Desegregating Ourselves

Challenging the Biases That Perpetuate Inequities in Our Schools

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Introduction

Filling Our Shopping Carts With Segregated Life Experiences

Modern science has revealed that all human beings are 99.9% alike in their genetic makeup. We differ, however, in our lived experiences. Our beliefs, attitudes, and opinions are largely informed by an accumulation of life experiences, and our lived experiences are, to some degree, influenced by the history that preceded our birth.

In 1965, the acclaimed author James Baldwin reminded us that *the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us* (Grossman, 2016). Americans descended from enslaved African people must live with this reality every day. The legacy of their ancestors' enslavement, a period that began in the early 1600s, lives on in our legal system and our schools. Enslaved persons were denied access to reading and writing over the course of generations—a denial legally sanctioned through slave codes. While such restrictions were intended to ensure the sustainability of the slave trade, the justification was rooted in assumptions about the inherent superiority of White males, and White families played a functional role in sustaining such assumptions. In *Raising Racists: The Socialization of White Children in the Jim Crow South*, Kristina DuRocher (2011) documents the racialization White children experienced that they similarly carried forward:

> White southern parents' instruction in regulating relations
> between the races was grounded in a highly idealized
> and nostalgic vision of a paternalistic white society. The
> ideological objective of this instruction, however unrealistic,
> was that the New South should replicate the romanticized
> social order of slavery. (p. 14)

DuRocher goes further to outline how parents received advice guides on raising children, particularly from faith-based institutions, that

professed, in particular, that White girls shall remain pure in order to maintain the racial privilege:

> Southern advice guides underscored that parents' foremost duty was to teach their children their social roles, including appropriate gender roles. The 1935 manual *Preparing for Parenthood*, published in Florida, required that a proper home include "both Father as Protector, and Mother, as caretaker and trainer" . . . Due to this threat, authors of advice books emphasized the parents' duty to teach morality, especially to white girls, upon whose shoulders the future of white domination rest. (pp. 16–17)

While White children were taught to maintain their racial privilege long after the Emancipation Proclamation, Black Americans continued to be denied the same educational opportunities as their White counterparts under the law of the land. The Supreme Court's 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision established the separate but equal doctrine that placed Black children in segregated schools for over 50 years. Segregation was an enactment of the race-based assumption that Whites are superior and Blacks are inferior—the same assumption used to justify slavery. The *Plessy* case involved the Citizens' Committee comprised of Black men challenging a Louisiana state law that required separate train cars based on race. The Supreme Court's majority opinion upheld the constitutionality of the law and utilized notions of White superiority as its rationale: "If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane."[1] This ruling was not challenged until 1951, when *Brown v. Board of Education* was tried initially in Kansas courts. In fact, the detrimental effects of a racist ideology were only recognized after a successful legal campaign against it. Walter A. Huxman, one of three judges in the Kansas Supreme Court, stated in his opinion that legalized segregation resulted in an inferiority complex among Black children:

> Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of law; for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the

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[1]U.S. National Archives and Records Administration. (2022, February 8). *Milestone documents:* Plessy v. Ferguson *(1896)*. https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/plessy-v-ferguson

inferiority of the negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to retard the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial integrated school system.[2]

Judge Huxman's language couldn't be more explicit. The words *the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group* are an open acknowledgment of the deficit-based ideology that had been an operational feature of our education system, while White children explicitly and quietly absorbed in school and at home their cultural experiences as the norm and superior. Moreover, the claim that such practices have a detrimental effect on Black children encouraged further legal pursuits by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to challenge school segregation by showcasing its adverse effects. As a result of the eventual *Brown* decision in 1954, the Supreme Court provided an approach toward educational equity built on at least two pillars: (1) equal access to school facilities and educational practices such as curriculum and high-quality teachers, and (2) social, curricular, and instructional strategies that interrupt bias-based beliefs and elevate the humanity of marginalized populations. The primary work of our school systems over the last 70 years has focused on meeting the objectives of the first pillar in the form of technical solutions such as enrollment integration and bussing policies. The second pillar, which necessitates nothing less than critically examining and disrupting the deficit-based biases and belief systems that undergird our education policies and practices, is less frequently addressed. The intent of this book is to guide K–12 professionals in enacting the second pillar of *Brown*, beginning with interrogating the ideology of Whiteness. Before engaging the rest of the chapters, you must first understand the concept of Whiteness and its maintenance of disproportionality. Then understand how we all absorb Whiteness in our everyday experiences of bias.

What Is Whiteness?

Throughout this book, I use the term *Whiteness* to signify a specific ideology. I also use the term *White*, which is not synonymous with *Whiteness*. In fact, these frequently misunderstood and conflated

[2]Linder, D. O. (2023). *Famous trials:* Brown et al. v Board of Education of Topeka, Shawnee County, Kansas et al. UMKC. https://www.famous-trials.com/brownvtopeka/658-brownhuxman

terms connote very different ideas. When I reference *White*, I am using a nation-state definition of belonging to that racial group. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, *White* describes

> a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as "White" or report responses such as German, Irish, English, Italian, Lebanese, and Egyptian. The category also includes groups such as Polish, French, Iranian, Slavic, Cajun, Chaldean, etc.[3]

This definition hints at another important distinction. Among those who identify as White are separate categories of ethnic identification. The term *ethno-racial* entails both ethnic and racial classification (Fergus, 2004). Among Whites, common ethnic identifications include Italian American, Polish American, Jewish American, and so on. These identification tools reflect the contours existing within the White identity. The title of a popular book, *How the Irish Became White* (Ignatiev, 2009), reveals an important historical truth: Each European immigrant group had to earn the distinction of a White identity through acculturation, such as replacing their home languages with English and, in some instances, Anglicizing their surnames. While such assimilation typically led to a devaluation of one's home culture, it carried the promise of increased economic opportunity and an elevated status. The distinction is important in that for some groups included in the U.S. Census Bureau definition of *White*, such as those of North African descent, the "benefits" of carrying a White identity are generally out of reach by virtue of their physical traits—most notably, skin color.

My use of the word *Whiteness*, in contrast to *White*, is to signify an ideological system in which a White racial and at times ethno-racial identification is utilized as the norm or standard and framed as superior to non-White identities. The word *system* is key to understanding the concept. While individuals can act in ways that perpetuate Whiteness, the emphasis is on influencing thought patterns and values as well as institutional policies and practices. A similar systems orientation can also apply to our understanding of racism. The sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2012), among others, argues that rather than thinking of racism as the provenance of individual perpetrators, we should consider it as a *system*

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[3]U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). *Race*. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/note/US/RHI625222

that relies on the cultural acceptance of superiority and inferiority bound to certain groups.

The ideology of Whiteness invokes a diminishment of non-White identities and cultures that plays out in multiple ways, such as devaluation, stereotyping, discrimination, and segregation. It manifests itself across our institutions, including education, banking, housing, and workplaces. It also permeates mainstream popular culture through the media. Whiteness elevates and idealizes aspects of Eurocentric culture including standards of beauty, language, and speech patterns (e.g., framing African American Vernacular English as "substandard" in comparison with Academic English). At the same time, darker skin hues are often exoticized or fetishized—yet another manifestation of degradation. And cultural artifacts of African, East Indian, and Asian origins are frequently appropriated: Think about trends in jewelry, hair styles and accoutrements, and clothing becoming "mainstream" over the years (e.g., Sari, corn rows, braids). The Whiteness ideology also accentuates and normalizes other identities as almost related offsprings reflective of the core White identity—identities such as heterosexuality, Christianity, and maleness.

Some readers may assume that the Whiteness ideology exists exclusively in White bodies. In fact, Whiteness lives within all of us in varying degrees whether we are aware of it or not, much like the air that we breathe. An example of this comes out of my consulting practice.

I met with a Black female middle school principal in the interest of addressing the lack of Black male students in her school who qualified for the advanced (or "gifted") math track. The school held a disproportionate pattern of White and Asian students over-represented in this math track. The principal asked me for feedback on an idea. Since she could not "find" any Black male students who wanted to participate in the gifted math class, she proposed launching a new program that honored giftedness in athletics. As you probably surmised, my reaction to this was less than positive.

Let's begin with the obvious. Such reasoning is grounded in the stereotypical belief that Black males have a "natural gift" in athletics. The flip side of this premise is that White students are more likely to be gifted in the cognitive domain. Whether she was aware of it or not, the principal fully embraced a Whiteness ideology by perpetuating a stereotypical, deficit-based belief of Black students as absent with cognitive ability. However, this story has even more layers. First, in a prior visit with this principal, while reviewing course grades of Black students, in fact, we *did* identify Black students who met the eligibility requirements for the gifted

program. When I asked the principal about this finding, she responded, "I asked the students and their parents, but they did not want to be in those classes." The principal had missed the opportunity to inquire *why* they did not want to be in those classes. Among the many plausible explanations, for example, did the students feel uncomfortable joining classes in which the existing students already had formed social bonds by participating in gifted classes together since elementary school? And, if so, how might the school mitigate such discomfort? The principal had ample opportunity to learn from these students, but my concern centers on her interpretation of the students' position as a lack of initiative—that is, more deficit thinking. In fact, it seems that her criterion for access to more challenging coursework was based on a subjective standard of "initiative," rather than the students' capacity to meet such challenges evidenced by their prior performance in math classes. Ask yourself this: Since when is the much lauded practice of "engaging in productive struggle" the exclusive domain of White (and Asian) students?

A closer look at the alternative she proposed reveals additional flaws in the reasoning. What are the criteria for acceptance into a "gifted" athletics program? For that matter, what is the definition of "giftedness" in athletics? Nearly every athlete who excels at their sport will agree that their talents are largely a result of hard work, sustained practice, and (where available) good coaching. The idea that athletic (or cognitive) prowess is largely hereditary not only perpetuates troubling stereotypes but, in and of itself, will very likely erode the athlete's initiative to excel. After all, if we believe that our abilities are genetically hardwired, why bother making any effort to improve?

Finally, if we peel back yet another layer of this narrative, we get a better sense of what has transpired in this school and the surrounding community. The feeder pattern in this school district is all too common in many regions of the country. The White students attended an elementary school that is 90% White and affluent. Its parent–teacher association routinely raises over $75,000 annually through its activities, allocating the funds, in part, to pay for additional full-time gifted teachers. Consequently, a larger percentage of its students are enrolled in gifted classes. In contrast, the elementary schools that the Black students attended rely on restricted additional funds including the district's funding of a half-time-equivalent gifted teacher. Rather than question or challenge an obvious injustice, the principal accepted and justified it on the grounds that it is somehow "fair." In this case, she appears to have internalized a Whiteness ideology as evidenced by her belief that her Black students lack the initiative (or, perhaps, the capacity) to excel academically.

In sum, when we discuss the need to disrupt or unseat Whiteness in our schools and society at large, we are referring to a moral imperative to challenge an ideology or system used to discriminate against and otherwise oppress specific populations, most notably BIPOC Americans. Our example offers a vivid illustration of *disproportionality*, the subject matter of the next section of this chapter.

How Whiteness Shows Up in Our Schools and Beyond: Disproportionality

Disproportionality in K–12 education typically refers to the over- and underrepresentation of racial/ethnic minoritized groups in various contexts. Most notably, when we dig into school- and systemwide data, quite commonly we find an overrepresentation of BIPOC students in special education and an underrepresentation of the same students in gifted and talented, Advanced Placement (AP), and Honors programs and courses. BIPOC students also experience a disproportionately high rate of disciplinary referrals and suspensions when compared to their White and Asian counterparts. These patterns can be traced back to the early post–*Brown v. Board of Education* era, as evidenced by data collected in 1968 that estimated 60%–80% of students identified with cognitive disabilities were Black students from families considered low-income (Dunn, 1968). While subsequent studies point to some decline in such overrepresentation (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Donovan & Cross, 2002), the patterns are still alarming when we consider that Black students currently comprise less than 15% of students enrolled in schools. In other words, the percentage of Black students enrolled in special education services continues to be disproportionate to their overall enrollment. Again, think back to the two pillars of *Brown*. Despite attempts to desegregate schools, ask yourself why such disproportionalities have persisted for so many years. If the structural changes in the interest of better school resources and facilities failed to eliminate these patterns, the question we must tackle as educators is whether we have done enough work to identify and eliminate the biases and deficit-based beliefs that impact such placements and referrals. The data suggest otherwise.

My work over the past two decades on addressing disproportionality in special education, discipline, and gifted/AP/Honors programs intersects both research and practice. I have worked with hundreds of schools and systems on investigating patterns of disproportionality and implementing reforms to eliminate them. Several key learnings have emerged from this work: (1) Gaps exist in the implementation of tiered intervention

supports, special education referral and evaluation, discipline referral, and gifted identification, placement, and retention; and (2) the primary root cause of disproportionality is negative bias. More specifically, when educators filter their perceptions through a lens of Whiteness, students who don't fit the "norm" with respect to race and ethnicity—and (by extension), language, sexual orientation, or gender orientation—are judged as inferior to (and more harshly than) those who fit their preconception of what is "appropriate." Such instances frame cultural differences as deficits. My impetus for writing this book is to challenge us as educators to understand that the history of disproportionality cannot simply be solved by technical fixes and new and improved policies; rather, we must also tackle the biases that influence our mindsets and beliefs—biases that allow us to rationalize harmful and unjust educational processes, policies, procedures, and practices.

In my consulting work, I often sharpen my understanding of disproportionality and its roots by visiting classrooms. While disaggregated school-wide data on special education placement, disciplinary referrals, and the like offer a "big picture" view of disproportionality rates and patterns, the classroom visits allow me to see the more fine-grained, day-to-day textures of disproportionality. In the winter of 2021, I conducted classroom visits with a Black female principal. The student demographics in this school were 98% Black while the teaching staff was 80% White. The principal and I spoke a great deal about the quality of instruction. In particular, she repeatedly asked a very poignant question: "Do I have the right people in front of my kids?"

We walked into a fourth-grade classroom and observed a reading comprehension lesson for about 10 minutes. I signaled to the principal across the room that I was ready to go. Once outside the classroom, I asked her, "Is there a history in the classroom? Because something felt off in the interaction between the White female teacher and the Black and Brown students." The principal shared that, aside from some instructional gaps, the teacher had cultural conflicts with her students. The principal then shared that she had asked the teacher to build better social-emotional connections with her all–Black and Latinx class.

I then learned that during the month prior to my visit, in the interest of building such connections, the teacher had purchased a stuffed monkey for every student as a gift for the winter holiday season. While the students seemed to appreciate and enjoy interacting with the toy, the teacher's choice of gift is highly problematic. More specifically, it reveals the teacher's lack of understanding of the cultural history of her students—a painful, centuries-long history of comparing Blacks to

primates based on erroneous perceptions of cognitive limitation and physical prowess. To put it mildly, her cultural frame, informed by the Whiteness ideology, lacked cross-cultural knowledge and experiences. In other words, she lived, absorbed, and universalized her experiences as a White woman. Educators who knowingly or unknowingly act on the assumption that their lived experiences are universal or "standard" place a crushing burden on their Black and Brown students. While this example may strike some readers as extreme, in my years of observing classrooms, I've witnessed countless examples of how Whiteness plays out in our schools.

The Shopping Cart Metaphor

For the last 20 years of my career, I have thought about, theorized on, and researched how Whiteness and its accompanying deficit-based framing of minoritized populations have become embedded in our approach to schooling. Where does this frame originate, and how do we continue to use it? I use the metaphor of a shopping cart to explain how we collect and perpetuate the beliefs that sustain frames of Whiteness, based on the idea that individuals travel throughout their days accumulating social and cultural experiences. Many of these experiences are monocultural, meaning they take place in segregated spaces. While this form of segregation is currently *de facto* (rather than *de jure* or governed by laws), it still has the effect of cultural isolation and *othering* those who are different from us. For a number of Americans, cross-cultural experiences (with the exception of casual encounters like passing differently complected people on the freeway or in the supermarket) occur relatively infrequently, which begs the question: If our shopping carts are filled with monocultural experiences, and if we draw from these experiences to make sense of our world, how can we truly understand and make sense of the experiences of those who differ from us?

For example, my youngest child, born female, disclosed at the age of 16 that they identified as a transgender male. My child had been on a long journey of self-reflection that culminated in their awareness of being trans. In retrospect, I realize that I was unprepared for this disclosure, in that the social and cultural experiences that lived in *my* shopping cart were grounded in the assumption of a gender binary. In other words, my lifelong experiences reinforced my belief that sex and gender are invariably tied together. More specifically, I had been living with the unchallenged belief that our reproductive organs, our physical appearance, our vocal tones, and other external traits signaled our gender identification and expression. All of this led me to the sobering realization

that I had nothing in my shopping cart that helped me to understand and build cross-cultural connections with my child. The monocultural experiences that filled my shopping cart were products of a lifetime of interacting with cisgender communities. As a result of such limited (and limiting) experiences, I had "otherized" the trans community. My own journey impressed upon me the need to unpack my shopping cart and replace its contents with more culturally appropriate experiences that would help me interrogate and dismiss my deep-seated assumption of a gender binary.

My purpose in self-disclosing is to help you begin to engage in a similar journey of discovery. Think about it: How often in our society do we have the opportunity to unpack and replace the contents of our shopping carts? Or, more specifically, to unpack and replace beliefs, policies, and practices that manifest a Whiteness ideology that—as for the principal who wanted to provide her Black students with the "distinction" of an athletic giftedness label—allows us to rationalize a de facto policy of school segregation?

As much as we would like to believe that the passage of *Brown* in 1954 put the Jim Crow era behind us, the mechanism that rationalized the form of segregation that persists across our nation's schools—Whiteness—has yet to be removed and in fact lives well beyond our schools, extending across numerous events and artifacts of our daily existence. It took until 2020 (the year that George Floyd was murdered) for Johnson & Johnson to announce the addition of new skin tone colors to its Band-Aid product line. White actors and models still dominate commercials for beauty products. Employment practices stipulate "appropriate" hairstyles and clothing requirements as neat and presentable, yet who defines what constitutes neat or presentable? Our society has normalized a valuation of such Whiteness attributes as the "standard," and the shopping cart serves as a figurative tool for warehousing how we continuously draw and make meaning from this ideology. When a preponderance of Whiteness dominates our social shopping carts, it promotes and/or rationalizes our presumption of racial and ethnic hierarchies. Similar presumptions of superiority/inferiority live within us with respect to language, sexual orientation, and gender identities. In this manner, Whiteness as a cultural ideology highlights attributes related to and constructed from the social and cultural experiences of Whites and White identity as the standard.

When we reflect on the presence of Whiteness in our current K–12 landscape, we must come to terms with some challenging questions:

- What happens when we enter the schoolhouse with varying social experiences of race, ethnicity, language, sexuality, gender expression, and culture in our shopping carts?

- How do these mindsets and beliefs come into play when we interact with those whose lived experience is different and unfamiliar to us?

- How do these mindsets influence our academic expectations of students with differing racial, ethnic, linguistic, gender, and sexual identities?

- How has Whiteness ideology persisted and played out in our current school structures?

- How has the Whiteness ideology operated in recent state- and district-level policies that call for removal of books, lessons, and conversations that affirm the presence and value of marginalized identities?

In 1995, as a student teacher, I was assigned to a school with a predominantly White student body. During the interview process, the principal disclosed that I would be the first Black teacher who taught at this school in almost 20 years. At the end of my second week as a student teacher, one of the two White male teachers appointed as my "mentors" approached me with the following question: "Can you have a talk with the Black kids? You know, have a Black talk with them about how they should behave?" Just 21 years old at the time, I felt both baffled and offended that I was assigned such a role to play at this school. Beneath the surface of this request was the belief that I must somehow have the key to "reaching" Black students or, more pointedly, that I could "talk Black." I may have been baffled at the time, but in hindsight, I understand that this "mentor" teacher (like many others in this school) carried none of the tools, skills, language, cross-cultural competencies, or empathic capacity in his shopping cart needed to establish healthy relationships with his Black students. Unfortunately, such stereotypical beliefs about BIPOC students are not uncommon among educators with limited cross-cultural experiences. In this case, my "Black talks" were intended to show Black students how to be "good" students—in other words, to fit a specific norm of "good behavior" grounded in a Whiteness ideology. With time and effort, I believe that most educators can cultivate the awareness to identify how Whiteness informs our beliefs, policies, practices, and actions or, as in my example, to recognize how it informs the beliefs and actions of others in the school community. If you feel challenged

by or uncomfortable with the questions posed earlier, remind yourself that cross-cultural experiences are within your reach!

How We Sustain Whiteness in Our Shopping Carts: Affinity and Associational Biases

An overarching premise of this book is that by accumulating more cross-cultural experiences in our shopping carts, we can challenge the deep-seated beliefs and stereotypes that harm our minoritized students through our policies, practices, words, and deeds. Social psychology research highlights the significance of such experiences in dispelling stereotypes (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Rasmussen & Sieck, 2015). In fact, as an American society, we have limited cross-cultural exposure, as evidenced by one of the most substantive support networks in our lives: our closest friends. A 2022 study from the Public Religion Research Institute found that Whites report having social friendships that are 90% White; 67% reported having *only* White friends. Older Whites had more segregated friendship circles than their younger counterparts. In contrast, the same study found that non-White populations generally maintain much more cross-cultural friendships.

In fact, these friendship patterns demonstrate two important ways that Whiteness sustains its effect: *affinity bias* and *associational bias*. Affinity describes our tendency to gravitate toward people like us. We all have affinity groups, and one of mine is runners. I think of myself as a serious runner. I began running when I was 12 years old in the mid-1980s when children were required to run one mile as part of the presidential fitness test. I met the benchmark of running faster than 7 minutes and 11 seconds but, more importantly, fell in love with running. Since then, I competed in track for nearly 10 years in high school and college, and after college I ran (and continue to run) hundreds of 5- and 10-mile races and half-marathons. Not surprisingly, I always gravitate toward other runners. We speak a special language to each other and share the experience of on- and off-season training. This affinity leans into favoring each other. But affinity bias means more than sharing common interests and passions. Affinity bias serves to support our need to belong and feel connected to people who will empathize with our experiences and worldviews. Affinity refers to the ways in which we favor in-group members. Our positive bias in favor of such members manifests in our willingness to give them extra leeway or permission. For example, if street closures catch me in traffic on the day of a marathon, I am far more patient and forgiving than those who don't share my affinity bias. In other words, we think more favorably of "folks like us." Among neuroscientific evidence for this phenomenon,

MRI data confirm that when we think about or interact with in-group members, our brains light up in similar patterns to those that form when we talk or think about ourselves (Molenberghs & Louis, 2018).

This affinity bias also affects how we explain crises or challenging events, viewing the in-group in a more favorable light compared to out-group members. For example, the national opioid crisis of our current century has been framed as a tragedy caused by pharmaceutical companies' manipulation of individuals. Compare this explanation of what amounts to a national addiction with the far less sympathetic narrative of the "crack" drug war of the 1980s. The news stories of the 1980s framed crack users as degenerates and criminals. Attribution, or who was framed as "at fault," was based on in-group bias in the case of the opioid crisis and out-group bias in the case of the crack drug war. Crack, a relatively cheap drug, was most commonly associated with Black Americans, whereas opioid addiction was more commonly associated with White Americans. (A similar dynamic was at work in the 1980s and 1990s when criminal sentencing for crack users was far more harsh than sentencing for powder cocaine users.)

Our shopping carts are filled with examples of beliefs that reflect our affinity biases. You may consciously or subconsciously believe someone is smart or capable of doing a specific job simply because they attended the same university as you or because they share your age, ethnic, sexual, or gender identification. You can enter a room and only see the people like you, failing even to notice the presence of other people. This form of bias allows for the maintenance of similar affinities. A common example of affinity bias in the world of K–12 is hiring teachers who are "like you," share your belief system, or have similar training.

The effect of this affinity bias also appears in how we treat students in our schools. For instance, I arrived early for a data meeting with an elementary school principal and noticed the White female principal meeting with two White female students. Once the students left and I entered the principal's office, I asked if everything was okay, and she shared that she had just met with two students who had a "scuffle" and were "mean-spirited." Later we discussed the discipline data from the prior three months of school that showed that each month the office discipline referrals were primarily male (i.e., above 80%) and involved "disrespect," "disorderly conduct," and so on. I asked her if "mean-spirited" described a type of infraction. Did being mean-spirited and engaging in a scuffle warrant an office referral, or would she give the two White female students a pass, based on an affinity bias? Think about your own school context: Are male students more susceptible to an affinity bias that frames them as a greater "physical threat"

than their female peers and, consequently, places them at greater risk of office referrals and/or suspensions?

Like other manifestations of Whiteness, in-group favoritism rationalizes superiority over those outside the affinity group. For instance, hiring practices may lead to the exclusion of teachers who "don't fit our culture," are "stand-offish," or did not attend schools familiar to us. In another example, a White, Italian-identifying male assistant superintendent of a district once approached me in an attempt to diversify the district's teaching workforce. This administrator wanted to know if I knew anything about historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs). He disclosed to me, "I've never heard of these schools. How long have they been around, and are they any good?"

This leader's question regarding the quality of these institutions reflects both affinity and associational biases. His affinity was toward familiar schools, and its effect was the assumption that applicants who attended these unfamiliar schools were inadequately prepared for teaching positions in his school. Associational bias, also referred to as confirmatory bias, occurs when an individual seeks information that confirms or maintains a set of beliefs, values, or perceptions associated with specific groups. These tend to be stereotypical ideas of an out-group (Oswald & Grosjean, 2004). Associational bias is derived from experiences and information that we rack up during our life span and uses stereotypes as a shorthand way to simplify the information. For instance, we may demonstrate our associational bias when we see a person at a grocery store paying with a cash assistance card or EBT[4] card, and we begin to examine their food choices; when we are in grade-level meetings discussing students needing support, and someone shares that a child lives in a trailer park; or when an assistant superintendent questions the value of Black and Latinx higher education institutions.

We carry a litany of concepts and assumptions about identities and, without realizing it, seek confirmation of these assumptions. In a 2016 study conducted by the Yale Child Study Center,[5] Gilliam and colleagues asked preschool teachers to watch a video of students and identify "misbehaviors." In fact, no students actually misbehaved in the video.

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[4]U.S. Department of Agriculture Food and Nutrition Service. (2023, October 3). *What Is Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT)?* https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/ebt

[5]Gilliam, W. S., Maupin, A. N., Reyes, C. R., Accavitti, M., & Shic, F. (2016, September 28). *Do early educators' implicit biases regarding sex and race relate to behavior expectations and recommendations of preschool expulsions and suspensions?* Yale Child Study Center. https://files-profile.medicine.yale.edu/documents/75afe6d2-e556-4794-bf8c-3cf105113b7c?sv

However, the teachers were three times more likely to identify boys and boys of color with behavior problems.

These associational biases are fed to us via a healthy diet of stereotypes, many of which show up in media and other artifacts of popular culture. Consider the case of American Girl dolls. My youngest child took an interest in these between six and eight years old, and in the interest of accommodating her interest, I decided to investigate. I discovered that these dolls are quite expensive and, at the time, occupied an entire multistory New York City building. The first time I visited the American Girl store, I was struck by what appeared to be an affluent and predominantly White clientele milling around the floors. The doll demographic matched that of the clientele in that eight of them appeared to be White and the remaining three (one each Black, Native American, and Mexican American) clearly were not. They differed in their respective stories, printed on accompanying placards. The White American girl stories, while set in different eras (e.g., World War II, the 1950s), were remarkably similar to one another in that the characters seemed to enjoy relatively comfortable lives. These stories stood in stark contrast to the story of the sole Black doll depicted as an escaped slave who, along with her mother, gets separated from her father and brother—a story of loss and struggle. I should acknowledge that since my visit to the store, the company has introduced additional Black dolls including Claudie, whose story is written by Brit Bennett, a Black author, and centers on being a Black girl full of joy in the 1920s.

With that said, the narratives behind these products feed an associational bias that characterizes the stories of BIPOC people by sadness and struggle. The habit of associational bias extends well beyond toy manufacturers and appears across our social institutions including law enforcement, employment settings, and schools. For example, police officers looking for "suspicious behaviors" may orient themselves toward individuals who fit their association of suspicious behaviors and ignore or excuse the same suspicious behaviors of individuals who fit their in-group schema. In schools, when intervention study teams focus on a student exhibiting skill gaps, they consider "home environment" factors or "student disposition" for students outside of their affinity circles; in contrast, such considerations are infrequent for in-group students. Associational bias is also quite common in the world of K–12 practice. I recall attending a meeting with a school's equity team about the root causes of their disproportionality patterns. The psychologist on the team argued that the continuous exposure to lead paint and polluted water caused the school's overidentification of Black students with intellectual disabilities and emotional dysregulation despite not having any knowledge of where the students lived.

Patterns emerge in schools that further reinforce associational bias. For instance, if we continuously see White and Asian (specifically, Chinese and Japanese) children in gifted classrooms, we develop an associational frame. We develop a belief of what giftedness looks like based on overrepresentation of White and Asian students in gifted programs. When I ask teachers of gifted, advanced, AP, Honors, and International Baaccalaureate programs what qualities make a student succeed in these classes, they often refer to social or cultural qualities: "shows initiative," "has a desire for the extra work," "is curious to do more," or "demonstrates strong work ethic." Even if these attributes were "objective," the disproportionate pattern of White and Asian students means these attributes are earmarked as an associational bias about these groups. Simultaneously, when we are continuously exposed to deficit narratives about other (non-White) groups that portray them as lazy, irresponsible, economically stunted, and so on, we form an associational bias that feeds deficit-based assumptions about their behavior and cognitive abilities. (For example, tune into such media outlets as Fox News and Newsmax that depict non-White, non-straight, nonbinary, non-Christian, non-middle-class populations in a less-than-flattering light, albeit often through coded language like *inner city* to signify Black, low-income neighborhoods.)

During a data analysis meeting, I shared the patterns of behavioral referrals by sex, and a White male principal raised his hand and argued, "That happens because boys have horseplay in their DNA." In that moment, this male principal maintained an associational bias about boys that included viewing their behavior as nature-driven. In other words, they are just "hardwired" to misbehave. Victim-blaming language like "They just can't help themselves" not only absolves K–12 professionals of any responsibility but also suggests other deficit-driven distortions like "Those kids misbehave like that because they come from low-income neighborhoods" or "Low-income kids are inherently traumatized and thus carry cognitive and/or behavioral limitations." A monoglossic ideology (O. García & Torres-Guevara, 2009)—another extension of Whiteness—is evidenced in such statements as "Why can't they just speak English in the hallways?" or (by association) "Did they come here illegally to take our services?" The power of such associational bias is it is (1) deeply embedded in an individual's shopping cart and unless disrupted will continuously be utilized to perpetuate inequities; and (2) used to attribute disparities to cultural or environmental factors, rather than barriers to access and opportunity. The dangers of such toxic narratives extend well beyond individual harm and into the institutions and systems that govern us in that we used them to rationalize structural

inequities such as discriminatory economic, social, and educational policies. Rather than call these policies into question, we place the blame on those who bear the brunt of such discrimination and are framed as lacking intelligence, initiative, or "grit" or simply as victims of "tough luck."

All these forms of bias are ever-present in our shopping carts and activated at various times when we enter schools. The problem with such biases is that they falsely attribute "blame" to our students, to our students' families, and to the communities in which they reside and ultimately rationalize inequitable systems, policies, and practices never designed to serve these students in the first place. Moreover, such systemic failures have harmed generations of minoritized students and families.

K–12 professionals can and should play a role in addressing them, beginning with challenging our own biases. Admittedly, this is hard work—especially given our current sociopolitical climate—but I want to believe that most of us in this field share a genuine desire to realize the promise of *Brown* by once and for all eliminating what Judge Huxton called the "sense of inferiority" that continues to live in so many of our children today.

Chapter Road Map

Several chapters of this book are devoted to identifying three common, but rarely explored, belief systems that perpetuate Whiteness in our schools and beyond: *colorblindness*, *deficit thinking*, and *poverty disciplining*. As I discussed in my previous Corwin book, *Solving Disproportionality and Achieving Equity* (Fergus, 2016a), these beliefs manifest themselves in educational practice in ways that create barriers to success for all students—particularly those who are historically marginalized. For instance, think about how deficit thinking informs our attitudes about behavioral expectations for our students. Such expectations, for the most part culture-bound, include presumptions about what is "loud," "threatening," or "standing too close," and even the proper way to sit in a chair. At a time when our attempts to "fix" underserved schools and student populations involve silver-bullet behavior management programs, the need to expose and unseat these beliefs is more urgent than ever. Rather than searching for the silver bullet of the month, I challenge you to unpack the baggage of segregated lives and to interrogate your own lived experiences as the source of the bias-based beliefs crammed into your shopping cart. In doing so, you will begin to see the world differently, through a cross-cultural lens that frees you to envision a "new normal" in which our children are affirmed and valued and can truly grow into their best selves.

Over the course of my research, I've collected survey data from over 4,000 educators that highlight their beliefs. These beliefs accumulate in the personal shopping cart of the Teach for America White male teacher from rural all-White Kansas assigned to teach in an all-Black New Orleans school; the Long Island, New York, suburban White female now teaching in the all–Black and Latinx South Bronx; and countless educators with similarly limited cross-cultural exposure. My work with these educators has affirmed my belief that cross-cultural skills and knowledge are within every educator's reach. The remainder of this book will serve as your guide to unpacking your shopping cart and developing these skills and dispositions.

Chapter 1 provides a historical overview of schooling in the United States and the progenitors to a system that continues to perpetuate Whiteness. In particular, it outlines laws and policies that supported and sustained superiority of White identification through the limitation of educational facilities, resources, curriculum, instruction, and personnel for Mexican, Black, and Indigenous/Native American populations. We need to understand these early strategies for cementing the Whiteness ideology in order to understand the way it has metastasized.

Chapter 2 provides a deeper exploration of the valuation of Whiteness including the manner in which it is fueled by fears of losing resources and monopoly, social threat of "the other," and fear of no longer being the standard of normalcy by which others are judged. We will understand how Whiteness has hampered the ability of educators to develop the cross-cultural understanding that will enable them to form healthy relationships and enhance their pedagogical effectiveness with students who don't look like them.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the aforementioned bias-based mindsets: colorblindness, deficit thinking, and poverty disciplining. Each mindset provides a rationalization for the persistence of the Whiteness ideology in our schools and beyond. These chapters are organized to provide an understanding of the mindsets, their genesis, and the ways in which they persist. The chapters also include vignettes intended to support your cross-cultural skill development, specifically by examining how these beliefs show up in our schools and most importantly how you can begin to replace them.

Finally, Chapter 5 provides a framework for a deliberate development of cross-cultural skills and dispositions that interrupt the valuation of Whiteness and devaluation of all other groups and recenter the notion of humanity in our educational equity beliefs that *Brown v. Board of Education* charged us to implement.

Reflection Questions

These reflection questions are intended to encourage unpacking and replacing the experiences in our shopping carts.

1. What is your experience of disproportionality in your school?

2. What is your prior experience with talking or hearing about Whiteness ideology?

3. What are your key affinity groups? What positive orientations do you have about these affinity groups?

4. What are some of your associational biases? How do you address them?

5. What were your friendship groups in elementary school, middle school, high school, and college? What were your friendship groups and neighbors in the community you grew up in?