

Understanding and Confronting White Privilege in Schools:

A Journey of Cultural Humility



By Charlotte Worsley

The Urban School of San Francisco

I was sitting in my office in the late 1990s having a conversation with our Multicultural Dean. To be honest, I was feeling a bit smug because I felt that Urban School was a leader in addressing issues of diversity and multiculturalism. The Dean said to me that the conversation at Urban had to broaden to include the cultural experience of the white students and faculty. I said: “I am tired of people telling me that I have to explore my European roots. I don’t have a separate culture to look at.” My ancestors came to the United States in the 18th and 19th centuries, and I considered their culture and experiences interesting as family history, but not relevant to my daily life.

From the perspective of 2018, I am embarrassed to share this anecdote. But at the time, I still perceived my culture as “normal American” culture. Luckily for me, the Dean was a colleague with grace and patience. He said “I am tired of white people thinking that diversity is the job of people of color. European white culture is just one culture that dominates the power institutions of this country.” Because I trusted and respected this man, I paused and considered that perhaps there was a much deeper understanding of diversity and multiculturalism that I was missing. I have learned that developing trusting relationships with people from marginalized backgrounds is crucial. For too long, those of us in positions of cultural dominance have not listened to the experiences of our colleagues of color. And when we do, we often are trying to defend ourselves or explain away their experiences. An important step for me was coming to a place of cultural humility, where I was able to listen and stay open to a new way of thinking.

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In her article, *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies*, Peggy McIntosh (1988) explored this transformative moment of seeing the world in a new light. She made two points in her introduction that reflect my own experience. First, she described the origin of her inquiry:

Through work to bring materials from women's studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men's unwillingness to grant that they are overprivileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. They may say they will work to improve women's status, in the society, the university, or the curriculum, but they can't or won't support the idea of lessening men's. (p. 2)

She started from a place of personal frustration and experience. Her inquiry was not just academic—it was connected to her own story. At Urban School, our 9th grade Identity and Ethnic Studies class begins with everyone exploring their own story. If we want students and faculty to care about this topic, we need to give them a personal connection. My trust in my colleague was the personal connection that made me step back and explore my cultural story in a new light.

Secondly, McIntosh (1988) moved from her story to curiosity and empathy for others. She asked herself: if I feel this way, might someone else be suffering from my actions?

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I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was “meant” to remain oblivious. (p. 2)

Transitioning from my own personal story to empathy for others was the tricky part of addressing white privilege. As McIntosh pointed out, it was easy for me to see the disadvantage of others, but harder to see my own advantage. When my friend, the Multicultural Dean, pointed out my blindness to white culture, it was my personal connection to him that made me stop and listen. Making this connection is something that needs to happen again and again. I didn't just learn about white privilege all at once. I have had many such “Aha! moments” that have led me to a deeper understanding. And through that journey, I am deeply indebted to my colleagues of color who, in addition to doing their own challenging jobs in our schools, have also taken on



the added task of educating their white colleagues. I rely equally on my white colleagues who are committed to social justice. We have learned to come together as white people to do our own work—to challenge each other to learn more about the history of whiteness in America.

As an administrator in an independent school, I cannot stop at this personal journey. Since I am part of the power structure of my school, I am accountable to challenge the systems of inequality that persist in education. *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof (2014) wrote:

The greatest problem is not with flat-out white racists, but rather with the larger number of Americans who believe intellectually in racial equality but are quietly oblivious to injustice around them. Too many whites unquestioningly accept a system that disproportionately punishes blacks...We are not racists, but we accept a system that acts in racist ways.

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where I have power to make change. As an independent school administrator, my school is one of the answers.

At Urban School, I have focused on bringing my white colleagues into the conversation. I have searched to find effective workshops and conferences that would challenge white faculty and administrators to understand our culture and our privilege. I want us to face the truth and hold ourselves accountable to making change, while also finding effective ways of drawing even our reluctant colleagues into the conversation. As a person of faith, I have looked at my own Christian tradition for ideas and approaches to this work. I use my spiritual values to inform the approach I take to inclusion and equity work, guided by Urban’s Mission to “instill a consciousness of social justice, an ethic of citizenship and a commitment to service.”

One Christian leader who has guided my thinking for many years is Jim Wallis, President and founder of Sojourners. In his book, *America’s Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege and the Bridge to a New America*, Wallis (2017) defines white privilege as “the assumption of racial entitlement and the *normality* of whiteness, something that most of those of us who are white still fail to recognize or resist.” (p. xvi) He starkly defines the original sin of racism: “The United States of America was established as a white society, founded upon the near genocide of another race and then the enslavement of yet another.” (p. 33). By calling racism a sin, he reminds us of the moral imperative to

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confront it and repent. By connecting racism to white privilege, he, like Peggy McIntosh, gives those of us from the Christian tradition a road map for making change.

The challenge as an administrator is to create standards and structures that move the institution towards being more inclusive and equitable while also creating pathways for adults and students to learn, grow and create community together. Certain practices must be required of all adults in the community. Through work on our Core Values and on a Mission Statement for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, our Board of Trustees has set a standard for working at the school. These standards need to be lived every day, not just left on the paper. Faculty are evaluated based on standards in our teaching rubric such as the range of diverse voices and perspectives in knowledge content and instructional materials, the creation of an inclusive classroom environment, and the teachers' commitment to affirming the uniqueness of each student.

Professional development must be differentiated, providing a path for each adult to make the school more inclusive and equitable. We combine in-house required professional development with extensive opportunities to attend conferences, especially the White Privilege Conference founded by Dr. Eddie Moore, Jr. and Othering and Belonging hosted by the Haas Institute for a Fair and Equitable Society. Our in-house professional development balances challenging content with tools and practice. We make sure to draw on the personal background and experi-

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ences of our faculty and staff as a starting place but then set a clear challenge of growth in skills and understanding. For example, we worked with Shakti Butler of World Trust over two years. She took the skill of active listening one step further and taught us to be strategic questioners, diving deeply into the underlying issues and structures that support institutionalized inequities. In the first year, she taught this technique to faculty and staff in a professional day and then to student leaders in a retreat. The second year, she came back to deepen the work with our faculty and staff. Since that time, departments have incorporated the practice into their work to improve pedagogy, and student leadership groups have incorporated the practice into workshops they lead for other students. In another example, through Inquiry for Equity based on the practice of the National Equity Project, we invited faculty and administrators to hold up a mirror to their professional practice and identify areas for improvement. Through conversations based on trust and shared cultural humility and commitment to growth, we worked together to change our practices.



Practice needs to be integrated into the fabric of the school and not just relegated to professional development. If we want our students to have honest conversations, we as adults must practice too. In faculty meetings led by our Dean of Equity and Inclusion, we share stories in dyads and talk about areas of the school that need to change. In department meetings and grade level advisor meetings, we actively apply tools and practices to our work in curriculum development, pedagogy, and advising. In our weekly senior admin meetings, we don't just rely on the Dean of Equity and Inclusion to raise issues around privilege and inequity. Each person at the table—the Dean of Faculty, the Academic Dean, Head of School, CFO, and Dean of Equity and Inclusion—is expected to consider issues of inclusion and equity in all aspects of their jobs.

Yet even with all of those pieces in place, I constantly remind myself that I have grown up in a country steeped in racism and white privilege, the original sin. The greatest hubris would be to forget that I am human, I am a sinner, and I will make mistakes. I need to build humility and active listening into my life, so that I am looking for the places where I have missed my privilege—not because I am a bad person, not so I can wallow in guilt—but so I can be a part of the solution and work with my colleagues of color to make our school and all education better for everyone. ●

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Charlotte Worsley is the Assistant Head for Student Life at The Urban School of San Francisco. She holds an M.A. in Nonprofit Management from Regis University and an A.B. in History from Harvard University. You can reach her at cworsley@urbanschool.org.