

RACIST BULLYING IN NEW ZEALAND SCHOOLS: A CULTURE-CENTRED APPROACH TO PREVENTION

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The Center for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand, is a global hub for communication research that uses participatory and culture-centred methodologies to develop community-driven communication solutions to health and wellbeing. Through experiments in methods of radical democracy anchored in community ownership and community voice, the Centre collaborates with communities, community organisers, community researchers, advocates and activists to imagine and develop sustainable practices for prevention, health care organising, food and agriculture, worker organising, migrant and refugee rights, indigenous rights, rights of the poor and economic transformation.

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RACIST BULLYING IN NEW ZEALAND SCHOOLS: A CULTURE-CENTRED APPROACH TO PREVENTION

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ABSTRACT

Racist bullying in New Zealand schools constitutes a pervasive form of structural violence entrenched within institutional cultures dominated by whiteness and settler colonial legacies. This is ongoing despite, internationally, Aotearoa New Zealand positions itself as a protector and guarantor of children's rights, which includes those from immigrant backgrounds through its ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) in 1993. Such commitment has remained symbolic and peripheral at best (Azarmandi & Sharifkhani, 2025). Drawing on the culture-centered approach (CCA; Dutta, 2008, 2021), this white paper elucidates how schools actively reproduce white supremacy through the dynamic interplay of cultural norms, structural arrangements, and agentic practices. Far from being isolated incidents of individual prejudice, racist bullying emerges as a systemic institutional practice that systematically erases the voices and lived experiences of racialised students - particularly Māori, Pasifika, and minoritised ethnic learners - while deploying performative gestures of diversity and inclusion to sustain underlying inequity.

Recent empirical evidence reveals alarming prevalence: one in five learners from ethnic communities experienced race-based bullying in the past month, with over half witnessing such incidents against peers and nearly one-third perceiving that schools do not address racism seriously (Education Review Office [ERO], 2023). This adds to findings from the Human Rights Commission report, *Drivers of migrant New Zealanders' experiences of racism* which describes the experiences of the migrant children's experiences of explicit, subtle and institutional forms of racism and the lack of action from educators when acts of racism are reported by children or parents (see also Butcher et al., 2006; Office of Ethnic Communities, 2019; Sobrun-Maharaj et al., 2009). Māori and Pasifika students report disproportionate discrimination, including from teachers, contributing to persistent educational disparities and higher disciplinary rates (Ministry of Education, 2019; Blank et al., 2016; Alansari et al., 2020).

This analysis addresses a critical gap in existing literature, which frequently individualises racism or overlooks institutional complicity, by centering subaltern voices, resistances, and demands for community-led structural change (Ahmed, 2012; Ray, 2019; Alam-Simmons, 2023, 2024, 2025). By exposing the whiteness embedded in complaint processes and regulatory architectures, this paper makes a significant intervention into New Zealand's educational discourse, calling for radical transformation to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi and achieve genuine racial justice.

INTRODUCTION

New Zealand educational institutions routinely frame racist bullying as discrete, individual-level events amenable to targeted interventions - perpetrator discipline, victim resilience-building, or staff cultural competency training (Alam-Simmons, 2023, 2024, 2025). This individualising approach, however, profoundly obscures the deeper systemic embedding of racist bullying within school cultures structured by white supremacy and the enduring legacies of settler colonialism. The culture-centered approach (CCA) offers a powerful analytic framework for redirecting attention toward how marginalised communities experience, interpret, and resist structural violence in communicative and institutional spaces (Dutta, 2008, 2021). Within schooling contexts, the CCA reveals racist bullying not as anomalous deviation but as a predictable outcome of institutions that normalise whiteness as the unmarked standard, universalise white experiences as the default reference, and prioritise white emotional and institutional comfort above racialised safety and belonging. The underlying whiteness that shapes the settler colonial infrastructure of schools in Aotearoa New Zealand is built on the creation, reproduction, and perpetuation of communicative inequality, erasing racially minoritised communities from voice infrastructures (Dutta, 2018, 2021).

National surveys and reviews illuminate the scale of the crisis. One in five learners from ethnic communities (Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American, African) reported direct experiences of race-based bullying in the preceding month, while over half witnessed such incidents directed at peers (ERO, 2023). Nearly one-third of these learners believed their schools failed to take racist bullying seriously, exposing a profound rift between institutional rhetoric of inclusion and the lived realities of racialised harm. Māori and Pasifika students similarly endure disproportionate discrimination from teachers and peers, manifesting in higher rates of exclusionary discipline, absenteeism, and disengagement - patterns that perpetuate intergenerational educational disadvantage (Ministry of Education, 2019; Office of the Children's Commissioner & New Zealand School Trustees Association, 2018; Alansari et al., 2020; Priest et al., 2013).

This white paper systematically interrogates the triad of culture, structure, and agency in reproducing racist bullying as entrenched institutional practice. Particular emphasis is placed on communicative infrastructures that facilitate voice erasure amid tokenistic diversity performances, and on the whiteness deeply embedded in complaint processes - a critical yet underexamined mechanism for protecting institutional racism. By integrating insights from racialised organisation theory, non-performative diversity work, and settler colonial critique (Ahmed, 2012; Ray, 2019; Milne, 2013; Alam-Simmons, 2023, 2024, 2025), this analysis fills a significant literature gap that often depoliticises racism or centers white institutional perspectives. Ultimately, this transformative critique foregrounds subaltern agency and community-driven resistances as essential pathways toward genuine structural justice and decolonised education.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CULTURE, STRUCTURE AND AGENCY IN THE REPRODUCTION OF WHITE SUPREMACY

Culture: Whiteness as Unmarked Norm and Institutional Commonsense

New Zealand school cultures embody what critical race theorists describe as interest convergence, wherein racial equity advances only when it aligns with and serves white interests (Bell, 1980). Whiteness functions as an invisible, unmarked benchmark: white students and families are rendered neutral ("just students," "just families"), while racialised others are hyper-visible, marked as culturally different, potentially problematic, or requiring special management and assimilation (DiAngelo, 2018; Milne, 2013). Average white academic and behavioural performance receives institutional protection through leniency, second chances, individualised support, and the benefit of doubt, whereas racialised excellence often invites scrutiny, dismissal via model-minority stereotypes, or accusations of inauthenticity (Blank et al., 2016).

Discussions of racism are systematically avoided or minimised to preserve white emotional comfort, with the act of naming racism framed as more disruptive to “school culture” than racism’s material and psychological harms (DiAngelo, 2018; Alam-Simmons, 2023). This cultural commonsense profoundly influences incident interpretation, investigation, and resolution, consistently privileging white narratives and institutional priorities while marginalising racialised experiences and analyses (ERO, 2023; Office of the Children’s Commissioner and New Zealand School Trustees Association, 2018).

Structure: Power Concentration and Barriers to Racialised Voice

Institutional architectures consolidate decision-making authority in white hands while erecting formidable barriers to racialised participation. Governance bodies, senior leadership, and disciplinary committees remain disproportionately white, producing decisions impacting racialised students without meaningful representation or accountability (Alansari et al., 2020). Complaint systems demand extensive bureaucratic navigation, institutional literacy, and sustained resource commitment - capacities disproportionately inaccessible to racialised families facing intersecting precarities.

Evidence protocols valorise “objective” documentary records over pattern-based experiential testimony, routinely dismissing racialised accounts as subjective (ERO, 2023). Confidentiality is deployed selectively to shield white actors while denying racialised families advocacy information. Professional solidarity networks insulate white staff from scrutiny. These arrangements actively sustain disparities in discipline, attendance, and attainment (Ministry of Education, 2019; Blank et al., 2016).

Agency: Performance of Fragility, Backlash and Tokenism

In whiteness-structured environments, agents enact predictable repertoires. Racism-naming elicits fragility performances: surprise claims, emotional recentering, demands for gentle education, or accusations of divisiveness (DiAngelo, 2018). Backlash pathologises complainants, isolates students, or retaliates via surveillance. Tokenism performs diversity - precarious racialised hires without authority, cultural events sans structural reform - while preserving racist norms (Ahmed, 2012; Alam-Simmons, 2024).

Communicative Inequality and the Systematic Erasure of Racialised Voices

Schools sustain racist cultures through communicative infrastructures privileging white narratives. Gatekeeping mandates formal discourse excluding direct racism-naming, fragments patterns into isolatable incidents, and imposes unattainable evidence standards (Alansari et al., 2020). Narratives reframe racism as mutual misunderstanding, selectively document racialised reactions, and prioritise institutional reputation. Voice hierarchies presume white benevolence while impugning racialised credibility, elevating professional over lived expertise (ERO, 2023). Erasure occurs via euphemistic redefinition, procedural invalidation, temporal/spatial fragmentation, relational individualism, and historical amnesia - delegitimising racialised testimonies and sustaining unaddressed harm (Office of the Children’s Commissioner & New Zealand School Trustees Association, 2018; Alam-Simmons, 2023).

THE WHITENESS OF COMPLAINT PROCESSES: A CULTURE-CENTRED ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR PROTECTING AND PERPETUATING RACISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY

From the perspective of the culture-centered approach (CCA), complaint processes in New Zealand schools emerge as powerful sites of communicative inequality, where structures of white supremacy actively erase subaltern (racialised) voices while constraining agency and reproducing cultural norms that privilege whiteness (Dutta, 2008, 2021). The CCA theorises the interplay of culture (meanings, values, and norms), structure (material

distributions of power and resources), and agency (capacity to act and resist) in processes of marginalisation. In educational complaint mechanisms, this triad operates to protect institutional racism by limiting access to voice infrastructures - those communicative spaces, resources, and processes through which marginalised communities can articulate experiences, demand accountability, and co-create change (Dutta, 2021).

Structures of whiteness embedded in these processes do not merely fail to address racism; they are designed to contain, neutralize, and ultimately perpetuate it. As racialised organisations, schools hoard communicative advantages for white actors: enhancing their agency, legitimating resource disparities, credentialing whiteness as neutral expertise, and decoupling formal equity policies from transformative practice (Ray, 2019). Complaint systems thus become non-performative enactments of anti-racism - they signify institutional commitment to justice while performing the opposite, exhausting racialised complainants and safeguarding the status quo (Ahmed, 2012).

Structural Barriers: Limiting Access to Voice and Resources

At the structural level, complaint processes erect formidable barriers that disproportionately exclude racialised families, particularly Māori, Pasifika, and ethnic minority whānau navigating intersecting precarities of class, migration status, language, and cultural alienation. These mechanisms demand high degrees of bureaucratic literacy, mastery of formal institutional language (often steeped in whiteness), sustained temporal and emotional investment, and financial resources for advocacy - forms of capital more readily available to white middle-class families (Alansari et al., 2020). Multi-tiered procedures - requiring progression through informal discussions, written submissions, board hearings, and potential external appeals - create prolonged timelines that favour those with institutional knowledge and networks.

In CCA terms, such structures constrain agency by denying racialised communities the material resources necessary for meaningful participation (Dutta, 2021). Families reporting racist bullying often face direct economic costs - lost wages from repeated meetings, fees for legal consultation, therapeutic support for traumatized children - while schools deploy publicly funded defenses and legal teams. Evidence hierarchies further entrench this inequality: institutions valorise “objective” documentary proof (staff witness statements, dated records) over pattern-based oral testimonies or cultural interpretations of harm, systematically dismissing racialised accounts as “subjective,” “exaggerated,” or unreliable (Alansari et al., 2020; ERO, 2023). Confidentiality protocols exemplify structural violence: selectively invoked to protect white perpetrators (shielding reputations, preventing precedent-setting disclosures) while withholding investigation details from racialised families, denying them information essential for ongoing advocacy or tangible steps that support child safety planning (Ahmed, 2012). External regulatory bodies replicate these barriers - the Education Review Office prioritises school self-reporting and broad compliance checklists over proactive racial equity audits; the Human Rights Commission favours mediation over binding enforcement; and generic complaints systems subsume racism under undifferentiated “bullying” categories without distinct tracking or analysis (Alam-Simmons, 2025; Came & McCreanor, 2015). This regulatory architecture ensures structural impunity, where schools face minimal meaningful consequences for maintaining racist cultures despite nominal accountability obligations.

From a CCA lens, these structural arrangements actively produce communicative inequality by erasing subaltern voices at the entry point (Dutta, 2008). Racialised experiences of sustained harassment - racial slurs, exclusion, microaggressions, physical targeting - are deliberately fragmented into isolatable “specific incidents” requiring independent corroboration often impossible in unsupervised peer contexts, rendering systemic patterns invisible and unsubstantiable by design.

Cultural Norms: Whiteness as Commonsense and the Erasure of Racism

Culturally, complaint processes normalise whiteness as the unmarked standard, treating white comfort, intent, and narratives as default while marking racialised expressions as problematic or excessive. Naming racism directly violates implicit cultural rules favouring euphemisms (“interpersonal conflict,” “cultural misunderstanding,” “inappropriate behaviour,” “kids being kids”), reframing structural violence as mutual misunderstanding or individual failing rather than institutional practice (Alam-Simmons, 2023; Milne, 2013). This cultural logic manifests prominently in tone policing: racialised complainants - often parents advocating passionately for harmed children - are labelled “aggressive,” “accusatory,” “forthright,” “unreasonable,” or “difficult,” pathologising their legitimate emotional responses and agency while recentring white emotional fragility and comfort (DiAngelo, 2018; Alam-Simmons, 2023).

White institutional actors frequently perform surprise (“we were shocked by these allegations”), personal hurt (tears, expressions of betrayal), or demands that racialised families educate them in non-threatening, palatable ways, transforming complaints into uncompensated emotional labour extracted from the marginalised (Ahmed, 2012). Alam-Simmons (2023) incisively characterises this cultural dynamic as the “deny, deflect, defend” triad: denial of systemic racism through insistence that incidents are isolated or bidirectional; deflection via obsessive procedural focus (correct forms, proper channels, jurisdictional questions); and defense of institutional reputation and white actors’ presumed good intent over racialised student safety and wellbeing. Culturally, this triad protects “whitestream” norms - whiteness as the invisible, normative backdrop structuring all interaction - while punishing those who disrupt it by naming racism explicitly and structurally (Milne, 2013). In the CCA framework, such cultural erasures prevent subaltern meanings and interpretations from entering institutional discursive spaces, sustaining hegemonic whiteness that universalises white experiences as neutral while exoticising, pathologising, or silencing racialised ones (Dutta, 2021). The act of naming racism becomes framed as the greater threat to harmonious “school culture” than racism itself, inverting the locus of harm and disciplining marginalised agency through cultural delegitimation.

Agentic Performances: Fragility, Backlash and Containment

Agentially, well-meaning white institutional actors - principals, boards, teachers, and supportive parent networks - can enact predictable performances that contain challenges to the status quo but inadvertently actively reproduce white supremacy. Performances of white fragility recenter white emotions and comfort, demanding that racialised complainants prioritise institutional feelings over pursuing justice (DiAngelo, 2018). Backlash mechanisms swiftly follow: characterising complainants as “troublesome parents” or mentally unstable; isolating and intensifying surveillance of reporting students; retaliating through escalated disciplinary actions against the victim; or subtly suggesting that the racialised student might be “happier elsewhere” (Alam-Simmons, 2024, 2025). Investigations are frequently structured to predetermine outcomes: selective inclusion of witnesses (excluding those likely to corroborate racialised accounts), prioritisation of white student or staff denials as credible, and procedural invalidation rendering complaints “unsubstantiated” despite clear patterns of targeting (Alansari et al., 2020). Tokenistic responses - announcing generic diversity training sessions, drafting new policies without implementation mechanisms, or forming powerless equity committees - perform institutional responsiveness while ensuring no meaningful redistribution of power or resources (Ahmed, 2012). Through the CCA lens, these agentic enactments severely constrain subaltern agency by punishing the expression of voice, exhausting familial resources, and can force unsafe withdrawals from school - thereby reproducing educational disadvantage and intergenerational trauma through communicative violence (Dutta, 2008). Racialised families are compelled to prioritize child safety over continued enrolment, effectively removing critical voices from the institution and reinforcing the perception that racialised students and their parents are the “problem” requiring management.

External Replication and Non-Performativity

External regulatory agencies extend and reinforce this containment architecture. Lacking binding enforcement authority, proactive racial equity mandates, or deep expertise in structural racism, bodies such as the Education Review Office, Teaching Council, and Human Rights Commission replicate school-level erasure dynamics (Came & McCreanor, 2015; Human Rights Commission, 2022). Government resistance to mandating distinct racism-specific incident recording - continuing to subsume racist bullying under generic bullying categories - ensures ongoing invisibility of patterns and perpetuates “business as usual” for institutional racism (Alam-Simmons, 2025). Complaints are transformed into performative evidence of due process without necessitating material change - classic non-performativity where institutional “doing” of anti-racism work actually blocks transformation (Ahmed, 2012).

Implications for Structural Violence and Transformation

In CCA terms, complaint processes constitute sophisticated communicative infrastructures of structural violence: systematically erasing subaltern voices, constraining marginalised agency, and culturally normalising whiteness to actively perpetuate racism and white supremacy (Dutta, 2021). They protect institutional whiteness by containing dissent within exhausting bureaucratic loops, extracting uncompensated labour from racialised communities, and decoupling equity rhetoric from substantive practice. Institutional whiteness is further reproduced through state produced resources such as Unteach racism which is a non-compulsory professional learning created by the Teachers Council that sidelines the role of the structural and systematic racism, but instead framing racism as solely individual and interpersonal (Alam-Simmons, 2023). Genuine transformation requires radical redesign co-created with racialised communities: presumptive validity for racialised testimony, mandatory pattern recognition across incidents, fully independent external investigations, public disclosure of racism data and outcomes, robust retaliation protections, and binding regulatory enforcement mechanisms with meaningful sanctions (Dutta, 2021). Only through dismantling these whiteness-embedded processes can schools cease functioning as sites of racialised violence and begin serving as spaces for authentic justice and belonging.

Patterns Across New Zealand Schools: Empirical Manifestations of Structural Racism

Confidential case analyses, corroborated by national data, reveal strikingly consistent patterns across New Zealand schools, underscoring the systemic rather than exceptional nature of racist bullying. Initial experiences of sustained racialised harassment - encompassing racial slurs, exclusion based on ethnicity, targeted physical aggression, and racist “jokes” or commentary - frequently encounter institutional minimisation framed as “kids being kids,” “normal developmental conflict,” or “friendship issues,” with victims advised to avoid perpetrators rather than addressing perpetrator behaviour or broader cultural enablers (ERO, 2023; Alansari et al., 2020; Alam-Simmons, 2023). When families escalate to formal complaints naming racism explicitly, institutions shift to defensiveness: tone policing complaint language as “aggressive” or “accusatory,” obsessive procedural deflection (emphasizing “proper channels,” correct forms, or jurisdictional questions), and white fragility performances from principals, leaders, staff or accused families (Alam-Simmons, 2024). Investigations exhibit clear bias through selective witness inclusion (often excluding racialised peers likely to corroborate), prioritization of white denials as credible, deeming racialised testimony insufficient, and invoking confidentiality to withhold outcomes and accountability details from complainants.

Responses remain superficially tokenistic - announcing generic diversity training, sessions lacking follow-up accountability, unsafe restorative conversations with impacted students, drafting policy documents without implementation, or forming powerless committees - while intensified scrutiny falls on reporting students, pathologising them as “troubled” or “behaviourally challenging.” Retaliation often escalates, creating hostile

environments that force families to withdraw children for safety and wellbeing (Alam-Simmons, 2025). These recurrent trajectories align with broader findings: ethnic learners frequently conceal identities to evade targeting, endure exclusion, and witness unaddressed incidents; Māori and Pasifika students experience higher rates of teacher discrimination and disproportionate discipline (Ministry of Education, 2019; Office of the Children’s Commissioner, 2024; Priest et al., 2013).

The Protection of White Mediocrity and Differential Standards

A defining feature of racist school cultures in New Zealand is the systematic protection of white mediocrity while imposing disproportionately high standards and severe consequences on racialised students, particularly Māori, Pasifika, and migrant students of colour. White students’ racist behaviours or academic underperformance are frequently reframed as “developmental mistakes,” “immaturity,” or “poor judgment,” warranting multiple opportunities for redemption, privacy protections, individualised support plans, and the presumption of good intent (Blank et al., 2016; Milne, 2017). In contrast, racialised students’ minor infractions or defensive responses to bullying are escalated as serious behavioural issues, labelled as “aggression” or “overreaction,” with privacy violations through public discussions of “cultural background” or “family issues,” and presumption of guilt or exaggeration (Alansari et al., 2020). White supremacy in education does not demand excellence from white students but rather the preservation of their average outcomes through extensive institutional accommodations, compassionate attributions for failures, lowered thresholds for success, and professional courtesy networks shielding white staff incompetence (Ray, 2019; Milne, 2013).

Racialised students, meanwhile, must exhibit exceptional resilience, perfect behaviour despite hostility, and outstanding achievement to access basic support - conditions rarely met amid systemic barriers (ERO, 2023). This differential treatment manifests starkly in disciplinary statistics: Māori students face suspension rates three to five times higher than Pākehā peers, even after controlling for socioeconomic factors, with Pasifika students similarly overrepresented in stand-downs, suspensions, and exclusions (Ministry of Education, 2019; Blank et al., 2016). Māori and Pasifika boys being valued more for their physical labour when school leaders pull them from the class to move furniture as opposed to supporting their intellectual development (Alam-Simmons, 2023). Such disparities contribute to attainment gaps, where Māori and Pasifika learners leave school with lower qualifications, face barriers to tertiary pathways, and experience reduced economic mobility - perpetuating intergenerational disadvantage rooted in settler colonial hierarchies (Priest et al., 2013; Simon-Kumar et al., 2025). The institutional protection of white mediocrity thus sustains dominance not through claims of superiority but through structural leniency for whiteness and racialised scrutiny, ensuring white comfort and institutional stability at the direct expense of racialised flourishing (Milne, 2017; Alam-Simmons, 2023).

Regulatory Failures and Structural Impunity

External regulatory bodies in New Zealand theoretically provide oversight and accountability for schools, yet in practice replicate and reinforce the culture-structure-agency dynamics enabling racist bullying, granting institutions profound structural impunity. The Education Review Office (ERO) prioritises broad compliance metrics and school self-reporting over rigorous racial equity audits or proactive investigations into complaint patterns, rarely examining systemic racism despite clear evidence of widespread harm across diverse school contexts (ERO, 2023; Alansari et al., 2020). Reviews employ institutional language that obscures racism - framing persistent issues as “cultural misunderstandings,” “diversity challenges,” or “inclusion opportunities” - with limited enforcement mechanisms even when significant inequities are identified (Came & McCreanor, 2015). The Teaching Council focuses predominantly on individual teacher conduct rather than broader institutional cultures, with professional solidarity and union protections often shielding white educators from meaningful accountability for bias, inaction, or complicity in racist incidents (Human Rights Commission, 2022).

The Human Rights Commission adopts a mediation-centered approach fundamentally ill-suited to addressing structural violence, requiring resource-intensive processes that favour those with institutional knowledge and networks, while possessing limited binding powers and tending toward compromise solutions that avoid confronting root causes or mandating systemic change (Ahmed, 2012). Police interventions remain notably reluctant and cursory, rarely classifying racist bullying as hate incidents despite serious harm and seldom intervening in what is dismissed as “school matters” (Alam-Simmons, 2025). Despite clear legal obligations under the Education and Training Act 2020 and Human Rights Act 1993 to eliminate racism and discrimination in education, the persistent absence of mandatory racism-specific incident reporting - continuing to subsume racist bullying under generic undifferentiated bullying categories - ensures ongoing invisibility of patterns and perpetuates “business as usual” for institutional racism (Alam-Simmons, 2025).

This multi-layered regulatory architecture effectively replicates school-level communicative erasure and structural containment, prioritising institutional reputation, white comfort, and administrative convenience over racialised student safety and justice. The result is profound impunity: schools face no meaningful consequences for maintaining racist cultures, allowing harm to persist unchecked across generations (Came & McCreanor, 2015; Human Rights Commission, 2022).

Impacts on Racialised Students, Families and Communities

The harms inflicted by racist bullying within white supremacist school cultures extend far beyond isolated incidents, profoundly affecting every dimension of racialised students’ lives and reverberating across families and communities with lasting intergenerational consequences. Educationally, racialised learners experience chronic disruption to concentration and engagement, leading to school avoidance, chronic absenteeism for safety reasons, forced school transfers, and permanent loss of educational opportunities - patterns that culminate in long-term disadvantage, including lower qualification attainment and reduced pathways to tertiary education and skilled employment (ERO, 2023; Ministry of Education, 2019). Psychologically, ongoing exposure to racism triggers severe anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress responses, hypervigilance, sleep disruption, somatic symptoms, and profound erosion of self-worth and belonging; vicarious racism further traumatises families witnessing their children’s suffering without adequate institutional protection (Priest et al., 2013; Heard-Garris et al., 2017). Māori and Pasifika youth report significantly higher mental health burdens directly linked to experiences of discrimination, including elevated rates of self-harm and suicide risk (Simon-Kumar et al., 2025; Office of the Children’s Commissioner, 2024).

Socially, racialised students face isolation from peer relationships, eroded trust in authority figures and institutions, strained familial dynamics from navigating hostile school responses, and disrupted community connections when cultural expression becomes unsafe. Economically, families bear substantial costs - including lost work time for endless meetings and advocacy, legal and therapeutic expenses not covered by schools, and potential relocation costs when changing schools or districts (neighbourhood or region) becomes necessary for safety (Alansari et al., 2020). Culturally and spiritually, repeated racist targeting damages pride in identity and heritage, forces disconnection from cultural communities to avoid harm, internalises messages of inferiority and unworthiness, and undermines hope for justice and equitable treatment in Aotearoa (Office of the Children’s Commissioner, 2024; Priest et al., 2013). These compounded, intersecting impacts constitute profound human rights violations, perpetuating cycles of marginalisation that breach Te Tiriti o Waitangi obligations and international conventions on child rights and racial discrimination (Human Rights Commission, 2022).

Resistance: Subaltern Agency and Community-Driven Transformation

Despite formidable institutional barriers, communicative erasure, and structural violence, racialised communities in New Zealand demonstrate profound subaltern agency through multifaceted, resilient strategies that actively challenge white supremacy, reclaim voice, and build pathways toward transformative change (Dutta, 2021). Families and students engage in meticulous documentation - compiling detailed timelines of incidents, gathering corroborating evidence from multiple sources, and constructing counter-archives outside institutional control - to resist denial, procedural fragmentation, and historical amnesia that characterise school responses (Ngata & Dutta, 2023). Coalition-building emerges as a vital practice, creating supportive networks among affected whānau who share structural analyses of institutional racism, provide mutual emotional sustenance and practical advocacy support, and collectively exert sustained pressure on schools and regulatory bodies for accountability (Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2024).

Public accountability strategies - including building a school racism register, media exposure, social media campaigns, community forums, petitions, and collaborative storytelling - disrupt institutional monopolies on narrative control, elevate subaltern voices into broader public discourse, generate wider community awareness and solidarity, and impose meaningful reputational consequences on schools maintaining racist practices (Alam-Simmons, 2025). Strategic engagement with regulatory mechanisms, despite their inherent limitations and whiteness-embedded design, serves to establish formal records of institutional failures, incrementally impose procedural and resource costs on schools, and build cumulative precedents across multiple cases that may eventually force systemic shifts. Communities also pioneer innovative alternative educational spaces and initiatives - such as culturally affirming homework centres, language nests, community-led learning pods, and anti-racism youth organising - that prioritise collective care, democratic participation, cultural celebration, and explicit structural critique over individualistic blame or assimilationist norms (Dutta, 2021; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2024).

These diverse resistances - deeply rooted in subaltern knowledge production, intergenerational solidarity, and refusal to accept erasure - illuminate viable, community-driven pathways toward genuine transformation while underscoring the indispensable role of marginalised agency in dismantling white supremacy within New Zealand's educational institutions (Ngata & Dutta, 2023; Alam-Simmons, 2025).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE: CENTERING THE CULTURE-CENTRED APPROACH

Transformative reform demands radical disruption of whiteness-centered culture-structure-agency arrangements, explicitly guided by CCA principles of centering marginalised voices, co-creating knowledge and solutions with subaltern communities, and localising contexts through solidarity-building against communicative erasure (Dutta, 2008, 2021).

- *Co-build a public infrastructure for accountability and to identify the true scope of racism across schools:* Support processes that ensure school boards are representative of the communities they serve, partner with diverse racially marginalized communities to co-build a public register of school racism. This register must be anchored in Te Tiriti, and must be shaped through the participation of community advisory groups of diverse racially marginalized communities.
- *Co-create structures with subaltern communities that can also seek to address under reporting of racism:* Mandate binding community governance bodies featuring proportional racialised representation with veto authority over equity-related decisions; establish fully independent, external investigators for all racism complaints, prioritizing pattern recognition across incidents and presumptive validity of racialised testimony.

- *Center marginalised voices in communicative infrastructures*: Shift the evidentiary burden to institutions requiring them to actively prove non-racism; implement mandatory public disclosure of disaggregated racism incident data, investigation processes, outcomes, and accountability measures; resource community-led anti-racism audits and protected student organising initiatives.
- *Localise contexts through cultural affirmation*: Decentre whiteness via comprehensive curriculum reform integrating Indigenous and racialised epistemologies as core content; eliminate colourblind policies; substantially fund mother-tongue maintenance programmes, bilingual education, and culturally sustaining pedagogies grounded in community priorities.
- *Foster solidarities via resource redistribution*: Invest in secure, decision-making positions for racialised staff across all leadership levels; divest from carceral and punitive approaches disproportionately targeting racialised students; provide compensated roles and support for community members undertaking essential anti-racism labour.
- *Mandate ongoing, accountability-linked transformation*: Require mandatory structural racism education led exclusively by racialised experts and community members, explicitly linked to measurable institutional cultural shifts, improved racial equity outcomes, and enforceable consequences for non-implementation or continued harm.
- *Strengthen regulatory enforcement for subaltern justice*: Grant regulatory bodies binding authority for proactive racial equity investigations, meaningful sanctions (including funding consequences and leadership removal), free independent advocacy for complainants, urgent response timelines for active harm, and presumptive validity for racialised complaints.
- *Support young people impacted by racist bullying*: Effectively documenting incidents, include the family, ensure accountability, offer access to racial trauma counselling.

CONCLUSION

New Zealand schools continue to enact settler colonial logic by performing inclusion - through diversity celebrations, equity policies, and cultural events - while systematically safeguarding white interests, privileging white voices, and punishing those who dare name racism. The culture-centered approach exposes this contradiction not as paradox but as deliberate design: diversity integrated only to be managed and contained, difference celebrated precisely to perpetuate exclusion and maintain white supremacy (Dutta, 2008; Ahmed, 2012). This white paper has demonstrated that racist bullying constitutes normative institutional practice rather than aberration; that complaint processes are engineered to shield institutions rather than deliver justice; that regulatory bodies largely replicate rather than disrupt enabling arrangements; that meaningful change emerges not from institutional goodwill but from organised subaltern power demanding accountability; and that white comfort, mediocrity, and supremacy must be actively disrupted to achieve genuine transformation.

The experiences of racialised students and families document urgent, undeniable necessity for change. Their multifaceted, resilient resistances illuminate concrete pathways forward. New Zealand's educational institutions now face a defining choice: persist in performative gestures that protect white supremacy, or undertake the difficult, co-created work of structural transformation honouring Te Tiriti o Waitangi, human rights obligations, and the right of every child to learn in environments free from racial violence. The moment demands courage to confront uncomfortable truths and commit to racial justice - not as aspiration but as immediate, binding imperative.

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