

# How Do White Educators Need to Show Up in Ethnic Studies Spaces? A Survey

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## Abstract

Ethnic studies is a rapidly growing emerging field in K-12 schools that centers a critique of white supremacy. Knowledge about how to prepare white teachers to teach and engage in ethnic studies spaces is urgently needed. The present study examined experienced Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) ethnic studies educator's perspectives on how white educators need to show up in ethnic studies spaces. A total of 17 BIPOC K-12 educators responded to open-ended prompts soliciting identification of what makes a good white co-conspirator in K-12 ethnic studies spaces (Love, 2019a, 2019b). Analysis of survey results revealed four themes that describe good white co-conspirators: (a) acceptance and awareness of white privilege; (b) listening and learning with humility; (c) taking action in systems of power; and (d) persistent self-efficacy and resilience. The implications of these findings for teacher preparation and research are discussed.

**Keywords:** ethnic studies, teacher preparation, decolonizing education

### IN LAK'ECH

*Tú eres mi otro yo.*

*You are my other me.*

أنت جزئي الآخر

*Si te hago daño a ti,*

*If I do harm to you,*

إذا آذيتك

*Me hago daño a mi mismo.*

*I do harm to myself.*

فقد آذيت نفسي

*Si te amo y respeto,*

*If I love and respect you,*

إذا أحببتك و احترمك

*Me amo y respeto yo.*

*I love and respect myself.*

فقد أحببت و احترمت نفسي

- Luis Valdez, 1973 (translated to Arabic by Lallia Allali)

White supremacy<sup>64</sup> is a toxic technology of power (Foucault, 1988) that is a major object of critique in ethnic studies. Without critical analysis of white supremacy, this technology “determine[s] the conduct of individuals and submit[s] them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject” (p. 18). All educators themselves can be sites of oppression and surveillance, compounding the violence of white supremacy in school and society. Imagine a white teacher reciting Luis Valdez’s (1973) *In Lak’Ech*, a deeply humanizing poem, with their students at the beginning of a high school ethnic studies class. The poem’s audacious message stands in stark contrast to the white supremacy that a white teacher represents. How do we address this juxtaposition?

Not only is ethnic studies work intended to dismantle white supremacy but given more than 79% of U.S. teachers are white (NCES, 2020) and are often unaware of the ways in which they wield this technology of power, understanding how white educators *need to* show up in ethnic studies spaces is essential (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). Compounding the violence of teachers who inflict this brutality is the way in which white folks normalize their own unaware existence. The role of white folks as good-intentioned liberals cements the daily damage they do to Black, Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC). It is this self-proclaimed innocence that is the first barrier to becoming a good co-conspirator (Love, 2019a). Love describes a good white co-conspirator as someone who says, “I know the terms; I know what white privilege and white supremacy mean; now, what risks am I willing to take?” It’s saying, ‘I’m going to put my privilege on the line for somebody.’”

White folks who read this article must first acknowledge that their very existence creates the violence Black, Indigenous and people of color have and continue to experience in every space, especially in settler-colonial schooling (Marsh et al., 2022). Our presence, our place, in this settler colonial project is automatically conferred power and normalization whether we wish it or not. And because of our presence as white folks we necessitate “a refusal to concede to the normality of antiblack U.S. domestic war” that maintains the status quo (Rodríguez, 2021, p. 578). It is only through monumental insurgency that we can begin to be good co-conspirators in ethnic studies spaces. By insurgency, I mean many things, an example of which could be Rodríguez’s (2021) “abolitionist praxis [that] encompass dynamic, well-debated, constantly formed ethical demands on those who claim affinity with its audacious visions of militant revolt, radical transformation, and speculative (queer, feminist, Black, Indigenous, liberated) futurity” (p. 576). In other words, we as white folks need to take radical responsibility for the ethical demand to get out of the way and listen to the people we oppress, for once and for always. How do we get out of the way and listen?

In order to disrupt white supremacist systems and practices and the harm they perpetuate, white teachers, and urgently, white ethnic studies teachers, are responsible for unlearning white supremacy, but they cannot do this alone. As Lisa Delpit (1988) reminds us, “Those with power are frequently least aware of—or at least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence” (p. 282). Therefore, this study centers the expertise of ethnic studies educators of color and Indigenous ethnic studies educators to learn how white teachers need to show up in ethnic studies. To be clear, if white folks try to imagine what is needed, they will likely make matters worse. It is BIPOC who understand what is needed for their self-

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<sup>64</sup> White supremacy is defined in many ways, but if you are new to it, reading Okun’s (1998) examples of white supremacy culture may help you see your role in the way it is rebirthed in every moment.

determination and liberation, not the imaginings of what me and my white siblings construct as necessary.

## Literature Review

This brief review of the literature addresses the role of teachers in relation to the white supremacist system of schooling (de los Ríos et al., 2015) and begins with the profound social, emotional, and academic effectiveness of teachers of color with both students of color *and* white students in schooling in comparison to the relative failure of white teachers (Blazar, 2021). The social, emotional, and academic benefits for students of color when they have a teacher of color are well-documented (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Egalite, 2024; Gershenson et al., 2018; Redding, 2019). In her review of 12 studies with standardized effect sizes of matching teacher and student race, Egalite (2024) reports significant positive social and academic effects for students of color who also have a teacher of the same race. Alternatively, Egalite reports that white teachers have lower expectations and more negative perceptions of students of color as seen in disproportionate discipline referrals and lower rates of referral to gifted programs.

We know there are benefits for students of color when having a teacher of color, and researchers have identified why this may be, including culturally responsive practices (Gay, 2000) and culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995b), and specifically: teachers serving as cultural advocates, developing more trusting relationships with students, holding higher expectations, viewing students' behaviors and futures more positively (NCQT, 2021). This body of research documents white teachers' failures but does not tell us how white educators should show up in ethnic studies classrooms. Given that BIPOC teachers tend to be more effective with BIPOC students than white teachers, should BIPOC teachers be the only ones assigned the work of ethnic studies teaching, or can white teachers also learn to share in this work? If so, how can white teachers show up for ethnic studies constructively?

The most applicable research on effective white teachers for the purposes of this study centers white teachers learning to grapple with systems of white supremacy. In her analysis of the whiteness of teacher education Sleeter (2017) begins with the assumption that tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) are useful tools to unpack needed reforms in teacher education that disrupt the interests of whiteness. Similarly, Flynn et al. (2018) report on strategies to develop racial literacy in white teacher candidates, including unpacking institutional racism and emphasizing taking responsibility for acting for both white preservice students and white teacher educators. In their discussion of successful white ethnic studies teachers, Tintiangco-Cubales et al. (2015) identify culturally responsive classroom pedagogy and self-reflection on marginalization as aspects of highly successful white teachers but emphasize these characteristics are not the norm for most white teachers. This need for teacher self-reflection about identity in relationship to the embeddedness of white supremacy is also echoed in Sleeter and Zavala's (2020) comprehensive review of research in the field of K-12 ethnic studies.

## Methods

The purpose of the survey is to answer the overarching question, "What makes a good white co-conspirator in K-12 ethnic studies?" Respondents were asked to consider Bettina Love's (2019a): "A co-conspirator says, 'I know the terms; I know what white privilege and white supremacy mean;

now, what risks am I willing to take?' It's saying, 'I'm going to put my privilege on the line for somebody.'"

The study took place in California and all of the participants were currently teaching ethnic studies in California. Participants represented all regions of California and in urban, suburban, or rural schools. Three participants also had experience teaching ethnic studies in other states including in Arizona and Texas schools. Beginning in fall of 2025 all California public high schools must offer an ethnic studies course and the class of 2030 will need to take an ethnic studies class in order to graduate (AB 101, 2021).

Participants were invited to answer four open-ended questions, with the fourth an optional question: (a) Think of a time when a white person was a good co-conspirator for K-12 ethnic studies. What did they do and why was it good?; (b) What are the top-three characteristics/actions/ideologies of a good white co-conspirator for K-12 ethnic studies?; (c) What advice do you have for educators who want to be good white co-conspirators in ethnic studies?; and (d) Is there anything else you want white folks to know about being white in ethnic studies spaces? The questions invited respondents to answer the guiding question, "What makes a good white co-conspirator in K-12 ethnic studies?" in three different ways. A focus on the single domain of what makes a good white co-conspirator supported data saturation and salience with a smaller sample of 17 respondents (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Weller et al., 2018).

Participants were recruited electronically from networks of experienced BIPOC ethnic studies teachers who have experience teaching K-12 and in teacher preparation and program development. A convenience sample of 33 BIPOC ethnic studies educators were invited to participate anonymously in the survey and 17 educators completed and submitted the survey form. Participants were 17 experienced K-12 ethnic studies teachers—11 cis-men and 6 cis-women. Each was asked to self-identify their gender and race/ethnicity, listed in Table 6.1.

**Table 6.1. Participant Self-Reported Gender and Race/Ethnicity**

Gender	Race/Ethnicity
Cis-Men - 11	Chicana/o - 4
Cis-Women - 6	Mexicano - 1
	Mexican Filipino - 1
	Palestinian American - 1
	AAPI - 1
	American Indian - 1
	Chicana- Apache/Yaqui/Cahuitec - 1
	Filipina/Pinay - 1
	Black/African American - 1
	Pacific Islander (Samoan) and Asian (Korean) - 1
	Chicano Indigenous - 1
	Brown/Filipino - 1
	Asian American/Taiwanese - 1
	Filipino - 1

Participants offered a range of responses in different formats, for example, they told first person short stories about white co-conspirators, praised white educators for doing racial justice work

without prompting, listed characteristics of co-conspirators, and spoke directly to an imagined audience, “You will make mistakes, and that is ok. Based on the nature of the course and discussions you may unintentionally open up trauma. It is imperative that you create spaces for students (and you) to heal.” Responses to each survey question were rich and varied. For example, in response to the question, “Think of a time when a white person was a good co-conspirator for K-12 ethnic studies. What did they do and why was it good?” participants shared short vignettes of when a white educator was a good co-conspirator. Responses ranged from recounting a white colleague engaging in a teacher training session where they said they needed to stop and let BIPOC define ethnic studies to a white teacher explaining that if he could understand his privilege, his high school students could, too.

Drawing upon survey data from 17 experienced ethnic studies educators of color and Indigenous ethnic studies educators, this study identifies the themes that emerged from the open-ended responses to questions posed to study respondents, for example, “What makes a good white co-conspirator in K-12 ethnic studies?” Demographic data were collected for each respondent, and data were analyzed utilizing constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and coded for themes and conclusion-drawing (Miles et al., 2020). Participants responded to all questions with only one instance out of 51 where a participant referred to a previous response in lieu of a new response.

## Results

Data analysis revealed four parallel themes across the three survey questions. Although each participant offered nuanced expert advice related to each theme and subtheme that merit a close reading, major themes arose that describe good white co-conspiratorship: (a) acceptance and awareness of white privilege; (b) listening and learning with humility; (c) taking action in systems of power; and (d) persistent self-efficacy and resilience. I will discuss each theme in turn with examples.

### Acceptance and Awareness of White Privilege

The most frequent theme across survey responses was the identification of the need to be accepting of and remain aware of white privilege in order to be a good co-conspirator. Survey responses made it clear that white folks need to learn about their own white privilege individually and how it is part of a larger structure of white supremacy, but also that they must remain aware of their privilege, accepting that unlearning it is a life-long pursuit. Participants described good white co-conspirators (WCCs) as people who “monitor their privilege” and “share how hard it is to be anti-racist” while also “calling out racism in other white people” and “challenging white folks to understand privilege.”

Concurrently, participants told stories of how WCCs “use their power” and “use their privilege” to help other people. For example, “They verified what I had just stated to a group. Sometimes we need a white messenger!” Likewise, many participants explained that WCCs use their privilege strategically, deploying it with prudence to make space for BIPOC leadership: “The main thing that they did was that they stepped to the side and [allowed] for space to center narrative[s] of my people. But then they also stepped up and used their privilege when needed to benefit ethnic studies.”

Importantly, WCCs don't let up on their awareness of their white privilege as they act to utilize it to help others as this participant describes:

In this period of white sup[remacist] reaction, my white co-conspirators are deeply appreciated when they are regularly self-reflecting and independently learning, grounding themselves in critical theory and applying those learnings in the most genuine acts of solidarity . . . they are vocal in championing es [ethnic studies] and sj [social justice] when they are in [a] predominantly white space; they are always reading the world and responding accordingly; they will acknowledge the privilege they have; and they leverage it to move our work forward.

Lastly, participants explained that this awareness takes time to develop, but this should not be the labor of BIPOC: "you may need to find a white affinity support group to do some of the necessary self-reflection work; please don't put that on PoC."

### **Listening and Learning with Humility**

Throughout survey responses, the experienced BIPOC ethnic studies educators emphasized the importance of listening to and learning from BIPOC folks. Participants made it clear that understanding and learning about one's white privilege is a prerequisite to engaging in BIPOC spaces and that WCCs "examined own power and privilege before engaging in the work" and "did their homework." Therefore, participants explained that not only will learning and listening be easier when one "let's go of white supremacy" and "decenters themselves" but this acceptance and awareness of white privilege opens the door to a life of learning from and listening to BIPOC communities and BIPOC ethnic studies leaders. As one participant put it:

Of all places, it's not about you. I mean, this is also the general principal no matter who is in the space. We are ALL servants of the people in the realist way, meaning, never should it be about us individually, but about us collectively.

Participants also identified specific spaces and ways of holding space in ethnic studies contexts that make good WCCs.

In BIPOC community spaces, WCCs "stand beside BIPOC" and are "constantly" "self-reflective" about how they enter and hold space. They decenter themselves and are open to "new ways" of being in community spaces. Participants often mentioned the need to "collectivize" with BIPOC—that our goal is to organize and create ethnic studies that benefits the greatest collective, not individual needs. For example, one participant offered: "Organize collectively and always seek advice. Strategize with your compass."

Similarly, "humility" and "humble" were used to describe WCCs numerous times across different participant survey responses: "Be humble. Learn and seek to develop both your knowledge and critical sensibilities." The humility that BIPOC call for helps WCCs deepen their anti-white supremacist practice that teaches them to emphasize their white voice and ideas as superior.

Indeed, we should not “take over” and should “stop telling BIPOC what to do” as is obviously our tendency:

Ethnic studies fundamentally decenters whiteness. Have you done the necessary self-reflection work to be comfortable with that? Know when to step up and when to step back, know what your lane is and always lift up the work of others. We are not here to self-aggrandize or take credit when it’s not ours to take.

Lastly, participants made it clear that WCCs follow BIPOC leadership in solidarity with BIPOC. One participant explained:

They didn’t take “the lead” but gave up space for leaders of color to provide direction. For example, I’m thinking about a time when a group of undocumented folks and allies came together to organize a protest in front of our state Senator’s office because of her anti-immigrant policies. This white person who had US citizenship, as well as other who had US citizenship were the ones who stood in front of the Senator’s office locked in arms, while those who were undocumented could march & rally right outside the office. They/we put ourselves on the line because we had US citizenship, including this white ally.

Participants linked white privilege and WCCs’ ability to act. They explained that acting in solidarity with BIPOC in ethnic studies spaces is predicated on WCCs level of acceptance and awareness of their white privilege, their ability to listen and learn with humility to BIPOC. However, participants do want WCCs to take action while concurrently enacting these other themes.

### **Taking Action in Systems of Power**

Despite the need to decenter ourselves and release control and leadership to BIPOC in ways that are self-reflective and humble, participants do want WCCs to take action when it: is grounded in an understanding of power relationships; is strategic leverage that our BIPOC don’t have; reduces or eliminates the labor of BIPOC; and follows the lead of BIPOC. Participants offered several examples of ways WCCs can take action: in the background, in white spaces, in the halls of power, and when their good and learned discernment makes it needed.

BIPOC experts described how WCCs can do the work that is less visible but makes the rest of the work happen. For example, “Help to provide tangible resources for ES [ethnic studies]: curriculum, coaching, advising, rides, food, financial support, networking support, institutional support/connections if they had them” or taking meeting notes, planning, and organizing behind the scenes. In white spaces, WCCs were described: “1. volunteering to present on whiteness/present to white people; 2. using actual institutional funds they have access to fund ES work (money where their mouth is)” or “The person was willing to challenge racism in other white people.”

Because of our power in school and society, WCCs have an important role in showing up in these spaces and using our privilege when it is in service of the collective in solidarity with BIPOC, for example, one participant shared: “They took the lead in defending Ethnic Studies at a public board meeting—actually several—without being asked to by BIPOC.” Lastly, WCCs with the appropriate

knowledge can act in solidarity in ethnic studies spaces by using all they have learned, for example, a participant shared that a WCC:

helped me when I was getting attacked and defamed by dehumanizing Zionists. She knew I didn't have the capacity to listen to the demeaning words that were being said about me. She knew I couldn't respond because I was in shock. She knew I was in pain. And she acted in a principled and loving way and she stood up for me, wrote for me, and rode for me. She was a true co-conspirator.

It seems prudent to end this section on taking action with an example from a pattern of response from participants: "Try not to take up a lot of space but do the work without being asked to do so."

### **Persistent Self-Efficacy and Resilience**

The last major theme was constructed from an array of survey responses that described WCCs as "showing up" *consistently*: They "show up in the communities" and "the white folks I think about who are good co-conspirators is that they show up, consistently." Respondents explained that WCCs don't give up in the face of challenge and adversity: "You will make mistakes, and that is ok. There is plenty of room for white educators in this space if they are willing to do the work."

Participants explained that WCCs have the confidence in their ability to live an ethnic studies life, from treating their own BIPOC students and colleagues as if they are their own family members and knowing they may lose friends over standing up for racial justice, to expecting and seeing past attacks from those who are against racial justice and ethnic studies. "You will probably be attacked along the way. It is a discipline to practice Ethnic Studies. It's not something you just hop into like a small project. It's an ongoing struggle, so be ready to be in it for the long haul." The characteristic of self-efficacy was a persistent survey response.

It bears reminding the reader, as one participant explains: "Our work challenges structures and ideologies of whiteness, not white people." Our persistence is needed to do this difficult but essential life-long work of fighting white supremacy in ourselves and in society.

Similarly, participants encouraged white co-conspiratorship and spoke directly to those who want to be WCCs:

We need you and you need us/you are my other me—this work is not "charity" work, it is mutual aid. Do you understand why you must have a vested, personal interest and political commitment to challenge and dismantle structures of white supremacy? That none of us are free until all of us are free—do you understand how whiteness harms you, too?"

Survey participants echoed the intent of this study: to undo past, present and future harm that white educators perpetrate in ethnic studies schooling spaces. These results may assist white educators to begin or to continue their journey to be good co-conspirators in ethnic studies spaces.



## Discussion

Western research is part of a colonial project meant to dehumanize the objects of study into their parts, dismembering them, reducing their humanity to numbers and patterns for the benefit of the systems that have oppressed them (Smith, 1999). I hold this weapon, these research results, fully understanding that the 17 participants who have labored for decades for self-determination and liberation of their people cannot be reduced to the patterns that have risen to the surface. On the contrary, my intention is to undo harm that we as white folks have done to BIPOC through this labor- a labor of admission, raising these painful sores of white supremacy to the sunlight so that we can heal the ways in which we harm BIPOC most especially in ethnic studies which is a sacred discipline given its purpose is the liberation and self-determination of BIPOC.

Not all of the survey “results” will apply to all ethnic studies spaces or for all BIPOC ethnic studies colleagues. The deep self-reflection and learning that white folks must do on their own and the mutually trusting relationships that must be developed will be unique and require more listening. These four themes for how WCCs should show up in ethnic studies spaces is just a first step to begin to understand how to be a good white co-conspirator.

The four themes from participant surveys intersect with previous research in ethnic studies. BIPOC participants’ focus on an acceptance and constant awareness of white privilege as a foundation for co-conspiring in ethnic studies spaces echoes similar calls, for example, in Sacramento (2019) wherein a teacher collaborative determined that the first order of business when developing an ethnic studies course was to explore white privilege. The call for ethnic studies teachers to self-reflect on their identities and white privilege is also well-documented (Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2015; Sleeter & Zavala, 2020) but how exactly teachers can keep their white privilege front and center as they work in ethnic studies spaces, especially from the perspectives of BIPOC, is new.

Survey results help us to operationalize a pedagogy of WCCs in ethnic studies, as a practice of continuously dismantling their white privilege. BIPOC calling for WCCs to listen and learn from BIPOC with humility is practical advice for educators that can help forge the trusting relationships that are necessary for solidarity work between white folks and BIPOC. Likewise, survey responses that led to the theme of acting within systems of power offer WCCs reflective and prudent ways of taking on labor that further ethnic studies work. Finally, acting self-efficaciously and with resilience in the face of anticipated challenges offers WCCs an orientation to ethnic studies labor that can sustain them for the long term.

I am left feeling grateful and indebted to the people who did additional labor, yet again, to teach white folks how to be in this world so that they can reduce the harm they inflict on the very people who answered my invitation to complete the survey. I have gained from self-reflection against the four themes that I’ve identified and remind myself and my WCC colleagues that we need to constantly surveil ourselves. Our work as WCCs requires constant vigilance and it is no exaggeration to say we must treat ourselves like a dangerous knife—that we are sharp and our ability to harm and destroy is unparalleled. What this looks like for me is that when in the presence of BIPOC, I must be in a constant state of not-knowing, unlearning, decentering, and, often, silence. I must question my motivations and work to yield to the leadership and expertise of BIPOC, taking up the labor that they should not have to do and have done for so long. We have broken this

world, so it is our responsibility to heal it as much as we can in our lifetimes. This is my radical responsibility. This is how I engage in “a refusal to concede to the normality of antiblack U.S. domestic war” that maintains the status quo (Rodríguez, 2021, p. 578).

### Implications

Teachers of color are best suited to teach ethnic studies. Given that nationwide 79% of teachers are white compared to the 44% student of color school population (Egalite, 2024) a focus on existing white teachers is a niche concern. Foremost, the need to abolish the systems and structures that maintain white supremacy in teacher education that keep teachers of color from being recruited and retained must be addressed (Carter Andrews et al., 2018; Sleeter, 2017). However, how white teachers in ethnic studies show up is an urgent concern as the field barrels toward implementation in K-12 classrooms in California and other states (Sleeter & Zavala, 2020).

As Sleeter (2017) and Chung and Harrison (2020) describe, teacher education programs promote and protect whiteness and are institutionally and ideologically structured to keep preservice teachers of color from being successful. These four themes of how to be a WCC in ethnic studies help to build a knowledge base that can support both preservice and inservice teacher preparation. Practical applications can be derived from the themes to support teacher development of white privilege awareness and acceptance and build capacity for BIPOC-directed ways to enter, act, and persist in ethnic studies spaces including community, school, and policy contexts.

Future research could include development of survey instruments based upon these themes to refine and more deeply understand additional dimensions of how WCCs should show up in ethnic studies. Additionally, research on how BIPOC educators and students think white students should show up in ethnic studies classrooms is also an area of need. We will close with where we started, with Bettina Love (2019b):

So, the question is not: Do you love all children? The question is: Will you fight for justice for Black and Brown children? And how will you fight? I argue that you must fight with the creativity, imagination, urgency, boldness, ingenuity, and rebellious spirit of abolitionists to advocate for an education system where all Black and Brown children are thriving. I call this abolitionist teaching. To love all children, we must struggle together to create the schools we are taught to believe are impossible: Schools built on justice, love, joy, and anti-racism.

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