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CCCC Statement on White Language Supremacy

Conference on College Composition and Communication

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Executive Summary

White language supremacy (WLS) is an implement to white supremacy, particularly within educational institutions. Contextualized within present exigencies, antiracist educators must work alongside students, communities, and institutions to push for the dismantling of WLS because of its deleterious effects on Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), domination and dehumanization of all people, and its detrimental effects to our environment and its resources. This statement provides a working definition of WLS as an apparatus of white supremacy and a general description of its ideological characteristics and manifestations with regard to language and literacy instruction. The statement provides a brief background on the field's work for social change and recommended critical theoretical frames for praxis.

Part One: General Statement

Purpose

This statement on white language supremacy (WLS) reflects our field's commitment to linguistic justice for our BIPOC students and their communities, and our dedication to work as coconspirators against white supremacist practices. Our goal as critical anti-WLS educators is to dismantle WLS in our field and in ourselves. The work involves advocating for the defunding of deficit-based racist research, and of racist ideologies of learning, teaching, testing, and evaluation of teachers and students. Historically, the WLS industrial complex has contributed to the lucrative enrichment of individual scholars and fields of language and literacy studies (e.g., sociolinguistics; see Rickford, 1999) while the so-called racial achievement exploitation gap has remained (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Definition

WLS is a tool of white supremacy. Because white supremacy is obscured and often misunderstood as applying only to white radical groups, we provide an extended definition to illuminate and address this vast system and the role of WLS. White supremacy is

a sociopolitical economic system of domination based on racial categories that benefits those defined and perceived as white. This system of structural power privileges, centralizes, and elevates white people as a group (DiAngelo, 2018, 30).

Further,

...[The] United States is a global power, and through movies and mass media, corporate culture, advertising, US-owned manufacturing, military presence, historical colonial relations, missionary work, and other means [including education], white supremacy is circulated globally. This powerful ideology promotes the idea of whiteness as the ideal for humanity well beyond the West (DiAngelo, 2018, 29).

WLS assists white supremacy by using language to control reality and resources by defining and evaluating people, places, things, reading, writing, rhetoric, pedagogies, and processes in multiple ways that damage our students and our democracy. It imposes a worldview that

is simultaneously pro-white, cisgender, male, heteronormative, patriarchal, ableist, racist, and capitalist (Inoue, 2019b; Pritchard, 2017). This worldview structures WLS as the default condition in schools, academic disciplines, professions, media, and society at large. WLS is, thus, structural and usually a part of the standard operating procedures of classrooms, disciplines, and professions. This means that WLS is a condition that assumes its worldview as the normative one that allegedly everyone has access to regardless of their cultural, social, or language histories (Inoue, 2021). WLS perpetuates many forms of systemic and structural violence.

Characteristics

A major characteristic of WLS is its seemingly colorblind nature, however tacit, that shapes aesthetics, epistemologies, attitudes, ideologies, and discourses that structure social arrangements, relations, practices, and policies that reinforce white power structures to the detriment of BIPOC and minoritized people.

Characteristics of the ideology of white supremacist capitalistic-based [language and] literacy include consumption, consent, obedience, fragmentation, singularity (as opposed to multiplicity), [binary logic], and positivism. The educational practices associated with this [white formation] of [language and] literacy are naturalized in the system and taught to students as a set of isolated skills divorced from social context, politics, culture, and power (Street, 1993). Teaching standardized English, a narrowly conceived academic discourse, and their cousin, the “academic essay,” are examples of the “neutral skills” needed to succeed in the corporate educational system and the market driven capitalistic society (J. Berlin, 1996). The viewpoint of official educational sites and institutions is that students/good citizens need these skills to function in society. (Richardson, 2003, p. 9)

Colorblindness is akin to another major characteristic of WLS, the ideology of individualism as it works with meritocracy to disguise the role of language in racial capitalism and legitimize the failure of whole groups of BIPOC by pointing to exceptional individuals who, for example, learned to be “articulate while Black” (Alim & Smitherman, 2012), or who transcended their “cultural handicaps” to acquire white middle-class social goods. Those who espouse liberal, individualistic, and white supremacist politics are not involved in a project of critical social justice movement or critical socially just language and literacy education. “Living passively with the status quo, maintaining what those with political and economic power deem acceptable is a survival tactic for many. Others use the status quo actively, to seek to gain from oppression of others” (Carruthers, 2018, p. 8). It is important that educators develop ideological clarity and understand the urgent need for social change and their role in it.

There are at least six habits of white language that often create the conditions of WLS. The first habit is always present in WLS and is required. It works with one or more of the other five habits to create conditions that are WLS. These habits of white language (HOWL) are:

- Unseen, naturalized orientation to the world
- Hyperindividualism
- Stance of neutrality, objectivity, and apoliticality
- Individualized, rational, controlled self
- Rule-governed, contractual relationships
- Clarity, order, and control (Inoue, 2019a; 2019c; 2021)

Brief Selected Background on CCCC’s Work for Language and Social Equality and Ways Forward

Largely, BIPOC have battled WLS in their struggle for self-definition, self-determination, and social transformation (e.g., Kynard, 2007; Mao & Young, 2008; King et al., 2015; Baca et al., 2019; Inoue 2015). Antiracist and anti-WLS coconspirator educators have sought to facilitate students’ right to their own language and critical literacy awareness approaches (e.g., CCCC Students’ Right to Their Own Language [SRTOL], 1974; CCCC National Language Policy, 1988, 1992, 2015; Smitherman, 1999; Richardson, 2003; Smitherman & Villanueva, 2003; Kynard, 2008; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011; Hoang, 2015). SRTOL was forged in the political backdrop of the Civil Rights, Black Power, and other liberation movements worldwide to provide “open access” for racially and linguistically oppressed groups. SRTOL has served as a cornerstone of some of the most critical language policy moments, from the 1977 Ann

Arbor “Black English” case, the creation of the National Language Policy (1988), the 1996 Oakland Ebonics Resolution, and various movements against “English First” or the “English Only” movements that limit access to bilingual education. To be sure, even though Latinx populations were the target in Arizona in outlawing Chicano Studies as well as bilingual education, English-Only has massively harmed American Indians there. The CCCC’s Language Policy Committee (LPC) also initiated the 1986 “Resolution on English and ‘English Only,’” with the LPC joining the English-Plus Movement and its Information Clearinghouse in 1987 (Villanueva, 2014). In today’s climate of neo-lynching in the form of “stand your ground” and police brutality, continued desecration of Native Americans’ sacred lands, and hatred of African Americans, Latinx, Asians, Native Americans, and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, antiracist language and literacy educators must be vigilant and aware.

Educators, at the middle school level, should be wary of colorblind approaches to youth (language) development at the expense of evading issues of power. As Caldera & Babino (2019) admonish, teaching about WLS is moving toward culturally sustaining instruction. At the college level, Institutional Freshman English (Kynard, 2008), basic writing (Gilyard & Richardson, 2001), Spoken English (for those deemed nonnative speakers), and other social arrangements are part of institutional practices that reproduce “advantages and benefits for some, and discrimination, oppression, and disadvantages for others” (Lyiscott, 2019). Labeling BIPOC students’ languages, lives, and identities as lifelong English learners, heritage language learners, and Standard English learners points to the raciolinguistic othering of US Latinx, Native Americans [labeled semilingual], World English speakers [labeled second-language learners], and Ebonics speakers [labeled as nonstandard] whose dynamic language practices do not fit monolingual white ideologies (Flores & Rosa, 2015). We must be attuned to the workings of linguistic imperialism (Phillipson, 1992) and how labels indicate power differentials and hierarchies and oppressive [educational] practices that must be interrogated and challenged: remedial readers, developmental writers, nonnative English speakers, ESL learners, limited English proficient (LEP) [aka LEPERS], low-income, first generation, undocumented, international students, immigrant students, historically underserved. As the authors of “This Ain’t Another Statement: This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!” express, our field has produced many important statements expressing legitimacy of diverse students’ languages and lives. Most forcefully in the wake of the George Floyd murder by Minneapolis police, our field cannot ignore the decades of research legitimizing Black language, and must continue to produce statements of solidarity stating that Black lives and Black languages matter; we must DEMAND and work to implement Black Linguistic Justice (Baker-Bell, 2020). Similarly, we must DEMAND the same for Indigenous, Brown, and all people of color.

Approaches for Social Change

Critical language awareness (CLA) approaches assist the profession and students in interrogating and challenging the sociopolitical arrangement of WLS and “[foregrounds] ... the examination of interconnectedness of identities, ideologies, histories/herstories, and the hierarchical nature of power relations between groups” (Alim, 2005, p. 28). As anti-WLS educators, we strive to collaborate with communities through our teaching “for sweeping social change” (Sladd, 1969, p. 1315). Linguistic change is the effect and not the cause of social change.

Tenets of Black Lives Matter, critical race theory-informed, decolonial, culturally responsive, antiracist, and race-radical literacies urge us to name and label the structural violence of the institutions that are working against BIPOC students (Kynard, 2018; Ruiz & Sanchez, 2019; Saeedi & Richardson, 2020; Baker-Bell, 2020). As Pritchard’s (2017, pp. 245–246) work in Black queer literacies teaches us, we are all complicit in the harms of normativity by our institutions and the human condition. Yet, Pritchard points us toward hope in language and literate acts “of self- and communal love that contributes to broader quests for social and political change to disrupt normativity.”

Largely, our profession’s pedagogies and assessment practices of linguistic diversity and inclusion have tried to fit students and faculty of all backgrounds into existing oppressive structures. Instead, we must push to dismantle all systems rooted in WLS and advocate for investment in BIPOC communities as we work toward liberatory languages and systems that honor the full humanity and equality of all people.

Resolution

We reaffirm our commitments to linguistic diversity and to the multiple languages and linguistic histories of our students and communities and, further, affirm a commitment to the dismantling of all systems of oppression, with the understanding of the central role of WLS in the formation of unconscious and conscious biases. We recognize the role of WLS as a tool of oppression and resolve that as coconspirators in one another's multiple struggles, including those of our students, we are responsible for challenging and uprooting WLS and pursuing and practicing a present and future that places liberatory languages and systems as central to our collective work.

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