

**Challenging White Supremacy Culture in Music Education:  
A Collaborative Workshop**

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## Introduction and Rationale

The field of music education has a long-standing tradition of centering Whiteness. From middle school band to collegiate ensembles, music education is primarily accessed by White students, taught by White educators, and mainly contains content created by White people. A national survey of high school students in the U.S. from 2009 to 2013 found that only 24% of students enrolled in band, chorus, or orchestra for at least one year (Elpus & Abril, 2019). Of the students that enrolled in those courses, 58% of them were White (Elpus and Abril, 2019). Not only does this show that high school music primarily serves White students, it is also significant that band, chorus, and orchestra, ensembles that typically feature music composed and popularized by White musicians (Lynch, 2020; McCrann, 2016), are not reaching over 75% of our students.

Unsurprisingly, these trends are reproduced and reinforced by higher education policies and practices. Perhaps most obviously, the admissions process for many preservice music teacher programs requires high levels of performance in Western Classical styles (Koza, 2008; VanDeusen, 2021). This process excludes students who have diverse musical knowledge or do not have access to the private lessons, personal instruments, or practice space required to meet these high standards. The elitist and racialized politics of preservice training programs result in a predominantly White teaching field. In 2007 to 2012, Elpus and Abril (2015) found that 86% of music teacher licensure candidates in the U.S. were White. Clearly, White hegemony in the field of music education has been well-maintained at many different levels.

This workshop aims to challenge white supremacy in the field of music education by providing practical anti-racist education to music educators. More specifically, the overarching

objective of the workshop is to explore the ways in which white supremacy culture manifests in music education and to identify tools for transforming it. We will examine how white supremacy operates implicitly and explicitly in ourselves, interpersonal relationships, classrooms or learning communities, schools, curricula, and standards. We will center music education in our analyses, but we will acknowledge that the field of music education and the perpetuation of white supremacy are deeply intertwined with many other disciplines, institutions, and systems in our society. Participants will leave with a deeper understanding of the ways in which white supremacy limits us, our students, and our communities, and a collection of practical tools for creating a more actively anti-racist and liberatory music education.

### **Underlying Social Justice Frameworks**

This workshop will draw from many different social justice concepts and theories. For the design and overall sequencing of the workshop, I am loosely using the framework of the four-quadrant design from *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice* (Adams et al., 2023). Essentially, this design starts with establishing a learning community, then moves toward unpacking our social identities and patterns of socialization, builds to exploring manifestations of oppression in our institutions and systems, and ends with identifying action steps and envisioning change (p. 122). My workshop design will reflect a simplified and less comprehensive version of the four-quadrant design. I will start with activities to build community and establish a level of comfortability among participants so that they will be more willing to open up to one another. We will then do some exercises to unpack our social locations which will help prime participants for thinking critically about their roles as educators.

From there, we will zoom out to examine white supremacy culture broadly and in the context of music education. Although this is the institutional and systemic portion of the workshop, we will remain focused on practical applications in order to ground ourselves in actionable change. Finally, the workshop will conclude with exercises to enact change in small and large ways. I think that this sequencing is valuable because each section scaffolds the next, and it offers a balance of oppression and resistance.

For the socialization portion of my workshop, I will draw from the frameworks of intersectionality. Popularly coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), intersectionality is the idea that social identity categories such as race, gender, sexuality, class, dis/ability, religion, and age compound and reinforce each other through interlocking forms of oppression. Although this workshop is primarily focused on racism and white supremacy, we will acknowledge that white supremacy systematically upholds and is upheld by all other forms of oppression and discrimination. In order to combat these interlocking forms of oppression, it is critical that our movements for liberation are also intersectional. Thus, we will consider the intersectional identities of ourselves and our students in the creation of anti-racist practices.

The bulk of this workshop is centered around the white supremacy culture characteristics. These characteristics were originally conceptualized by artist and activist Tema Okun, whose work has since evolved into a creative and collaborative website. On this website, Okun (2022) defines white supremacy culture as “the widespread ideology baked into the beliefs, values, norms, and standards of our groups (many if not most of them), our communities, our towns, our states, our nation, teaching us both overtly and covertly that whiteness holds value, whiteness is value.” The characteristics of white supremacy culture that

are highlighted on the website serve as a tool for identifying the ways in which our cultural norms both are products of white supremacy and serve to maintain white supremacy. Because these characteristics are so normalized, I find that this tool is particularly useful for exposing the pervasive and hegemonic nature of white supremacy in every aspect of society. Additionally, many of the characteristics (such as perfectionism, one right way, fear, and urgency) are particularly relevant to the culture of music schools and preservice music education programs.

The design, content, and facilitation of this workshop are also greatly informed by critical pedagogy. Both hooks (1994) and Freire (2000) argued against the banking model of education in favor of a pedagogy that actively engaged the teacher and the learners, incorporated their lived experiences, and facilitated the development of a critical consciousness. In particular, hooks (1994) stressed the importance of the teacher's role in engaged pedagogy stating that "teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students" (p. 15). For my own design and facilitation of this workshop, I will draw from hooks and Freire's work by actively engaging the participants through activities and discussion, giving them opportunities to draw from their lived experiences, and providing them with tools to think critically about power and racial dynamics in their educational roles. It is my hope that this will move participants along their journey of "self-actualization."

Additionally, in terms of content, part of the workshop will be centered around critical hip-hop pedagogy as a framework for creating an anti-racist music education. Critical hip-hop pedagogy draws on Freire's (2000) concept of conscientization while incorporating the musical styles, activism, interdisciplinarity, youth resistance, and resourcefulness of hip-hop culture

(Karvelis, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2015; Kruse, 2020). Additionally, as a genre that originated and continues to thrive in Black communities, hip-hop can allow for productive conversations about race and racism in music education spaces (Hess, 2018).

Finally, I recognize that the work of dismantling white supremacy in music education is a massive undertaking that cannot be achieved in my lifetime, let alone one 6-hour workshop. However, under emergent strategy (brown, 2017), we are reminded that “small is all:” that transformation emerges from our interdependence and a multitude of small acts. Thus, my goals for the workshop are *really* to build community, ask difficult questions of each other, make some progress on our self-transformation and healing, and grow our capacity to envision and enact change. Because white supremacy has a long-standing history of destroying communities in order to assert control, I believe that community building and transformation are inherently anti-racist and must be prioritized in our education of youth and their teachers.

### **Audience, Context, & Setting**

The intended audience for this workshop is people who are currently teaching music in schools or community programs. These individuals would likely be 25-60 years old and would have at least a bachelor’s degree. I envision this workshop occurring on a weekend professional development day before a school break (i.e., before winter break) so that the participants are able to draw from/reflect on their experiences thus far, have time to process the information from the workshop, and have time after the workshop to implement changes in their teaching. Ideally, I would invite all the music teachers from a large local/regional area and provide transportation and food. The workshop would not be required, but I would attempt to work with school districts and community organizations to provide some kind of work incentive or

benefit for attending. I also want this workshop to be transferrable to multiple settings and contexts, including an online format. Ideally, the workshop design would be accessible to anyone who wishes to facilitate this workshop with their colleagues.

### **Goals and Objectives**

#### **Content Goals (CG)**

Participants will be able to...

1. develop an understanding of the ways in which their social location informs their roles as educators.
2. critically consider the social locations and specific needs of their students.
3. recognize the pervasiveness and normalization of white supremacy culture in society.
4. examine specific music teaching practices and analyze their relationship to white supremacy culture.
5. imagine, create, and compile practical tools for dismantling white supremacy in music education.

#### **Process Goals (PG)**

Participants will be able to...

1. connect with and learn from other music educators.
2. reflect on feelings that come up in potentially difficult conversations.
3. practice appropriately responding to feedback about teaching practices.
4. practice vulnerability and honesty when sharing.
5. grow and utilize their critical consciousnesses.

6. show their engagement in the workshop by actively participating in pair sharing, large group sharing, activities, and surveys.

### **Learning Objectives (LO)**

Participants will be able to...

1. consider and state their needs in the co-creation of community agreements for the workshop.
2. associate their social identities with systems of power, privilege, and oppression.
3. identify the primary characteristics of white supremacy culture through an understanding of their manifestations in society.
4. list music education practices that represent and remedy the white supremacy culture characteristics.
5. reflect on their experiences as a teacher and a learner in music education settings.
6. develop methods for incorporating hip-hop music, culture, pedagogies, forms, and/or tools in their classrooms/learning spaces.
7. create a plan for enacting anti-racism in their classrooms/learning spaces in short-term and long-term ways.



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