

It's Not About You, It's About Us: A Black Woman Administrator's Efforts to Disrupt White Fragility in an Urban School

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Abstract

This case centers on a Black woman school administrator and efforts to disrupt Whiteness among an urban elementary school teaching staff. The case details the resistance she encounters while encouraging teachers to confront “White fragility” and consider how their fragile perspectives on race and racism shape how they educate Black students. She attempts to incorporate relevant social justice issues, particularly associated with the “Black Lives Matter” campaign into professional development to challenge teachers’ deficit thinking. Finally, the case demonstrates oppressive leadership politics driving the (mis)education of racially minoritized students.

Keywords

White fragility, urban leadership, Black education, White teachers, resistance

Deborah Garrett sat in disbelief as she pondered the tense situation at Williams Elementary School. This was Deborah’s second year as assistant principal. As she sat in quiet contemplation, three thoughts crossed her mind. First, she was a Black woman who had spent her formative educational years in a low-income, working class city with a predominantly Black, underresourced school district. As a result, she had first-hand experience with the challenges faced by families, students, and teachers in these types of settings. Second, she had spent a significant portion of her career committed

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to teaching and leading in similar settings and used not only her educational training but also her life experiences to inform her leadership style (Dillard, 1995). Third, she always advocated for students and modeled behaviors that should be reflective of any instructor committed to culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In other words, as a teacher she had become masterful at shaping curricular activities in a way that centered the experiences of the students she taught. As an administrator she was adamant about working with teachers and training them to practice culturally relevant teaching that was empowering for young learners and promoted their development and success (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

When the opportunity presented itself, she was very excited to come to Williams because of its strong reputation and the opportunity to work with an accomplished teaching and administrative staff. It was surprising and somewhat unsettling to learn that for an urban school with an incredibly large Black student population, the majority of the teaching staff was White, whereas the assistant teachers were primarily Black. The staff consisted of 51 people, 19 White teachers, three Black lead teachers, 25 Black Assistant teachers, one White and one Black administrator, and two Black support staff members. Even more troubling was the growing racial separation among the teaching staff. After several impromptu individual conversations, Garrett learned that the Black teachers and staff often felt as if they were treated unfairly and that White teachers were oblivious about the subtle ways they marginalized their colleagues.

Although situations such as this might have given some administrators pause, Garrett saw these dynamics as an opportunity for staff development, both personally and professionally. She also considered how these dynamics were affecting the students at Williams and decided to create a plan to disrupt racism, colorblindness, and microaggressions (each contributing to the negative climate). For the Black teachers, teaching assistants, and staff, Garrett's arrival and her positioning as a senior administrator signaled hope for possible changes to the brewing racial tensions in the school. For the White teaching staff, her presence generated a sense of discomfort, though many of them struggled to explain why. For example, one afternoon, two White leader teachers, Alice McGuire and Jane Wabash, were conversing over lunch. Alice commented, "I just don't get a good vibe from her. Not sure why, but we'll see how she does." Jane replied, "Things have been going well, so hopefully she doesn't plan to make too many changes."

The Williams Elementary School Context

Williams Elementary School offers classes from Pre-K through Grade 2. The school is located in the city of St. Louis in the local school district. William's student body is comprised of 300 students who are 75% African American, 10% White, 6% Hispanic, 2% Asian, and 7% Other. In addition, 68% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch. Williams is considered an exception because it has maintained its accreditation status in an unaccredited school district. Dr. Rose Webb, the school's principal, has served in that capacity for over 3 years. Dr. Webb is extremely happy to have Garrett join the staff, but seems unaware of the brewing dissatisfaction among members of her staff.

The majority of the staff had been employed at Williams for several years. Although there was an undercurrent of staff tension, most staff members did not openly acknowledge issues. The culture of the school did not promote this type of openness. Once Garrett joined the staff, Black teachers quickly gravitated to her and shared their ongoing concerns about discriminatory treatment, perceived favoritism based on race, and inability to openly express concerns because of fear of reprisal. Garrett's goal was to challenge racism in the environment through several initiatives. Focused on racism and social justice, Garrett shared her plan with Dr. Webb and asked permission to work with the staff on these issues and to provide professional development. Dr. Webb agreed training in these areas was a good idea and that the staff was ready to tackle topics of this nature because of how closely they had worked during her leadership tenure.

Professional Development for Social Justice

With social justice at the core, the first activity designed to promote conversations among the staff members was initiated. Deborah scheduled the first training during the teacher's "Back to School" orientation. A renowned speaker on social justice was invited to come and facilitate dialogue by uncovering underlying racial assumptions held by staff members. The training exposed staff members to race and social class differences. In particular, the facilitator encouraged greater self-awareness among the staff and challenged them to grapple with privilege and oppression in their lives. Although the entire staff began the session by agreeing to be honest and open, many White staff members remained quiet, indicated they had nothing to add, or unintentionally offered comments that illuminated White privilege (DiAngelo, 2012). Several White teachers were clearly uncomfortable and a few were quite tearful, explaining they felt attacked and guilty for racism they did not create. For many of the Black staff members, the experience was difficult because they realized that they would have to choose between honesty (isolation) and or feelings of continued oppression. By the end of the workshop, many of these staff members would openly express their discontent with the culture of the school. The marginalization they felt was ingrained in their experiences as staff members of color. White staff appeared to be more open by validating their colleagues' experiences. The training, while difficult for the staff, was a solid introduction to a year-long focus on cultural diversity and social justice.

Garrett collected data from the training and was disappointed to find that feedback on the evaluation did not match comments shared within the group discussion debriefing of the workshop. Many White staff members expressed dissatisfaction with the training and called it "a waste of time." This group of staff members pointed out that they did not see racism as a major issue in the school. Their comments also suggested they thought their Black colleagues were complaining and unnecessarily "pulling the race card." The White staff enjoyed the social aspect of school and believed that all staff members were treated equally. Using these data as a springboard for conversation, Garrett began planning for the next staff training opportunity, which would capitalize on an important social issue that was developing in the St. Louis community.

White Fragility and the Shooting Death of Michael Brown

The St. Louis metropolitan area was rocked by news of the tragic killing of Michael Brown, an African American, unarmed teenager, by a White police officer (Buchanan et al., 2015). His death was an unfortunate event, but one that Garrett hoped teachers noticed given the population of Black boys attending Williams. With the national attention surrounding police shootings in the Black community and the surge in the Black Lives Matter Movement (blacklivesmatter.com), Garrett wanted to seize an opportunity to bring these social issues into staff training. She decided to create a forum for open communication among staff members. To set the tone and generate dialogue, Garrett began by writing a blog and publishing it online. The blog was also emailed to each staff member. Their assignment was to share general comments on the blog but also offer a fuller response by email. She never imagined the assignment would spark such rich dialogue accompanied by tremendous anger. An excerpt from the blog is included below:

As agents of social justice, we learned we must be concerned with embracing an ideology rooted in social justice. Social justice should be central to our teaching and how we show up in the classroom. During our last professional development workshop, many of you attempted to show your vulnerability and a willingness to engage in difficult conversations around race and racism. To my dismay, the evaluations revealed that many of you found the session quite helpful and thought provoking, while others opined the session was a waste of time. Williams is comprised of a professional community of teachers who must be committed to the diverse students we serve. This commitment should be one in which we work to establish a greater level of consciousness about the societal inequities that our learners face. Such a commitment depends on how we, as a collective, deal with our issues of difference. The use of words like oppression and privilege can often evoke defensive responses, regardless of race. If we are going to become agents of change, we must first remember the following:

The goal of social justice education is to enable people to develop the critical analytical tools necessary to understand oppression and their own socialization within oppressive systems, and to develop a sense of agency and capacity to interrupt and change oppressive patterns and behaviors in themselves, and in the institutions and communities of which they are a part (Bell, 2007; Washington, 2007)

I want to engage you with an opportunity to reflect on social justice. Several issues are occurring in St. Louis, many dealing with racism, privilege, and oppression as described in our workshop a few weeks ago. In our role as educators it is critical that we understand that Williams does not exist in a vacuum. Our school is surrounded and affected by what occurs in the surrounding community. The thought crossing my mind as I write, is the senseless death of Michael Brown. Michael in many ways represents the young men who reside in our classrooms on a daily basis. From all accounts, Michael was a good young man, a high school graduate headed for his first day of college. Then comes the videotape of him committing a “strong arm” robbery-with no weapon. What were your perceptions of the video? Was he fairly depicted in the media? Did his actions align with the loss of

his life? What is the difference in the behavior he displayed and the behaviors of students we work with every day? There are Michael's in your classroom, even now. You know him, the one who pretends to be tough, but cries at the drop of a hat when confronted. He is resistant, but you can't quite figure out why. He is the first to come and hug you and then go about the work of being recognized by his classmates. He is the one who makes a statement with his behavior. How are we managing the Michael Brown's in our building? Are our students deserving of the treatment that they receive?

Think about Michael Brown and think about the students in your classroom. How are they treated based upon the assumptions that you or their classmates make about them? How does our own understanding of racism, privilege, and oppression shape how we interact with the children in our classrooms? What can we do better? How do we need to challenge ourselves and address our personal shortcomings? How might we demonstrate to our students that we value what they bring individually and collectively to the learning environment? How do we disrupt deficit narratives about our children? How, through our own personal and professional growth, do we validate the students we serve, while simultaneously and challenging the systemic status quo? I encourage you to take some time to reflect and share your responses with the group on our shared blogspace.

Quickly, responses began to pour in. Some were filled with excitement that the "elephant in the room" was being addressed. Black staff members discussed their fears for their sons and daughters. They shared concerns about repercussions that might ensue if they spoke out. They were thankful to Garrett for prompting a critical conversation and had decided to verbalize their thoughts despite possible retribution. The oppressive school dynamic was apparent to them because they were neither White, nor lead teachers. Other teachers responded with sentiments reflective of their concern for the Black students with whom they worked, recognizing the importance of understanding their experience and positively impacting their lives.

The White teachers were hesitant to be grouped as a "White majority" and attempted to distance themselves from the conversation. Others claimed that the conversation focused too much on Black boys rather than all students. They argued it was inappropriate to compare students at Williams with Michael Brown. A few other teachers thought the conversation was imbalanced. They stated the police officer who shot Michael Brown should not be at fault for doing his job. Furthermore, as teachers at Williams, they should not be faulted for doing their jobs. After all, Williams had been recognized in the district so they must be doing something right.

The collective responses revealed a clear racial divide; lines were being drawn in the sand. Garrett's effort to generate dialogue was successful, but was it taking a negative turn? The seriousness of race issues was illuminated in two ways. The White teachers disregarded the request to write their reflections and instead held private conversations with the principal. The teachers indicated they felt uncomfortable and targeted. They stated their refusal to participate in future conversations. Simply put, they told Dr. Webb that they were "opting out." Dr. Webb listened to their concerns and expressed that she could not force or require staff members to participate further. In her follow-up with Garrett, Dr. Webb mentioned that two staff in particular had come

to her separately and expressed their discomfort with the topics. Alice McGuire and Jane Wabash expressed feelings of fear and not wanting to come to work because they felt attacked. It should be noted that Dr. Webb did not challenge the teachers or encourage them to see the benefits of their participation. Furthermore, Dr. Webb did not participate in the online discussion, nor did she submit a reflection.

Professional Development Without Simple Answers . . . or Support

The social justice effort took a turn for the worse when Dr. Webb received an anonymous email in which Garrett was accused of being a troublemaker and threatened to report the activities to the Superintendent. The writer stated that the activities were immoral and had no place in a school setting. Furthermore, the author accused the administrators of harassment and argued the teachers in the school should not be forced to participate in such activities. Upon receiving the email, Dr. Webb invited Garrett to a meeting to discuss the social justice efforts. She stated,

I think you should consider postponing professional development until things return to normal. We can't have teachers afraid to come to work. I also don't want to receive any more emails that have the potential to ruin our school's reputation.

In response, Garrett argued,

Returning to normal is the problem. We have racial discord among our teachers and we need to address it. Believe it or not, the fact that some of our teachers are feeling a sense of discomfort is a good thing. I want them to get beyond their comfort zones and acknowledge that racism is real. I also want them to understand that these efforts aren't about "them." It's about our students and our students deserve the best. This includes culturally competent teachers.

Dr. Webb said she understood the point but wondered if there might be a better way to move the group forward.

Garrett found the lack of support disappointing, but decided to write a response that might help faculty and staff members understand that the goals of social justice could not be served without everyone believing in the cause and dealing with their resistance (Picower, 2009). After deep thought, Garrett decided to try a different strategy that might make it easier for her counterparts to understand the importance of participation. She assigned two articles she believed would be instrumental in aiding a group discussion that might once again help White teachers to identify why they were afraid and allow Black teachers to express their feelings. This session was designed to separate the teachers by caucus groups and have them dialogue about the articles within their small groups. This would allow the teachers to discuss the issues in what they perceived to be "safe" spaces. Once small groups were completed, they would report out their reflections to the large group.

Overall, the activity went well. Teachers participated in their caucus groups with substantial discussion. However, when it was time for the large group discussion, one Black teacher challenged the White caucus group by asking, “Why were you able to have such good dialogue when you were in your caucus group, but unable to have a similar conversation with other members of the staff.” Once again, anger erupted within the room. Again, White teachers expressed that they were being attacked and had a right to choose what topics they discussed. Some teachers cried but when asked why, they stated that they were afraid. None could clearly articulate what was prompting their fears. Garrett continued to facilitate the articles discussion and gain feedback from participants. Things were not going well, but Garrett still believed the efforts were necessary. She followed the session with another blog post, which stated,

As I reflect on our social justice activity this month, it is apparent that addressing social justice has been more difficult for some to embrace. Emotions are high and moving this effort forward will require us to reflect on why we feel the way we feel when difficult dialogues emerge. Is the discomfort some feel rooted in white privilege? Is it rooted in a fear of coming to terms with thoughts, behaviors and ideas that promote the racism we claim to know about and consciously disrupt? What would happen if we dealt with our emotions, as uncomfortable as they may be because we care about a cause that is greater than our individual selves?

When we endeavored to investigate racial justice, we entered into process stating that we understood the difficulties that might arise. We also agreed that true justice requires us to think deeply and to move beyond long held beliefs and ideologies that are oppressive in nature. As a staff, we have been challenged to join a conversation as colleagues, grounded in transparency. We started the journey by developing norms that would help to maintain the integrity of our work. This is crucial to developing trust and honoring our colleagues who are bravely undertaking the journey through their reflections and sharing. If we are to truly gain knowledge and share insight, then every voice must be heard and valued. It is necessary. Let us continue to honor one another in this way.

By this time, Garrett began to see that the work of generating social justice dialogue and helping the staff to deepen relationships based on trust and understanding was going to take significant time, and she admitted to herself that she even felt fatigued (Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). The teachers at Williams had worked together for so many years, but bonded only within their respective circles. The bond was strongest among the White teaching staff. They had begun to meet after work and have drinks. They also met one morning each week to have breakfast together. This was their right and they did not have to invite any of the minoritized staff members. The isolation and silos was palatable, and now Garrett could truly understand how the Black staff felt. Sadly, the Black staff members noticed the meetings, discussed what was happening, and even considered creating a similar group. Yet they were never able to actualize their thoughts into a consolidated effort.

Garrett was often concerned about her ability to continue in this work, knowing that she had not been successful in her attempt to unite and educate the staff. The realization

that she had been tasked with such a difficult job was disheartening, coupled with the lack of true support from the building administrator. Up to this point, Webb had encouraged her to continue the work, but did not provide the necessary engagement or enforcement needed to effectively implement the social justice project.

Once again Garrett searched for a way to bring her colleagues together. This time, she decided to take a risky step by using the creation of “cross-cultural learning” teams. The teams would provide, a one-on-one opportunity to speak with a staff member of the opposite race. She challenged the teams to consider their racial identity and socialization and to discuss this with their partner. To get the teams started, Garrett provided context by sharing an article on the benefits of cross-cultural engagement. She invited the teams to read the article, meet with one another twice within a 3-week period, and report highlights from their interactions on the shared forum site. Garrett paired the staff based on race and position. Surely it would not be difficult to have a conversation with one co-worker. The African American staff members expressed their support and willingness to dialogue with their partner; a sentiment that was not shared by White staff members.

A Coup d’etat to End Professional Development

Following the announcement, the White teachers approached Dr. Webb about the project. In turn, Dr. Webb invited Garrett to her office to share more about the effort. Dr. Webb failed to inform Garrett that she would be walking into a direct confrontation. During the meeting, various staff members expressed their anger at being assigned to speak with a staff member of a different race. One staff member stated that she did not want to have a conversation with a person she barely knew, despite having worked with the teacher for over 2 years. Anger turned to fury as several teachers became emotional and spoke of how the social justice efforts had traumatized them. They shared with Garrett that they did not appreciate the social justice project and that she was making things worse not better. Their overall sentiment was that they liked things the way they were and did not want to change anything. Their school culture was comfortable and they did not feel the need to address race and class, or build consensus with other staff members.

Garrett felt upset, disrespected, and abandoned. A project that she had eagerly embraced and to which she committed emotional labor, was now being diminished. As she listened to the staff members, she noticed the ease with which they shared their feelings with her. She was aware of their growing boldness with Dr. Webb in the room, as she sat quietly, the lone person of color in the room. At that moment, she was no longer a senior administrator. They did not view her as a leader. As the teachers spoke, Garrett’s mind drifted. She thought,

So, this is what it what a modern day lynching must feel like. I feel like I’ve been unwittingly set-up and accused without a trial. This is a situation in which my life, career and identity as a black woman administrator is in jeopardy. These white women just don’t get it.

Garrett listened carefully to the feedback. When it was time for her to speak, she looked at Dr. Webb. This was the time when she needed Dr. Webb to use her administrative authority to support her. Dr. Webb failed to offer support. Garrett was left with no choice. She addressed the group of staff members with the following words:

It seems we have come to an impasse with this work. While it is important to me and to your colleagues of color, and to the African American children that you teach on a daily basis that you operate with unconditional regard, I now understand that you are incapable. I am saddened by your comments today, but I am not surprised.

Williams School is not a socially just environment. The type of environment that we should be attempting to create is a place where we change our mindsets and transform our thinking. This community is one where we must not only respect one another, but we must focus on the voices of those who are speaking, and allow ourselves to feel the pain and fear that comes from within. Then and only then have we allowed ourselves to experience the openness that honesty and authenticity bring.

This is the learning . . . Social justice education requires us to interrupt our patterns-of teaching, of communicating, of relating to one another. We cannot do things the same way we have in past attempts, hearing only one side of the story, the white story. This is not just about you. I know you've lived your entire lives socialized to believe everything is about you; hence your continued state of fragility since these efforts began. It takes everyone, regardless of race to create community and to sustain it. Note I said "everyone." It is true that Williams is a wonderful school, full of wonderful students, who have wonderful parents. But it is also true that the staff of Williams is challenged in the area of communication and lacks necessary cohesion to move forward as agents of social justice. The work to change patterns of thinking so that we can successfully and collaboratively find ways to improve the experiences of our students cannot be completed until you are ready to fully examine your whiteness and why it keeps you angry, fearful, and resistant. I can't do your work for you. It's your responsibility. I'm not inclined to wipe a single tear, nor do I wish to offer any statement that allows you to leave this meeting feeling as if you've accomplished something. What you've done is demonstrate a clear deficiency in telling the truth to yourselves and each other. We have now uncovered the truth haven't we? I encourage you to realize it. This experience was never really about *you*, it was about *us*.

Garrett then left the office and joined the African American staff members who were conducting their first group meeting, unconcerned and unworried about the actions and resistance of their White counterparts.

Teaching Notes

White Fragility

The concept of White fragility is relevant to the case primarily given the responses and reactions from the White lead teachers at Williams Elementary. DiAngelo (2011) coined the phrase, which refers to,

A state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves . . . such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation [which] function to reinstate white equilibrium. (p. 54)

Oftentimes schooling environments protect White fragility by providing a seemingly comfortable space where White teachers are neither required, nor expected to deal with difficult or stressful predicaments associated with race and/or racism (DiAngelo, 2011). For example, 82% of teachers are White and 76% are women (National Center for Educational Statistics). A homogeneous teaching pool creates a context for schools where White teachers, particularly White women, are situated as the norm. Therefore, White teachers' sense-making around issues of racism and social justice can be limited when they are not exposed or simply refuse to engage in issues of difference, privilege, and oppression, even when such issues directly affect their professional roles and their influence on the students with whom they work.

Although White fragility was prominent in this case, readers should also consider the toll White fragile behavior takes on people of color. The toll of White fragility is particularly high when people of color thoughtfully and actively work to promote professional development opportunities for all teachers, but encounter roadblocks by those afraid to have their Whiteness or other positions of privilege challenged. This is perhaps most important because the case centers the efforts of a Black woman administrator who is repeatedly willing to engage in difficult dialogues and support all of the teaching staff in grappling with issues of power and privilege. Her perseverance is not only commendable but also points to the many ways in which such efforts either go unnoticed, disregarded, or unsupported. The following questions should be used to support learning and deeper understanding of the issues presented in the case.

Further Reading

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Discussion Questions

1. Deborah Garrett, the main character in the case, identifies as a Black woman. Given that the majority of the lead teaching staff was White, do you think these racial dynamics shaped how the White teaching staff responded?
2. White resistance to difficult dialogues about race can occur in several different forms (e.g. tears, anger, disengaging). What strategies would you implement to address the resistance? Did Garrett miss opportunities to challenge the resistance?
3. How might Dr. Webb have handled the teachers' complaint in a different manner? To what extent does her White identity shape the outcome of the case?
4. How do teachers' attitudes and dispositions about race filter into a classroom environment? Given the resistance demonstrated by the teachers in this case, what are the implications for the minoritized students whom they teach?
5. Throughout the case, the Black teaching staff seemed to have greater willingness to engage in difficult dialogues despite their concerns of repercussion. What do you think prompted their willingness as juxtaposed by their colleague's resistance?
6. Did Garrett's efforts fail? Can you identify ways in which her strategies may have actually worked? Are her efforts reflective of activities in which you have participated or facilitated?
7. Dr. Webb seemed to empathize with the resistant teachers and failed to hold them accountable. How can school principals be challenged to uphold the values of social justice and hold teachers accountable?
8. The resistant White teachers in this case demonstrated a commitment to the status quo despite several efforts to disrupt the ordinary. What should be Garrett's next step? Should she consider the group a lost cause? What are the implications if the culture remains unaddressed? What are the possibilities for getting the teachers to move forward?
9. Garrett's attempt to introduce Michael Brown's shooting death was thoughtful and bold. Was this effort inappropriate or too political? Or do you think it captures what efforts should entail for schoolteachers and leaders?
10. How can school leaders address White fragility and resistance without re-centering Whiteness? Is such a goal even possible?
11. What pressing societal events can you think of that could be incorporated into staff training to promote deeper understanding of the relationships between urban schools and their surrounding community in relation to social justice issues?

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