critical relationships that provide accountability and critical feedback, which can offer support as they learn and grow in their antiracist work (Utt & Tochluk, 2020).

While creating a safe space is an important part of engaging white educators in antiracist work, overemphasizing the need for “safety” can stunt white teachers’ development into antiracist practitioners. Crowley (2016) found that white preservice teachers were hesitant to implement antiracist practices into their own teaching, even after having a safe space to critically engage with topics of race and racism. While the participants could intellectually grasp critical racial knowledge, “they displayed ambivalence when they discussed putting it into practice, as shown by their desire for safe spaces to talk about race” (Crowley, 2016, p. 1026). Rather than creating safe spaces, Leonardo and Porter (2010) argue that “humanizing violence” is necessary for engaging white people in antiracist work. The notion of “safe spaces” usually denote comfort for whiteness. While BIPOC and white people come to race dialogue from different perspectives and lived experiences, interracial dialogue too often centers whiteness and caters to white participants, allowing them to depart with their worldviews unchallenged and unchanged.

When white people claim they do not feel safe (read “comfortable”) when confronted about racism, they trivialize the violence perpetuated by white people against BIPOC communities throughout America’s past and present. DiAngelo and Sensoy (2014) also critique the ways in which the goal of white comfort controls the creation of “safe spaces” for cross-racial discussions. They found that when cross-racial discussions cater to white emotionality, they position and re-inscribe white

participants as racially innocent while portraying BIPOC participants as perpetrators of violence. Centering whiteness also contributes to maintaining white solidarity and stabilizing white ideologies. Racial discourses that position discussions of race and racism as violent (i.e., in need of a safe space) function to uphold white supremacy (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014).

### Critical Conversations as a Reflective Act

Another key feature of white antiracist affinity groups is their focus on engaging white educators in the work of examining and dismantling racism in education through critical conversations about race and racism. One goal of these critical conversations is to dismantle racist narratives and replace them with antiracist counternarratives that reflect the realities of BIPOC communities (Michael & Conger, 2009). Affinity groups engage white participants in what Denevi and Pastan (2006) refer to as white-on-white dialogue. This dialogue focuses on critically examining what it means to be white and combating manifestations of white privilege and white supremacy. Rather than engaging in uncritical conversations, or “white talk” (McIntyre, 1997), affinity groups engage educators as politically-aware individuals. Critical conversations are a form of reflective, dialogical action (Michael & Conger, 2009) and a path toward Freirean liberation (Kohli et al., 2015).

Critical conversations can also take on the form of storytelling and collaborative problem solving. In their examination of a white antiracist affinity group of New York City educators, Strong et al. (2017) found that storytelling and collaborative problem solving were two influential aspects of the affinity group meetings. These strategies help the white educators address “the insidious ways [white supremacy] shows up in our society and in our own behaviors” (p. 136). They

regularly used story circles, which consisted of participants sharing a three-minute story followed by dialogue about their story. Strong et al. (2017) found that through telling stories about personal and professional encounters with racism, racial superiority, and white privilege, white teachers took steps toward actively undoing “the white supremacist culture of individuality and heroism” (p. 137). Examples of antiracist actions taken by group members include organizing race-related book clubs, teaching lessons on race-related topics, and initiating antiracist training in their schools. Participating in the antiracist affinity group helped teachers push themselves and each other to take antiracist action in their classrooms and communities in solidarity with their BIPOC colleagues.

I have chosen to use the term *critical conversations* to describe this form of antiracist dialogue because of the decentralized and informal nature of white antiracist affinity groups. These groups do not follow a single, prescribed approach to conversations. However, they are guided by a set of principles that appear to keep their conversations grounded in the tenets of critical race scholarship (see Bell, 1995; Crenshaw, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In their work with race-based caucuses, Varghese et al. (2019) use the terms *critical* and *criticality* to “signal an orientation to power and to varied manifestations and consequences of power at work in the world” (p. 10-11). Similarly, I use *critical* to signal how the conversations are oriented to the manifestations and consequences of power in the American system of education. I define *critical conversations* as a social justice-oriented dialogue that acknowledges race as socially constructed, recognizes and names oppressive systems, and seeks to disrupt the status quo through antiracist praxis. My understanding of what takes place during such conversations has also been informed by de Novais’ (2019)

work on Brave Community and Singleton's (2015) work on Courageous Conversations.

Brave Community (de Novais, 2019) is a model for cultivating a critical and reflective classroom culture without recentering whiteness. This model focuses on blending content and culture to create "more empathetic and intellectually courageous behaviors" during group discussions (p. 2). The Brave Community model consists of four phases. First, establish an environment that encourages active engagement and respectful discussion grounded in evidence from the guiding texts (e.g., articles, films, podcasts). Second, the environment helps participants feel intellectually brave, which encourages them to reflect deeply, ask risky questions, and lean into the discomfort they experience during the discussions. Third, participants develop greater empathy and learn to work through the tension of racial discussions by "listening bravely" to one another and allowing for mistakes. Fourth, participants develop a more critical and complex understanding of race and how it connects to their own experiences and society.

Courageous Conversations (Singleton, 2015) are another model for engaging educators in critical conversations about race. This model was designed to promote the engagement of all participants including those who do not want to talk, sustain the conversation in spite of tension or discomfort, and deepen conversations to promote understanding and action. Before entering into Courageous Conversations, participants must agree to stay engaged, speak their truth, experience discomfort, and accept non-closure. Singleton (2015) outlines a set of six conditions that should be followed sequentially during Courageous Conversations. First, establish that the racial context of the conversation is personal, local, and immediate. Second, keep the discussions

focused on race while also acknowledging intersectionality and the broader scope of diversity. Third, acknowledge that race is a social and political construct and develop a critical understanding of race. Fourth, keep everyone involved in the conversation by monitoring group size, providing discussion prompts, and specifying time for listening. This condition is guided by the Courageous Compass, which helps participants locate themselves in the conversation and understand the perspectives of others. The compass helps participants determine how they are processing the racial information morally, intellectually, emotionally, or relationally. Fifth, establish a definition of race and clearly differentiate between race, ethnicity, and nationality. Sixth, critically examine the role and impact of whiteness.

While these two models are similar to those presented in the literature on antiracist affinity groups, they were neither explicitly cited nor were their frameworks followed in any of the articles reviewed. For this reason, I have chosen to refer to these dialogues as *critical conversations*. This term is meant to capture the core elements of antiracist affinity group conversations, without trying to fit them into a specific model for critically engaging with race.

#### Accountability and Critical Feedback from BIPOC Partners

White antiracist affinity groups must hold themselves accountable to the BIPOC community and seek critical feedback on their work from BIPOC collaborators. Antiracist affinity groups are an important tool, but they need to be part of a cross-racial collaborative effort (Strong et al., 2017). Developing accountability with BIPOC colleagues is an important part of ensuring that the internal growth from the affinity group can be transformed into antiracist action (Blitz & Kohl, 2012; Devevi & Pastan, 2006; Michael & Conger, 2009; Obear & Martinez, 2013; Utt &

Tochluk, 2020; Varghese et al., 2019). Participating in white antiracist affinity groups prepares white teachers to engage in authentic cross-race dialogue about race and racism and helps them gain a deeper understanding of how systemic racism impacts their BIPOC colleagues and students (Denevi & Pastan, 2006; Obear & Martinez, 2013). Collaborative antiracist work can also improve relationships between BIPOC and white colleagues (Strong et al., 2017).

In their study of race-based affinity groups, Blitz and Kohl (2012) highlight the importance of holding white groups accountable to their BIPOC peers, engaging in regular cross-racial dialogue about race and racism, and building trust between the affinity groups. Blitz and Kohl (2012) examine the role of race-based affinity groups in creating change within a corporate environment. Employees of a large, private, nonprofit organization were invited to participate in one of three race-based affinity groups: BIPOC women, BIPOC men, and white allies. Groups regularly met both separately and together, which Blitz and Kohl identify as an important part of accountability for the white group and building interracial collaboration. As Blitz and Kohl (2012) explain, “Accountability in antiracism work refers to an explicit agreement that white people will answer to people of color in an effort to better understand subtle enactments of privilege and bias” (p. 493). Such accountability is an essential part of white antiracist work, especially for white affinity group participants.

### **Beneficial Outcomes of White Antiracist Affinity Groups**

Research has shown that participating in white antiracist affinity groups can lead to several positive outcomes. For example, engaging in antiracist work pushes white teachers to move beyond white racial norms by creating “transgressive ruptures in the world views” of white educators (Crowley, 2016, p. 1025). In reviewing the

literature, I found that successful affinity groups focus on three specific outcomes. First, they seek to prepare white participants to engage in interracial dialogue without causing harm to BIPOC participants. Second, they focus on helping white participants develop a positive white identity as an antiracist ally. Third, they prioritize antiracist praxis by preparing white participants to move from critical reflection to antiracist action.

### Preparation for Productive Interracial Dialogue

White people are underprepared to engage in interracial discussions about race and racism, often becoming a burden for BIPOC individuals (Michael & Conger, 2009; Tatum, 2017; Tochluk, 2010; Varghese et al., 2019). Race-based affinity groups help to mitigate the damage white participants can inflict on their BIPOC peers during critical conversations about race and racism. As Varghese et al. (2019) explain, white antiracist affinity groups allow white teachers to “articulate uncritical, ignorant, and racist sentiments without directly inflicting violence on candidates and faculty of Color” (p. 11). Interracial dialogue, collaboration, and accountability are an important goal of antiracist work, but white people need to put in the work independently before they can engage with BIPOC colleagues without causing harm. According to Blackburn and Wise (2009), affinity groups can provide a “less tense and more secure environment” for addressing the “conversation-stopping and tension-creating comments,” which ultimately improves interracial dialogue (p. 120).

Michael and Conger (2009) describe affinity groups as a space to be honest, where white people can ask ignorant questions, process emotions, and examine privilege without becoming a burden to their BIPOC peers. However, affinity groups do not replace interracial dialogue on race. Rather, they provide a space where white

people can get the “constant and remediated attention” they need to productively participate in interracial conversations about race (p. 58). Before this can happen, “white people need to understand how racism privileges us, to recognize how racism injures our colleagues of color, and to consider our responsibility and role in responding to racism in our environment” (Michael & Conger, 2009, p. 58). They warn white allies to approach the work with humility and to hold one another accountable in this work, lest they themselves become a barrier to antiracism. For example, storytelling is an important part of antiracist work (Strong et al., 2017). However, just because white people need to share stories about racism, does not mean that BIPOC people need to hear them. As Tatum (2017) explains, “Listening to those stories and problem solving about them is a job that white people can do for each other” (p. 206).

Participating in white antiracist affinity groups prepares participants to engage in authentic cross-race dialogue about race and racism, and helps them gain a deeper understanding of how systemic racism impacts their colleagues and students. Obear and Martinez (2013) found that race-based caucusing can be an important tool for helping participants recognize racism and oppression, explore strategies to promote equity, and develop the courage to actively pursue systemic change. They found that participants need time to build their own awareness regarding privilege and oppression before authentic discussions can take place, which means planning for recurring meetings over several months or years. Their work highlights the need to make race-based affinity groups part of a larger effort to make antiracist and equitable changes in education.

## Allyship as a Positive White Identity

Antiracist white affinity groups help white people reclaim a positive white identity as an antiracist ally through critical self-reflection (Michael & Conger, 2009; Tatum, 2017; Utt & Tochluk, 2020). The concept of a positive white identity has been obscured and diminished by centuries of white supremacy and racial oppression (Strong et al., 2017). White ally development requires the ability to cope with the negative emotions that arise during antiracist work and channel them into social justice action (Case, 2012; Reason, Roosa Millar & Scales, 2005; Reason, Scales & Roosa Millar, 2005; Smith & Redington, 2010; Thomann & Suyemoto, 2018). The lack of salient racial identity can cause white people to initially struggle with participating in antiracist affinity groups (Denevi & Pastan, 2006). Thomann and Suyemoto (2018) found that white participants grappled with feelings of guilt, sadness, and hopelessness while engaging with their white identity. However, they also found that developing the ability to tolerate such feelings helped sustain their active engagement in antiracist development. Feelings of guilt, hopelessness, and defensiveness can inhibit white ally development, often causing white participants to disengage from the process. However, white people who developed an understanding of the power and privilege of being white are more likely to engage in action for social justice (Reason, Roosa Millar & Scales, 2005).

Tatum (1994, 2017) uses Helms' (1990) model for white identity development as a framework for understanding the ways in which white people respond to learning about race and racism. Because white people lack a positive white identity, they often experience feelings of guilt and shame. The discomfort of these feelings can cause white participants to resist critically engaging with race and racism. Tatum (1994) suggests that teaching students about white allies who can serve as role models and

showing white people a positive path for identifying as a white ally can transform how white people respond to learning about race and racism. White antiracist affinity groups help take the burden off of BIPOC people by engaging white allies in every aspect of the work. White antiracist affinity spaces can help combat social isolation and support white educator as they forge new, positive, antiracist identities. According to Tatum (2017), participating in white antiracist affinity groups is a powerful way to “keep moving forward” in antiracist praxis (p. 204).

### Moving from Reflection to Action with Antiracist Praxis

White antiracist affinity groups create social change by building a supportive community that helps move participants from critical reflection to antiracist action (Kohli et al., 2015). This combination of reflection and action is what Freire (2013) refers to as *praxis*. White antiracist affinity groups place an emphasis on action (Blitz & Kohl, 2012; Kohli et al., 2015; Strong et al., 2017), because action is an imperative of antiracism (Smith & Redington, 2010). As Freire (2013) warns, if reflection does not ultimately lead to antiracist action, it is no more than the idle chatter of verbalism (p. 87). The ultimate goal of white antiracist affinity groups is to engage participants in *antiracist praxis*, which is “reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed” (Freire, 2013, p. 126), specifically the structures of racism that continue to permeate America’s system of education.

Research has shown that developing white racial consciousness promotes increased antiracist action (Case, 2012; Michael & Conger, 2009; Reason, Roosa Millar, & Scales, 2005; Smith & Redington, 2010). Praxis is the goal of antiracist work, because reflection alone is not enough and action without reflection leads to misguided activism. For white antiracist affinity groups, antiracist praxis must be done

in community with their BIPOC colleagues, because antiracist praxis requires interracial relationships and accountability (Kohli et al., 2015; McManimon & Casey, 2018; Utt & Tochluk, 2020). White antiracist affinity groups direct their antiracist praxis toward the structures of white supremacy and racism. Table 1 provides examples of antiracist action that are grounded in antiracist reflection, and thus evidence of antiracist praxis.

Table 1 Examples of Antiracist Action

Antiracist Action	Citation
Introducing topics of race into the curriculum Teaching critical examination of cultural stereotypes Displaying high expectations by taking initiative with BIPOC students Engaging with colleagues to discuss issues of race Interrupting offensive racial comments/behaviors among colleagues Encouraging equity in hiring practices	Lawrence & Tatum, 1997
Supporting BIPOC students Challenging stereotypes and white privilege Confronting institutional racism	Schniedewind, 2005
Collaborating with BIPOC groups as white allies in antiracist work	Michael & Conger, 2009
Taking on leadership roles in antiracist groups Ongoing membership and engagement with antiracist groups Purposeful communication about racism in their daily lives	Smith & Redington, 2010
Organizing race-related book clubs Teaching lessons on race-related topics Initiating antiracist training in their schools	Strong et al., 2017
Increasing the number of BIPOC student enrolled in AP classes Responding to instances of racialized oppression Fostering antiracist learning environments	McManimon & Casey, 2018

### **Challenges and Limitations of White Antiracist Affinity Groups**

While there are many benefits to white antiracist affinity groups, there are also several limitations and challenges that need to be considered. As Crowley (2016) explains, “Even when white teachers engage willingly, learning about race and racism remains exceedingly thorny” (p. 1027). Such thorns include the limited racial knowledge and experience of white people, creating a white echo chamber when antiracist work is done without accountability to BIPOC colleagues, recentering whiteness, and necessitating interest convergence as motivation for antiracist praxis.

Blitz and Kohl (2012) found that white antiracist affinity group participants experienced a “temporary paralysis” in their ability to take antiracist action, because the white participants were initially overwhelmed by their desire to avoid enacting white privilege (p. 492). This challenge can be addressed by creating a safe space in which white participants can risk being wrong. However, such safe spaces also risk recentering whiteness and white fragility if the desire for safety is not balanced by critically challenging whiteness and maintaining accountability to BIPOC collaborators. Another limitation is that white people often struggle to identify their own racism, being either unable or unwilling (Case, 2012). White participants can, however, learn to work collaboratively within their white antiracist affinity group. Case (2012) found that, “Through dialogues with allies in the same situation, white anti-racists may draw on the collective experience and knowledge of the group members and identify aspects of their own racism that would otherwise go unnoticed” (p.94).

According to Denevi and Pastan (2006), white antiracist affinity groups are based on the idea that white people need to feel the effects of racism and white privilege before they will actively work to end racism. Thus, one purpose of their

affinity group was to help participants develop a collective pride in their identity as a white antiracist ally by exploring, challenging, and affirming white identity. However, their model appears to rely on interest convergence (Bell, 1995a), which is the idea that white people need to see a benefit for themselves in order to successfully engage in antiracist praxis. While I would agree that racism and white privilege negatively affect white people, I disagree that the work of antiracism is only possible under the conditions of interest convergence. Necessitating interest convergence limits the possibilities of white antiracist affinity groups and brings into question whether white people can authentically engage in antiracist work without centering the need for interest convergence. Table 2 provides an overview of the findings from my review of the literature on white antiracist affinity groups and white race-based caucuses.

Table 2 White Antiracist Affinity Groups

Important Features	Beneficial Outcomes	Challenges & Limitations	Citations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared Focus on Centering and Critically Addressing Issues of Race and Racism</li> <li>• Centering BIPOC Voices and Experiences (<i>e.g., articles by BIPOC authors</i>)</li> <li>• Voluntary Participation</li> <li>• Informal Setting (<i>outside formal PD</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Transforming Worldviews</li> <li>• Engaging in Interracial Dialogue without Centering Whiteness or Harming BIPOC Partners</li> <li>• Positive Identity as a White Ally</li> <li>• Antiracist Praxis (<i>reflection and action</i>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White Invulnerability</li> <li>• White Echo Chamber</li> <li>• Limited Racial Knowledge and Experience</li> <li>• Recentering Whiteness</li> <li>• Interest Convergence</li> </ul>	Blackburn & Wise, 2009; Blitz & Kohl, 2012; Case, 2012; Crowley, 2016; Denevi & Pastan, 2006; Kohli et al., 2015; McManimon & Casey, 2018; Michael & Conger, 2009; Matias, 2016; Obear & Martinez, 2013;

Table 2 continued.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Co-Created Safe Space</li> <li>• Long-Term Repeated Engagement</li> <li>• Storytelling</li> <li>• Collaborative Problem Solving</li> <li>• BIPOC Accountability Partners</li> <li>• Context-Specific Critical Conversations</li> <li>• Shared Ownership or Power Structure</li> </ul>	<p>Reason, Roosa Millar &amp; Scales, 2005; Reason, Scales &amp; Roosa Millar, 2005; Schniedewind, 2005; Smith &amp; Redington, 2010; Strong et al., 2017; Tatum, 2017; Thomann &amp; Suyemoto, 2018; Tochluk, 2010; Utt &amp; Tochluk, 2020; Varghese et al., 2019</p>
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### **White Fragility as a Barrier to Antiracist Praxis**

Whiteness is a way of understanding and engaging in the world that functions to uphold white supremacy and maintain the position of power that white people continue to claim for themselves. Disengaging from critical conversations about race and racism serves white people by maintaining the status quo, which is grounded in white supremacy (Bush, 2004; DiAngelo, 2011; Picower, 2009). Whiteness socializes white people to believe in their own superiority (Solomona et al., 2005). One way that whiteness manifests in and disrupts antiracist work is through white fragility.

#### White Fragility

DiAngelo (2011) coined the term white fragility to describe “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of

defensive moves” (p. 54). White fragility manifests through these defensive moves, which include displays of emotion, such as anger, fear, and guilt, in combination with displays of defensive behaviors, such as argumentation, silence, or physically leaving the racially uncomfortable situation. DiAngelo (2011, 2016, 2018a, 2018b) outlines several factors that help inculcate white fragility, such as living in racially segregated communities, entitlement to racial comfort and freedom from racial stress, racial arrogance that comes from white privilege, and the constant message that white people are more valuable. When white ideologies such as color-blindness, meritocracy, and individualism are challenged, white fragility is employed to shut down any discussions of racism and maintain the status quo. White fragility often manifests as outrage or righteous indignation when someone breaks the unspoken cardinal rule: *Do not give me feedback on my racism under any circumstances* (DiAngelo, 2016). Other unspoken rules are used to obscure racism and regain white equilibrium when this first rule is broken. These rules regulate the conditions under which white people will consider engaging with accusations of racism. Requirements include using proper tone, giving feedback immediately and privately, ensuring white comfort, and focusing on intentions over impact, which are used to cancel out the impact of any racist behavior. Thus, white fragility protects white comfort and “works to punish the person giving feedback and essentially bully them back into silence” (DiAngelo, 2016, p. 252). White fragility is a weapon that maintains the current racial equilibrium, which disproportionately benefits white people and communities.

White fragility is a barrier to antiracism in education. Evans-Winters and Hines (2019) use counter storytelling to discuss their experiences with white preservice teachers’ resistance to antiracist education. This study is based in the authors’ own

experiences as Black female professors working with primarily white preservice teachers. Their white students expressed resistance to antiracist work, and Black women professors, through embodiments of white fragility. They found that white students engaged in five specific forms of resistance: passive-aggressive, hostile stance, groupthink, lynch mob, and bystanders' effect. Similarly, Patton and Jordan (2017) present the case of a Black assistant principal's efforts to disrupt whiteness in the predominantly white teaching staff of her urban elementary school through antiracist trainings. During the training sessions, white teachers exhibited aspects of white fragility and white privilege, such as crying, refusing to engage, or saying they felt attacked or afraid. As the Black assistant principal incorporated relevant social justice issues pertaining to the "Black Lives Matter" movement, the white teachers became increasingly angry and refused to participate. The effects of white fragility can be seen throughout the article in how white teachers leveraged claims of white victimhood (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014) to disengage from and disrupt the antiracist trainings.

#### Intolerance of Racial Stress

DiAngelo (2011) describes white fragility as the lack of psychological stamina when faced with racial stress. Racial stress occurs when white ideologies are challenged (e.g., color-blindness and meritocracy) or the racial equilibrium (e.g., white supremacy) is disrupted (DiAngelo, 2018b). Table 3 provides a list of interruptions to white racial comfort that can trigger racial stress for white individuals (DiAngelo, 2011), which I refer to as racial stressors.

White fragility is an intolerance of racial stress, whether that stress is real or perceived. As Stevenson (2014) explains, racial stress is the "emotional overload or

shock to an individual’s coping system before, during, and after racial interactions” (p. 28). Racial stress can also occur in anticipation of a stressful racial interaction, which includes being grounded in an irrational fear of being called a racist. The level of stress is determined by the individual experiencing it. However, it is important to note that white people experience disparate forms of racial stress than BIPOC individuals, for whom racial stress is a constant and life-threatening reality. White people are developmentally immature when it comes to coping with even a small amount of racial stress, because whiteness has insulated them from the realities of racism (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018b; Stevenson, 2014).

Table 3 Interruptions to White Racial Comfort (DiAngelo, 2011)

Racial Stressor	Example
Challenge to Objectivity	Suggesting that a white person’s viewpoint comes from a racialized frame of reference
Challenge to White Racial Codes	BIPOC individuals talking directly about their racial perspectives
Challenge to White Racial Expectations and Need for (Entitlement to) Racial Comfort	BIPOC individuals choosing not to protect the racial feelings of white people in regards to race
Challenge to Colonialist Relations	People of color not being willing to tell their stories or answer questions about their racial experiences
Challenge to White Solidarity	A fellow white not providing agreement with one’s interpretations
Challenge to White Liberalism	Receiving feedback that one’s behavior had a racist impact
Challenge to Individualism	Suggesting that group membership is significant
Challenge to Meritocracy	An acknowledgement that access is unequal between racial groups

Table 3 continued.

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Challenge to White Authority	Being presented with a person of color in a position of leadership
Challenge to White Centrality	Being presented with information about other racial groups through, for example, movies in which people of color drive the action but are not in stereotypical roles, or multicultural education

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### Critique of White Fragility

According to Tate and Page (2018), white fragility needs to be decolonized. They argue that when enactments of white fragility are centered in antiracism, it prioritizes comforting white suffering and creates a paradox in which white people are the victims of the same racism they benefit from. In this way, antiracist training that focuses on addressing unconscious biases can “(re)center white supremacy by removing blame and its accompanying shame and guilt” (p. 151). Tate and Page (2018) contend that feelings of shame and guilt are part of the process white people need to go through while unlearning white supremacy. Expressions of white fragility need to be felt and processed, not performatively acknowledged during superficial unconscious bias trainings.

In the wake of George Floyd’s murder, DiAngelo’s (2018b) book *White Fragility* soared to the top of the *New York Times* best seller list. White people took to social media to share their praise for the book, along with their carefully curated, performative photos. However, not everyone approved of DiAngelo’s new-found fame. One of the more scathing critiques came from McWhorter (2020), who accused *White Fragility* of being racist and condescending to Black people because it centered white people as an essential first step in antiracist work. While he agrees with

DiAngelo that racism is a pervasive problem in the United States, he disagrees the idea that white people need to spend their lives critically examining their own inner racism. Although the idea that critical self-reflection is a form of antiracist action can appear from the outside as performative naval-gazing, research has shown that engaging white people in critical reflection can lead to an increase in antiracist action (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997; McManimon & Casey, 2018; Schniedewind, 2005). What McWhorter (2020) describes as an endless cycle of guilt accompanied by mental and spiritual straitjacketing (Doubek, 2020), other scholars have identified as a necessary and important part of white antiracist development (Applebaum, 2010, 2017; Crowley, 2016; Gilson, 2011; Matias, 2016; McManimon & Casey, 2018; Sleeter, 2001, 2008, 2016; Strong et al., 2017; Tatum, 1994; Thomann & Suyemoto, 2018; Varghese et al., 2019).

### **Other Theories of White Invulnerability**

My examination of white fragility is also informed by the works of Matias (2016), Picower (2009, 2015), and Gilson (2011), who examine the ways in which white teachers leverage their physical and emotional response to antiracism to disengage from critical conversations about race and racism.

#### **White Emotionality**

In her book *Feeling White*, Matias (2016) examines what she calls the *emotionalities of whiteness*, which are the multitude of emotions white teachers conjure up when confronted by issues of race and racism. These include feelings of guilt, shame, defensiveness, denial, sadness, anger, dissonance, and discomfort, which are heavily influenced by social institutions of (white) power. In her study of white

preservice teachers, Matias found they centered their own white identities in conversations around race and racism, claiming to feel attacked and using white tears to end the conversation. According to Matias (2016), these emotionalities of whiteness need to be understood and deconstructed before white teachers can fully commit to racial equity, because white emotionality disrupts antiracist work by prioritizing intent over impact and preventing deep discussions of the realities of race and racism.

### Tools of Whiteness

Picower (2009) found that when faced with questions of race, white preservice teachers used “tools of whiteness” to uphold white supremacy and support hegemonic understandings of race and racism. First, participants used emotional tools such as anger, defensiveness, and guilt when confronted with racism. Second, they used ideological tools to deny racial inequality, institutional racism, and the need for antiracist action. Third, performative tools allowed the white teachers to remain silent on issues of race, maintain racial hierarchy through white saviorism, and believe good intentions are sufficient to negate the effects of racism. Picower’s work demonstrates the ways in which “tools of whiteness” can be used to preserve the status quo, thus further advantage white individuals and communities.

In a later study, Picower (2015) examines why preservice teachers who were successfully teaching about social justice were not engaging in social action. She identifies four “tools of inaction” white preservice teachers used to explain their inaction in social justice: tools of substitution, postponement, displacement, and dismissal. Candidates used tools of substitution to highlight their activism in the classroom as a substitute for personally acting in the community. They used tools of postponement to frame their inaction as a temporary by-product of their circumstances

as a teacher candidate, while others claimed they did not know what issues to actively support (or when or how). Candidates used tools of displacement to blame others for their inaction, suggesting that the onus for social change did not fall on them as educators. Finally, candidates employed tools of dismissal to justify their inaction, suggesting social action was ineffective and that they couldn't make a difference. Even as white candidates expressed their commitment to social justice, they utilized these four tools to relieve their guilt and justify their own social inaction.

### Invulnerability

Gilson (2011) describes white fragility as a form of invulnerability, which allows white people to ignore what is inconvenient, disadvantageous, or uncomfortable. She identifies this invulnerability as the basis of many kinds of ignorance, such as complicity in racial oppression. Knowledge makes white people vulnerable to discomfort and new worldviews, while invulnerability is a willful ignorance that preserves white privilege and other oppressive social structures. Gilson (2011) also notes that it is in the interest of those in power (i.e., white people) to maintain a willful ignorance through invulnerability. Invulnerability allows white people to remain ignorant of their own complicity in racism, thus protecting their privileged place in society and maintaining their sense of control, even if it is just an illusion. Invulnerability is valued and rewarded by white supremacy culture, and white fragility is a manifestation of willful ignorance that maintains white privilege. As Gilson (2011) explains, "We ignore because to know might disturb us and even disempower us" (p. 319). Invulnerability allows white people to avoid engaging with information that would unsettle their worldview; it keeps white people closed off from anything that might alter their understanding of themselves or how they understand

others. Invulnerability perpetuates oppression by obscuring how white people understand and interact with the world, supporting whitewashed versions of reality through white ideologies of color-blindness, meritocracy, and individualism.

### **Discursive Practices of White Fragility**

White fragility has a specific and well-documented set of discursive practices that derail antiracist praxis. Table 4 provides a summary of these practices parsed into three categories: defensive behaviors, discourse moves, and displays of emotion. This list is a compilation of the literature reviewed above, including theories of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011), white emotionality (Matias, 2016), and invulnerability (Gilson, 2011). Research has repeatedly shown how white people employ discursive moves to avoid engaging in racially stressful situations, whether the stress is real or perceived (Case & Hemmings, 2005; Denevi & Pastan, 2006; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2019; Matias, 2016; McIntyre, 1997; Patton & Jordan, 2017; Picower, 2009, 2015). In their study of preservice teachers, Case and Hemmings (2005) found that white women strategically used silence, social disassociation, and separation from responsibilities to distance themselves from classroom discussions about racial inequities in which they felt they were being implicated. Participants reported distancing themselves or remaining silent when confronted with racist comments or interactions with their family and friends, as well as in the classroom. They sought to disassociate with the label of racist by declaring themselves “not racist,” associating with being a good white person, and proclaiming colorblindness. Participants sought to separate themselves by framing racism as a thing of the past, engaging in victim blaming, or citing reverse discrimination. According to Case and Hemmings (2005), participants thought about themselves as being antiracist, while

also distancing themselves from engaging with or confronting racism. Antiracist reflection without action is no more than the idle chatter of verbalism (Freire, 2013).

Table 4 Discursive Practices of White Fragility, White Emotionality, and Invulnerability

Defensive Behaviors	Discourse Moves	Displays of Emotion
Silence	White Saviorism	Anger
Physical Distancing	Willful Ignorance	Defensiveness
Argumentation	White Ideologies	Discomfort
Physical Signs of Discomfort	<i>color-blindness</i>	Fear
<i>crossed arms</i>	<i>meritocracy</i>	Guilt
<i>red face</i>	<i>white supremacy</i>	Shame
<i>rolling eyes</i>		
<i>clenched teeth</i>		

### Disrupting White Fragility in Antiracism

White fragility reinforces racism. Research continues to show that white educators are engaging in the discursive practices of white fragility when faced with even a small amount of real or perceived racial stress (DiAngelo, 2018a; Matias, 2016; Tate & Page, 2018; Thomann & Suyemoto, 2018). However, it is still unclear how we can engage white teachers in antiracist work without stumbling over the barrier of white fragility. Thomann and Suyemoto (2018) found that even though participants continued to grapple with feelings of guilt, sadness, and hopelessness while engaging with their white identity, the ability to tolerate such feelings helped sustain their active engagement in antiracist development. Varghese et al. (2019) also suggest that with more time and adequate support, they might have been able to help the extremely resistant white teachers to critically engage and learn from the experience. These

findings support DiAngelo's (2011, 2018b) theory that white fragility can be alleviated by prolonged engagement with antiracist topics. What remains unclear is whether having the capacity to endure white fragility is the end goal for white antiracist development.

### **Vulnerability as Antidote to White Fragility**

While DiAngelo (2011) positions stamina as the cure for white fragility, Applebaum (2017) argues that we cannot disrupt white fragility without first becoming vulnerable. Applebaum characterizes vulnerability as an openness that is in opposition to white fragility, which she describes as an active performance of invulnerability. Invulnerability leaves white people closed off from critically engaging with topics of race and racism, closing them off from being affected (Applebaum, 2017; Gilson, 2011). It is a form of willful ignorance, which is used to maintain the status quo of white supremacy. Vulnerability, on the other hand, is an openness that enables white people to be affected by new perspectives and to change their worldviews. Applebaum (2017) focuses her critique on the ways in which white fragility is wielded to ensure white comfort, while increasing violence on BIPOC colleagues and communities. She directly challenges the practice of comforting white discomfort, because comforting whiteness maintains the status quo of white supremacy: "Comforting white students' discomfort validates their emotional pain at the expense of dismissing and ignoring the emotional pain of students of color, provides absolution from white guilt, and protects challenges to the status quo by ending the discussion" (p. 865).

Vulnerability disrupts white fragility, making it possible to confront whiteness and dismantle racism. Applebaum (2017) positions vulnerability as the opposite of,

and thus the antidote to, the oppressive invulnerability of white fragility. Applebaum builds on the work of Gilson (2011), who argues that a better understanding of vulnerability is necessary for undoing oppressive social relations and governing systems. While being vulnerable is widely understood as being exposed or in danger, and thus weaker and defenseless, Gilson reframes vulnerability as a basic condition of humanity that is inherently tied to our social experiences, privileges, knowledge, and worldview. She defines vulnerability as an openness to change which can affect us and cause us to affect others, in both positive and negative ways:

Being vulnerable makes it possible for us to suffer, to fall prey to violence and be harmed, but also to fall in love, to learn, to take pleasure and find comfort in the presence of others, and to experience the simultaneity of those feelings. *Vulnerability* is not just a condition that limits us but one that can *enable* us. As potential, vulnerability is a condition of openness, openness to being affected and affecting in turn. (Gilson, 2011, p. 310)

Invulnerability allows us to ignore what is inconvenient, disadvantageous, or uncomfortable. It is the basis for many kinds of ignorance, such as complicity in racial oppression, where knowledge makes us vulnerable to discomfort and new worldviews (Gilson, 2011). Whereas vulnerability understands the self in relationship with others and within society, invulnerability protects our understanding of self by taking an ahistorical and atemporal worldview (Applebaum, 2015). White fragility, as willful ignorance, preserves white privilege and other oppressive social structures (Applebaum, 2017; Gilson, 2011). Vulnerability makes it possible to learn and reduce ignorance. According to Gilson (2011), epistemic vulnerability is vital for everyone, because “we all have lapses and gaps in our experience and attunement that demand

alterations in our knowing attitudes” (p. 325). Vulnerability is thus a vital part of becoming an antiracist white educator, as white teachers must critically examine and alter their “knowing attitudes.” Table 5 provides examples of the dispositions and actions that can signal vulnerability.

Table 5 Vulnerable Dispositions and Actions

Evidence of Vulnerable Dispositions and Actions	Citation
Openness to change Dispossession Willingness to risk exposure Constant vigilance Willingness to change one’s self	Applebaum, 2017
Open to not knowing Openness to being wrong and still venturing ideas Ability to be in and learn from uncomfortable situations Open to ambivalence of emotional and bodily responses Open to reflecting on experiences Being open to altering beliefs and sense of self	Gilson, 2011
Asking for help Admitting “I’m afraid” Sharing an unpopular opinion Being accountable Asking for forgiveness Trying something new	Brown, 2010, 2015

### **Finding Hope in Vulnerability**

Vulnerability positions white people to learn through racial stress, rather than descending into the discursive practices of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) or leveraging the tools of whiteness (Picower, 2009) to derail critical conversations about

race and racism. According to Applebaum (2017), “vulnerability is key in countering white fragility, and critical hope<sup>5</sup> may be a way of supporting vulnerability without providing comfort” (p. 873). Building on the work of Boler (2004), Applebaum frames critical hope as a way to support students in their discomfort, framing it as a space of profound learning. Critical hope requires an examination of what is lost and what can be gained through loss. Boler (2004) defines critical hope as an “emotional willingness to engage in the difficult work of possibly allowing one’s world view to be changed” (p. 128). It acknowledges that we must have a willingness to exist in ambiguity and uncertainty as we recognize privileges and inequities. As Delpit (2006) notes in her book *Other People’s Children*, if teachers hope to communicate effectively across cultures and address fundamental issues of power, “we must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness” (p. 47). In the context of vulnerability, critical hope acknowledges systemic oppression, challenges emotional inattention, and requires a willingness to experience ambiguity and uncertainty, encouraging openness toward continued struggle. While invulnerability protects ignorance and privilege, vulnerability through critical hope embodies openness to change and willingness to risk exposure.

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<sup>5</sup> Here Applebaum uses Boler’s (2004) understanding of critical hope as an important tool for engaging white students in critical conversations around issues such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. Rather than seeking to comfort white students when they become emotional (or fragile), Boler proposes a combination of compassion and hope to form a pedagogy of discomfort that can be used to disrupt whiteness and shatter their worldviews.

Discomfort can be a catalyst for antiracist praxis (Boler, 1999). According to Fuller and Meiners (2020), white people need to actively struggle against white supremacy because our inactivity causes significant harm. They echo DiAngelo's (2011) call for building stamina to resist white fragility, suggesting white people must learn to admit when we are wrong, change and be accountable: "The next time someone points out that we are exhibiting behavior that is white superior, discriminatory, or racist take a breath and take it in as a chance to learn and build stamina (and not embrace fragility)" (Fuller & Meiners, 2020, p. 270). While such instances will help white people to build stamina, it is vulnerability and not stamina that prepares them to white fragility as a chance to learn. According to Leonardo and Porter (2010) argue that white people engaging in critical race dialogue need to take ownership of their discomfort, inadequacy, and defensiveness. For white people to move from fragility to vulnerability, they need to take ownership of their fragility, not remove it. Together, in this space of humanizing violence and vulnerability, BIPOC and white people can remove the masks they have worn for self-preservation. When "both groups assume the consequences for risk" it actually allows for a more authentic dialogue and reflects the "tension" inherent in discussing racism (Leonardo & Porter, 2010, p. 153). Leonardo and Porter reframe manifestations of white fragility as a necessary part of antiracist education for white people. Similarly, Matias (2016) argues that feelings of fear, anxiety, and stress are a normal and perhaps even necessary part of engaging in antiracism. Whiteness is the problem of racism and even race-conscious white people are not exempt from implication for being complicit. Applebaum (2015) calls on white people engaged in antiracism to be vigilant, to

critique their understanding of self, to stay in the discomfort of critique, and to stay vulnerable.

### **Critical Whiteness Studies**

This study is informed by Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS), which provides a critical lens for examining whiteness as the structure that produces white privilege, protects white supremacy, and supports systemic racism. Through this lens, “whiteness becomes the center of critique and transformation” (Leonardo, 2009, p. 91). According to Owen (2007), “Whiteness infuses and infects all aspects of the lifeworld. Its effects are not restricted to one domain or another; instead, we are immersed in whiteness, as fish are immersed in water, and we breathe it in with every breath” (p. 214). This all-encompassing view of whiteness is built on the idea that race and racism are fundamentally interwoven and that whiteness is deeply intertwined with white supremacy (Frankenberg, 1997). Whiteness is a construct that cannot be separated from racial dominance and the perpetuation of white supremacy (Allen, 2001; Leonardo, 2009). Matias and Mackey (2016) define CWS as a “transdisciplinary approach to investigate the phenomenon of whiteness, how it is manifested, exerted, defined, recycled, transmitted, and maintained, and how it ultimately impacts the state of race relations” (p. 34). White fragility is one manifestation of whiteness, which is exerted to protect the systems of white supremacy that continue to benefit white people.

Lipsitz (2018) argues that white people benefit from their possessive investment in whiteness, which is the culmination of public policy and private prejudices that manifest the racialized hierarchies. He maintains that white people benefit from investing in whiteness, the invisible norm used to measure, construct, and

maintain difference. While whiteness is often described as an invisible norm, Ahmed (2004) points out that it is “only invisible for those who inhabit it. For those who don’t, it is not hard to see whiteness; it even seems everywhere” (p. 1). With white teachers making up 80% of the American teaching force (Taie & Goldring, 2020), whiteness continues to operate as the unexamined, invisible norm. Allen (2001) notes that “most white supremacists do not know that they are white supremacists. Middle-class, working-class, and even radical whites are generally complicitous with white supremacy as a totalizing force” (p. 484). When white teachers are complicit in the structures of white supremacy and whiteness, they maintain white supremacy and racial inequity. While expressions of white fragility maintain the status quo of white supremacy, expressions of vulnerability have the potential to transform world views and disrupt the cycle that continues to perpetuate whiteness.

This dissertation is situated in CWS, acknowledging that white supremacy and thus whiteness are pervasive in American society and schools. As Oluo (2017) wrote following the white supremacist demonstrations in Charleston, “The system of white supremacy does not care about your intentions, it does not care if you do or do not hold hatred for people of color in your heart—it only cares that you participate in the system” (para. 9). White fragility protects the continued participation of white people in the system of white supremacy. In this dissertation, I put forward a framework that examines the potential of vulnerability to disrupt expressions of white fragility, and thus disrupt participation in the system of white supremacy, by engaging white educators in critical conversations capable of promoting antiracist praxis.

## Conceptual Framework

My conceptual framework focuses on how white educators are responding to racial stress while engaging in critical conversations, what their responses sound like (vulnerability/fragility), and how their response to racial stress can lead to either reengaging with or disengaging from antiracist praxis (Figure 1). This framework is situated within the context of white antiracist affinity groups, which are spaces designed to support white educators as they critically examine the effects of white supremacy in society, schools, and themselves (Michael & Conger, 2009; Milner, 2010; Sleeter, 2008, 2016; Tochluk, 2010; Varghese et al., 2019; Wise, 2004).

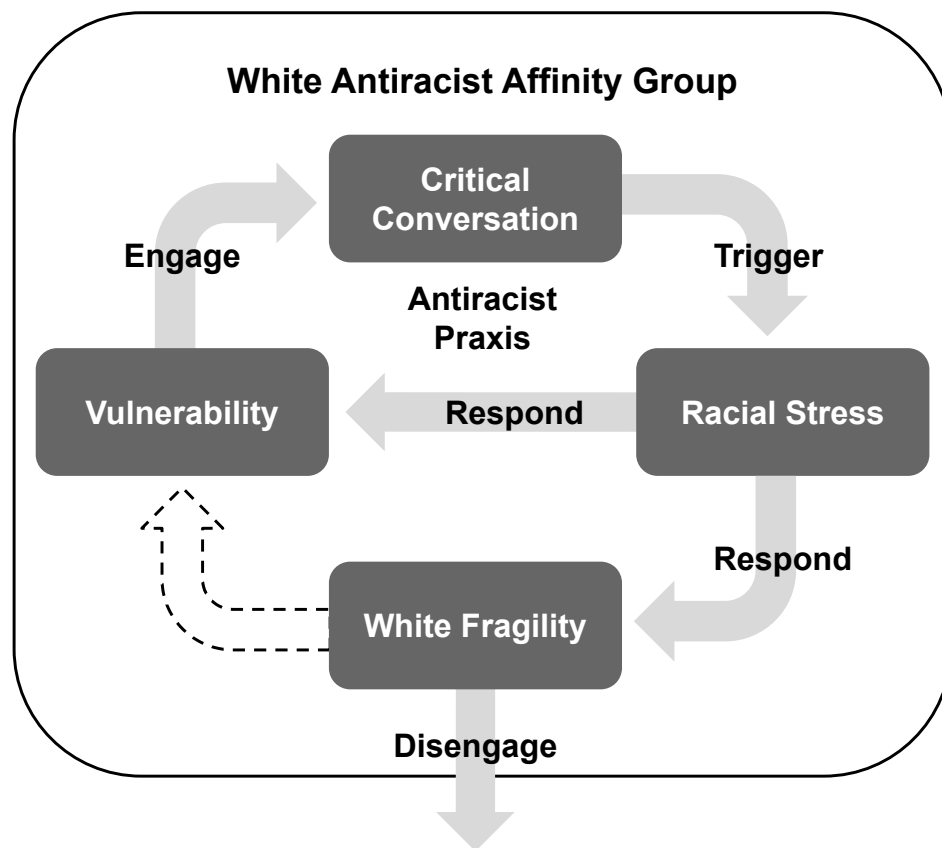


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

Critical conversations are a form of antiracist dialogue that engages white teachers in a politically-aware and racially-grounded conversation about what it means to be white and how they can combat manifestations of white privilege and racism in education. Such conversations are at the core of preparing white educators to engage in antiracist praxis (de Novais, 2019; Singleton, 2015; Varghese et al., 2019). However, critical conversations have also been shown to cause racial stress (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018b; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Matias, 2016; Stevenson, 2014). For white educators, racial stress is an emotional overload that occurs when white ideologies are challenged or the racial equilibrium of white supremacy is disrupted. The literature identifies two potential paths for responding to racial stress: white fragility and vulnerability.

When white teachers respond to racial stress with white fragility, they engage in discursive practices that leave them closed off from engaging with or learning from critical conversations about race and racism (DiAngelo, 2011; Gilson, 2011; Matias, 2016). Research has shown that their intolerance of racial stress leads them to disengage from critical conversations and close themselves off from being affected by the white antiracist affinity group (Case & Hemmings, 2005; DiAngelo, 2018a; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Matias, 2016; Picower, 2009, 2015; Thomann & Suyemoto, 2018; Varghese et al., 2019). Responding with white fragility removes white teachers from the process of critical reflection and disrupts the possibility of antiracist praxis.

When teachers respond to racial stress with vulnerability, they choose to remain in the discomfort of racial stress and reengage in critical conversations (Applebaum, 2017; Gilson, 2011). Research suggests that remaining in the discomfort of white emotionality and racial stress is an important part of antiracist work for white

people (Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Matias, 2016; Thomann & Suyemoto, 2018).

Responding to racial stress with vulnerability creates a reflection-action cycle within the context of antiracism, which keeps white teachers engaged with critical reflection and moves them towards to goal of antiracist praxis (reflection and action).

My review of the literature has revealed two gaps in our understanding of how vulnerability can support antiracist work. First, we have yet to understand how vulnerability can be fostered and promoted as a response to racial stress, specifically in white antiracist affinity groups where enactments of white fragility continue to disrupt antiracist praxis. Second, we have yet to examine the ways in which vulnerability could be used as a tool for reengaging white teachers who are experiencing white fragility in response to racial stress. This potential function of vulnerability is represented by the dotted arrow connecting white fragility and vulnerability in the diagram of my conceptual framework (Figure 1). This addition would create a reflection-action cycle that would keep white teachers engaged in critical conversations and working toward antiracist praxis, even after experiencing white fragility.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presents a review of education research that focuses on the use of white antiracist affinity groups for engaging white teachers in critical discussions of race and racism. Guided by critical race theory and critical whiteness studies, I examine the use of white antiracist affinity groups as a form of critical, antiracist professional development for white teachers. Successful white antiracist affinity groups cultivate a safe environment, engage white teachers in context-specific critical conversations about race and racism, and hold themselves accountable to their BIPOC

colleagues. Beneficial outcomes of white antiracist affinity groups include preparing white teachers for interracial dialogue that values and supports BIPOC colleagues, help teachers develop a positive white identity as an antiracist ally, and prepare white teachers for engaging in antiracist praxis. However, raced-based affinity groups also face challenges and limitations, such as confirmation bias, and interest convergence, and white fragility. White fragility functions as a barrier to antiracist praxis, but scholars have theorized that vulnerability could function as an antidote to white fragility and promote antiracist praxis. However, there are gaps in our understanding of how to foster vulnerability in white antiracist affinity groups and how to leverage vulnerability as a tool to reengage white teachers who are experiencing white fragility in antiracist work.

## **Chapter 3**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this multiple-case study is to examine how white classroom teachers who work in a racially diverse school are expressing white fragility and vulnerability while engaging in antiracist work. A better understanding of vulnerable dispositions and their relationship with antiracist actions can help teachers and teacher educators disrupt the negative impacts of white fragility in education. This study presents three qualitative case studies of individual white teachers from an antiracist affinity group as they engage in critical conversations about race, racism, and antiracist action. This chapter describes the methodology of the present study and includes discussions around the following areas: (a) overview of research design, (b) rationale for research approach, (c) description of the research context and participants, (d) methods of data collection, (e) analysis and synthesis of data, (f) ethical considerations, and (g) issues of trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of my research design and methodology.

#### **Research Design Overview**

The present study uses a holistic, multiple-case study design (Yin, 2018) to investigate how white teachers take on dispositions of vulnerability and white fragility in response to racial stress while engaging in critical conversations about race and racism. This approach was selected because it can be used to offer an empirical examination of theoretical concepts in a real-life, bounded context (Yin, 2018).

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a qualitative multiple-case study is “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single, bounded unit” (p. 232). In this multiple-case study, each case is bounded by the context of an individual white teacher who is actively participating in antiracist work. Within each case, expressions of vulnerability and white fragility serve as the unit of analysis. Figure 2 visually displays the multiple-case study design.

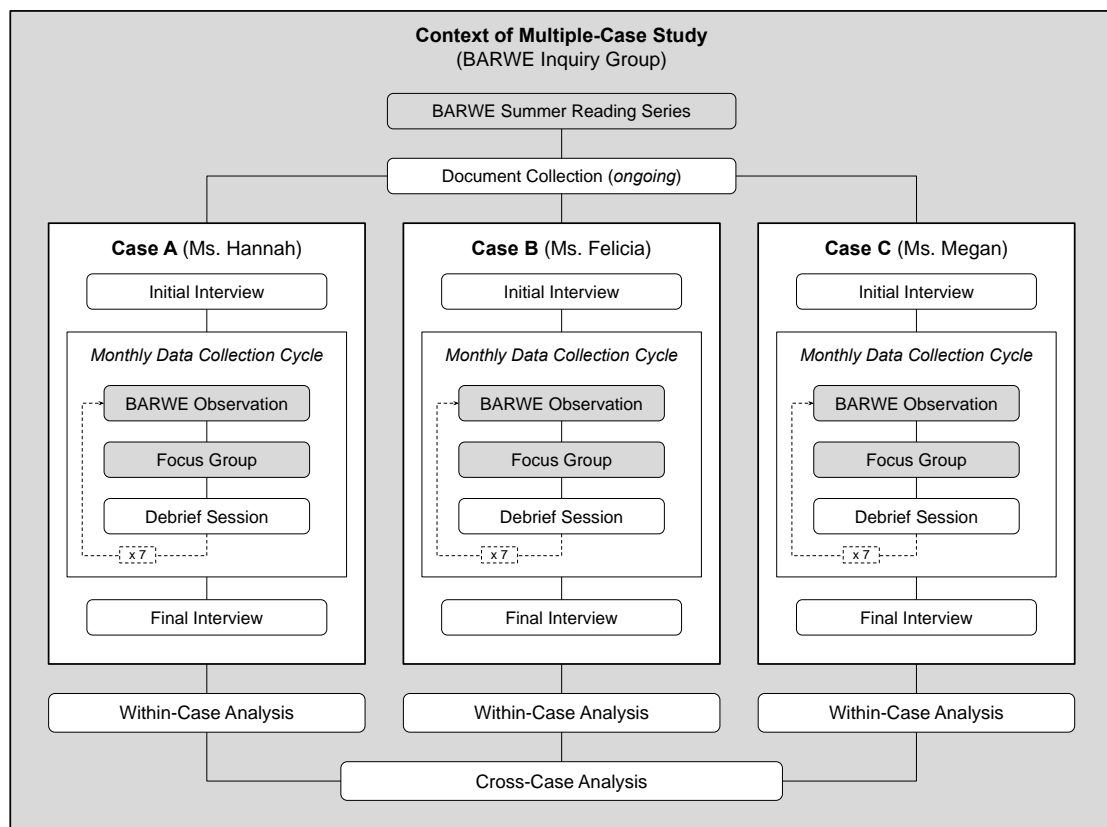


Figure 2 Diagram of Multiple-Case Study Design

Prior to this study, I participated in the BARWE Summer Reading Series, which brought together educators from across the country to discuss two democratically selected books during four virtual BARWE meetings. We discussed *Stamped* (Reynolds & Kendi, 2020) during the first two meetings (June 30, July 14) and *We Want to Do More Than Survive* (Love, 2019) during the final two meetings (July 26, August 11). Participating in the Summer Reading Series helped me gain insider knowledge about BARWE, initiate contact with BARWE core members (n=4), and connect with potential participants (n=8). After two months of networking and recruiting, I selected an active BARWE inquiry group to become the context of this multiple-case study. Each case focuses on an individual white teacher (n=3) participating in this BARWE inquiry group over the course of the 2020-21 school year. These three cases were carefully selected for literal replication with predictably similar results (Yin, 2018).

Over the course of the 2020-2021 school year, I observed case study participants as they attended their monthly BARWE meetings (October-March), during which they engaged in critical conversations and reflection about manifestations of racism and white supremacy culture in their school. I conducted initial interviews with each participant at the beginning of the study (September) and final interviews following the conclusion of data collection (April). Each month, I met with participants for an individual debrief session (September-March). I also met with my three participants each month in a focus group to reflect on their experiences during each BARWE meeting (September-March). Throughout the study, I gathered documents and artifacts relevant to the context and content of my study, including the local and national BARWE newsletters and curriculum, school-based communication,

local and national news articles, and documents referenced by my participants. Finally, I analyzed each case independently using an interpretive analytic approach (Hatch, 2002) before performing cross-case analysis for explanation building (Yin, 2018). Throughout the study, my analysis was guided by the theoretical propositions of vulnerability (Applebaum, 2017; Gilson, 2011) and white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011). In seeking to explore these theoretical propositions, the following four research questions were addressed:

1. What is the relationship between white teachers' self-perceptions of their role as antiracist white allies and their interactions during antiracist inquiry and praxis?
2. What do expressions of vulnerability and white fragility look like and what is the relationship between these expressions?
3. What is the relationship between these expressions and teachers' antiracist (in)actions?
4. In what ways does the BARWE structure support, or hinder, expressions of vulnerability, white fragility, and antiracist (in)action?

### **Rational for Research Design**

For this study, I use qualitative methodologies and a holistic, multiple-case design to gain insight into how white teachers are experiencing manifestations of vulnerability and white fragility while engaging in antiracist work. Qualitative research allows for the researcher, as the principle data gathering instrument, to connect with participants on a human level and seek to understand the world from their lived perspectives (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Hatch, 2002). Specifically, I designed a qualitative, multiple-case study because I wanted to understand a real-world case and contextual conditions of white teachers grappling with racial stress. Qualitative methodologies were chosen for this study in order to “illuminate the

meanings people attach to their words and actions” (Lareau, 1996). To this end, I designed a study that would allow for prolonged engagement in the field and member checking. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), qualitative researchers are skeptical of theories unless they have been “grounded through active interplay with data” (p. 14). I was interested in grounding Applebaum’s (2017) theory of vulnerability in the real-life context of white teachers engaging in antiracist work, and thus a qualitative approach was appropriate for this study.

### **Research Context**

#### City Charter Middle School

The participating teachers in this study work City Charter Middle School<sup>6</sup> (CCMS), which is located in a large urban city in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. CCMS is a free public charter school that admits new students using a lottery system. The students who attend CCMS are primarily low-income (78%) and Black (93%). Although teacher demographics are not reported, study participants describe the CCMS teachers as primarily white and female. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, CCMS went to an all-virtual model for the first three quarters of the 2020-21 school year, shifting to a hybrid model in April following the conclusion of data collection for this study. Students received a Chromebook in August, which they used to attend their classes from home via Zoom and access class materials via Google Classroom.

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<sup>6</sup> Pseudonyms were used for all places and participants to protect confidentiality.

According to their website, the mission of CCMS is to create a learning community that focuses on individual freedom, critical thinking, and problem solving, while creating a learning environment that values community, teamwork, and peace building. Following the nationwide Black Lives Matter protests, CCMS released a statement confirming their commitment to antiracist action (June 2020). They also recognized that CCMS has more work to do in acknowledging and fixing systems of racism and white supremacy in their school and community. They committed to becoming an “actively antiracist school network,” which included creating and promoting antiracist affinity spaces, such as BARWE.

#### Building Antiracist White Educators

BARWE, which stands for *Building Antiracist White Educators*, was created by a group of educators in Philadelphia who were focused on fostering antiracism among white educators. These founding members were affiliated with other grassroots organizations, such as the Teacher Action Group and the Caucuses of Working Educators. Their mission focuses on bringing white teachers into antiracist work so they can better serve their BIPOC students: “White teachers, even those with experience and compassion, can unconsciously cause pain to students of color in their classrooms. We believe that through consistent study and reflection, we can slowly address our own unconscious biases and make changes so we can better support the academic, social and emotional well-being of our students of color” (<https://www.barwe215.org/>). Through their monthly Reading and Inquiry Series, the BARWE core members offer curated articles and detailed discussion questions to help white teachers explore their own biases and improve their antiracist teaching practices by engaging in critical conversations about race and racism (Appendix A). They also

provide a recommended discussion protocol (see Table 6), which provides a value-based structure for BARWE meetings.

Table 6 BARWE Discussion Protocol and Value Alignment

Protocol	Description	Values Reflected
Opening & Closing	Take time to check in and build relationships with participants.	Relationships are the foundation of capacity-building for change. This work cannot be done alone.  Follow collaboratively created norms to encourage open, truthful, brave conversations and learning.
Opening Reflection	Individual time for everyone to write and reflect on the article and discussion questions (10 min).	Creates space to accommodate multiple learning needs.
Sharing & Questioning Cycle	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Split into small groups of 2-4 people, giving everyone a chance to share and discuss.</li> <li>2. Sharing and questioning cycle: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Person 1 shares their reactions and reflections on the article and questions (2-3 minutes).</li> <li>b. Others ask questions and Person 1 answers (5 minutes). The question-only structure promotes active listen and pushes Person 1 to dig deeper. Acknowledge that this may feel unnatural.</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Repeat step 2 for each group member.</li> </ol>	<p>Uninterrupted sharing from each group member facilitates hearing from every participant.</p> <p>Questions from other group members creates space for participants to receive probing questions that challenge ideas and encourage deeper reflection.</p>
Open Discussion	Bring small groups back together for an open discussion (10 min).	Promotes free-flowing conversation, as highly structured conversation may be restrictive.

I chose to focus my work on BARWE teachers because their inquiry groups seek to support white teachers as they encounter the discomforts of confronting racism. As one BARWE teacher wrote in *Learning for Justice*,<sup>7</sup> “If we are going to confront racism and white supremacy in our lives and work, we are going to have to get uncomfortable and deeply question long-held beliefs” (McGeehan, 2018). In the article, he outlines five key guidelines that shape BARWE’s approach to confronting racism and white supremacy with white teachers: white people have a responsibility to address racism and white supremacy, antiracist work is ongoing, antiracist work must be accountable to people of color, humility is central in antiracist work, and so is discussion. Central to my examination of vulnerability is BARWE’s focus on humility. “We must learn from and listen to people of color, especially our colleagues and students,” McGeehan writes, “We should also approach our work with fellow white educators from the perspective of fellow learners, rather than as experts.” Through humility and embracing discomfort, BARWE groups create a context conducive to vulnerability.

As schools began closing across the country due to the coronavirus pandemic, BARWE encouraged local groups to continue meeting virtually. In an overview of their discussion materials for April 2020 they noted, “While schools are closed and communities are in isolation, it may begin to feel like we are becoming disconnected from this work. BARWE would like to encourage you to reach out to your networks and consider a plan for holding your monthly discussion groups virtually.” They

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<sup>7</sup> In 2021, *Teaching Tolerance* changed their name to *Learning for Justice*, which “speaks to the collaborative work of learning and growing together to reach our goal of justice for all” ([www.learningforjustice.org](http://www.learningforjustice.org)).

provided instructions for using Google Hangouts and Zoom as virtual platforms for BARWE discussion groups. In the months that followed, BARWE continued encouraging teachers to form virtual inquiry communities, which they modeled during their 2020 Summer Reading Series.

BARWE changed their curriculum approach during the 2020-2021 school year. Rather than covering a new topic each month, as they had in previous years, the curriculum was designed around two core themes: dismantling white supremacy culture and promoting Black joy. Appendix A provides an overview of the BARWE curriculum from Inquiry Series One (2018-2019), Inquiry Series Two (2019-2020), and Inquiry Series Three (2020-2021). The recursive structure of the Inquiry Series Three BARWE curriculum allowed teachers to engage with topics over multiple months, always returning to the central concepts of white supremacy culture and Black joy. As one of my participants explained, each month the BARWE curriculum built on the work done during the previous months:

This month [September] is article-focused, discussion question focused and October's going to be another article. But then, the whole point of the November meeting is checking in on the action step and looking at things like the handout about identifying white supremacy in your school. (Hannah, September focus group)

Building month-by-month helped the teachers stay grounded in the central concepts. It also allowed for conversations to continue to develop and deepen over several months, which in turn promoted antiracist praxis through recursive critical reflection and antiracist action grounded in the core concepts of dismantling white supremacy culture and promoting Black joy.

## City Charter BARWE Inquiry Group

This study focuses on a group of white teachers who are actively participating in the BARWE inquiry group at City Charter Middle School (CCMS). The CCMS BARWE inquiry group has been meeting after school for the past three years with 4-6 members attending their monthly meetings. However, their inquiry group underwent two key changes in 2020. First, their BARWE meetings moved online beginning in March 2020, following the guidance of the BARWE core members: “While schools are closed and communities are in isolation, it may begin to feel like we are becoming disconnected from this work. BARWE would like to encourage you to reach out to your networks and consider a plan for holding your monthly discussion groups virtually” (<https://www.barwe215.org>). The CCMS BARWE group continued to meet virtually via Zoom throughout the 2020-21 school year.

Second, the City Charter School District formed antiracist affinity groups as part of their push to address racism and white supremacy in their schools. To create an antiracist affinity group for white educators, the district leadership asked the CCMS BARWE group to form a new district-wide BARWE group to include educators from all four schools in the district. In return, the district would provide time for the group to meet during each of the district-wide PD days. The group continued to follow the BARWE curriculum and discussion protocols, but their average attendance went from 4-6 CCMS teachers to approximately 110 teachers, staff, and administrators from across the district. The district also set aside funds to pay the affinity group leaders for this extra work. Additional details about the CCMS BARWE group are presented and discussed along with the findings in Chapters Four.

While BARWE focuses on engaging white educators in antiracism, the affinity space is open to anyone who wishes to attend. Several BIPOC educators attended the

inquiry meetings to learn about BARWE and the work being done with their white colleagues. However, the vast majority of attendees each month self-identified as white. White teachers were not invited to attend the BIPOC affinity groups.

## **Participants**

### **Recruitment**

In June 2020, I began reaching out to the BARWE core team members<sup>8</sup> to share information about my study and request their assistance in recruiting potential participants. I communicated with four core team members via email and they each agreed to help connect me with potential participants by reaching out to their own networks on my behalf. They also included information about my study in their email newsletter and social media posts from the official BARWE accounts. Because BARWE is a grassroots organization, they do not have a central database of BARWE groups. During this time, I continued to reach out to my own network of educators and scholars who had connection to BARWE or the core team members (see Appendix B for sample recruitment emails). I also corresponded with the teachers I met during the Summer Reading Series to learn about their local BARWE group and tell them about my study.

I encountered two main challenges while recruiting participants for this study. First, the people who are engaged in the deeply personal work of BARWE crave

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<sup>8</sup> The BARWE core team is a small group of educators who run the BARWE organization. They work collaboratively to put produce the BARWE curriculum, put out a monthly newsletter, and maintain the organizations' social media presence. One of my participants is part of the BARWE core team.

anonymity and confidentiality, which made groups hesitant to grant access for observations and research. Second, the COVID-19 global pandemic made teaching extremely difficult and teachers were hesitant to take on any additional work, such as participating in a yearlong dissertation study. The BARWE core team members who helped with recruitment for this study reported these same challenges after reaching out to BARWE groups in their own networks and across the country.

This multiple-case study is contextualized by a single BARWE group. For this reason, I initially used criterion sampling to recruit BARWE groups with at least five active members who worked in K-12 education and were continuing to meet virtually during this time of social distancing. While I reached out to nine teachers from different BARWE groups across the United States, I was only able to find one BARWE group that met my recruitment criteria and whose members were willing to grant full access to their monthly inquiry meetings. I then used convenience and snowball sampling (Hatch, 2002) to recruit participants from the same BARWE group by asking my initial contact, Ms. Hannah, to identify other BARWE members who might also be willing to participate. Teachers who were interested in participating completed a recruitment survey (Appendix C), which asked them to provide demographic and background information. Ultimately, three teachers agreed to participate in this study, which provided a sufficient sample for replication and cross-case analysis (Yin, 2018). These three participants each represented potential examples of white educators adopting vulnerable stances while engaging in antiracist work.

## Case Study Participants

Each case study focuses on one of three white teachers: Ms. Hannah, Ms. Felicia, and Ms. Megan. All three teachers have been an active part of the CCMS BARWE inquiry group for three years and they all self-identify as white women in their early to mid-thirties. Ms. Hannah serves as the leader of the CCMS BARWE group and my main point of contact. While each participant teaches a different subject at CCMS, they are demographically similar (Table 7). Yin (2018) suggests selecting cases for a multiple-case study based on replication logic rather than sampling logic. The similarities among my participants suggested predictably similar results, which Yin refers to as *literal replication* (p. 55). While addressing my first research question, I focused on the differences between my three participants to examine the diversity that exists among the white educators who are choosing to participate in white antiracist affinity groups. However, it was the similarities among my participants that emerged during data analysis that allowed me to put create a framework for vulnerable engagement during antiracist inquiry, which I put forward in Chapter 4. The literal replication of data points played a key role in addressing my second, third, and fourth research questions. In the following sections, I provide a detailed description of each participating teacher.

Table 7 Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Politics	Teaching		
				Subject	Grade	Experience
Ms. Hannah	Female	White	Liberal	English Lang. Arts	8 <sup>th</sup>	10 years
Ms. Felicia	Female	White	Liberal	Art Enrichment	5 <sup>th</sup> -8 <sup>th</sup>	9 years
Ms. Megan	Female	White	Liberal	Math	5 <sup>th</sup>	8 years

## **Ms. Hannah**

Hannah is an English Language Arts (ELA) teacher at CCMS, where she is in her 10<sup>th</sup> year of teaching. She is a thoughtful, kind, and engaging educator who prioritizes relationships with her students over “checking standards boxes” or preparing for state testing (Hannah, initial interview). Hannah describes herself as a “jokey and goofy” person who is always trying “to get smiles on faces” and help her students stay engaged. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she created a Bitmoji<sup>9</sup> classroom to “infuse a little bit of joy” for her students (Hannah, initial interview). She also cut out exams during virtual learning, instead shifting to project-based learning and writing assignments to better meet the needs of her students. In addition to focusing on white supremacy and Black joy, two key aspects of the 2020-2021 BARWE curriculum, Hannah’s pandemic pedagogy<sup>10</sup> also included “a healthy dose of trying to make everything feel relevant in a time when nobody needs to be doing busy work” (Hannah, January debrief). She focused on centering empathy, grace, and understanding, rather than policing student engagement (final interview). As an educator, Hannah is also deeply committed to redressing racial inequities at CCMS. She is a founding member and leader of the CCMS BARWE group and she is widely involved in antiracist work in the community. As Megan explained, when it comes to

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<sup>9</sup> A Bitmoji is an expressive cartoon avatar that individuals edit to look like themselves (<https://www.bitmoji.com/>). Bitmojis and Bitmoji classrooms became popular during the COVID-19 pandemic as schools abruptly transitioned to virtual learning.

<sup>10</sup> Pandemic pedagogy refers to the pedagogical changes that teachers made to accommodate and prioritize the needs of their students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

antiracist work at CCMS, Hannah is “the glue that holds it all together” (Megan, October debrief).

### **Ms. Felicia**

Felicia is the art teacher at CCMS, where she is in her 9<sup>th</sup> year of teaching. She also spent five years overseeing a national grant to support extracurricular activities at CCMS, which puts her in her 14<sup>th</sup> year in education. Felicia describes herself as “a pretty typical art teacher” and she tries “not to take things too seriously” (initial interview). She is a creative, funny, and delightfully disorganized teacher who enjoys improvising on the fly, because planning is not her strong suit. However, Felicia does not think of herself as a “super affectionate or flowery” kind of teacher. Instead, she is actively working on “connecting with kids beyond...just the art nerds” (initial interview). During the COVID-19 pandemic, Felicia transitioned to teaching computer literacy skills to help students prepare for effective online learning during the first quarter of the 2020-2021 school year. Felicia summed up her pandemic pedagogy, saying you’ve “just gotta roll with it” (initial interview). She focuses on making her virtual classroom a space where students have the “room and space to make and create,” even during tumultuous times (final interview).

### **Ms. Megan**

Megan is a math teacher at CCMS, where she is in her 8<sup>th</sup> year of teaching. She is a passionate, energetic, and exuberantly genuine educator who prioritizes building authentic relationships with and investing in her students. Megan believes that teachers, especially white teachers, need to be actively involved in antiracism because teaching is not neutral or apolitical. This is especially true for the white teachers at

CCMS, who tend to live in the suburbs while teaching a population of students who are predominantly Black and urban. Megan’s pandemic pedagogy has focused on “letting a lot go” in light of virtual learning (initial interview). Instead of forcing students to have their cameras on during class, she focuses on meeting students where they are and doing everything she can to meet their needs. This has included pushing back on the school’s “Cameras On” policy and advocating for equitable grading practices that will not keep students from advancing to the next grade because of the pandemic. Megan assumes that “there’s always a reason to me why they can’t log on or why they’re not doing something, and I just have to assume the reason they’re not doing something is really, really deep” (March debrief). She positioned herself as an advocate for inclusive virtual learning, pushing back when teachers exclude students from their virtual classrooms: “We’re still denying people education” (initial interview). As an educator, Megan is an outspoken advocate for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. She has a BLM sign and a rainbow flag hanging in her Zoom background, and even her Bitmoji is wearing a BLM t-shirt. Even though she knows that it “looks corny” to some students, she also knows it can be really impactful for other students and it makes a statement to her colleagues that she is here to give her unapologetic support for Black lives.

### **Data Collection**

The use of multiple data collection methods and triangulation are critical in case study research. According to Creswell (2007), case studies investigate a bounded system “over time, through in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” to create case descriptions and report case-based themes (p. 73). For this multiple-case study, I employed four qualitative data collection methods: observations,

individual interviews, focus group interviews, and documents. Table 8 illustrates how these four data collection methods are aligned with my research questions. In this section, I detail the data collection methods, timeline, and protocols used in this multiple-case study. A timeline detailing data collection points and types can be found in Appendix D.

Table 8 Research Questions and Data Collection Alignment

Research Question	Observations	Interviews	Focus Groups	Documents
What is the relationship between white teachers' self-perceptions of their role as antiracist white allies and their interactions during antiracist inquiry and praxis?	X	X	X	
What do expressions of vulnerability and white fragility look like and what is the relationship between these expressions?	X	X	X	
What is the relationship between these expressions and teachers' antiracist (in)actions?	X	X	X	
In what ways does the BARWE structure support, or hinder, expressions of vulnerability, white fragility, and antiracist (in)action?	X	X	X	X

## Observations

Over the course of six months (October 2020-March 2021), I conducted observations of the monthly BARWE inquiry group meetings. Meetings took place over Zoom and breakout groups were used to facilitate small group discussions. During the monthly meetings, I kept detailed fieldnotes that focused on instances of vulnerability and white fragility (invulnerability) as teachers engaged in critical conversations around race and racism. I took note of dialogic interactions as well as non-verbal cues from my participants. As Bailey (2015) notes, these “bodily performances” often accompany instances of white talk, such as hands tensing up, oral pauses, or physical tightening and withdrawing (p. 42). While I found it challenging to observe non-verbal cues over Zoom, I was able to use debrief sessions and focus groups to expound upon their emotional responses.

During these meetings, I positioned myself as an observer-participant (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My primary role in each meeting was to observe. However, I took on the secondary role of participant in order to gain access into a space where teachers were sharing deeply personal information. It would have been impossible for me to access BARWE without engaging in at least partial participation, as I needed access to inquiry group meetings, BARWE communications, and other documents related to the monthly meetings. To this end, I first attended the BARWE Summer Inquiry Series as a full participant. This allowed me to position myself authentically as an observer-participant. I continued to work in the hyphen between insider and outsider throughout the study (Fine, 1994). Sharing my own experiences and responding to questions was an important part of building trust and rapport with my participants and humanizing myself as a researcher, but I remained cognizant of how my participation influenced group dynamics.

Small groups were used during the Sharing and Questioning Cycle (see Table 6), which meant they held a prominent role in each BARWE meeting. According to Ms. Hannah, consistently meeting in the same breakout groups of 4-6 teachers helped “save time and build a safer sense of community for tough conversations.” The virtual setting limited my observations to a single small group during breakout discussions. Two of my participants, Ms. Hannah and Ms. Felicia, self-selected the same breakout group and Ms. Megan self-selected into a group with other teachers who had previously participated in the CCMS BARWE inquiry group. After careful consideration, I chose to position myself in the breakout group with Ms. Megan for two key reasons. First, this would provide two perspectives on the critical conversations taking place in each breakout group. Ms. Hannah and Ms. Felicia both told stories about their small group discussions, and I was able to confirm Megan’s small group discussions through my observations. Second, the other teachers in Ms. Megan’s breakout group had previously consented to my observations. I asked the group leader, Ms. Hannah, to reach out to the other teachers in Megan’s group on my behalf to confirm that they were okay with me observing their group.

While negotiating access with my participants, we made the decision that I would not attend the first BARWE meeting in September, because this would be the first district-wide event. While the CCMS BARWE teachers had agreed to allow me unfiltered access to their meetings, there would be dozens of new participants at this meeting. Instead, Ms. Hannah used the September meeting as opportunity to tell the new participants about my study and answer their questions regarding access and confidentiality. During the September meeting, teachers discussed white supremacy culture (Okun, 2000) and sought to answer the guiding question: How can we identify

and challenge white supremacy culture in ourselves and our institutions? Table 9 provides an overview of the seven BARWE meetings that took place during the 2020-2021 school year. The district-wide BARWE meetings occurred on shared PD days, while the CCMS-specific BARWE meetings were scheduled around the availability of CCMS teachers, although everyone was welcome to attend. I found that the change in scope had little effect on my data collection, as my focus remained on the three participating teachers.

Table 9 BARWE Meetings 2020-2021

Meeting	Guiding Question	Topic / Primary Article	Scope
September	How can we identify and challenge white supremacy culture in ourselves and our institutions?	White Supremacy Culture (Okun, 2000)	District
October	How can we as white educators center Black joy in our classrooms and schools?	Black Joy (Love, 2019a)	District
November	How can we more deeply reflect and/or apply what we learned about white supremacy culture and Black Joy?	A Deeper Look at Your Institution (Love, 2019a; Okun, 2000)	CCMS
December	How can we identify and challenge white supremacy culture in our curriculum?	Ending Curriculum Violence (Jones, 2020)	District
January	How can we identify and challenge white supremacy culture in our curriculum?	Critical Analysis of a Curricular Unit (Jones, 2020)	District
February	How can we create classroom culture that resists white supremacy and that nourishes Black joy?	Social-Emotional Learning as Policing (Kaler-Jones, 2020)	CCMS
March	How can we identify and challenge white supremacy culture in our classroom culture? How can we co-create joy with students?	Reflection on topics covered September – February (Jones, 2020; Kaler-Jones, 2020; Love, 2019a; Okun, 2000)	District

## Individual Interviews

Interviews are an important piece of case study evidence. For this study, I used a semi-structured approach to interviewing that allowed for a fluid conversation with my participants that was guided by a consistent line of inquiry (Yin, 2018). For each case, teachers participated in an initial interview (September), monthly individual debrief sessions (September-March), and a final interview (April). These interviews helped me get to know my participants and learn about how they are experiencing vulnerability and white fragility while engaging in antiracist work. According to Patton (2015), researchers can use interviews to learn about “things we cannot directly observe” and to enter into another person’s perspective (p. 426). Due to coronavirus restrictions, interviews were conducted over the phone or via Zoom, depending on the preference and schedule of each participant. All interviews were audio recorded for transcription, which allowed me to focus on engaging with my participant and listening to their responses.

### **Initial Interview**

Following participant selection, I conducted individual interviews with each of my three participants. These initial interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted approximately 45 minutes. I used a semi-structured interview format, which allowed for a more natural flow of conversation and relevant follow-up questions to address ambiguities in participant responses (Mishler, 1986). Interview questions focused on collecting data pertaining to participants’ backgrounds, specifically pertaining to their past experiences with learning about race. The initial interview protocol, found in Appendix E, consisted of 11 guiding questions with an additional

15 suggested follow-up questions to prompt deeper reflection, such as “Why do you think this instance stands out in your mind?”

### **Debrief Sessions**

Following each of the monthly BARWE meetings (September-March), I meet with each participant for a debrief session. These debriefs took place over the phone or via Zoom and lasted approximately 30 minutes. The goal of these sessions was to unpack the participant’s experiences during the previous meeting, with a focus on their response to racial stress. Each debrief followed a similar sequence of questions, as outlined in Appendix F. I began each debrief by asking participants how they were doing and how things were going at school. This allowed me to acknowledge the unique challenges teachers were experiencing throughout the study as a result of the global pandemic and political unrest, as well as the ongoing racial violence and protests. Next, I asked teachers to think aloud (Charters, 2003) about their experiences during the previous meeting. The protocol outlines several optional questions to prompt additional details from each participant. I also asked teachers to reflect on the emotions they experienced during the meeting. For example, was there a moment that required them to be brave or a moment when they were hesitant to express themselves. Finally, I asked teachers to reflect on their preparation for the previous BARWE meeting. This series of questions prompted them to share the thoughts and feelings they experienced in response to the discussion topic and primary reading.

### **Final Interview**

After the final cycle of monthly data collection (see Figure 2), I conducted a final interview with each of my participants (April). This interview focused on

member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and teacher-led discussions about their perceptions of vulnerability and white fragility in antiracist work. These interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, as outlined in Appendix G. The first portion of this interview focused on data sharing and member checking. To this end, I prepared excerpts of my preliminary analysis to share with my participants. During the interview, I asked teachers to read the excerpts, share their thoughts, and correct any errors or misinterpretations they noticed. During the second portion of the interview, I asked teachers to reflect on their experiences in the BARWE inquiry group and share their final thoughts on vulnerability and white fragility in antiracist work.

#### Focus Group Interviews

After their monthly BARWE meetings, I met with my three participants for a focus group interview, which were separate from the individual debriefing interviews. Focus group interviews did not follow a set protocol, but they were guided by a similar line of inquiry as the individual debrief sessions. Focus group interviews provided data that was socially constructed through interactive discussions between my three participants. In these discussions, “participants share their views, hear the views of others, and perhaps refine their own views in light of what they have heard” (Hennink, 2014, pp. 2-3). Focus groups met each month via Zoom (September-March) and focus group interviews were audio recorded for transcription.

#### Documents

Throughout the study, I collected documents related to the context and content of my case studies, such as BARWE materials and communication. These documents included any written, visual, and digital materials put out by the official BARWE

organizers or the CCMS BARWE inquiry group. I also collected information from the official BARWE website and social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Documents from the CCMS BARWE inquiry group included email correspondence, information posted in their Google classroom, and artifacts collected during the monthly meetings, including feedback forms, the Zoom chat thread, and shared note tracking document. I also collected documents pertaining to the City Charter Middle School and school districts, such as their community newsletters and announcements, public records related to enrollment and achievement, and information available on the CCMS website. Finally, I collected documents pertaining to the current events that directly impacted this study, which included information on the COVID-19 pandemic, national and local politics, and local incidents of racial violence and Black Lives Matter protests.

### **Data Analysis**

Each case study is bounded by the context of an individual white teacher who is actively participating in antiracist work. Within each case, expressions of white fragility and vulnerability serve as the unit of analysis. According to DiAngelo (2011), “racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar” (p. 57). White racial comfort can be easily interrupted by interactions that challenge white racial expectations (see Table 3 for examples of racial stressors). These challenges trigger racial stress for white individuals (DiAngelo, 2011). In a white dominant society, these interruptions contradict expectations for white racial comfort. Whiteness functions as a “protective pillow” by repelling wielding privilege and status (Fine, 1997, p. 57). In the United States, “the larger social environment insulates and protects whites as a group through institutions, cultural representations, media, school textbooks, movies,

advertising, dominant discourses, etc.” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 55). Antiracist affinity spaces like BARWE purposefully create an environment in which white participants are asked to move beyond the social environment that protects their racial comfort in order to address racism. When white people engage in antiracist work, they choose to experience temporary racial stress.

My general analytic strategy relies on the theoretical propositions of vulnerability and white fragility (Yin, 2018). Within the bounded context of each case, I focus on how the teacher responds to racial stress, with a specific focus on expressions of vulnerability and/or white fragility. Beginning analysis with theory can lead to what Glaser and Strauss (1977) describe as force-fitting the data to the theory. To address this challenge, I began this work by making my theoretical notions explicit and my intuitive practice overt. According to Vaughan (1992), “By acknowledging our theoretical tools (i.e., our “biases) as best we can at the outset, we can better guard against the tendency for our worldview to affect our interpretation of information in unacknowledged ways” (p. 196). Additional safeguards are built into theory elaboration (Vaughan, 1992), such as maintaining the internal integrity by thoroughly exploring each case as a whole.

Table 10 outlines the approaches and analytic processes used in this study. For each of my three cases, I conducted a within-case, interpretive analysis. At this stage of analysis, I treated each case independently, analyzing the idiosyncratic details of each case to maximize theoretical insight and assessing the theoretical notions in light of my findings (Vaughan, 1992). For each case, I progressed through the eight steps for interpretive analysis (Hatch, 2002), as outlined in Table 10. After analyzing each case study, I began my cross-case analysis, which focused on theory elaboration and

explanation building (Vaughan, 1992; Yin, 2018). Theory elaboration (Vaughan, 1992) allowed me to compare case findings with my guiding theories, as well as comparing findings between levels of analysis. During cross-case analysis, I followed the iterative process outlined in Table 10.

Table 10 Data Analysis Approaches and Process

Level of Analysis	Analytic Approach	Steps in Analysis
<i>General Analysis</i>	Theoretical Orientation of Analytic Approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldaña, 2016; Vaughan, 1992; Yin, 2018, p. 168)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Theoretical orientation guided the case study analysis</li> <li>2. Pre-coding, preliminary jottings, diagraming, and analytic memos</li> </ol>
<i>Within-Case Analysis</i>	Interpretive Analysis (Hatch, 2002, p.179-191)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Read the data for a sense of the whole</li> <li>2. Review field notes, memos, and research journal entries</li> <li>3. Read data to identify and record impressions</li> <li>4. Review memos for salient interpretations</li> <li>5. Reread data, (open) coding excerpts that support or challenge interpretations</li> <li>6. Write draft case summary</li> <li>7. Review interpretations with case participant</li> <li>8. Revise summary and identify excerpts that support interpretations</li> </ol>
<i>Cross-Case Analysis</i>	Explanation Building (Vaughan, 1992; Yin, 2018, p. 179-181)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Form initial explanatory proposition</li> <li>2. Series of iterations for case A: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Compare case data against proposition</li> <li>b. Revise explanatory proposition</li> <li>c. Repeat process by comparing case data against revised proposition</li> </ol> </li> <li>3. Repeat process with cases B and C, leading to further revisions, repeating as many times as needed</li> </ol>

During within-case analysis, codes were created through open coding and refined using the theoretical orientation of this study, which focuses the theories of vulnerability (Applebaum, 2017) and white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011). Following the first round of coding, codes were collapsed into overarching themes. The four research questions guiding this study guided this process. Table 11 shows the alignment of research questions, code categories, and codes. Codes were further refined during cross-case analysis. My complete coding manual can be found in Appendix H.

Table 11 Alignment of Research Questions, Code Categories, and Codes

Research Questions	Code Categories	Codes
RQ2 - What do expressions of vulnerability and white fragility look like and what is the relationship between these expressions?	Vulnerability	Acknowledging Fault, Fear or Responsibility Brave Engagement Emotional Willingness Seeking Input and Help
	White Fragility	(Re)Centering Whiteness Defensive Behaviors Discourse Moves Displays of Emotion Hesitancy to Engage
RQ1 – What is the relationship between white teachers’ self-perceptions of their role as antiracist white allies and their interactions during antiracist inquiry and praxis?	Reflection (Antiracist Praxis)	Active Self-Monitoring Critical Examination Empathy, Perspective Taking Sources of Learning
	Action (Antiracist Praxis)	Amplifying BIPOC Efforts Antiracist Identity Collaborative, School-Level Change Curriculum Changes Pedagogical Changes Talking to Others about Race and Racism
RQ3 - What is the relationship between these expressions and teachers’ antiracist (in)actions?		
	Inaction	Misguided Action Passive Inaction Uncritical Engagement

Table 11 continued.

RQ4 - In what ways does the BARWE structure support, or hinder, expressions of vulnerability, white fragility, and antiracist (in)action?	Affinity Group Features	BARWE Curriculum BIPOC Accountability Critical Conversations District-Wide Scope Participation Structure
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### **Ethical Considerations**

Throughout this study, careful attention was given to ethical considerations. The UD Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this project and designated it as exempt from most federal policy requirements for the protections of human subjects (Appendix I). To safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of participants, all data obtained throughout the study were deidentified and stored on a password protected computer. Additionally, precautions were taken to ensure that only the researcher had access to the records and data. The names of participants and locations have been replaced with pseudonyms throughout this report and every effort has been made to protect the identities of participants. Informed consent was obtained from all case study participants prior to data collection (Appendix J) and a passive consent letter was shared with all BARWE attendees prior to my first observation (Appendix K). As compensation for participating in this study, each case study participant received a \$250 gift card upon the completion of the study.

My ethical considerations were also relational. According to Tracy (2013), “A relational ethic means being aware of one’s own role and impact on relationships and treating participants as whole people rather than just subjects from which to wrench a good story” (p. 245). This research study was entirely conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a time of increased physical and emotional stress. Treating

my participants as a whole person meant checking in with them to see how they were doing physically and emotionally. The first portion of each interview and focus group was set aside for this verbal checking in and my data collection procedures were adjusted to meet the needs of the teacher. Sometimes participants had a lot of frustration they needed to share; other times they needed a moment to sigh deeply and acknowledge that the world around them was vastly different than it had been just months before. While relational considerations are a part of all qualitative research, I found they were especially important in the context of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

### **Trustworthiness**

Measures were taken throughout this study to ensure trustworthiness, which I address using the qualitative constructs of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Table 12 provides an overview of the techniques used during the design and implementation of this study to ensure trustworthiness.

Table 12 Contributions to Trustworthiness

Qualitative Construct (Lincoln & Guba, 1985)	Techniques (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018)
Credibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prolonged engagement, length of data collection period</li> <li>Symmetry of data collection</li> <li>Triangulation of data sources, methods, and theories</li> <li>Transcribe audio recordings and manually clean transcripts</li> <li>Member checking</li> <li>Clarifying researcher biases, dispositions, and assumptions</li> </ul>
Dependability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Audit trail</li> <li>Chain of evidence</li> <li>Using theory and replication logic in case analysis</li> </ul>

Table 12 continued.

Confirmability	Case study database Reflexive journaling
Transferability	Thick description

### Credibility

To ensure credibility, several techniques were applied during the planning, implementation, analysis, and reporting of this multiple-case study. I designed this study to ensure prolonged engagement in the field (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), symmetry of data collection across the three case studies (Yin, 2018), and triangulation through the use of multiple methods, multiple sources of data, and multiple theories (Denzin, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Case study methodology relies on using multiple sources of evidence to triangulate findings. As Guba and Lincoln (1981) explain, “when various bits of evidence all tend in one direction, that direction assumes far greater credibility” (p. 107). During data collection, individual and focus group interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and manually cleaned to eliminate transcription errors.

Following preliminary data analysis, I used member checking to ensure the credibility of my findings. Lincoln and Guba (1985) identify member checking as “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Through member checking, my participants were able to “play a major role in directing as well as acting in” my multiple-case study by providing their “critical observations” and informing the language used throughout this study (Stake, 1995, p. 115). Throughout the study, I checked with participants to clarify or enhance my understanding. For example, I would share my interpretation of the BARWE meeting and ask my participants if that

aligned with their experiences during the inquiry meeting. Following the completion of data collection and analysis, I sent each participant a copy of their case study. Participants were given four weeks to look over their case and report any inaccuracies of concerns with my analysis. To further support the integrity of the researcher, I present a statement on my positionality, which explores my biases, dispositions, and assumptions regarding the content and context of this research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### Dependability

In qualitative research, a study is considered dependable if the reported findings “are consistent with the data presented” as evidence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To this end, I have created an audit trail that details the research steps from initial design to the final reporting of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail provides detailed descriptions of my data collection and analysis, including the creation of codes and code categories. I constructed the audit trail using my reflexive journal, memos, and communication with participants. Throughout the study, I also sought to maintain a chain of evidence that clearly links my research findings to specific evidence that was gathered through protocols clearly aligned with my research questions (Table 8) and analyzed into emergent themes that were also aligned with my research questions (Table 11). According to Yin (2018), maintaining a chain of evidence “increases the construct validity of the information in a case study” (p. 134). My iterative analytic approach also strengthens the dependability of this study, using theory during within-case analysis and replication logic in cross-case analysis (see Table 10).

### Confirmability

Confirmability relates to the accuracy of reported findings. In this chapter, I have sought to make my research process transparent by providing detailed descriptions of data collection and analysis to confirm that my findings are “reflective of and grounded in the participants’ perceptions...and not altered due to researcher bias” (Given, 2008, pp. 112-113). To this end, I created a case study database, which provides a “separate and orderly compilation” of all data collected during this study (Yin, 2018). This database includes my fieldnotes, memos, interview and focus group transcripts, documents with an annotated bibliography, and narrative materials composed during early stages of analysis. The database also includes my reflexive journal, which included notes on my methodological decisions and logistics of the study (audit trail), as well as my own reflections on the content and context of this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### Transferability

To enable transferability, I provide thick description (Geertz, 1973) throughout the study to promote external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and extrapolation of findings (Patton, 2015). As Lincoln and Guba (1985) explain, “The original inquirer cannot know the sites to which transferability might be sought, but the appliers can and do” (p. 298). Throughout the study, I seek to provide enough detailed description that readers will be able to decide for themselves whether or not the findings are applicable to their own context. In addition to providing thick description of my finds, I also include detailed information regarding the context of this study. While constructing my case studies, I referred to Creswell’s (2007) criteria for evaluating a

“good” case study (p. 219) and Stake’s (1995) checklist for critiquing case studies (p. 131), which helped to ensure detailed and thorough reporting.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I provide a detailed description of the research methodology used in this study. Qualitative research methodology was used to examine how white classroom teachers who work in a racially diverse school are expressing white fragility and vulnerability while engaging in antiracist work. The participant sample consists of three white educators who are actively engaging in antiracist work as part of a BARWE inquiry group at their charter school. Case study data were collected over eight months and four data collection methods were employed, including observations, individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document collection. The data were reviewed against existing theories and emergent themes during within-case and cross-case analysis. Finally, ethical considerations and issues of trustworthiness were accounted for through various strategies, such as informed consent, triangulation, and member checking. The intent was that this study would contribute to the understanding of vulnerability as a potential antidote to white fragility, which often derails antiracist work.

## **Chapter 4**

### **FINDINGS**

This study examines the ways in which white educators are expressing vulnerability and white fragility during antiracist inquiry and how these expressions relate to their propensity to engage in antiracist action or inaction. In this chapter, I present the findings of this study as they relate to each of my four research questions. First, I explore the relationship between participants' self-perceptions of their role as antiracist white allies and their interactions during antiracist inquiry. Second, I explore the ways in which participants are expressing white fragility and vulnerability during antiracist inquiry, and the relationship between these expressions. In this section, I also present a series of vignettes focused on these expressions and an exploration of each teacher's perceptions of white fragility and vulnerability as gleaned from the data. Third, I examine how expressions of white fragility and vulnerability relate to teachers' antiracist action or inaction. In this section, I explore the potential of vulnerability to serve as a catalyst for antiracist praxis and present a framework for understanding the relationship between white fragility, vulnerability, and antiracist action. Fourth, I examine how specific structures and features of BARWE relate to expressions of vulnerability and white fragility, as well as antiracist action and inaction. In this section, I also explore how the shift to virtual meetings impacted the facilitation of antiracist inquiry in the midst of the double pandemic of COVID-19 and systemic racism.

## Positioning Themselves as Antiracist White Allies

The first research question asks, what is the relationship between white teachers' self-perceptions of their role as antiracist white allies and their interactions during antiracist inquiry and praxis? This research suggests that the ways in which white teachers think about and make sense of their role as an antiracist white ally informs their approach to allyship and their interactions during antiracist praxis. In the following section, I examine how each participant positioned herself as an antiracist white ally.

### Ms. Hannah as an Antiracist White Ally

Hannah has made a name for herself as an outspoken advocate for antiracist change at CCMS. However, she does not consider herself to be an expert in antiracism:

**Hannah:** I am trudging through the shit just like everybody else, [*chuckle*] I don't have any training, I certainly don't have any more—I maybe read more than some of my colleagues. I've maybe talked about it more. So, maybe I have more practice, but I certainly don't have more knowledge.

**Diane:** But what's the difference between practice and experience versus knowledge?

**Hannah:** I think that as a white person, I can never be an expert on antiracism, and I think I question people who say that they are. You can be more practiced in the work, and I think you can be a better ally, and I think that you can be well-informed. I think you can be all those things, but I just don't think as a white person you can be an expert on what it means for something to be antiracist. And that's why I like the word *building*, where it's just constantly working towards something. I don't know. The only people they can tell us how we're doing are the students of color that we're serving, the parents of color that we're serving, our colleagues of color that we're working with. I mean, those are the people that can tell us how antiracist our organization feels. (Hannah, March debrief)

Although Hannah has been actively involved in antiracist work for six years, she does not describe herself as an expert. Instead, she positions herself as a well-informed antiracist ally who has experience talking about and redressing racism. This is why she likes the use of the word *building* to describe the work being done in BARWE, which stands for Building Antiracist White Educators. *Building* implies that the work is and will always be ongoing. Hannah also emphasizes the importance of holding herself accountable to the BIPOC community as she engages in antiracist work. As a white woman, she seeks out feedback from her BIPOC students, parents, and colleagues, which she uses to guide her continued engagement in antiracism. As Hannah explains, “I’m an English teacher who spends a lot of time investigating race in my free time, but in no way am I more or less qualified than any other human to do this” (November debrief). Antiracist work is for everyone, but antiracist expertise is reserved for BIPOC communities who continue to be affected by racism.

### **Putting in the Legwork**

Hannah is like an antiracist worker bee; she focuses on putting in the “legwork” to create antiracist change at CCMS in collaboration with her BIPOC colleagues. She gladly takes on “the role of one of the noisy white folks who’s got something to say about race” and she leverages her privilege as a white teacher to support the work of her BIPOC colleagues (Hannah, initial interview). As Hannah explains, when the administration fails to respond her BIPOC colleague’s concerns, “I’ll bring them up and try to use my white privilege leverage to elevate her concerns, obviously only with her asking and input” (initial interview). Hannah has established herself as a trusted white ally to her BIPOC colleagues and she does not shy away

from publicly taking a stand to support them. After six years of antiracist conversations, Hannah does not hesitate to bring up issues of racism and racial equity, even with the principal:

It's a conversation I've had with my boss a number of times, but that again is because I've been actively engaged in this work now for five or six years. At the start, I was very hesitant to even bring up issues, and now it's like, what's he gonna do? Is he gonna fire me? [*chuckle*] He's not gonna fire me. (Hannah, September debrief)

Hannah trusts that she will not be fired for speaking out and she acknowledges that she is speaking from a privileged position: "I've had a blessed position as one of [the principal's] favorites, and I've tried to use that position to do some fucking good" (March focus group). For Hannah, part of putting in the "legwork" for antiracism means being outspoken and persistent.

Although Hannah argues that white people should not be leading the charge in antiracism, she does believe they should be doing a lot of the "legwork" to support antiracist change. Since beginning the CCMS BARWE group in 2018, Hannah has focused on "helping white people do the work" (initial interview). Together with her fellow BARWE teachers and BIPOC colleagues, Hannah worked to bring the Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action<sup>11</sup> to CCMS. "I think that's probably where I created a name for myself as an antiracist worker at our school," Hannah explained, "I was always the one, the only one, willing to do the legwork of getting [the Week of Action] up and running" (initial interview). Other changes have taken longer to

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<sup>11</sup> Black Lives Matter at School is a national coalition of educators and educational stakeholders who have organized to support racial justice in education. They have four specific demands for change: end zero tolerance, mandate Black history and ethnic studies, hire and retain Black educators, and fund counselors not cops (see Jones & Hagopian, 2020).

accomplish. For two years, Hannah and the other BARWE teachers have been pushing for antiracist and anti-bias training at CCMS. They conducted phone interviews with organizations and brought a list of vetted, BIPOC-run organizations to the administration, but they were repeatedly told no. The principal was unwilling to support school-wide antiracist training. Although CCMS finally hired an organization to train the administrators this year (2020-2021), “it took national riots<sup>12</sup> for it to happen” and not necessarily the work of BARWE teachers. As Hannah explained, “I think we paved the road for that. I think by mentioning it to my boss every year for the past three years, BARWE sort of laid the groundwork for him to think of that as a step that they could take” (September debrief). Hannah also helped secure time and resources to support affinity groups for teachers from across the district, which included a Black affinity group, a non-Black BIPOC affinity group, and BARWE as the affinity group for white educators. The district provided a one-hour time slot for groups to meet on each of the five district-wide PD days and paid the leaders of each group a stipend for their time. Hannah, as the leader of the BARWE group, shared her stipend with the other teachers who helped plan and lead BARWE meetings.

### **Calling People In**

For Hannah, antiracism means calling people, especially white people, *in—into* community, *into* critical reflection, and *into* a space that promotes antiracist praxis. She understands the value of having a supportive antiracist community,

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<sup>12</sup> Hannah is referring to the protests that took place nationally and internationally following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor at the hands of police (see Preface).

because she often depends on her own community of co-conspirators to keep her invested in the work. She describes her community as “super valuable ... because they are incredibly brilliant human beings who have done a lot of thinking as well, and being able to be a part of that group and have those conversations has helped me create a language, but also an awareness that [antiracist work is] ongoing. There is no end to that cycle of introspection and identity development; it’s a constantly evolving beast” (Hannah, initial interview). Without a community for support, it is easy for white people to become complacent. Hannah thinks antiracism comes down to “your own personal willingness to do what you’ve been asked to do,” specifically what the BIPOC community has asked you to do (March debrief). Hannah first began engaging with antiracism when a critical white friend invited her to join a book group that was reading Emdin’s (2016) book, *For White People Who Teach in the Hood*. Having this critical community has helped Hannah stay engaged in antiracism, even when she experienced moments of white fragility. As Hannah explained, “I think that just continuing to lean into my white friends [who are] also doing the work is really helpful ... leaning into the people that help hold you accountable, that help push you to do the work” (March focus group). Hannah continues to try and create such a community through her work with the CCMS BARWE group. She focuses on creating a space in which white people can be held accountable for critically engaging in antiracist praxis.

Even as she pushes her colleagues to critically engage in antiracism, Hannah also understands that there are too many demands on teachers and those demands have only gotten worse during the COVID-19 pandemic: “I think that the issue with antiracism work within education is that it’s just one more thing. It’s so important, it’s

critical, but for many people it is just one more thing” (Hannah, March debrief). Teachers have to choose their battles, and one of those choices is whether or not they will prioritize antiracism. That is why Hannah focuses on making the CCMS BARWE group a supportive space for teachers to critically examine racism and collaboratively engage in antiracist praxis:

I think white people don’t have enough experience talking about this shit, so people feel uncomfortable doing it and feel uncomfortable drawing people into the conversation because they’ve never had to, because even though all of these human beings have been in a room where they elicit feedback every single day, all day, that is their job, it somehow feels different to do that when you’re talking about race. (Hannah, January debrief)

Hannah positions herself as a welcoming and empathetic ally in antiracist work. While she is ready to call out racist policies and practices at CCMS, she is also ready to call her colleagues *into* critical conversations about race and racism. She wants them to join her and she is willing to meet them where they are in their own antiracist development, while also challenging them to dig deeper and do better. To this end, Hannah is both gentle and direct during critical conversations, and she tries to help her colleagues be receptive to her feedback by couching it in empathy and acknowledging her own shortcomings. By acknowledging her own faults, Hannah tries to model vulnerability during the BARWE meetings.

#### Ms. Felicia as an Antiracist White Ally

As an antiracist art teacher, Felicia tries to move beyond the art lessons that focus exclusively on dead white guys. Instead, she tries to “teach a broad range of cultures and artists and different ethnicities” and she tries “not to make a big deal about it where it’s just part of what we’re doing” (Felicia, initial interview). Rather

than waiting for Black History Month or another external reason, Felicia tries to make racially diverse artists part of her regular curriculum throughout the year. When it comes to talking to her students about race, Felicia explains, “It’s like I don’t want to fuck up, but also I don’t want to turn a blind eye” (initial interview). She tries to make space in her classroom and curriculum for conversations about race and racism. However, she still thinks about race as a topic of conversation associated with tension and discomfort:

It’s a topic of a conversation or it’s being mentioned, and I feel like it’s still a little bit of a tightness in the chest or a catching of the breath or a bracing for something that I guess at this point maybe I’ve interpreted as unpleasant or heated maybe. (Felicia, initial interview)

Felicia admits that she does not often think about herself in terms of race. When I asked why, she explained, “Well, because I’m white. . . . I benefited from not having to really think about it much” (initial interview). She grew up with the goal of colorblindness in her suburban community. Part of antiracism for Felicia involves unlearning and consciously confronting previously held beliefs. She is glad to see antiracism is being openly discussed at CCMS: “We’re getting emails about it and it’s in the weekly newsletter, and it’s at least part of the conversation in a way that it hadn’t been in my experience really” (Felicia, initial interview). At the beginning of the school year, Felicia was interested in joining one of the new book groups at CCMS, but she ultimately decided “this is not the time to jump ship” and leave BARWE (initial interview). Felicia does not think of herself as a “model BARWE member,” but she has been a part of the CCMS BARWE since it first formed three years earlier (initial interview).

## **Frustrated and Skeptical**

After the first district-wide BARWE meeting in September, Felicia expressed some frustration with how quickly CCMS shifted from being disinterested in engaging with their small BARWE group to pushing for district-wide engagement with antiracism:

What a fucking drag that for a couple of years it was like maybe four people in a [BARWE] meeting and then maybe like a fifth person who occasionally could come and occasionally couldn't come. And we went to administration with, 'Here's an outside consultancy. We've even vetted them, so at least they wouldn't waste your time.' And then another horrific thing happened<sup>13</sup> on top of a lifetime of horrific things, and [the CCMS administrators] just go from zero to 60. (Felicia, September focus group)

She is especially frustrated that it took “tragedy to amplify what people have been trying to do or say” to support antiracist change at CCMS for several years (initial interview). After hearing ‘no’ from the administration for the past three years, they were suddenly on board with antiracist work. This quick shift left Felicia feeling “salty” and “skeptical in terms of what the hope or the expectation was for everyone to get out of it. ... Meeting a handful of times a year is a start, but it's certainly not enough” (Felicia, September debrief). Felicia is trying to trust that there are reasons for how the district has structured their approach to antiracism, but she is still feeling “aimless” and “a little bit lost” in the meantime (September debrief). Although there are “a lot of well-meaning people behind” the antiracism initiative, she is still skeptical that their effort would lead to real changes at CCMS.

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<sup>13</sup> Felicia is referencing the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, which sparked national outcry in May 2020 (see Preface).

Felicia was also shocked to realize how unprepared the other white educators were to engage in antiracist praxis. As Felicia explained:

It was really interesting to be someone who feels like they are just in the beginning of their antiracism journey, but then to also, in the course of that conversation, be like, ‘Oh my god. No one in this group [has done this work]. I was literally shocked. (September focus group)

Although Felicia still thinks about herself as a beginner in antiracism, the new district-wide structure of BARWE meeting helped her see just how far she has come. This revelation continued throughout the year. During our January focus group, Felicia explained, “I feel like I’ve barely taken a pen to scratch the surface, but then I talk to people and I’m like, oh you haven’t even taken the pen out of the packaging yet” (Felicia, January focus group).

Realizing she was farther along in antiracist work than her peers also came with some challenging emotions. While Felicia still thinks about herself as a beginner, she occasionally experiences a sense of superiority when she finds herself in a crowd of white people who are new to antiracist work:

The trap that I find myself running into, personally, is if I get a sense that I’m in a crowd of white people where it’s like, maybe I’ve done a little bit more reading or a little bit more self-reflection. It’s just, I definitely develop a sense of superiority. (Felicia, September debrief)

Felicia realized she was feeling this sense of superiority, which she described as an “unproductive emotion” during the first district-wide BARWE meeting. As she explained, “Towards the end of the meeting, I maybe got a little bit more soapbox-y and maybe actively frustrated” (Felicia, September debrief). Having noticed this in herself, she tried to listen more than she was speaking to avoid the soapbox of superiority.

At other times, Felicia finds herself struggling with remaining engaged in antiracism when she experiences “this ongoing sense of like, you’re not doing enough, you’re not good enough, you’re not doing it right” (February focus group). She names this sense of self-doubt as “rooted in white supremacy” and capitalism. When she gets overwhelmed, tired, or frustrated in the work, she finds herself thinking “It’s all fruitless, it’s all stupid, nothing makes a difference. Who cares?” Felicia recognizes it is important that she and her white colleagues recognize that they are not doing enough, and white people “don’t get props just for doing the things they are supposed to be doing” (February focus group). However, she also admits that there are times when “a little pat on the back does give you, at least me, a little momentum” to keep going in antiracist work.

### **Hesitant, but Willing**

Felicia often describes antiracist work as “simple not easy,” especially when it comes to addressing her own role in perpetuating white supremacy. While reading *We Want to Do More than Survive* (Love, 2019b), Felicia found herself asking “Do I want to be challenged or do I want to be coddled? And I guess here, the answer is both” (October debrief). She also reflected on the need to intentionally make room for asking herself, “What part do I play in this?” Felicia thinks about antiracist work as personal:

I do think it’s tough to read a book about just basically dismantling the thing you do. [*chuckle*] And it’s not a matter of not thinking it’s necessary or not agreeing with it, but it’s like, ‘I’m part of the thing that’s the problem.’ (October debrief)

While being “the problem” can be difficult and occasionally cause her to hesitate, Felicia is willing to keep engaging with antiracist work. She doesn’t throw in the towel

when she makes a mistake and she is emotionally willing to remain engaged with antiracism, even when it is difficult (Felicia, final interview).

Although Felicia is committed to BARWE, her level of engagement fluctuates. Her preparation for BARWE “basically is always at a minimum before the meetings,” which she describes as her “secret shame with BARWE” (Felicia, September debrief). For the September BARWE meeting, Felicia described reading the primary article “the morning of the meeting day” and then donating during Pass the Hat “just out of feeling bad that I didn’t do a little bit more in terms of the prep” (September debrief). While she did everything that was asked of her before the meeting, she still experienced guilt for not doing more. As she explained, “I’m not proud of it, it’s just something I need to work on, pushing myself to do a little bit more in terms of the reading” (Felicia, September debrief).

Teaching during the COVID-19 global pandemic frequently left Felicia feeling completely overwhelmed. This occasionally led to a lapse in her antiracist efforts. As Felicia explained, “I feel like I’m still in this stage where it’s like, my commitment to antiracism and educating myself is still one of the first things on the chopping block when it gets busy or I get overwhelmed or whatever” (December debrief). The pandemic was completely overwhelming and it left Felicia feeling apathetic about doing antiracist work on her own. As Felicia described, “everything’s taking a hit” (January focus group). While she often has anxieties about doing antiracist work the “right” way or “not being offensive,” the pandemic helped her put everything into perspective. “Everything everywhere is a fucking disaster,” she explained. “Like whatever, I say the wrong thing and someone calls me out on it or, whatever, it’s just like—It’s not whatever. It’s just, it’s not a setback, it’s just what it is” (Felicia, January

focus group). Rather than letting her fears stop her from engaging in antiracist work, Felicia tries to position herself as emotionally willing to sit in the discomfort of getting it wrong.

### **Using “Reply All” to Support BIPOC Efforts**

During the February focus group, Megan shared that members of the Black affinity group had given Felicia a shout out for replying publicly in support of a Black woman colleague following the January 6<sup>th</sup> insurrection:

I know for a fact they were really impressed with when you replied all to an email. I think it was back to [Ms. E<sup>14</sup>] ... You stepped up, maybe not even knowing it, by replying all on that. That was noticed by [the Black affinity group]. (Megan, February focus group)

Although Felicia thought of this as a small action, her willingness to “reply all” had a big impact. As Felicia later explained, “The day of the riot, the insurrection, [Ms. E] sent an email just expressing her feelings about everything that was happening” (February debrief) The email was sent out at 3:57 pm on January 6, less than two hours after rioters breached the Capitol building.<sup>15</sup> In the original email, the Black staff member shared her raw and emotional response to how the news networks were choosing to cover the rioters. While Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters had been quickly called “thugs and rioters” while protesting police brutality, the people (read “white people”) who stormed the Capitol on January 6 were referred to as “protesters,” even after they had breached the Capitol building. In last paragraph of her email she wrote:

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<sup>14</sup> Ms. E is a Black female administrator at CCMS.

<sup>15</sup> For a full timeline of the events that took place during the insurrection on January 6, 2021 see Leatherby et al. (2021).

There is a clear racial divide that can be seen clear as day on the news right now. The fact that those Trump supporters were able to storm into the Capitol, break windows, and cause mayhem in a city that holds a lot of federal buildings, is truly beyond me. The fact that our 'president' decided to tweet asking 'everyone at the U.S. Capitol to remain peaceful...' instead of calling for a stop to be put to this is horrible. Sorry everyone, I am just honestly over all of this stuff and at a loss for words. (January 6, 2021)

While she originally sent the email to her Black affinity group, she forwarded the message to the larger CCMS community adding "I feel like this is something that should be discussed."

When Felicia read the email, she made the "conscious decision to respond ... in solidarity" because "it felt like it was kind of just put out there and then left hanging" (February debrief). At 5:36 pm, Felicia hit "reply all" and composed a short reply, RE: Current Event at Capitol Hill:

An apology could not be less necessary. Thank you for sharing your words with the wider school community. I don't know what to say right now but I do have a question that I'm sure other folks are working on behind the scenes, which is - what the hell do we even do tomorrow to address this infuriating and upsetting scene? The relentless traumas our students are forced to face is staggering. (January 6, 2021)

By the time we met for the February focus group, Felicia had forgotten about the email and she was surprised to hear it had made such an impact on her Black colleague, Ms. E. The following conversation took place during Felicia's February debrief:

**Diane:** When you sent it, did you feel like it was going to make a big impact?

**Felicia:** No. Honestly, no. ... Hearing it from Megan on Monday, I'm glad that it made an impact. ... Whatever impact it made, if it was somewhat positive in light of a not positive situation, then that's great. But honestly it really just felt so vulnerable [for Ms. E] and I just didn't like that it was hanging out there. And it was after school hours, and all

of this stuff was [*sigh*]. So, it's like, I get it, people weren't actively probably checking their email. But I don't know. I also just don't like to be very earnest at work. [*chuckle*] So, I guess that was simple. I think it was just like trying to meet her vulnerability with some of my vulnerability I guess, which is not usually my move.

**Diane:** Yeah can you say more about meeting her vulnerability with your vulnerability?

**Felicia:** I guess it might be my default, especially in all-staff email replies, to just keep it light, keep it jovial, keep it snarky or self-deprecating. Any of those things. It's just usually my method. And this is ridiculous, but I've been told on multiple occasions over the years, 'You're really good at sending all-staff emails' [*laughter*] And I used to have to do it a lot for my old job at CCMS but I don't really do it anymore as a teacher, but in my old job I had to send a lot, ... but nowadays I really don't send hardly any all-staff emails. In the event I do, it's definitely snarky or self-deprecating. So, I think I felt vulnerable sending it and I definitely had some regrets after, just in terms of just—not regrets, but definitely a moment of pause and being like, 'Oh my God, should I have done that?' Just feeling uncertain that that was the right move I guess.

**Diane:** What were you worried about?

**Felicia:** Well ... The feeling that I was projecting onto [Ms. E] about feeling maybe she was left hanging with how I was feeling I was like, 'Oh God now I feel like I'm left hanging.' [*laughter*] Not that I was expecting a reply or like a pat, I really wasn't. I wasn't expecting— Well, I guess that's not true. I think when I sent it, I wasn't expecting anything but then once I did, I didn't like kind of like just the void of no response. So then, about an hour and a half later or so, Hannah came in and said like 'I made this if you want to use it tomorrow.' So that kind of got it to be maybe a little less emotional and more practical, maybe. And then our assistant head of emotional support, she came in and kind of gave some advice. And then [the principal] chimed in maybe like 40 minutes after or something like that.

**Diane:** You mentioned earlier on that you were hesitant to be earnest at work. And I was wondering if you could say more about why you're hesitant or what it means for you to be hesitant?

**Felicia:** I guess [it's] with the whole school community, I feel like. I think individually or with a smaller group it's not so much of a

concern. I feel like I get worked up and complain. [*laughter*] I don't feel like I'm trying to be cool or whatever with those smaller groups, but that's with people that I feel that I can be that way with. And I don't feel like I can be that way with everyone mostly just because I'm not super close with everyone or even a lot of people that I work with, so. I think that's where the hesitancy came from. It's just much easier for me at least, to keep it light. (Felicia, February debrief)

Felicia replied to her colleague's email because she wanted to meet her Ms. E's vulnerability with some of her own vulnerability. To do this, she had to express vulnerability by pushing herself to move outside of her comfort zone. In this case, Felicia expressed vulnerability by choosing to hit "reply all" and sending a school-wide email in support of her Black colleague, Ms. E.

While Felicia was glad to hear that her email had made an impact, she was also aware of just how little was expected of white educators at CCMS by their BIPOC peers:

I think also the other thing that Megan was saying on Monday that rings very true, it was just like Jesus Christ the bar is so low it's not even off the ground for what being supportive means or is considered by the people that we work with. Because once I sent it, again, there was like that immediate, 'Oh, shit.' And then I did not think about it again until Monday [during the February focus group], and I was truly surprised to hear that and flattered, to bring my ego into it, and it was like, 'Oh, that's nice. I did something good.' [*chuckle*] And yeah, but then the sadness sets in and it's like, 'Jesus Christ, that was nothing.' (Felicia, February debrief)

Felicia was flattered by the appreciation for her vulnerability, but she was also sad to realize she did little more than exceed the very low expectations of her BIPOC colleagues.

#### Ms. Megan as an Antiracist White Ally

Megan is outspoken in her support for antiracism and she is driven by a sense of urgency in this work. She tries to position herself as an example of how white

people can be receptive of feedback about the racist impact of their behavior, without descending into the discursive practices of white fragility:

I'm just embarrassed on how slow I was. ... I think I may have turned that curve. I want people to call me out in public. I want to serve as the one who could show other white people, 'It's okay. This is how you listen, ... Look at what I do when someone tells me what to do, look at me do it. Look at me receive the message and not be mad at how the message came out. Look at this person hollering at me because I'm an idiot and look at me fix my behavior and realize that the message is love, no matter how it came to me.' (Megan, initial interview)

Megan is the first to admit that she continues to make mistakes as a white person engaging in antiracist work. However, she is emotionally willing to sit in the discomfort of being wrong and put in the work to keep improving every day. Megan recognizes that racism is a “white people problem” and positions herself as an advocate for bringing white people into the work, knowing that white people are often more receptive to antiracist feedback when it comes from another white person (October debrief). She pushes herself to be that white person, while also acknowledging that she still experiences discomfort talking about racism and still needs to “put in time” engaging in critical self-reflection.

### **“Best Friends on My Shoulder”**

Megan's identity as a white ally has been shaped by her two best friends from childhood, who both identify as Black-biracial. Growing up, Megan attended schools in the city where she now teaches, which serve primarily Black students. Although she was surrounded by Black friends, she still struggled to understand her role in white supremacy culture. It wasn't until after the murder of Michael Brown and the ensuing

BLM protests<sup>16</sup> that Megan's friends began to hold her accountable for understanding and taking a stance against racism. After all, she was a white woman teaching primarily Black students. The first thing they asked her to do was read DiAngelo's (2011) original article on white fragility. However, her "white fragility came out" and she ignored their request, instead engaging in "white silence" (Megan, initial interview). She remembers thinking "No, I'm good. I'm already cool. I'm good, I'm a good person. I'm not racist because I have Black friends. Look at you, you're on my group chat. What are you talking about?" (Megan, initial interview). Her friends continued to hold Megan accountable for engaging with the topic, telling her, "It's 17-pages. Please read it." That is when Megan became "so fragile" that she "got mad and left the group chat for the weekend" (initial interview). Eventually, Megan began reading the article:

I read "White Fragility" in doses. I read it after she said something and then didn't want to say anything, because I knew she was right. I was still in the cognitive dissonance, like, I think something was clicking, but I was kind of mad still. ... And then I read it again, and then I read it again, this is the 17-page document. And then, I don't know, it was like we never talked about it. And that was so sad, I should have talked about it. ... That was a big one though, but I remember, I remember me reacting poorly to Ferguson riots ... I was on that continuum of being stupid, of being like, 'I'm not racist, it can't be me.' I didn't realize the systemic issue at the time, and now that it's like, of course. I see it now, but I can't believe I didn't. I just hope that she didn't know that about me. I think she actually had a higher thought of me than I really was. She thought I knew better at that time, and I didn't. ... That summer, it was like she was desperately begging me to read ... she was so nice and that that's how she did it. She just was like, "Please read this, I'm

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Brown was shot and killed by a Ferguson police officer on August 9, 2014. His death sparked international outrage and brought the Black Lives Matter movement to the national stage (see Buchanan et al., 2015; Luibbrand, 2015).

begging you. Please, please, please, please just shut up and read this, shut up and read this.” (Megan, initial interview)

Megan initially responded with fragility, but with the help of her friends and their kind persistence she was eventually able to engage with the concept of white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011). Her friends held her accountable and this accountability continues to keep Megan engaged in antiracist work. Their accountability keeps her focused on actionable antiracism and continually confronting her own fragility.

As a white antiracist ally, Megan sees it as her job to listen to her friends and act accordingly. As protests erupted following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, Megan’s friends again looked to her for a response:

They basically had to see what side I was on. It’s me, I’m their best friend. But every time there’s this summer of unrest, they have to recalibrate where Megan stands on it, and it breaks my heart that my closest fucking friends have to re-check in to see where I’m at with it. Am I on their side? Can they trust me? And I had to do a lot to prove that they could trust me this summer. (Megan, March focus group)

Megan’s friends wanted to see her take antiracist action, but she was initially reluctant to join the BLM protests because of her concerns about the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. However, her concerns changed when she watched one of her best friends get tear gassed and shot with a rubber bullet by police on Facebook Live. Although Megan was “still not getting it fully at that point,” watching the Black community take to the streets despite the pandemic helped her understand the true urgency of BLM and the antiracism movement. People were taking to the streets because they had to be there, they had to let their voices be heard:

It matters that much, and we’re not doing enough. It matters that fucking much that he can go there and get shot. And I saw it. It looked like a war. It was literally exactly what they pictured. There were tanks. There were troopers. There were guns aimed at regular people. These people were just walking down the street. These are homes. My

students were terrified. I had to teach after that. I had to go to school the next day. Virtually, but still it's like I don't even know what to say. And my friend had to be there, like he had to be there after being quarantined for months. He, in his soul, had to be there. And that just changed me. (Megan, initial interview)

The magnitude and intensity of the 2020 BLM protests took many white people by surprise, including Megan. It was the start of a larger shift in how she thought about her own role in antiracist work. Now, when she needs to summon the courage to address racism head on, Megan thinks about her best friends: "I have to go in there with my two best friends on my shoulder, and acting like they're watching me, if my two best friends can't be proud of me in the meeting, then I didn't do it" (January focus group). Megan tries to make her friends proud, even when it leaves her feeling uncomfortable. Their accountability has helped Megan find her voice as an outspoken critic of white inaction.

### **Outspoken Critic of White Inaction**

Megan "can't go a day without bringing [antiracism] up somehow" with her colleagues. She has put the white educators "on notice" saying, "I read everything, I'm looking at all of you, I'm hearing it all ... So, you better be careful around me." (Megan, September debrief). When she first began taking on the role of the outspoken critic, Megan went on "a rampage on social media" in which she called on white people to do more (September debrief). Specifically, she called on white people to donate to support BIPOC-run organizations, read books, acknowledge white privilege, and address their own biases. In white letters against a pink and orange background Megan wrote in a series of posts:

Donations aren't everything but it's something small and actionable that helps the people who are actively working towards antiracism [right now]. ... Reading and educating yourself on privilege as a white

person is necessary. However, do not confuse reading and learning with ACTION. AGAIN, THIS DOESN'T FIX RACISM. But it does calibrate your lens so you can understand your role in this. ... Another small think you can do is at least **\*\*ACKNOWLEDGE\*\*** your privilege. The true goal is actually using that privilege to help others. (Instagram post from May 2020, emphasis in original)

Megan saved these posts and dozens of others in her Instagram stories, organized chronologically into five albums titled “White Allies” 1-5. Looking back, Megan thinks she may have been a little too aggressive with her social media campaign following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor:

I was on a rampage on social media a little bit this summer, just calling people out, and then I think that's before I started to realize like, 'Fuck, I can't just openly be mad at people or just say you're stupid.' That's when I realized arguing on social media wasn't the goal. ... Who am I trying to impress there? Am I trying to impress my Black friends? Well, they don't give a fuck. Who am I trying to impress? Myself? No, the goal is to get people on my side. So, I think I started out a little too like, 'If you're not doing this, you're fucking up. If you don't donate all your money right now, you're doing it all wrong.' I thought in the beginning there was a certain way, and I was all hype. But like, who am I? I'm late as hell. I'm just as late as everybody else in May 2020, telling people what to do. And even my own friends are like, 'Bitch, why you so loud now? ... Where were you a week ago?' (September debrief)

Megan rerouted over the summer; she “kind of toned it down” because she noticed fewer people were engaging with her posts. She saw white people engaging in the defensive moves of white fragility and needed to remind herself that it “wasn't about them”—it wasn't about recentring whiteness (Megan, September debrief). She tried to reposition herself to call white people into the work and engaging them in conversations about racism, which she sees as an important part of her role in antiracism: “You can literally see my transformation through it, and I was so, so angry and so enraged” (September debrief). She positions herself as an accountability

partner in this work. Megan is watching to see what her white peers are doing and how they are responding to racism at CCMS. She thinks about BARWE as more than a space for learning; it is also a space for accountability: “It’ll be definitely a good way to see who’s there, who’s not. Like, I’ll be paying attention” (Megan, September focus group).

As teachers prepared for the 2020-2021 school year, CCMS began to engage in more antiracist work. Megan acknowledged that the school was “tiptoeing in the right direction,” but the changes they made were far from enough (initial interview). Specifically, she worries that white teachers will come to the district-wide BARWE meetings and feel like they have done enough because they have checked the antiracism box. Megan wants her white colleagues to do more than show up; she wants them to take an active role in addressing racism at CCMS. However, she does not want CCMS to wait around for white teachers to get on board before making systemic changes:

I’m like, hearts and minds can wait. Obviously, we’re still waiting lifetimes to see people’s hearts and minds change, so let’s just change policy. You can change your mind later. ... Let’s change racist policy first and then once you guys see how much better it is when everyone is doing well together, then maybe your heart and mind will change. So, I don’t necessarily think hearts and minds needs to come first. (Megan, October debrief)

Although Megan is actively working to bring white people into the work, she is also ready to see the change happen without them. “Our job as white allies is to drag people a-fucking-long behind us,” Megan explained. “So, I have to make sure when I am checking people they know it’s coming from a place of love” (September debrief).

While Megan is an outspoken critic of white inaction, she also struggles with her own hesitancy when it comes down to confronting instances of racism. For

example, one of the administrators sent out four different emails in which he stated, “The most antiracist thing that we can do right now as a staff is give on grade level work.” Although Megan brought this up in our focus group, she did not say something directly to the administrator. “That was also something that was burning me up, that I should have told him about” Megan explained. “The first time, I was like, ‘I need to say something.’ The second time, I was like, ‘I need to say something.’ The third and fourth time, I’m just like, ‘This is outrageous’” (November focus group). She realized that continued to use the same phrase because no one had “checked him, not one staff member said anything.” Megan includes herself in this criticism. It had been bothering her for weeks, but she still had not said anything to the administrator. Following the November focus group, Megan went back to add her thoughts on this misrepresentation of antiracism to the notes document in our Google classroom. She knew that the administrator would be looking through the notes and she wanted to draw his attention to his problematic comment. However, she ultimately decided to go back and delete it:

I did have a ‘post and delete.’ ... I wrote how that came off as tone deaf, and how I understood the intention behind it, I get what the message was trying to be. ... I think I used the phrase like, ‘it just didn’t land as intended.’ ... But then I just deleted it out because I was like, I didn’t talk about that with you guys, and I didn’t think that was fair for me to try to float that comment there. (November debrief)

Because her post was anonymous, she did not want to get other teachers from her group in trouble for what she had written. Megan is aware that her outspoken, blunt approach to antiracism can rub people the wrong way. She occasionally feels like she is risking her job by speaking out against specific acts of racism at the school, but that has not stopped her from continuing to speak truth to power:

I don't have too many regrets about missed chances or missed opportunities on conversations or bringing something that needs to be said, said out. I still do it even though it's hard. (January debrief)

### **Focused on Concrete and Actionable Antiracism**

Megan thinks about antiracism primarily in terms of action. Although she acknowledges the importance of antiracist reflection, she thinks the goal of BARWE is to “actually make actionable change ... to actually see where white supremacy and white norms are showing up and get rid of them on any level we can” (Megan, October debrief). Megan is always pushing CCMS to do more in the name of equity—hire and retain more BIPOC teachers, engage the staff in anti-bias training, unburden the BIPOC staff and pay them for the extra work they take on to support antiracism at the school. She is also frustrated with what she sees as the lack of antiracist action among her white coworkers:

Why can't they just read a book, just read the damn book. I have a feeling they're not going to read a single book after. I don't think [the principal] is going to pick up a single book and I'm scared about that. He's not going to pick up a single book after this. Crack open a damn book! (Megan, September focus group)

Megan thinks about antiracist action in terms of concrete steps white people can take to support antiracism. Specifically, she wants to see her colleagues donate to BIPOC-run organizations, read books about antiracism, and listen to the BIPOC community and amplify their efforts. Even though he is attending the BARWE meetings, Megan is skeptical that the principal will “pick up” any books or do additional antiracist reflection on his own.

When it comes to reading books about antiracism, Megan is ahead of the curve and she is ready for her white colleagues to catch up. She often talks about antiracism in terms of how many books someone has read. Are they still exhibiting white

fragility? Read more books. Are they engaging in misguided antiracist action? Read more books. As much as she wants people to read, Megan also acknowledges that reading needs to be followed by actions:

Reading, self-reflection, all of that is not ever going to be as much as amplifying, donating, doing. You can read, you can discuss, you can say, you can post, but are you amplifying? Are you donating? Are you in charge and can do the power moves? [*laughter*] (September focus group)

Antiracist reflection is not enough. It must be followed by antiracist action, specifically antiracist actions that support BIPOC efforts.

When it comes to making financial contributions to support antiracism, Megan leads by example. She uses the website Donors Choose to raise money to support her BIPOC colleagues in their work. She recently raised \$900 to purchase dozens of young adult books for a Black colleague's classroom. She also makes a point of donating during Pass the Hat at BARWE and she wants to encourage the other white teachers to join her: "If all these white people just donated some money, that's good. At least if we did one thing" (September focus group). Megan acknowledges that she is coming from a place of financial security and privilege that allows her to make significant donations. She and her husband have decided to start donating approximately 7% of their total income to promote Black woman run, antiracist organizations: "So, I just feel like that's something," Megan explained. "That's pretty big, and I think that's something a lot of white people could do. So that helps alleviate the guilt some" (March focus group).

The most important think Megan wants white people to do is listen to the Black community, because they are constantly telling white people what needs to be done. White people just aren't listening:

It's as simple as literally just listening to a Black person. They're telling us. If you stop and look at what they're typing to us or saying to us, they're literally telling you what to do ... It's like being shouted and it's everywhere. So how are you not seeing it? You're not listening to the Black friends you have; you're not simply adding a few activist organizations [on social media]; you're not reading a book, obviously. I'm trying to think like how are they able to hide from this stuff, it's everywhere. I don't know how they're hiding from it. (Megan, November focus group)

White teachers need to come out of their echo chambers and listen to the Black community. For Megan, listening to the Black community means prioritizing equity and antiracism over kindness and good intentions.

### Section Summary

The ways in which white teachers approach allyship is informed by their positionality, background experiences, and self-perception of their role in antiracism. Hannah is a compassionate ELA teacher at CCMS, who has made a name for herself as an outspoken advocate for antiracism. She positions herself as an antiracist white ally who is willing to put in the legwork to support BIPOC-lead efforts at CCMS and throughout the city. As the leader of the CCMS BARWE, Hannah thinks about antiracism as calling people into a supportive, yet critical, community where they can engage in antiracist praxis. Felicia is an authentic and humorous art teacher at CCMS, who has come to realize that she is no longer a beginner in antiracist work. She is frustrated that it took repeated tragedies to get CCMS involved in antiracist work and skeptical of whether these efforts will last, but she is hopeful that bringing the white educators together for district-wide BARWE meetings will have a lasting impact on CCMS. Although Felicia is occasionally hesitant to engage in antiracism, she is emotionally willing to sit in the discomfort and express vulnerability with her peers. Megan is a dedicated and passionate math teacher at CCMS, who thinks about

antiracism in terms of concrete and actionable steps that white people can and must take to address white supremacy. She approaches antiracism as if her best friends were right there with her and she tries to make them proud by being an outspoken critic of white inaction. There is more than one way to be an antiracist white educator. These three teachers represent very different approaches to antiracist white allyship and although their self-perceptions differ, they are all able to effectively engage in antiracist action.

### **White Fragility and Vulnerability: Expressions, Perceptions, and Connections**

The second research question asks, what do expressions of vulnerability and white fragility look like and what is the relationship between these expressions? I begin this section by exploring the ways in which participants expressed white fragility and vulnerability during antiracist inquiry. Then, I present vignettes to further illustrate the ways in which each participant experienced vulnerability and white fragility. Next, I present participant perceptions of white fragility and vulnerability. Finally, I discuss the ways in which these expressions were found to be interconnected during antiracist inquiry.

#### **Expressions of White Fragility**

My analyses show that white teachers in BARWE express white fragility through displays of emotions, defensive behaviors, discourse moves, (re)centering whiteness, and hesitancy to engage.

#### **Displays of Emotion**

White fragility is often expressed through displays of emotion that disrupt or prevent critical engagement with issues of racism. The four emotions most often

discussed by my participants were fear, guilt, shame, and discomfort. Participants did not engage in over-the-top displays of emotion, such as yelling in anger or publicly crying during BARWE. Instead, they displayed emotions more subtly and, due to the virtual setting of the meetings, privately. For Felicia, experiencing emotions associated with white fragility can leave her in a downward spiral:

The harder part was writing it down to myself than sharing it out... I think [I experienced] a lot of guilt and some shame and definitely needing to resist the urge or desire or tendency, whatever it may be, to spiral—to spiral where it's like, 'Yeah. Just jump ship, you're a horrible racist.' You know? I still think about [the totem pole lesson] I'd say fairly regularly, where it's just like, 'Ugh.' So, I think it was just facing that, those feelings of just discomfort, but not trying to let it spiral out of control. (Felicia, December debrief)

Felicia experienced guilt, shame, and discomfort while reflecting on an instance of curriculum violence (Jones, 2020) that occurred while teaching about the totem poles of Canada's First Nations in her art class. Reflecting on her decision to use toilet paper rolls to replicate culturally significant artwork left her experiencing white fragility prior to engaging in the critical conversation with her small group.

Hannah also expresses white fragility through displays of emotion when it comes to her ELA curriculum. She is "one of those people that ruminates," which means she is "overly conscious" of what she says and how she says it (Hannah, final interview). She finds herself questioning how people will interpret what she has said, which leaves her feeling fearful and stressed about how people, particularly BIPOC people, are perceiving her:

I think that's a piece of what white fragility is, right? I don't want anyone to take the words I'm saying and say that they were the wrong words, and that would cause me shame. ... I think that that is playing into that idea of white fragility, and it's just sort of constantly a piece of the work. I also think any time you're talking about, 'Oh, a parent said

they didn't like this,' or 'A kid said they didn't like this,' or 'Your unit is problematic for x, y, z reason.' Those conversations happen all the time in education and should happen all the time in education, but they're never easy to encounter. (Hannah, final interview)

While Hannah tries to position herself as being open to feedback about her curriculum and pedagogy, she continues to experience fear leading up to such an encounter and shame following the critique.

### **Defensive Behaviors**

White fragility also presented as defensive behaviors, such as silence, avoidance, argumentation, and physical signs of discomfort (e.g., crossed arms, pursed lips). The defensive behavior most often displayed by participants was silence. Sometimes silence occurred in the form of long pauses in the conversation. During the January BARWE meeting, teachers met in small groups based on their content area. The group of math teachers struggled to engage in the critical conversation about white supremacy culture in the math curriculum. The conversation remained disjointed and superficial, even after Megan expressed vulnerability by acknowledging the ways in which she continues to struggle with bringing antiracism into her math curriculum and pedagogy.

Felicia had a similar experience during the February BARWE meeting, during which groups were randomly assigned for discussions. She remembers this group as "the one where like no one was talking and it was super weird" (Felicia, January debrief). The teachers in her group remained almost entirely silent during the small group discussion, which most likely indicated a level of discomfort. Their sustained silence left Felicia feeling frustrated:

Honestly, my patience was like stretched so thin by that point, just with everything that ... I was just super annoyed at ... fifteen, twenty adults

all just sitting staring at each other. I get it, I get that none of this feels like ideal, but oh my God. I was just so over it. Like come on, [*chuckle*] just leave then if you're not going to like—We're just going to stay here and stare at each other? Ugh ... That was just lame. (Felicia, January debrief)

This group was larger than usual, with 15-20 participants instead of four to five. Although it is unclear exactly why participants were not talking, it does suggest a level of discomfort. This breakout group lasted approximately 20 minutes. Participants were more willing to sit in the discomfort of sustained silence than engage in the critical discussion, which focused on the guiding question, “How can we create classroom culture that resists white supremacy and that nourishes Black joy?”

During the December BARWE meeting, Megan engaged in a tense discussion with her small group regarding the use of offensive language to discuss Indigenous Peoples during a social studies lesson about Christopher Columbus. This interaction left Megan feeling nervous about being in the same small group during the January meeting. However, teachers were instead placed into discussion groups based on content area:

I felt relieved because I was like, I kind of didn't want to be in the same breakout room because I had felt like I gave them the—I really had to go in on that Columbus shit. So, I was almost grateful for the break. I feel like Ms. A needed a break from me. Ms. B needed a break from me. I didn't want them to feel like I'm just dumping on them again, so I was almost relieved it wasn't our normal group, so that they were not scared to be with me. [*chuckle*] ... I was like, 'Good. Our regular group gets a break from me and I them.' (Megan, January debrief)

Megan was glad to avoid her regular small group members. Although she frames it as the other teachers needing a break from her, she also notes that she needed a break from them.

## Discourse Moves

White fragility often takes the form of discourse moves that rely on the language of white saviorism, willful ignorance, or language that promote white ideologies such as color-blindness, meritocracy, or white supremacy. Sometimes this looks like white people claiming “I’m not a racist” or “I can’t be racist, I teach Black children.” Other times, this language is more insidious in nature. During her September debrief, Megan shared a story about the summer book club hosted by CCMS to discuss books on antiracism, such as *Stamped* (Reynolds & Kendi, 2020). Megan recalled that during the small group discussion, a “white woman [school] board member” explained to the group that “antiracism just runs naturally in [her] blood” (Megan, September debrief). Megan concluded, “She clearly didn’t read the book. ... We’re literally in a book club, she clearly didn’t read the book” (September debrief). By stating she was inherently antiracist, the white school board member avoided further engagement with the topic. Megan’s experiences with the summer book club continued to trouble her as she thought about what it would be like to have such a large, district-wide group of teachers attending BARWE.

The discourse moves of white fragility can also be used to couch unjust policy in antiracist language. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was an ongoing battle over whether or not students should be required to have their cameras on during instruction. Despite widespread equity concerns (see Will, 2020), schools like CCMS pursued a “Cameras On” policy. The CCMS policy, which was listed each Monday in their weekly newsletter, read:

We are universally focused on Cameras On because it helps us ensure equity, provide deeper learning, and connect with kids on a human level. Our staff is prepared to work with you to remove any barriers to

Cameras On. **100% of cameras will be on and student faces visible in every class, every day.** (March newsletter, emphasis in original)

Although this statement notes that the Cameras On policy will “ensure equity,” scholarship has suggested that this may not be the case (Jackson, 2020; Will, 2020). Adding the word “equity” to their announcement was a discourse move that helped the school (i.e., the white administrators who were a part of the CCMS BARWE group) avoid engaging in a critical discussion regarding the issue with teachers, students, and families. When the policy was first announced in December, Megan and Hannah were surprised to see the administration use the language of equity to support a policy they found to be inequitable. During our focus group, Megan read the email announcing the new policy aloud:

**Megan:** Here we go, “Over the next few days, the equity-driven leadership team, the 40 people participating in [formal anti-bias training] are creating campus-specific plans that align with the larger CCMS network standard that all cameras are on and faces stay visible. We are considering other things. Who are the kids that keep cameras off because of background? We will ship them a backdrop so that the barrier is removed. Who are the kids who are keeping their camera off because it’s too loud? We will ship headphones to them, so that that barrier is removed. Who are the kids who say that the house Wi-Fi can’t handle cameras on? We will hook them up with a hotspot.” That’s bullshit, only if they have Verizon.<sup>17</sup> “Whatever it takes to make cameras on and face visible the norm, so that keeping your camera on and showing your face feels as natural to students as checking their TikTok page, we are committed to doing. We need to #FixInjusticeNotKids. Like the schedule, let’s fix the system, not our kids.” So, he brings it back to [formal anti-bias training], and that bothered me.

**Hannah:** Yeah, I mean he definitely has been—I like your term, sprinkling his terminology like parsley. (December focus group)

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<sup>17</sup> Although CCMS has been offering internet hotspots to students during virtual schooling, the hotspots were actually limited to students who had Verizon internet.

By sprinkling equity language “like parsley,” the principal is able to cloak an inequitable policy and avoid further discussion on the topic. This new policy emerged after the principal found that only 93% of students had their cameras on during classes. Although Megan and Hannah felt this signified that the policy was unnecessary, the school used it as justification to set a firm policy of requiring “100% cameras on.”

### **(Re)Centering Whiteness**

White people often center whiteness when they experience white fragility during conversations about race and racism. Centering whiteness occurs when white comfort, emotions, or desires are prioritized over BIPOC comfort, emotions, desires, or their ongoing experiences with racism. As Megan explained, “As a white person, I sometimes make the mistake thinking I need to do it; I need to solve it. I’m taking the power from Black people” (September focus group). When Megan tries to take on inequity alone, rather than in community with her BIPOC colleagues, she is recentering whiteness by prioritizing her own desires rather than addressing racial inequities. Felicia also shared her thoughts on centering whiteness in antiracist work:

Whether intentionally or not, white people center themselves in other people’s experiences. I guess the focusing on whatever, the hurt feelings or the ‘Well, I’m trying my best,’ or ‘I can’t be perfect,’ or whatever, like that sort of stuff. I feel like, just like getting all butthurt because you’re trying to do the right thing or whatever, but it’s not enough. (Felicia, January debrief)

Giving themselves an out by noting that they “can’t be perfect” allows white teachers to disengage from the conversation without acknowledging fault or taking corrective action. White people center themselves when they focus on their own hurt feelings or good intentions, rather than acknowledging and taking responsibility for their actions.

White teachers often center themselves when they talk about why they became an educator. When Hannah first started teaching in urban schools, she centered whiteness through a narrative of white saviorism:

I'm sure I was coming from a white savior mentality at that point, and really eager to fulfill that dream of being the great white teacher who goes into this poor urban school and saves all these Black kids because that narrative is put up so well in our culture. And so, I think I felt pretty woke and pretty aware then, and I'm sure I wasn't at all.  
(Hannah, initial interview)

Like many white teachers, Hannah came into teaching believing a narrative based in white supremacy. The narrative centers whiteness by framing Black students as needing a white teacher to come to their urban neighborhood and save them. As Hannah notes, this narrative is held up time and again as an example of white heroism and goodness (Aronson, 2017). As Hannah has continued to engage with antiracism and develop as a teacher, she has learned to constantly question her biases. She asks questions like, "Okay, where is this behavior coming from? Why am I feeling the way that I'm feeling?" and she tries to be "more attuned to" her students' cultures and interests (Hannah, initial interview).

Whiteness was centered and then recentered during the critical conversation about the use of offensive language while teaching about Christopher Columbus. When Megan shared with her small group that students had been "talking about the words 'Indians'<sup>18</sup> and 'settlers'" while telling her about their social studies lesson, Ms. A<sup>19</sup> responded by centering whiteness: "The text was talking about Indians in the

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<sup>18</sup> I acknowledge that the term "Indians" is offensive language. However, I have chosen not to sensor the language used by my participants during data collection. This term will only be used when it appears in a direct quote.

<sup>19</sup> Ms. A is a 5<sup>th</sup> grade ELA and social studies teacher at CCMS.

context of Christopher Columbus calling them Indians” (December fieldnotes). Later in the discussion, Ms. A recentered whiteness when she said, “But it’s history. I think you’re taking one reading and ignoring the entire context. You’re just saying like the word choice” (December fieldnotes). Rather than engaging in the content of the conversation, Ms. A tried to refocus on the historical context of her lesson and suggest that Megan’s critique was focused on semantics rather than grounded in a legitimate concern regarding the continued use of offensive language in the curriculum.

### **Hesitancy to Engage**

Participants frequently expressed white fragility through their hesitancy to engage. Hesitancy occurs when teachers wait for more guidance or leadership, rather than engaging themselves. Although Hannah sent out the articles for discussion well in advance of the monthly BARWE meetings, the majority of teachers came to the monthly meetings without reading. In the feedback form, teachers wrote that they did not have the article nor did they know where to find it. Hannah continued to address this problem throughout the year. She set up a line of communication with the other schools in the district, but the teachers at those schools never seemed to have the article in advance of the meeting. She showed them how to access the articles through the BARWE website (<https://www.barwe215.org/>), but few people took the initiative to access the article themselves. Teachers appeared to be hesitant to prepare for the BARWE discussions, suggesting it was low on their list of priorities.

Hesitancy also occurs when white teachers are uncomfortable or fearful. Although Megan was interested in collaborating with her BIPOC colleagues on antiracist work, she was hesitant to approach them directly about the subject:

And especially for me, I'm almost scared to ask because I don't want them to think the work is on them. And they're not my friends, they're my colleagues, so I don't know how—Once you bring in race, it does burden them. So, that's the part I'm struggling with, it's like how ... Even my favorite teacher at the school, Ms. D, I think I mentioned her, that's who I worked with for the past four years. We had the same kids. So, we were really close. But even then, I'm like, I don't think that I'm close enough to her to [ask]. (Megan, March debrief)

Megan hesitates to engage with Ms. D, even though they have been working together for the past four years and she considers them to be “really close.” Megan mentions that she is hesitant because she does not want to put “the work” onto Ms. D or the other BIPOC teachers. However, Megan is also hesitant because she does not want to be perceived as a white person who is trying to put the work on BIPOC teachers rather than taking it on herself. Her hesitancy keeps such a collaborative antiracist effort from forming. Similarly, Hannah has experienced hesitation when it comes to approaching her BIPOC colleagues for their input or assistance with antiracist work. Although she is interested in collaborating with the BIPOC affinity groups, she continues to hesitate:

I think one of the things I struggle with is how to have that conversation without making it be like, ‘Hey, Black person, how do we do this?’ And I don't want to be that person, I don't want to be that colleague. I think there's a few people, like [Ms. G<sup>20</sup>], for example. ... She's come to BARWE meetings, we've talked, we've given each other input on things. I wish I had that relationship more with other Black members of the staff, but I just don't ... So, I think, yeah, it's a good point that we need to come up with a way for the two groups to crosstalk. (Hannah, October debrief)

Like Megan, Hannah hesitates to reach out to her BIPOC colleagues to collaborate in antiracist work. She worries about how her request would be perceived by her Black

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<sup>20</sup> Ms. G is a Black female educator at CCMS and leader of the Black affinity group.

colleagues like Ms. G. This hesitation prevents collaboration between BARWE and the two BIPOC affinity groups.

Participants hesitated when it came to exposing themselves to their peers. As Megan explained following the January BARWE meeting, “I think I was hesitant to show how little I know in some ways” (January debrief). Although no one else in her group was talking, Megan hesitated to unmute herself and add to the conversation because she was afraid of exposure. Felicia hesitated when it came to sending an email to correct her previous statement on social and emotional learning (SEL): “I wasn’t hesitant to send the first [email] with my two cents, and then I was hesitant to send the other one” (February debrief). Although she sent the first email in confidence, she hesitated before sending an email to acknowledge she had been wrong in how she was thinking about SEL.

### Expressions of Vulnerability

My analyses showed that white teachers in BARWE express vulnerability through emotional willingness, acknowledging fault and responsibility, brave engagement, and seeking input and help.

#### **Emotional Willingness**

Participants expressed vulnerability through their emotional willingness to sit in the discomfort during critical conversations, being open to the ambivalence of not having all of the answers, and being willing to experience and process their emotions without descending into the discursive practices of white fragility. Emotional willingness helps white teachers stay engaged in antiracist work, even when they experience discomfort or white emotionality (Matias, 2016). Felicia expresses

emotional willingness when reading about and reflecting on her role in perpetuating white supremacy culture by remaining in the discomfort, which allows her to process her own complicity and experience a “personal reckoning” (October debrief).

Emotional willingness keeps Felicia engaged, even as her interest in commitment to taking antiracist action ebbs and flows:

I feel like I’m someone who can really easily put the blinders on and ignore things that are inconvenient to me. ... It was like, alright, this will be the thing that I’m *not* going to just pretend isn’t there, isn’t solved. Obviously, my interest or activism or whatever, wanes considerably, ebbs and flows, but I don’t feel like it’s something that I’ll permanently walk away from. ... I don’t have the capacity or the energy to be someone who’s dedicated to a bunch of different causes, so this will be the one. And to me, it does feel important, it does obviously impact so many other things. ... I’m just trying to tap into whatever reserves of faith in myself I might have, to not just abandon the work entirely. (Felicia, final interview)

Even when she is overwhelmed and lacking the capacity to take on additional work, Felicia positions herself as emotionally willing to remain engaged with antiracism.

Vulnerability as emotional willingness positions teachers to experience and process their emotional response to racial stress during critical conversations about race and racism. For Hannah, this means acknowledging that white emotionality is part of the process:

I think the growth comes in recognizing those emotions and just not acting on them. Right? I think you’re always going to feel what you feel and you’re always going to feel—I don’t know. Maybe there’s people that have reached a higher plane and no longer feel embarrassed, uncomfortable, jealous, any of those terrible words, right? Any of those bad emotions that come up. I think that most people feel those emotions and it’s just the acting on it that we have control over. (Hannah, final interview).

Hannah engages in antiracism despite her feelings of embarrassment and discomfort. She recognizes these emotions in herself and chooses not to act on them. One thing

she can control is how she responds to her emotions. Megan also experiences discomfort during the BARWE meetings:

In that meeting, I felt so uncomfortable because I'm like, 'I'm not going to sit here and let you guys continue to be blind.' And I have to be in the meeting and pretend that my best friends were, again, sitting on my shoulder and making sure I'm doing right by them. We have to act like Black people are in that meeting with us. And so, we can't just be patting ourselves on the back knowing damn well nobody in the math department is speaking about this shit. (Megan, January debrief)

Megan holds herself accountable during the meetings by imagining her Black best friends are there with her, sitting on her shoulder and observing everything she does. She also pushes the other people in her group to confront the discomfort of realizing the extent of the work that needs to be done to disrupt white supremacy culture in their math curriculum and classrooms.

### **Acknowledging Fault and Responsibility**

Participants expressed vulnerability during critical conversations by openly admitting they were wrong or experiencing fear, and acknowledging their responsibility in bringing about equitable change. Prior to the small group discussions, participants engaged in personal reflection on the discussion topic. They took notes on the article and journaled about their initial response. These reflections were deeply personal and the thought of sharing their reflections often brought a flood of emotions. Participants expressed vulnerability by making the decision to share their personal reflections within the small groups: "I mean, obviously it's a little bit vulnerable to look at your own shit and identify the problems" (Hannah, December debrief). However, Hannah feels "safe and comfortable" enough in her small group to allow herself to express vulnerability by acknowledging the problems with her curriculum

and reflecting on the trauma she may have caused while teaching the gun violence unit in previous years (December debrief). Acknowledging fault and fear leaves you open to receiving and processing criticism.

During the December BARWE meeting, Megan expressed vulnerability by acknowledging that she is still working to bring antiracist changes to her math curriculum and pedagogy. After engaging in a tense discussion about the use of offensive, outdated language in the social studies curriculum, Megan shifted the conversation to focus on her own shortcomings:

It's not only English. In math, too many Black and Brown students don't see themselves in the math classroom. Numbers are Arabic. This is from not-white people. ... I need to figure out how to figure out how to bring in their natural math abilities. Math is community. If you're doing math alone, you're not doing it. I have gaps in my own classroom, too. (Megan, December fieldnotes)

As she spoke, her eyes welled up with tears and her voice began to break. Megan was intentionally pushing herself to acknowledge her faults and bring her own classroom into the conversation. Up until this point, the focus had been the social studies curriculum taught by Ms. A and Ms. B. Megan was asking them to be vulnerable, so she sought to meet their vulnerability by expressing her own vulnerability:

I feel I was almost showing emotion on purpose and knowing that I had to, because that was the only way they were going to get it. And I was very conscious of that, what was needed right there. And very conscious that they needed to hear and see that from me, unfortunately. (December debrief)

Megan felt that she needed to externally express her emotional experience in order to help her colleagues understand where she was coming from during this tense conversation. Rather than displaying emotions as a form of white fragility, Megan

displayed her emotions as a tool for vulnerable engagement—a tool that allowed her to meet their vulnerability with her own.

### **Brave Engagement**

Participants expressed vulnerability through brave engagement having overcome their initial hesitancy or fear. Brave engagement is exemplified by a willingness to move outside of their comfort zone by venturing ideas, speaking truth to power, or otherwise risking exposure (de Novais, 2019). During the January BARWE meeting, Megan bravely engaged in a critical conversation with her fellow math teachers. The math teachers were hesitant to engage, leaving long, slightly awkward, pauses between each speaker. After three different teachers praised the math curriculum for “encouraging a growth mindset” and helping students learn to engage in “productive struggle,” Megan finally chimed in. With a deep breath, she began to push back on the idea that the math department was doing a good job of disrupting white supremacy in their curriculum:

I think we’re missing some big things, though. We barely checked off growth mindsets and grade level standards. I’m struggling to see how we’re making math more relevant to our kids’ lives, and I say that because in a way (*sigh*)—Math is community and I’m not sure we’re embracing that yet. I don’t think we’re valuing the math that the kids bring to us. We’re ignoring the math kids are bringing to us, not linking to things that could possibly connect to them. It’s so separate from their being, and they have to see that math is important in their lives. We’re not linking it to civics, the community, the personal connections that they bring. We have to start making this (*pause*). You can’t do math alone, good or bad, and you can’t have no connections. You have to see that there is some value to the math. I’m having a hard time bridging how to help them see math as connected to their lives. Honestly growth mindset is getting critiqued heavily right now. How are you going to talk to someone in poverty about grit and growth mindset? You’ve got to stop telling kids in poverty you just need some grit. ... Numerals are

Arabic. We can make these connections and we're just missing it somehow. (Megan, January fieldnotes)

Although she was initially hesitant to share her perspective, Megan chose to engage bravely by presenting a counterpoint to their self-praise. In the January focus group, Megan explained why she decided to speak up:

I know for me, it felt like I just had to say it out loud. For me, it was like they just needed to know. They just needed someone to show them, because I don't even know that they would have went in that direction if I wasn't in there. I don't know. I'm curious what they would have got into. It would've just been real happy, smiley. (January focus group)

Megan pushed the conversation from begin self-congratulatory to critically reflective on the shortcomings of the math curriculum. Her brave engagement pushed the conversation beyond surface level and reengaged the small group in critically discussing manifestations of white supremacy in their curriculum.

### **Seeking Input and Help**

Participants expressed vulnerability through seeking input or help with their antiracist development. This willingness to seek input helps teachers address whiteness within their classroom by speaking with a trusted partner in antiracist work, such as BIPOC colleagues, antiracist white allies, and even students. Hannah first implemented student cyphers (Emdin, 2016; see p. 143) because she knew she needed help improving classroom culture. By positioning herself to receive input and learn from her students, Hannah was able to gain a deeper understanding of her BIPOC students' experiences and adapt her pedagogy to better serve her students. Felicia also sought input from her students by adding a question to a student survey that asked students if they would like to learn about more Black artists during the after-school art program. Their input, which was a resounding yes, gave Felicia the help she needed to

make a change to her planned curriculum. Megan sought help from an instructional coach at CCMS when she realized she could not tackle the challenges of creating an antiracist math curriculum without support. Together they were able to bring about real change within Megan’s classroom. Within a month of beginning this collaboration, Megan’s students were engaging in activities that integrated their prior knowledge and centered around the idea that math should be done in community, even during a global pandemic.

### Vignettes of Vulnerability and White Fragility

The following vignettes provide further insight into how Hannah, Felicia, and Megan are experiencing vulnerability and white fragility while engaging in critical conversations about race and racism. The vignettes address three themes that emerged during data analysis: vulnerability as critical self-examination, confronting curriculum violence with vulnerability, and addressing white fragility by pushing back against “default mode.”

#### **Vulnerability as Critical Self-Examination**

During the February BARWE meeting, Hannah reflected on the ways in which she has used Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) to impose standards of white supremacy on her students. The conversation was driven by Kaler-Jones’ (2020) article on how schools have used SEL as a form of policing BIPOC students. In the article, she recounts the story<sup>21</sup> of one female student braiding the hair of another

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<sup>21</sup> This story was first shared in Monique Morris’s (2019) book, *Sing a Rhythm, Dance a Blues: Education for the Liberation of Black and Brown Girls*.

female to help comfort her during a traumatic experience. As Kaler-Jones (2020) explains, “Doing hair has long been used as a cultural practice of building communal and ancestral ties in Black and brown communities, which, within the context of the classroom, young people would get in trouble for” (para. 5). This example stuck with Hannah and she continued to reflect on it during the February focus group:

One thing I found myself thinking of as I was reading the article, especially the hair braiding part, is the ways in which I, as a teacher, have tried to stamp those moments out in the past. The ways in which I told kids, ‘Stop doing your make-up, this is not a salon.’ Or I’ve heard so many times from my mouth and from others, ‘This is not a Hair salon, why are you doing hair?’ ... There’s just a lot of ways that we try to dictate, and it’s rooted in white supremacy, because the workplace is rooted in white supremacy. And so, we’re under this guise of teaching kids how to be professional for a world in which ‘professional’ sometimes has a very limited meaning, but I would hope that we’re moving towards a world where that definition can broaden. But it is interesting that, like we are very much hampering students’ abilities to be their full and authentic selves. (Hannah, February focus group)

Hannah’s reflection focuses on her own experiences with stamping out moments of connection for her students by imposing ‘professional’ (read white) norms on her BIPOC students. She acknowledges that she has made snide remarks to students who were engaging in culturally comforting activities by declaring that school is not a hair salon. Even so, she also notes that she has heard similar comments from other teachers as well, suggesting this is a school-wide practice. This standard response serves to dismiss the benefits of the cultural practice and uphold the very limiting white norms imposed on students in American schools. Hannah goes on to acknowledge that this policing of BIPOC students is done under the guise of preparing them to be ‘professional’ in a world where being professional means abiding by white supremacy culture. However, rather than preparing students for the ‘professional’ world, these

comments stop students from being their full, authentic selves. This reflection lead Hannah to shift her pedagogical approach to teaching SEL:

In terms of the doing hair thing, I like the idea of consent and awareness and creating a space where those are concepts that are openly talked about and acknowledged, which I think is something we don't tend to do in school. So, I think overall, it just comes down to this idea of control—who's controlling what's allowed. (Hannah, February debrief)

Instead of continuing to leverage SEL as a form of policing, Hannah suggests that teachers need to learn to be “socially emotionally intelligent in a way that is culturally sensitive” (February debrief). This includes learning to talk to students about consent and reflecting on the use of white norms to police BIPOC bodies.

Hannah spends a lot of time reflecting on how she can adapt her classroom to better meet the needs of her students, which includes creating space for them to be their authentic selves. These changes based on student input, because Hannah believes that antiracist work cannot, and should not, be done in isolation. One way that Hannah seeks to get student input in her classroom is through the use of cyphers, which come from the book *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood* (Emdin, 2016). As Hannah explains, “It's a small group of students ... that basically are an advisory board for the teacher giving their input on what's working in class, what's not working, and how can we fix it” (February debrief). The students in the cypher continue to rotate throughout the year, so every student has the opportunity to participate. Although she has not been able to do the cyphers during virtual learning, they have been an extremely successful part of her class in previous years. According to Hannah, strategies like cyphers and restorative circles are “a great practice because you're getting to hear voice and you're actually providing a safe space for kids share their

vision” (Hannah, February focus group). During the cyphers, Hannah “bravely listens” to her students as they share their ideas and opinions in the mutually trusting space they have co-created (de Novais, 2019). She expresses vulnerability in her emotional willingness to receive input and acknowledge fault. Listening to her students is also a way for Hannah to hold herself accountable to serving her BIPOC students.

As a teacher, Hannah has found that antiracism often requires vulnerably engaging in critical self-monitoring of her pedagogical practices. She expresses vulnerability by acknowledging the ways in which whiteness and white supremacy culture penetrate interpretations of student behavior. For example, Hannah struggles when she is around a lot of loud noise:

It is just something I don’t process well, and I know that’s a whiteness thing. And so that’s something I’m constantly coming up against because just physiologically, my body responds to loud situations poorly. So, when I struggle to acknowledge positive, vibrant, chatter in a positive way, it exhausts me on a physiological level. And that is something that has been a constant struggle. (Hannah, February debrief)

Having reflected on cultural norms and her own bodily response to loud noise, Hannah names the issue as “a whiteness thing” and places the responsibility for change on herself as the teacher. She is not focused on changing the way students interact and express themselves in her classroom. Instead, she reflects on how she still needs to grow as a culturally responsive educator:

I think I’ve gotten better over the years, but I’m not as culturally responsive as I’d like to be. I’m conscious of it, but I haven’t figured out a way to fix it yet. [*chuckle*] And I think that the things that look like stereotypical, threatening, angry behavior, still trigger that in me. And I think I have gotten to a place where I can see that those are just cultural responses that my whiteness is responding. I can see that just because somebody is making a specific facial expression or making a sound or reacting in X, Y, Z way doesn’t necessarily mean the same

emotional response that I imagine it to mean. (Hannah, February debrief)

Noisy classrooms can still “trigger” a negative response for Hannah. However, she recognizes her response as a symptom of whiteness and acknowledges that her initial assumptions about a situation are often grounded in white supremacy culture. Finally, Hannah focuses on one of the tools she has identified to help her address this situation when it arises:

As I’ve learned more and more about white supremacy culture, I’ve been able to pull out the tool of humor and just be like, ‘Whoop!’ And so often that is enough of a buffer. If I’m misreading a situation, using a bit of humor will often be enough of a buffer for the kid to respond in kind, and me to see the misunderstanding that I had. So, I’ve been able to find tools that have been able to give me a bit of a moment to see if I’m right or wrong, but obviously that’s not a perfect system and it doesn’t always work. (Hannah, February debrief)

Hannah relies on her sense of humor and rapport with the students to help her navigate culturally challenging situations. The simple, self-deprecating use of ‘whoop!’ creates space for her to reevaluate the situation. It also implies personal fault, suggesting to the students that Ms. Hannah realizes she has made a mistake. However, as Hannah notes, this does not always work and it is not a replacement for learning to be a more culturally responsive educator. By vulnerably reflecting on the racial implications of her pedagogical practices, Hannah was able to find a way to lighten a tense situation and help her gracefully acknowledge fault.

### **Disrupting White Supremacy in Classroom Culture**

The reading for the September BARWE meeting was on identifying common elements of white supremacy culture as they show up in cultural norms and expectations. During the BARWE meeting, Felicia shared with her small group how she had been reflecting on how white supremacy culture impacts her expectations in

the classroom. She shared an example that has come up in the BARWE discussions of “yesteryear,” which focused on the overwhelming number of white teachers at CCMS who teach a predominantly Black student population:

It would often come back to this example of the white teacher at the front of the classroom of Black kids, and the expectation is silence, or no speaking or no talking and like, when is that appropriate? In what settings is that appropriate, in terms of what you’re doing in the classroom? How much of what we expect of our students is based on what was expected of us as students? ... Most of the people that I’ve had this discussion with are white and went to schools that were predominantly white. So that one always just jumped out at me first in terms of when I’m telling students to be quiet or asking them to be quiet, or yelling because they won’t be quiet, it’s like, when is it the right setting? When is it because instruction’s happening and they need to listen and understand, and when is it just because it’s just so fucking loud? And that knee-jerk reaction in me, where does that come from, to like stifle? I did talk about that, and then I just made a general blanket statement, wrapping it up about how I see things like this in my own classroom and at CCMS, and things meaning, some of the examples that they gave out in the reading. (Felicia, September debrief)

Felicia expressed vulnerability by being emotionally willing to share her reflection during the small group discussion and acknowledging the ways in which she is continuing to grapple with white supremacy culture in her own classroom expectations. Rather than prioritizing her own (white) comfort, she tries to center the needs of her BIPOC students.

Felicia recognizes that this is not the only example of white supremacy culture at CCMS. While reading the article on white supremacy culture (Okun, 2000), she found herself connecting several of the examples with specific things she had seen at CCMS. However, she was surprised to learn that not all of the white teachers in her group had connected the reading with examples of white supremacy culture at CCMS:

One of the teachers, there were a lot of my middle-school colleagues in that group, but one of the teachers, she was like, ‘You’ve seen some of

this stuff at CCMS?’ And I was like ‘Yeah.’ ... I just wasn’t expecting [that]. It just surprised me that she seemed surprised. (Felicia, September debrief)

Felicia attributes their lack of recognition to the fact that white supremacy culture has been normalized in schools and throughout American society. While reading about “how different aspects of white supremacy are reinforced in workplace culture,” she realized that if she hadn’t known the title of the article she “would have just thought it was an article on like the ‘efficient workplace’ or something” (September debrief). Although the antidotes to white supremacy culture proposed in the article (Okun, 2000) were not “earth-shattering, ground-breaking revelation,” Felicia noticed herself feeling cynical because white supremacy culture is “so deeply ingrained” in American society. This led Felicia to experience a moment of fragility, in which her cynicism left her hesitant to engage in antiracist work.

When she thinks about antiracism, Felicia feels like she doesn’t know where she fits in: “I’m still struggling to find where I fit in and in affecting any, or trying to affect any, moving of the needle” (September debrief). This has been especially challenging for her during virtual teaching. While she often thinks about antiracism in how she develops a supportive classroom culture with her students and seeks to decenter whiteness in her classroom norms, everything changed during the pandemic:

The biggest thing I came back with for trying to focus or refocus on is recognizing the barriers to, especially in this state of virtual learning, building relationships with kids. ... For me, it feels like so much more organic in real life, in real school life. And it’s easier for me in virtual school to close my computer and be like, ‘Okay.’ ... It’s increasing the level of disconnect that I feel in the virtual-learning environment. So, it was just a reminder that for me, it is and will probably continue to be a fairly significant hurdle. (Felicia, September debrief)

Felicia expressed vulnerability by acknowledging her own shortcomings as a teacher in virtual school and showing a willingness to sit in the discomfort.

## **Pushing Back Against “Default Mode”**

When teaching becomes overwhelming, as it often does, Megan finds herself reverting to what she calls “default mode.” When she is in default mode, it is hard to think about or prioritize antiracist teaching. When school started back in January 2021, after roughly eight months of virtual teaching, Megan began slipping into default mode, which often left her antiracist intentions behind:

You can have the lesson plan and you can be ready, but there is something about when that class starts, it’s just like you go into default mode. And that’s dangerous. And that’s exactly why it’s dangerous in real life, too, because once you get into that default mode—that’s exactly what we’re trying to break. ... My teacher default mode is not thinking about this shit. ... So that’s what’s scary, is that teaching is so anxiety-producing, and it’s very, very, very hard to override that auto-control of like, ‘I’ve just got to be managing my class.’ ... I feel myself slipping into default the second something goes awry, I’m going into that default mode. And we all, as humans, I think, have to be wary of default mode, because that means we’re going to be less deliberate, less conscious. We’re going to be more blind. There are a lot more blind spots if we’re just falling into default mode. (Megan, January debrief)

Default mode maintains white supremacy culture and the inequitable status quo. When she is focusing on managing 30 students and taking attendance and “constantly making decisions about shit that doesn’t even have to do with school,” Megan can feel herself reverting to default mode. The first class starts and she forgets everything.

Default mode is a kind of invulnerability that keeps Megan from implementing her antiracist ideals in her classroom. During our January focus group, Megan further explained her struggle to push back against default mode:

I just find [default mode is] like, you know how when 9:00 AM hits, whatever you planned or whatever you thought you planned, you just become a different person once the school day actually [starts]. You just go into autopilot and who knows what that looks like unless you’re totally deliberate and thinking about all your actions. ... If I’m not

consciously thinking about the whole time like, I just won't think about it at all. I don't know. (Megan, January focus group)

Default mode has been especially challenging during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the January focus group, Megan, Hannah, and Felicia described a general feeling of apathy that was beginning to affect every part of their lives, including their teaching. However, as Megan points out, when white people complain of feeling exhausted, that is when they “need to lean into it the most, because that's when you're going to fall back into your worst habits and just go back to not doing it because it was exhausting and it was work” (Megan, March debrief). One way in which Megan sought to push back on default mode was by working with an instructional coach to rethink her whole approach to math education.

### Perceptions of White Fragility and Vulnerability

Throughout the study, participants shared their perceptions of white fragility and vulnerability. In this section, I discuss the ways in which participants are making sense of their own experiences with white fragility and vulnerability within the context of antiracist inquiry.

#### **Hannah's Perceptions**

##### Benefits of Guilt and Shame

For Hannah, vulnerability means learning to recognize and respond to moments of white fragility, rather than trying to completely overcome them. In fact, she sees a benefit in continuing to experience feelings of guilt and shame:

I see the benefit in guilt and shame for white people, in that it means you're not ignoring [white supremacy]. I think there's a benefit in those feelings because it's like, 'Oh, you're acknowledging that there is something that's a problem here,' and I think that that is a good thing. I

don't want to start ignoring white privilege and white supremacy in the various systems that I experience throughout my day. It's really, really easy for white people to ignore [white supremacy], and so I hope I don't stop feeling those moments because I hope I don't start ignoring it. ... I don't want to be one of those woke white people, who's like, 'No, I don't feel the shame and the guilt anymore.' Really? [*chuckle*] ... I think when I have negative emotions, I try to turn them into action steps. I think obsessing over white shame and white guilt is not good, and using that as a way of shutting down is not good. I want to continue to use it as a force that drives me to action, but I think that as long as there are inequities in racial structures in this society and in this world, then I hope I don't stop feeling that tension, that shame, that guilt. (Hannah, March focus group).

For Hannah, acknowledging moments of fragility means you are still grounded in the realities of racism and white supremacy. She is skeptical of “woke white people” who claim to have transcended expressions of white fragility when triggered by racial stress. Rather than seeing the goal of antiracism as eliminating feelings of guilt and shame, Hannah suggests leveraging those feelings to drive antiracist praxis.

### Creating Space for Vulnerability

After more than five years of engaging in antiracist work, Hannah argues that tension is an inherent part of antiracism. Hannah has found that “the most fruitful conversations come out of the places where there's tension, and you're much more likely to get tension in a space that feels safe” (March focus group). Safe spaces facilitate engaging in what Hannah describes as “almost savagely open anonymous conversations,” which allow white people to confront white supremacy head on:

If you're actually engaging with what it means to be white in a world ruled by white supremacy, and work in a school with predominantly Black children, there is an innate tension that is there. ... It can be really hard to try to serve others and then have to acknowledge that you've done a bad job of that. ... It requires a lot of vulnerability to then say, 'Oh, I messed up.' And not just messed up, but messed up in a way that caused emotional harm to the children I'm trying to teach, or

my colleagues. To be able to admit that to yourself, you first have to feel comfortable in the space that you're in. (Hannah, March focus group)

Hannah sees tension as part of what makes it possible for white teachers to engage in antiracist praxis, and tension requires a space in which teachers can be vulnerable.

However, creating a space for antiracist work is not about catering to white fragility:

We're not all in the same level of comfort with doing this work and I think there is merit in saying white folks are never going to really get there unless they can be super, super vulnerable, and it's hard to do that for many [white] people if you're around Black colleagues. It's tough. ... And, not to cater to fragile white folks, but I do think that it just changes the dynamic. And not everyone is ready for that change. And so, while not catering to white folks, I do want these folks to engage in the conversation. (Hannah, December debrief)

Hannah focuses on making BARWE a space in which white people can be vulnerable enough to engage in critical conversations. Although anyone is welcome to attend BARWE meetings, the meetings are designed to support white people in critical reflection and planning for antiracist action. BARWE promotes antiracist praxis by fostering a space for vulnerability.

Hannah describes vulnerability as “being open and honest” because you are “opening yourself up for criticism” rather than “shying away from the work” (final interview). Vulnerability is not the absence of white fragility, but rather “recognizing those emotions and just not action on them” (final interview). Vulnerability is an important part of BARWE because it allows white educators to position themselves as emotionally willing to sit in the discomfort of critical conversations:

I don't think you can confront the fact that you're a part of and benefiting majorly from systemic racism without being vulnerable, because it's like sitting back and saying, 'Okay, I didn't actively ask for this, but it's been given to me, and I need to acknowledge that I'm a part of this really, really, really problematic and violent system.' And I think nobody wants to feel violent, especially if you're an educator and

you try to help people learn in their lives, if you are working towards becoming antiracist and trying to help people have a more just society, anyone who's actively trying to help other people, does not want to be seen as being that or violent or evil in any way and so I think you can't do the one without the other though, because you need to acknowledge that these bad and violent and awful things are happening and they're benefiting you, and that requires a lot of parsing. (Hannah, final interview)

By creating space for vulnerability, BARWE positions white educator to engage in and learn from critical conversations about racism in education.

### **Felicia's Perceptions**

#### White Fragility as (Re)Centering Whiteness

According to Felicia, white fragility is “another way that, whether intentionally or not, white people center themselves in other people's experiences” (final interview).

White fragility relies on discourse moves, such as “‘Well, I'm trying my best' or ‘I can't be perfect,’” which prioritize white comfort and justify complicity in white supremacy (Felicia, January debrief). Although Felicia has been engaging in antiracist work for several years, she continues to experience moments of white fragility: “It's probably a lot more subtle than it used to be, just because now it's like I know that it's not really a good thing. So, I think it's probably more insidious” (final interview). One way that white fragility has been present for Felicia is through feelings of superiority when discussing racism in BARWE:

Even though I consider myself to be in the very early stages of doing any sort of antiracist work, it became somewhat clearer to me [this year] that many of my colleagues are even further behind. So, it felt like all of those maybe, initial kinds of run ins with things that might provoke those feelings [of white fragility], I've already gone through it. (Felicia, final interview)

Instead of experiencing traditional displays of white fragility, such as anger, defensiveness, or fear, Felicia found herself experiencing feelings “white superiority” when compared to the other white teachers who were engaging in antiracist work for the first time. Felicia explained, “It’s like, ‘Oh, I’m so much more enlightened than you.’ I feel like I had to keep that in check, more than getting my feelings hurt” (final interview). She realizes these feelings are “not helpful” and names them as “another way to center myself and make me feel like I’m better, more involved, more enlightened ... It’s not helping anybody if I’m just sitting there patting myself on the back for doing the bare minimum” (Felicia, final interview).

Although Felicia realizes the feelings are unhelpful, she also acknowledges that she “absolutely” still has them (January debrief). While these feelings still occur, she has been able to distance herself a bit by positioning herself to hear feedback that she has done something racist without associating it directly with being called a racist. As Felicia explained, “Not meaning it doesn’t still happen, but also, that if it does happen, it feels like less of an attack on my character or whatever. It’s like because then, that’s just centering myself and all of those things” (January debrief). Felicia feels like she has made some progress in this area, but expects she will continue to confront feelings of fragility in the future.

### Vulnerability as Essential for Antiracist Praxis

Felicia describes vulnerability as “important or essential to growing and changing” (final interview). Vulnerability is “relinquishing feeling like you have answers or you’re an authority” in antiracism, which positions you to learn in the discomfort rather than disengaging and descending into the discursive practices of

white fragility. For Felicia, vulnerability means coming to terms with the process of engaging in antiracist work as a white educator:

It's like making peace with the fact that sometimes I *am* going to roll my eyes, and sometimes I *am* going to be annoyed, and sometimes I *am* going to want to put my comfort ahead of the stuff that I claim I'm actively trying to learn about and undo ... I've had to learn to just lean into it and be like, 'Alright, this is annoying me, I don't want to fucking read this right now.' It's like, it makes it easier to move on from and let go of, instead of trying to pretend I'm the super enlightened person, and act like it's not tying me down or blocking my vision to just make room for it and be like, 'Alright, well, I don't want fucking read this, it's annoying.' It's like it just makes it easier to move on, than to hold on to this idea of myself that is not accurate. (February debrief)

Vulnerability helps Felicia take down her own expectations of perfectionism and remove the façade of being a 'good' white person. In the context of BARWE, Felicia thinks about leveraging her own vulnerability as a way to bring other people into critical conversations about antiracism:

I feel vulnerability, or the benefits of the vulnerability, when it's like talking about mistakes I've made or things that I thought that I wished I hadn't or things that I had done that I wish I hadn't and being able to share that as maybe a way to get someone else to open up. (final interview)

Vulnerability is an essential part of antiracism because it positions Felicia to benefit from her own critical self-reflection and to bring other white educators into critical conversations about race and racism.

## **Megan's Perceptions**

### Receptive of Critical Feedback

White people need to be able to confront their own biases and racist actions without "freaking out" on the person who brought it to their attention (November

debrief). As Megan explains, “I think white people think it’s like again, their immediate thinking is like ‘It’s not me!’ And it’s like calm down. [*chuckle*] We didn’t even start the conversation like they don’t even want to have the conversation” (final interview). Even before the conversation begins, white people are ready to disengage. Megan thinks about vulnerability as being receptive to feedback, however it is delivered, and acknowledging fault, which allows you to take corrective action. She gave the example of how CCMS created space for adding staff pronouns to the school website this year. However, in the email that went out, the sender referred to these as people’s “preferred pronouns.” Not long after, a second email came out acknowledging and apologizing for the mistake. He also took corrective action to remove the term “preferred” from the title and instructions for how to add your pronouns to the website. The sender then signed off using his pronouns. For Megan, this is exactly what she wants to see more of at CCMS—people accepting feedback, acknowledging fault, and making a correction.

Part of becoming an antiracist white ally is learning to call people in, even when it is uncomfortable or unwelcome:

[Calling people in] is hard, but that’s our job. You should also want to be called in, and I see the fear with them there. It’s like, I want people to correct me because I do not want to go one more second offending you and I just like if you take that attitude. It kind of shifts your mindset. If you look at it as like, ‘Shoot, you’re doing me a favor,’ then maybe the conflict is less scary. (Megan, November focus group)

Correcting racist behavior comes from a place of love and respect: “If we didn’t care, we would just let you keep offending people and we’re not” (November focus group). Megan feels the urgency of confronting the racist behavior of white colleagues because they are “a teacher in charge of Black children” not someone’s “crazy uncle”

on Facebook. Megan holds white educators “to a different level” because their actions have very real and immediate consequences on the students in their classroom (November focus group).

Throughout the year, Megan positioned herself as the bringer of critical feedback. When the Math Department was too focused on their superficial successes in antiracism, Megan felt she had to “come in and kind of put the hammer down” (January focus group). She positioned herself in the critical conversation to push back on what she felt was an overly positive version of how the math teachers were really doing with antiracism. Megan is willing to position herself in this way because she believes her white colleagues “need to hear the shit I have to say, if no one else is going to say it” (January Debrief).

#### Emotionally Willing to Make Mistakes

Megan is frustrated with white fragility. Specifically, she is tired of people using white fragility as an excuse to avoid engaging in antiracist work:

Like if you’re scared of conflict, boohoo. We’re going to be making mistakes for the rest of our lives, so you’ve got to just jump in at this point and make the mistake and just get it fixed. At least try not to make the same mistakes, but we’re just going to be fucking this up non-stop because we’re white. There’s nothing we can do about that. So, the sooner you accept that you’re just going to be a lifelong mistake maker, I think the conflict will hopefully get less scary. ... And I guess the sooner white people just get over the conflict thing and realize it’s going to take a lot of practice—They should just look at it as practice. White people are so threatened and scared, but it doesn’t need to be that deep. It can be a ‘my bad’ and we move on. And like I said, you’re going to have to do it over and over and over again, because you’re going to be white your whole life, so we’re going to keep fucking this up. (Megan, November focus group)

Having been raised in and continuing to benefit from a culture of white supremacy, white people are going to make a lot of mistakes while learning about and working to disrupt white supremacy. This includes Megan. However, when she makes a mistake, she tries to learn from it. She describes this form of vulnerability as being “willing to take on the accountability” (final interview). Although she was not trying to do this in the past, she says, “Now I will be accountable. I’m not trying to run from any consequence” (Megan, final interview).

White fragility often presents as “defensiveness” and avoiding confrontation by claiming “I’m not a racist” (final interview). Like many white people, Megan still experiences fragility: “I’m so scared to do things, when I know there should not be a reason” (final interview). However, she focuses on being emotionally willing to engage in critical conversations, which sometimes look like open conflict over issues of racism. The discomfort isn’t going away for white people: “I think that’s the point that white people need to get. You should be upset, angry and uncomfortable until [racism is] fixed” (Megan, March focus group). So instead of running from the confrontation, Megan wants white people to stay in the discomfort and use it to spur antiracist change.

Megan still experiences white emotionality while engaging in antiracist work. While she tries to leverage these feelings of guilt and shame to drive antiracist praxis, she wonders if they will ever go away:

[Tension] is hard for me too because I feel the guilt and I feel the shame and I choose to use that. But then I read stuff that says, ‘White people should let that guilt and shame go.’ So, it’s hard for me because I’m totally wired to work off of that guilt. You can guilt me and then my anxious tendency will make sure it gets done at some point. But then when I read stuff that says, you know, ‘White people, let that shit go because that holds you back.’ I almost wonder if there is a way. That

has been my question too, how do we get rid of some of the tension? Because, we just need to embrace it and move on, like you made the mistake, again, the more you focus on it, the worse it's going to feel. Yes, we've got to acknowledge it, because that's step one. But I almost thought about it in a different way, like the tension, of course the tension will be there, but how do we [use it?] When I'm reading, it's like, it doesn't necessarily need to be that tense. I don't know. But it feels tense, then I'm one who, I just feel it, feel it, feel it, the guilt, the shame. (Megan, March focus group)

While Megan is emotionally willing to make mistakes, she also struggles to let go of the guilt and shame that come with them. Some of these mistakes are less egregious than others. She talks about these mistakes as not being “that deep.” White people need to learn to acknowledge fault and make a correction in their behavior without descending into white fragility. While the guilt may not be “necessary” in such instances, Megan views this tension as proof that the conversations are addressing something real. The lack of tensions seems more like complicity than transcendence. Racism *should* be uncomfortable.

#### Interconnected Nature of Vulnerability and White Fragility

Findings reveal a more complex relationship between enactments of white fragility and vulnerability in the bounded context of this study than previously theorized by Applebaum (2017) and Gilson (2011). Vulnerability does not prevent moments of racial discomfort or white fragility from occurring. Instead, vulnerability leaves white educators open to learning in the discomfort rather than descending into the discursive practices of white fragility that leave them invulnerable to change. Findings are sorted into four overarching categories: disrupting white fragility with vulnerability, confronting white fragility through vulnerable storytelling, meeting vulnerability with vulnerability, and benefit of prolonged vulnerable engagement.

## **Disrupting White Fragility with Vulnerability**

Expressions of vulnerability helped participants disrupt white fragility by leaving them open to learning in the discomfort. Applebaum (2017) proposes vulnerability as a possible antidote to white fragility. As an antidote, this research suggests vulnerable dispositions can counteract expressions of white fragility. It does not, however, prevent white fragility from occurring. As Hannah explained, “The growth comes in recognizing those emotions and just not acting on them” (final interview). While reading about social and emotional learning (SEL) for the February BARWE meeting, Hannah experienced feelings of shame and regret over how she has misused SEL to control student behavior in the past. However, through expressions of vulnerability, Hannah was able to position herself as open to changing her perception of SEL and rethinking how she will incorporate a revised version of SEL in her pedagogical practices. Felicia also experienced white fragility while reading the article on SEL. She was initially offended by Kaler-Jones’ (2020) portrayal of SEL as a form of policing Black and Brown bodies at school, which caused her to ask herself, “Is everything fucking racist?” (February debrief). However, Felicia did not stop reading. Instead, she expressed vulnerability by staying in the discomfort of the article and leaving herself open to engaging with a new perspective on SEL, despite experiencing resistance. By expressing vulnerability, Felicia allowed the article to change her perspective on SEL.

Participants were also able to leverage their vulnerable dispositions to counter expressions of white fragility coming from other white people. During the September BARWE meeting, the principal stated that he felt “powerless” to make antiracist changes at CCMS, which prompted Megan to express vulnerability by moving outside her comfort zone: “I did push back on him. I let him know like first of all, anyone with

a voice is not powerless. ... You have way more power than all of us. You're the policymaker" (September debrief). Two months later, following the November BARWE meeting, Hannah expressed vulnerability by her own brave engagement:

**Hannah:** The problem is that the people whose job it is [to lead antiracist affinity groups at CCMS] don't have the power. Right? Like I don't have the power to do anything. ... I think it's very nice that [CCMS] is paying us this year. ... But our job, our task is to lead these conversation groups, which is important and work I'm happy to do and work that needs to be done. But there's a missing piece in that chain, and the missing piece in that chain is that there needs to then be a time that the whole school gets together and says, 'Okay, so we've identified these four aspects. We've identified discipline, uniform, testing, and scheduling, or whatever they are. We've identified these things that we want to take on as a school. We've noticed that there's white supremacy showing up. We have some ideas on how to fix it, maybe.' Now we need to actually have committees that are going to do this, that are going to make the change and that involve the people that need to be a part of that conversation. ... These are conversations that require multiple people's inputs, but there are some people that are stakeholders that need to be there. And so what needs to happen next is that somebody, who's an administrator, probably [the principal], needs to say, 'We're going to now set aside time for these meetings to happen. If you'd like to come and give input, cool. Here are the people that need to be in that conversation.' And then from that conversation, you need to walk away with specific changes you're going to make. If I was [the principal], that's what I would do next. But I'm not and he hasn't done that. And so, I'm just hoping that he does do that, I guess, is where I am today.

**Diane:** Do you feel like you're in a position where you can tell him that? Like, 'Here's what steps I think you need to take next.'

**Hannah:** So, I sent a more open email today. I sent an email to just the admins, saying, 'Thanks for coming. There was a clear desire to have more campus-specific planning-for-action time related to the work BARWE is doing. I wanted to reach out to see how you think we should facilitate that going forward. I don't think December PD is right, since that's a big group, unless there's folks from each campus that feel comfortable holding the conversations.' And I asked for their input

because I kind of wanted to see what the admins themselves were thinking. ...

**Megan:** I guess, the only other thing I would have changed is you because you have such a great plan, Hannah, is I would have just been like, 'I have a plan if you need one.'

**Hannah:** Well, I'll see what [the principal] says.

**Megan:** I think they really don't know what to do.

**Hannah:** If he doesn't come back with an idea, then yeah, I will send him my thoughts.

**Megan:** Because they told you, they told you they're scared, they don't know what to do.

**Hannah:** [The admin] doesn't do well.

**Megan:** They don't know.

**Hannah:** [The admin] clearly wants change and he doesn't do well, so if there's one thing I've learned from working with him for six years, it is that he doesn't do well with initial reactions to things; he takes a long time to process. And his initial reaction is often negative and quick, and then you have to sort of talk him back into it. And he usually comes around and says yes. But with so many things, I've come out of the gate with a big plan. And he's like, 'No.' And I'm like, 'Well.' And then I stress out and I work myself up and I have all this anxiety. And then I come back to him a couple of days later and I fully explain myself, and he's like, 'Well, yeah, of course, that sounds great.' And I'm like, 'Well, huh? Then say yes the first time!' So, I think at this time, I'm not going to go that route. I'm going to see what he says. And if he doesn't write back, then I'll specifically email just him [and another admin]. But, he's the one who instigated the conversation about change that I want to see develop. (November focus group)

The administrators have been hesitant to engage with the ideas coming out of BARWE and the two BIPOC affinity groups head on. Having acknowledged that she, as a teacher and BARWE leader, does not have the power to make school-wide change on her own, Hannah appears to be expressing vulnerability by sending an email directly

to the administration to invite them to be part of creating space and support for antiracist action at CCMS. Hannah responded to the administration's expressions of white fragility with her own expressions of vulnerability.

### **Confronting White Fragility through Vulnerable Storytelling**

During critical conversations in BARWE and interviews for this study, participants often reflected on their past experience white fragility, which allowed them to express vulnerability by acknowledging fault and bravely engaging with their colleagues through storytelling. During the October focus group, Hannah shared a story about how she had been hesitant to respond to a series of repeated microaggressions she observed during a staff meeting:

**Hannah:** I do think we as a staff struggle with microaggressions, we as a country, as a world, struggle with microaggressions.

**Megan:** Yes, but we're not regular white people. ... We're actually in front of Black students. We've got to be a little bit ahead of the curve, slightly ahead. ...

**Hannah:** The goal is that we are. And I think that we're not all there yet. There's no gatekeeper that's testing this before you become a teacher. And I think that's one of the things we need to improve upon, and the only way to do that is consciously talking, is microaggression checking.

**Megan:** I've been noticing it every meeting. Every meeting I see something I don't like. Every single one.

**Hannah:** I'm sure if you were Black, you'd see even more. But I totally agree, yeah. The calling out and calling in is really important, and we include [ourselves]. I didn't say anything to the people that I thought were maybe making [Ms. G] feel uncomfortable, but I noticed it.

**Megan:** I didn't even notice that.

**Hannah:** Well, I'm sitting here thinking, I'm like, 'Should I have said something? Should I have said something to [Ms. G]?' I don't know. I don't know what the right answer is to do in that moment, but I did notice that 15 people commented on [her] hair and it was straightened. And that's why they were commenting on it. (October focus group)

Although Hannah wants to see the teachers at CCMS consciously talking about and checking microaggressions, she expressed fragility when she hesitated to respond when she observed a microaggression toward her Black colleague, Ms. G, repeatedly occurring during a staff meeting, instead choosing to remain silent. Hannah expresses vulnerability in this conversation by acknowledging her failure to respond and questioning how she should respond in the future. Vulnerable storytelling confronts white fragility by creating a space for white teachers to acknowledge their own fragility and seek input from their colleagues on how to change their behavior in the future.

### **Meeting Vulnerability with Vulnerability**

Findings revealed that expressions of vulnerability can be used to elicit reciprocal expressions of vulnerability. For example, when a Black colleague sent a staff-wide email during the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack on the Capitol, Felicia felt compelled to respond. As Felicia explained, "I think it was just like trying to meet her vulnerability with some of my vulnerability" (February debrief). Felicia recognized that her Black colleague had expressed vulnerability through brave engagement. When Felicia saw the email and realized no one had replied, she felt compelled to respond in kind by hitting "reply all," even though this left her feeling very uncomfortable (read "fragile"). Her reciprocal vulnerability amplified the efforts of her Black colleague and let her know that she was not alone.

During the December BARWE meeting, Megan’s small group engaged in a tense discussion centered on the use of offensive language in the social studies curriculum. During this conversation, Ms. A, an ELA and social studies teacher, expressed vulnerability by showing that she was emotionally willing to learn while remaining in the discomfort. Megan reciprocated Ms. A’s vulnerability by openly acknowledging her own struggle to create an antiracist math curriculum. Meeting vulnerability with vulnerability helps establish a level of trust and intimacy, which promotes critical engagement with new perspectives on antiracism.

### **The “Both/And” of Responding to Racial Stress**

Hannah frequently responds to questions about antiracist work by saying, “I think it’s both/and.” In her experience, antiracism exists at the intersection of both vulnerability and white fragility. It is both/and, not either/or. During her first interview, I asked Hannah if there were specific emotions she associates with antiracist work. She responded by situating antiracism as both shameful and affirming:

It can be really tiring. It can feel really elusive and overwhelming and big. And then it can also be really connecting. I have found it has created for me a network of colleagues and friends and co-conspirators, if you will, that have really just given me life in a whole different way. While there are days where I’m like, ‘I can’t deal with any more of this,’ that same day, checking with BARWE folks will give me a really positive energy that’s really affirming. ... I mean, it’s shameful too, right? It’s like a huge bit of shame and guilt and frustration and self-doubt that comes with all of this. Any time you’re sitting there and you’re like, ‘Man, did I just do something that was racist or racially charged?’ or any time I’m questioning whether I’m making judgments about kids, there’s a large part of me that’s like, ‘I don’t like that part of me.’ So, I think that [antiracism] always comes with a complicated set of emotions. (Hannah, initial interview)

Engaging in antiracist work has changed how Hannah sees her role as a white educator. It has brought her into a new community of co-conspirators who fill her with a positive and affirming energy. However, the work also leaves her feeling guilty, shameful, and overwhelmed. She still experiences moments of fragility, even after six years of engaging in antiracist reflection.

Existing at the intersection of both/and means that the emotions associated with white fragility do not ever fully go away. Sometimes Hannah experienced white fragility as a moment of frustration:

I do think that there's always a level of like, call it frustration or guilt or shame or whatever, but I think the acknowledgement that things are not equal, the desire for them to be equal, and also the acknowledgement that I'm not necessarily the person who made them unequal but they still are, like that interplay. And I'm not sure what you would call that emotion but I think that that's a piece of [antiracist work]. (Hannah, March debrief)

For Hannah, as for many white people, acknowledging racial inequality is often in tension with the desire to absolve yourself of the guilt by pointing out that you are not the root cause of the racial inequality. Antiracism forces white people to sit in the discomfort and acknowledge that they continue to benefit from white supremacy, which is often accompanied by emotions of guilt and shame. Hannah also experiences moments of white fragility in the form of anxiety:

I think my anxiety has stopped being about consequences for me. I think I've recognized that I have enough privilege, the consequences aren't there, at least in this organization, they're not gonna fire me. And so, I think the anxiety is more about wanting to say things the right way and not say something that is accidentally hurtful or harmful in any way to the space or to any individuals in the room. I think that's where the anxiety comes from these days and not from a place of personal fear, but more from a place of wanting to actually do the right thing, the right way. (Hannah, September debrief)

When Hannah first began engaging in antiracist work, she experienced personal fear. She was afraid of how people would react when she confronted them about issues of racism. She was afraid she could lose her job or friends in the process. While those fears have subsided, Hannah continues to experience anxiety around antiracism. She questions whether she is doing or saying the right things. She worries that perhaps she should be doing more. However, Hannah meets this anxiety, guilt, and shame with vulnerability, which allows her to engage in antiracist praxis (reflection and action) in spite of her moments of fragility.

Hannah sees herself in a space of always growing, but that does not keep her from engaging in antiracist praxis. She situates herself as an imperfect but willing antiracist white ally. Although she often experiences defensiveness when confronting the ways in which white supremacy appears in her curriculum, she counters the defensiveness with vulnerability that allows her to engage in antiracist praxis:

**Hannah:** The constant battle of reflection and growth [counters the defensiveness]. [*chuckle*] I don't know, just trying to read more, listen to more things, taking any and all feedback I can get from just about anybody; students, parents, other people looking at my curriculum. I wish that there was someone looking at curriculum, I wish we had a staff member of color who could be paid to be curriculum oversight. I wish we had a paid position that was part of our antiracist campaign that would be like an audit of our curriculum. That'd be freaking great because a bunch of white ladies wrote the curriculum.

**Diane:** When you feel that defensiveness in yourself, do you seek out that feedback or do you just kind of acknowledge like, 'I'm feeling defensive.'

**Hannah:** I think the defensiveness is a signal that there's something to look closer at, right? ... That's like for me with everything. My initial reaction to something that I don't like is defensiveness. So, I think that trying to train myself to take that as an invitation to just look deeper at it, because if you're feeling defensive it's a signal that something is wrong on some level or at least maybe problematic, or the thought has

at least crossed your mind that it could be problematic or that somebody could be taking offense to it ... I guess my initial thought is to always spend some time Googling. Like if I'm feeling defensive about my anthology for unit one because it doesn't have enough Black joy in it, well, I'll do some Googling to try to find some pieces I could include. (January debrief)

Hannah acknowledges that even six years into antiracist work, she still experiences defensiveness. However, she reframes defensiveness as an invitation to self-reflection and critical examination of the context. When she is feeling defensive about her curriculum, she uses that moment of fragility to reposition herself as emotionally willing to experience and process her emotional response. In this way, antiracist work exists at the intersection of both white fragility and vulnerability.

### **Benefit of Prolonged Vulnerable Engagement**

In her theory of white fragility, DiAngelo (2011) suggests that stamina can be used to counter white fragility by helping white people remain engaged with the challenging topic of race over a prolonged period of time. Applebaum (2017) presents the counterargument that vulnerability, not stamina, can be used to counter white fragility by leaving white people open to being affected by new perspectives. Findings suggest that white fragility can be successfully disrupted through *prolonged vulnerable engagement* with antiracist inquiry. Vulnerability is what enables prolonged engagement. Without vulnerability, participants disengage rather than remaining in the discomfort. For example, when Megan's Black best friends first asked her to read DiAngelo's (2011) article, Megan immediately descended into the emotional displays and defensiveness of white fragility. Although her friend continued to text her a link to a free copy of the article, Megan refused to read it and tried to avoid the topic entirely. She even left their group chat for a few days. Eventually,

Megan was able to express vulnerability by being emotionally willing to engage with the article. Although it was only 17 pages long, she read it in small doses over several days. In this instance, prolonged engagement helped Megan to eventually become vulnerable enough to allow her worldview to change.

Prolonged engagement can help increase the likelihood of responding to racial stressors with vulnerability rather than white fragility. In the years since first reading “White Fragility” (DiAngelo, 2011), Megan has continued to engage with antiracism by attending BARWE meetings at CCMS with Hannah and Felicia. She remained engaged, despite continuing to experience fragility. When Megan’s Black friends again asked her to engage with the topics of antiracism during the 2020 BLM protests, Megan was “a little bit more prepared and a little less defensive” (Megan, March focus group). After several years of prolonged vulnerable engagement, Megan jumped into antiracist work with both feet. She took a public stance against racism in education, despite negative feedback from her colleagues. She quit her sports league in solidarity with her best friend due their lack of action to address white supremacy culture and anti-Blackness in the league. A combination of vulnerable dispositions and prolonged engagement with antiracism prepared Megan to embody the role of an antiracist white ally.

Based on the stories that participants shared about their early experiences with learning about race and racism, their expressions of white fragility have decreased and they are more likely to respond to racial stress with expressions of vulnerability. However, when they encounter new racial stressors, they often experience an initial response of white fragility before progressing to expressions of vulnerability. For example, when Felicia encountered a new perspective on SEL while reading Kaler-

Jones' (2020) article, she initially responded with the displays of emotion and defensive behaviors associated with white fragility. However, she was able to remain engaged and express vulnerability by leaving herself open to new perspectives on SEL. When combined with expressions of vulnerability, prolonged engagement can disrupt white fragility and prepare white educators for antiracist praxis. However, prolonged engagement that is not met with expressions of vulnerability continues to result in expressions of white fragility.

### Section Summary

During antiracist inquiry, white teachers expressed white fragility through displays of emotions, defensive behaviors, discourse move, (re)centering whiteness, and hesitancy to engage. However, these expressions were often countered by vulnerability, which participants expressed through emotional willingness, acknowledging fault and responsibility, brave engagement, and seeking input and help. Participants perceived white fragility and vulnerability in a variety of ways. Hannah focused on how white fragility can signal a need for antiracist praxis and how she can foster vulnerability in BARWE. Felicia thinks about how white fragility as (re)centering whiteness and how the critical conversations in BARWE are dependent on vulnerable engagement. Megan focused on how being receptive to critical feedback can combat white fragility and how vulnerability can be expressed as emotional willingness to make mistakes. This research reveals that white fragility and vulnerability have a complex, interconnected relationship within antiracist inquiry. Although vulnerability does not prevent white fragility, it does leave white educators open to learning in the discomfort and remaining engaged in antiracist inquiry.

### **Vulnerability as a Catalyst for Antiracist Praxis**

The third research question asks, what is the relationship between expressions of white fragility and vulnerability and teacher's antiracist action or inaction? Findings suggest that vulnerability is a catalyst for antiracist praxis, which is the combination of antiracist reflection and antiracist action (Freire, 2013). In the absence of vulnerability, white fragility causes teachers to disengage from critical conversations, resulting in uncritical engagement, misguided action, or passive inaction (Figure 3). However, when white fragility is met with expressions of vulnerability it helps teachers reengage in critical conversations and antiracist reflection, which ultimately promotes antiracist praxis. Through prolonged vulnerable engagement, participants were able to respond to racial stress with vulnerability and remain engaged in critical conversations and antiracist praxis. First, I explore the ways in which expressions of white fragility lead to misguided action or inaction when not met with expressions of vulnerability. Second, I further discuss the framework outlined in Figure 3 and apply it to a series of vignettes to examine the ways in which vulnerability functions as a catalyst for antiracist action. Third, I explore how the critical conversations that take place during BARWE small group discussions can foster vulnerable dispositions and promote antiracist praxis. Fourth, I explore the potential of prolonged vulnerable engagement for decreasing, and ultimately bypassing, expressions of white fragility during antiracist inquiry.

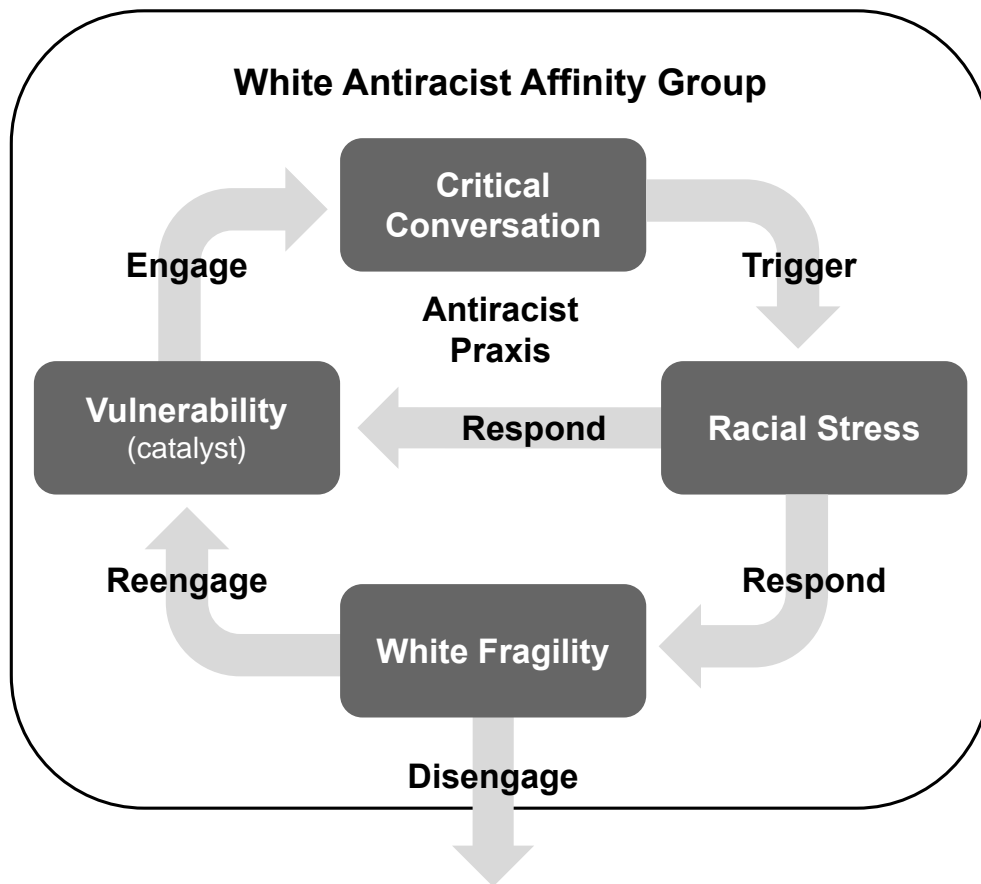


Figure 3 Framework for Vulnerable Engagement in Antiracist Inquiry

### The Dangers of White Fragility without Vulnerability

Findings revealed that when white educators responded to racial stress with expressions of white fragility that were not met with expressions of vulnerability, it led them to disengage from antiracist inquiry. Specifically, when white fragility occurred without vulnerability, it led to misguided action, passive inaction, and uncritical engagement with critical conversations.

Throughout the year, Hannah struggled to find someone from the other schools in the district who would be willing to lead BARWE discussions for white educators

at their school. Hannah attributed this hesitancy and anxiety to their past experience with “racially charged incidents” that “resulted in massive curriculum changes and/or firings” (November debrief). Hannah shared a story of one such incident that led to misguided action rather than vulnerable engagement with antiracism:

Two years ago, there was a high school English teacher who was teaching *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The kids were, I don't know, being annoying and not paying attention or whatever, and so he was reading a page that had the N-word in it, and he read the word and he didn't give any sort of prep work around that, and it blew up. I mean the kids were pissed. He didn't respond well. It was just a poorly handled situation. Out of that situation came a letter to admin from the students saying that they thought the curriculum of that class was racist because all of the books that were about Black people were really depressing and there was no Black joy, which is like a legitimate critique. But the letter sort of—The kids were mad at the teacher, so they were trying to go around the teacher, right, to send this letter. And then admin, rather than saying, ‘Hey, you know what we should do, we should all try to deal with this together,’ admin just, they didn't fire him, but they forced a scripted curriculum on that class and they banned every book he had taught that year. Which like, that's not the answer, guys. Like, you can't just ban Zora Neale Hurston. ... The answer is not to do that. The answer is to try to look at the curriculum and see where you can incorporate more Black joy rather than just banning any book that's depressing about Black people. (Hannah, November debrief)

The students raised a legitimate concern about the lack of Black joy in the curriculum, which triggered racial stress for the administration. However, rather than responding with expressions of vulnerability that would allow the school to acknowledge fault and accept responsibility for making curriculum changes with the input of the BIPOC students, the administration responded with expressions of white fragility that completely avoided engaging with the issue presented by the students. Their uncritical engagement left them searching for superficial, easy fixes that could be enacted without directly addressing the issues raised by the students. Ultimately, the

administration decided to take the misguided action of banning all books by Zora Neale Hurston. Their expressions of white fragility led to the further exclusion of influential Black voices when the following year they replaced *Their Eyes Were Watching God* with *Friday Night Lights*, which has both the N-word and has “a ton of racism in it” (Hannah, January debrief).

Another example of misguided action unfolded during the February and March BARWE meetings. During the February meeting, critical conversations centered on the topic of SEL as policing (Kaler-Jones, 2020) and sought to answer the question, “How can we create classroom culture that resists white supremacy and that nourishes Black joy?” During the meeting, teachers critiqued the ways in which CCMS had used character development classes to teach SEL. Many of the white teachers suggested the school should rethink or get rid of such classes based on the idea that SEL, when used as a form of policing, is harmful to BIPOC students. A month later at the end of the March BARWE meeting, the principal announced that CCMS would not be doing character development next year. He then explained how [several Black educators] love character development and were upset that the class was being removed. This pushback from the Black staff members triggered racial stress. However, rather than responding with expressions of vulnerability, the principal expressed white fragility by avoiding critical engagement and announcing that the school would be making the change anyway (March fieldnotes). Hannah was surprised by this announcement:

**Hannah:** One of the things [someone] was really excited about in my small group was that there wasn't going to be character development, but then you heard [the principal] share out that it actually is something that our Black staff members or some of our Black members are going to miss. So, that was an interesting thing that I wish we could have dug into a little bit more as a school. Also, I really wish he would have had a whole group conversation about that before just delivering that

message to the character development [teachers], I don't know. It just seems interesting to me that he as a boss would not have facilitated some sort of joint meeting before that decision was made. ... It just feels like he was breeding this idea that like, 'Oh, a group of white people has made a decision. Now the Black staff members are upset about it.' It's like, 'Yeah, that's why the next step is not make the decision, the next is have a conversation with everybody.' And I don't know why I need to explain that to him.

**Diane:** So, does it seem like those cross-group conversations still aren't necessarily happening at the school?

**Hannah:** I don't think they're happening at all. (Hannah, March debrief)

The decision to eliminate character development classes seemed to come directly from the critical conversations during the February BARWE meeting. Which would mean that the decision was made by a primarily white administration after having conversations with a group of white educators, without bringing any BIPOC educators into the conversation. The principal and other administrators expressed fragility by being either too hesitant or entirely unwilling to meet with the BIPOC staff members prior to making this decision. This misguided action highlights the importance of BIPOC accountability for white antiracist affinity groups.

#### Progressing from White Fragility to Vulnerability and Antiracist Praxis

When expressions of white fragility are met with vulnerability, it enables white educators to reengage in the process of critical reflection and opens up the possibility for antiracist action (Figure 3). Vulnerability functions as a catalyst in that it was shown to precipitate antiracist praxis. Following expressions of vulnerability, participants engaged in antiracist reflection through active self-monitoring for biases, critically reflecting on how BARWE topics were present in their own curriculum and pedagogy, reflecting on the perspectives and experiences of their BIPOC students and

colleagues, and engaging in additional reading and reflection outside of BARWE. Following antiracist reflection, participants engaged in antiracist action by amplifying BIPOC efforts at CCMS or in the community, working collaboratively to bring about school-level changes, adapting their curriculum and pedagogical practices, and talking to people about race and racism outside of BARWE. Vulnerability creates a closed loop, which allows white teachers to remain engaged in critical conversations and antiracist praxis (Figure 3).

The following example illustrates how Felicia remains engaged in antiracist praxis and progresses through the closed loop after initially responding to racial stress with expressions of white fragility. As a white teacher, Felicia sometimes struggles to situate herself in support of Black joy (Love, 2019a) without expressing white fragility through appropriation or centering her own whiteness. “As a white person, how do you appreciate Black Joy but not appropriate it?” Felicia asked during our October debrief. “It feels like there’s stuff that I just shouldn’t really touch. [*chuckle*] It’s like I don’t really feel like it’s my place to comment on this, or have an opinion, or is something I just can’t relate to, or don’t have in common” (October debrief). Felicia experiences racial stress when her experiences as a white educator are incongruent with her Black students’ experiences or expressions of Black joy. One way that Felicia tried to make space for Black joy in her classroom was by intentionally including more Black artists in the curriculum. The following excerpt from our October debrief provides an example of how Felicia expressed white fragility and vulnerability before ultimately engaging in antiracist praxis:

**Felicia:** I do an afterschool club that just started like two weeks ago. It’s like an art club that we’re doing virtually. And I did a little interest inventory survey at the beginning. ... One of the many questions was, like as far as how we spend our time, I asked ‘Do you want to learn

about artists and artist's movements?' And then another question is, 'Do you want to learn about Black artists specifically?' And that was like, the overwhelming response was yes to learning about Black artists specifically. And I was hesitant to ask that. Not super hesitant, but I was like, 'Ah, I don't know if I should ask this. It's kind of like blunt, but who cares? Whatever.' So, I did, and I'm glad I did because I think it was the question that had the most yeses. So, I feel like that's a good place for me to start. I always actively try to teach diverse artists and leave the cannon of just white dudes and white dude painters, because I feel like it's just such a fallback for so many. But I think that that is still scratching at the surface of diversifying my curriculum. ... And I do think part of that is also because this whole past quarter, I've been teaching computer literacy. And that's really just 'learn how to copy, learn how to paste.' And it's like, 'Yes, I can try to infuse racial justice into that.' But it's also like, 'You fucking need to know how to copy and paste.'

**Diane:** You mentioned you were originally hesitant to ask them about learning about Black artists specifically. Do you know what was making you hesitate?

**Felicia:** Yeah. I think it was fleeting, but I think it felt like I didn't want it to feel inauthentic. I didn't want it to feel like leading ... and those were my fleeting concerns, but it was an authentic question that I wanted to know the answer to. And then in terms of if it was leading, I mean it is. [*chuckle*] And I need to be okay with that.

**Diane:** What helped you decide to go ahead and ask the question?

**Felicia:** I think, honestly, this sounds like a little cheesy, but I do think I tried to put myself—Again, this all happened in probably like 10 seconds, but I feel if that was something they truly wanted to learn, I wanted to make sure that it was something that I gave them those opportunities to express their interest. I didn't want them to not be asked that question specifically, and especially to not be asking due to whatever discomfort I may be experiencing.

**Diane:** And it sounds like you're glad that the question ended up on there?

**Felicia:** Yeah, I am. I am. I'm really glad. (October debrief)

Felicia experienced racial stress when she thought about asking her students if they would like to learn about Black artists. Talking about race with her students, even in the form of a survey, triggered racial stress. Despite her initial hesitation, which is an expression of white fragility, Felicia was able to express vulnerability by engaging bravely and moving outside of her comfort zone. Ultimately, antiracist action occurred because she did not want her own discomfort to take the opportunity to learn about Black artists away from her students; she did not want her own white fragility to disrupt antiracist praxis. Felicia was able to remain engaged in the closed loop of antiracist praxis because she expressed vulnerability by recognizing the white fragility within herself and consciously decided to engage in antiracist praxis by adding the questions to her survey despite her discomfort.

#### Vignettes of Vulnerability as a Catalyst for Antiracist Praxis

The following vignettes provide insight into how Hannah, Felicia, and Megan are progressing through the framework outlined in Figure 3. The first vignette explores how Hannah's expression of vulnerability became a catalyst for curriculum change. The second vignette explores how Felicia's expression of vulnerability became a catalyst for publicly redressing misguided actions. The third vignette explores how Megan's expression of vulnerability became a catalyst for pedagogical change.

#### **Vulnerability as a Catalyst for Curriculum Change**

During the December and January BARWE meetings, teachers were asked to critically examine their own curriculum for instances of *curriculum violence* (Ighodaro & Wiggan, 2010; Jones, 2020). This deep dive into curriculum was especially challenging for teachers at CCMS because they have been tasked with writing their

own curriculum. Which means each example of curriculum violence discussed in the meeting became of point of racial stress for those teachers who had written, adapted, or implemented the lessons. For Hannah, these instances of racial stress triggered an emotional response which she recognized as expressions of white fragility within herself. However, rather than disengaging from the critical conversations, Hannah expressed vulnerability by being emotionally willing to remain engaged in the critical conversation and acknowledging her role in perpetuating curriculum violence.

Reflecting on the ELA curriculum triggered racial stress, which Hannah responded to by expressing white fragility through feelings of discomfort and hesitancy. Hannah began by reflecting on the seventh-grade ELA curriculum she had been in charge of writing a few years earlier. Although she would still describe it as a “kick-ass curriculum,” she also acknowledges that the curriculum focuses too heavily on Black trauma and oppression:

They read Black authors, white authors, very urban, suburban, rural [authors]; so, there’s all these different viewpoints. But when you think about what those books actually are and who holds the power in all of those books, like *Raisin in the Sun* and *Bronx Masquerade*. While they’re both Black voices, they’re both oppressed Black voices, and they’re both oppressed Black voices that are fighting back, but they are both definitely oppression tales. So, I think that is something to think about and reflect upon and acknowledge that that is problematic.  
(Hannah, January debrief)

Hannah critically examines her own choice to include exclusively oppressed Black voices in the curriculum without making room for “narratives of joy and resistance” (Jones, 2020). Even in this moment of vulnerability, Hannah continues to express white fragility. She wavered between describing problematic parts of the curriculum as “inherited” and acknowledging that she “chose to keep” them when she had rewritten the curriculum. Each time she engages in the defensive move of pushing

responsibility for the curriculum violence onto someone else, she quickly issues a verbal correction to acknowledge responsibility: “So, for example, the text that they read in seventh-grade that I inherited, so I chose to keep *The Outsiders* and *Bronx Masquerade* ... and then I chose to add, I fought to add, *A Raisin in the Sun*” (Hannah, January debrief). After engaging in critical conversations about curriculum violence, Hannah concluded, “I could have done more to change it” (January debrief). However, she was no longer in a position to make changes to the seventh-grade ELA curriculum, which caused her to shift her focus to her upcoming unit for eighth-grade ELA.

### Confronting Fragility

During the December BARWE meeting, Hannah’s unit on gun violence was a topic of conversation in several small groups, which triggered racial stress and left her feeling exposed and defensive:

**Hannah:** I think on a surface level, it just feels like being judged and found wanting. And I don’t think that is what it is, but I think that is what it feels like. It’s one thing for me and the other people teaching that unit to sit there and be like, ‘Oh yeah, this is problematic,’ but to know that in at least three or four different breakout rooms that unit was being talked about. It does activate a little bit of that shame quality, and I think not in any way that’s going to be lastingly problematic. I’m not losing sleep over it, but I think it initializes that shame response, because it’s not a good thing. You’re being talked about, not you specifically, but something you’re doing is being talked about in a negative light.

**Diane:** Looking back on it now, are you still having some of those same feelings?

**Hannah:** Yeah, I think the logic side of my brain knows that everyone in the school knows that this unit is problematic, including me, and has known for a couple of years. And so, is it surprising to me that it came up in a discussion of curriculum violence? No, it’s not surprising to me at all. It’s like a very glaringly obvious example. I think it just paved

the way and made it easier to tell admin I'm changing this unit. Like, 'This is being changed.' (December debrief)

Being the topic of critical conversation triggered racial stress that left Hannah feeling fragile. Although she notes that people were discussing the curriculum in a negative light and not her specifically, it still felt extremely personal. She struggled to reconcile her logical thoughts with her emotional response and continued to express feelings of discomfort and shame.

Hannah has been teaching this unit for years, but acknowledges that it "has been problematic" since she first taught it (Hannah, December debrief). Although she has "tweaked" the gun violence unit over the years, she has not made any vast changes despite feelings of angst and discomfort:

I find discomfort with the fact that I've done it for three years and not had the impetus to stop and say, 'This is problematic.' And I've always told myself, 'Oh, but the kids love it,' and they do, they really connect with it, but for some kids, it's really retraumatizing, so that is something that needs to be weighed. (Hannah, January debrief)

Last year, Hannah recalled talking to the principal "about how we needed to be trauma-trained to teach this unit" and she took the time to document some of her thoughts on the unit over the summer (December debrief). However, it was the critical conversations in her small group that finally pushed her to make sweeping changes to the curriculum: "I think that BARWE was an empowering opportunity" (Hannah, December debrief). BARWE helped Hannah confront her expressions of white fragility with expressions of vulnerability, which kept her engaged in the critical conversations that ultimately led to antiracist praxis.

## Putting Critical Reflection into Action

Engaging in critical conversations during the BARWE meeting encouraged Hannah to reflect more deeply on her curriculum. However, critical reflection is only the first step; antiracist praxis also requires antiracist action. Hannah's expressions of vulnerability functioned as a catalyst for antiracist praxis, positioning her as emotionally willing to engage in the process despite feelings of fragility.

While the gun violence unit had involved empowering students to use their voices to end gun violence, the content was unnecessarily retraumatizing for students. As Hannah explained, "This is a unit that every year, the first question would be like, 'Who in this room has experienced gun violence either against themselves or the death of a family member,' and every single hand went up" (January focus group). In rewriting the gun violence unit, Hannah focused on "using your voice to affect change through activism" by looking at four different realms of social justice: environmental justice, disability justice, racial justice, and LGBTQIA+ justice (January focus group). While it was initially hard to let go of her gun violence unit, Hannah was also "really freaking psyched" about implementing her new unit on activism:

We'll have a guest speaker from each realm of justice come in and the kids will read one first-person narrative, non-fiction about working in that realm of justice and then the kids will pick a realm. They then spend the rest of the unit reading and working in one of those four areas. And then at the end, the final project is basically to submit a proposal on how our school can do better in that particular area and/or run a lunch bunch for younger kids to educate them or film a PSA or something like that. So, I'm excited! (Hannah, January focus group)

Hannah addressed the curriculum violence in her unity by shifting the focus from trauma to activism. This change also made room for incorporating new issues that focused on intersectional identities into her classroom:

This was my first year teaching a unit that explicitly had LGBTQIA+ voices and issues in it, and that felt like a huge win. ... There was a writing activity afterwards and the number of kids who self-identified as part of [the LGBTQIA+] community in their writing pieces, I was like, ‘Yeah, of course, you need to see yourself in this room.’ That they have the bravery to share that with me and their classmates, and that they finally were reading about trans youth or just reading about that community in a way that they haven’t been able to do in school before, felt good. (Hannah, March debrief)

The new unit helped students feel seen. They were no longer positioned as a room full of students impacted by gun violence. Instead, they were able to explore new and diverse aspects of their diverse, intersectional identities.

Although this curriculum change felt like a big win, Hannah also acknowledged that this was not the only instance of curriculum violence she needs to address. This unit was *a* problem, but it was not *the only* problem: “I am sure there are other instances of curriculum violence within my own class throughout the entire year, but if I only say this one glaringly obvious unit is the problem, then I’m missing all the other instances” (Hannah, December focus group). Addressing curriculum violence is an ongoing process, which Hannah thinks about as part of the continual process of antiracist reflection (curriculum evaluation) and action (curriculum revision)—antiracist praxis. Changes are a part of the process, because teachers should always be growing, learning, and changing:

There’s so much to do in terms of curriculum, and there never stops being stuff to do. Ideally the curriculum would change every year in small, significant ways. ... To be relevant, you have to be changing it all the time, but then the work never stops. And then, to me at least, it feels pretty fricking exhausting and overwhelming. ... As practitioners, we need to just get used to looking. We look at this for reading level, and we look at this for math rigor, and we look at this for standards. We need time every-year to look at our curriculum and what we’re teaching in terms of race and racism. I think that was my takeaway from it. And it seems like there were some really solid conversations happening.

Based on the feedback and based on the groups I was in, it seemed like people were really taking the time to be personally reflective. (Hannah, December focus group)

Changing the curriculum requires getting teachers to personally invest in an ongoing process of reflection and revision, especially at a school like CCMS where teachers are in charge of writing their own curriculum.

Vulnerability promotes a cycle of active reflection and reflective action, through which participants were able to apply antiracism in their work as an educator. For Hannah, vulnerability was a catalyst for rewriting the ELA curriculum (Figure 4). Although she has previously reflected on the need to revise her unit on gun violence, becoming the topic of conversation as an example of a teacher who has perpetuated curriculum violence triggered racial stress, which Hannah responded to with expressions of white fragility. Despite her discomfort, Hannah expressed vulnerability by being emotionally willing to stay in the discomfort and acknowledge her own culpability, which helped her reengage in the critical conversation. Remaining in the critical conversation proved to be an important part of antiracist praxis, as it provided the space and support for critically reflecting on trauma associated with teaching about gun violence with students whose own lives had been directly impacted by such violence. Expressing vulnerability helped Hannah transform a traumatic unit into an opportunity to feature diverse voices and perspectives in her classroom.

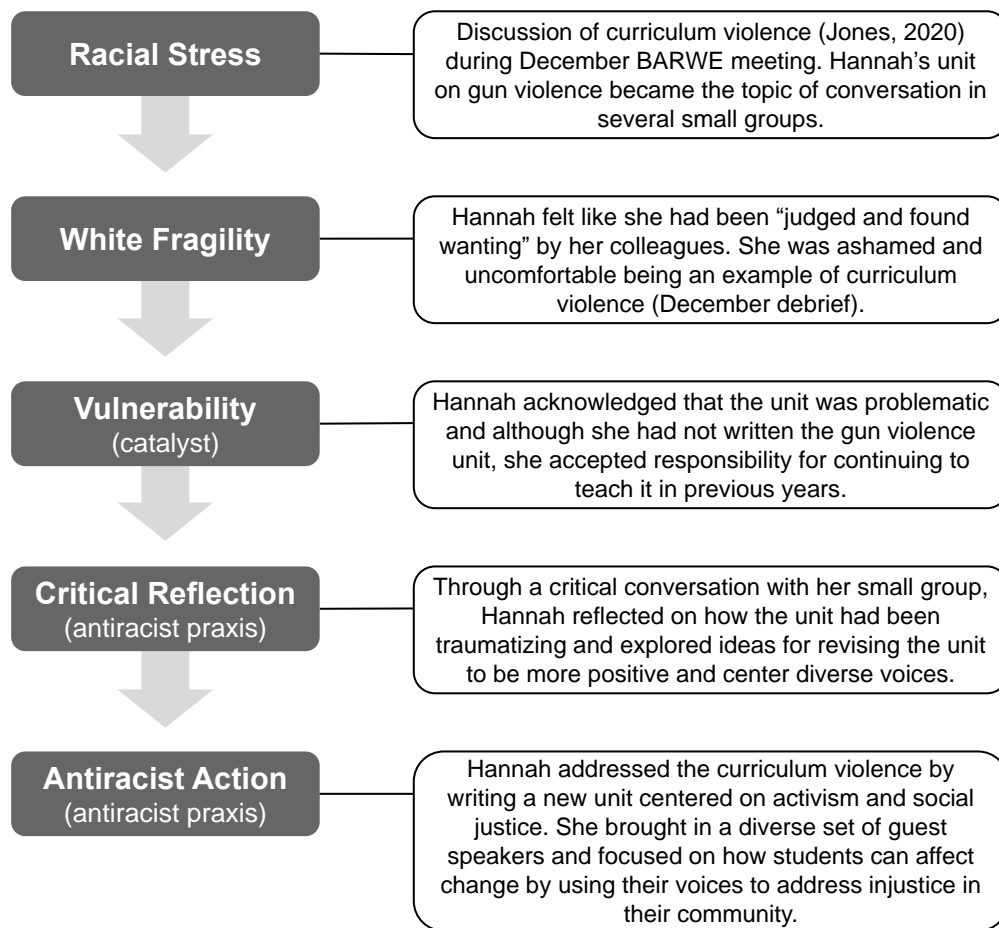


Figure 4 Vulnerability as Catalyst for Curriculum Change

### **Vulnerability as a Catalyst for Redressing Misguided Action**

A few days before the February BARWE meeting, the CCMS principal sent an email to Felicia and the other enrichment teachers regarding their decision to hire a new enrichment teacher who would take over the character development classes. After reading the email, Felicia immediately replied all, which she described as “pretty out of character” for her (February debrief). In the email, Felicia threw in her “two cents” about incorporating mindfulness, self-regulatory strategies, and building growth

mindsets, which she refers to as “developing a YET mentality for life.” A few hours later, she read the February BARWE article (Kaler-Jones, 2020), which focuses on how Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has been misused to police the bodies of Black and Brown students in schools.

Felicia has been involved in antiracist work for several years and she often finds herself “nodding along” with the antiracism articles she reads. But this one helped her eyes “open wider for the first time” because it provided a perspective she had not previously considered (February debrief). However, she also noticed herself expressing white fragility while reading, which left her feeling resistant to Kaler-Jones’ (2020) perspective on SEL. When she read the title, “When SEL is Used as Another Form of Policing,” her initial reaction was “What the fuck?” She rolled her eyes and asked herself “God, is everything fucking racist?” before she even began to read. The article triggered racial stress, causing Felicia to feel “frustrated” and “bogged down in self-pity type thinking” (February debrief). “Okay, you still feel that way,” she said to herself, acknowledging this moment of white fragility. “It’s like I needed [the author] to at least give the pat on the back for trying.” When the article began to address the science behind SEL, Felicia was able to feel “a little bit more self-congratulatory, and less eye-rolly” (February debrief). She found the reference to Dena Simmons’ characterization of SEL as “white supremacy with a hug” (Kaler-Jones, 2020; Mada, 2019) very impactful, and felt “genuinely moved and not annoyed by the notion of self-regulation” (February debrief). By the end of the article, Felicia was able to hear and receive Kaler-Jones’ argument. She was able to become vulnerable enough to allow her view of SEL to change.

Reading the Kaler-Jones (2020) article caused Felicia to change her stance on the new enrichment position, so she hit “reply all” a second time and composed another email less than an hour after sending the first:

‘I just read this month’s BARWE article, and I’d like to amend my previous reply instead of focusing on self-regulation strategies, I will instead refer to this paragraph as a reminder that there is already lots for our students to celebrate and this class could also be an opportunity to focus on the now for what students already bring to the table.’ And then the quote I included, it was basically a whole paragraph: ‘Healing, for Black and Brown young people, should be centered in SEL. We must not lose the importance of co-constructing spaces with young people, to lean into creative expression and joy—to shift conversations to what Dr. Shawn Ginwright<sup>22</sup> calls a healing centered perspective, where young people are reminded that they are not just their trauma, but rather all of the ways they continue to dream, imagine, hope, and grow. Let them dance, sing, laugh, play, scream, organize, and encourage all the brilliant ways they show up. SEL devoid of culturally-affirming practices and understandings, is not SEL at all.’<sup>23</sup> (Felicia, February debrief)

Rather than disengaging or descending into the discursive practices of white fragility, Felicia expressed vulnerability by publicly acknowledging she had been wrong. She also engaged in antiracist action by sharing the excerpt from Kaler-Jones’ (2020) article on SEL and inviting her colleagues into conversation regarding the teaching of SEL at CCMS. While she wasn’t hesitant to send the first email supporting SEL, she was hesitant to send the follow-up email acknowledging and correcting her misguided action. The decision to send the second email was inspired by an analogy the principal

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<sup>22</sup> Kaler-Jones (2020) includes an internal link to Ginwright’s (2018) article, “The Future of Healing: Shifting from Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement.”

<sup>23</sup> Kaler-Jones, 2020, para. 9

had made during a BARWE meeting about informing people when they have done something racist the same way you would inform them about having spinach in their teeth. Felicia calls this the “you have racism in your teeth” concept: “It’s just like, ‘Oop! I made this statement and now maybe it wasn’t the best-informed statement, so I want to acknowledge that and pivot to the best of my ability with the new information that I have gathered” (February debrief). This concept of having racism in her teeth helped Felicia become vulnerable enough to engage in antiracist action by “replying all” to acknowledge her changed perspective and invite her colleagues into the discussion about transforming SEL at CCMS.

For Felicia, vulnerability was a catalyst for redressing her previous understanding of SEL as an exclusively positive experience for students (Figure 5). When she first started reading Kaler-Jones’ (2020) article, Felicia responded to racial stress with expressions of white fragility, feeling herself becoming immediately resistant to the idea that SEL was negatively impacting BIPOC students. Despite her strong emotional response and initial defensiveness, Felicia expressed vulnerability by positioning herself as emotionally willing to remain in the discomfort. After reading the article, Felicia realized she needed to take antiracist action by amending her email. However, this again triggered racial stress, which she responded to with expressions of white fragility through discomfort and shame. Ultimately, Felicia was able to express vulnerability through brave engagement by composing a new email in which she acknowledged that her first email had been misguided and invited her colleagues into a discussion centered around Kaler-Jones’ (2020) perspective of SEL.

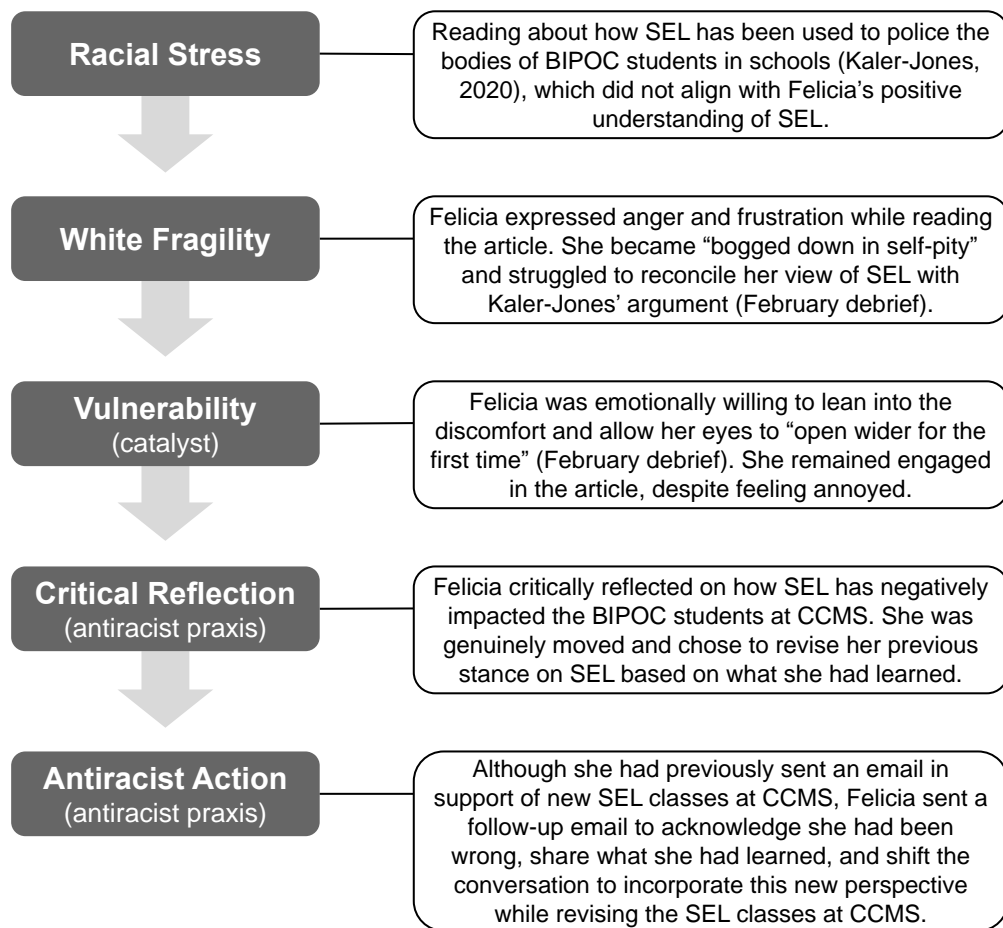


Figure 5 Vulnerability as Catalyst for Redressing Misguided Action

### Vulnerability as a Catalyst for Pedagogical Change

When it comes to antiracist teaching, Megan reminds herself that “math teachers are not off the hook” (initial interview). In the midst of BLM protests and the COVID-19 pandemic, Megan began to ask, “How do I make sure my classroom is safe, even virtually, and how do I not ignore this?” (initial interview). Megan wants to make sure her classroom a safe space for her BIPOC students to learn and be: “Whiteness is a standard and it is everywhere, and I have to be so cognizant of making

sure I'm not upholding some white standard, and that is hard" (initial interview). During virtual teaching, this sometimes looked like letting students freely unmute themselves and letting the chat "run wild," because Megan sees "turning your chat off is a white standard" for controlling and silencing students (initial interview). Beyond that, Megan is looking to make her math classroom a place for civics and culturally responsive teaching: "I'm not off the hook with this. I feel like nobody should be. It's everyone" (initial interview). By December, Megan was "exhausted" from the "uphill battle" of cultivating a math curriculum free of curriculum violence (December focus group).

To support this change, Megan focused on reading articles about how to teach math with a focus on equity and antiracism. She started "having students use justification as an equity practice that give students like equitable access" and explicitly "talking about Math [to help] them develop their agency and support their engagement" (December debrief). She started to focus on "purposefully using the math content to get into civics." Specifically, Megan started thinking about her math curriculum and pedagogy in terms of "the ethics part, the rehumanizing part, the specific skills, like justification as a specific skill that you can hone to try to get more equity in your room" (December debrief). She also started following scholars such as Rochelle Gutiérrez, a math educator who "has a bunch of articles about how to rehumanize" math. In an *Education Weekly* article Megan shared with me, Gutiérrez is quotes as saying:

Math education has been very focused on access and closing the achievement gap, around grit and growth mindset. Those ideas are centered around individuals, and ways of thinking they need to adopt. We haven't focused enough on identity or systems of power. Students should be able to see themselves in the curriculum, recognize math as a

tool for making their lives better, and question what math is, and the purpose of math. (Gewertz, 2019)

This is how Megan tried to refocus her classroom, prioritizing community and collaboration over individualism and trying to make her curriculum culturally relevant for her students.

While doing her own reading on antiracist math pedagogy, Megan came across an idea that she summarized as, “You’re not teaching math the right way if you’re not talking about math with other non-white math teachers” (December focus group). When she read this, Megan “looked around the building like, ‘Oh my God, there are no Black math teachers? (Megan, December focus group). Although the students are predominantly Black, the math teachers are entirely white. While diversifying the math department is a long-term goal, Megan is also looking to make changes to the way she teaches right now. She recognizes the urgency in cultivating an antiracist math classroom because she knows that math functions as a gatekeeper, especially in connection to standardized testing:

I love Ibram X. Kendi’s quote on standardized testing, which I would like to quote here. I feel like that relates to Math in some ways. “The use of standardized tests to measure aptitude and intelligence is one of the most effective racist policies ever devised to degrade Black minds and legally exclude Black bodies. We degrade Black minds every time we speak of an academic ‘achievement gap’ based on these numbers,” and that’s from Ibram X. Kendi, *How to be an Antiracist*.<sup>24</sup> And those tests are gatekeepers. If a child doesn’t get into algebra in high school, you basically sealed your fate, and that’s a really scary part of math. (December debrief)

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<sup>24</sup> Kendi, 2019, p. 101

Megan's continued engagement shows that she is emotionally willing to sit in the discomfort while she reads and learns about the role she and other math teachers have played in perpetuating white supremacy culture in their math classrooms.

Through reading and critical examination, Megan began to think about math as community:

If you're doing math alone, you're not really doing math. If you're not starting from a place of community where every input is valued and mistakes help you move to the better direction and all of that, and every voice, you're not really teaching math. Math has that strong community in the same way that science does. We're not really making math relevant or it's not culturally responsive or relevant to our kids.  
(December debrief)

Changing how she thought about "doing math" helped Megan shift her classroom expectations for when her students were doing in math. As Megan explains, it's the "same thing with science," which is also meant to be done in community: "You've got to share that data, that's the reason you're doing all that scientific method stuff, and math is the same way" (November debrief). Although Megan has been able to develop a community in her classroom, she is lacking a way to specifically link the idea of community to the "content and process of doing math" because "you are not doing [math] if you're doing it alone." Megan ties the idea of teamwork and doing math as community to Okun's (2000) article on white supremacy culture, because doing math in community is "a way to combat individualism" (November debrief):

Every single person brings value, even the mistakes. How do we show that? And I want that to be celebrated, open arms. You're cool to fuck up because we know your contribution is still valuable and there's still going to be a space for that. ... Your mistake is going to help us explain it more clearly to you and just each other and make sure we all kind of got it. I don't think we have that kind of culture yet, and that's hard to build for anybody, but I think it needs to be deliberate. (Megan, November debrief)

While the concept of community is more widely known and used in relation to teaching science, Megan wants to see the same shift happen in her math classrooms.

During the January BARWE meeting, teachers met in content-area groups to discuss the curriculum. Several teachers in the math group felt that the curriculum needed to be changed, but they struggled to name or identify *what* needed to be changed. One math teacher brought up the example of a word problem set in a Chinese noodle factory. He felt like there was something they needed to talk about with this example, but he couldn't identify what it was. "Is there something there?" he asked, throwing his hands in the air and then resting his head in his hands (January fieldnotes). Megan experienced a similar challenge (read "racial stress") while reflecting on her own math curriculum:

I think that was a hard part for me also—admitting I don't have the answers and I am not necessarily doing it right, but I do see a glaring fucking hole. I can at least point out the hole and I'm saying I have the same hole, but I just want to make sure that you guys are not running around the network thinking this hole doesn't exist. It does, and I don't have an answer for it. (Megan, January focus group)

Megan knew there were problems with their math curriculum and pedagogy, but she struggled to find a viable solution. When CCMS offered support from an instructional coach, Megan decided to use this support to make antiracist changes to her math curriculum that focused on the concept of math as community:

We planned that lesson together, trying to figure out ways we can make math more culturally responsive. ... My coach helped me sit down and like, 'How can we draw on all those funds of knowledge that the fifth graders are bringing and what did they think of this particular math problem? Was it realistic to them? Did they like it?' and just broaching it from that way. ... And then [the instructional coach] just had a nice talk with me about how just because something's not relevant, doesn't mean it's not worth their time. ... This is now the new focus of my whole coaching. How do we link math to fifth grade in a way that

makes sense to them and honors what they bring and honors what they want to learn about in math? (January focus group)

The critical conversations in BARWE helped Megan shift how she was thinking about antiracism in her classroom and encouraged her to work with the instructional coach to make substantial revisions to her curriculum and pedagogy. She took her BARWE reflections and put them into action. However, she also attributes these changes to putting in a lot of antiracist work her own. Outside of BARWE, Megan read books on antiracism and sought out math-specific resources and antiracist curriculum ideas.

During her first meeting the coach, Megan focused on how to make her math classroom antiracist. Megan worked with the instructional coach to figure out what an antiracist math classroom could look like at CCMS. They studied what antiracism looked like “from a math lens,” beginning with specific strategies and pedagogical approaches Megan could use in her classroom and looking toward what it could mean to have an antiracist math department:

We were focusing first on what math are they bringing in. Let’s build on the math they’re bringing in. ... Even if we kept the same exact lesson, ... we would incorporate questions at the end. I was like, ‘Hey, was this scenario realistic? Is this something you would actually see?’ So, it’s just like that gave them just enough buy-in. ... We get conversations [started] that way. Some of it was when we would open the problem, almost like giving them a choice of how they were going to [solve it]. ‘What tool did you use and what strategy did you use?’ And I was like, use any strategy or any way. So that was kind of giving them a little bit of ownership that way. ... So basically, it came down to how do we shift the mathematical authority from the teacher back to the students, because I feel like I’m such a control-heavy person too, and so we were just figuring out little ways to let them be in control. (final interview)

Over the course of this study, Megan completely changed her pedagogical approaches to teaching math.

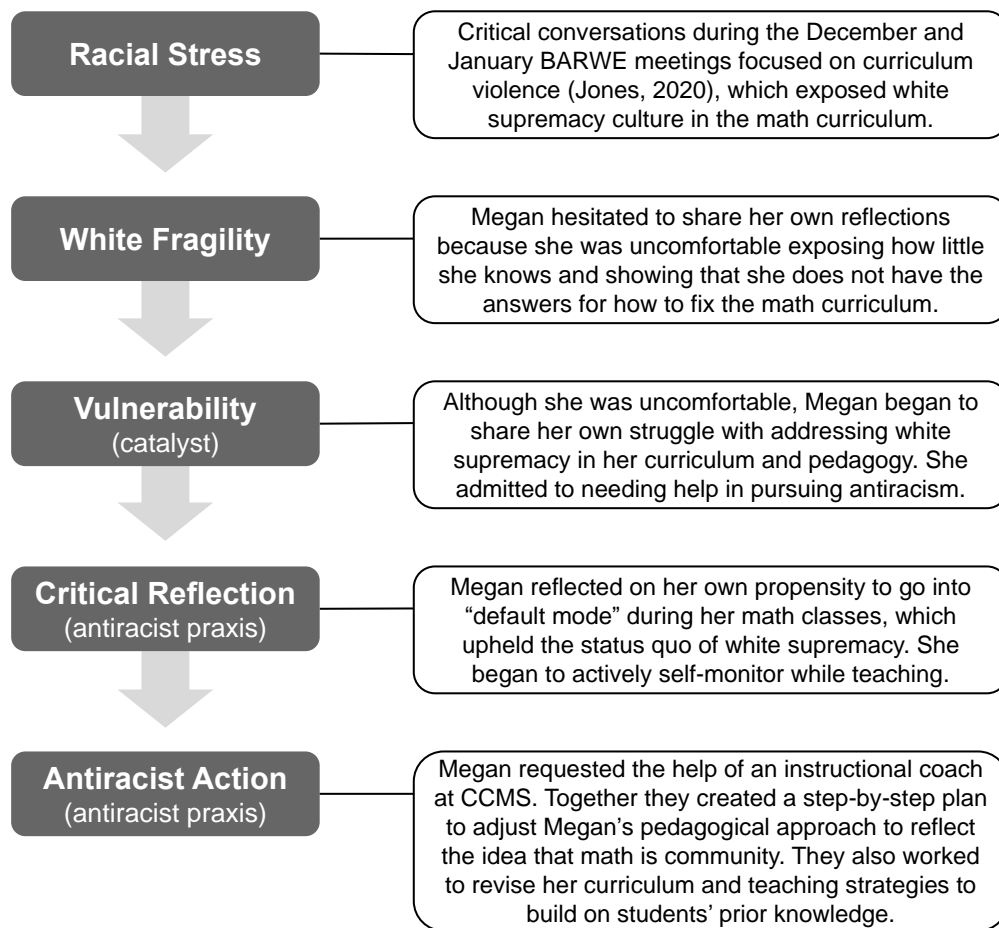


Figure 6 Vulnerability as Catalyst for Pedagogical Change

For Megan, vulnerability was a catalyst for making sweeping curriculum and pedagogical changes in her math classroom (Figure 6). While Megan was willing to reflect on how white supremacy culture was continuing to persist in her math classroom, she experienced fragility when it came to sharing her personal reflections with her white colleagues during critical conversations. Megan frequently positioned herself as an outspoken critic of white inaction at CCMS and she was hesitant to expose her own shortcomings as an antiracist teacher. By expressing vulnerability, she

was able to bravely engage during the critical conversations by identifying the ways in which she was continuing to struggle to bring antiracism into her math curriculum and pedagogy. She also expressed vulnerability by seeking help from an instructional coach with the explicit purpose of pursuing antiracist approaches to math education. Together they created a plan to transform how and what Megan was teaching. They also planned to share these new approaches and resources with the other math teachers at CCMS. Expressing vulnerability helped Megan address elements of white supremacy culture and create a more culturally responsive math classroom for her BIPOC students.

#### Moving from Critical Conversations to Antiracist Praxis

Critical conversations during BARWE small group discussions played an important role in fostering vulnerable dispositions and promoting antiracist praxis. Below I present two vignettes that focus on Megan's small group, which was the focus of my field observations throughout this study. During monthly BARWE meetings, Megan frequently expressed vulnerability through brave engagement. She would often waver between hesitating to share her thoughts and bravely confronting instances of racism or racial inequity. Her willingness to move outside her comfort zone, helped her to engage her colleagues in critical conversations, many of which focused on their specific curriculum.

#### **Challenging the ELA Curriculum**

The English language arts (ELA) curriculum first came up during the October BARWE meeting, specifically the use of books by white authors that focus on Black characters. It was the first meeting in our self-selected small groups and there were a

lot of tentative pauses. The discussion centered on the topic of Black joy (Love, 2019a) and the guiding question was, “How can we as white educators center Black joy in our classrooms and schools?” The first person to share was an ELA<sup>25</sup> teacher, whom I will refer to as Ms. A. During her reflection, Ms. A connected Black joy back to the book they were currently reading in her class, *Maniac Magee*: “Characters talk about the beauty in the diversity of Black skin. Describing it as like Black, Brown, caramel, and chocolate. Celebrating individual color as part of celebrating Black people and promoting Black joy” (October fieldnotes). Another ELA teacher, Ms. B, also chimed in:

*Maniac Magee* has lots of racial themes. I think about Black joy in terms of exposing students to different authors and texts, choosing Black poets and authors, something that celebrates or writes about Black joy. Playing music by Black artists as working music. Just exposing students. Even though they are Black, they can be naïve. (October fieldnotes)

After Ms. B praised their book selection, there was long pause before Megan began to share her perspective. Although Megan is a math teacher, she reads a lot of young adult literature and tries to keep up with what books are being taught at CCMS. She took a deep breath and told the group, “Books by white authors that describe Black people as ‘chocolate’ are concerning” (October fieldnotes). She went on to call *Maniac Magee* “mad cringy” and suggested that some parts of the book should be critiqued instead of centered and celebrated as an example of Black joy. During her October debrief, Megan reflected on the experience of bravely engaging in a critical conversation:

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<sup>25</sup> The fifth grade ELA teachers also teach social studies classes.

I was a little brave in that I called out their curriculum, because that had been heavy on my mind. They're reading a really cringe book right now, *Maniac Magee*. It is mad cringe. There are literally lines in the book where he goes, 'Oh, I'm so bad, I must be Black,' literally like two or three times. And then it just feels weird the way they talk about the Black characters, in my opinion. There is a way to teach that stuff, but like who is this for? Who is this author? (October focus group)

Two months later, during the December BARWE meeting, the ELA teacher in our small group reported that she had taken Megan's advice and changed the way she was teaching the book *Maniac Magee* with her students. Although it was too late for them to choose a different text, Megan's critical feedback helped them feel empowered to change the way they were teaching the book:

**Ms. A:** Thanks, Megan, for bringing up the problems with *Maniac Magee*. I looked up information about the book and totally changed the way I teach it.

**Ms. B:** Same!

**Megan:** Thanks for saying that. It makes me feel like I can tell you guys things.

**Ms. A:** For example, we paused to talk about the history of race to help students empathize with the characters. What you pointed out totally helps moving forward.

**Ms. B:** We need to change or open our minds to using more books and authors. We were already half way through teaching the book, but we found resources that provide the leverage to have discussions about race and racism. I didn't say this flat out, but the kids realized that books can be 'cringy.'

Although the ELA teachers continued reading *Maniac Magee* with their students, they took Megan's feedback and completely changed the discussions they were having with their students. They explicitly brought the topics of race and racism into their classrooms, and made space for the students to critique the book as well. During her

debrief, Megan shared that she had been “absolutely shocked” when the two teachers thanked her for bringing up the problems with their curriculum:

I was actually shocked because I didn't think they were going to bring that up at all. I didn't think we were going to return to that at all so I was very shocked, very impressed. I've got to say I was really impressed because I didn't know that they heard me the first time. I feel like the first time we had the conversation, she was like talking around me, like I would say something and then she would just like not address it. So, I'm surprised they heard something I said that day. ... And I liked how they talked about the angry Black man [in the story] too, like, how he had a point. I liked that they stopped on that, I thought that was good. Like yeah, he does have a fucking point. So, I'm glad you got the kids to see, and I'm sure some of the kids thought that and didn't want to say something. So, I'm glad [I did]. (December debrief)

Megan was excited to see that by being emotionally willing to sit in the discomfort of engaging her colleagues in critical conversations during BARWE, she was able to bring about real change in the ELA classrooms. Her vulnerable engagement helped move teachers from critical conversations in BARWE to antiracist praxis in their classrooms.

### **Decolonizing the Social Studies Curriculum**

Receiving positive feedback from her small group helped Megan bravely engage in the December BARWE conversation about curriculum violence (Jones, 2020). The guiding question asked, “How can we identify and challenge white supremacy culture in our curriculum?” Before the meeting, Megan looked into the SS curriculum, because some of her students had come to math class using the term “Indians” and she was concerned about the language being used and perpetuated by the curriculum. After Megan shared that she was trying to bring students’ “natural

math abilities” into the math curriculum, she turned to discuss an issue with the social studies<sup>26</sup> (SS) curriculum:

**Megan:** I heard the kids talking about the words ‘Indians’ and ‘settlers’ and they should not be talking about ‘Indians’ at all.

**Ms. A:** The text was talking about Indians in the context of Christopher Columbus calling them Indians...

**Ms. B:** Can you give me an example?

**Megan:** (*Looking through papers on her desk that she printed out in preparation for the BARWE meeting.*) “Who is Christopher Columbus.”

**Ms. A:** These are primary sources. ... Just to give context, not to get defensive, but to give context of when they were used in class. They looked at all three primary source documents to argue that Christopher Columbus is wrongly recognized.

**Megan:** We can’t let students say ‘that I word.’ It’s that deep.

**Ms. A:** But I would push back and say kids need to be taught this.

**Ms. C:**<sup>27</sup> Is there a way that you could still work with this? Like cross out ‘Indian’ and have a physical reminder not to use the word.

**Megan:** The kids kept saying they were writing about ‘Indians.’

**Ms. A:** It was just for that reading

**Megan:** (*Holding up the article*) It says Indians in here.

**Ms. A:** But it’s history. I think you’re taking one reading and ignoring the entire context. You’re just saying like the word choice.

**Megan:** You have a more difficult job than me as ELA and history teachers. I know bringing this to you is heavy and thank you for letting

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<sup>26</sup> At CCMS, Ms. A and Ms. B teach both ELA and SS with their 5<sup>th</sup> grade students.

<sup>27</sup> Ms. C is a 5<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher at CCMS.

me bring this to you. And my stuff is just as bad, so please bring it to me, too. Please bring it to me.

**Ms. B:** I think there's gaping holes in education as it is.

**Megan:** It was like a pull it out of your ass document that wasn't critically analyzed.

**Ms. A:** It was a Read Works<sup>28</sup> document.

**Megan:** They should be able to correct it, like when they are reading they should say NATIVES, like they should know. When the N word comes up in the text, it is starred out...

**Ms. B:** When engaging them in discussions, what would be the appropriate term to use? Should we let them come to their own conclusions or have them be part of the decision? ...

**Megan:** This has been weighing on me, Ms. A, so I hope I didn't hurt you.

**Ms. A:** No, you're right. It was a Read Works article. What I took away was that my students didn't have the right take-aways if they are still using the word Indians. Bring it back up and address why it has changed—that discussion we had didn't work if they're still using the word. (December fieldnotes)

The conversation came to an abrupt stop as our breakout room gave a 10 second countdown before closing. During the whole group share out, Ms. A gave Megan a shout out for making her reevaluate her curriculum: "Even though sometimes I might seem defensive, I'm not" (December fieldnotes). She also highlighted how much she appreciates having a coworker who only wants what's best and helps her rethink the curriculum. Megan replied, "When we're able to bring conflicts to each other and hear

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<sup>28</sup> Read Works is an online resource for educators that produces their own content and resources on improving literacy (<https://about.readworks.org/>).

it—I'm closer to Ms. A. I can keep telling you stuff because you can accept it and I can hopefully accept it too when you come to me" (December fieldnotes).

Although Megan came to the meeting prepared to discuss other parts of the Social Studies curriculum, she kept it to one topic because she noticed the other teacher "was getting defensive" and immediately pointed out that this was a primary source (December debrief). However, as Megan pointed out, the derogatory term for Indigenous Peoples was also used in the Read Works article she used to show the students what she was wanting them to do. While Megan conceded that the primary articles use "the old language," she was critical of the fact that the teacher had used the same offensive language in her example. As Megan explained, "Even if you are using the primary article, when you're modeling that thinking and you're modeling that writing out for them, you need to model" the language you want the students to use (December debrief).

Megan expressed vulnerability several times during the December BARWE meeting, by acknowledging her own shortcomings in creating an antiracist math curriculum, by opening herself up and requesting feedback on her own classes, by being emotionally willing to engage in the difficult conversation, and by bravely engaging despite her own discomfort. Megan explained, "I was nervous because I knew what I was going to say. It was going to be harsh, or not harsh but I knew that they were going to have trouble hearing it" (December debrief). She brought up the offensive language in the BARWE meeting because she thought the other teachers "needed to hear it," even though she knew it would be tough for them to receive the critical feedback. During the discussion, she noticed the other teachers "using this point of, 'Well, it was the past. This is the language we used. It's the past, so I have to

teach it” (December debrief). However, not using offensive language was only part of the issue:

I think that the finer point was, and why people struggle with this is we’re still trying to equate these two things. And it’s like, ‘No, mass genocide doesn’t need to be on equal footing or talked about the same way as a pros and cons thing of the settlers coming. We don’t need to do a pro-con thing.’ And a lot of it was like, ‘Let’s describe the benefits and the... The benefits and the cons of them coming.’ And it’s just like, ‘We don’t have to do that. ... We don’t need to do a pro versus con. They’re not on equal footing.’ ... There are some things that we just don’t have to debate, and we don’t have to act like there’s merits in trying to see both [sides]. (December debrief)

When it comes to colonization, Megan argues there is no need to give equal weight to both perspectives and she places the responsibility for knowing that on the teachers:

“At some point, the obliviousness becomes complicit” (December debrief).

Engaging in this critical conversation during the December BARWE meeting was part of what drove Megan to take steps in developing an antiracist math curriculum with her instructional coach:

We crafted an entire plan, like month-by-month action steps, and it was specific to the Math classroom because I think we came out of the BARWE meeting where I had dragged the Social Studies Department. But I was trying to tell them I didn’t have answers either. My math class wasn’t any better. I just don’t have to teach about white heroes, so I kind of can avoid it a little bit better than they were. I didn’t have an antiracist math classroom, and so for me it does, it maybe does look kind of like she can talk the talk but not walk the walk, and so maybe more to title, oh, it’s so easy for me to call out Frisbee on Facebook, but I’m not jumping up to be on the board. (March debrief)

Megan’s brave engagement helped her colleagues critically reflect and take antiracist action by addressing curriculum violence. Her colleagues’ emotional willingness to receive uncomfortable feedback and acknowledge fault helped Megan critically reflect on her own antiracist teaching and take antiracist action by teaming up with the

instructional coach to create a targeted plan. Vulnerability has helped position Megan for engaging in antiracist praxis: “This whole year has taught me to just embrace the conflict, embrace it, embrace it, embrace it, because we’ve been running from it for so long. I’m not perfect either” (December debrief).

#### Leveraging Prolonged Vulnerable Engagement to Bypass White Fragility

Findings suggest that white teachers are able to leverage their prolonged vulnerable engagement with antiracism to bypass white fragility, thus following the small inner loop in Figure 3. When participants had previously grappled with the topics or otherwise confronted specific racial stressors, they progressed to expressions of vulnerability rather than experiencing white fragility. For example, as Hannah prepared to discuss Black joy during the October BARWE, she acknowledged the ways in which she had previously excluded expressions of Black joy from her classroom without experiencing defensiveness or guilt. She had previously grappled with this topic and her prolonged vulnerable engagement with antiracism prepared her to move toward critical reflection and antiracist action without descending into the discursive practices of white fragility. Similarly, Megan progressed to expressions of vulnerability when discussing white supremacy culture during the September BARWE meeting without experiencing white fragility. Over the summer, she had experienced prolonged vulnerable engagement with the topic of white supremacy, which allowed her to move toward critical reflection and antiracist action without needing to disrupt manifestations of white fragility. This suggests that vulnerability is a skill that can be practiced and improved to diminish the presence of white fragility in antiracist development.

## Section Summary

Expressions of white fragility cause teachers to disengage from critical conversations, which results in uncritical engagement, misguided action, and passive inaction. However, expressions of vulnerability can help teachers reengage in critical conversations and become a catalyst for antiracist praxis. Hannah took on vulnerable stances while engaging in critical conversations and self-examination, which has helped her make major revisions to her ELA curriculum. Felicia expressed vulnerability by remaining in the discomfort while engaging with a new perspective on SEL, which helped her publicly acknowledge and correct her misguided action. Megan expressed vulnerability by acknowledging she needed help in creating an antiracist math classroom and seeking input from an instructional specialist, which helped her make substantial changes to her pedagogy. The critical conversations that happen during BARWE small groups play an important role in fostering vulnerable dispositions and promoting antiracist praxis. By leveraging prolonged vulnerable engagement, white teachers are able to decrease and ultimately bypass expressions of white fragility during critical conversations and take part in antiracist action.

### **Fostering Vulnerability and Promoting Antiracist Praxis in BARWE**

The fourth research question asks, in what ways does the BARWE structure support, or hinder, expressions of vulnerability, white fragility, and antiracist (in)action? Findings suggest that BARWE provides a structure and features that are able to foster vulnerability and promote antiracist praxis among white educators. Beneficial features included critical conversations, creating a comfortable space for brave engagement, decentralized participation structures, and the Inquiry Series 3 (2020-2021) BARWE curriculum. However, two factors were linked to increased

white fragility and inaction—the district-wide professional development (PD) structure and the lack of BIPOC accountability. In the following section, I explore each of the influential features identified during data analysis. I also present an overview of the successes and challenges of facilitating virtual inquiry meetings.

### Encouraging Critical Conversations

Critical conversations are at the heart of BARWE. The primary purpose of BARWE is to engage white educators in critical conversations about race and racism. During such conversations, I observed teachers collaboratively problem solving, telling stories about their experiences with racism and antiracism, and intentionally engaging in context-specific dialogue guided by the BARWE curriculum. These critical conversations engage white educators in antiracist reflection, which is one half of antiracist praxis, with the goal of promoting antiracist action, which is the second half of antiracist praxis. According to Felicia, white educators are “processing and understanding and asking questions and getting introspective” during these conversations as they “take a deep dive” into their own teaching practices, which leads to “individual or internalized” antiracist action (Felicia, January debrief).

BARWE provides a supportive structure for engaging in critical conversations about race and racism. After the first BARWE meeting, teachers self-selected into a small group for the rest of the BARWE meetings. Felicia “purposely chose to be in Hannah’s group” because Hannah is “like a beacon” for Felicia in antiracist work. Selecting their own small groups helped participants create an environment in which they could be more vulnerable:

I am hopeful that more fruitful stuff will come from being with the group that you at least are familiar with on a community level because you work with them. And then in addition, you’re choosing, within that

group, your own small group. So, I do think there's a level of trust and comfort built in that wasn't there. (Felicia, October debrief)

Selecting groups generated a level of trust and comfort that helped participants position themselves as open to sitting in the discomfort of critical conversations.

The depth of conversation is controlled by the teachers in each small group. Megan often assigned herself the role of pushing conversations to be more critical and reflective: "I don't even know that they would have went in that direction if I wasn't in there" (January focus group). It is hard to say whether another teacher would have taken on the role to push the conversation deeper if Megan hadn't been there, but it is safe to say the conversation benefited from her critical perspective. Rather than patting themselves on the back for their use of a "growth mindset" in math classes, their conversation took a deep dive into what it would mean to have a truly antiracist classroom. This is one reason why BARWE intentionally puts people at all stages of antiracist development in conversation together. As Hannah explained:

A piece of feedback we get a lot is we need differentiated BARWE groups, and we're like, 'No! The work is talking to everybody at the stages that they're at.' And so, we're leaning into the power of sharing your personal experience with your journey through white racial identity development. (Hannah, February debrief)

The critical conversations that take place during BARWE meetings have the potential to benefit everyone involved, no matter where they are in their antiracist journey.

Although critical conversations are guided by the primary article and discussion question provided in the BARWE curriculum, small group conversations are shaped by the stories, perspectives, questions, and concerns participants share. During the January BARWE meeting, Hannah's group of ELA teachers went "down a rabbit hole" of discussing how the books in their ELA curriculum can serve as a "more natural segue to talk about things like race and oppression ... because a lot of texts

deal with that” (Hannah, January focus group). Although this conversation took them “down a rabbit hole,” Hannah is quick to point out “it was a productive rabbit hole.” This critical conversation was especially fruitful. “I liked that it felt concrete,” Hannah explained, “People were naming specific books, specific units, specific aspects of the curriculum that were either good or problematic, and then at least I went back and literally changed curriculum, and I know some other people made some changes” (January focus group). Teachers were able to say “I may not have control over our school discipline policy, but I do have control over either what I’m teaching or how I’m teaching it” (Hannah, January focus group). The critical conversations prompted antiracist reflection, which began during the inquiry meeting and continued afterward, and antiracist action, which resulted in real and immediate changes to the curriculum. Although the topics often elicited expressions of white fragility, the conversations themselves fostered vulnerability.

### Space for Brave Engagement

BARWE inquiry meetings fostered vulnerability by creating a space in which white educators felt safe enough to engage bravely, acknowledge fault, and remain in the discomfort of challenging conversations. One way they sought to cultivate a brave space was by putting teachings in the same small group during each meeting. Hannah, Felicia, and Megan each reported that the white educators were fearful, nervous, and overwhelmed during the September BARWE meeting, the first BARWE meeting of the year and the first district-wide BARWE meeting. After the September BARWE meeting, Hannah asked teachers to self-select which small group they would like to be in for the rest of the BARWE meetings. The instructions for group selection read, “This will allow us to have the same groups each time, save time, and build a safer

sense of community for tough conversations” (Google classroom). Teachers were asked to select a group based on their school to allow for more context-specific conversations with colleagues and administrators were asked to form their own small groups. Establishing a level of familiarity and trust helped create a space in which white educators felt comfortable engaging in honest, challenging, critical conversations about race and racism.

Hannah tries to make the CCMS BARWE group a comfortable space by pushing back on perfectionism and naming it as a part of white supremacy culture. As she explains, white teachers are hesitant to engage because “no one feels that they can do it perfect, so no one is willing to do it. I think its fear of being judged for saying the wrong thing” (Hannah, March focus group). As Megan explained, “I want [BARWE] to be a space where [white teachers] can fuck up and need to fuck up.” However, there are limits to what is welcome in the safe space: “There has to be some line if you come in there saying like the N-word, okay, no, the safe space just totally dissipated. That’s not what we’re doing here. So, there is like a tough line with that” (Megan, January focus group). BARWE is a safe space for making mistakes, but it is not a safe space for white supremacy or bigotry.

Prolonged vulnerable engagement with BARWE also helps to create a comfortable space for brave engagement. Specifically, it has provided a space for Hannah practice, and improve at, having challenging conversations with her colleagues. Although it is still tough for Hannah to confront her colleagues when they make “problematic comments,” she acknowledges that she has “gotten a little bit better about having those conversations” since joining BARWE (September debrief). However, cultivating a brave space means walking “a fine line between

acknowledging when someone said something that's problematic and not wanting to scare people away from the work" (Hannah, September debrief). By walking the line between comfortable and critical, BARWE seeks to disrupt white fragility and foster vulnerability through brave engagement.

### **The Comfort of Addressing Whiteness with White People**

One of the reasons Felicia felt less hesitant to engage in critical conversations during BARWE "was because of all the white people" (October debrief). When she is in a discussion with white people, "it's like there's less of a concern about looking bad or feeling judged" for whatever she might be sharing (October debrief). Felicia is not concerned about being judged by her white colleagues, but she is afraid of causing harm to her BIPOC colleagues, which is one reason she is more comfortable being vulnerable and working through her own biases in BARWE. As Felicia explains:

I do feel like the fact that it is catered towards white people, [*chuckle*] I think it is helpful because it does create a safer—For many of us, a feeling of 'I can really fuck up here, but not do it in a way that's taking away someone else's pain and experience that I can't possibly understand.' So, I feel it does provide space and room to do that, and I do think on the flip that it was really great and I hope—I don't know how they feel, but that there's the [BIPOC affinity] group happening for staff members of color. So, in that regard, I do think it's great that we have our own areas. [*chuckle*] And I think it's great that what's happening in those spaces is stuff that benefits the whole, hopefully. (Felicia, January debrief)

The structure of having multiple race-based affinity spaces allows all of the educators at CCMS to meet with peers who share a racial identity and address race and racism from their specific perspective. For white people, this means reflecting on their own role in perpetuating white supremacy. Felicia found it easier to share her personal

reflections in a space designed to engage white educators in critically examining whiteness:

If it hadn't been just white people, I think my focus would have been more on, instead of just sharing out something I did that I regret, I don't feel good about, I think my focus would have been more on, 'How are these people viewing me?' Or, 'What do they think of me now that I've done this thing?' ... Just the fact that I didn't really pause, I guess, to really consider how my words might affect that group of people. I think there's some freedom ... that makes it a little easier to be forthcoming, I guess. Because I didn't feel any major hesitations that I think I probably would have if it was a more diverse group. (Felicia, December debrief)

Although Felicia experienced fragility while reflecting on her own mistakes regarding curriculum violence during the December BARWE, she did not hesitate to admit her mistakes during the small group discussion. She was comfortable enough in her group to sit in the discomfort of knowing she had made a mistake and verbalize her critical reflections to her white colleagues. Felicia believes that call in antiracism is for white people "to come get your people" and she sees BARWE as a key component in bringing other white people into the work (January debrief).

### **Cultivating Brave Spaces to Reengage Hesitant Participants**

Megan positions herself as an advocate for racial justice, which often means speaking truth to power. For example, during the September BARWE meeting, a white male principal from another school in the district said he felt "powerless" to make antiracist change. While he was talking, Megan was visibly shaking her head: "I don't know if that's appropriate, but I just wanted to let him know like that's not the direction. I have to check him because he's a leader" (September debrief). Megan expresses vulnerability in these moments, because she is pushing herself outside of her comfort zone and bravely engaging in a critical conversation about racism.

Occasionally, this has left her fearing retribution, but she continues to persist. As Megan explained, “I’d rather be on his shit list for doing the right thing than me being quiet and letting them think that no one notices, because all we’re really asking from white allies is to say, ‘Hey, I see it and I don’t agree with it’” (September debrief). These conversations require a level of safety and comfort that allow for brave engagement.

Megan found that small group discussions were an important space for “intimacy building,” which helped teachers position themselves as brave (read “vulnerable”) enough to engage in critical conversations (March focus group). Although she was initially uncomfortable with the teachers in her small group, they were able to establish a level of trust and connection that allowed them to engage bravely in critical conversations:

**Megan:** I liked that I found joy or value in the personal spaces like our [small group] because it was nice to see the way [the other teachers] got to grow a little bit. At least. I don’t know if it was performative or not, but it’s that like, they did say some concrete actions that took place that I can think of, so that was good too. It was nice to see them grow in a concrete way.

**Diane:** Yeah, it was nice to be part of your group all year. I really enjoyed watching the conversations evolve.

**Megan:** At first, and there was a lot of tension in some of those meetings, so I do appreciate that we stuck with it long enough where the tension would ebb and flow. ... I feel like nobody was angry. It was safe and nobody felt threatened. I don’t know that we ever got that tension again, so I do wish we could’ve pushed each other more. And that was always my thing, and I think that’s where the silence has come from. It’s like we’ve got to just lean into pushing each other a little bit more, because I don’t want them to think shit is all gravy. They were being all proud of themselves, talking about how now when they see the word ‘Indian,’ they cross it out and write ‘Native American.’ And I have to tell them, ‘Wait up, Native American might not be the best

word either.’ [*chuckle*] You know what I mean? They got to be ready to get hit with, ‘Damn, I’m still fucking up.’ And so maybe that tension is good in that way, because there definitely was a decrease in our tension in our group. I was fearing coming to the group after that Columbus talk, and we got through it, and so hopefully they all see that we all made it through. I’m here to get y’all better; we’re here for each other to get better. That’s the whole point. Nobody wants to be offending people, so it’s like, that’s how I have to phrase it to myself like, ‘I don’t want to be offending you for one extra fucking second,’ and so a lot of this is just pointing it out to each other, because we don’t see it as clearly as somebody who’s not white. (March focus group)

The space was not safe for white fragility or racist beliefs to go unaddressed. Instead, it was safe for teachers to open themselves up without fear or repercussions (e.g., losing their job). It was safe for making and then learning from mistakes. It was safe for being vulnerable.

### Participation Structure

BARWE provides a specific participation structure for groups to follow (see Table 6). BARWE provides the article and reflection questions that become the central focus of each BARWE meeting. At the beginning of each meeting, participants are given time to individually reflect on the article and collect their thoughts before the dividing into small groups. The small group discussions provide an intimate space for sharing their personal reflections and engaging in critical conversations. BARWE provides a suggested discussion protocol, which groups are free to use or ignore. At the end of the meeting, everyone comes together to share out what they discussed in their small group and engage in a whole group discussion. Finally, they “Pass the Hat” and ask teachers to donate to the BIPOC-run organization selected by BARWE that month. This year the organizations included the Abolitionist Teaching Network, the Black Girl Freedom Fund, and the Dignity in School Coalition. This participation structure centers BIPOC voices through the selected articles and BIPOC efforts

through the Pass the Hat organizations. Hannah has found that this “whole group, small group, whole group” structure “fosters vulnerability” (final interview). While the general structure remained the same, Hannah adjusted the protocol based on participant feedback, such as adding a second, slightly larger discussion group following the small group discussions.

Although BARWE provides a discussion protocol, small groups are free to use it, or not use it, as they see fit. The protocol is useful for getting teachers started with the discussion and provides floor space for each participant to share their thoughts. However, as Hannah points out, “it’s not good to be really strict about how people express themselves necessarily,” which is why she tells people to “feel free to do what works for your small group” (September debrief). Other benefits of the BARWE participation structure include a shared sense of ownership, flat leadership structure, voluntary attendance, and the iterative nature of the meetings. As the leader of the CCMS BARWE, Hannah found that this structure took a lot of the responsibility off of her shoulders:

I think that one of the benefits of something like BARWE is that the facilitator ... didn’t choose the article, and so I think that always enables people to be more critical and real and honest, because they don’t feel like they need to defend the choice of the material, and so that, I think, fosters vulnerability because it’s okay to then say, ‘I disagree with this piece or I agree.’ It just removes that level of anxiety, and any level of anxiety you can take away before a conversation is beneficial to that conversation. (Hannah, final interview)

The structure that BARWE provides makes it easier for the facilitator to step back and join in the conversation. She also recruited additional leaders throughout the year, seeking to expand and further decentralize the power structure.

BARWE is structured as an iterative process, which promotes prolonged engagement and community development. This strong sense of community is what helps keep Hannah committed to antiracist praxis:

I think that just continuing to lean into my white friends [who are] also doing the work is really helpful. Megan is such an inspiration; her Instagram is just like antiracist fire all the time. And so, I think leaning into the people that help hold you accountable, that help push you to do the work. (March focus group)

BARWE helps white teachers establish a core group of critical white educators who are committed to redressing systemic racism in education. The participation structure helps foster vulnerability by creating a familiar and iterative process for critically engaging with the central text and promotes antiracist action by asking teachers to support BIPOC efforts through financial donations.

### BARWE Curriculum

The Series Three BARWE curriculum (see Appendix A) takes a new approach, designing discussion topics that build on each other month after month in order to promote deeper inquiry and reflection throughout the year. Although Hannah was excited about BARWE's new approach to curriculum, she regretted not following BARWE's advice to start with the very first article from Inquiry Series One:

There's an article that I wish I had started with now. I wish I had gone back to that very first thing we did in August 2018. Step one, BARWE, and I didn't do it for this group and I kind of wish I had. I think what I was feeling, and this speaks to white supremacy culture, was a sense of urgency, because we only have four<sup>29</sup> [district-wide] meetings. And so,

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<sup>29</sup> Although there were only four district-wide PD days planned at the beginning of the year, a fifth district-wide PD day was eventually added to the schedule. Of the seven BARWE meetings covered in this study, five were district-wide PD days and two were held on CCMS PD days.

I wanted to get the most bang for our buck, but I think hindsight's 20/20 and it would have been really nice to start with that other article.  
(Hannah, September focus group)

BARWE recommends starting with the August 2018 article (Watson, 2017) and discussion guide as an orientation meeting for new BARWE groups, because “it addresses the ‘why’ of the project and facilitates conversations to get to know each other and create a common vision” (www.barwe215.org). Even without this orientation meeting, the CCMS BARWE group was able to successfully implement the Inquiry Series Three curriculum. Table 13 provides an overview of the action steps that were generated during the CCMS BARWE meetings, as reported by participants during the final district-wide BARWE meeting in March.

Table 13 Action Steps Generated during Antiracist Inquiry

Topic	Action Step Reflection Examples (March)
White Supremacy Culture (September & November)	<p>Counter to “Individualism”—What would it look like if we emphasize collaboration and team work (especially and specifically in math classrooms)?</p> <p>Looking at our grading policies and how they are enforcing perfectionism, compliance, and individual success.</p> <p>Can we use the opportunities presented to us by the global pandemic to really, truly reimagine and redirect our approaches to education, instead of worrying about “learning loss” which can be argued is also a symptom of white supremacy culture? (Who decides who loses and what ‘</p> <p>Promote the idea of self-worth and that you are enough; praise cooperation and teamwork between students.</p>
Black Joy (October)	<p>Include more student voice and choice! Allowing students to have their own voice in the classroom and also reminding them that it's okay to make mistakes and to have fun with learning because we are in a safe space to do so.</p> <p>When choosing a novel to reflect the Black students in our classrooms, steer the focus away from reading books that center around Black violence and focus on Black joy.</p> <p>Forgetting the notion that a classroom needs to be a quiet place at all times. Trying not to be so serious all the time to allow for more joy in the classroom, laughter doesn't always mean off task.</p>

Table 13 continued.

Curriculum Violence (December)	<p>Ask ourselves, what is the inherent whiteness within our respective fields? Recognizing the historical and ongoing systemic racism in these fields.</p> <p>Making sure history includes positivity, hopefulness, excellence, and innovation brought about by Black people, not just oppression. “I don’t want to keep reading about racisms. I walk outside and encounter it every day, I turn on the news and see it every day. I want to read about something positive.” – CCMS student</p> <p>Plan ahead, get other eyes on my curriculum. Be open, ask other people to critically examine my ideas, ask for feedback so as not to operate in a vacuum. Don’t rely on the white staff as the only voice in curriculum decisions.</p> <p>Remembering that our students have intersecting identities. Making sure that health and sex education courses are representative of the LGBTQ+ community!</p>
Content Specific Curriculum Reflections (January)	<p>Recognize the trauma of communities of color in science and how many discoveries were made without the permission of the people being experimented on. How do we do this without retraumatizing? How do we bring our students into feeling validated in thinking of themselves as scientists? We must inspire students to become scientists, not just pass the science state testing.</p> <p>The English department took a step backwards here with the pilot, at least with one of the anchor texts. It was written by a white man and was riddled with racial slurs. A goal may be to try to heal from any damage we may have done.</p> <p>Across the network, math teams noted an emphasis on mistakes, and how mistakes can be appreciated, celebrated, and support math learning. How do we capitalize on this?</p> <p>How to take one-off inclusion lessons and weave them into units/curriculum as a whole? Intentionally include more stories written by Black authors about Black culture, and include the joy that it has to offer.</p>
Social Emotional Learning (February)	<p>We need more student input into our systems. How are we creating space for this when we return to school after a year away in a way that is based on developmental science?</p> <p>The fact that SEL is part of our whole culture, it’s important to dig into the insidious ways white supremacy culture shows up. Much of the behaviors we are trying to quell is rooted in capitalistic belief that we trying to build effective workers.</p> <p>Using the return to hybrid learning as a chance to really rethink school-wide systems, like uniforms and how to encourage empathy and appreciating students as whole people instead of only focusing on standards and “learning loss.”</p>

The Inquiry Series Three curriculum encouraged teachers to return to and reread the primary articles as topics reoccurred in later months. The familiarity with topics promoted in-depth, critical conversations that fostered vulnerability and critical reflection within the small groups. The curriculum also provided teachers with the specific language for critically engaging with and talk about these topics:

This is the most we were ever specific and deliberate in the words that we chose. Like ‘curriculum violence,’ when I first read that phrase, that really hit me. I’ll never forget that combination of words. I just like how, we knew, like you said, we made a space. And for me what I noticed about that space, it was so, so, fucking deliberate—so, so specific. ... Now people are going to be thinking about this stuff.  
(Megan, March focus group)

Megan found the language of “curriculum violence” particularly moving and it completely changed the way she was thinking about her math curriculum. After initially digging into curriculum violence during the December BARWE meeting, the topic carried over into January. This continuation created space for promoting antiracist action that would not have been possible without the new curriculum structure:

**Diane:** Do you think people had a plan leaving the groups on Friday to critically evaluate more of their curriculum?

**Hannah:** No, [*chuckle*] but I think that’s what January’s for. I mean so the whole Series Three scope of BARWE, the reason we changed up our model as a group is that you need a day to do the reading and the reflecting, and then you need a whole other time to do the action stuff and planning. That’s not one-hour worth of work to do, both of those things. And so just as an organization, we’ve taken the step this year so that each time there’s a topic, there’s a one month that’s on the reading and questions and the second month is more like what November was, where you’re like, ‘Are you finding an accountability buddy? Are you digging deeper at your institution?’ And so, I feel like maybe as a group, we decide to find accountability buddies for January or

whatever, where we actually set a plan for what we're going to do to change our curriculum and check back in. (December focus group)

The monthly BARWE meetings provided the building blocks for antiracist praxis by intentionally switching between active reflection and reflective action. The curriculum fostered deep discussions grounded in the readings from previous months as teachers were able to implement and reflect on what they had previously learned.

### **Fostering Vulnerability and Critical Reflection in BARWE**

BARWE created the space and structure necessary for fostering the vulnerability Hannah needed to engage in antiracist praxis by critically reflecting on her curriculum and rewriting the problematic unit. The discussion within her own small group encouraged each teacher to critically examine their own curriculum before getting feedback from the other group members. However, the discussion required teachers to be vulnerable: “Obviously it’s a little bit vulnerable to look at your own shit and identify the problems, but I think that my group feels very safe and comfortable for me. So, I really think that it was a good conversation” (Hannah, December debrief). The structure of BARWE helped create a space in which Hannah could be vulnerable enough to sit with the discomfort, acknowledge fault, and prepare to make antiracist changes to her curriculum.

Hannah also noticed a link between the iterative BARWE curriculum and increased antiracist praxis. The Inquiry Series Three curriculum, which was created for the 2020-2021 school year, took a new approach to that focused on creating a structure that would support teachers in antiracist reflection and antiracist action. While Inquiry Series One and Two focused on a new topic each month, the Inquiry Series Three curriculum built on the same concepts for several months in a row. The December BARWE meeting helped teachers critically reflect on and discuss the

concept of curriculum violence, while the January BARWE asked teachers to conduct a curriculum audit with the specific purpose of finding and removing instances of curriculum violence. As Hannah explained, “I think it’s really nice to be able to spend one month reading an article, and then another month really digging into my own classroom practice. I think that that’s been really impactful.” BARWE provided the time and support Hannah needed to work with the other eighth-grade ELA teachers to do “some conscious thinking about the voices being shared and the trauma aspect” of their curriculum, which they used to do a “total rewrite” of the gun violence unit (Hannah, January debrief).

### **Vignette of Curriculum Application**

As an art teacher, Felicia tries to expose her students to various forms of art from around the world. However, reflecting on these lessons during BARWE left her feeling like her multicultural curriculum choices may actually be an example of curriculum violence (Jones, 2020). While preparing for the December BARWE meeting, Felicia “didn’t have any major reservations” other than discomfort with her own examples and stories (December debrief). Felicia focused on a lesson she taught in 2019, in which she had students make totem poles in order to incorporate different cultures. However, looking back, she described it as feeling weird and inappropriate and tokenized:

There was one lesson that I did last year, ... it was teaching about Canada’s First Nations. And I knew going into it that ... I had reservations. Reservations because of appropriation versus representation and all of those things, and not wanting to minimize and water down something that I’m not an active part of, but I’m still trying to expose people to. So ultimately, the cringe part, ... we made totem poles and we made them out of the hundreds and probably thousands of toilet paper rolls I had collected, and I tried really hard to make sure

that we spent time talking about the First Nations People and the significance of animals and symbolism, but it still felt, I don't know. I think when I focused on the art piece of it, which we were doing symmetry, that was like the art aspect I felt fine, but I felt very, I don't know, like a fraud, I guess, in every other aspect of it. So, that was the first thing that came to mind when I thought about lessons I have done in the past. (December debrief)

Although Felicia has taught using “other art styles and techniques from other cultures” without feeling “fraudulent,” it was the use of toilet paper rolls in this lesson that struck her as feeling “too symbolic in the wrong way” (December debrief). She also realized that her knowledge of Canada's First Nations was limited and the lesson was definitely out of her comfort zone. In the end, this lesson “just felt wrong” (December debrief).

At the beginning of the December BARWE meeting, the teachers had five minutes to journal reflectively about curriculum violence. For Felicia, “the hardest part was writing it down” and acknowledging the ways in which her lesson fit the description of curriculum violence (December debrief). While journaling, she thought about how other teachers likely remembered this lesson because Felicia had their students in her art class. While writing her reflection, a Felicia experience guilt, shame, and the urge to “jump ship” (December debrief). Although Felicia was experiencing moments of fragility during her reflection, she was able to meet this fragility with vulnerability, which allowed her to sit with the discomfort. During the small group discussion, “every person who participated spoke pretty openly about acts of curriculum violence that they've committed, whether it be years ago or more recently or actively happening” (December debrief). The sharing of stories helped Felicia realize, “yeah, well, there's a lot of ground to cover here.” She was not the only teacher critically reflecting on their curriculum choices.

Reading the article on curriculum violence (Jones, 2020), independently reflecting on her curriculum, and engaging in a critical conversation with her small group helped Felicia progress from fragility to vulnerability and ultimately antiracist praxis. The article included a list of “a few essential questions you can ask yourself about your lesson or your content,” which Felicia found helpful for analyzing her curriculum choices:

I feel like I do try to ask those questions, but incorporating it more actively into, I guess, the initial stages of coming up with lessons and content and that sort of thing, so that it’s a driving force. I think more of what I focused on in the past was just trying to introduce a diverse group of artists or a diverse group of cultures, so the focus was more positive, for lack of a better term, than me thinking about, "Oh, what destruction am I doing here?" ... I guess the action stuff is actively incorporating those [questions] into lesson planning. (Felicia, December debrief)

Participating in BARWE helped Felicia progress through her fragility and vulnerably engage with the topic of curriculum violence in conversation with her small group. Following the BARWE meeting, Felicia used the article to guide her own reflection on curriculum violence during lesson planning.

Looking back, Felicia realized that her First Nations lesson plan “really incited a lot of anxiety” around whether she was going to “short-change or misinterpret” the cultural content, “And in the end, I think that anxiety really did impact the lesson just on its own” Felicia explained. “... And I think that’s the other side of the point, is being so concerned with not fucking up that you either just make it 10 times worse, or you avoid it all together” (final interview). Although Felicia has been focused on improving cultural representation in her curriculum, she is “still in the ‘scratch the surface’ phase” of redesigning her curriculum. As Felicia explained:

**Felicia:** I don't think I've gotten to the deep dive of the curriculum part of analyzing and questioning. I think it's been more personal. So, I feel like I'm at the very, very beginning stages of that in regards specifically to curriculum.

**Diane:** Where would you say you are in the personal questioning of things?

**Felicia:** Not much deeper. [*chuckle*] I think it's been something that's been on my mind. ... I don't think I know what the finish line is, so to speak, or even if there is one. ... I do feel like I've seen myself get more comfortable discussing issues centering around race over the years. So maybe that's some sort of indicator. (January debrief)

BARWE helped Felicia begin engaging in antiracist praxis focused on addressing curriculum violence, but there is a lot of work to do after the BARWE meeting. Engaging in reflection and critical conversations helped in the reflection piece of praxis, but the action piece of praxis requires work between and beyond BARWE meetings. Especially considering Felicia is the only art teacher at CCMS, addressing curriculum violence requires her to independently engage in antiracist action.

### District-Wide Professional Development

During the 2020-2021 school year, the CCMS BARWE group expanded from approximately five CCMS teachers to more than 125 white educators from across the charter school district. What was once an intimate after-school discussion group had quickly become a formal district-wide professional development. Even with the added stress of having five administrators on the Zoom call, Hannah was “pleasantly surprised by the number of people that showed up” for the first virtual BARWE meeting in September (September debrief). It signified an important shift in their work:

BARWE was kind of preaching to the choir last year, because the only people that made the time to show up were people that were already

thinking about it, which is great in some ways, and also not necessarily the point of it in other ways. So, I think it's a good problem to have. The problem that we have people coming at it from different levels of knowledge is a good problem, I think. (Hannah, September debrief)

While Hannah was happy that the CCMS BARWE would no longer be preaching to the choir, the shift in demographics brought other challenges that ultimately led to an increase in white fragility.

The extremely large number of attendees from four different schools across the district made it harder to establish trust and build a sense of community, which are an important part of fostering vulnerability during antiracist inquiry. Hannah suggested breaking into four separate BARWE groups based at each of the four schools, but she was unable to find a single volunteer to take on the task of leading their own BARWE group:

I would say that the lack of willingness to lead these conversations is like a bright red beacon of that fear [of open conflict]. The fact that no one else, no one else in the entire network, and even the people that have been part of BARWE ... No one's stepped up. Even of the amazing humans that have been doing this work for three years, no one's willing to do this. So, sure, I think that [fear of open conflict] is where that's coming from. I don't think that's coming from a lack of willingness to take on additional work or time, or it's not hard to facilitate a meeting, I think it's because nobody wants to facilitate *this* meeting, and so I think that is fear. ... I think it's not an easy conversation to have ... Am I willing to have it? Sure, but I think defensiveness and the fear of the defensiveness and the fear of the defensive reaction, is what people are afraid of. (Hannah, November debrief)

Over the course of the year, Hannah was able to recruit three other educators to help lead the BARWE group, but she was unable to break up the district-wide group into smaller, locally-run BARWE groups. Although consistently meeting with the same small groups helped foster critical conversations, the district-wide BARWE group was

unable to form a close-knit group like the other BIPOC affinity groups, which had fewer administrators and approximately 100 fewer teachers in each meeting.

BARWE is designed to be a voluntary, grassroots form of personal development. As Hannah explained, BARWE was “never intended to be the only thing your school is doing to be antiracist. It was never intended to take the place of professional anti-bias, antiracist training” (final interview). However, that was exactly how the charter school district decided to implement BARWE. Teachers were expected to attend one of the affinity groups, which meant white teachers attended BARWE by default. Although Hannah did not keep track of attendance, the mandatory nature of the meeting still tainted the experience. There were people who showed up to every meeting asking, “Why am I here and what is this?” (Hannah, March debrief). The lack of local leadership and mandatory nature of the BARWE meetings breed apathy among some participants, who employed the discursive practices of white fragility to avoid critically engaging with the topics.

Running BARWE as a district-wide professional development came with several logistical challenges. With over 100 people on the Zoom call, there was less time for in-depth whole group discussions. It also meant Hannah had to prioritize running the meeting over engaging in her own critical conversations:

There was a weird disconnect for me this year in terms of facilitating those meetings, I think just because of how many people were there. I didn't feel as present in the actual conversation and the actual work this year, in those meetings, as I have in the past. (Hannah, final interview)

Hannah spent a lot of her time coordinating the small group discussions and addressing technical issues, rather than meeting with her own small group. Pass the Hat presented another logistical challenge in that Hannah was unable to coordinate donations from such a large number of people. In previous years, teachers would

electronically send money to Hannah at the end of the BARWE meeting and she would make one large donation to the Pass the Hat organization. Instead, teachers were asked to donate through the organization websites at the end of the meetings and it was unclear how many people participated in this portion of the BARWE protocol. The biggest challenge Hannah faced in leading the district-wide BARWE was coordinating the distribution of materials and information to teachers at the other schools in the district. Although Hannah sent out the articles in advance and provided instructions for how to retrieve the articles from the BARWE website, teachers would show up every meeting saying they did not have access to the article ahead of time. While reflecting on a particularly frustrating meeting, Hannah rhetorically asked, “How many ways do you want me to put this article out ahead of time and still not have access? I don’t know how else to give it to you. Ship it to your house?” (December focus group).

Turning BARWE into a district-wide PD was not as effective as it could have been. “I think it was as effective as people put the effort in, which is the model of BARWE,” Hannah explained. “You’re going to get as much out of it as you put into it” (March focus group). She compared BARWE to a book club. If you show up without reading the book and you spend the whole time on your phone, you do not get much out of it. If you do the reading and engage in the conversation, then it can be a meaningful experience: “I think like there are some people that did get a lot out of it, and there are some people that got nothing out of it, and I’m sure that there’s some people that fall somewhere in between” (Hannah, March focus group). While Hannah and other teachers had been asking for antiracist training for several years, the use of

antiracist affinity groups as district-wide PD was more of a superficial gesture than a deep commitment to antiracism:

I think the issue is our network is like eager to look like they're doing the work, but nobody is willing to take on the work. ... Do I think that our school is fully invested? Not as fully as they could be. I think they're trying more than they have in the past, which is not enough. (Hannah, March focus group)

### BIPOC Accountability

Although the district-wide antiracist PD included three affinity groups for white teachers, Black teachers, and non-Black teachers of color, they did not plan for cross-group collaborations or accountability. Throughout the year, Hannah worked with the other affinity group leaders to arrange what she referred to as a “cross-over meeting,” but they struggled to coordinate such a meeting due to time constraints and continued reluctance from administration:

Every time we've tried to have conversations about race in the past, they've turned into shit shows to varying degrees at the different campuses. And like at the middle school, I was in a conversation that went horribly wrong ... We came back from summer break and they put us all in little rooms. My room was a fucking shit show, it was terrible. People were cursing each other out, so it got really bad and I think the middle school's version of that conversation was the best of all of the campuses. I think people quit over it at other schools. So, I think that there's just a real desire to have trained professionals in the room the next time we have a bunch of white and Black staff members talking about race together. (Hannah, January focus group)

Negative past experiences with interracial dialogue on racism have left the charter school district resistant to the idea of facilitating such a dialogue again. This lack of support continued to stifle plans for a cross-over meeting throughout the year. However, during Hannah's final interview I learned that plans for such a meeting were in the works and she hoped they would be able to facilitate an interracial dialogue

before the end of the year. Even as she worked to arrange a cross-over meeting, Hannah noticed some hesitancy within herself:

I think that working more closely with [the leaders of the Black affinity group] has absolutely made me more conscious of my insecurity in terms of plugging in with my colleagues of color to do the work. And all of those experiences were wonderful experiences, and we worked really well together. But I would find myself hemming and hawing over the language in my emails and stuff when I've emailed [leader of the Black affinity group] a million times about other things. (Hannah, final interview)

Despite their collegial relationship and shared desire to coordinate a cross-over meeting, Hannah noticed her own hesitancy to collaborate with her BIPOC colleagues. Even with her insecurities, Hannah expressed vulnerability by remaining in the discomfort and engaging bravely in the name of BIPOC accountability.

One of the critiques of white antiracist affinity groups, is that they can inadvertently recenter whiteness by creating an echo chamber of what Megan referred to as the “white choir.” The BARWE organization seeks to address this critique through BIPOC accountability. Specifically, they pay BIPOC educators from the Melanated Educators Collective (MEC) to review the curriculum materials, including the chosen articles, reflection questions, and even the wording of their monthly newsletters. BARWE also pays MEC educators to attend their leadership retreat and provide guidance during the planning stages. This accountability is central to the work BARWE is trying to do with white educators. However, such accountability is missing from the CCMS BARWE:

That's the missing piece. It's that assessment piece. Because if it was just white folks doing the work and asking themselves, 'Hey, did we meet this goal?' That's still a problem. [*laughter*] Because we're never going to know. It's not us that we're affected negatively in the first

place, so how are we to say if it's gotten better? (Hannah, March debrief)

As the beneficiaries of white supremacy, white people are not in the position to decide when goals have been met. The lack of BIPOC accountability fostered uncritical engagement and misguided action at CCMS this year, such as removing the character development classes without bringing the BIPOC affinity groups into the conversation. As Megan explained, "I think the white people are so woke right now that we're creating this whole plan and we're not actually including the Black staff. ... We're sitting arguing about what's best for Black people and there's not a Black person in room" (March debrief). BARWE without accountability recenters whiteness and white fragility. During the January focus group, Hannah and Felicia discussed the need for both BARWE and interracial dialogue:

**Felicia:** [There's been critique of] the need for white people to feel comfortable in discussing race and how when you're only doing that with other white people, you're not doing anything essentially. It's like an act of violence because you're still keeping it contained; you're not centering Black voices.

**Hannah:** But there's a need for both.

**Felicia:** Yeah.

**Hannah:** And I think a lot of people acknowledge the need for both, and our school has chosen to do one side of this. And [Ms. G] and I keep pushing for there to be a joint meeting, but nobody's for it. (January focus group)

Creating space for antiracist affinity groups only accounted for half of the necessary steps for addressing white supremacy culture at CCMS and across the district. Without BIPOC accountability, BARWE becomes an echo chamber for the "white choir," which breeds white fragility and inaction.

## Facilitating Virtual Inquiry Meetings during a Global Pandemic

Facilitating BARWE over Zoom during a the COVID-19 global pandemic came with many challenges, but it also created the opportunity to meet with teachers from across the district. As Hannah explained, “It’s a lot easier to get 110 people on a Zoom than it is to get them in a room. . . . The school has never given us this time before, and I think the virtual piece is helpful for that” (September debrief). While the virtual setting helped to accommodate larger numbers of participants, the setting also made it “incredibly difficult to build culture” through the virtual platform. As the findings have indicated, generating trust and community are foundational for fostering vulnerability in antiracist inquiry. As the lead facilitator, Hannah found it difficult to get “a vibe check on Zoom” during the whole group conversations and she was completely unable to monitor how discussions were going in the small groups (January debrief). Even with over 100 people on the call, virtually BARWE meetings were relatively quiet. Having a physical room full of people “just creates a different energy” than a Zoom meeting with everyone on mute.

During the pandemic, it was easy to for teachers to “feel isolated,” which made it especially important connect with other teachers during the virtual BARWE meetings (Felicia, January debrief). As Felicia explained, “It’s like you’re already so disconnected, it’s just so hard. It’s like trying to feel vulnerable and open with people that I will see once a month maybe” (October debrief). However, there were things about the virtual meetings that increased Felicia’s physical comfort and helped her express vulnerability during critical conversations:

I feel like I can probably be just as vulnerable and probably a little bit more in virtual worlds because I’m already... I’m at home in sweat pants, chillin’. I’m already kind of comfortable physically. I’m not in a classroom. I’m not in an uncomfortable chair. (Felicia, October debrief)

Sweat pants and a comfy chair helped Felicia stay engaged during BARWE. The COVID-19 pandemic has been isolating, which made the virtual BARWE community even more important for connecting white educators and keeping them collectively engaged in antiracist work. However, Felicia also found it challenging to be vulnerable within the virtual BARWE. Antiracism is an area where “physical proximity and closeness” definitely contribute to “people feeling safe or people feeling connected,” which was “sacrificed” as a part of the pandemic (final interview). While Felicia believes antiracist work is always important, she feels “it’s especially important to hear those perspectives now when it’s really easy to shut yourself off from them” (January debrief).

Teachers felt burned out before the 2020-2021 school year even began. With everything going on, it became especially challenging for teachers to remain committed to antiracism throughout the year:

I think virtual world and Zoom fatigue and pandemic fatigue, and all of the stresses of our world right now are a very real thing. And I think that in that shuffle, if you’re stressing out about the physical safety of your family and you’re white, then antiracism probably is lower down on the spectrum for you at that moment in time. There are people that we work with that are dealing with that concern, and I’m sure on given days, all of us have dealt with those concerns, and I think that it’s very real and legitimate to say that that’s going to be what comes first. I’ve had days where I’m just like, ‘Fuck all this shit, I’m shutting everything down and crying on my couch for four hours.’ I think those are very real things in this current world. (Hannah, February focus group)

Despite the ongoing challenges created by the COVID-19 global pandemic, the continued fight against systemic racism in America, and political unrest fueled by misinformation, the teachers at CCMS remained committed to antiracism. Although the virtual setting made antiracist teaching especially difficult, it was also a constant reminder of the need to continue fighting for antiracist change in education.

## Section Summary

BARWE features a structure and several beneficial features that foster vulnerability and promote antiracist praxis. Specific beneficial features include their approach to critical conversations, creating a comfortable space that promotes brave engagement, decentralized participation structures, and a curriculum that connects topics across several months. However, two features were revealed to inculcate white fragility and inaction—the district-wide PD structure and a lack of BIPOC accountability for the CCMS BARWE group. Facilitating BARWE meetings virtually via Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic also created several challenges, such as making it harder to build a strong sense of community.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the findings from my multiple-case study, which focused on how teachers are experiencing white fragility and vulnerability during antiracist inquiry and how those experiences promote engaging in antiracist action or inaction. Findings suggest that white educators express both white fragility and vulnerability during critical conversations about race and racism. Vulnerability can be described as an antidote to white fragility, in that expressions of vulnerability can successfully keep white educators engaged in critical conversations and promote antiracist praxis. Through prolonged vulnerable engagement, white teachers are able to express white fragility less frequently during antiracist inquiry. In addition to being an antidote to white fragility, vulnerability is a catalyst for antiracist praxis. BARWE fosters vulnerability and promotes antiracist praxis through engaging white educators in critical conversations, creating a comfortable space for brave engagement, decentralizing the participation and power structures, and providing curriculum that

promotes active reflection and reflective action. However, findings suggest that the use of BARWE meetings as district-wide PD and lack of BIPOC accountability contributed to expressions of white fragility and inaction. Finally, I discuss the challenges of facilitating virtual inquiry group meetings in the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

## **Chapter 5**

### **DISCUSSION**

In the wake of national protests that erupted following the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in the spring of 2020, BARWE experienced a “huge increase” in members from across the country. In an email welcoming these new members, BARWE leadership wrote, “We are glad that interest in antiracist practices is on the rise, but know that dismantling white supremacy is a movement, not a moment. We are in this work for the long run - because we know that antiracist work is an ongoing process of internal reflection and external action” (June 12, 2020). My dissertation research began in a moment of protest, passion, and self-reflection among white Americans. It is in this context of antiracist inquiry that I examined how three white educators were responding to critical conversations and engaging in antiracist praxis. This study contributes to the education field’s understanding of how fostering vulnerability among white educators during antiracist inquiry can promote the antiracist praxis—internal reflection and external action—required for antiracist teaching and systemic change.

In this chapter, I discuss the findings of this study in relation to the literature and I provide implications for the field of education. First, I discuss how the findings of this study fit within previous research on antiracist inquiry. This discussion is organized into themes based on my four research questions: relationship between perceptions of what it means to be an antiracist white allies and interactions during antiracist inquiry and praxis, interconnected nature of vulnerability and white fragility,

disrupting white fragility while promoting antiracist praxis, and fostering vulnerability in antiracist inquiry. Second, I reexamine the theories of vulnerability (Applebaum, 2017; Gilson, 2011), white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011), and critical hope (Boler, 2011), which have guided this research. Third, I address the implications for the field of education before discussing the limitations of this study and providing recommendations for future research into the role of vulnerability in antiracist inquiry. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of the scholarly contributions of this study.

### **Vulnerability, White Fragility, and Antiracist Praxis**

The present study builds on and extends findings from previous research into the use of white antiracist affinity groups as a tool for engaging white educators in antiracist inquiry. Affinity groups are a form of critical professional development (PD) that pushes back on the traditional, antialogical form of PD and promotes engaging in critical conversations and antiracist praxis (Kohli et al., 2015; Sleeter, 2008; Smith & Redington, 2010). In the following sections, I explicate the findings of this study as they relate to my research questions and the literature reviewed in Chapter Two.

#### **Perceptions of Antiracist White Allyship**

My first research question examines the relationship between white teachers' self-perceptions of their role as antiracist white allies and their interactions during antiracist inquiry and praxis. Hannah thinks about antiracist inquiry as an ongoing process of engaging in critical self-reflection and antiracist action, which leads her to position herself as a worker bee in antiracism. She seeks to bring other white educators into antiracist work and support them as they engage in the challenging process of

antiracist inquiry. Felicia thinks of herself as a beginner even after engaging in antiracist inquiry over several years, which leads her to position herself as a hesitant-but-willing participant in critical conversations. While she does not take the lead in antiracist inquiry, she is willing to “reply all” in support of her BIPOC colleagues at CCMS. Megan thinks about antiracism as being concrete and actionable, which leads her to position herself as an outspoken critic of white inaction. She approaches critical conversations with white colleagues as if her Black best friends were on her shoulder. How each participant thought about antiracism influenced how they positioned themselves as white allies and shaped their interactions during antiracist inquiry.

Although the three participants position themselves differently, they all share a positive self-identity of white antiracist allyship. While a positive white identity does not prevent expressions of white fragility, it can promote reengaging in antiracist praxis through expressions of vulnerability. Developing an understanding of themselves as antiracist white allies helped participants reexamine moments of white fragility as signaling the need for critical self-examination, which allows them to reengage in antiracist praxis (Case, 2012; Reason, Roosa Millar & Scales, 2005; Reason, Scales & Roosa Millar, 2005; Smith & Redington, 2010; Thomann & Suyemoto, 2018). According to Tatum (1994), a positive self-perception as an antiracist white ally can transform how white people respond to critical conversations about race and racism. For the participants in this study, this transformation included increased expressions of vulnerability during antiracist inquiry.

#### Interconnected Nature of Vulnerability and White Fragility

My second research question examines how white teachers are expressing vulnerability and white fragility, as well as the relationship between these expressions.

Findings confirm previous research and theories on how white educators are expressing white fragility in response to racial stress (DiAngelo, 2011; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2019; Gilson, 2011; Matias, 2016; Patton and Jordan, 2017; Picower, 2009, 2015). Participants expressed white fragility through displays of emotion (e.g., guilt, frustration), defensive behaviors (e.g., silence, argumentation), discourse moves (e.g., positioning themselves as “good” white people), (re)centering whiteness (e.g., prioritizing white comfort), and hesitancy to engage (e.g., waiting for more guidance). DiAngelo (2011) suggests that white fragility can be mitigated through prolonged engagement with antiracist inquiry. However, the findings of this study challenge this interpretation. Although participants had been involved in antiracist inquiry for at least two years prior to this study, they continued to confront expressions of white fragility in response to racial stress.

This study contributes to our understanding of vulnerability by providing empirical evidence to support theories of vulnerability in antiracist inquiry (Applebaum, 2017; Gilson, 2011). Participants expressed vulnerability through emotional willingness (e.g., willingness to sit with and process emotions), acknowledging fault and responsibility (e.g., accepting culpability for past actions), brave engagement (e.g., moving outside their comfort zone during critical conversations), and seeking input or help (e.g., turning to outside sources or accountability partners to plan for antiracist action). This study also challenges the idea that white fragility and vulnerability are wholly separate in the context of antiracist inquiry. According to Applebaum (2017), vulnerability serves as an antidote to white fragility by leaving white people open to being affected. While this study supports her theory, it also suggests that expressions of vulnerability do not eliminate

expressions of white fragility. Rather, by leaving white educators open to being affected, vulnerability encourages white educators to remain engaged in antiracist inquiry even while experiencing white fragility. Prolonged engagement, as proposed by DiAngelo (2011), is not enough to disrupt white fragility without working in combination with expressions of vulnerability, which I refer to as prolonged vulnerable engagement.

#### Leveraging Vulnerability to Disrupt White Fragility and Promote Antiracist Praxis

My third research question examines the relationship between expressions of vulnerability and white fragility and white teachers' antiracist action or inaction. While critical reflection is an important part of antiracist praxis, it is only effective when it leads to antiracist action (Freire, 2013). This study puts forward a framework for understanding how expressions of vulnerability and white fragility relate to engaging in critical conversations in order to promote antiracist praxis (Figure 7, first presented as Figure 3 in Chapter Four). In this framework, vulnerability does not prevent moments of racial discomfort from occurring. Instead, vulnerability leaves white educators open to being affected and remaining engaged in antiracist inquiry, rather than descending into the discursive practices of white fragility that leave them invulnerable to change. Without vulnerability, white fragility functions as a tool of inaction. According to Applebaum (2011), "White people actively *perform* fragility and continue to perform it in a way that consolidates white narcissism and white arrogance—signs of power and privilege, not weakness" (Applebaum, 2017, p. 868 emphasis in original). Findings support Applebaum's assertion that fragility is not weakness, as DiAngelo (2011) suggests, but a tool employed by white people to avoid critically engaging with issues of race and racism. Applebaum (2017) also identifies a

link between expressions of white fragility and complicity in systemic oppression. By disengaging from the process of antiracist inquiry depicted in Figure 7, white fragility functions as a barrier to critical conversations and antiracist praxis.

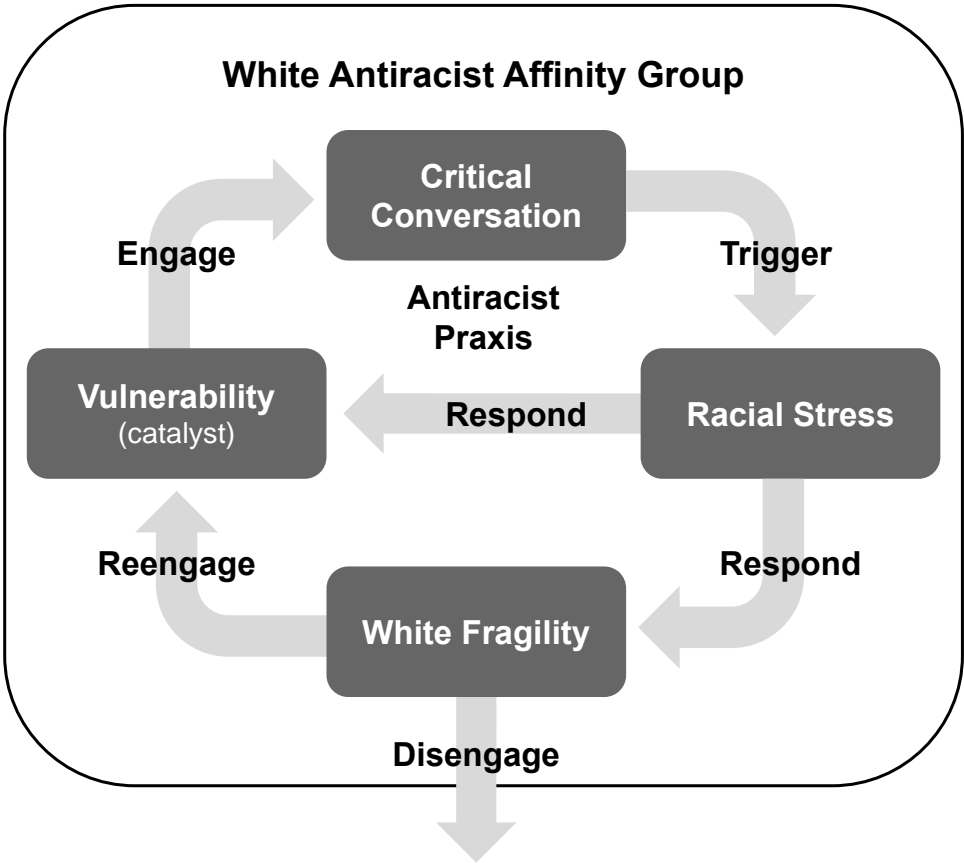


Figure 7 Framework for Vulnerable Engagement in Antiracist Inquiry

While unexamined white fragility is a barrier to antiracist praxis, it is not insurmountable. White fragility can be transformed through expressions of vulnerability, which function as a catalyst for antiracist praxis by allowing white educators to reengage in critical conversations and remain within the process of

antiracist inquiry. Participants in this study responded to racial stress with expressions of both vulnerability and white fragility. While expressions of white fragility initially disrupted engagement with antiracist inquiry, participants were able to reengage in critical conversations through expressions of vulnerability. This study addresses a gap in the literature by reporting on how expressions of vulnerability can be leveraged as a tool for reengaging white educators in critical conversations. Without vulnerability, white fragility brings engagement with antiracist inquiry to a screeching halt. By reengaging and expressing vulnerability, white educators are able to remain in and learn through the discomfort caused by racial stress.

#### Fostering Vulnerability in Antiracist Inquiry

My fourth research question examines the ways in which the BARWE structure supports expressions of vulnerability, white fragility, and antiracist (in)action. In my review of the literature, I identified three key features of successful white antiracist affinity groups, which were confirmed by this study.

#### **Safe Space to Critically Confront Whiteness**

First, white antiracist affinity groups need to create a safe space for critically confronting whiteness over a prolonged period of time. Previous studies have shown that one-off forms of antiracist PD are ineffective at creating lasting change and promoting antiracist praxis among white educators (McManimon & Casey, 2018; Schniedewind, 2005; Sleeter, 2008). The CCMS BARWE group engaged white educators from across the charter school district in critical conversations throughout the school year, beginning in September with a discussion of white supremacy culture and concluding by facilitating an interracial dialogue with the Black affinity group in

May. This prolonged period of engagement with topics of race and racism helped teachers critically examine whiteness in themselves and their school. The CCMS BARWE group also created a space in which teachers felt safe to engage bravely and express vulnerability, which kept them engaged in the process of antiracist inquiry.

Previous research has emphasized the importance of striking a balance by creating a space that is both safe and critical (de Novais, 2019; Kohli et al., 2015; Michael & Conger, 2009) by building trust within the affinity group (Blitz & Kohl, 2012) and providing support, accountability, and critical feedback throughout the process (Tatum, 2017; Utt & Tochluk, 2020). In seeking to support white educators without comforting white fragility, Applebaum (2017) reframes discomfort as “synonymous with the possibility of individual and social transformation” (p. 863). In the context of social-justice education, discomfort becomes a “necessary catalyst for growth and learning” (Applebaum, 2017; see also Boler, 1999). The findings of this study expand on previous work by revealing a link between prolonged vulnerable engagement and responding to racial stress with expressions of vulnerability rather than white fragility.

### **Context-Specific Critical Conversations to Promote Antiracist Praxis**

Second, white antiracist affinity groups need to engage educators in context-specific critical conversations that focus on personal reflection as a form of antiracist action. Previous studies have shown the importance of critical conversations for dismantling racist narratives that reflect white supremacy and replacing them with antiracist narratives that reflect the realities of BIPOC communities (Michael & Conger, 2009). The findings of this study highlight the importance of storytelling and collaborative problem solving for addressing white supremacy culture and engaging

teachers in antiracist praxis (Strong et al., 2017). The Inquiry Series Three curriculum guided teachers in critically examining white supremacy culture, Black joy, curriculum violence, and social and emotional learning within the context of CCMS and their individual classrooms. Small group discussions focused on context-specific reflection and helped teachers plan for antiracist action.

### **Accountability to the BIPOC Community**

Third, it is essential that white antiracist affinity groups hold themselves accountable to the BIPOC community and seek critical feedback on their work from BIPOC collaborators. Although the BARWE organization itself has measures in place to establish and maintain accountability to BIPOC-lead antiracist organizations like the Melanated Educators Collective, such accountability was lacking from the CCMS BARWE group. Although Hannah sought to collaborate with the BIPOC affinity groups throughout the year, she and the BIPOC leaders struggled to clearly define structures of accountability. When white educators attempt to take antiracist action without engaging in critical reflection and interracial dialogue, it is often misguided. The findings of this study confirm the need for BIPOC accountability in order to avoid such uncritical and misguided actions (Blitz & Kohl, 2012; Deveni & Pastan, 2006; Michael & Conger, 2009; Obear & Martinez, 2013; Utt & Tochluk, 2020; Varghese et al., 2019). BARWE is a space in which white educators willingly leave the “protective pillows” of a white dominant society (Fine, 1998) and engage in critical conversations that are likely to evoke racial stress. Such spaces are an important part of antiracism because they support white educators as they engage in critical conversations about racism and gain the skills for participating in productive interracial dialogue with their BIPOC colleagues.

### **Transforming *Habitus* Through Prolonged Vulnerable Engagement**

The findings of this study challenge DiAngelo's (2011) theory that white fragility is caused by a lack of stamina. She argues that white people engage in the discursive moves of white fragility because they are unable to endure prolonged engagement with racial stress. In her original article on white fragility, DiAngelo (2011) discusses her theory as it relates to Bourdieu's (1993) concept of *habitus*:

According to Bourdieu, *habitus* is a socialized subjectivity; a set of dispositions which generate practices and perceptions. As such, *habitus* only exists in, through and because of the practices of actors and their interaction with each other and with the rest of their environment. Based on the previous conditions and experiences that produce it, *habitus* produces and reproduces thought, perceptions, expressions and actions. Strategies of response to "disequilibrium" in the *habitus* are not based on conscious intentionality but rather result from unconscious dispositions towards practices, and depend on the power position the agent occupies in the social structure. White Fragility may be conceptualized as a product of the *habitus*, a response or "condition" produced and reproduced by the continual social and material advantages of the white structural position. (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57-58)

DiAngelo conceives of white fragility as a product of the *habitus*, that is to say a product of white people socialized in a society designed to support and preserve white supremacy. *Habitus*, as a result of lived experiences, is deeply ingrained in our consciousness and informs our habits, skills, and dispositions (Bourdieu, 1993). Whiteness is so ingrained in the *habitus* of white people that it is difficult to disaggregate from normalized American culture. The *habitus* thus produces the perceptions and discursive practices of white fragility.

According to DiAngelo (2011), "Whites have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills or develop the stamina that would allow for constructive engagement across racial divides" (p. 57). By her own admission, white people need to develop the "cognitive and affective skills" for engaging with racial stress in addition to

developing the stamina for prolonged engagement. The findings of this study suggest that prolonged engagement alone is insufficient for disrupting expressions of white fragility and should be understood in combination with vulnerability, an affective skill capable of disrupting white fragility and promoting antiracist action. If habitus is the result of lived experience, then it stands to reason that *prolonged vulnerable engagement* has the power to influence our habitus, thereby changing the way we engage with and respond to racial stress. Where expressions of white fragility “function to reinstate white racial equilibrium” when faced with racial stress (DiAngelo, 2011), expressions of vulnerability position white people as open to remaining in and learning through the discomfort of racial stress (Applebaum, 2017; Gilson, 2011).

DiAngelo (2011) identifies seven factors that inculcate white fragility and presumably inform the habitus of white people: racial segregation, universalism and individualism, entitlement to racial comfort, racial arrogance, racial belonging, psychic freedom, and constant messages of white superiority. The findings of this study suggest that white antiracist affinity groups such as BARWE are able to disrupt the inculcating factors through prolonged vulnerable engagement, which suggests that antiracist affinity groups have the potential to transform how white people respond to racial stress by transforming their habitus.

According to DiAngelo (2011), white people grow up in segregated neighborhoods and live segregated lives, in which “they receive little or no authentic information about racism and are thus unprepared to think about it critically or with complexity” (p.58). Messages of white superiority are ingrained in American culture (DiAngelo, 2011; Tatum, 2017) and white people rarely experience a sense of not

belonging. When they do, “such experiences are usually very temporary, easily avoidable situations” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 62). When this lack of belonging does occur, it can be “destabilizing and frightening” for white people who have come to expect a constant sense of racial comfort and belonging (p. 62). White antiracist affinity groups like BARWE ask white people to willingly experience temporary racial discomfort by choosing to remain in the discomfort, while still creating a racially homogenous space for engaging in critical conversations about race. Even though white people live primarily segregated lives, DiAngelo (2011) suggests that intentionally creating segregated spaces in service of addressing racism can cause them to become uncomfortable, agitated, and upset. While such racial segregation is considered “unremarkable” when it occurs in their daily lives, intentionally segregating to discuss race pushes back on the “(fragile) identity of racial innocence” that white people have falsely constructed (p. 62). BARWE pushes back on these expectations of racial comfort by creating a space in which white people are confronted with authentic information about racism.

Another inculcating factor of white fragility is that white people understand the world through a lens of whiteness, which leads them to view white perspectives as objective and representative of reality (DiAngelo, 2011; McIntosh, 1988). When it is applied in discussions of racism, “universalism functions to deny the significance of race and the advantages of being white” (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 59). At the same time, individualism is also leveraged to erase history and hide structural inequity, which also allows white people to dissociate themselves from being implicated in systemic racism. BARWE seeks to disrupt this universalism through a carefully curated curriculum, which centers BIPOC voices in the readings and engages white educators

in critical conversations that examine the ways in which whiteness manifests in their world views. This works in conjunction with the psychic freedom white people create by viewing themselves as non-racial beings, instead understanding race as something that exclusively resides in people of color (DiAngelo, 2011). By freeing themselves from the psychic burden of race, white people devote their psychic energy elsewhere. According to DiAngelo (2011), this disconnect “prevents us from developing the stamina to sustain attention on an issue as charged and uncomfortable as race” (p. 63). BARWE challenges the notion of psychic freedom by positioning white people as racialized beings who continue to benefit from white supremacy and thus bear responsibility in actively addressing racism.

According to DiAngelo (2011), white people “have not had to build tolerance for racial discomfort” and thus experience a sense of entitlement to remaining in a state of racial comfort (p. 60). Discomfort is what triggers the defensive counter-moves of white fragility, such as refusing to remain engaged in the racially uncomfortable conversation. As DiAngelo explains, “whites often confuse comfort with safety and state that we don’t feel safe when what we really mean is that we don’t feel comfortable” (p. 61). BARWE pushes back on this idea of “safety” as being free from racial discomfort, instead focusing on creating a space that fosters vulnerability and thus enables white people to remain in and learn through the discomfort. DiAngelo (2011) argues that white people also experience racial arrogance, feeling empowered to dismiss informed BIPOC perspectives rather than having the “humility to acknowledge that they are unfamiliar, reflect on them further, and seek more information” (p. 61). Vulnerability, in combination with prolonged engagement, positions white people to hear and reflect on BIPOC perspectives by developing both

the stamina and the skills necessary for learning in the discomfort and allowing themselves to be affected by BIPOC perspectives. This study suggests that the structure of BARWE promote prolonged vulnerable engagement that is capable of disrupting white fragility by transforming the habitus.

### **Finding Hope in Vulnerability**

This dissertation contributes to ongoing efforts in the field of education to promote equitable and antiracist teaching practices, driven by a desire to improve schools and better prepare educators to address inequities and push for systemic change. Understanding how we can foster vulnerability among white educators has the potential to offer essential insight into creating effective spaces for antiracist PD and promoting antiracist praxis among white educators. While working to change the “hearts and minds” (de Novais, 2019) of white educators is only one small facet of antiracist work, I believe it is an important endeavor. White people are not, and should not be, the central focus of antiracism; changing the hearts and minds of white people does not need to precede systemic change. However, white educators continue to make up the majority of teachers in the United States (Taie & Goldring, 2020) and when their classroom doors close, teachers wield an enormous amount of power and influence. Research has shown that white teachers are regularly failing to teach BIPOC students in equitable and supportive ways (DiAngelo, 2018a; Picower, 2009; Sleeter, 2001, 2004), despite ongoing efforts to promote diversity and equity in education (Coddling, 2020). Findings from this study support the use of white antiracist affinity groups for engaging white educators in prolonged vulnerable engagement with the topics of race and racism. It is in this context that we can find hope in vulnerability. As Delpit (2006) writes, “We must learn to be vulnerable

enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness” (Delpit, 2006, p. 47). Through vulnerability and prolonged vulnerable engagement, white antiracist affinity groups are able to transform the world views of white educators and promote antiracist praxis, thus transforming the educational experiences of BIPOC students.

The findings of this dissertation support Applebaum’s (2017) theory that vulnerability has the power to disrupt white fragility. Studies have consistently documented the presence of white fragility and emotionality among white teachers (DiAngelo, 2011; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014; Matias, 2016; Tate & Page, 2018), especially when they are confronted with their own culpability in systemic racism (Boler, 2004; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Stevenson, 2014). However, comforting racial discomfort (i.e., white fragility) centers whiteness and reproduces the power hierarchies of white supremacy. Applebaum (2017) names the comforting of racial discomfort as complicity: “Comforting white students’ discomfort validates their emotional pain at the expense of dismissing and ignoring the emotional pain of students of color, provides absolution from white guilt, and protects challenges to the status quo by ending discussion” (p. 865). White fragility draws the attention away from issues of systemic racism and recenters whiteness in antiracist discussions, preventing critical reflection or antiracist action. Rather than comforting white discomfort, Applebaum (2017) proposes a shift toward critical hope (Boler, 2004), which “aims to encourage openness toward continued struggle and forefronts discomfort as a signal to be alert for what one does not know about others but also about oneself” (Applebaum, 2017, p. 872). Throughout this study, participants identified their own expressions of white fragility as a signal to be alert—alert to

previously unencountered forms of racism, alert to unexplored racial biases, alert to how they are engaging, or not engaging, in critical conversations during antiracist inquiry.

Through critical hope, Boler (2004) provides a path forward in antiracist inquiry that creates a critical space in which white educators experience support and compassion in lieu of comfort. Rather than comforting or validating expressions of white fragility, critical hope provides support for white educators as they express vulnerability by remaining in the ambiguity and uncertainty that comes with deconstructing worldviews and habitus grounded in white supremacy. Transformative learning experiences can only occur when “the systemically privileged are willing to take ownership of discomfort and not be defensive,” especially within the context of interracial dialogue (Applebaum, 2017, p. 873). Shattering worldviews may require a pedagogy of discomfort, but rebuilding an antiracist worldview necessitates the support of critical hope:

In contrast to naïve hope, critical hope recognizes that we live within systems of inequity, in which privilege, such as white and male privilege, comes at the expense of the freedom of others. A willingness to engage in in-depth critical inquiry regarding systems of domination needs to be accompanied by a parallel of emotional willingness to engage in the difficult work of possibly allowing one’s worldviews to be shattered. Critical hope entails a responsibility—a willingness to be fully alive in the process of constant change and becoming. (Boler, 2004, p. 128)

Boler (2004) argues that critical hope is necessary because “education is not effective if it is combative and alienating” (p. 119). If the purpose of engaging white educators in antiracist inquiry is to transform world views and promote antiracist praxis, then critical hope (Boler, 2004) and vulnerability (Applebaum, 2017; Gilson, 2011) should be leveraged to create a space in which white people can remain in and learn through

the discomfort, reminding emotionally willing to engage in the process of antiracist inquiry.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study hold important implications for the field of education, particularly for white educators, white antiracist affinity group facilitators, administrators, and professional developers. In the following sections, I address the important implications and recommendations derived from this study in relation to each of these groups.

#### **Implications for White Educators**

Engaging in antiracism and positioning yourself as an antiracist white ally is a constant process that involves acknowledging and reflection on your own experiences with white fragility. White fragility is a temporary response to racial stress, which signals the need to reevaluate beliefs, reexamine biases, and reposition yourself as open to affecting and being affected by new information and perspectives (Case, 2012; Smith & Redington, 2010; Thomann & Suyemoto, 2018). This repositioning requires vulnerability. In order to remain engaged in antiracist inquiry, I recommend seeking out a community of fellow educators who are able to support your antiracist development without comforting white fragility or (re)centering whiteness. Brené Brown (2015) emphasizes the importance of community and trust in fostering and promoting vulnerability:

Vulnerability is based on mutuality and requires boundaries and trust. It's not oversharing, it's not purging, it's not indiscriminate disclosure, and it's not celebrity-style social media information dumps. Vulnerability is about sharing our feelings and our experiences with

people who earned the right to hear them. Being vulnerable and open is mutual and an integral part of the trust-building process. (p. 45)

Expressions of vulnerability are grounded in mutual trust and the desire to progress through the discomfort of unlearning a habitus and world view informed by white supremacy.

While white people should avoid putting the burden on their BIPOC colleagues to provide action steps for addressing racial inequities, it is also important that such plans are not created in a white echo chamber. This means developing BIPOC accountability and continually reassessing how your efforts are supporting BIPOC-led antiracist movements. White educators can, and should, play an important role in redressing systemic racism in education. However, this does not mean they should be leading such efforts without critical guidance and feedback from the BIPOC community. Devoid of antiracist reflection and BIPOC accountability, actions are often uncritical, misguided, and harmful. Listen to what BIPOC organizations are asking white allies to do because the information is out there and antiracist action should be preceded by critical reflection and “listening bravely” (de Novais, 2019).

#### Implications for White Antiracist Affinity Groups

White antiracist affinity groups can play an important role in promoting antiracist praxis among white educators. The findings of this study hold several important implications for effectively facilitating such groups. First, I recommend intentionally designing a space that fosters vulnerability and promotes prolonged vulnerable engagement. Participating in white antiracist affinity groups should be driven by a personal commitment to or interest in antiracist work, rather than forcibly prescribed by a district. These groups should also be iterative, engaging white educators in topics that recur and build over time, prioritizing depth of engagement

over breadth. No matter how large the group is, critical conversations should take place in small groups to help generate trust and accountability among group members. Meeting with the same small group during each inquiry meeting was found to promote vulnerability. Second, expect and prepare to address expressions of white fragility as white educators encounter new racial stressors. When expressions of white fragility occur, much can be done to support white educators through critical hope, without comforting white fragility or recentering whiteness. Meeting such expressions with compassion and providing critical hope can support white educators as they persist in the discomfort of unlearning and becoming. Do not let expressions of white fragility deter your efforts. Third, approach vulnerability as a *skill* that needs to be developed. Rather than dismissing white participants who express white fragility, focus on reengaging them in the conversation by modeling expressions of vulnerability. Vulnerability cultivates vulnerability in others.

#### Implications for Administrators and Professional Developers

This study supports rethinking how we approach antiracist professional development with inservice teachers. Antiracist change requires a long-term commitment to rooting out white supremacy and making substantial changes at every level of education. Systemic change can, and should, begin immediately with the guidance of BIPOC educators, students, and parents. There is an urgent need for antiracist change. However, urgency is not an excuse for excluding BIPOC voices and experiences from the decision-making process; this urgency is grounded in white supremacy (Okun, 2000). Interracial dialogue should play an important role in guiding antiracist changes. However, steps should be taken to prepare white educators for engaging in interracial dialogue to avoid centering whiteness and harming BIPOC

participants. White antiracist affinity groups are one way in which white educators can take up the burden of educating themselves and their colleagues through critical conversations and prolonged vulnerable engagement. One-off PD does little to shift the hearts and minds of educators, and can instead trigger expressions of white fragility and result in misguided action or inaction. It is also important to expect and prepare to address white fragility throughout the process, without placing the burden on BIPOC educators. As the beneficiaries of white supremacy, white people must take up the burden of rooting out white supremacy in ourselves, our schools, and our communities. Racism is a white problem.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

Although this study provides new insight into how white educators are engaging in antiracist inquiry, there are also potential limitations to this work. One limitation is that the participants in this study were all demographically similar. While the teachers each brought their own unique personalities and approaches to their work with BARWE, they are only representative of a small, homogenous group of teachers. All of the participants were white women in their early to mid-thirties who describe themselves as liberal and have been involved with BARWE for several years. Future research should address this limitation by expanding the scope of the study to include participants who represent a diversity of backgrounds, ages, genders, and political beliefs. Additionally, future research should test the conceptual framework put forward in this study by examining white teachers who are at various stages in their antiracist development to better understand how expressions of vulnerability influence engagement in antiracist inquiry. This would allow future studies to explore how white

teachers are learning to express vulnerability and acquiring the skills necessary for progressing from white fragility to vulnerability and antiracist praxis.

This study is also limited by an abundance of whiteness. Like my participants, I am also a white woman in my early thirties with liberal political beliefs and I have been involved in antiracist inquiry for several years. This study relied on qualitative methods, which meant that data were collected from white participants and interpreted by a white educational researcher. While I seek to critically examine whiteness throughout the study, future studies would benefit from including additional BIPOC voices and perspectives, particularly during data analysis.

The COVID-19 global pandemic limited data collection throughout this study. While I successfully built a good rapport with my participants, it is important to note that I was unable to meet them in person. Due to social distancing restrictions and school closures, the entire study was conducted virtually, which also limited the information I could gather during BARWE observations. While video conferencing technology allowed me to observe BARWE meetings and focus group discussions, it also limited my ability to observe more subtle forms of communication, such as body language, murmurs, and acknowledgment tokens. During whole group discussions, only one person was unmuted at a time, which meant I could not hear any verbal cues that would signify agreement, disagreement, or other emotional responses. With more than 100 people on the Zoom call, I could often observe only one of my participants at a time, as the boxes displaying their videos would be spread across several pages of participants. During small group discussions, I could only observe the teachers in my break out room. Video conferencing also disrupted the flow of conversation, often causing participants to truncate responses or limit their engagement in the

conversation. As Ms. Hannah wrote following our January focus group, “Thanks for bearing with me talking over everyone. Zoom is tough for me!” Due to these limitations, I relied primarily on interview and focus group data when presenting my findings, drawing from fieldnotes when applicable.

The pandemic also limited how much time and energy participants were able to devote to antiracist inquiry. While I initially intended to collect participants’ written reflections and journal entries each month, I decided to cut this form of data collection rather than ask participants to devote additional time to this study during a truly difficult year. Finally, the pandemic directly impacted the data collection for this study when I tested positive for COVID-19 only hours before the October BARWE meeting. While I was ultimately able to collect all of the data for this study, the virus limited my ability to engage fully during data collection.

Future research would benefit from in-person data collection. For example, conducting field observations during the school day would allow researchers to gain insight into how teachers are implementing, or not implementing, antiracist teaching practices and pedagogies in their classrooms. Future studies could also expand on this work by engaging a diverse group of white educators in participatory action research. This would allow researchers to gain insight into participants’ emotional and psychological experiences throughout the study. Finally, future research should further examine the potential benefits of prolonged vulnerable engagement in transforming the habitus of white people. Can prolonged vulnerable engagement transform the habitus? What is the role of vulnerability and white antiracist affinity groups in facilitating such a cultural shift/unlearning of white supremacy? What is the

relationship, if any, between prolonged vulnerable engagement and interest convergence in white antiracist affinity spaces?

### **Conclusion**

White educators play an important role in redressing white supremacy in education. This study provides evidence for engaging white educators in antiracist inquiry as a means of promoting antiracist praxis. White antiracist affinity groups, such as BARWE, can provide a structure for antiracist inquiry that promotes expressions of vulnerability, which are essential for disrupting expressions of white fragility and promoting antiracist praxis. The findings of this study reveal important implications for engaging white educators in antiracist inquiry. Without prolonged vulnerable engagement with antiracist inquiry, white educators will likely continue causing harm to BIPOC students through racialized interactions, racist worldviews, and uncritical misguided action. In the preface of this dissertation, I discuss the timeliness of this research into antiracist inquiry. As the United States continues to grapple with our legacy of racism, this dissertation offers hope for facilitating critical conversations and leveraging vulnerability to transform the world view of white educators who continue to view the world through a lens of white supremacy.

## **EPILOGUE**

It is unwise for us, as white educators, to theorize and reflect on the need to teach multicultural antiracist education if we ignore our own construction of what it means to be white and if we refuse to examine the ways in which we are implicated in the continued oppression of people of color in white society.

– Alice McIntyre, “Constructing an Image of a White Teacher”

Conducting research that critically examines whiteness in education, as I do in this dissertation, necessitates a close examination of how I, as a white researcher and former K-12 educator, am also “implicated in the continued oppression of people of color in white society” (McIntyre, 1997, p. 677). If I am going to critically examine whiteness, I must also critically examine manifestations of whiteness within myself. I began this process in Chapter One with a discussion of the assumptions I bring to this work, and again in Chapter Three with a discussion of my positionality in relation to this study. Here I will continue this work by examining a few of my own experiences with whiteness, white fragility, and vulnerability in researching and writing this dissertation.

### **Combating My Own White Fragility with Vulnerability**

Throughout this study, I positioned myself as an observer-participant by prioritizing my observations and participating only on the periphery. Occasionally, however, I chose to share my own experiences and reflections when they related to the stories that participants had chosen to share with me. In the words of Felicia, I was

seeking to meet their vulnerability with my own vulnerability. Below I share a vignette in which I confront my own expression of white fragility by expressing vulnerability while debriefing with one of my participants.

The December BARWE meeting focused on curriculum violence, which “occurs when educators and curriculum writers have constructed a set of lessons that damage or otherwise adversely affect students intellectually and emotionally” (Jones, 2020, para. 8). Jones goes on to describe curriculum violence as “emotional destruction legitimized as teaching” (para. 8). Reading this phrase felt like a punch in the gut and I immediately turned to my research journal to reflect on how curriculum violence had occurred in my high school English classroom:

How many times did I respond to students asking for more diverse curriculum with some excuse about being required to teach British literature? How many times have I taught about the Holocaust without any warning or asked students to relive generational traumas while I, as a white woman, remained willfully ignorant of the impact of this curriculum? “Intentionality is not a prerequisite for harmful teaching. Intentionality is also not a prerequisite for racism” (Jones, 2020, para. 7). As a teacher, I always had the best of intentions and it is hard to realize that these intentions did nothing to mitigate the damage of curriculum violence in my classroom. (Research Journal, December 10, 2020)

I experienced white fragility while reading about and reflecting on curriculum violence. Feelings of guilt and shame arose as I thought about the pain I had caused my students and I recalled the defensiveness with which I responded to students and passed the blame for our (exceptionally white) curriculum back to the English department. I sought to meet this white fragility by expressing vulnerability through remaining emotionally willing to engage with the reading. I also chose to express vulnerability while debriefing with Hannah by responding to her story about addressing the N-word in her ELA curriculum with a story of my own:

**Diane:** Yeah, it makes me think back on my own teaching. Especially in British literature with Chaucer, he used one of the root words from it. It's the N-word, but ends in A-R-D.

**Hannah:** Oh yeah.

**Diane:** And my first year of teaching, it was one of those years where you're barely ahead of your students sometimes, so we get to it, and I had done no preparation for that, like what I was going to do when we got there. So, we get to the word and it's defined at the bottom of the page, and the students were like, 'Whoa!' And I was like, 'It's not'—I just kind of glossed over it like, 'Here's the definition, this was before that word was used. Moving on.' And looking back, it's like that was totally the wrong thing to do, but I just kind of bought into the way that we taught English at that school. That was the text they used and that's how the school had addressed it. And it wasn't until I watched my students react that I realized just how traumatizing having that word show up in a text unannounced, especially a text you just had no idea this was coming. And then to have a white teacher just kind of gloss over it and be like, 'It's okay. It's okay. Moving on.' So yeah, to think about, just—And again, it's completely out of context entirely. It's not addressing Black people of any kind, that's just not the context. But at the same time, to have that word used so flippantly was probably really traumatic for my students. It's one of those things where you look back as a teacher and you're like, 'That was bad.' [*chuckle*] I traumatized some students there.

**Hannah:** And really the root of the word—like in some ways, learning the root of the word makes it worse. [*chuckle*]

**Diane:** I know, right?

**Hannah:** Because the definition is so bad.

**Diane:** It's terrible. [*chuckle*] And to—I don't know. It's like I just did so many things wrong in that moment where I wish I had addressed it completely differently. (Hannah's December debrief)

In sharing this reflection with my participant, I sought to meet her vulnerability with some of my own, to humanize myself as an imperfect educator. The fact that the word in question is not etymologically related to the N-word does nothing to mitigate the pain it caused the students in my English class as I read to them from *The Canterbury*

*Tales*. Similarly, referring students to the definition of the word, which read “stingy or miserly,” did nothing to address the pain they felt. In that moment, I responded to my students with defensiveness and excuses that showed I was unwilling to engage with their legitimate concern. Even now, I notice a defensiveness in myself and a discomfort in accepting responsibility for failing to position myself as open to changing my worldview.

### **Similarities of Whiteness**

During my research with white educators, I often find myself relating to my participants. Building on these similarities can help me to generate trust and rapport. However, I have also come to realize that similarities can also be an indication of white supremacy culture. The February BARWE meeting focused on the ways in which social and emotional learning (SEL) has been used to police Black and Brown bodies in education. In my research journal, I reflected on the ways in which I had leveraged SEL in my own classroom and I was especially struck by Dena Simmons’ description of SEL as “white supremacy with a hug” (qtd in Kaler-Jones, 2020). As a teacher, I had also used SEL as a way to force students to conform to the norms of whiteness that dominate educational spaces. A few days later, during Hannah’s February debrief, she shared some of her own reflections on how she has leveraged SEL to uphold white norms in her classroom:

**Hannah:** Yeah, I think that I have over the years tried to be more conscious [of SEL], but in virtually virtual learning there are no behavior problems, so I’m cool with that. [*chuckle*] But in the classroom, yes, I am somebody who struggles with loud noises. And I’m someone who struggles when there’s a lot of loud noise. It is just something I don’t process well, and I know that’s a whiteness thing. And so that’s something I’m constantly coming up against because just physiologically, my body responds to loud situations poorly. So, when

I struggle to acknowledge positive, vibrant, chatter in a positive way, it exhausts me on a physiological level. And that is something that has been a constant struggle.

**Diane:** I can definitely relate to that. (Hannah's February Debrief)

Listening to Hannah's reflection, I realized that this point of similarity between us was grounded in whiteness and the norms of white supremacy culture. When she said, "I'm someone who struggles when there's a lot of loud noise," I felt myself nodding along. I remembered struggling when my classroom would get too loud, even when it was a highly productive loudness. However, as Hannah points out, struggling with loud noises is "a whiteness thing," and SEL is often leveraged as a way to keep students working quietly and stamp out Black joy. Following Hannah's debrief, I reflected on this interaction in my research journal:

As a white researcher (and former educator) working with white teachers, I often find myself connecting with the stories that they share. I have come to realize that this connection often identifies the influences of whiteness and white supremacy culture. For example, it really resonated with me when Hannah shared about her struggle with loud, noisy classrooms. I could feel it in my soul—in a deep part of who I am as a person. I can't stand loud noises and, like Hannah, they exhaust me on a physiological level. It strikes me just how similar our experiences are—not because we are two peas in a pod, but because we are two white women with similar cultural norms. (Research Journal, February 23, 2021)

This journal entry helped me begin processing what it means for me as a white educational researcher and former K-12 educator to identify traits that I share with the white educators I study. While similarities can help generate trust and build rapport, they should also be scrutinized as a potential signal of shared experiences in white supremacy culture.

Throughout the study, my own experiences with white fragility and vulnerability left me empathetic to my fellow white educators as they sought to open

themselves to vulnerability. As the instrument of data collection and analysis, a critical examination of whiteness requires a critical examination of myself. As Hatch (2002) explains, “In qualitative work, it is understood that the act of studying a social phenomenon influences the enactment of that phenomenon. Researchers are a part of the world they study; the knower and the known are taken to be inseparable” (p. 10). While I tried to position myself as an observer-participant and remain on the periphery during data collection, I also remained aware that my presence influenced the phenomenon I was studying.

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## Appendix A

### BARWE CURRICULUM INQUIRY SERIES 1-3

Inquiry Series One (2018-2019)		
Month	Guiding Question	Primary Article
August	Why do white teachers need to talk about race?	Watson, A. (2017). Ten things every white teacher should know when talking about race. <i>The Cornerstone for Teachers</i> . <a href="https://thecornerstoneforteachers.com/truth-for-teachers-podcast/10-things-every-white-teacher-know-talking-race/">https://thecornerstoneforteachers.com/truth-for-teachers-podcast/10-things-every-white-teacher-know-talking-race/</a>
September	How can our curriculum challenge dominant and oppressive ideologies?	Pitts, J. (2018). Black history month teaching: Miseducation or empowerment? <i>Learning for Justice</i> . <a href="https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/black-history-month-teaching-miseducation-or-empowerment">https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/black-history-month-teaching-miseducation-or-empowerment</a>
October	How can we identify and challenge implicit bias in our own practice?	Turner, C. (2016). Bias isn't just a police problem, it's a preschool problem. <i>NPR</i> . <a href="https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2016/09/28/495488716/bias-isnt-just-a-police-problem-its-a-preschool-problem">https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2016/09/28/495488716/bias-isnt-just-a-police-problem-its-a-preschool-problem</a>
November	How does whiteness affect our practices, relationships, and expectations in the classroom and the school community?	Demby, G. (2016). The code switch podcast, episode 1: Can we talk about whiteness? <i>NPR</i> . <a href="https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/05/31/479733094/the-code-switch-podcast-episode-1-can-we-talk-about-whiteness">https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/05/31/479733094/the-code-switch-podcast-episode-1-can-we-talk-about-whiteness</a>
December	How do we disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline?	American Civil Liberties Union. (n.d.). Race, discipline, and safety at U.S. public schools. <i>ACLU</i> . <a href="https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline/race-discipline-and-safety-us-public-schools">https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline/race-discipline-and-safety-us-public-schools</a>
January	How can we ensure that our schools value Black lives?	Watson, D., Hagopian, J., & Au, W. (Eds.). (2018). Introduction. <i>Teaching for black lives</i> . Rethinking Schools. <a href="https://www.teachingfor">https://www.teachingfor</a>

		<a href="http://blacklives.org/read-the-introduction">blacklives.org/ read-the-introduction</a>
February	Why are teachers of color so important for our schools and how can we increase their numbers?	Aina, M. (2019). To get to college, it helps black students to have a black teacher early on. <i>NPR</i> . <a href="https://www.npr.org/2019/01/11/682194015/-black-teachers-helps-black-students-get-to-college">https://www.npr.org/2019/01/11/682194015/-black-teachers-helps-black-students-get-to-college</a>  Anderson, M. D. (2018). A root cause of the teacher-diversity problem. <i>The Atlantic</i> . <a href="https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/01/a-root-cause-of-the-teacher-diversity-problem/551234/">https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/01/a-root-cause-of-the-teacher-diversity-problem/551234/</a>
March	How can we support colleagues of color and build anti-racist work environments?	Lathan, C. (2014). Dear White teacher. <i>Rethinking Schools</i> , 29(1).
April	How can we implement culturally relevant teaching to challenge the culture of power that exists in schools?	Irvine, J. J. (2009). Relevant: Beyond the basics. <i>Teaching Tolerance</i> , 36, 41-44.  Delpit, L. (n.d.). Lisa Delpit on power and pedagogy. <i>Works and Days</i> . <a href="https://newlearningonline.com/new-learning/chapter-8/lisa-delpit-on-power-and-pedagogy">https://newlearningonline.com/new-learning/chapter-8/lisa-delpit-on-power-and-pedagogy</a>
May	How do we push our schools, classrooms, and communities to incorporate more equitable disciplinary practices?	Public Counsel. (2015). Why we must reform school discipline in California. <i>Fix school discipline: How we can fix school discipline: Toolkit for educators</i> . (p. 3-4) <a href="http://njpsa.org/documents/pdf/FixSchoolDiscipline.pdf#page=5">http://njpsa.org/documents/pdf/FixSchoolDiscipline.pdf#page=5</a>
June	How do we move this conversation forward and include more educators?	BARWE. (2019). Recruiting new participants: Creating an anti-racist relationship map. [Google doc]. <a href="https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wSgslt5BvmFwxUX16xRpwY1i0KC9ANISTiuvzDFWHzk/edit">https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wSgslt5BvmFwxUX16xRpwY1i0KC9ANISTiuvzDFWHzk/edit</a>

Inquiry Series Two (2019-2020)		
Month	Guiding Question	Primary Article
September	What does it mean to develop an anti-racist identity as a white educator?	White anti-racism: Living the legacy. (n.d.) <i>Learning for Justice</i> . <a href="https://www.learningforjustice.org/professional-development/white-antiracism-living-the-legacy">https://www.learningforjustice.org/professional-development/white-antiracism-living-the-legacy</a>

		<p>Kendi, I. X. (2019). Ibram X. Kendi’s latest book: ‘How to be an antiracist.’ <i>NPR</i>. <a href="https://www.npr.org/2019/08/13/750709263/ibram-x-kendis-latest-book-how-to-be-an-antiracist">https://www.npr.org/2019/08/13/750709263/ibram-x-kendis-latest-book-how-to-be-an-antiracist</a></p>
October	How do our implicit biases affect our students?	<p>Race Forward. (2014). Chapter 1: High school. <i>YouTube</i>. <a href="https://youtu.be/ezZn_N43Jdw">https://youtu.be/ezZn_N43Jdw</a></p> <p>Unconscious bias in teaching: Interactive case studies for understading and addressing bias in STEM. (n.d.). <i>MIT Teaching Systems Lab</i>. <a href="https://mit-teaching-systems-lab.github.io/unconscious-bias/">https://mit-teaching-systems-lab.github.io/unconscious-bias/</a></p>
November	How could incorporating ethnic studies in our classrooms and schools help make our curriculum more antiracist?	<p>Anderson, M. (2015). The value of ethnic studies—for all students. <i>Learning for Justice</i>. <a href="https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/the-value-of-ethnic-studiesfor-all-students">https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/the-value-of-ethnic-studiesfor-all-students</a></p> <p>Castro-Gill, T., VanDerPloeg, L., Alonzo, A., Charlton, J., Au, W., &amp; Guzmán, G. (2018). Seattle public schools anti-racist content and practice definitions. [PDF] <a href="https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dXjg3s-xIWW1hdulN5UJ6LLmbH8yxB_/view?usp=sharing">https://drive.google.com/file/d/1dXjg3s-xIWW1hdulN5UJ6LLmbH8yxB_/view?usp=sharing</a></p>
December	How can we ensure that our school discipline policies are equitable and do not push girls of color out of school spaces?	<p>National Women’s Law Center. (2016). <i>Let her learn: A tool kit to stop school push out for girls of color</i>. <a href="https://nwlc-ciw49tixgw5lbab.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/final_nwlc_NOVO2016Toolkit.pdf">https://nwlc-ciw49tixgw5lbab.stackpathdns.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/final_nwlc_NOVO2016Toolkit.pdf</a></p> <p>Pushout Film. (2019). Pushout Trailer. <i>YouTube</i>. <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWPayvrHkEM">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nWPayvrHkEM</a></p>
January	How can we ensure that our schools value Black lives?	<p>Dillard, C. (2018). Black lives matter week of action. <i>Learning for Justice</i>. <a href="https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/black-lives-matter-week-of-action">https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/black-lives-matter-week-of-action</a></p>
February	How can we recruit and retain more Black teachers in our schools?	<p>Foster, M. (2018). Why America needs more African American teachers—and how to recruit and retain them. <i>Scholars</i>. <a href="https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YpOkMD278bVFNwdEf4oOEjvAYLoCqNh5/view">https://drive.google.com/file/d/1YpOkMD278bVFNwdEf4oOEjvAYLoCqNh5/view</a></p>

March	How can White educators be accountable to their colleagues of color?	Brazas, C. (2020). What white colleagues need to understand. <i>Learning for Justice</i> , 64. <a href="https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2020/what-white-colleagues-need-to-understand">https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2020/what-white-colleagues-need-to-understand</a>
April	How can we interrupt anti-AAPI and xenophobic narratives in our classrooms and school communities?	Dillard, C. (2020). Speaking up against racism around the coronavirus. <i>Learning for Justice</i> . <a href="https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/speaking-up-against-racism-around-the-coronavirus">https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/speaking-up-against-racism-around-the-coronavirus</a>
May	How do we support our students during this crisis and connect to the larger fight to dismantle race and class oppression in our communities?	Bautista, N. (2020). Distance learning during coronavirus worsens race, class inequity in education. <i>TeenVogue</i> . <a href="https://www.teenvogue.com/story/distance-learning-low-income-students">https://www.teenvogue.com/story/distance-learning-low-income-students</a>

Inquiry Series Three (2020-2021)		
Month	Guiding Question	Primary Article
September	How can we identify and challenge white supremacy culture in ourselves and our institutions?	Okun, T. (2000). White supremacy culture. <i>Dismantling racism: A workbook for social change groups, Durham, NC: Change Work</i> . Retrieved from <a href="http://www.dismantlingracism.org/Dismantling_Racism/liNKs_files/whitesupcul09.pdf">http://www.dismantlingracism.org/Dismantling_Racism/liNKs_files/whitesupcul09.pdf</a>
October	How can we as white educators center Black joy in our classrooms and schools?	Love, B. L. (2019a, March 19). <i>Bettina Love discusses her book, we want to do more than survive</i> [interview]. C-SPAN Video Library. <a href="https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4910585/user-clip-black-joy">https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4910585/user-clip-black-joy</a>
November	How can we more deeply reflect and/or apply what we learned about white supremacy culture and Black joy?	Okun, T. (2000). White supremacy culture. <i>Dismantling racism: A workbook for social change groups, Durham, NC: Change Work</i> . Retrieved from <a href="http://www.dismantlingracism.org/Dismantling_Racism/liNKs_files/whitesupcul09.pdf">http://www.dismantlingracism.org/Dismantling_Racism/liNKs_files/whitesupcul09.pdf</a>
December	How can we identify and challenge white supremacy culture in our curriculum?	Jones, S. P. (2020). Ending curriculum violence. <i>Learning for Justice</i> , 64, 47-50. <a href="https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2020/ending-curriculum-violence">https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2020/ending-curriculum-violence</a>

January	How can we identify and challenge white supremacy culture in our curriculum?	BARWE. (2021) Critical analysis of a curricular unit. [Google Doc]. <a href="https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Bd2Yg6mT4zcfnDVIFgUIfYZsrS-RvqoO-J5Fo9dV1SI/edit">https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Bd2Yg6mT4zcfnDVIFgUIfYZsrS-RvqoO-J5Fo9dV1SI/edit</a>
February	How can we create classroom culture that resists white supremacy and that nourishes Black joy?	Kaler-Jones, C. (2020). When SEL is used as another form of policing. <i>Medium</i> . <a href="https://medium.com/@justschools/when-sel-is-used-as-another-form-of-policing-fa53cf85dce4">https://medium.com/@justschools/when-sel-is-used-as-another-form-of-policing-fa53cf85dce4</a>
March	How can we identify and challenge white supremacy culture in our classroom culture? How can we co-create joy with students?	BARWE. (2021). Co-constructing spaces of joy. [Google Doc]. <a href="https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pc16bHoW4QgmfC5qviBkSYyhQcvINxG6nQMEL_dgYk/edit">https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pc16bHoW4QgmfC5qviBkSYyhQcvINxG6nQMEL_dgYk/edit</a>  BARWE. (2021). Classroom culture audit. [Google Doc]. <a href="https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wwOSwz72NmK-GgG-r-yXIeu4QWJaYaXSxpyfHHQfIMg/edit">https://docs.google.com/document/d/1wwOSwz72NmK-GgG-r-yXIeu4QWJaYaXSxpyfHHQfIMg/edit</a>
April	How can we help develop staff culture that resists white supremacy culture and makes space for Black joy?	Dillard, C. (2021). Black male educators create space for joy. <i>Learning for Justice</i> , 66, 37-41. <a href="https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2021/black-male-educators-create-space-for-joy">https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2021/black-male-educators-create-space-for-joy</a>
May	How can we help develop staff culture that resists white supremacy culture and makes space for Black joy?	BARWE. (2021). Staff culture audit. [Google Doc]. <a href="https://docs.google.com/document/d/1awodsFv2u0BJWH-oUndUpUk0GFrI9Z75sv7sWF-PBec/edit?usp=sharing">https://docs.google.com/document/d/1awodsFv2u0BJWH-oUndUpUk0GFrI9Z75sv7sWF-PBec/edit?usp=sharing</a>

## Appendix B

### SAMPLE RECRUITMENT EMAILS

#### BARWE Group Recruitment Email

Dear [*group leader name*],

My name is Diane Coddling and I am doctoral candidate in the School of Education at the University of Delaware. As part of my doctoral dissertation, I am conducting a research study to understand how white educators are pursuing antiracism through professional inquiry groups, such as BARWE. I am recruiting local BARWE groups that are continuing to meet virtually during this time of social distancing to take part in this study.

Participating in this study will involve:

- Allowing me to observe your monthly BARWE discussion meetings
- Individual interviews with approximately five participants throughout the study

If you are interested in participating in this study or would like additional information about the study, **please reply to this email**. Emailing your interest is not a guarantee that you will participate in this study, and you can certainly change your mind.

Sincerely,  
Diane Coddling

#### Case Study Participant Recruitment Email

Hello [*potential participant name*],

Thank you for reaching out and expressing your interest! It sounds like you are part of a really active BARWE group and I hope I will have the chance to hear more about your experiences soon.

I am in the process of selecting participants for my study and it would be helpful if you could share a little bit about yourself. I have put together a short survey (*imbedded link to Qualtrics survey*) that will help me select a diverse group of participants.

Please let me know if you have any questions and I will touch base with you again next week. I hope you have a great week.

**Survey Link:** (*link to Qualtrics survey*)

Sincerely,  
Diane Coddling

## Appendix C

### PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT SURVEY

Thank you for your interest in participating in my dissertation research. Please take a few minutes to answer the following questions about yourself and your experiences with BARWE. All information collected will be kept confidential and you are free to skip any questions you do not wish to answer.

If you have any questions or concerns, please reach out to me, Diane Coddling, at [dcodding@udel.edu](mailto:dcodding@udel.edu).

**Do you consent to participate in this survey?**      Yes      No

Name:

Email Address:

Location (City, State):

#### Demographic Information

- Where do you teach?
- What grade(s) and subject(s) do you teach?
- How long have you been teaching?
- How old are you?
- How do you identify racially?
- What is your gender identity? (e.g., female, male, transgender, non-binary)
- How do you identify politically? (*optional*)
- How would you describe your religious or spiritual identity? (*optional*)

#### Antiracist Teaching

- Are you affiliated with any activist groups? If so, please list them.
- How long have you been involved with BARWE?
- What made you interested in joining BARWE?

- What do you see as the primary goal or mission of your BARWE group?
- How likely are you to attend all (or most) of the monthly BARWE meetings this year?
  - Very Likely
  - Likely
  - Unlikely
  - Very Unlikely
- Is there anything else you wish to share about yourself or your experiences with BARWE? (*optional*)

## Appendix D

### DATA COLLECTION TIMELINE

Timeline	Data Point	Collection Date			
		BARWE	Hannah	Felicia	Megan
<b>2020</b>					
September	Initial Interviews		Sept. 9	Sept. 16	Sept. 11
September BARWE	Observation	*			
	Focus Group	Sept. 21			
	Individual Debriefs		Oct. 5	Sept. 30	Oct. 2
October BARWE	Observation	Oct. 19			
	Focus Group	Oct. 19			
	Individual Debriefs		Oct. 29	Nov. 2	Nov. 6
November BARWE	Observation	Nov. 10			
	Focus Group	Nov. 10			
	Individual Debriefs		Nov. 17	**	Nov. 19
December BARWE	Observation	Dec. 11			
	Focus Group	Dec. 14			
	Individual Debriefs		Dec. 16	Dec. 15	Dec. 18
<b>2021</b>					
January BARWE	Observation	Jan. 15			
	Focus Group	Jan. 26			
	Individual Debriefs		Jan. 19, 20	Jan. 20	Jan. 22
February BARWE	Observation	Feb. 22			
	Focus Group	Feb. 22			
	Individual Debriefs		Feb. 23	Feb. 26	Feb. 26
March BARWE	Observation	Mar. 12			
	Focus Group	Mar. 15			
	Individual Debriefs		Mar. 16	Mar. 15	Mar. 16
April	Final Interviews		Apr. 15	Apr. 14	Apr. 13

Notes. The asterisks (\*) indicate data points that were not collected.

\* At the request of my participants, I did not observe the September BARWE meeting (Sept. 21), which was their first BARWE meeting of the year. The format of the CCMS BARWE meetings was expanding to include teachers from all four schools in the charter school network. A letter was distributed to all attendees during this meeting to inform them of my study and provide contact information.

\*\* Felicia did not attend the November BARWE meeting and she did not respond to email requests to schedule her November Individual Debrief.

## Appendix E

### INITIAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- What comes to mind when you hear the word *race*?
  - What emotions come up for you when you think about race?
  - Has your understanding of race changed over time?
- Would you say race is an important part of how you think about yourself as a person?
- When do you first remember learning about race? Can you tell me more about that experience?
  - What emotions do you associate with that experience?
  - What do you think you learned (about yourself or others) from that experience?
- Was race something that your family talked about when you were growing up? If you don't think race was explicitly discussed, how do you think race was implicitly taught at home?
  - How? Who? When? In what context?
  - *Where did you grow up?*
- Was race something that people talked about at school when you were a kid? If you don't think race was explicitly discussed, how do you think race was implicitly taught at your school?
  - How? Who? When? In what context?
  - *How would you describe the racial make-up of your school? Your community?*
- Can you describe an experience in which you were aware of your own race? What emotions would you associate with that experience? (ex: shame, guilt, vulnerability, exposed, uncomfortable, calm, at ease)
  - How? Who? When? In what context?
  - Why do you think this instance stands out in your mind?
- How would you describe yourself as an educator?
  - What are you like in your classroom?

- What was your classroom like back when you had a physical space?
  - What is your virtual classroom like now?
- How often do you think about race as an educator? In what contexts?
  - What emotions come up for you when you think about race in the context of your school?
  - How do you think race influences how your students think about you as their teacher?
- When you think about race in the context of your school, what comes to mind?
- How did you get started with antiracist work?
- What do you think it is important for me to know about you as we engage in this work together?

## Appendix F

### DEBRIEF SESSION PROTOCOL

First of all, how are you? How are things going at school?

#### **Take a moment to reflect on your first BARWE meeting.**

- Can you tell me about how you were feeling during the small group discussions (school-based content group and district-wide content group)?
  - What was it like in your first vs second group?
  - What would you say was your strongest emotion?
- Can you describe any moments during the session that required you to be **brave**?
- Where there any moments when you were **hesitant** to express yourself, what did you do? How did you make that decision?
- Was there anything about the inquiry group that makes it easier or harder for you to engage in the discussion about white supremacy culture?
- Was there anything that surprised you about the meeting?

#### **Take a moment to reflect on your preparation for the BARWE meeting.**

- What did you do to prepare for the January BARWE meeting? (Do you recall which articles you read?)
- Was there anything that really resonated with you in the readings for this month?
- What was it like for you to reflect on how specific aspects of white supremacy culture show up in your teaching practices, curriculum, and relationships with students and colleagues?
  - Did you notice any feelings of **resistance** during your reflections?
  - What would you say was your strongest emotion during this process?
- Did you leave the meeting with any action steps, or a plan for noticing and disrupting white supremacy culture?

## **Appendix G**

### **FINAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

#### **White Fragility**

- What comes to mind when you think about white fragility?
- Do you think white fragility continues to play a role in your own antiracist development, even after being a part of BARWE for several years? Why or why not?
  - Can you tell me about a time this year when you remember experiencing white fragility?
  - What did you do when you noticed you were experiencing white fragility?
  - When you're experiencing white fragility, is there anything that helps you remain engaged with antiracist work?

#### **Vulnerability**

- What comes to mind when you think about vulnerability?
- What role, if any, do you think vulnerability play in becoming an antiracist white educator?
  - Can you tell me about a time this year when you remember experiencing vulnerability?
  - What lead up to that experience?
  - Did you find it difficult to be vulnerable? Why or why not?
  - Did you engage in any specific antiracist actions as a result of that experience?
- Is there anything about the BARWE inquiry group that makes it easier for you to be vulnerable?
- Is there anything about the BARWE inquiry group that makes it harder for you to be vulnerable (or more likely to be fragile)?

### **Antiracist Praxis**

- Freire defines praxis as a combination of reflection and action (Freire, 2013). Do you think BARWE has helped you engage in antiracist praxis? Why or why not?
  - Can you tell me about a time this year when you remember engaging in antiracist reflection that led to antiracist action?
  - Did you experience white fragility and/or vulnerability while engaging in antiracist praxis?

### **Member Checking**

*During data analysis, I compiled a list of questions for each participant that would help me gain insight into their experiences, receive feedback on data presentation, and follow-up regarding specific vignettes.*

**Appendix H**  
**CODING MANUAL**

Literature	Code	Definition	Data Example	
RQ2 – What do expressions of vulnerability and white fragility look like and what is the relationship between these expressions?				
<b>Vulnerability</b>	(Applebaum, 2017; Boler, 2004; Brown, 2015; de Novais, 2019; Gilson, 2011)	Acknowledging Fault, Fear, or Responsibility	Admitting to feeling afraid, or asking forgiveness, saying (out loud) that you were wrong, acknowledging responsibility to engage in antiracist praxis	It’s not only English. In math, too many Black and Brown students don’t see themselves in the math classroom. Numbers are Arabic. This is from not-white people. ... I need to figure out how to figure out how to bring in their natural math abilities. Math is community. If you’re doing math alone, you’re not doing it. I have gaps in my own classroom, too. (Megan, December fieldnotes)
		Brave Engagement	Willingness to move outside of their comfort zone (e.g., venturing ideas, willingness to risk exposure)	I know for me, it felt like I just had to say it out loud. For me, it was like they just needed to know. They just needed someone to show them, because I don’t even know that they would have went in that direction if I wasn’t in there. I don’t know. I’m curious what they would have got into. It would’ve just been real happy, smiley. (Megan, January focus group)

		Emotional Willingness	Sitting in discomfort, Open to ambivalence, willingness to experience and process emotions	I think the growth comes in recognizing those emotions and just not acting on them. Right? I think you're always going to feel what you feel ... Maybe there are people that have reached a higher plane and no longer feel embarrassed, uncomfortable, jealous, any of those terrible words, right? Any of those bad emotions that come up. I think that most people feel those emotions and it's just the acting on it that we have control over. (Hannah, final interview).
		Seeking Input and Help	Accountability to BIPOC colleagues, asking for help addressing whiteness in herself/her classroom from a trusted partner in this work (BIPOC colleagues, white allies)	Yeah, [BIPOC teachers association] has been really a blessing. But it's one of the things where they hold us accountable for the articles we choose and the questions we put out and the wording of our emails. So, we have really specific parameters. We pay them for their time to review those resources. We pay them for their time to come to our retreat once a year to help us guide provisional work, but then it's up to the individual schools to see how they're using that. (Hannah, March debrief)
<b>White Fragility</b>	(DiAngelo, 2011; Gilson, 2011; Matias, 2016; Picower, 2009, 2015)	(Re)Centering Whiteness	Actions or emotions that lead to centering or recentering whiteness, such as prioritizing white comfort or white emotions over BIPOC experiences	Whether intentionally or not, white people center themselves in other people's experiences. I guess the focusing on whatever the hurt, feelings or the 'Well, I'm trying my best,' or 'I can't be

			perfect,' or whatever, like that sort of stuff. I feel like, just like getting all butthurt because you're trying to do the right thing or whatever, but it's not enough. (Felicia, January debrief)
		Defensive Behaviors	Silence, avoidance, physical distancing, argumentation, physical signs of discomfort (e.g., arms crossed), observable behaviors
		Discourse Moves	White saviorism, willful ignorance, white ideologies (color-blindness, meritocracy, white supremacy), avoiding critical conversations, elevating yourself as a "good" white person
		Displays of Emotion	Anger, defensiveness, discomfort, fear, guilt, shame, white
			Honestly, my patience was like stretched so thin by that point, just with everything that ... I was just super annoyed at whatever. Fifteen, twenty adults all just sitting staring at each other. I get it, I get that none of this feels like ideal, but oh my God. I was just so over it. Like come on, [chuckle] just leave then if you're not going to like—We're just going to stay here and stare at each other? Ugh ... That was just lame. (Felicia, January debrief)
			It was a white woman board member who, I think I told you this too, but she just was saying all the wrong stuff, and she clearly didn't read the book. And we're in a... We're literally in a book club, she clearly didn't read the book, and she was saying stuff along the lines of, 'Oh well, good thing I'm not racist because...' she literally said the quote, 'Anti-racism just runs naturally in my blood.' (Megan, Sept debrief)
			The harder part was writing it down to myself than sharing it out... I think [I experienced] a lot

			emotionality, emotional discomfort that causes them to be unable/unwilling to engage	of guilt and some shame and definitely needing to resist the urge or desire or tendency, whatever it may be, to spiral—to spiral where it’s like, ‘Yeah. Just jump ship, you’re a horrible racist.’ You know? I still think about [the totem pole lesson] I’d say fairly regularly, where it’s just like, ‘Ugh.’ So, I think it was just facing that, those feelings of just discomfort, but not trying to let it spiral out of control. (Felicia, December debrief)
		Hesitancy to Engage	waiting for more guidance or leadership, rather than engaging yourself	I think one of the things I struggle with is how to have that conversation without making it be like, ‘Hey, Black person, how do we do this?’ And I don’t want to be that person, I don’t want to be that colleague. (Hannah, October debrief)
<p>RQ1 – What is the relationship between white teachers’ self-perceptions of their role as antiracist white allies and their interactions during antiracist inquiry and praxis?</p> <p>RQ3 – What is the relationship between these expressions and teachers’ antiracist (in)actions?</p>				
<b>Reflection (Antiracist Praxis)</b>	(Freire, 2013; McManimon & Casey, 2018; Michael & Conger, 2009; Schniedewind, 2005; Sleeter, 2008; Varghese et al., 2019)	Active Self-Monitoring	Monitoring emotional response (fragility), monitoring behaviors and biases	I guess it feels like a lot of reading it is like ‘This is simple but not easy,’ and that it’s like, ‘Why?’ It’s like nothing... It’s like ‘Why does this book have to even be written?’ So, it’s navigating that, and then the additional, and then exploring, and making room for me asking that question on ‘What part do I play in that?’ (Felicia, Oct debrief)

		<p>Critical Examination</p>	<p>Critically reflecting on issues raised, pushing for deeper engagement with issues beyond the self</p>	<p>If we're ever going to really address SEL well in school, it has to be woven into the fabric of everything and a specific time; a specific time is done well, but I think for everyone in this world, adults and children, everyone needs to be better educated about emotions and the ways that our bodies produce emotions and why and how we can deactivate and de-stimulate. And I just think that we need more of that instruction, particularly in America where we have such a prudish, anti-emotion society in a lot of ways. And I think that you can't do that without having time dedicated to it. (Hannah, Feb debrief)</p>
		<p>Empathy, Perspective Taking</p>	<p>Thinking about/reflecting on inequities from another point of view or looking to engage new perspectives</p>	<p>... at the end when [a teacher] said that thing about the kids don't have an opinion. Like they have fucking opinions, we don't create a space for them to feel good about sharing those opinions or they're so concerned with giving the right answer that they limit their own thinking, consciously or unconsciously, because they want the answer we're looking for. ... We're creating space where the kids don't have, or don't feel like they have the space to be authentic in a lot of ways. (Hannah, February focus group)</p>

		Sources of Learning	Engaging with additional sources of antiracist learning (e.g., social media, articles, other discussion groups)	My favorite math educator, one of them is Rochelle Gutierrez, and she's a big woman on this site Todos, T-O-D-O-S. Rochelle, she is all about re-humanizing math, she has a bunch of articles about "how to re-humanize it," and she says she had this article, which was cool, she pulled up research from Seattle and Seattle kind of changed their math teacher framework. (Megan, December debrief)
Action (Antiracist Praxis)	(Lawrence & Tatum, 1997; McManimon & Casey, 2018; Michael & Conger, 2009; Schniedewind, 2005; Smith & Redington, 2010; Strong et al., 2017)	Amplifying BIPOC Efforts	Specific actions in support of efforts being led by BIPOC leadership or collaboration with BIPOC colleagues	But honestly it really just felt so vulnerable [for Black colleague] and I just didn't like that it was hanging out there. And it was after school hours, and all of this stuff was [sigh]. So, it's like, I get it, people weren't actively probably checking their email. But I don't know. I also just don't like to be very earnest at work. ... I think it was just like trying to meet her vulnerability with some of my vulnerability I guess, which is not usually my move. (Felicia, February debrief)
		Antiracist Identity	How the teacher positions herself within antiracist work, traits or patterns of engagement with antiracism (e.g., white ally). Informs how participants are taking antiracist action	I think I was always the person pushing the logistical end of it, even when we were meeting in person, but it was only like four of us, so we were all very much on equal footing, it was just like I was the one sending the emails and printing the article. And that was really the only logistical setup,

			maybe haggling with my boss for time and space, but other than that, there really wasn't other logistics to think of. I didn't have a PowerPoint, I didn't have anything to do for the day of. (Hannah, Sept debrief)
		Collaborative, School-Level Change	<p>This includes collaboratively addressing inequities beyond individual classrooms (e.g., grade-level curriculum, dress code, cameras)</p> <p>Now, I'm speaking the same language with my other [colleague], so now [she] is sending me stuff. ... And she's been breathing, sleeping, and eating this math equity language to the point where she's in charge of the whole district's math curriculum. ... I feel like a lot has changed for me, and I see that some of the changes happening around the school. (Megan, March debrief)</p>
		Curriculum Changes	<p>Antiracist Changes to curriculum, addressing issues of curriculum violence, culturally responsive pedagogy, representation vs appropriation</p> <p>We'll have a guest speaker from each realm of justice come in and the kids will read one first-person narrative, non-fiction about working in that realm of justice and then the kids will pick a realm. They then spend the rest of the unit reading and working in one of those four areas. And then at the end, the final project is basically to submit a proposal on how our school can do better in that particular area and/or run a lunch bunch for younger kids to educate them or film a PSA or something like that. So, I'm excited! (Hannah, Jan focus group)</p>

		Pedagogical Change (Individual)	Specific changes made to the way they teach and deliver content	We planned that lesson together, trying to figure out ways we can make math more culturally responsive. ... My coach helped me sit down and like, 'How can we draw on all those funds of knowledge that the fifth graders are bringing and what did they think of this particular math problem? Was it realistic to them? Did they like it?' and just broaching it from that way. (Megan, Jan focus group)
		Talking to Others about Race and Racism	Engaging people in critical conversations outside of BARWE, calling them into conversation, redressing racism	I had an inside discussion with them last Wednesday, because I was bringing up other concerns ... and they were very open and were admitting to me that this is the first time they're ever talking about this ever. (Megan, Oct focus group)
<b>Inaction</b>	(Case & Hemmings, 2005; Denevi & Pastan, 2006; DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014; Evans-Winters & Hines, 2019'; Matias, 2016; McIntyre, 1997; Patton & Jordan, 2017; Picower, 2009, 2015)	Misguided Action	Such actions can have racist outcomes; however, they were initially implemented in an attempt at antiracism (or to address racism), <i>empty activism</i> (Freire, 2013)	"I think the white people are so woke right now that we're creating this whole plan and we're not actually including the Black staff. ... We're sitting arguing about what's best for Black people and there's not a Black person in room" (Megan, March debrief).
		Passive Inaction (Lacking Implementation)	Waiting for Someone Else, Unwilling to Lead (passing the buck), unimplemented ideas, he ball is put forward but then it stops moving. Ideas are shared with admin and then don't have it any	It sounded to me like [a teacher] identified a bunch of areas that needed work, but then, she was like, 'Well, I don't have anything to do with the discipline. So how do we get the discipline involved?' That's where we keep falling in this trap where it's like we don't

			further.	have the power to make these changes. ... I even sent a follow-up to all the admin and nobody wrote me back except the high school people saying that they didn't feel comfortable leading this conversation at their campus. So literally, no one is picking up this ball. (Hannah, November focus group)
		Uncritical Engagement	Superficial, easy fixes without digging deeply to examine inequities, failing to dig deeply into a topic	I think the school is reaching the point where now the work that needs to do is harder, it's like the more below the surface work, so I think really the school needs to do some actual anti-bias training before they can move forward as a staff, the whole staff, so I'm hoping that that is something they do next year. (Hannah, March debrief)
RQ4 – In what ways does the BARWE structure support, or hinder, expressions of vulnerability, white fragility, and antiracist (in)action?				
Affinity Group Features	(Case, 2012; de Novais, 2019; Kohli et al., 2015; McManimon & Casey, 2018; Michael & Conger, 2009; Singleton, 2015; Strong et al., 2017; Tatum, 2017; Varghese et al., 2019)	BARWE Curriculum	Curriculum structure, Black Joy & White Supremacy Culture	This month [September] is article-focused, discussion question focused and October's going to be another article. But then, the whole point of the November meeting is checking in on the action step and looking at things like the handout about identifying white supremacy in your school. (Hannah, September focus group)
		BIPOC Accountability	leadership in conversation with BIPOC group and	That's the missing piece. It's that assessment piece. Because if it was just

		colleagues	white folks doing the work and asking themselves, 'Hey, did we meet this goal?' That's still a problem. <i>[laughter]</i> Because we're never going to know. It's not us that we're affected negatively in the first place, so how are we to say if it's gotten better? (Hannah, March debrief)
	Critical Conversations	(e.g., collaborative problem solving, storytelling, racial dialogue, context-specific)	A piece of feedback we get a lot is we need differentiated BARWE groups, and we're like, 'No! The work is talking to everybody at the stages that they're at.' And so, we're leaning into the power of sharing your personal experience with your journey through white racial identity development. (Hannah, February debrief)
	District-Wide Scope	How the district-wide scope has impacted the BARWE meetings, specifically in terms of creating space for critical, vulnerable engagement	BARWE was kind of preaching to the choir last year, because the only people that made the time to show up were people that were already thinking about it, which is great in some ways, and also not necessarily the point of it in other ways. So, I think it's a good problem to have. The problem that we have people coming at it from different levels of knowledge is a good problem, I think. (Hannah, September debrief)
	Participation Structures (decentralized)	Shared ownership/power structure, voluntary attendance, iterative	I think that one of the benefits of something like BARWE is that the facilitator ... didn't choose

			the article, and so I think that always enables people to be more critical and real and honest, because they don't feel like they need to defend the choice of the material, and so that, I think, fosters vulnerability because it's okay to then say, 'I disagree with this piece or I agree.' It just removes that level of anxiety, and any level of anxiety you can take away before a conversation is beneficial to that conversation. (Hannah, final interview)
		Brave Space	<p>Comfortable space that fosters deep, critical discussions (not "safe" or comforting to whiteness)</p> <p>But I do think that there's a fine line between acknowledging when someone said something that's problematic and not wanting to scare people away from the work. (Hannah, Sept debrief)</p>

# Appendix I

## IRB APPROVAL LETTER



DATE: June 18, 2020

TO: Diane Coddling  
FROM: University of Delaware IRB

STUDY TITLE: [1604461-1] Preparing Anti-Racist Educators through Professional Inquiry  
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS  
EFFECTIVE DATE: June 18, 2020

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # (1,2)

Thank you for your New Project submission to the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board (UD IRB). According to the pertinent regulations, the UD IRB has determined this project is EXEMPT from most federal policy requirements for the protection of human subjects. The privacy of subjects and the confidentiality of participants must be safeguarded as prescribed in the reviewed protocol form.

In-person research interaction with subjects cannot begin until the UD moratorium in response to the declaration of national emergency related to the COVID-19 pandemic is lifted. Please continue to reference <https://research.udel.edu/coronavirus> for the most up-to-date recommendations.

This exempt determination is valid for the research study as described by the documents in this submission. Proposed revisions to previously approved procedures and documents that may affect this exempt determination must be reviewed and approved by this office prior to initiation. The UD amendment form must be used to request the review of changes that may substantially change the study design or data collected.

Unanticipated problems and serious adverse events involving risk to participants must be reported to this office in a timely fashion according with the UD requirements for reportable events.

A copy of this correspondence will be kept on file by our office. If you have any questions, please contact the UD IRB Office at (302) 831-2137 or via email at [hsrb-research@udel.edu](mailto:hsrb-research@udel.edu). Please include the study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

[www.udel.edu](http://www.udel.edu)

## Appendix J

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Title of Study:** Preparing Antiracist Educators through Professional Inquiry

**Principal Investigator:** Diane Coddling

#### KEY INFORMATION

Important aspects of the study you should know about first:

- **Purpose:** The purpose of the study is to observe antiracist white teachers as they participate in critical conversations in a professional inquiry group.
- **Procedures:** If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in two individual interviews and six debrief sessions.
- **Duration:** This will take place over six months.
- **Risks:** There is a slight risk of psychological discomfort.
- **Benefits:** There are no direct benefits to you from this research. Results will be used to improve antiracist professional inquiry groups.
- **Alternatives:** There are no known alternatives available to you other than not taking part in this study.
- **Costs and Compensation:** If you decide to participate there will be no additional cost to you. Upon completing the study, you will receive a \$250 gift card as compensation.
- **Participation:** Taking part or not in this research study is your decision. You can decide to participate and then change your mind at any point.

Please carefully read the entire document. You can ask any questions you may have before deciding if you want to participate.

You are being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form tells you about the study including its purpose, what you will be asked to do if you decide to take part, and the risks and benefits of being in the study. Please read the information below and ask us any questions you may have before you decide whether or not you want to participate.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to observe how white teachers are learning about antiracist teaching practices in professional learning communities, such as BARWE. This study will be used in my dissertation to fulfill the requirements of my doctoral degree in education at the University of Delaware.

### **WHO IS BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE?**

You will be one of approximately 5 case study participants in this study. You are being asked to participate because you are an active participant in your local BARWE group, which has agreed to take part in my study, and you have expressed interest in providing additional feedback about your experiences with antiracist inquiry.

### **PROCEDURES: WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?**

As a part of this study you will be asked to participate in two interviews and six debrief sessions. These interviews and debrief sessions will take place virtually via Zoom and your participation in this part of the study will require eight one-hour sessions. All interviews and debrief sessions will be audiotaped and transcribed. Recordings will not be shared outside the research team.

**Interviews** – Once you agree to be a select participant, I will contact you to schedule a one-hour interview. During this initial interview, I will ask you questions about your background and your experiences as a teacher. Following the conclusion of my BARWE observations and our final debrief session, I will contact you to schedule a one-hour interview. During this final interview, I will ask you to reflect your experiences in BARWE and how it has influenced you as an educator. I will also share my research findings with you during this meeting and ask for your feedback.

**Debrief Sessions** – After each of the monthly BARWE meetings, I will contact you to schedule a one-hour debrief session. During the debrief sessions, I will ask you to think aloud about your experiences during the last BARWE meeting. I will also ask you questions about things I observed or heard during the BARWE meeting.

### **WHAT ARE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**

Possible risks of participating in this research study include the risk of psychological discomfort during interviews and debrief sessions. Some of the questions I will ask you as part of the study could cause you sadness or increase your level of stress while thinking of the answers. You have the right to skip questions or end the interview.

### **WHAT ARE POTENTIAL BENEFITS FROM THE STUDY?**

You will not benefit directly from taking part in this research. However, the knowledge gained from this study may contribute to our understanding of how white

teachers are learning about antiracist teaching practices in professional learning communities.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY: WHO MAY KNOW THAT YOU PARTICIPATED IN THIS RESEARCH?**

Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. If results of this study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used. To minimize the risks to confidentiality, the research team will make every effort to keep all research records that identify you confidential. The findings of this research may be presented or published. If this happens, no information that gives your name or other details will be shared. Recordings and other deidentified data will be collected and stored on a password protected computer or a locked filing cabinet. Recordings will be used to transcribe and will only be viewed by study personnel. We will keep your study data confidential and only those with permission in the research team will have access to information that identifies you. We may have to report certain information for legal or ethical reasons, such as child abuse, or intent to hurt yourself or others. If required, your records may be inspected by authorized personnel in the following groups and agencies: University of Delaware Institutional Review Board.

### **USE OF DATA COLLECTED FROM YOU IN FUTURE RESEARCH:**

Your information collected as part of the research will not be used or distributed for future research studies even if identifiers are removed.

### **COSTS AND COMPENSATION**

There are no costs associated with participating in this study. Upon completing the study, you will receive a \$250 gift card to Amazon, Target, or Walmart as compensation. These funds are intended to support your efforts to promote racial equity and pursue antiracist teaching.

### **DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

Taking part in this research study is your decision. You do not have to participate in this research. If you choose to take part, you have the right to stop at any time. If you decide later not to participate, or if you decide to stop taking part in the research, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision to stop participation, or not to participate, will not influence current or future relationships with the University of Delaware.

### **INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board (UD IRB), which is a committee formally designated to approve, monitor, and review biomedical and behavioral research involving humans.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the UD IRB at [hsrb-research@udel.edu](mailto:hsrb-research@udel.edu) or (302) 831-2137.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have any questions about the purpose, procedures, or any other issues related to this research study you may contact the Principal Investigator, Diane Coddling at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or [dcodding@udel.edu](mailto:dcodding@udel.edu). You may also contact my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Elizabeth Soslau at [esoslau@udel.edu](mailto:esoslau@udel.edu).

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### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH STUDY**

I have read and understood the information in this form and I agree to participate in the study. I am 18 years of age or older. I have been given the opportunity to ask any questions I had and those questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I will be given a copy of this form for my records.

**Do you agree to participating in this research study?**

- Yes, I agree to participate
- No, I do NOT agree to participate

## Appendix K

### PASSIVE CONSENT LETTER

Dear BARWE Attendees,

My name is Diane Coddling and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Delaware. As part of my dissertation research, I will be participating in and observing your BARWE meetings during the 2020-2021 school year. My observations will be focused on three members of your BARWE group who have agreed to participate in my research study. This letter is to inform you about my presence at the BARWE meetings this year and to provide additional details about my research.

Please review the information provided below. You do not need to take any action in response to this letter. However, should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Diane Coddling (she / her / hers)  
Doctoral Candidate, School of Education  
University of Delaware  
[dcoddling@udel.edu](mailto:dcoddling@udel.edu)  
(xxx) xxx-xxxx

#### Key Information

- **Purpose:** The purpose of the study is to observe white educators as they participate in critical conversations in a white antiracist affinity group, such as BARWE.
- **My Role:** I will be a participant-observer during BARWE meetings, which means I will take notes about my experience and my three participating educators.
- **Confidentiality:** Everything that I hear or observe will be kept strictly confidential and stripped of any identifying information. Neither you nor your school will be identified in my research.
- **Risks and Benefits:** There are no risks or direct benefits associated with participating in this study.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions about the purpose, procedures, or any other issues related to this research study please contact the Principal Investigator, Diane Coddling at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or [dcoddling@udel.edu](mailto:dcoddling@udel.edu). You may also contact my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Elizabeth Soslau at [esoslau@udel.edu](mailto:esoslau@udel.edu).

**Institutional Review Board**

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Delaware Institutional Review Board (UD IRB), which is a committee formally designated to approve, monitor, and review biomedical and behavioral research involving humans. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the UD IRB at [hsrb-research@udel.edu](mailto:hsrb-research@udel.edu) or (302) 831-2137.