Humanity is Not a Thing: Disrupting White Supremacy in K-12 Social Emotional Learning

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Abstract

White supremacy is pervasive in K-12 education and frequently enacted through traditional social emotional learning (SEL). We ask: How do current iterations of SEL reinforce white supremacy? If white supremacy frames humanity as a thing, how do those of us invested in SEL that is humanizing frame it differently? We attempt to engage this question by examining two vignettes from our own experiences that illustrate how white supremacy is reinforced by popular approaches to SEL while simultaneously evading recognition. We then reimagine SEL using Camangian's (2019) framework on humanization as a platform of departure and offer two final, personal vignettes that reveal how SEL might be enacted to humanize every student, particularly BIPOC students. Critical questions and recommended readings are provided.

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Keywords: Social emotional learning | white supremacy | K-12 education | school counseling | inservice teachers

Social emotional learning (SEL), defined by the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as the "process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, 2020, para. 1) has long been used in schools and framed as a way to teach students the skills needed to navigate difficult situations and complex emotions. While SEL programming could be designed as a means to enhance the lives of students, it regularly runs the risk of turning into what Dena Simmons of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence described as "white supremacy with a hug" (Madda, 2019, para. 11). When SEL is taught in schools absent of sociopolitical context, it more often than not reifies existing white supremacy and dehumanizes students, particularly BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color)[1] students.

Freire (1993) contended that "humanity is a 'thing,' and they [oppressors] possess it as an exclusive right, as inherited property. To the oppressor consciousness, the humanization of the 'others,' of the people, appears not as the pursuit of full humanity, but as subversion" (p. 41). White supremacy frames humanity as a thing in our schools. In this paper, we aim to answer the following questions: *How do current iterations of SEL reinforce white supremacy? If white supremacy frames humanity as a thing, how do those of us invested in SEL that is humanizing frame it differently?* Often a part of school districts' broader equity efforts (Simmons et al., 2018), institutionalization of SEL devoid of a transformational equity approach is problematic:

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[1] We borrow from Crenshaw (1988) and Gotanda (1991) who fought to capitalize Black and lowercase white. In our efforts to decenter the racial domination of whiteness, "white" will be lowercased throughout this paper. White will only be capitalized if it is at the beginning of a sentence or in a quote where the original author capitalized it. To acknowledge the powerfully political and social significance of BIPOC as a liberating locution, "BIPOC," "Black," "Brown," and "Indigenous" will be capitalized throughout this paper. We recognize that doing so does not erase whiteness in this text (Hawkman & Shear, 2019) or even this journal.

while creating an illusion of equity, these efforts actually mask racial inequity (Gorski, 2019). When SEL emphasizes individualization and relies on policing (Kaler-Jones, 2020), educators are abdicated of the responsibility to identify and eradicate the ways racism operates in schools (Ladson-Billings, 2017). White supremacy remains the operative context, impacting every student, especially BIPOC students (Leonardo, 2009; Liou et al., 2017).

Riley, a white womxn[2], was an elementary school counselor for approximately seven years prior to beginning doctoral studies. She has been critically reflecting on her whiteness for many years but is not and never will be an expert on race. Riley recognizes the benefits that white supremacy affords her as well as her responsibility to actively disrupt it. Alicia, a Black womxn and born into some level of expertise, has been negotiating the need to dismantle systems of oppression while thriving in racially diverse settings. The call to be an antiracist educator has always been personal for her as a Black womxn within the U.S. educational system. When tasked with developing a comprehensive school counseling program at a historically and predominantly white high school in a major U.S. city, Alicia became fully immersed in her journey with antiracist pedagogy and practice.

In what follows, we outline white supremacy and humanization (Camangian, 2019), which act as our theoretical framework. We then examine traditional, white supremacist approaches to K-12 SEL and discuss the problematic nature of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model. Next, we offer an analysis of two vignettes of white supremacy in SEL at the elementary and secondary level. Finally, we describe our call for a disruption to white supremacist, dehumanizing approaches to SEL. We describe how we (a former elementary school counselor and a current high school counselor) sought to disrupt the white supremacy we saw being enacted in our schools by acting to implement humanizing approaches to SEL. We conclude with critical questions and recommendations for K-12 teachers and school counselors to consider as they act to create more humanizing experiences for young people to engage in SEL.

Theoretical Framework

White Supremacy

White supremacy acts as the "political, cultural, and economic system premised on the subjugation of people who are not white" (Solomon & Rankin, 2019, p. vii). Scholars of critical whiteness studies contend that white supremacy is embedded and materializes in our everyday world (Allen, 2001; Gillborn, 2006; Leonardo, 2009; Nayak, 2007). Within universal white supremacy, whiteness frames what we deem both human and normal, a nefarious relationship that confounds the very real characteristics of white existence and white pathology (Allen, 2004; Jackson, 2011). The underlying machination that protects and sustains our racist system, whiteness relies upon its invisibility to capacitate the perpetuity of race and racism (Allen, 2001; Leonardo, 2009). Power is held through whiteness by acting as the standard or benchmark against which all else will be judged; evading recognition and naming; framing whiteness as knowledge needed for all understanding (Jiwani, 2006); and maintaining perspectives that insulate white people (Haviland, 2008). Whiteness operates to possess and maintain power that many white people deny, often relying on discursive techniques to conceal or deflect that power (Haviland, 2008).

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[2] We use "womxn" to resist the white supremacist understanding of "womxnhood" and move toward a meaning of womxn that encapsulates solidarity and sisterhood (Ashlee et al., 2017).

White supremacy is pervasive in K-12 education (Leonardo, 2009; Liou et al., 2017). Frequently structured as ahistorical or neutral, education serves white interests, much to the detriment of racialized teachers and students (Sleeter, 2017). White supremacy is primarily enacted by white teachers, who make up 80% of the teacher workforce (NCES, 2019) and stand to benefit from white supremacy. A litany of scholarship underscores the existence of whiteness in teacher education programs (Gorski, 2009; Matias, 2016; Sleeter, 2017). Most teacher education programs do not disrupt whiteness; it remains intact and impacts K-12 schooling and students, particularly BIPOC students, reproducing white supremacy in schools (Matias et al., 2017).

Specifically, white supremacy is reinforced when the notion of meritocracy, or the idea that one's personal achievements are determined by hard work and perseverance alone, is employed (Viesca et al., 2013). When meritocracy is embraced in schools, the focus is not on oppression and systemic inequities but individual success and failure (Castagno, 2008). Meritocracy invites educators to see themselves as innocent, instead of complicit participants in a system that reinforces and is reinforced by white supremacy (Applebaum, 2005). Teachers' complicity in schooling undergirded by white supremacy regularly prevents them from being successful with all their students, particularly BIPOC students (Castagno, 2008).

Another form of white supremacy regularly enacted in schools is color-blindness (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Gotanda, 1991), or color-evasiveness (Annamma et al., 2017), a broadened and nuanced reconceptualization of color-blindness, the racial ideology of refusing to acknowledge race. While many educators may believe that taking a color-evasive approach to SEL makes them not-racist, Kendi (2019) argued that "the claim of 'not racist' neutrality is a mask for racism" (p. 9). Professing to not "see race" means that educators are then also not able to "see racism." This ideology perpetuates white supremacy, because it leads educators to maintain low expectations of BIPOC students, reinforcing white dominance even in classrooms with no white students (Matias & Allen, 2013) and lean on deficit-laden views of primarily low income, youth of Color (Camangian, 2019; Sleeter, 2004). Many teachers are under the false assumption that BIPOC youth are academically deficient and unable to learn from too rigorous curricula and pedagogy (Gorski, 2010; Sleeter, 2004).

Dependent upon meritocracy and color-evasiveness, far too many educators believe that students' self-determination alone will determine success and failure. The commitment to these concepts means that race is of no consequence, because "if race and racism existed and held some significance in students' lives, then either our schools are not really colorblind, equal, and meritocratic, or teachers aren't" (Castagno, 2008, p. 324). In their efforts to "save" BIPOC youth from failure, educators who claim to not see race often lower their expectations, simultaneously removing opportunities for BIPOC students to learn rigorously. Opportunities that are extended to their white counterparts are commonly denied to BIPOC youth, disadvantaging them in a multitude of ways and limiting not only their present but future potential.

Humanization

Camangian (2019) asserted that SEL's scant attention to identities such as race and class bolster existing injustices in schooling and proposed a disruption of injustice using a framework on humanization (Camangian, 2019). Humanization consists of three concepts that students must learn: (1) knowledge of self, (2) solidarity, and (3) self-determination. These concepts form the

framework that is "real social and emotional learning" (Camangian, 2019, p. 126) and are outlined below.

Educators can support BIPOC students' knowledge of self by ensuring that students are learning about who they are, where they're from, and what they value. This requires teachers to involve students in interrogating, analyzing and interpreting the world. Engaging with their own humanity in this way means that educators and students may experience pain as they unpack an unjust world. This process may stir up myriad emotions for students; they may need to grieve or celebrate themselves and their histories. Space should be sanctified for students to grapple with the complex emotions they may experience.

Solidarity can be built when teachers develop BIPOC students' ideological clarity, build community based on those understandings, and encourage students to be accountable to a common goal. To develop BIPOC students' ideological clarity, teachers will have to unveil the ways that white supremacy acts as the foundation for inequities experienced commonly in communities of Color. Once students understand inequities and where they originate, they may bond over common experiences of oppression. This requires space for students to build community in solidarity with one another. Additionally, when students share their experiences, tensions may present themselves. These are to be expected and must be named, so that students may begin to work toward identifying a community purpose.

Self-determination moves students to disrupt the dehumanizing experiences they face daily. They must also hold tightly to their community purpose; rather than struggling against inequities that they individually experience, BIPOC students must understand that their own success hinges on not only their own humanization but also the humanization of the communities to which they belong. Camangian's conceptualization of self-determination does not rely on individualism, but on the understanding that success is a collective, not an individual, advancement.

Camangian (2019) acknowledged that approaching SEL as humanization can be difficult for teachers. Teachers are encouraged to critically self-reflect and try to understand the lived experiences of those most marginalized in this world. This may be uncomfortable for many teachers, but they must "learn to be comfortable in their discomfort and to trust their students' ability to teach them when they articulate their experiences with social oppression—especially when the teachers feel implicated in students' indictments against those systems" (Camangian, 2019, p. 132). Teachers can acknowledge that they have never considered the world as oppressive to BIPOC; sharing vulnerability may aid in connecting with students. Finally, teachers must reimagine the ways that they understand achievement. Teachers should maintain high expectations, and ensure that every student is developing academically, and this should be accomplished through humanizing classroom experiences that help them to understand their worlds and how they can act to shape them.

White supremacist approaches to SEL lead to the dehumanization of students, neglecting or outright denying histories of violence that have resulted in the very conditions that many students struggle to survive. Camangian's (2019) framework aims to disrupt the "social amnesia" (Camangian, 2020, p. ix) impeding liberation in communities most violently impacted by historical subjugation. Humanizing SEL is essential not only for BIPOC students, but for white students as well, who, without tending to their humanity, develop a false sense of the world and their superiority in it (Choules, 2007; Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Hagerman, 2018; Luthar, 2003; Swalwell, 2013). In this paper, we apply Camangian's framework not only as a replacement for traditional SEL, but as an integration of the spirit of humanization into education for radical transformation with both BIPOC and white students. By reckoning with historical and

contemporary violence aimed at communities of Color and creating spaces for K-12 youth, teachers and school counselors to collectively disrupt dehumanizing systems, humanization (Camangian, 2019) offers a capacious and liberatory way of being that our world needs in order to undergo profound healing and the humanization and liberation of everyone.

Literature Review

White Supremacy in SEL

The historical roots of SEL in the U.S. trace back to the 1920s when conflict resolution arose from industrial psychology (Boler, 1999). From there, the 1950s and 1960s saw the materialization of racial tolerance discourse (Coleman & Deutsch, 1998) followed by the creation of affective education in the 1960s and 1970s (Beane, 1990). Each of these practices and discourses emerged within a historical context with social, political, and economic forces underlying them (Boler, 1999). Those forces are often made invisible through whiteness, but each of the aforementioned roots of SEL (i.e. conflict resolution, racial tolerance, and affective education) are visible in contemporary SEL.

Contemporary SEL programs differ widely in settings, skills and competencies, and purported outcomes. Some programs take place in school and are lesson based. Other programs take place in school and are non-curricular. Others take place outside of school. Major social emotional skills that are linked to positive outcomes for youth include cognitive regulation, emotional processes, social/interpersonal skills, character and mindset (Jones et al., 2017). Scholarship reports that "high quality evidence-based SEL programs produce positive outcomes for students, including improved behavior, attitudes, and academic performance" (Jones et al., 2017, p. 7). SEL programs are purportedly designed to suit particular settings, in particular ways and emphasize particular social emotional skills. Teaching such skills in order to produce such "positive outcomes" in any setting, however, contributes to schooling's aim of social control (Boler, 1999), not students' humanization.

One such skill increasingly emphasized in schools is in the area of mindset, or how students understand their abilities (Dweck, 2015). Many schools have adopted or developed programming that attempts to promote a growth mindset, popularized by Dweck (2008). Nearly a decade later, Duckworth (2016) championed the concept of grit, which she asserted explained why people with natural talent often fail to be successful in achieving their goals while others with less natural giftedness go on to achieve great success. Duckworth (2016) claimed that achievement is not about giftedness, but a passionate persistence: grit. She also contended that in order for people to develop grit, they need to cultivate a growth mindset. According to Dweck (2008), people with a growth mindset "embrace challenges, persist in the face of setbacks, see effort as the path to mastery, learn from criticism, and find lessons and inspiration in the success of others" (p. 45).

In schools, promoting a particular type of mindset (e.g., Dweck, 2008) is alluring to educators, especially when we consider how whiteness bolsters and is bolstered by it. The promotion of growth mindsets transfers the responsibility of learning from educators to students. If students are unable to comprehend the content, then there must be something wrong with them, not the educator's instruction. Despite the dehumanizing challenges that students and their families may be facing as a result of underfunded schools, violence, and under/unemployment, all of which compound stress already facing families due to the oppressive nature of schools and

society broadly, educators rooting for grit and growth mindset instruction emphasize individual character development and use SEL as the antidote to what they perceive as students' "bad" attitudes toward white supremacist practices in their schools, a "give-up-easily" orientation toward skill and drill instruction, and a "lack of engagement" in the Eurocentric coursework centered in their classrooms. This usage is frequently unaccompanied by recognition of sociopolitical context, and the potential for harm is significant (Simmons, 2019). Primarily white educators forsake the humanization of youth with marginalized identities by demanding that they never give up when trying to survive is exactly what they are doing (Love, 2019).

Ginwright (2016) asked: "How much grit actually makes a difference when nothing changes around you?" (p. 17). When students are taught grit and a growth mindset, especially as part of equity efforts and in environments that exclude attention to racism, the message that educators are actually sending is: "Sure, racism is tough, but if you work hard and don't give up, you can learn to deal with it. Just don't give up!" This is frequently extended further by the teaching of coping skills. Deep breathing, relaxation strategies, and mindfulness commonly accompany the instruction of grit and promoting a growth mindset. Instead of opening up space for students to radically heal (Ginwright, 2016), the promotion of these strategies sends the message to students that they can learn to deal with the very real, toxic and damaging effects of racism and other forms of oppression in their lives by employing the use of a coping skill. Current SEL grounded in white supremacy that promotes concepts like grit and growth mindset are grossly inadequate, because they do not even begin to address the practices and policies that disrupt students' social emotional wellbeing in the first place (Ginwright, 2016).

White Supremacy in K-12 School Counseling

Understanding the historical nature of white supremacy in schooling, particularly as it reinforces and is reinforced by traditional SEL, can perhaps best be illustrated with historification of a schooling profession with which we have acute experience: school counseling. We offer an introduction to the origin of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the National Model used to guide school counselors. The ASCA National Model "outlines the components of a school counseling program that is integral to the school's academic mission and is created to have a significant positive impact on student achievement, attendance and discipline" (ASCA, 2020) and evolved from the Vocational Guidance Association of 1913 (Cinotti, 2014) after the need for postsecondary job training expanded. Guidance curriculum, coined by Jesse Davis in the late 1800s, was initially disregarded as an unnecessary and superfluous mechanism within the system.

Jesse B. Davis, who is considered to be one of the first school counselors in the United States, developed The Grand Rapids Plan, the first documented attempt at a comprehensive model that extended beyond the classroom to incorporate students' vocational prospects as well as their social emotional needs (Pope, 2009). Davis, a white man, was a Michigan public school counselor in the late 1800s and early 1900s, when only 30% of Black children were enrolled in school (Snyder, 1993). Of that 30%, all Black students experienced segregated schooling during the time that Davis was an educator in the Detroit and Grand Rapids school districts (Pope, 2009).

ASCA adopted not only the aspects of Davis' model that encapsulated the social emotional priorities of students but also the framework influenced by Davis' racialized understanding of students. The perceptions and attitudes of school counselors throughout the country have been

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influenced by Davis' work (Dahir et al., 1997). With the growing popularity of the field of psychology, school counseling evolved to a degree (Cinotti, 2014), but the practices and policies fueled by the early work of Davis still shapes the profession as we know it contemporarily.

Today's model acts as a guide for school counselors across the U.S. despite there being no direct attention to the drastically shifting demographics in public schools across the states since the model was created. The implementation of the National Model has shaped the way districts have perceived and defined the role of the school counselor in every school despite the educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006) owed to BIPOC communities. Universally, school counselors are often misguided about accountability; their data-driven practices are not aligned with equity and improving student academic success (Dahir & Stone, 2009). Action steps are left to individual school counselor interpretation.

The "specific attitudes, knowledge and skills students should be able to demonstrate as a result of a school counseling program" (ASCA, 2014, p. 1) are known as the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success, or the school counseling learning standards for students. In a recent publication entitled "Eliminating Racism and Bias in Schools: The School Counselor's Role," among other guidance for counselors, ASCA recommended particular Mindsets and Behaviors standards that "apply to issues of racism and bias" (ASCA, 2020, p. 4). ASCA asserted that "helping student victims of racism and bias develop these mindsets prepares them for success and helps them escape the oppression of racism" (ASCA, 2020, p. 4). These standards, like the rest of the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors, demonstrate inattention to the real inequities students experience. One such ASCA standard is Mindset Standard M. 3: 'Sense of belonging in the school environment' (ASCA, 2014, p. 2). The standard suggests that students must cultivate the mindset to develop a sense of belonging, which reads as though the responsibility for creating inclusive environments rests solely on young people, many of whom are doing everything they can to survive racist schooling environments (Love, 2019). Like the standard itself, lessons aligned with this standard are rarely explicitly antiracist. Instead, lessons tend to be superficial and whitewashed, paying little to no attention to the lived experiences of those who are most unrecognized, unaccepted and routinely experience a lack of belonging in schools.

For example, elementary school counselors commonly teach this standard by teaching classroom counseling lessons using a story about a box of crayons or a book by Dr. Seuss, emphasizing differences while sending the message that "we are all one race — the human race," which is color-evasiveness in action. High school counselors may teach lessons to address this standard by inviting students to collaborate in the making of a quilt, so that each student can cut and add textures, patterns and shapes to illustrate themselves. The lesson might be figurative in showing the tapestry of differences but regularly lacks a direct commitment on the part of schools to actualize real and meaningful belonging for students, particularly BIPOC students. The standard and subsequent lessons come nowhere near attending to what BIPOC students actually need to feel as though they belong: schooling environments that support students' collective, diverse identities through action and not merely symbolic gestures. Further, school counselors who are untrained and unskilled in creating lesson plans that dismantle racism are encouraged, not required, to participate in professional development. ASCA does not specify what kind of professional development counselors must pursue in order to stay credentialed or a member of its association, resulting in the outcome it was designed to produce: the reinforcement of white supremacy.

When students graduate from our schools prepared to attend college and feeling confident about their abilities, school counselors are often contributing to that outcome. When students leave our schools with a vague recollection of a lesson involving "multicultural paints" that was intended to shape the way they understand their racial identities in the world, school counselors are contributing to that outcome as well. The assumption that school counselors are not racist simply because they use multicultural paints to help students identify the color of their skin or read books about the various colors of skin is racist in that it ignores the historical context of education and does little to undo or prevent harms caused by 250 years of education, or lack thereof, designed for and by white people. The ASCA National Model that governs school counselors across the country does little to nothing regarding humanizing BIPOC students or the education that white students need to act alongside their BIPOC peers.

Analysis

In what follows, we offer two iterations of analysis. The first iteration responds to our first research question: *How do current iterations of SEL reinforce white supremacy?* This iteration describes our experiences with SEL and our fortification of white supremacy. The second iteration responds to our second research question: *If white supremacy frames humanity as a thing, how do those of us invested in SEL that is humanizing frame it differently?* This iteration contextualizes the promise of utilizing humanization as SEL (Camangian, 2019). Meaningful life vignettes (Saldaña, 2003) are used to explicate each iteration, and are particularly powerful sources of accounts, because they provide glimpses "reveal[ing] a discovery and retell[ing] an epiphany in a character's life" (Saldaña, 2003, pp. 224-225).

In the first vignette, Riley institutionalized goal setting for standardized testing in the K-5 building where she was the school counselor. In the second vignette, Alicia led a college and career lesson to advance growth mindset development for 11th grade students at a high school where she was a school counselor. Both vignettes demonstrate how white supremacy was reinforced in SEL lessons and evaded our recognition.

Getting Gritty with Goal Setting: An Exercise of White Supremacy

Grit (Duckworth, 2016) was the foundation of school counseling programming during the 2015-2016 academic year, actively spearheaded by Riley, who was encouraged by some members of district leadership to cultivate students' growth mindsets (Dweck, 2008). This very foundation is grounded in white supremacy. The idea that students need to develop grit and growth mindsets is deeply rooted in meritocracy, or the idea that students' personal achievements are determined solely by hard work and perseverance (Viesca et al., 2013), or grit, in this case. We deem perseverance and hard work as all that is needed to achieve one's desires without attending to the consequential nature of racism and other forms of oppression that systemically dehumanize BIPOC (Castagno, 2008). This is a move made to insulate white people (Haviland, 2008) by ensuring that white dominance appears natural and normal (Allen, 2004, Love, 2019).

Additionally, as part of standardized testing preparation, Riley taught third through fifth grade teachers how to use growth mindset goal setting with their students. Teachers conferenced individually with students in their classroom and discussed each student's standardized testing scores in the areas of math and reading, emphasizing the importance of improving their scores. The teacher and student then created a goal to raise their scores and discussed growth mindset

strategies they could use to bolster the student's performance. These strategies acted as the knowledge needed for all understanding (Jiwani, 2006) and were written on notecards and taped to students' desks. No one questioned this enactment of white supremacy, because whiteness relies upon being unnamed (Jiwani, 2006) and invisibility to perpetuate dominance (Allen, 2001; Leonardo, 2009). A strong sense of success as meritocratic framed Riley's and educators' self-perceptions of themselves as innocent benefactors, instead of seeing themselves as complicit pawns, moving themselves in a game of white supremacy (Applebaum, 2005).

When the assessment scores were returned, many BIPOC students were dejected; they saw themselves as flawed. Whiteness acts as the standard or benchmark against which all else will be judged (Jiwani, 2006), upholding white supremacy. Many of the students did not isolate this view of themselves to the one test, but applied it generally, seeing their entire academic self-concept as one that was incapable of achievement and inferior to their predominantly white peers, many of whom met their goals. This is what white supremacy does; it leads those who are white to believe in their superiority (Hagerman, 2018) and those who are BIPOC to believe in their inferiority (Love, 2019).

This example illustrates how SEL reinforces white supremacy, producing harmful outcomes for particularly BIPOC students: Black and Brown students who did not meet their goals were not flawed. Standardized testing is flawed. It exists as further evidence of the pervasiveness of white supremacy in education (Leonardo, 2009; Liou et al., 2017). The practice of having students set SMART goals and outline how they will use a growth mindset to achieve those goals is deeply flawed. This puts students "at risk," not due to being BIPOC, but due to the white supremacist nature of this activity. Students may have developed conceptualizations about themselves and/or their communities as being inferior or incapable of achieving their goals. They may have begun to pathologize themselves or others who looked like them, although it is whiteness that is pathological (Allen, 2004; Jackson, 2011). They may have received more "evidence" from schooling that they, and others who looked like them, were deficient (Love, 2019).

Acting on Assumptions: An Exercise of White Supremacy

High school counseling is a cyclical process that involves self-reflection and future planning for all 11th grade students. Alicia had led such counseling lessons for years in multiple school environments and set out to create a two-hour lesson that incorporated growth mindset. Challenges, obstacles and effort, the themes introduced in the lesson, are directly related to ASCA Mindset and Behavior Standards of self-knowledge application. Alicia began with challenges; the objective was for students to identify ways they sought out and overcame a challenge. Alicia provided a concrete example of AP and Honors classes and invited small groups of students to discuss the ways in which they pursued rigor while in high school. Students began talking in their small groups. Throughout the lesson, Alicia never explicitly named oppression, or the consequences of oppression such as barriers to accessing rigorous courses for BIPOC students. This is an example of color-evasiveness (Annamma et al., 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Gotanda, 1991) in that Alicia and the lesson did not directly name and account for the challenges BIPOC experience and from which they could have drawn.

The next prompt for each small group was to briefly identify an obstacle they encountered when considering more rigorous courses. Students were to spend another ten minutes discussing not only the obstacle but how they approached the obstacle, what tools they accessed and what

help they sought. When Alicia assumed the leadership role without consulting students about how they might want to engage in a self-reflective activity, she assumed students would feel comfortable sharing publicly. The expectation that all students would engage in the same normal and natural way is rooted in white supremacy (Allen, 2004; Love, 2019). Alicia assumed students would be willing to verbalize their inner process with others at their table and she assumed the students had already formed trusted bonds with each other. The importance of the context of their relationships with each other and with her as their counselor was not considered; white supremacy tends to invisibilize (Allen, 2001; Leonardo, 2009) relational considerations that would create more humanizing experiences for all students, particularly BIPOC students.

Many students noted their grades as the primary obstacle for not pursuing advanced courses. Some students noted being uninterested in the AP and Honors courses. Lastly, as a part of this brief activity, small groups discussed the efforts they made in order to register for the course or choose a different but rigorous path. Alicia reflected beliefs that every student knew how to register for courses or how to access rigor in the way that white supremacy frames knowing anything—as one way, the right way, the white way (Jiwani, 2006).

Alicia did not invite students to define rigor, what it meant to them, or how they had experienced it. White supremacy is invested in structuring understandings and experiences as uniform (or white) and as such, whiteness manifests as knowledge needed for all understanding (Jiwani, 2006). Furthermore, some students may have been exposed to information and technology courses for them to understand the benefit of an AP Computer Science course but some students had never taken an IT course prior to being a student at this particular school. In other words, students' past experiences in education had been foundationally inequitable; Alicia failed to account for this. Again, the invisibility of white supremacy acted to conceal students' varied experiences (Allen, 2004; Leonardo, 2009).

The lesson was designed to not only prepare students for future planning but to also allow students the opportunity to see how they had overcome challenges in the past. The self-reflection activity aimed to promote flexibility in students' thinking before they began the college application process. Ironically, Alicia, demonstrated inflexibility in her own thinking by making assumptions about what students knew, defined similarly, or had experienced, an operation of color-evasiveness (Annamma et al., 2017; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020; Gotanda, 1991) premised on white supremacy.

Approaches to SEL and school counseling that are devoid of a sociopolitical analysis of current social conditions and which fail to draw upon the humanity of every student, particularly those faced with multiply marginalized identities, cannot and will not create the real social emotional learning that historically neglected communities deserve (Camangian, 2019). In schools, understanding how white supremacy conceals itself to appear innocuous, particularly in social emotional learning, may allow all of us to deeply consider what we accept as normal or natural. Educators who teach SEL without attending to white supremacy and its insidious moves are likely reinforcing white supremacy in SEL instruction.

Elementary School Counseling: Becoming Activist Allies

During the 2015-2016 academic year, Riley began corresponding with the author of a book entitled *Educating Activist Allies* (Swalwell, 2013). A small community of educators gathered to study the framework presented in Swalwell's book and how it could be applied at an elementary level. From there, Riley examined the ASCA Mindsets and Behavior Standards (ASCA, 2014) to

see how they could be linked to a developmental and sequential process of learning about self, others, and relations in the context of the oppressive nature of the U.S. She was able to tie the standards to the redesign by redefining them critically. For example, one of the ASCA Mindset Standards is: self confidence in the ability to succeed. The standard does not indicate a prescribed form of success, so she reimagined the standard as "self confidence in the ability to succeed *in community acting for justice*."

During the 2016-2017 academic year, Kindergarten through fifth grade students were introduced to the redesigned school counseling programming for SEL: Becoming Activist Allies, adapted from Swalwell's (2013) text. The curriculum was developmentally scaffolded but also flexible so that, for example, students who were already marching for Black Lives Matter (BLM) and understood what matters to BLM as a collective could share their knowledge with their classmates. Riley was careful to make sure that BIPOC students were not essentialized, or expected to speak on behalf of all members of their race, but agreements were established to center the voices of historically marginalized students in ways that they had not previously been centered. Some students in primary grades were partnered with students from upper elementary grades to read, process and develop anti-oppressive projects together to teach other students. This is an example of building solidarity (Camangian, 2019) across grade levels.

The introduction of Becoming Activist Allies invited every student to learn about identities and the intersections of multiply marginalized identities. Students were introduced to vocabulary like oppression, privilege, and marginalization. Camangian (2019) calls this flipping the script. Students learned how to interrogate dominant and non-dominant concepts and ideas. They learned how to ask questions such as: "Who wrote this story? Who does this story benefit? Who does this story exclude?" These are the types of questions that promote students' ideological clarity (Camangian, 2019).

Primary aged students were engaged in conversations about their own identities and particularly what they noticed about systemic oppression in their school and upper elementary students were examining systems of oppression in their school, but also in their communities and the U.S. fourth and fifth graders dialogued about racism in the school and community. At first, Black students were hesitant to center themselves in dialogue, but with time, brave Black youth voiced disproportionate disciplinary practices as an example of racism in schools and most white students listened, acknowledging that yes, they noticed it, too. Fourth and fifth grade students were able to begin the process of sorting out some of the tensions they felt (Camangian, 2019) through speaking, listening, writing, and drawing.

By the end of the year, students across grade levels were inquiring about injustices in the school and the community. For example, several students were curious about why a toxic waste dump was in close proximity to the school building, while other schools attended by children in the same city were protected from exposure to such waste dumps. These students learned about redlining, school boundaries, and environmental racism and were invited to share their concerns with community leaders. Many of them wrote letters to local officials, members of the school board, the school principal, and members of Congress, asking questions and explaining in sophisticated ways why they were sharing these concerns and what change was needed.

Students were deeply engaged in learning and being in community together. Many classrooms and grade levels were experiencing a transformation from a superficial level of care to solidarity (Camangian, 2019). In fact, in some classrooms, teachers became heavily involved in Becoming Activist Allies, bringing in texts and using vocabulary taught during classroom counseling lessons to reinforce students' understandings. Many teachers noticed the ease with

which students discussed oppressive conditions and their creative justice-centered solutions to those inequities. Students' solutions may have differed, but they often shared a common purpose (Camangian, 2019). Those classrooms where students thrived the most and developed the most sophisticated understandings of oppression were those classrooms where teachers actively became a part of Becoming Activist Allies.

Not all teachers were pleased by the changes they noticed, though, especially those who were called out for exacerbating oppressive conditions. Riley had more than one teacher in her office enraged or crying about a student who had accused them of racism. While she encouraged them to take time to reflect on their actions that led to the accusation, there were a handful that did not approve and blamed Becoming Activist Allies, and therefore particular BIPOC students and Riley, for what they saw changing in the school community.

What Riley tried to explain was that many students, particularly BIPOC students, already knew what was happening to and around them. Becoming Activist Allies served as a catalyst to unite children and help them build language, so they could collectively articulate their experiences of oppression or oppression they witnessed in nuanced ways. Further, many classroom communities who embraced Becoming Activist Allies were stronger, because students were more rigorously recognizing injustices that other students were experiencing and they named it, acting in solidarity with their peers (Camangian, 2019). In other words, many students saw their lives as being linked together. What was an injustice for their classmate was an injustice for them.

Becoming Activist Allies was not executed without error. There were unintended consequences, such as students who were berated by teachers when attempts to engage in dialogue about racism turned into "I'm not a racist teacher!" While students were rapidly developing their own critical ways of thinking and being, several adults in the school were not.

At the end of the 2016-2017 academic year, countless students were asserting their right not only to exist, but to thrive (Love, 2019). They regularly responded with their truths, divesting from the status quo and moving together in community to hold every educator (Riley included) accountable for their wellbeing and justice—their humanity. Action, art, intellectualism, reflection and storytelling helped them seize communal victories by digging at the roots of issues and aligning with one another. Though Riley cannot speak for the students, she saw individual and collective transformation as so many of them sought the reacquisition of their freedom within their school and communities. Nearly every classroom was actively engaged in learning about injustice and taking action for freedom in some way, shape or form. In alliance with many teachers and Riley, elementary students integrated humanization into their education; they manifested it in their connectedness to and solidarity with one another to subvert white supremacy.

High School Counseling: A Journey of Identity

During Alicia's seven years as a school counselor, she facilitated a number of programs for students, but the catalyst for what became humanizing SEL for students began with a TED Ed Forum. Camangian (2019) argued that students of Color often are forced to learn about who they are by engaging with a curricula in schools that was designed using the perspectives of those who are not part of their same culture; these perspectives are often inaccurate and dehumanize students of Color. Alicia knew this; she had lived it. She created opportunities for students that

centered and uplifted their self-knowledge, which is essential for students, particularly BIPOC students, if they are to develop their understandings of themselves in humanizing ways.

The TED Ed branch is designed for students in educational settings to share their learning. Alicia applied to join the program, and she received supporting materials that would help students in her building connect with students in other countries. They exchanged ideas with students around the world about what was happening in their school communities such as police in schools, dropout rates and teen pregnancy. Students compared notes and had lengthy conversations about what schooling was like in the U.S. and Turkey. This activity required students to be self-reflective about their experiences and built upon the self-knowledge that they already had (Camangian, 2019).

The students in Alicia's school were not regularly given opportunities to dialogue about the world from their perspectives (Camangian, 2019), and were enthusiastic about further learning. Alicia recognized their passion, so she initiated the next part of the project. Students were organized into groups of four based on diverse identities. Their task was to work together to create a lesson they would share at a public speaking event. Alicia was intentional about helping students to build connections in these diverse groupings. For example, one small group consisted of a Black trans* middle-income student, a white cisgender male high-income student, a white queer female low-income student and a Latina cisgender female student whose first language was Spanish. Further, these four students lived in different parts of the major metropolis. Alicia spurred activities that strengthened solidarity (Camangian, 2019) amongst groups, who collectively worked toward a common purpose (Camangian, 2019) that they determined.

Students spent three months meeting after school to decide a topic, pick a speaker and write their speech with supporting evidence. During this time, Alicia was thoughtful about building students' ideological clarity by helping students to make connections about how history was influencing the present (Camangian, 2019). Final presentations included a myriad of topics chosen by each group that highlighted some aspect of racism in the U.S. During their presentations, students explained why they selected their topic, the process their group experienced and how the diversity within their group contributed to the outcome. Students named their differences, real and perceived (Camangian, 2019).

Following the final presentations, families called the school expressing appreciation that their child had been discussing racial disparities in law enforcement, cultural appropriation and the underrepresentation of BIPOC in STEM fields. Students could be heard casually discussing the presentations in the hallways, leaving school and while eating lunch. Clearly, many students internalized what they learned. They applied ideological clarity during their conversations with their peers. Students selected the topic on their own, presented in the way they saw fit and proceeded to re-engage with the topic on their own accord. Alicia, however, recognized that the students needed more than the forum. It highlighted the needle but didn't push it. Students were excited to publicly speak on these topics and Alicia wondered if perhaps students felt comfortable to do so. Comfort wasn't the ultimate goal and Alicia knew she had six more months of school to further expand humanization within SEL every day.

What transpired next was an intentional plan to further push the school community toward action. In a social studies course, students participated in an identity workshop Alicia derived from a preexisting game where group members had to help a guessing member of their team correctly identify a person whose name they could not see. The workshop was a risk, because it involved students publicly calling out identifiers using terms that could be outdated and harmful. Alicia planned ahead and taught students about language that they could use to humanize one

another. By introducing humanizing language used to identify groups of people, students were not only acquiring interpersonal skills, but they were actively being given an opportunity to apply those skills in a way that uplifted Black and Brown people, as all of the examples in the workshop were of BIPOC.

The timed and competitive nature of the game compelled students to activate their prior knowledge while adjusting in the moment to humanize their peers. Students thought and spoke quickly, and using their ideological clarity, students used humanizing language, actively recreating their sociopolitical reality (Camangian, 2019). The two-hour workshop was unlike anything Alicia had facilitated. Based on data collected at the beginning of the school year and before the last day of school, the school community was transformed by it. Data showed that students felt more prepared after the workshop to disrupt an uncomfortable incident involving race. Students met standards and guidelines not set by anyone but perhaps themselves.

As a culminating feature of SEL during the school year, students were guided through a lesson about intersecting identities. Using the proximity to a metropolis with plentiful opportunities to participate in protesting, Alicia taught and facilitated a discussion about race and class. International Womxn's Day in the area brought activists from all over the metro to the Capitol in protest against wage discrimination and racism. Alicia and students spent the morning of March 8, 2017 discussing and creating signs. Students learned about labor movements within BIPOC communities, the wage gap and workplace sexual harassment. Collaborating with the English teachers, the purpose of this guided experience was to build upon prior knowledge and promote social justice. Students researched wage and employment statistics, noting the contact information for researchers at local universities in the city. They made plans to contact these researchers after the protest to learn about action steps they would take.

Students connected the lesson to their personal experiences of oppression and privilege. Students with dominant identities recognized their privilege and made changes to affirm the experiences of marginalized communities. Several white students changed their signs to affirm the experiences of BIPOC communities and several male students changed their signs to affirm the experiences of womxn and trans people. Camangian (2019) notes "the key for both educators and students lies in understanding that success for marginalized people means something different than success for those with privilege" (p. 131). Students were able to center the lives of BIPOC without centering comparison to the lives of the white and other privileged groups. Instead of simply comparing wages of Black womxn to that of white men, students began to examine the wage gap, racism and how labor is monetized. Each student was given a chance to share their signs and receive feedback from the group on language, wording, imagery and effect while unpacking the status quo. Students then walked to the Capitol building chanting and merging with other protesting groups, demonstrating collective dissent and resisting the dehumanization that many of them and their families experienced every day (Camangian, 2019). Students were interviewed by local news stations who mentioned their surprise to see young people holding thoughtfully constructed signage. While outside at the protest, Alicia gathered information about students' observations and motivations to continue or discontinue social activism. Students resoundingly voiced dedication to continue the fight for justice and increase their understanding, exhibiting a fusion of action and reflection (Camangian, 2019). The students were collectively creating self-knowledge in action, refusing to be complicit in the dehumanization of themselves or their peers (Camangian, 2019). This example of a humanizing approach to SEL was based solely Alicia's research as an antiracist professional and her lived

experiences as a Black womxn living in the U.S. teaching in an educational system steeped in white supremacy.

Most teachers are initially drawn to education because they believe it matters (Nieto, 2014). Education does matter, and so does the humanity of students, particularly BIPOC students who are most harmed by white supremacy. We believe in education not only as a fundamental right, but as a tool for liberation, and we see our roles as educators as mobilizing to create humanizing SEL (Camangian, 2019). In order to support every student's opportunity to experience freedom, we contend that our relational pedagogies must be rooted in interdependence; in other words, the fate of young people is inextricably linked to our own.

Implications

If white supremacy frames humanity as a thing, how do those of us invested in SEL that is humanizing frame it differently? Framing humanity differently does not mean that educators and school counselors should not have standards or that concepts that grit and growth mindset are inherently heinous. Using either, though, without reckoning with the racist, hegemonic violence enacted by colonizers in the U.S. both historically and contemporarily leaves white supremacy in SEL intact. Camangian (2019) pointed out that "fulfilling the aims of SEL does not ensure humanization, whereas fulfilling the objectives of humanization does ensure that teachers are addressing the social and emotional needs of marginalized students" (p. 126). SEL and humanization then must be united (Camangian, 2019) for students' wellbeing.

Freire argued that "to the oppressor consciousness, the humanization of the 'others,' of the people, appears not as the pursuit of full humanity, but as subversion" (1993, p. 41). In order for the people to experience full humanity, then, we must engage in subversion. Scholars argue that wellbeing is a function of the agency that young people have and are able to enact in their schools and communities (Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2006; Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). Studies that emphasize freedom, oppression and justice among groups dedicated to subverting white supremacy describe how awareness building of justice and oppression in combination with resistance may contribute to collective wellbeing and hopebuilding (Camangian, 2019; Ginwright, 2016; Potts, 2003; Prilleltensky, 2003, 2008).

In other words, when students are given space to learn and dialogue about the underlying structural and political conditions that impact their own lives and the lives of those with whom they are in relationship and take collective action to address those, they may experience enhanced wellbeing and collective hope. We believe that to disrupt white supremacy, we must reimagine SEL in the context of humanity, not as a thing, but as wellbeing and justice. Prilleltensky (2008) contended that wellbeing and social justice are not mutually exclusive; they influence one another. If "wellbeing is a function of social conditions, social capital, and social (in)equality" (Ginwright, 2016, p. 24), then wellbeing is ultimately a function of humanization.

The transformation of traditional SEL to justice-oriented approaches to SEL such as humanization require a reimagined partnership between school counselors and teachers. As educators, we share a collective responsibility to our students, particularly BIPOC students for whom schooling is routinely dehumanizing. School counselors, who are educated to understand emotions and emotionalities, have an unconditional responsibility to recognize the political nature of emotions (Boler, 1999). With this responsibility, transformative alliances with classroom teachers may create the conditions necessary for humanization as SEL to not only

exist, but to sustain life, breathing it into and repairing cracks that so many students do not "fall" into, but into which they are pushed (Morris, 2016).

Camangian (2019) described humanization as "the real social and emotional learning that historically marginalized communities deserve" (p. 126). Students deserve the space to be fully human in schools, question structures and systems that have been imposed upon them and challenge and eradicate those that dispossess them of humanization. We wonder what students, teachers and school counselors might experience if they collectively rooted themselves in humanizing SEL. Therefore, future studies should examine reimagined partnerships between school counselors and teachers that act to create humanizing, antiracist SEL in education, particularly centering the experiences of BIPOC youth in research. Studies that investigate SEL as both wellbeing and justice, not as dichotomous entities, but as relational, symbiotic processes that rely upon one another are needed if we are to uproot SEL as a form of white supremacy in education.

Recommendations

In this piece, we attended to SEL as it regularly reinforces white supremacy and reimagined SEL as humanizing. For those educators who wish to engage in a disruption of white supremacy and dehumanization that takes place in schools, and instead co-create collective humanizing and healing integrated spaces with students, we offer the following critical questions and recommended readings.

Table 1

Critical Questions and Recommended Readings

Critical questions	Recommended readings
What would education **be** if accountable to humanization instead of white supremacy?	*Toward What Justice?: Describing Diverse Dreams of Justice in Education* (2018) edited by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang *Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School* (2017) by Carla Shalaby
How is white supremacy upheld through SEL and teaching across your building?	*It's Not About Grit: Trauma, Inequity, and the Power of Transformative Teaching* (2018) by Steven Goodman *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty* (2013) by Paul Gorski
Reimagine standards and classroom spaces as humanizing: What do they look, sound, and feel like? How are they different from what you see, hear, and feel now?	*All Students Must Thrive: Transforming Schools to Combat Toxic Stressors and Cultivate Critical Wellness* (2019) by Tyrone C. Howard, Patrick Camangian, Earl J. Edwards, Maisah Howard, Andrea C. Minkoff, Tonikiaa Orange, Jonli D. Tunstall, and Kenjus T. Watson *Planting the Seeds of Equity: Ethnic Studies and Social Justice in the K–2 Classroom* (2020) by Ruchi Agarwal-Rangnath
What do educators need in order to understand whiteness and racial injustice?	BIPOC educators and school counselors: *Black Appetite, White Food: Issues of Race, Voice, and Justice Within and Beyond the Classroom* (2019) by Jamila Lyiscott

	White/white-identifying educators and school counselors: *Me and White Supremacy* by Layla Saad
How can specific curricular processes be dismantled to build humanizing curricular processes across schools, districts, school boards, and related organizations?	Considerations for BIPOC students: *Hope and Healing in Urban Education* (2015) by Shawn Ginwright *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (2019) by Bettina Love Considerations for white students: *What If All the Kids Are White?: Anti-Bias Multicultural Education with Young Children and Families* (2011) by Louise Derman-Sparks and Patricia Ramsey *What Does It Mean to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy* (2016) by Robin DiAngelo
Beyond SEL and teaching in classrooms and schooling spaces, what would mobilizing for humanization mean for teachers? What would happen in the classroom and in the streets?	*Practice What You Teach: Social Justice Education in the Classroom and the Streets* (2012) by Bree Picower
What resources might support schools invested in the humanization of students most historically harmed by white supremacy?	*Teaching for Black Lives* (2018) edited by Dyan Watson, Jesse Hagopian, and Wayne Au *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) by bell hooks
White supremacy and whiteness impact everyone, but white people tend to embody the characteristics of whiteness. White teachers, imagine the building blocks needed to support a *collective* divestment in whiteness and an investment in humanization.	*The Dreamkeepers* (2009) by Gloria Ladson-Billings *Educating Activist Allies: Social Justice Pedagogy with the Suburban and Urban Elite* (2013) by Katy Swalwell

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