Journeying Toward Racial Justice in Schools: A Scholarly Personal Narrative on Exposing Racism and Sustaining the Fight for Equity in Mostly White Systems

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Journeying Toward Racial Justice in Schools: A Scholarly Personal Narrative on Exposing Racism and Sustaining the Fight for Equity in Mostly White Systems

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

By
Laura Hayes Love

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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JOURNEYING TOWARD RACIAL JUSTICE IN SCHOOLS

UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS, MINNESOTA

Journeying Toward Racial Justice in Schools: A Scholarly Personal Narrative on Exposing Racism and Sustaining the Fight for Equity in Mostly White Systems

We certify that we have read this dissertation and approved it as adequate in scope and quality. We have found that it is complete and satisfactory in all respects, and that any and all revisions required by the final examining committee have been made.

Dissertation Committee

Stephen Brookfield, Ph. D., Committee Chair

John Diamond, Committee Member

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March 29, 2018

Final Approval Date
Abstract

This study explores the ways White educators expose racial injustice and sustain the fight for equity in mostly White school systems. The research involves uncovering one’s personal racism as well as unearthing how it functions systemically and it examines effective ways of bringing that to people’s attention. The data for this Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) study, therefore, is the researcher’s own experiences accumulated over the past 18 years in educational leadership.

I explicate processes a leader must undergo to: 1) explore the social construct of racial identity, 2) develop effective short and long-term strategies to sustain progress, and 3) utilize mindful responses in collegial interactions in order to work for racial justice in school systems. I consider theories, perspectives, and practices from a wide array of scholars and educators in order to examine ways to navigate the tumultuous waters of racialized impacts and outcomes for youth in public schools. In the SPN, research utilizes theory and relevant literature to critique, inform, and explain the author’s experiences—in this case, my experiences in working toward racial justice.

The goal of this research, using the lenses of critical race theory and mindful practices, includes offering insights for White educators in mostly-White districts. I hope to help myself and others avoid pitfalls and build personal and professional skills to address racial injustice. While small celebrations may support further progress, this research concludes with the acknowledgement that missteps provide regular learning opportunities and that self-study never ends. Fear often prevents White educators from the necessary errors that can lead to greater understanding. In addition, several topics related to marginalization and oppression that result in achievement and opportunity gaps in school systems demand further research.
Key words: implicit bias, racial justice, microaggressions, white fragility, counter narrative, and mindfulness

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to all of the students, like “Ty,” whom I failed over the years as I struggled to understand my own racism and the related impacts on others. Some of the students I failed not only survived, but thrived and became educational leaders themselves, hoping to make education a better place for students of color today than it was for them as youth. I dedicate this research to supporting positive outcomes for every youth who enters through our school doorways. As I come to know better, I commit to do better by the students.
Acknowledgements

This research would have been impossible without the immense support and encouragement from my superintendent and my District Equity Leadership Team (DELT) colleagues who helped me laugh, cry, and struggle forward. My colleagues and our staff and students put up with many novice questions and my naive attempts at advances for racial justice along the way, and they still do.

My family, both nuclear and extended, provided unwavering support and understanding over the past six years of this educational journey. Words cannot express the magnitude of my appreciation for their patience with my learning process and with the sacrifices they made to help me accomplish this goal. Most importantly, they have accepted permanent and ongoing changes in me. Additionally, family members willingly confront community challenges on their own and along with me as we continue to struggle and learn together.

Many other colleagues and friends deserve appreciation, but a few I must acknowledge include those in my graduate learning communities, beginning with the one at the University of St. Thomas (UST). Years ago, Drs. Boyle and Noonan promised to radicalize me and the other members of Cohort 26 as we entered our program in the summer of 2012, and that they did! The members of our cohort encouraged each other all the way through this process. In addition, Dr. Roulis provided an introduction to, along with resources and reinforcements for, mindful leadership practices.

Miles away, in another learning environment, Dr. Diamond and the members of his classes at the University of Wisconsin-Madison further inspired and enhanced my journey. Moreover, Richard Davis, musician and teacher, supported my healing from racism along with that of many interested community members through the Institute for Racial Healing, welcoming
us into his home each week. Finally, Drs. Brookfield and Fish encouraged continuing radicalization, as well as consideration of the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN). Dr. Brookfield, in particular, offered a model of critical humility as inspiration to explore my own racism and related leadership practices.

I stand truly indebted to all of those named above and unnamed who helped me achieve this accomplishment and reminded me that this is only one of many steps in a lifelong journey.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In the year 2000, during my first experience with educational administration, I served as one of three associate principals for a high school of more than 1300 students. At that time, racial diversity in our district grew at a steady pace after redistricting of boundaries with a neighboring city. The majority of the student body identified as White and middle to upper class, but a growing number of students identified as students of color or lived in poverty. A clear divide existed between student groups, whom staff worked diligently to bring together.

The most significant challenges for me in crossing racial boundaries involved dealing with my emotions, my racial ignorance, and my biases. I lacked an understanding of institutional oppression and its impacts on students and families; therefore, I responded as if individuals had complete control and responsibility within the system. Additionally, my desire to prove myself as a new member of the administrative team overshadowed my scant knowledge of racial disparities. For example, I started the year by studying past school data on consequences for behaviors, which led me toward specific actions for addressing student behaviors in the name of consistency and fairness. The damage I carried out as an administrator left me with lasting shame and a sense of guilt.

"what you see when you look at me?
you know how many of y'all I swallowed?
you just a drop of ink
on this canvas
boy

~“what the ocean said to the black boy,” Clint Smith, 2016, p. 10

Ω
My Freshman Teacher, Ty

Sometimes I wonder if Smith’s (2016) ocean might symbolize school behavioral response systems when it comes to swallowing up our students of color. I remember the internal struggle I faced in my first month as an associate principal regarding interactions with a freshman student I will call Ty, who was Black and whose family was financially unstable. Football kept Ty connected to school. He excelled in the sport but found much less success academically and behaviorally in classes. Thus, when directed by a teacher to leave class for exhibiting disruptive behavior for the third time, Ty came to my office to discuss his situation and to receive the typical consequence from me. As one member of the administrative team, I followed the progressive discipline model set forth by the student code of conduct and past practice. This meant that Ty received a school suspension for his third behavioral offense.

I sent Ty home, explaining that a suspension from school included a suspension from football practice and from school property until his return the following Monday. Because Ty loved football so much, he still came to the varsity game Friday night. I supervised the game and ran into him there. Again, I had to send Ty home from school grounds, even though no family member had transportation to pick him up. My stomach churned as I thought about how my verbal messages and actions would further alienate Ty and his family from school. Using progressive discipline with this student felt egregious, likely adding insult to injury for a young person who lacked resources and most of the advantages so many of our other students held. The incident etched deeply into my memory because I felt responsible for the injustice Ty experienced in school.

This represents a similar feeling I experienced when ineffectively disciplining my own children, despite good intentions. Most of the time when they misbehaved I kept my cool and
responded rationally. On occasion, however, I lost control of my emotions and yelled or even used an open hand across the cheek. When that happened, I felt awful. I immediately regretted my inappropriate response and wished I could take it back. The repugnance that surfaced in my heart and mind created a whirring of thoughts in an attempt to justify or defend my behavior. With Ty on the other hand, I felt trapped by the requisite expectations of the educational system and yet, still felt personally responsible.

The situation with Ty represented layers of racism I was unaware of at the time. These layers involved me, our staff, our school practices, and the expectations of our mostly-White, middle class community. My administrative colleagues cared deeply about our students of color, and from them I learned a little about cultural responsiveness. Nevertheless, we all worked in a system designed for and by the White middle-class that found itself challenged by a changing demographic student body. The expectations held by a mostly-White, middle-class majority, namely my demographic group, involved following certain norms for behavior in school and meting out specific consequences for those who did not conform. This left me conflicted about how to achieve “fairness” when I sensed that my approach marginalized students from different backgrounds, including some with scant resources. Experiences like the one with Ty occurred regularly with other students, despite my cognitive and emotional dissonance. These events often left me torn apart inside and yet, I wondered how the students felt. Our administrative team members all envisioned a very different school, one where students of color could experience success in every way their White peers did. Despite our intentions, interests, and hard work, the educational outcomes for students of color remained starkly disparate (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Back in 2000, I was wholly unaware of Bonilla-Silva’s (2013) concept of racism without racists and further, oblivious to my own racism. Since
then, I have learned about implicit bias (Kirwin, 2014; Neason, 2015; powell, 2015; Project Implicit, 2015), racial microaggressions (Solorzano, 2014; Sue, 2010) and institutional racism (NEP, 2015). Though I wanted to believe I treated Ty the same as if he were White, my unconscious, implicit bias betrayed the goals I held for myself and the outcomes I hoped to facilitate for students.

The ways I enact racism as an individual uphold White supremacy in schools and society on a regular basis. I make decisions, both conscious and unconscious, that perpetuate inequities for people of color. Sometimes I remain quiet when I should speak up. Thoughts emerge within me about people based solely on stereotypes, rather than because of what I know about them. Additionally, I sometimes purport to know what is best for others when the basis for my knowledge rests solely in my White, middle-class upbringing. In reinforcing racism, I fail to live out my core values related to social justice for all people. Therefore, by studying internal and external experiences with racism, I intend to align my leadership actions to my goals as an educator.

**Purpose of this Study**

Comedian Michael Jr. describes his *why* as inspiring people to walk toward their purpose. He shares that his *what*—stand-up comedy—differs from his *why* and states that knowing his *why* helps his *what* have greater impact (Michael Jr., 2015). The purpose and process of this research ought to be clear, despite the crooked path I take in journeying toward racial justice. My *why*, therefore, is racial justice for every child and colleague. I attempt to attain this through the *what* of identity and relationship development, technical actions, and mindful educational leadership. My hope includes having this research and my work hold significant value in the lives of students and readers, as well.
I designed this study, therefore, to examine ways White leaders can expose racial injustice and sustain the fight for equity in mostly-White educational systems. This project involves uncovering personal racism, unearthing how it functions systemically, and learning how to bring its existence to people’s attention without pushing them away. Moreover, I intend to discover strategies for sustaining these actions over the long haul. The data for this Scholarly Personal Narrative study is the researcher’s own narrative experiences accumulated over the past 18 years of working to achieve these goals. This research involves taking action, reflecting critically, and making meaning of experiences using scholarly literature.

I set out on this journey by learning about the history of racial oppression and my own connections to it. I enrolled in many formal opportunities for professional learning related to the topic. In addition, I examined my interest in and approaches to leading toward racial justice. Frequently, questions arose instead of answers. This led me to conclude that I have a great deal left to learn, both personally and professionally. For example, I presently hold mixed perspectives on whether integrated educational systems serve students of color better than schools did prior to Brown v. the Board of Education (1954), especially given the lack of educators of color working in public schools today.

**Integrated… Why?**

Many educators assume leadership roles in order to make a greater difference in a school or district; nevertheless, very little improves for many of our students of color in predominantly White suburban school districts (Wisconsin Council on Children and Families [WCCF], 2013). In fact, as the year 2018 begins, significant outcome disparities persist in schools across the United States for students in different racial and ethnic groups (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; MacLeod, 2009; Michael, 2015; Shapiro, 2004; Smith, Crawley, Robinson, Cotman, Jr., Swaim,
Despite the promise inherent in the landmark *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954) ruling, we have neither equality nor equity in education today (Ladson-Billings, 2005; National Research Council [NRC], 2004). This reality should demand that White leaders like me consider our own complicity in the perpetuation of these disparities for students of color.

It may prove difficult for some of us to see our role in reproducing racial injustice in education. For example, I may never fully know how my actions disadvantage some students and staff members in our system and serve to advantage others, thereby unintentionally oppressing people of color. Moreover, because Whites created and designed education in the U.S., it may be hard for us to see how the system fails to accommodate socio-economic, familial, racial, and cultural differences. A majority of staff members in school systems across the nation are White (NRC, 2004) and our Whiteness often keeps us from empathizing with those who feel marginalized, excluded, or oppressed (DiAngelo, 2011). In fact, schooling worked well for me as a student and a teacher, but did not for almost every person of color I know.

Consider the following analogy: The school system serves as healthy, oxygenated water for Whites, who often fail to notice the water in which they swim. At the same time, students and staff members of color may find themselves floundering in undernourished water or evaporating tide pools, or even drowning in riptides. This may result from negative representations, erasure in curriculum, narrow pedagogy, and White educators who unknowingly marginalize students of color.

Take the story of “Eddie” as one example. Eddie is a doctoral candidate in psychology who identifies as Black. He now attends a large, mostly-White university in the Midwest. When I asked Eddie about his educational experience, he shared that he left his neighborhood daily to
attend “a better high school.” Eddie recalled one of many experiences of racial microaggressions during his four years at his good, but mostly-White high school. One of his Advanced Placement (A.P.) teachers said he should remove his hoodie sweatshirt because it made him look like he belonged in a gang. She later informed his parents, educators who are Black, at a parent-teacher conference that she and Eddie had a great relationship, as demonstrated by her joke about his hoodie. Livid, they asked, “Did you say that because he was one of the only males in your class? Or, because he is Black? Or, because of where he lives?”

This microaggression demonstrates implicit bias held by the teacher about Black male students who wear hoodies. Eddie’s teacher associated the hoodie with membership in a gang. Scholars define racial microaggressions as subtle insults toward people of color that are automatic and usually unintended (Solorzano, 2014; Sue 2010). White educators, like Eddie’s teacher and I, commit racial microaggressions regularly and often without recognizing it, which can cause accumulated damage for our students. If not damage, in Eddie’s case, it certainly produced a lasting, negative memory of his high school years.

In dialogue about educational experiences with every adult who identifies as Black, I hear stories of traumatization similar to, or worse than, that from Eddie. This misaligns with what I envision as the true goals of education, i.e. support for students’ growth and facilitation of their interests, talents, and aspirations. These goals may prove true for some students, though it seems they are reserved for those who identify as White, Indian, and Far East Asian. Local, county, and state-level standardized assessment data where I live and work display a failure of most schools and districts to serve our students appropriately who identify as Black and Latin@1 (WCCF, 2013). As I listen to the qualitative data—the personal stories of these individuals—they reveal

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1 Latin@ = both Latino (male) and Latina (female) identities.
negative experiences for students of color. Sometimes these stories indict school policies, lack of supports, narrow curricula, tracking, or individual White educators. Likely, each factor plays some role I could analyze for its contribution to racialized outcomes.

As I reflect upon more than 20 years in education, I wonder how often I personally contributed to race-based trauma rather than helped facilitate a student or family’s vision for education. Additionally, consider the preponderance of White educators and our collective responsibility for the negative experiences for Ty, for Eddie, and for all of our students of color. I question whether we will ever realize the integration goal of educational equity. In my most cynical moments, I wonder if the intentions of the designers of Brown v. BOE (1954) included equitable outcomes for students identifying as Black.

The problem of disparate racial outcomes may seem insurmountable since it has been years in the making (Macleod, 2009) and because suburban schools are often staffed predominantly by White educators (NRC, 2004). By conducting this research on myself, however, I hope to demonstrate that one White leader’s self-awareness and corresponding actions can begin to make a more positive impact across our system. Additionally, I hope to heal from the racism that hurts all of us (Gomez & Brown, 2015) whether we realize it or not.

One Way to Begin Healing

Nearly 18 years after working with Ty, the problems inherent in trying to act colorblind are clearer to me now. If educators in my district are truly colorblind, why do Black and Latin@ students receive discipline referrals much more often than White students do, even when they exhibit similar classroom behaviors? Why do Black and Latin@ students perform academically “below proficient” at much higher rates than their White and Asian American peers? Why are Black and Latin@ students so unlikely to enroll in advanced classes, such as accelerated math,
honors, and Advanced Placement (AP) courses? Why do Black and Latin@ students graduate at rates significantly lower than their White peers do? Though these questions lack simplistic responses, Rutstein (2001) posits the greatest factor involves unconscious racial conditioning. This injustice runs rampantly within me and throughout our school systems still today, albeit in covert fashion. My complicity as an educational administrator and my need for healing, therefore, compel me to take on this research.

Nash and Viray (2014) share the meaning of the word integrity as “whole.” When we perpetuate racism, even unknowingly, we lack wholeness. In answering my own question about why I feel the need to conduct this Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN), I wish to make meaning of my life and the world around me, to develop and think my own thoughts, to become the person I truly want to be—healed and whole. Warren (2010) shares that in the process of standing up for racial justice White activists state they believe they live more fully. I cannot, in good conscience or in striving to feel whole, continue to accept racialized outcomes in my educational system, no matter how imperfectly I approach this work, even if I never achieve racial justice. In examining my life and my work as a racialized being, I intend to consider the following:

1) What additional inside out work do I need to conduct in order to continue becoming less racist?

2) Why would people of color, or even White colleagues, trust me?

3) How can I maintain the courage needed to ask hard questions, have difficult conversations, stand firmly, and/or walk alone?

4) How might self-care and mindfulness help me approach others and myself with loving kindness and non-judgment?

Leonard Cohen (1992) offers a hopeful approach to this imperfect journey, below:
Objectives and Research Question

In studying this topic and sharing my experiences through the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) approach, I hope to write my way toward healing my racism (Nash & Viray, 2014). The journey I describe begins as a result of cognitive dissonance I held because of the way I served students of color, especially those disenfranchised in school. Today, the more I observe the reality of racial injustice in schools, the greater sense of urgency I hold to figure out a way to live with myself as an educator trying to undo some of the damage I caused and through missteps I continue to make. The question I endeavor to explore is how White educational leaders can expose racial injustice and sustain the fight for equity in mostly-White schools and school systems. Of course, the work is never complete and it must be undertaken in conjunction with others.

This topic feels like both a sprint and a marathon. When I think of the students in the schools I presently serve, both hope and hopelessness well up swiftly within me. At the same time, I acknowledge layers of racial injustice exist and have for hundreds of years in the United States. I control only myself and yet, have some influence within my institution; however, systemic racism cannot be eliminated by me or even by a small group of dedicated individuals within my lifetime. Nevertheless, through continual learning, by developing meaningful, cross-race relationships, and in employing both passion and strategy, I hope to make our school system a better place for students and families.
Although I tell my story here, the objective includes offering possible insights for other White leaders working for racial justice in their schools and districts using my experiences. The work I do takes place in a Midwest suburban community in a mostly-White district. On average, student performance outcomes and our school district ratings soar. Families move into our district so their kids can attend good public schools. Moreover, the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of our student body grows slowly and steadily. However, contrary to our many accolades, I work in a district where we serve some demographic groups significantly better than others. Sometimes I hear staff members say we are a great school district, but I argue we will truly become great only when we serve all student groups and families well.

When staff members, colleagues, family members, and friends ask about my research, they sometimes inquire whether I intend to address other marginalized and vulnerable groups of students beyond students who identify as Black or African American and Latin@. In fact, in conversations with most White adults, the topic of under-resourced economic status often arises as justification for low student performance outcomes. When it does, I share that our student data demonstrates that, although there appears to be some overlap, the single most critical predictor of performance in our district is race/ethnicity. In other words, when disaggregated, the performance of our students who are Black or Latin@ is lower on average than for those living in poverty and lower than for students who have special education needs. This indicates to me that institutional racism thrives in our district and it is up to White educators to look in the mirror when considering our participation in its perpetuation.

**Approaching Race from Within**

*I’m asking you to tap into another set of feelings to guide you—understanding and compassion for people of color, outrage at injustice, courage, passion and commitment to building a democratic, multicultural and just society.*

~Paul Kivel, 2011, p. xvi
When I work to acknowledge and change racial injustice, I experience its overall complexity much as Kivel (2011) describes in the quote above. As I learn more about the social construct of race—i.e. something we made up historically to justify power differentials and the abuse of other human beings—I yearn to simplify it in order to enhance racial justice in my circles of control and influence. When I then commit a racial blunder, I realize how deeply racism hides within me. This presents one of many significant challenges I face to unearth racism and diminish its effects. For example, White activists interviewed by Warren (2010) explain they experience mistrust from African American counterparts because of a lack of critical humility among Whites. Within this research project, therefore, I intend to increase my skills of critical inquiry and humility.

During a Leadership Team discussion about building a more equitable system, a colleague told a parable describing false ally-ship. He spoke of a football game he and his White friend attended. When the game ended, White fans approached the pair and began to harass the friend identifying as Black. The White friend disappeared into the crowd until the melee ended. Moments later, the White friend comforted his Black pal. As my colleague relayed his story, I reflected on times when I acted similarly to the White friend, not standing up when my colleague most needed my support.

Sitting back and idly watching others mistreat a colleague of color equates to taking a break from fighting racial injustice in an institution designed to support Whites like me. Though I wanted to defend my actions during some of the events we faced related to racism, I could clearly see myself as a false ally. Despite immersing myself in learning about and addressing
racism for more than a decade’s time, therefore, I regularly find I need to remain open to constructive feedback from colleagues of color and I appreciate that they still offer it.

With each passing year as a leader in education, I remain straddled across the racial justice line between hope when relationships strengthen and hopelessness when students and colleagues of color get trampled or marginalized. I learn regularly through reading, writing, listening, taking action, and assessing outcomes; yet, I cannot shed the racism within me or eliminate the injustices embedded in our school system. Reflecting on a time twenty years ago, I thought I was free of racism though I now understand my racial identity development had barely just begun.

As I learn to accept the reality of racism and find ways to work mindfully for racial justice, despite the vicissitudes, I feel better as a member of humankind. I have labeled this work a marathon rather than a sprint, meaning I must actively search for methods to sustain it over my entire lifetime. Through this research and SPN, I offer windows into segments of my learning journey.

The Journey

In Chapter 2, I describe the Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) methodology. The SPN approach provides a creative way to research one’s own experiences. The methodology was designed by Robert Nash (2004) and explicated by Nash and Bradley (2011). This chapter includes the guidelines utilized within the SPN methodology; here, I also explain the way relevant theory and literature provides support and critique for the research. Moreover, I describe how a dissertation focused on the author may be extrapolated for potential interpretation and application for readers.
In Chapter 3, I explain challenges of conducting this research within the field of education and locating it at my own places of work. The chapter includes my observations of racial injustice through interactions, in our pedagogy, and within policies that guide our system. I describe the immense, but unstated, pressure to avoid the topic of race in schools and the continuous lure toward a White worldview. I also acknowledge the pull toward action, as well as the opportunities to continue the learning journey. The focus of this chapter involves the need to avoid both whitewashing of racial incidents and the alternative, simple fix-it mentality. Although I describe this as my context, aspects of it may transfer to other mostly-White districts across the nation.

In Chapter 4, I share observations of White fragility in myself and in interactions with other Whites in the district community. Here I provide examples of fragility and strategies for staying engaged, despite the discomfort encountered during conversations about racial injustice. These stories of White fragility demonstrate additional possibilities for explaining our lack of progress toward equitable outcomes for all students.

Chapter 5 offers an opportunity to explain my inside out approach. Both the National Equity Project (NEP) and my graduate program encourage leaders to begin with themselves when learning about race and oppression. In this chapter, I reflect upon my White racial identity development. Here I share ways I battle my implicit bias and stereotyping that lead me to commit microaggressions. Alternatively, I explain the process of seeking and sharing counter narratives in my personal and professional networks. I highlight errors in my efforts when working with colleagues of color, and I explain the need to approach learning about race and racial injustice as part of the action steps White leaders like me must take.
In Chapter 6, I describe specific efforts to work with students, staff members, and other leaders in my school district. Some of these attempts provide examples of learning through failure, others prove transformational, and some present lingering challenges. Certainly, no one wants to be known as racist and no educator wants to reproduce oppression of any sort. I also describe my response to others labeling me as “all about equity” and explain how that poses problems in our organization. In this chapter, I share strategies I learned to use when I needed to have direct conversations, when I needed to avoid judgment—both internal and external—and when I needed to forgive myself and move forward. I explain the feelings of isolation I experienced, as well as times when I felt supported. Finally, I relay how I worked to spend energy on the problems of racial injustice rather than on the people involved in the equation.

Chapter 7 centers on sustaining these efforts over the long haul. In this chapter, I relay strategies I have used for several years in dealing with the toughest issues I faced as an administrator. Self-care during stressful times, for example, remains just as important as understanding the nature of impermanence. In addition to tried-and-true strategies for facing the most difficult challenges, I share new skills and perspectives I am presently acquiring that help me confront racism. Not only do these approaches enhance my resilience but they also help increase my effectiveness during highly emotional interactions.

In Chapter 8, I suggest implications of this research for other White leaders attempting to expose racial injustice and sustain the fight for equity in their own school districts. Here, I acknowledge that this battle is never done, never won. I recognize many other White educational leaders may be working towards reducing disparate student outcomes by race in their mostly-White school districts. Using a mindfulness strategy, I understand that many White administrators are “just like me” in some ways; they, too, want to know what to do to improve
their school and district environments for students. Some of these administrators may also recognize the change begins from within. This story, therefore, is not just my story. My findings may extrapolate to leaders locally, statewide, and even across the country where disparate outcomes occur. This narrative also contains the stories of many of our students and some of my colleagues of color, who are ultimately the reason for this research.

I list opportunities for related research on the topic of racial justice in schools in Chapter 9. Significant work must be accomplished before we reach satisfaction that we are doing everything possible to serve students across all demographic groups well. We should not rest until all educational systems pass the test: Treating every child as if she or he were our own child. Research alone may not be sufficient to achieve racial equity in schools; legislative advocacy by scholars and educational partners may also be required. All of us may look in the mirror and look out the window, but we must do both if we want to achieve racial justice.

My hope in conducting this research and sharing this SPN is to continue building upon my own positive White racial identity, to improve my interactions with colleagues and the broader district community in ways that promote racial justice, and to sustain this activism through mindfulness and other self-care practices. Ultimately, I intend to bring to light issues of racial injustice in mostly-White school systems that need to be addressed through individual, institutional, and systems responses. I intend to connect with my readers by sharing common errors in my thinking and actions and by relaying strategies and skills used to sustain progress toward racial justice. In no way do I believe I have the answers, but this project helps move me on this journey toward better understanding, acceptance of non-closure, and personal healing. Before I get started with my story, however, it may be important to include some definitions of words I use throughout this narrative.
Definitions of Key Concepts

Many of the terms I use in describing cultural oppression and racial injustice entered my lexicon in the past decade. Here I define a few key concepts in order to clarify the meaning of the terms as they relate to this narrative. As noted specifically below, various scholars utilize these terms in similar contexts when describing individual and institutional racism. The list of words includes implicit bias, racial justice, microaggressions, fragility, counter narrative, and mindfulness.

**Implicit Bias.** Implicit bias, often termed unconscious bias, refers to associations individuals make with the way people look that play a significant role in evaluating others on an unconscious level. Implicit bias occurs well before conscious thought kicks in. Often, implicit bias related to race arises from racial stereotypes we develop and solidify over time, reinforcing negative associations with people of color. (Kirwan, 2014; NEP, 2015).

**Racial Justice.** With the help of scholars (Kivel, 2011; Michael, 2015; Rutstein, 2001; Warren, 2010) I define racial justice as equitable access to all forms of educational success and positive treatment based on membership in the human race. I understand race as a social construct with no basis in science (Smedley & Smedley, 2005), yet I also recognize that it results in very real negative treatment and consequences for people of color. When I use racial justice, therefore, I mean the absence of any form of oppression or marginalization based on race or ethnicity, and cultural or linguistic differences.

**Microaggressions.** Scholars describe racial microaggressions as statements or actions, often subtle and unintentional, which leave people of color feeling insulted or confused (Solorzano, 2014; Sue, 2010). Racial microaggressions often relate to and/or reinforce negative stereotypes of a particular racial or ethnic group. Other forms of microaggressions exist, related
to gender, class, religion, ability, and more, but I do not refer to them in this narrative, except where explicitly stated.

**Fragility.** With regard to racial justice, I use the term fragility and White fragility interchangeably. DiAngelo (2011) helps me understand White fragility broadly as the inability “to tolerate racial stress” (p. 54). What it can look and sound like involves segregation, defensiveness, excuses, or justification.

**Counter Narrative.** The narrative around race involves so much stereotyping that a counter narrative, sometimes referred to as a counter story, provides specific examples that defy the racial stereotype (NEP, 2015). Counter narratives demonstrate that stereotypes lack transfer or universalizability. Critical race theory exposes this as a myth of racialization through the notion that we construct racial stereotypes socially (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

**Mindfulness.** The term mindfulness refers to mindful awareness in the present moment (Harris, 2014; Hay, 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Mindfulness practices include a number of strategies for training the mind to increase awareness, such as meditation, yoga, gratitude journaling, pausing, and “dropping in,” among other methods. Gomez and Brown (2015) add clarity to the definition in light of this SPN: “Mindfulness, in cultivating awareness, compassion, understanding, and insight, is a path of practice that can decrease bias” (p. 19).

Now that I have described some of the key terms I use throughout the SPN, I turn toward explaining the concept and methodology of the Scholarly Personal Narrative. I have chosen this journey to explore numerous ways to become the human being I aspire to, rather than the one Plato describes below.

*Wouldn't he or she prefer to put up with absolutely anything else rather than associate with those opinions that hold in the cave and be that kind of human being?*

~Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, 380 BCE, p. 3
CHAPTER TWO

THE SCHOLARLY PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Racial justice in schools is a topic ripe for sharing in a way that personalizes quantitative data with relatable experiences to hook the reader. The Scholarly Personal Narrative (SPN) methodology described by Nash and Bradley (2011) involves using research and theory as a lens for examining my personal experiences of working toward racial justice in schools. As I relay the narrative of these experiences and efforts, I use relevant research to question and clarify my interpretations of this qualitative data. Numerous measures of quantitative data overwhelmingly demonstrate disparate racial outcomes in education (NRC, 2004; Shapiro, 2004; Smith et. al., 2011; WCCF, 2013). By conducting narrative research, I hope readers more easily relate to the story. Moreover, having educational leaders empathize with my experiences, errors, and intentions serves as one goal of this SPN.

Narrative Research

Nash and Viray (2014) share that, “SPN is a new form of non-fiction, essay writing… as rigorous, and as vigorous, as other types of academically-certified, quantitative and qualitative research” (p. 7). Narrative research, described by Creswell (2013) as autoethnography, contains this new methodology of the SPN. Creswell (2013) states, “[Autoethnographies involve] the personal story of the author as well as the larger cultural meaning for the individual’s story” (p. 73). This qualitative methodology, therefore, aligns well with the self-reflection and critique needed to learn and lead for racial justice in a school district where our student data displays significant outcome disparities by race. One purpose Creswell (2013) suggests for narrative research is to “lift up the voices of individuals who have been marginalized in our society” (p.
133). Accurately reflecting the voices of others while considering my perspective and my own racism provides a positive challenge for me.

Various broad themes exist at present in leading for equity and racial justice; however, the SPN specifically hones in on the narrative of the author. Nash and Bradley (2011) declare the SPN weaves, “scholarship, personal stories, and universalizable themes in a seamless manner” (p. 24). Storytelling in this fashion supports the needs of both the writer and the reader. In essence, for this study I reflect critically on my story—considering the influence of my own racism on staff and student outcomes, as well as my attempts to lead for racial justice with mindful awareness. For the reader, the SPN explicates my personal story in context. The application of relevant theory to my experiences results in a more profound understanding of why and how racism surfaces in me and across our district.

Although I serve as the subject of the research, I must find connections to theory and literature in order for my personal narrative to emerge as full scholarship. In other words, each theory and literary concept I utilize should assist in questioning, challenging, and illuminating my experiences while working toward racial justice. For example, the theory of White fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) provides an explanation for why I bristle when someone places the label of “racist” on me. In addition, Helms’ (1990) White racial identity development theory describes the stages I traverse as I recognize that my ongoing White privilege stands in opposition to my goal for dismantling racial injustice (EACCW, 2010). Using research, theories, and literature enhances my personal learning experiences by turning them into scholarly understanding. By framing this narrative with research and literature, others may more easily interpret their lived experiences with racial injustice in educational institutions.
From “Me-search” to “We-search”

Praxis describes the concept of theory in practice, which befits the SPN methodology. The author examines and explains her experiences, using theory, in order for the reader to consider aspects of the research that might apply in similar contexts. Although qualitative research does not always generalize well, my intention in using the SPN over any other form of research involves moving the reader beyond more familiar considerations of research-based, best practices in professional development. Nash and Viray (2014) report that the SPN methodology works from the author and radiates outward to the reader. I do acknowledge that my specific context may limit the application of this research to educators in other environments—examples may include those that are more racially diverse or those in different geographical locations. Additionally, the narrative context here involves educational settings rather than that of other fields of employment. Nevertheless, leading for equity and racial justice is often about working with others on a relational level.

Racial justice work in education is more emotional and interpersonal than it is technical and structural (NEP, 2015) and this methodology demands reflection upon my relational leadership skills. Moreover, I intend to examine intrapersonal fluctuations—my emotional reactions in a variety of relevant work situations. By sharing my own story, I move to a place of vulnerability, exposing my own racist thoughts and actions. My intention in doing so is to encourage other educators to conduct profound self-reflection, model inquiry, and take effective steps to expose racism or similar forms of oppression in their schools and systems in order to achieve racial equity and social justice. Citing Denzin, Creswell (2013) states, “the ability of the researcher to illuminate the phenomenon in a thickly contextualized manner… [helps] reveal the historical, processual, and interactional features of the experience” (p. 258). To capitalize on the
opportunity to generalize my experience to others—to move from “me-search” to “we-search,” I intentionally apply all aspects of the SPN methodology.

**Scholarly Personal Narrative Guidelines**

Specific guidelines outlining the SPN demonstrate the nexus between my research topic and this two-fold purpose—improving myself and relating to other White leaders in similar contexts. I could not conduct effective research without considering the use of relevant theory and literature, nor could I assume my context and experiences are unlike that of other administrators. These SPN guidelines, originally developed by Robert Nash and expanded by Nash and Bradley (2011), support research that holds significant integrity. The detailed guidelines, with connections to my research process, follow.

SPN researchers must:

1. **Claim their distinct voice.** This is the most challenging part of my research. I do well listing events that take place related to leading for racial justice in my district, but it is much more difficult to relay emotional responses and errors in my actions as racial issues arise. At the same time, the positivist approach of remaining objective about my research and separate from my study would fail when I feel so passionate about the impact of my leadership on students and staff members. Unger (2014) asserts, “As a researcher brings her voice to bear on a topic, her own convictions, beliefs, perspectives, and ideas will come through” (p. 25).

2. **Create a “through-line” in the narrative.** By analyzing my leadership story, themes related to identity development and racial justice work emerge. One theme that rises to the surface in my research, for example, is awareness of the self and others. The themes connected to this work relate both to my personal experiences and to experiences relayed by others in the school system—both non-Whites and Whites.

3. **Maintain focus on the stories.** Nash and Bradley (2011) explain the SPN requires the researcher must go inward, so “the ‘subjective I’ of the writer… share[s] the centrality of the research along with the ‘objective they’ of more traditional forms of scholarship” (p. 14). The stories of the author intertwine with those with whom she interacts, which also draws the reader into the author’s research on a more personal level.

4. **The author must do “me-search” first.** Although extant theory becomes important in this research like any other, the intensive reflection I conduct demonstrates both my core values and my cognitive dissonance, providing a foundation for my story. As Nash and
Bradley (2011) suggest, it “starts with the me, reaches out to the you, and ends up with universalizable themes that connect with the larger we” (p. 27).

5. **Conduct “we-search:” context and generalizability both hold importance in an SPN.** Similar to the narrative research described by Creswell (2013), themes illuminate “in a thickly contextualized manner” when conducting an SPN. This serves to support the reader in understanding my research and its possibilities for application in the reader’s own school or district setting.

6. **The literature and theory serve the story rather than the opposite.** Unger (2014) states, “[The literature] is used to ground, support, or critique the points the author is making in the narrative… [and is] integrated into the narrative, rather than placed in its own section” (p. 27). In most research papers, the opposite is true. The text written about previous research and literature stands segregated and placed up front to provide evidence the author knows where her research sits in relation to the body of work already conducted on the topic of study.

7. **The SPN requires risk-taking.** Traditional writing conducted in the academy often does not fully engage the reader. Nash and Bradley (2011) suggest a more creative style of narrative writing that pulls the reader into the research more naturally. In order to describe the emotional story of leading for racial justice and equity, struggle and surprise intersperses throughout the text. I use relevant poetry and quotes braided into the narrative hoping to deepen the reader’s interaction with the text.

8. **Understand your story matters.** Although this is my personal story, it also tells a broader tale about racial injustice in education. I acknowledge my intense passion on this topic but also know of many others who hold it in similar light (Warren, 2010). An important story should be told, as our educational institutions have underserved students and families of color for decades. Thus, I hope my trials and tribulations hold value beyond that of my own professional growth.

9. **“Strive to write in a way that is fun and engaging”** (Unger, 2014, p. 28). Most people may not view writing or reading about research as scintillating, but that could be because they have not yet experienced research as story. Nevertheless, Charmaz (2013) shares, “Narratives often contain features that prompt surprise or curiosity” (p. 210). Beyond the natural fit between my experiences with racial injustice, mindfulness practices, and the SPN approach, I hope to draw readers deeply into the story.

10. **The SPN requires “academic vigor”** as explained by Nash and Bradley (2011). This type of research contains rigor and life, theory and story. From Critical Race Theory to the science of meditation practices, the expanse of literature underpinning my writing may surprise readers. Here I find unique connections between racial justice and mindfulness emerging on a regular basis.
“Me-Search” Research

In order to examine my leadership for moving toward greater racial justice and equity in our system, I find I must thoroughly scrutinize my individual history, racism, identity, and reactions and their impact on others in using this SPN approach. The scope of my narrative, therefore, also includes many others in my educational community. While my focus is on reflection and self-awareness, the story also attempts to consider my interactions and influences on others. This research involves students, support staff, teachers, and administrative colleagues only where it helps explicate my beliefs and actions, along with others’ reactions that offer context for my reflections. Aside from myself, I use pseudonyms for everyone connected to my story.

As Nash and Bradley (2011) recommend, I must begin with me-search. Me-search starts by considering my individual history but does not end there. My reflection highlights my personal and professional reasons to work for racial justice and demonstrates my interest in continuing the work of identity development as a leader. The SPN process requires deep examination of the importance of this topic in my life as well as events influencing my journey. In order to conduct “me-search,” therefore, I examine my background and experiences to consider many possible connections to racism.

As I conduct my professional work and reflect on these experiences, I utilize stories, perspectives, and feedback from others and myself as the qualitative data for this research. In order to examine whether my leadership for racial justice and equity is effective, I listen to the people of color—students, family, and staff members—impacted by my racism and by racial injustice in our educational system. Additionally in this process, I carefully consider feedback about my influence on White colleagues, both positive and negative.
This research involves observations, inquiry with students and colleagues of various racial and ethnic backgrounds, and careful self-examination of my emotions and actions in experiences directly related to race. The more I look through this lens, the more I learn about racial justice and the barriers we face to achieving equity in education. On a daily basis, I find new data to reflect upon as I undertake this study. Additionally, as I implement meditative practices, I build skills of inquiry and self-awareness that help me continue to explore my racial and leadership identities. Although this “me-search” may seem self-centered, my errors and insights should offer considerations that transfer to others. First, however, others’ foundational theories, research, and literature offer lenses for me to analyze these experiences and my responses.

**The Place for Theory and Literature in an SPN**

As mentioned briefly in the SPN guidelines listed above, to support critical analysis of my experiences, research weaves throughout the narrative rather than occupying a segregated space in front of the study. Past research, theory, and literature enters the narrative in order to reinforce or question my thinking, to hook the reader, and to offer inspiration for the work. Although the narrative provides insight into my experiences for the reader, scholarship validates them with historical evidence, explanation, or critique.

Nash and Bradley (2011) explain that citing the work of others in this type of research may be desirable, but only when the notion or text inspires the author. They suggest using others’ quotes and ideas, “[if] these citations come from your heart and soul rather than as ritualized padding” (p. 28). Certainly, a great many scholars write about racial disparities and offer reasons for and protests of their existence. The task in this SPN, however, involves honing in on that scholarship which connects directly to the themes emerging from my collection of experiences.
Additional text I choose may complement the narrative or provide greater engagement and insight for the reader.

The more I learn about working for racial justice and using mindfulness in this process, the more I find inspiration from other writers, scholars, and leaders. Readers will see several examples of this inspiration throughout this SPN, from well-known speakers and mindfulness experts to students and colleagues in my district. When using mindfulness to effectively expose racism and fight for justice, revelation can also emerge in the form of emotion, without adequate words to explain an experience. I find that learning from the work of scholars often feels like riding a wave of support and yet, in an SPN, the origin of the wave must rise from within. In short, my story matters, but the layers of individual, institutional, and structural racism and social justice demand that I situate my narrative in a particular context.

*we bring a part of where we are from to every place we go.*

~”Meteor Shower,” Clint Smith, 2016, p. 53

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Conclusion

As suggested by Smith (2016) in “Meteor Shower” above, I bring each aspect of my story along this research path as I enter the world of academic scholarship. The Scholarly Personal Narrative approach requires profound self-study not conducted as if in a vacuum. This narrative research method demands academic vigor, breathing life into foundational theories and literature through an emotional tale of journeying toward racial justice through mindful educational leadership.

This SPN endeavors to engage the reader through its creative style. At the same time, the vigor needed requires that I clearly explain the “me-search” conducted to examine my interest in the topic of racial justice. In addition, I must consider the research of scholars as I attempt to
improve my racial identity development and mindful interactions with others in my district. Moreover, the SPN should offer possibilities for transfer to others in similar contexts. Although I acknowledge that my story matters, in submitting it to the realm of academia, other learners must also find it useful.

It is my hope that readers connect to themes and personal experiences rooted in this narrative. If educators make similar observations regarding barriers standing in the way of racial justice, if they find strategies for examining their own identity and biases, or if they relate to these approaches to effectively expose racism and sustain the fight for equity, then this SPN research is successful. In addition, I highlight where my research situates within an array of work already conducted around racial justice in education and I offer suggestions for future exploration. It is time now to share the avenues I journeyed in my attempts to achieve these ends.

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CHAPTER THREE

OBSERVATIONS WITHIN THE SYSTEM

My career in education includes more than 17 years as a relatively successful administrator; nevertheless, I sometimes feel completely inept when it comes to leading for racial justice. Although I would consider much of my leadership experience as positive, I liken my journey to swimming up river against a strong current, especially when I attempt to expose racial structures and processes in our schools and system. Moreover, unearthing my own racism parallels untangling a twisted ball of yarn while unintentionally tying new knots in the process.

In the past five years working in my present district, I recall several situations when I questioned my abilities and fell significantly short of the mark in attempting to lead for racial justice. Some errors involved lack of experience or novice political strategy and part of my failure resulted from constraints built into the system.

For instance, I worked on removing barriers to enrollment in honors level courses over the past five years. Despite acknowledging that students of color lacked representation in these sections, some students, teachers, parents, and board members challenged our detracking efforts. As I offered supports and resources for teacher teams to design a course that provided every student with the opportunity to earn honors, members of these groups fought tooth-and-nail to maintain a separate honors track. With the support of leadership colleagues, we removed all barriers for enrollment in the segregated sections. I worried, nonetheless, that these measures stopped short of creating honors sections that matched the overall school demographics or offered appropriate rigor for every student. My lack of success in leading this initiative and other similar efforts led to feelings of frustration, inadequacy, and even cynicism within me. I yearned
to find strategies to help me maintain the necessary energy for and improve the likelihood of
future success in sustaining the fight for equity in our school system.

My Context

The context in which I serve as an educational leader mirrors what exists in suburban
locations across the United States (NRC, 2004). All schools and districts in which I have worked
are constituted by majority-White student enrollment and staff demographics. Across these
systems, my career path involves several shifts: starting as a high school teacher, moving into
administration as a high school associate principal, serving as a high school principal in two
districts, and now leading in a district office role. In every location, most staff members
identified as White, like me. Nevertheless, the racial diversity among students, families, and staff
members in my current district is presently on the rise.

I now work as a district-level secondary director in a suburban school system with
approximately seven thousand students from pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. Aside from
our district office, we have ten facilities, consisting of six elementary schools, two large middle
schools, one small innovative high school, and one large, comprehensive high school. In the past
five years alone, the number of K-12th grade students who identify as White declined by more
than six percent. Each year several of our families with students who identify as Black or Latin@
transfer back and forth between our district and the urban school system we border. Our
neighboring district now claims minority-majority status, as of the 2017-18 school year. Four
other school districts like ours surround this urban district of more than 30,000 students.

Families move to our district because of its reputation and its proximity to a large state
university, which results in steadily increasing housing costs and an elevated number of families
with high educational attainment. In general, people consider our district on the liberal side of
the spectrum, as well as slightly progressive. For example, we use terms like “equity” and “mindfulness” without major backlash from the staff or the greater community. On the other hand, our district also finds itself situated in the epicenter of the greatest disparities of outcomes by race/ethnicity in the United States. Our district, like many across the county and state, flaunts high academic scores, attendance, and graduation rates, especially for students who are White, Indian, and Far East Asian. In contrast, our students who identify as Black, Latin@, or of two or more races display significantly lower outcomes on all three measures.

My fifth year in the district sees scant positive changes in this disparate data despite significant efforts to address these inequities on multiple fronts. We publicly acknowledge a strong reputation, yet admit we will not reach the descriptor of a “great” district until we serve every demographic student population well. We hold annual equity institutes, preparing staff to acknowledge and interrupt implicit bias, stereotyping, and microaggressions, and to implement building-level actions that address school and classroom culture and climate. We support student leadership at the secondary level by providing platforms for their voices, facilitating school and community forums on race, and helping solidify student action plans related to bridging peer groups. We participate in the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN) to learn from other districts across the country who also want to eliminate achievement and opportunity gaps. We undertake learning about racial equity and social justice regularly in our leadership team meetings and staff professional development activities. Despite all of these efforts and more, improvements in student outcome data for Blacks and Latin@s lag.

It seems as if we make tiny nicks in the dense armor of racial injustice, yet, experience little improvement. This is the most important work to undertake and sustain if we intend to become a great district for all of our kids. Moreover, I believe working toward racial justice
offers one of the only ways to heal ourselves as a mostly-White community. As Warren (2010) suggests, “Racism undermines the humanity of White people” (p. 87). White educators fail to be fully human until we take care of all students as we would our own.

I do not suffer defeat lightly in my efforts to lead any initiative, much less one focused on improving racial justice. Once I set out to accomplish something, I typically forge onward, making adjustments as needed, until achieving the goal. Most initiatives in education require teamwork; thus, if I serve as a genuine leader or co-leader, others must be willing to follow. In addition, leadership includes accepting critical feedback. I find that exposing racial injustice and fighting for equity in a mostly-White school system requires greater fortitude and thicker armor than any other initiative. Repeatedly in our district, I hear staff members, board members, students, and family members explicitly acknowledge the need to address racial opportunity gaps. However, I also regularly witness opportunity hoarding (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Nicks in my emotional armor happen when I hear members of these groups say things like, “Motivated students deserve to work in separate settings with like-minded peers.”

They know and they appreciate the things which the white friends of humanity...are doing, but they know that these liberal white folk are not triumphant, that they are facing a terrific wall of prejudice and evil; and every day these students in their lives are experiencing this evil.

~W.E.B Du Bois, 2001, p. 71

The Push Away from Racial Understanding

As Du Bois (2001) notes above, Whites who work for racial justice may face great challenges. Nevertheless, students of color suffer every day from racial injustice in schools. Because I live in a world that generally refuses to acknowledge privilege for Whites and the lack thereof for people of color, I could easily forget the difficulties faced daily by people of color if I
step away from these efforts. While at work, however, ignorance no longer equals bliss as I cross paths with students and staff members from myriad backgrounds, including many who experience marginalization and oppression in our system. I live in a neighborhood that offers interactions with people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, but my race and class still get in the way unless I intentionally and actively work toward racial justice. In other words, DuBois’ (2001, p. 71) wall of evil includes my own indifference.

As a White middle-class educator, I see peers in the workplace every day, nearly all of whom look like me. When we share stories of our upbringing, we find a multitude of commonalities. In all of the jobs I have held within the field of education, every one of my supervisors, past and present, identify as White. In other words, Whiteness is the norm everywhere in my educational communities. This represents one of the main tenets of critical race theory—that racism is ordinary (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In line with this theory, for example, I have to ask why our district employs not one single classroom teacher who is Black out of more than 500. If I fail to see this abnormality in my educational system, how can I purport to expose racial injustice?

From colleagues of color I know well, I regularly have opportunities to learn of negative treatment that they receive based on race. When I participate in this mistreatment, I appreciate constructive feedback from colleagues about my responsibility for reproducing racial injustice. Sometimes, this happens when I reflect on an analogy a colleague shares in a gentle manner to describe an experience of racism. On occasion, my learning alternatively takes place through interactions demonstrating stark racial injustice.

One example brings me great humility and some shame upon reflection. This occurred during preparation for our first district equity institute in 2015 when my colleague, Johnny, who
identifies as a Black male, collaborated with me and other colleagues to design the institute. A gap in our team’s communication widened and Johnny increasingly distanced himself from our otherwise all-White team. During these months of our planning efforts, several incidents of police shootings of unarmed Black males took place. I knew this affected Johnny more deeply than any of us and attempted to check in with him regularly.

All the while, Johnny’s decreasing participation in the planning process frustrated me, because I felt he did not “pull his weight” on the team. When we talked about this after the institute ended, Johnny expressed feeling that we marginalized his voice during our planning process. I witnessed Johnny’s emotional turmoil, reflected on my contributions to that, and started to listen more carefully to understand his perspective better. Looking back on my insensitivity toward Johnny, I now know that I let my Whiteness—White norms I held for everyone—block my ability to consider his experience fully. I, therefore, marginalized Johnny further by not engaging him directly in conversation months earlier.

At times, White colleagues declare they do not believe certain situations involve racism. My actions with Johnny as relayed above, were clearly racist and yet, unrecognizable to me at the time. Additional examples of racial injustice occur when colleagues skirt Marcus, another director who is Black, and they communicate with a different district-level leader, instead. When I ask questions of White colleagues about why they do this, the administrators involved provide various excuses for leaving Marcus out of the communication loop. If it took place on rare occasion, I might concur race has little to do with it; however, it happens frequently. This reminds me that those of us without personal experience—i.e. being on the receiving end of racial injustice—assume the person of color simply misunderstands the situation. We fail to see
our actions as racially unjust, even when patterns surface. In fact, I argue we Whites live with many myths related to race and ethnicity.

One of the myths I grew up with, that society and schools reinforce regularly, is meritocracy: People who worked hard in life got ahead. For example, I thought I went to college based on my grades, extra-curricular activities, and savings from multiple jobs. Some of that proved true; however, I also had a car at my disposal in high school so I could participate in school activities and work. In fact, my father’s dealership provided the car and covered the cost of the gas for me. I did my homework and usually paid attention in school, but my older sister also attended the university where I began as a college freshman. Did legacy factor in my acceptance? Maybe her enrollment there enhanced my application process.

When I think of the multitude of students who lived in poverty or identified as students of color with whom I worked over the years, I can surface names and faces of those who put forth more effort than I did in high school. Yet, many of them could not attend college. Some could not afford it; others could not gain access despite their hard work in school. Some students struggled to engage in the irrelevant curricula that offered no hope for their future, leading to poor grades. Today, I stand humbled by the determination and participation of these students, despite what they faced in and out of schools related to race and class.

What intrigues me about the myth of meritocracy involves what I see from colleagues of color who work harder than many of the White people I know. Four of the thirty-some administrators serving on our leadership team identify as people of color. Three of the four are presently working on doctorate degrees, have families, teach at the college level, and volunteer. Nevertheless, when each of the four began their employment with the district, White staff members questioned their credentials and/or their integrity. Some White staff members
perpetuated rumors about a few of these administrative colleagues, prompting others to question how we could hire them in the first place. I wonder why none of this happened to me when the district hired me five years ago. In addition, my other White leadership team colleagues did not face these same barriers when hired.

This treatment from staff takes place often when we select a person of color, no matter the position. For example, we thoroughly vetted my colleague, Marcus, for a director vacancy and he squarely rose to the top of the candidate pool in a competitive bid for the position. Upon selecting Marcus, I became appalled to hear that White faculty members looked up his background online, searching for red flags. The excitement I felt for working with and learning from Marcus quickly turned into a pit growing in my stomach. I worried about people’s attempts to diminish his influence and label him before he served even one day in his new position. No wonder we have such difficulty increasing staff diversity in our district! As a leader within this system, I feel compelled to examine how I might influence a positive change in our racialized culture.

**Sphere of Influence in the System**

My sphere of control in the district may be quite limited as a director; however, my sphere of influence is considerably larger and holds the potential to grow, if I undertake racial justice work effectively. Warren (2010) shares that White activists feel responsible for engaging other Whites in shifting ideas and practices away from perpetuating institutional racism. With more than 90% of staff members identifying as White, I feel a strong sense of duty to work with them to reveal the layers of racism students and colleagues of color face. I see the wounds we cause when we enact or reinforce racism and I believe these wounds affect all of us, whether we realize it or not. The following words from Dr. King’s Letter from a Birmingham Jail seep into
my being: “Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly” (1963, p. 1). As a result, I focus on taking action to achieve racial justice, especially when I believe we have individual and collective control and responsibility.

I work with a variety of individuals and groups across our system. In my role as a director, for example, I support building administrators in each of our secondary schools. I also work with teachers and staff teams across the district. Most of these people identify as White. Along with other colleagues, I present to our Board of Education. I also have opportunities to develop partnerships with parents and community members for committee work. On occasion, I hold conversations with students in classrooms, in meetings, and through opportunities to facilitate their learning directly. These students represent the most diverse groups of all people with whom I work. They are diverse by race, class, gender, and intersections of identification, among other aspects of individual identity. As noted in the literature, the racial diversity of student enrollment in the United States greatly outweighs that of the teaching force (Delpit, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Michael, 2015; NRC, 2004). Working with these various individuals and groups in the district affords me opportunities to exert gentle influence or strong pressure, where appropriate, regarding the ways we enact or reinforce racial injustice across our system.

During many of the learning activities, White participants become indignant about system inequalities and immediately turn toward a fix-it mentality, asking, “So, what can we do to eliminate racial injustice?” When I reflect on the initial phases of my learning journey, I remember the heartache I felt in my work with students like Ty. I, too, wanted to fix the problems he faced, and did not realize I was part of the problem. With greater acceptance of the permanence of racism (Kivel, 2011; NEP, 2015), however, I understand more fully today the
most important work to be undertaken is my internal work—that of recognizing and disrupting the racism within me. This realization both excites and terrifies me: I acknowledge control over my conscious thought and actions, but comprehend that so much of the learning required of me resides buried in my unconsciousness.

**Learning as Doing**

Examination of the implicit nature of racial bias requires extreme patience and intensive observation. Most White educators I know demonstrate a desire to fix this problem in themselves as soon as they learn about it. This desire ebbs and flows within me, even though I comprehend that I cannot rid myself of racism. When observing students during social justice learning experiences, I notice White students immediately want to change the situation, too. Alternatively, their peers of color demonstrate experiential maturity related to racism and exhibit significant patience with their classmates.

Few challenges related to racial injustice are simple; most are both complex and complicated. This problem is multi-layered, with deep, historical roots that continues to propagate like unstoppable weeds. Not only does it involve individuals, but spreads in communities, systems, and structures across all societal contexts (NEP, 2015). The more I learn about the complexity of the problem, the more I comprehend that the best action I can take involves continuous learning through immersion and self-discovery. Nevertheless, I still experience regular urges to fix the situation myself.

Sometimes, my position keeps me from immediately acting to resolve what I see as an injustice. For example, a time I refrained from injecting myself into a situation involved the National Honor Society (NHS) induction process. The demographics of the students in NHS did not match that of our larger school population, demonstrating that it provided another example of
our racialized system. I learned the advisers altered a student’s application because he attached a second page to the application, which broke the rules. They tore off the second page of the application submitted by this student—one of our top Black male students involved in several activities. I knew this student would meet the qualifications required for NHS admission, yet I could not intervene. I badly wanted to direct the staff to reverse the decision. Nevertheless, with a new principal overseeing the process, I thought my questioning would not change the outcome. Instead, my place in this situation rested more with professional development than efforts to steer building-level practices.

When educators in our school district go through a transformational professional learning experience, such as our Equity Institute, they discover many ways racial injustice embeds itself in education. Here again, I can empathize with their quest simply to fix the system. Ladson Billings (2011) explains that she refrains from telling White educators what to do because they will just do it, as if a checklist exists. In other words, we must balance the doing with necessary, critical self-reflection—exploration of the ways we ourselves demonstrate or reinforce racism in the educational system. For example, in this research investigation, I experience messy learning, discomfort, frustration, conflict, and humanization all at the same time. Without the intrapersonal excavation and the examination of interpersonal experiences, these racial justice efforts would simply turn into intellectual learning exercises.

I find both the internal and external work important as an administrator. I choose to undertake nearly every formal opportunity presented to learn about race and related forms of injustice. As important, however, informal situations provide frequent chances for new learning to occur. When I lead professional learning experiences for others and they ask what they can do about fighting racial injustice, I suggest that continued learning and self-exploration may be
more important than fixing others (EACCW, 2010; Rutstein, 2001). We sometimes jump to action but do not acknowledge how we turn people off to the very solutions necessary for improving our system. These efforts parallel training for the Ironman, yet as mentioned, I frequently experience the urge to solve racial injustice immediately. I worry about students and colleagues of color now, as I consider how long my internal approach and my work with White colleagues will take. This evokes a sense of hopelessness within me.

In the midst of planning for our third summer of the Equity Institute in 2017, where we educate staff members about implicit bias, stereotypes, and microaggressions, I learned of research demonstrating a potential boomerang effect of this educational approach. Social psychologists describe the boomerang effect as the unintended consequences of trying to persuade persons in a way that results in them believing the opposite. In other words, our work to educate teachers about implicit bias could actually reinforce that bias. My hopes for our work diminished further and questions flooded my consciousness regarding potential damage related to our attempts to improve understanding and to close gaps for students. Our intentions involved making our schools and district more welcoming and effective for students and families of color. Thus, this research intrigued and troubled me at the same time.

Now I worry that my naiveté regarding White-on-White work could result in solidifying racial bias. When I learn new, disconcerting information like this, I scramble to respond by asking colleagues about their experiences with interrupting unconscious bias. I lack confidence in the perspectives of Whites, alone. Therefore, I communicate with colleagues of color, asking about their observations and experiences, as well as what they are discovering in their research. I still feel unsettled as we continue to educate students, staff, and community members about how unconscious bias plays a role in racial injustice (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; NEP, 2015). The nagging
possibility of a boomerang effect results in uncertainty that our work will help move the needle of racial justice in the right direction. I cling to teetering assuredness, with responses from many Equity Institute participants who claim improved self-awareness after our equity institute.

When I first participated in the NEP’s Leading for Equity Institute in the Spring of 2015, it moved me toward a profound conviction to address opportunity and achievement gaps in our district. I attended the institute with a small team of district-level colleagues. We found it transformational. Because of our collective experience there, we decided to create our own equity institute for staff members, graduates, and family members in our district.

As soon as we opened enrollment for our equity institute, it filled with staff participants from every building and level. We designed it to include the educational components of implicit bias, stereotyping, microaggressions, and counterstories. We built in time for participants to envision goals and action plans for effective work with students and families of color. The exit slips and plans of action revealed significant shifts in perspective from nearly every individual participant and building-level team. These results contrasted with the news we received of possible deleterious boomerang effects.

Questions that remained for me, therefore, included:

1) Does this research involve required or voluntary bias awareness education?

2) By showing people negative impacts of implicit racial bias, stereotyping, and microaggressions, are we actually reinforcing those thoughts?

3) Should we immediately shift our planning for the next round of the equity institute to include more focus on what to do versus what not to do?

4) What value does the institute hold for members of different racial demographic groups?

Maybe answers to these questions lie in the notion that we can only change ourselves. On the other hand, we cannot simply accept as inevitable the outcome disparities in our schools for
students of color. Markus Brauer, the researcher who informed my team members and me about the possible boomerang effect, uses social marketing principles to encourage changes in behaviors. His staff offers research participants strategies for initiating intergroup conversations and ideas about what successful peers do to increase racial diversity and inclusivity. With a questioning mind, I reflected on racial incidents that involved people who completed our institute. Because some events reproduced racial injustice, I continued to worry about the boomerang effect versus lasting changes in behaviors.

During one of the institutes, when staff members asked what they could do about racial injustice, I offered a potential action that might positively affect our system. I facilitated the institute with four staff members of color. As I shared earlier, three of them received immense scrutiny from teaching staff after starting in their new positions in our district. Questions about their credentials and/or character spread through rumors among staff members in and across school buildings. For institute participants, therefore, I shared examples of these rumors. I explained that the same did not occur upon my hiring, despite similar qualifications.

I attempted to convey to participants the intensity of my frustration through my voice, my stance, and my choice of words. In a moment of relative calm, during what is otherwise an emotional professional learning experience, I stood on a chair in front of about 70 staff participants. I told the story of one of our colleague’s induction ordeals and asked several questions about why participants think this rumormongering happens to staff members of color. I ended by repeating their often-asked question, “What can we do to fix racial injustice in our district?” I answered this with a plea that staff members, “Shut that shit down when you hear it.” In order to drive it home, I repeated, “One thing you can do is shut that shit down!” No one deserved the scrutiny under a microscope that our colleagues of color received.
Educators may question my choice of language as less-than-professional, but my desire to communicate passionately to staff members at times overrides my concern for professionalism. I hoped participants found this experience memorable the next time they heard one of these rumors. In fact, a year after I asked teachers in the institute to cauterize negative rumors, I heard from an elementary teacher who said she felt freed by my plea. This teacher, I will call Paige, told me that she heard about my impassioned request from one of the instructional coaches at the institute. Paige felt frustrated by messages from colleagues she believed demonstrated deficit thinking about their students of color. When the instructional coach relayed my message to Paige, the two of them discussed how she might be able to “shut that shit down” by naming the deficit-based comments and using counter narratives that reflected the assets of students and families, instead. Knowing my plea rippled out to students in an elementary classroom provided a sense of empowerment to support the positive changes I wanted to see.

I acknowledge my privilege in acting this way without reproach. As a White leader, I must fully understand how my race plays a role in the perceptions of others, in my influence on others, and in my own thoughts and actions. In the past, knowing this might have produced a sense of guilt, but today I recognize White guilt as unproductive.

The Many Ways I Am White

My racial understanding has been developing for more than five decades, but I still often overlook the Whiteness buried within and surfacing around me. As a young child, I had opportunities to meet people with different racial and ethnic identities. In my teen years, my surroundings were nearly all White. Following high school, in larger cities, my circle of friends
expanded. Nevertheless, my work environment shifted, resulting in mostly-White colleagues. I had brief opportunities throughout my lifespan to learn alongside people of color.

When I entered formal schooling in kindergarten, I noticed students who looked different from me. I liked a boy with very dark skin whose name was Earl and we often played together at recess until my parents enrolled me in first grade at a Catholic school. I liked school there but found myself angry when I thought the nuns mistreated classmates. At that time in my life, I saw my nearly all-White school as “normal.” No children who were Black or African American attended that school during those seven years. In fact, even in the public high school I attended, only one family with children who identified as Black attended the school. Yancy (2017) explains how we socially construct White spaces so we can move through them with ease and comfort. I wonder how this caused unease for those few classmates and families of color. In those formative years of my life, however, I had little comprehension of my race, even as I longed to attend a school with greater racial diversity.

In my first year of college at a large university in the South, I lived with women from several backgrounds and countries. Although this reduced the Whiteness of the space around me (Yancy, 2017), I still lacked much interaction with people identifying as Black or African American. Alternatively, I made friends with people from Brazil, Lebanon, Greece, and Italy. The absence of classmates and coworkers identifying as Black was lost on me during my college experience in Texas.

At that time, I lacked awareness of wounds buried inside me because of my membership within a White society that treated African Americans and other Black individuals as less than human. Without relationships with members of these communities, I could not explicitly surface the hurt and subsequently work toward healing. Moreover, the terms people of color and racial
*diversity* remained too broad to dissect the different ways my own identity was connected to that of other racial and ethnic groups. During this period of my life, however, I lacked comprehension of how the racial identity of others resulted from White supremacy, in which I participated.

The spaces and circles I traversed remained mostly White, except on occasions when I left my home city and state. For example, six months after our wedding, during my senior year in college, my spouse and I journeyed to Central Mexico. After a few days in Mexico City, we took a bus to Puebla. On the way out of town, the poverty represented by hundreds of shanties astounded me. I broke into tears. A noticeable un-suturing (Yancy, 2017) began here. Yancy (2017) describes this un-suturing as a “Site of openness, loss, and great discomfort…a site of suffering” (p. 13). Before this experience, the diversity I longed for focused on my own enrichment. While in Mexico, I began to feel White, middle class guilt; yet, I still lacked understanding of the need to explore my internal complicity as an oppressor. Nevertheless, with a broken heart, I felt an opening that required further investigation.

After graduating from college, my husband and I moved to Americus, Georgia, to participate in a training program for an international service organization. Still in my early 20’s, awareness of my race and class privilege struck. Americus seemed worlds away from where I grew up, with its red dirt and rotting boards on the front porches all across town. Friends advised that we avoid certain establishments in town, even when we were with other friends of color. The sense of injustice in me remained overshadowed by my ignorance about lingering anger toward Whites for our historical oppression of Blacks. At the same time, this ignorance kept me comfortable more often than not in the few years that followed. In my early 20’s, I remained rather oblivious to my own racial identity.
The next time I found myself hyper-aware of my race, I was an associate principal, ten years later, driving a student home from truancy court. This student lived in an area of high-density housing, where most of our students of color resided. As I drove into the neighborhood, heads turned and watched me drop her off at home. My heart raced and my grip on the wheel tightened. I wondered what they thought of me and remember wanting to explain that I had developed a relationship with this student. Today, however, I wonder if she thought so, too. In my early years as an administrator, I experienced frustration and heartache when my racial and socioeconomic background created barriers for connecting with students of color.

Now, more than 17 years later, I notice my race regularly. I no longer see it as “normal” when I find myself surrounded only by White people, though it happens often. On the flipside, I still experience feelings of awkwardness when I am in the minority. For example, my husband and I recently attended a Thanksgiving meal for local families at a neighborhood center near our students’ homes. We arrived a bit late and the food lines had cleared. White school staff members—all colleagues of mine—served the buffet dishes, which had little left in them. The two of us surveyed the room in discomfort, not knowing if we should eat from the waning food supplies or simply sit down at a long table. I felt like a sore thumb and searched urgently to find students and families I knew.

Sitting down with a family of color who did not know us might have exposed our ignorance and racism. The discomfort I felt likely resulted from fear of saying the wrong thing and offending others. Ultimately, we grabbed a small plate anyway, sat down with a Latino family we did not know, and asked where the children attended school. The temporary awkwardness we felt subsided as we ate and talked. On the way home, still hungry, we agreed not to stop for more food, another privilege we acknowledged. Feelings of sadness lingered as
we thought of the economic hardships many of our families of color experienced regularly. The complexity and interconnected nature of race and class issues made us feel powerless in the moment. Obviously, my Whiteness entailed more than just skin color. Participation in this Thanksgiving meal revealed lack of opportunities through housing, food, and material wealth.

Although I do not think of my race all day every day, I notice it much more often than I used to. Rarely do I find myself in the minority, no matter where I go during my weekly routine. I remain comfortable with Whiteness, from the ubiquitous availability of foods I eat, to the streets I bike or walk, to the sounds around me. At work, most colleagues also identify as White and find themselves in familiar surroundings. The language I use and assets we bring to work, therefore, are generally recognized and valued, rather than questioned. I know I am White because I remain comfortable the majority of time. In other words, I find my culture represented nearly everywhere; Peggy McIntosh (1990) deems this White privilege.

In reality, however, I feel a significant void in my life with so few cross-race relationships. When I contemplate this, a sense of sadness seeps into my soul. This arises from the ways I see the “other” depicted and treated in our society, but also from the understanding that I participate in this treatment through conscious and unconscious thoughts and decisions (NEP, 2015; powell, 2015). I recognize I make choices that largely result in separating myself from people of color (Shapiro, 2004). Shapiro (2004) notes that segregated communities and schools arise from several small and large decisions individual families make, often based on financial security and education for their children. Thus, if I want to journey further toward a positive racial identity and learn from others, I must actively work to initiate and develop additional cross-race, cross-class reciprocal relationships (Unger, 2013). The more often I
question the basis of my comfort and interrogate my racism, the more I refrain from reproducing racial injustice as Yancy (2017) describes below.

Implications of their whiteness... 

admit to how it functions to keep them alive, 
to keep them flourishing, to keep them safe and complicit with racialized injustice. 

~Yancy, 2017, p. xv
CHAPTER FOUR

WHITE FRAGILITY

In our mostly White schools, we avoid otherwise common sense actions with students of color for fear of exposing our racism or experiencing racial distress. For example, when I stepped in for a building administrator and a student who identified as Black crossed well beyond the line of acceptable behaviors, I tried to redirect him and failed. As the student ignored my direction and, in fact, escalated inappropriate behaviors, I felt powerless. Because I had not established a relationship with the student or his family, I worried about stepping in as the White “witch” who appeared void of compassion. Had the student been White, I might have reacted more forcefully and communicated with less hesitation. This demonstrated my White fragility. DiAngelo (2011) defines fragility as, “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (p. 57). At times, patterns of similar adult behaviors across the school over time created a culture fraught with White fragility. Unless we White educators confronted our fragility, therefore, we could not hope to provide an effective educational environment for our students of color.

Knowing this type of White fragility permeated the school environment, I called our district leaders together to problem-solve with the building administrative team. We acknowledged the blurred behavior boundaries drawn for some students. At the same time, we clearly enforced the code of conduct for our White students, resulting in a climate of unhealthy racial stress. It helped to process this concern with colleagues like Johnny and Marcus using my response as an example. Alternatively, they also expressed concerns about patterns of Black male students receiving amplified consequences from White educators for low-level behaviors that White students do not.
These colleagues identify as Black and have awareness of the traumatic backgrounds of some of the students. They understand that all students need boundaries, but we cannot use that as an excuse for over-aggressively responding to students of color. When they addressed similar behavior situations, they often held immediate credibility with the students and families—one that I lacked—resulting in a positive response from the student. Johnny and Marcus agreed that we needed to communicate and hold a firmer line on excessive behaviors for students of color and acknowledged it can be more challenging for White educators. On the other hand, we lost credibility when we regularly nit-picked minor behaviors that we overlooked for White students. Naturally, it took us a lot more effort to develop a positive relationship with students of color and their families, but that was exactly what we needed to do. While avoiding a response resulted from my White fragility, assertively responding to low-level behaviors demonstrated racism.

Convincing students of color that my goals as a leader involve their success in school requires more time and commitment because I am White. I may never reach this goal if I cannot overcome my White fragility. Brown (2004) reminds me that we hear and see more through our beliefs than through our ears and eyes. The complex nature of this racial dynamic leaves me frustrated and results in sleepless nights as I explore possible paths forward. The socially constructed nature of race makes it even more maddening and perplexing to understand why I respond differently to students identifying as Black versus White.

At times, I, and other Whites with whom I work, exhibit the White fragility that DiAngelo (2011) describes anytime race enters the conversation. I often wonder how a social construct can cause such stress, but then I consider the history of racism and my connection to its roots. Therefore, I attempt to interrogate my actions when working with students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, asking, “Would I be expecting this from the student, or
responding this way, if the student were White?” During these experiences I fully recognize the difficulties Warren (2010) communicates as he shares, “How to challenge… racism in a way that moves [us] forward rather than causes defensiveness and retreat” (p. 116).

In most other forms of social activism, the “enemy” is someone else. White Americans, however, are themselves profoundly implicated in racism.

~Mark Warren, 2010, p. 108

Ω

When White staff members experience fear or anxiety related to racism, I can certainly empathize. I endure self-doubt regularly because of my own racial conditioning. Conversations with people of color, especially on the topic of race and its impact in society, take place too infrequently. With my office mate, Marcus, I have the opportunity to ask naïve questions and safely expose my ignorance. I do not assume Marcus answers for all people of color or for Black males, but it helps to hear another perspective. I hold similar conversations with Johnny, though we work together less often. When I interact with new individuals who identify as Black or African American, I am much less assured in my words and actions. However, White fragility maintains and reinforces racial injustice when I avoid necessary conversations about race. I must face it head-on in order to make progress toward achieving a more positive identity for myself.

As a White person, I sometimes find myself feeling that I need to prove myself with people of color I meet. Three years ago, for example, some of our high school students asked me to sit on a panel at a conference they put together on the topic of racial disparities in our county. The conference attracted about 150 high school students from four area districts, most of whom were students of color. Out of about nine panel members, I was the sole White individual. I vividly recall wondering if students from other districts questioned my legitimacy as a panel
member. This may not have reflected students’ thinking; rather, it might have simply been my perception. Nevertheless, I immediately wished I had established credibility with all of the students in advance. The thoughts and feelings I held likely reflected my insecurity as an imposter. The anxiety I experienced because of this self-doubt made me want to leave the front table. I often realize that working toward a positive White identity demands courage in times like this.

In lieu of avoiding the topic of personal and institutional racism, I must remain with discomfort and model ways to work through, instead of around, racism and other forms of oppression and marginalization. It feels easier to do this when we have generic conversations, rather than when addressing a particular incident. During a specific race-related incident, individuals sometimes retreat to separate camps to discuss the situation, even when we recognize that we make better decisions working together. When leaders work in isolation to avoid racial stress, I feel frustrated by our lack of progress. It often results in errant thinking and does not lead to a racially just resolution.

DiAngelo (2011) explains that people exhibit White fragility in many ways. Sometimes, Whites argue or defend their position. Some people may maintain silence and others simply leave the situation. I notice my White fragility frequently shows up as a statement of defense. In the moment, however, I rarely recognize it as White fragility. Often, I come to that conclusion only when I take time for critical reflection (Brown, 2004).

**White Fragility among Administrative Colleagues**

When racial incidents arise in our district and we forget to include administrators of color at the table, the issue deteriorates further and results in inadequate resolution for everyone involved. One example in recent years involved a White high school student who flew the
Confederate flag in the parking lot during the last week of school. His schoolmate, a student of color whom I will call Bianca, posted a response on social media to which many peers reacted. In the exchange, Bianca claimed the school was racist and nothing would happen if she went to administration with the issue. The building administrators did respond and they utilized restorative practices; however, we—as a district system—failed to consider a comprehensive approach to support everyone involved.

Resolution took place without collaborative development of a communication response plan. One building administrator responded to peers; a district public relations person spoke to the media; deans investigated the incident. Accusations of racial injustice hurt colleagues on many levels; thus, I worried about each of my colleagues individually and about our team as a whole. I thought, here we go again! My mind raced, my brow furrowed, my chest tightened, and I found my neck and shoulder muscles tense. Our system-level response to this incident proved little better than the multiple other racial incidents that occurred in the past few years.

Our disconnectedness set us back on the journey toward racial justice and left each of us feeling angry and frustrated. I learned from Johnny when he spoke about feeling marginalized by our inability to listen for understanding; therefore, this time, I wanted direct communication with the team members involved. Rather than avoid each other or converse by email, I asked that we meet to develop a systemic, rapid-response plan we could agree upon for future incidents of racial discrimination. Although I felt a responsibility to organize and structure the meeting—a common role for me—I spoke very little during the process.

The experience resulted in significant discomfort, as I sensed the tension between colleagues I respected immensely. I noticed my fragility during the meeting related to my past errors in handling similar situations. As a result, I worried that colleagues who were White
would say something that disrespected colleagues of color, minimized the hurt students of color expressed, or exposed their own racial bias. In other words, I worried that my White colleagues would step in the same potholes I had in similar conversations. My anxiety in the meeting showed up as a quickening of my heart rate, increased sweating, and a frequent urge to jump in and say something. Instead, I refrained and let others speak.

Listening and facilitating the meeting meant I had to trust that my colleagues wanted to work through fragility and maintain relationships. In situations like this, I need to remind myself that working toward racial justice means getting out of the way. If I attempt to claim credit for fixing situations, that centers my Whiteness and only reinforces the injustice. I need to ask myself why I look for credit in restoring colleagues’ relationships. Alternatively, do I take responsibility when I participate in causing the problem? I recognize that my sphere of control involves only my own thoughts and actions as they relate to racial injustice. The limited influence I have on colleagues can produce either positive or negative results; thus, I must remember to focus on and model my own errors in working toward racial justice.

During this particular meeting, each of us acknowledged that the lack of communication and collaboration left us all vulnerable. Therefore, we developed a systems approach for use in the future that included each perspective at the outset of any incident. Without this type of collaboration in the past, I witnessed colleagues regularly retreating into their segregated circles and experienced it myself. Additionally with past leadership actions, we encouraged segregation for students, sometimes even with the best of intentions.

_The quality of white space being in large part measured via the absence of people of color (and Blacks in particular) is a profound message indeed, one that is deeply internalized and reinforced daily through normalized discourses about good schools and neighborhoods._

~Robin DiAngelo, 2011, p. 58
Separation for Behavior Consequences. DiAngelo’s (2011) message above stirs deep emotions in me, because I hear this sentiment expressed in our schools. For example, teachers sometimes request that administrators remove students from the classroom, referencing the need for uninterrupted teaching of “the rest of the students who are behaving.” Many thoughts fuel my anger about this request. Not being in the building regularly, I wonder whether the teacher makes repeated demands. I also think about the message this sends to the student of color and to the other students in the class. I reflect on the many ways these actions reproduce marginalization and racial injustice in this classroom and across the school.

In my heart, I feel a sense of brokenness as I observe our lack of success with students of color. I regularly hear students of color report that they hate this class or that teacher. Many of our instructional strategies and relational messages focus on student deficits. Maybe my heartbreak stems from knowing I do not have answers; however, I sometimes feel the urge to take over the classroom or school to redesign the environment. I recognize, however, I would stumble, too, given all of the complexities of the classroom. Hammond (2015) suggests we utilize collectivist approaches, positive identity development with an asset-based focus, and respect students’ abilities by preparing them for productive struggle.

Maybe my frustration arises from a lack of efficacy with Ty years ago, for which I want to redeem myself. Moreover, I still recognize glimpses of that ineffectiveness in my efforts to convince students who wander the halls by choice that they should return to class. Additional frustration I hold stems from judgment about the lack of relevant content and pedagogy in some classrooms where students of color disengage. Though I observe small changes to the curriculum
and instruction, my patience with the removals from the classroom wears thin and return me to feelings of urgency.

Teachers sometimes claim lack of support from administrators who fail to hold students accountable for their choices. When members of our leadership team examine the data, however, we notice that the students with the greatest number of behavior referrals disproportionately represent students of color, most often Black students. The coded message from questioning teachers is, “Why do you not support me by keeping this student out of my classroom?” The ultimate end to this question involves messaging to our students of color that they do not belong. I want to ask these teachers about the ways they attempt to make the students feel included. I long to inquire, “What would you want for your own child? Isolation? Exclusion?”

I work hard to refrain from judgment by reminding myself that the teacher wants to be successful in the classroom and may not know how to engage students of color. I also remember that I could not reach every student every day in my classroom years ago, no matter how I tried. In fact, sometimes my actions made the situation with a student worse. All I could do was try again the next day with a new strategy. At times, I turned to colleagues to inquire how they connected to and engaged a particular student in class. These reminders helped me judge teachers less and have more patience instead. Achieving our district’s expectations to include and engage all students required interdependence from staff members in every role.

When my optimistic side emerges, I attempt to figure out ways to align teachers’ actions with their core values. I believe the majority of our staff members want to relate to and succeed with our students of color. Warren (2010) shares that educators likely wish to actualize their values, but they just need to see how. In my role at the district level, I work using a layered approach in collaboration with building administrative colleagues.
My work to support building administrators includes inquiring about ways we might directly address teachers who frequently send students out of the room. Presenting teachers with data that shows concrete evidence of unfair treatment over time might be one approach (Warren, 2010). Encouraging self-reflection with this data may remove feelings of judgment. I suggest we ask the teachers direct questions like, “What supports and/or professional development do you need in order to keep students in class so they have the opportunity to learn?” When I discuss these strategies with some building-level colleagues, I notice hesitation to hold these challenging conversations and acknowledge the fear myself. On the other hand, I also know we cannot expect change in adult behaviors if we choose not to address them.

One example of this approach arose recently. In one of our schools with disproportionate behavior referrals for students of color, we discussed observations of and feedback to particular teachers. The apprehension in the room felt palpable, so I reminded building-level colleagues the observations could be fruitful if conducted in a less evaluative and more supportive manner. I remembered the anxiety I experienced at times as a principal when holding these critical conversations. I hoped that by teaming with building administrators, we could offer each other and the teacher emotional support throughout the observation and follow-up conference. In most cases, all three of us are White, and none of us holds all of the answers to an immediate solution for the student and teacher. Thus, we can use an inquiry-based approach and learn from trial and error together (Michael, 2015).

When I expect that teachers keep students in the learning environment, I also must acknowledge the challenges classroom teachers face in balancing the needs of all students. While I avoided reacting due to fragility, teachers may also overreact to behaviors out of frustration and fatigue. My vision for my leadership in our system involves supporting engaging learning for
every student in all classrooms, as utopian as that sounds. Rather than judge teachers, therefore, I must try to help problem-solve around the reasons for student lack of engagement. For example, a veteran teacher in one of our secondary schools reports she finds it challenging to watch a student pay more attention to his cell phone in class than to what he should learn. When he refuses to put it away, she struggles to decide whether to send him out or ignore him, thinking the latter has a negative impact on other students in the room. Though I may have several strategies in mind, I also recognize students are intelligent, social beings, focused as much or more on relationships as interest in a topic. Patterns of referrals in our school system at present indicate White teachers have greater difficulty connecting with students of color; thus, students’ behaviors may reflect weak teacher-student relationship as much as pedagogical approaches to learning. Building strong relationships takes significant effort and time. In addition, many factors play a role in disproportionate office referrals for students of color.

Another White staff member told me she expected that a student who is Black, whom I will call Sam, do worksheets in the office because he refused to follow her directions. My throat tightened as she spoke and I felt myself wanting to distance myself from her. At the time, I stood in for a building administrator, so I said I would speak with Sam. She responded, saying that was the expectation to be followed when he refused to engage in class. In observing her tone, I wondered if she disliked the student or just felt disrespected by Sam’s actions. I felt conflicted in that moment in several ways. I did not supervise the staff member; thus, I could not immediately call her in to have a conversation about her relationship with Sam. I wished I had the skill to ask questions of her on the spot about her hopes for Sam and what strategies she already tried with him. Additionally, I feared that I would show too much emotion and appear judgmental had I
addressed her in that moment, even if I had attempted an inquiry-based approach. For these reasons, I left her and went to connect with Sam in the office.

We hear from our students of color that teachers address *their* behaviors much more often than those of White classmates, even when the behaviors seem identical. At times, I feel stuck in the middle between two worlds. I hear about perceptions of racial discrimination from students; yet, teachers often state their actions are justified and they think students sometimes “pull the race card.” Nevertheless, as I noted above, district data demonstrates strong evidence that our educators disproportionately single out students of color. The research of Lewis and Diamond (2015) indicates teachers have intentions of fairness but their actions play out differently for students of color.

My feeling of being stuck between compassion for teachers trying to manage the classroom and students frustrated by unfair treatment intensifies because of the racial divide between the adults and the students. As a building administrator for more than a dozen years, I know teachers who proactively build rapport and design and carry out strong instructional practices seldom send students out of the classroom. Thus, I begin with a bias when any teacher repeatedly refers students to the office. That bias solidifies when the teacher is White and the student identifies as Black or Latin@. I find I have to suspend judgment and listen with an open mind in order to understand the teacher’s intentions and ability fully. If I can extend my patience and minimize frustration, the extra time allows me to consider adult supports that might move the teacher’s practice in a positive direction.

My internal conflict stems from knowing the needs of students of color and White teachers are presently at odds with each other. On the one hand, I intellectually justify the feelings of marginalization expressed by students of color. The lack of positive representation in
the curriculum and the different responses to their behavior compared to White classmates is absolutely unfair. Alternatively, mid-career White teachers have little time to study and implement changes to curricula and pedagogy that balance their attention among and support for all students in class. Nevertheless, when a teacher’s inability to connect repeatedly hurts students of color, a sense of urgency erupts in me, emerging as anger and a desire to confront the teacher.

I rarely see a clear way forward. When making decisions about people’s lives, be they students or staff members, I cannot throw caution to the wind. Any decision in these situations is wrought with emotion, whether it involves consequences for student behaviors or disciplinary action and coaching for the teacher. My struggle to support both the students of color and the most-often White educators bounces between individual incidents to patterns of adult behaviors. I sometimes question whether an individual incident is race-based, yet I know patterns in our data provide evidence of institutional racism.

I recognize some of the work we need to do involves educating teachers about different approaches to fair treatment of students. I suggest implementation of restorative practices over punishments and rewards, for example. When I try to do this, however, some teachers respond with pushback. I sense they feel deflated, judged or wholly inept with these strategies. Thus, maybe I should ask whether they have the skills to promote a sense of community with every student in the classroom. Then, I might be able to collaborate with administrative colleagues to offer teachers resources, vis-à-vis the information and skills they need to be successful. Only when I acknowledge my part in failing to provide systemic supports do teachers and colleagues demonstrate an openness to new approaches.

None of us carries sole responsibility for the problem of segregation by race due to responses to student behaviors, yet I despise my own part in it. Racial injustice permeates our
system through the individuals and structures. As a system, we need to focus on culturally inclusive, engaging strategies for all students. A proactive, asset-based approach likely leaves fewer individuals stuck in choosing support for teachers at the expense of student inclusion. Because one of our stated district pillars is *inclusion*, I can point to our brand and collaboratively plan alignment of our collective actions with district goals. Given the combined nature of the factors that contribute to systemic racial injustice, however, I cannot purport simplistic solutions for complex challenges teachers and building administrators face.

*We find that Riverview students, teachers, administrators, and parents discuss an environment in which black [and Latin@] students are seen as less capable than their white peers.*

~Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 86

Ω

**Segregation by Academic Performance.** One of the areas misaligned with my core value of access to challenging coursework involves academic tracking, which often divides students along racial lines (Burris & Garrity, 2008). Although we do have students of color in our honors tracks, few to none are Latin@ or Black. In other words, our demographic ratios in honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses do not match that of our school population. In effect, therefore, we have segregation within the same school, a practice the decision of *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954) allegedly sought to end. When I work with other building and district leaders to address the divide, I attempt to challenge the myth of meritocracy and disrupt the White racial equilibrium described by Robin DiAngelo (2011).

I push toward a belief that our Black and Brown students are as capable of achieving at levels matching those of our White and Asian American students. When I meet with teams of teachers and administrators, I consistently ask why our demographic data in upper level courses
does not parallel our school demographics by race. Teachers often respond with silence or explain that just putting students in higher-level courses does not mean they will succeed there. I believe that is true. Nevertheless, as I work to remove barriers for entry into these courses in collaboration with building administrative colleagues, resistance erupts from a few teachers. I want to blame the teachers for excluding some kids from honors, but I know that approach will block our progress.

The racially coded messages I hear from some students and staff demonstrate self-interest and segregation. For example, in addition to the resistance from teachers, students in the honors track describe why they need a separate classroom environment where all students are motivated. Some teachers of the honors sections state that these “gifted” students can only flourish in a separate classroom where their teacher provides them with strategies and supports uniquely matched to their needs. These types of remarks anger me, as they imply White and Asian students merit the opportunity, whereas students who are Black or Brown do not. I contain my emotion and bite my tongue rather than risk a response I might later regret. Instead, I collect the statements to collate them with administrative colleagues in efforts to construct a strategic approach to detracking.

I try not to react in haste by offering students of color placement in classrooms where the teacher may not have the skill to meet their needs. Interestingly, some of these teachers claim to have unique strengths in meeting the needs of students they identify as advanced. My skepticism emerges as judgment that the students they describe could learn from nearly any teacher or none at all. I hear statements from both teachers and students in the honors sections communicating a belief that they will lose something when moving from segregated tracks to heterogeneous grouping. This seems to result from the accumulation of many small decisions made by
individuals in our society resulting in segregation by race and ethnicity (Shapiro, 2004). The knotted web of these decisions now permeates our public school system and at times seems impossible to untangle. The resulting feelings of sadness can overwhelm me at times until I reframe my thinking. As a result, I commit to breaking it down into reasonable steps we can take within each school within our system.

Not only does detracking provide access to increased rigor for all students, but also offers opportunities to combat racism (Burris & Garrity, 2008). I recognize some people do not see tracking as a racialized structure. Instead, they promote the notion of meritocracy, i.e. any student could earn her way into honors. If we simply remove barriers to enrollment and allow any student to self-select into this track, some educators believe that would satisfy everyone. This perception, often held by those in privileged positions, fails to recognize entrenched racism beyond the levels of the individual and institutional racism (Rutstein, 2001). I can only imagine how the students remaining in the “regular” sections feel about themselves and their situation. The resistance to detracking stands so firmly, I wonder how a few White leaders and teachers in a district begin and sustain momentum for this initiative.

A collective approach to addressing this opportunity gap for students lifts me out of despair. The fact that staff colleagues, administrators and teachers alike, also want to remove these inequities reminds me I am not alone. In working with a group of teachers, we each take on various approaches to detracking as we meet. For example, sometimes I communicate using strong statements about all students having access to rigorous learning. When my emotions are too strong, however, I hold back and let a colleague speak. Thankfully, now in the fifth year of working with this team of teachers and administrators, I can trust that our collaboration is moving in a direction that better serves our students who identify as Black and Latin@.
The greater performance expectations are for people, the more chances they get to perform, the more likely they are to speak up, the more likely their contributions are going to be positively evaluated and affirmed.

~Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 95

Ω

Staying with White Fragility

When I co-facilitate our Student Leadership Institute for Equity and Social Justice, I see Lewis and Diamond’s (2015) message above play out with students across the traditional grade point average quartiles. Our students achieve at high levels given the opportunity; they want to make a difference in our schools when it comes to racial equity and social justice. In this student leadership institute, I witness healthy exchanges when White students make statements that include stereotypes of students and families of color. When a White student demonstrates a willingness to listen and consider another perspective, he experiences growth in his thinking, evidenced by this high school sophomore student’s response to the institute, as follows:

A highlight for me was making that out of line (i.e. bad) comment on the second day and being called out… It is the growth and acknowledgement of bias that has opened my eyes to the world I will never understand. ~“Shay”

Adults within our educational institutions should respond with the level of maturity demonstrated by Shay. For him to remain in the institute following this event, when he felt badly for his statements that included stereotypes, offers facilitators like me a model and a glimmer of hope for improving racial justice. In fact, I thought of Shay when I responded to accusations of racism just a week after the institute.

My White Fragility

I often think of a colloquialism I heard when I was young, which may be a variation of a statement made by Robert Frost long ago: The best way out of a problem is through it. With regard to White fragility, this means we should remain in the conversation even when—maybe
especially when—it gets uncomfortable because someone accuses us of racism. A research participant of Warren (2010), Doug Anderson, shared, “I understand that, as a white person functioning in this society, my actions are going to be perceived by people of color as racist no matter what my intentions are” (p. 193).

It certainly pains me when a colleague says I have said or done something that causes racial oppression or marginalization. I begin to panic and self-doubt creeps in on me. At my present age, I sometimes break into a sweat. My tendency to rationalize or justify my actions naturally kicks in, even though I often acknowledge publicly that racist thinking resides buried within me. Thus, when an email arrives from a colleague that suggests I participated in decisions or actions that involve racism, I ruminate on every aspect of the accusation. I wrestle with what racist words or actions I might have said or done. I ask myself, “Was this racist? Am I racist?” Later, I remind myself: of course, I am racist, and consider the thoughts behind my statements. I explain to myself that I should have said this or done that, and I likely would have if my colleague were White.

This cycle of questioning and rationalization continues for days and I long to gain closure. At the same time, I wade through my own White fragility, staying with my discomfort, and request that my colleague and I meet to discuss the concerns. I recognize I have so much to learn and the pain comes from my racism and the knowledge that it hurts others, as well. My desire to become less racist overrides the fear of a face-to-face conversation. I believe I can improve my insight as I work to understand my colleague’s perspective and avoid similar missteps in the future.

The more often I engage in these conversations with colleagues of color, the less fear I hold when anticipating them. Nevertheless, as I begin listening, I still find myself wanting to
rationalize or defend my statements. Instead, I have to breathe and relax so I can remain calm and in listening mode. I should not plan my response as my colleague speaks. I cannot let the dread of exposure as a racist overtake my desire to learn.

As I consider experiences related to racist thinking and actions over the years, I cringe. These memories make me want to deny that I thought that racist idea or made that racist statement. I would just as soon distance myself from that personal history. I feel shame in contributing to the oppression of a whole group of people based on race or ethnicity. Early examples abound in my leadership of times when I addressed Black students for behaviors I did not confront when exhibited by White students. My non-response, due to White fragility, can pose complicated problems, too. Today, I intellectualize these feelings and remind myself that racism also exists beyond the individual level. Racial injustice and oppression relies upon individuals, institutions, and structures across society (NEP, 2015). Nevertheless, I can work on diminishing my individual racism when I acknowledge it as embedded deep within me from years of racialized messaging.

I refuse to be an impostor working for racial justice. Instead, I want to improve my ability to recognize what triggers White fragility in me and in my colleagues (DiAngelo, 2011). In doing so I hope to struggle through, rather than avoid, this fragility. Only then might I confront my individual racism and address institutional practices that keep us from achieving racial justice in our system. Rather than pointing out White fragility in others, I understand the need to focus on myself. I can also expose my own fragility in order to communicate empathy when colleagues experience fragility in new situations.

White fragility may be one of the main reasons we do not talk about race more often (DiAngelo, 2011). I find it much easier to discuss racism in general, but I quickly recognize my
discomfort when we talk about racial injustice in which I play a central role. This overlap of individual and institutional racism demonstrates one of the reasons working toward racial justice is so complex. It requires not only work that improves the system but also necessitates regular reflection on my own complicity through critical humility (Brookfield, 2014). In other words, I cannot simply look out the window. I must also continually examine what I see in the mirror (NEP, 2015).
CHAPTER FIVE

WORKING ON THE SELF

Interestingly, even as a well-schooled educator, before beginning my doctoral studies my training lacked an emphasis on historical oppression and racism. I imagine this parallels leadership preparation programs for most White school administrators. Aside from one course on understanding multiple aspects of diversity during my master’s program for educational administration, I learned very little about critical race theory (CRT). This seems strange, given that I earned the degree from UW-Madison, where CRT emerged within the field of education through the work of Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings. I finally understand my level of naiveté about the so-called “achievement gap” many years later, after enrolling in the doctoral program at the University of St. Thomas. Indeed, I now understand the term “education debt” that Ladson-Billings (2011) proposes we use instead of “achievement gap.” The former acknowledges what the system of education owes to students and communities of color. Additionally, unless I choose to interrogate my part in reproducing racial injustice in schools, I remain partially responsible for disparate outcomes by race.

Scant research conducted by the start of the 21st century centers on one’s own racism and its impact in education (Michael, 2015). Smith, Crawley, Robinson, Cotman, Swaim, and Strand (2011) claim that eliminating the achievement gap in schools, “requires the participation of all those who comprise the system” (p. 2). When I converse with some of my colleagues of color in several staff positions—from para-professional to administrator—I receive additional layers of education about racial justice. Unless we listen to others and increase self-awareness about how we reproduce racism or help interrupt it, the outcome and opportunity gaps persist or expand and the educational debts to students of color continue to accrue.
When I entered the field of education, however, I envisioned making a positive difference for students. I now look back on more than 20 years as an educator and wonder how much of my work reinforced unfair outcomes and unequal access for Black and Latin@ students and their families. Both Rutstein (2010) and Yancy (2017) propose that Whites reflect on their participation in racial conditioning. Despite the agony it causes, therefore, I often consider the cumulative long-term damage to which I contributed for students of color and their families. The ache I feel in my heart sometimes turns into uncontrollable shaking and a desire to be alone and just weep. When I hear speakers of color on this topic as I continue along my learning journey, the agony shows up as tears shed for all the pain I caused.

Early in my administrative career, I failed to realize that I would continue to hold racist thoughts and actions forever, despite my desire for racial justice. As Lewis and Diamond (2015) suggest, many educators have intentions of fairness, but their actions—like mine with Ty, for example—play out differently for students of color. Nevertheless, in order to interrupt racial injustice and enhance my ability to foresee unintentional marginalization of Black and Latin@ students, I must improve my self-awareness beginning with an exploration of my racial identity.

**Developing a Positive White Racial Identity**

When I use critical reflection, I begin to see connections between my personal journey and Helms’s (1990) White racial identity development theory. In my early years as a teacher, for example, I thought the best perspective I could achieve related to race was that of colorblindness, treating everyone as an equal member of the human race. This approach erased important aspects of others’ identities and did not provide room for me to see unique contributions they made to the community. Moreover, my self-identity involved a lack of understanding of what my own membership in the White race meant related to privileges I held and how those privileges
automatically resulted in marginalization and oppression of others. These oversights existed within me from an early age and messaging I received in many environments reinforced them over the decades.

Many models of racial identity development exist and everyone in our culture experiences some level of racial identity development (Vaccaro, 2011). Although terms from other models resonate with me, Helms’ (1990) model offers some details to which I can connect my past and present thinking and related experiences. Vaccaro (2011) adds, “No racial or ethnic identity development model is a perfect tool for analyzing the complexity of human life” (p. 107). Before offering examples of my racial identity development, I begin by summarizing Helms’ (1990) model in Table 1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>White Racial Identity Development (Helms, 1990)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 1: Abandonment of Racism</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contact Status</strong></td>
<td>Characterized by an obliviousness to racial/cultural issues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disintegration Status</strong></td>
<td>Includes awareness of Whiteness but lacking responsibility for discrimination.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reintegration Status</strong></td>
<td>Involves acknowledgement of a personal White identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Phase 2: Defining a Nonracist White Identity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pseudo-independent Status</strong></td>
<td>Characterized by discomfort with a racist identity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Immersion/Emersion Status

Involves defining a positive White identity. Individuals in this stage begin to replace myths and stereotypes that reproduce racism.

Autonomy Status

Racial self-actualization emerges. Whites in this stage actively expand racial and cultural understanding and no longer see another’s racial identity as a threat.

I grew up in a large, Catholic family in a city outside of Chicago, where few of my childhood friends were non-White. I attended a local public school for kindergarten with many students of color, but my parents enrolled me in a Catholic school beginning in first grade. We had family friends who identified as Mexican-American and I loved going to their homes for celebrations and meals. However, I failed to understand the impacts of attending a school and church with mostly White participation. Moreover, we lived in an area of the city populated almost solely by White families. As a result, I grew up primarily in Helms’ (1990) contact status—thinking often of people of color as others I heard about in the news and thinking of myself without a racial identity.

Before proceeding, I must acknowledge race as a social construct, having no biological explanation whatsoever (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). At the same time, Doug Anderson reminds us, “It’s just not a comfortable thing to always be reminded of race. But it’s a reality of… the society that we live in” (Warren, 2010, p. 193). As mentioned in the definition of racial justice early in this narrative, race is a term that members of society constructed historically to separate people (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Kivel, 2011; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Yancy, 2016). This does not change the facts: some individuals in our society benefit from Whiteness, while people of color are often disadvantaged, oppressed, or marginalized by their racial identity. Similarly,
gender and/or class identities privilege or disadvantage individuals in various situations. All of this contributes to individuals’ identities and to their self-concepts, as well.

Before I graduated to the high school level, our family moved to a small town across the state line. One family of African Americans attended the public high school there and almost everyone else identified as White. In a neighboring city, the demographics of residents included many people who identified as Chican@\(^2\) and Latin@. Therefore, in athletics, we competed against teams with student athletes of color and I often wondered about their lives and family cultures. During my teenage years, I remained quite naïve about my own racial identity.

Following high school, I left for college in the South and developed relationships with people from Brazil, Puerto Rico, Tunisia, and Lebanon. I still failed to recognize my own racial identity, but likely entered Helms’ (1990) *disintegration status*. In discussions with my college friends, I learned a great deal about various other cultures and their interest in that of the United States. Pregnancy interrupted my early college years, however, and I later married before earning my first post-secondary degree. My focus thusly became even more egocentric.

My husband and I planned to go abroad for three years with a program of service, so we left the Midwest to participate in a training program in Georgia. This experience provided me with an education I did not receive formally—living in community with many people who identified as Black and/or African American. An unplanned pregnancy and related hospitalization interrupted this brief experience and we headed back home. In Georgia, my education about the historical oppression and marginalization of people of color had begun. I began to teeter between Helms’ (1990) *reintegration status* and Phase 2 of my racial identity

\(^2\) Chican@ refers to both Chicano and Chicana.
development. Previously, I had not recognized the ways in which our country systematically kept Whites in positions of superiority and power.

Back at the University of Wisconsin, again surrounded by a mostly-White student population, I enrolled in a secondary education program. Without a racially diverse community, I struggled to continue my own racial identity development. In short, the problem I still faced in my first few years as an educator involved not acknowledging the many ways my White identity served to privilege me over people of color. Moreover, I did not understand how Ty’s or Eddie’s Black identity resulted in unearned challenges and disadvantages they faced every day.

In all my years as an elementary and secondary student, I attended schools where the staff and nearly all classmates reflected my neighborhood and me. None of my students of color had that experience. Both Ty and Eddie bussed from home to a completely different community in order to attend high school. Ty and other students like him interacted with White administrators and teachers like me. White students who behaved just like Ty received preference in that 1) teachers referred them to me less often than students of color for similar behaviors (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Rutstein, 2000) and 2) upon referral, they heard from administrators of the same racial identity. The more frequently that happened, the less often Ty and other students of color attended school. Then, when I drove my student home from truancy court, I noticed the stark differences in our surroundings. An education on Whiteness and on structural racism jump-started for me during this first year as a school administrator. For quite some time during this period of my life, however, I remained in Helms’ (1990) reintegration status as I held feelings of guilt and anxiety about my role as a White leader.

Many inter-racial experiences took place during those early years as an administrator. In fact, I must admit that I likely received more education as a high school associate principal than
did my students of color. For example, I clearly remember a voicemail one mother left, when she called me racist for administering a suspension for her daughter for fighting at school. This parent expressed such outrage in the message she left that I was wary about meeting with her on my own. When I discussed the situation with the principal, she helped me reframe the voicemail through perspective taking—as if my own daughter had been involved. The student’s mom arrived still showing significant anger with me, but later apologized for the message and left our meeting with a calm demeanor. At this stage of my life, I labeled myself a White liberal, as noted by Helms’ (1990) pseudo-independent status. I understood society’s inequities and wanted to help people of color, but held no real comprehension of my part in reproducing racism. Fortunately, my education about racial marginalization and oppression continued off and on throughout the following years, both informally and through graduate coursework.

Observations of power and oppression in schools and society continued to offer a microscope on the privileges I receive as a White, middle class individual. When the documentary, Waiting for Superman, first came out, for example, I felt ashamed of our educational system in the United States. As my self-awareness improved and interactions with people of color increased, I began to notice similarities in their stories of oppression and marginalization in supposedly effective school systems. As in Helms’ (1990) immersion/emersion status, I started examining more profound questions about my evolving racial identity. The cognitive dissonance I thusly experienced pushed me toward critical humility and more profound self-exploration.

Like most personal journeys, my racial identity development occurs as a crooked path. I often experience internal struggles with my privilege, resulting in guilt or justification of my actions, with a sense of helplessness in overcoming racism, and with acceptance of my identity. I
regularly ask myself questions: How would my experience differ if I identified as non-White? How does Whiteness show up in my daily life and what should I do about it? Do I hold this leadership position based on hard work, privilege, or both? Do I have time for self-care because I prioritize it? Is activism for racial justice a responsibility or part of my privilege? Should I be working with people of color, exposing the system, or addressing Whites on our racism…or all three? Every day now, I reflect on some experience or observation that reminds me of my membership in the White race.

The more I wrestle with and explore my racial identity, along with my vision for the person I want to become, I find I move closer to Helms’ (1990) autonomy status. In other words, I live more comfortably in my own skin today. I understand and acknowledge my racism and work diligently towards not acting in ways that oppress and marginalize others. I may never fully thrive here, but I often connect with a White identity that no longer sees persons of color as a threat of any kind (Helms, 1990). On the other hand, I also recognize that I routinely fall back into earlier stages of racial identity development.

Regression takes place when I experience White fragility, when unconscious bias or stereotyping surfaces within me, and/or when I commit another microaggression. For example, I notice White fragility in the defensiveness I feel when a colleague remarks on actions I took that preserved my position of power in a decisional process. Additionally, a simple example of a microaggression I committed involves me asking a young Latino man if he was a teacher when, in fact, he was the principal of his school. Experiences like these take place regularly. Often, they embarrass and humble me on my journey to exorcise my racism.

When I reflect on my racist actions, I sometimes attempt to return to the individuals impacted to apologize if I think it will not add to the harm already caused. On occasion, an
apology could reinforce the negative impact of my initial offense. In these situations, I simply acknowledge my error internally and attempt to do better.

Working toward autonomy status remains a lifelong project for me. Examples of the ways I falter surface even when I hope to serve colleagues as an ally working toward racial justice across our district. In a Leadership Team meeting, for example, we discuss the possible reasons we have worse graduation rates for students of color than the neighboring districts across the county. Some colleagues question the veracity of the data and I fail to speak up. Instead, another White colleague states he does not care about whether the data is perfect, it still demonstrates a problem to address. I snap my fingers in appreciation, but otherwise remain silent. Even if colleagues peg me as one who is all about equity, I should still support a colleague overtly when he takes a stand.

**Noticing False Allyship.** In the introduction, I mention a parable on false allyship offered by a colleague. I can sometimes be fully aware of the need for collaborative work across racial lines and still miss an opportunity to stand up for racial justice. This false allyship shows up in me from time to time, even while intending to address racial inequity across our district. I wish I could always see it in the moment, but it sometimes requires reflection and hindsight.

One example of my errant actions occurred when my Black colleague and I supported building administrators as they responded to a fight between two students who were Black and each relatively new to the school. One of the students landed a punch on a teacher, intending it for the other student. Both students fought, disrupted the school environment, and hurt others; therefore, the school resource officer determined the boys would both receive tickets but stated that he would ask the judge to issue community service as an alternative consequence.
Additionally, the administrators issued suspensions from school to ensure time for the development of a plan for the boys’ safe reintegration in the school environment.

We processed the incident and consequences with the school resource officer (SRO) and my colleague posed a question about the issuance of tickets. As the conversation between my colleague and the SRO heated up, I stepped away to confer with another colleague on an unrelated topic. The dialogue continued between my colleague and the SRO for several minutes and, though no one raised voices, disagreement persisted. Without much conscious thought at the time, as the tension subsided I moved back toward the pair. I then heard the officer say to my colleague, “I can see your point.” Then they agreed on how to proceed and called the parents together.

I felt good about the two arriving at a positive learning opportunity for the students without tickets and I offered my appreciation to them for working through this restorative approach. Additionally, the building administrator returned after calling one family about the suspension. He agreed with the restorative behavior plan they proposed. Later in the day, I reflected on this outcome and thought of my colleague’s wisdom and strength in the discussion with the SRO. The two of them had not worked directly together before then.

Temporarily, I held a sense of accomplishment that our district equity work seemed to make a difference. Then it hit me: I fell back when a colleague could have used my support, even if it was just a collaborative presence. Moreover, in moving away from the exchange I acted with unconscious fragility, defined by DiAngelo (2011) as, “White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress” (p. 54).

My colleague did not accuse me of false allyship that day but I left at a critical juncture in the conversation, just as the temperature rose. As the interaction heated up, my skin prickled and
without realizing it, I separated myself from the tension. Later, I felt disappointed in my actions and the lack of support I demonstrated for my colleague. This showed up as deep sadness and an ache in my gut. Though tears surfaced, they did not flow. Instead, I desired a hug of self-forgiveness and a friend with whom I could discuss my failure or brainstorm what I should have done. The repeated failures accumulated in my body and mind and produced the need for healing.

Despite any excuse I could make about supporting the other person in the room on a separate issue, I realize I should have stayed with my colleague. In fact, excuses result in more hurt and self-doubt rather than deflection of injury. My only consolation involves coming to this realization through critical reflection, without needing to be told or accused. No matter how much I want to believe that I serve as an ally or lack White fragility, neither proved true in that moment. In reality, many unintentional decisions I make seem benign until I reflect upon them and realize the negative impacts those decisions may have on others.

_Even educators who have taken an explicit social justice or progressive stance have implicit bias based on their exposure to the dominant culture’s messages._

~Zaretta Hammond, 2015, p. 29

Ω

**Recognizing Implicit Bias**

Upon rereading an old professional journal written a few short years ago, I noticed many ways my language demonstrates Hammond’s (2015) above statement. For example, in my early work with a colleague who identifies as Black, I noticed his tardiness to or absence from meetings. I also sometimes worried about his preparedness for presentations we co-facilitated. At that point in time, stereotyping contributed to my negative thinking about my colleague.
Now, after years of working together, I know several things about his work that provide greater insight. Regarding my colleague: 1) many people in the larger community depend upon him, 2) he rarely stops thinking about racial justice work in the district and often plans presentations without writing down details, and 3) both student and adult audiences respond powerfully to his messages. My White mindset about preparation for professional learning does not often equate to effective outcomes for participants.

The work I do to prepare for adult learning about equity and social justice matters little in comparison to the power in Johnny’s messages. I acknowledge that planning structures and strategies for professional development hold some importance. However, I witness real transformation when well-placed stories move White staff members. At our annual equity institute, for example, when I co-facilitate with Johnny and others, modeling my racism affects White colleagues more effectively if a narrative from Johnny couples with my example. In fact, I listen to Johnny and notice the effects on me, even though I have heard his message many times. After three years of co-facilitating, I stand convinced that as a White person alone, I carry less influence.

Collaboration during our equity institute, where I depend on the strengths present among team members, does not excuse me from educating White peers on my own. Moreover, I acknowledge that relying on Johnny and other students and colleagues of color to educate Whites is unfair, at best. I learn more about the bias and stereotypes I hold when I open myself up to new perspectives from people of all ages, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and income levels. In addition, I continue to learn from White staff members when I see racism that mirrors my own.

When I judge others based on first—or early—impressions, implicit bias plays a significant, negative role. This kicks in before conscious thinking takes place and often results in
stereotyping others by race or ethnicity, religion, gender, class, and the like (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006; Kirwan, 2014). This unconscious response resides in all of us for good reason, as it protects us in fight or flight situations (NEP, 2015). On the other hand, media and other societal messages can solidify negative associations and increase the likelihood for committing microaggressions (Solorzano, 2014; Sue, 2010). When I do this at work, not only do I regress in my White racial identity development, but I also reinforce institutional racism in my role as an educational leader.

In hearing from colleagues who are leaders of color, I learned some of the ways this type of thinking affected them. For example, my colleague Marcus shared with me that when he called a meeting with teachers and/or leaders, he learned that White participants often asked peers about his intentions for the meeting. This rarely happened to me, even though we have similar positions and we invite staff members to meetings for the very same reasons. He explained to me that he thinks this type of questioning takes place because he is Black. He shared that people “find him intimidating” and said he thinks this happens because of the ways society frequently portrays Black males. Before beginning my own racial identity development, I held similar thoughts that I now find deplorable in White educators’ treatment of Marcus.

A colleague of long ago, I will call Arianna, whose motives I questioned early in my journey held a position as the multicultural coordinator. Arianna was one of only two colleagues who identified as African American. We worked together on many occasions as racial tensions erupted in that school. Although I did not find Arianna intimidating, I questioned her motives from time to time. Even when I observed strong engagement from Black female students because of her work, I wondered if her goals for students extended beyond that demographic group. When I think back on Arianna’s work nearly two decades ago, I cannot find any evidence to
justify my doubts. What gave me the right to question her motives when she helped the students feel included? When I enrolled in doctoral studies six years ago, I understood this type of questioning on purely an intellectual level.

In working with Johnny at first, my lone Black administrative colleague, I questioned his participation and follow-through even when he wrestled with the larger socio-political context of aggressive policing in Black communities. I unfairly judged his commitment to our district racial equity work despite the fact that I knew our system made little or no progress without his contributions. In conversations with other staff members, I spoke in support of Johnny, at the same time I held lingering doubts about his work. The lack of real support for Johnny represents another way I served as a false ally. What I needed to do instead involved: 1) actively interrogating my racial bias (Yancy, 2017), 2) building a stronger, deeply reciprocal relationship with Johnny (Unger, 2013), and 3) examining my own commitment to standing up for racial justice (Warren, 2010) when it proved most difficult.

We now have more persons of color on the Leadership Team and I find it easier to refrain from stereotypical thinking. When I get to know each of these colleagues on a personal level, new perspectives challenge previously held racial biases and stereotypes. Moreover, as I observe the unique contributions of each of these colleagues, my sense of urgency to continue expanding our team’s diversity grows. I now notice holes in our dialogue and gaps in our decision-making processes when the leaders around the table are all Whites. When our circle expands to include colleagues who are staff members of color, our collective ability improves for thinking differently and for arriving at solutions that serve our students and families better.

Again, Marcus, a Black leader, provides an example of this on our team of district-level directors. Marcus joined our team in recent years and began asking questions about a systems
approach for instruction and interventions. Instead, we had been operating using an adaptive model. Because of this, educators failed to recognize an inappropriate situation. Two boys of color, brothers who were African American, were identified as students with disabilities on the very same day. Alarmed, Marcus asked what interventions we attempted and what data provided evidence for the identification. This injustice occurred without proper scrutiny. Marcus protected the students from an errant system and forced the consideration of their assets, instead. Absent multiple perspectives, we often misjudge individuals.

Finding the Counter Narrative

Black Violin—a musical group I listen to, provides a refreshingly positive challenge to the Black male stereotype. The musicians, Kevin Sylvester and Wilner Baptiste, offer examples of counter narratives, as classically trained strings musicians who play a fusion of traditional and hip-hop music. Counter narratives provide alternative messages that defy stereotypes (NEP, 2015; Solorzano, 2014; Sue, 2010). The musicians address stereotyping and its negative impacts during performances with their audiences, including many school groups, and through specific songs on their albums. I point to this musical group because it disrupts messages and images I held as an early educator despite my desire to have a positive impact on each of my students.

It gives me a goal…

I smile on stage because I’m completely crushing people’s perceptions of what a Black man is capable of.


When I intentionally look for counter narratives like the one mentioned in the lyrics written by Black Violin (2015) above, I find them all around me. For example, I heard a teacher state that a student who identifies as Black, whom I will call Katie, should not be in AP Physics. I asked Katie about her goals. Katie enrolled in three high-level courses because she wanted to
become an athletic trainer. I learned from Katie that she often felt isolated in classes like this and sensed that teachers doubted her ability to achieve her post-secondary goals. Nevertheless, Katie succeeded in these classes and went off to college following graduation from high school.

Counter narratives or counter stories, as stated in the first chapter, provide specific examples that expose the myth of racial stereotypes (NEP, 2015). Katie offers us one of many examples of a counter story. She expressed herself in quiet anger, often because the adults who were supposed to encourage her dreams and support her achievement doubted her. Indeed, teachers sometimes wondered if she mistakenly enrolled in higher-level courses. When I hear a staff member communicate low expectations for a student that I perceive is based on race or ethnicity, I now have the opportunity to share counter stories.

My involvement in these conversations takes place rather infrequently since I serve as an administrator at the district level. Nevertheless, I recently learned of another female student who identifies as Black who wants to become a neurosurgeon. At times, staff members viewed this student, whom I will call Maria, as a troublemaker. Maria sounded the alarm when she saw or heard something in the school she believed to be racially unjust. When I heard from Maria that she wanted to pursue education to become a medical professional, I took the opportunity to share her story in a video we created for all staff on the topic of academic and career planning. Although this approach was indirect, I hoped to extend and help reshape the narrative staff members held about Maria.

We slap a label on too many students of color based on a narrow, and often negative, story we create for them. In her 2009 TED Talk, Chimamanda Adichie warns us against holding a single identifying story about others. When I get to know people of color on a personal level, I
begin to see they have gifts and flaws just as I do. The more I listen and observe, the easier I see that skin color offers no defining character feature beyond itself.

My perspective expands as I continue to have many first-hand experiences with students and colleagues of color who challenge my biases. These opportunities present themselves frequently when I co-facilitate our student institute where the topic relates to racial equity and social justice. Nevertheless, implicit bias continues to reside in me (Kirwan, 2014) and becomes reinforced through messages I receive from the White spaces in the world around me. Although these negative messages reinforce stereotyping, I can change my perceptions by actively surfacing biases and seeking counter narratives (NEP, 2015).

This practice of noticing counterstories crosses over from my work to my personal life. At work, I find that when I hear a staff member using stereotypical language for students, families, or colleagues of color, I can ask questions and offer alternative messages. One example of this took place when a colleague mentioned how a parent refused to engage with her during a meeting, implying her parenting skills were insufficient. My colleague described how the parent exhibited anxiety. I asked my colleague what kind of society produces judgment of this mom as a bad parent. Initially, my question seemed to take her back, but she checked herself and nodded. Whether she fully agreed with me mattered not. I spoke up and knew neither of us held the answer.

I must practice critical humility and self-reflection when I regress in stereotypical thinking. Specifically, I question why biased thoughts arise that reinforce the stereotypical narrative and I remind myself of simple, missing, or alternative information. I force myself to consider the many errors I have made when I transferred something I knew about one individual
to another person or to an entire group of people of the same racial or ethnic (or gender, religious, or class) background.

One mistake that surfaces in me from time to time, for example, takes place when I assume men of color disregard women as equals. Although this might prove true with an individual, I cannot use a broad brush for all, or even most men of color. Moreover, some White men I know communicate messages of superiority over women.

A question Paul Gorski asked in a presentation to educators in 2015 regularly surfaces in my thinking: “What percentage of people does it take to make a stereotype true?” Imagine anyone saying, “White people do [this or that].” Fill in the blank. In fact, consider the need for counter narratives for Whites. Yet, because we have a racialized history in the United States, we need to actively seek out positive examples to counter the cumulative effect of myriad negative messages we receive every day that imply Blacks and Latin@s are somehow inferior to Whites. As I put this down in ink at the turn of 2018, it seems unbelievable. Nevertheless, if it were untrue, how could any educator rationalize the achievement and opportunity gaps that persist in school districts like the one I work in now? I find I must remind myself of the regular, insidious, and subliminal messages that permit complacency about these gaps. As an educational leader, I must address the inability to acknowledge differences in the ways we treat students of color and students who are White. I can no longer pretend every student has equal access to success in our educational system, despite the color of her skin.

Not Colorblind nor Blinded by Color

Leaders working for racial justice in education must comprehend the complications inherent in trying to act in a colorblind fashion. Early in my administrative career, I was oblivious to the ways in which this approach to working with students of color asked them to
mute or erase their identity and minimized the significance of the challenges they faced. Essentially, by treating every student as if their skin color was a non-factor, I marginalized my students (and other persons, including staff and family members) of color. As I progressed along my learning journey and my own racial identity development, I learned to be aware of the richness of color and culture.

**Removing the Myth of Colorblindness.** When I went off to college, I left a nearly all-White space and found joy in friendships with people of many different backgrounds. Initially, I met women from several countries, mostly Central and Latin American. From them, I learned to dispel my stereotype of the Latina who stays home and raises the children. Another circle of friends in my early college years included a group of friends from Lebanon. From them, I learned about loyalties they had for their homeland, peace they longed for, multiple languages they spoke, and interests they held in cross-cultural relationships. After transferring to another university, I developed friendships with people from Tunisia and Puerto Rico. From these friends, along with their love of home, I learned that many men they knew treated women as equals, unearthing another bias I held. Moreover, with a wider circle of friends of color, I began to treat people less as part of a group identity and more as individuals with complex layers and nuances within their identity.

The perspective of colorblindness shifted as I grew to acknowledge and respect individuals with the full history and culture of their identities. Alternatively, I experienced painful reproach from peers that became another significant teacher on my journey toward racial awareness. This emerged at times when I held individuals of color in higher regard simply because they came from a different racial and cultural background than I. The reproach came from other colleagues’ frustration with me for overestimating someone’s ability based on race.
Just because someone brings a different racial/ethnic perspective to the system does not mean we automatically move toward racial justice. For example, I have experienced working with staff members of color who engendered my trust over time and then betrayed it. Most colleagues know that I work diligently to expose areas of weakness in our educational systems, especially those that lead to disparate outcomes by race. In part, this means that I frequently work with staff members of color who can support students in ways White staff members sometimes cannot. In addition, I believe staff members of color should receive extra support from the district that would be unnecessary for many White colleagues. Because of this, on more than one occasion in the past, I overlooked red flags with colleagues of color. As a result, the repercussions for our students and my colleagues mounted.

One might ask why anyone would overlook a red flag. As a leader trying to increase staff diversity of an overwhelmingly, some might say unnaturally out-of-balance, White staff, the challenge in hiring staff members of color proves nearly impossible. Our reputation as a White district throws up one barrier and dominant cultural norms result in more red flags for local educators of color. Simply consider that incarceration rates for Black males outnumber those for White males by a multiple of six, despite similar types of crimes committed by White males (Criminal Justice Facts, 2018). In any other racial demographic—again, despite similar levels and rates of crime—would one find as many red flags? Examples of these disparities exist within my own circle of friends.

With a number of past colleagues of color upon hiring, for example, references communicated mixed messages. Sometimes, these colleagues pushed for racial justice in past work environments which resulted in discomfort for the very people likely to serve as a reference. Without being too specific, which might unnecessarily identify colleagues, I observed
this drive towards racial equity lead to frustration, burnout, and a job change for some. Thus, some of my colleagues of color reported more job changes on their resume that would otherwise pose concerns for a prospective employee. Finally, some colleagues faced requests for restraining orders, which, despite dismissal, still showed up on the Internet through a search conducted by White staff members.

Black male colleagues face situations that could produce red flags on a regular basis, even though their credentials and ongoing work in academia equal or surpass that of some of my other colleagues. Knowing this, I attempt to evaluate any “red flag” information I hear from others about colleagues of color with a critical ear, but sometimes I err. When I do this, it can put our collective racial justice work at risk. Nonetheless, I recognize what these colleagues must overcome as they begin employment in a mostly White district. Here I would like to share two examples, one on each side of the equation. I begin with the importance of overlooking red flags based on hyper-intense scrutiny received by staff members of color.

When I listen to nearly every staff member in my district, I hear almost one hundred percent agreement that we need to diversify our staff. Yet when we hire a staff member of color, questions arise from staff members that do not surface when we hire a White person. The selection of a Black male colleague I call Marcus here offers an example of a time when I felt the need to address these behaviors with White staff members.

Despite similar credentials and a more competitive hiring process, the reception Marcus and I each received in the district differed significantly, especially from White staff members. Marcus’ experiences and references were stellar and he emerged from a rigorous hiring process as a clear top candidate. Nevertheless, questions and rumors about Marcus swiftly cycled through the teachers and returned to district level administrators. In my experience across several
mostly-White districts, this happened to nearly every staff member of color we hired no matter the role, but especially in certified and leadership positions.

The year Marcus started in the district, he and I co-facilitated a professional learning event in which more than 60 staff members participated. The equity institute, mentioned above, involved learning about implicit bias and focused on racial equity and social justice. Participants asked what they could do about oppression and racial injustice in our system, so I used this opportunity to explain the scrutiny Marcus and other colleagues of color faced upon hiring that I did not. Therefore, my answer to participants’ question was, “Each of us needs to take responsibility in stopping the unjust scrutiny and rumor mongering staff members of color face when they fill a position in the district.”

Since he was hired, Marcus’ insights, questions, and hard work have strengthened many of our district practices. Had we acted colorblind, Marcus could not have brought his full self to our team. Had we listened when the rumors first emerged and acted in a way that affected his employment, we would not benefit from Marcus’ leadership today. Personally, I would have missed learning from Marcus over the past few years.

I share this example of Marcus as one explanation for why I overlook so-called red flags on occasion. Nevertheless, at times this intentional oversight results in halting our progress toward racial justice. The following story, therefore, describes an example of a time when I should have paid closer attention to the concerns or red flags.

Consider Red Flags. As stated above, I feel a sense of responsibility to support staff members of color in a mostly White district. This means that I go out of my way to reach out, to ask what support they would like, to check in routinely, to include new colleagues in appropriate opportunities, and to request feedback from them on ways we can improve our system. When
other colleagues criticize or question the work of these new staff members of color, I ask my colleagues to consider possible White norms at play and prod these colleagues to reflect upon whether these norms promote racial justice or reproduce institutional racism. In other words, I spend a good deal of social capital to support newly hired colleagues of color.

When I overlook red flags that should spark concerns, I spend social capital in error, which can damage relationships and hurt collective progress toward racial justice. Nevertheless, I will still always err on the side of questioning the flags and providing extra support. Note here that I slightly alter the example below in order to maintain the anonymity of the individual. This story represents a time when I overlooked concerns and recommended someone for hire in error.

In a past district, I lobbied for an individual of color who did not hold a proper license but was enrolled in coursework to obtain certification. The interview team agreed the candidate was our top choice—someone who would enhance our work with students of color based on both his experiences and his area of study. The other question, or red flag, that surfaced involved mixed messages from references in the candidate’s previous districts of employment. Upon review of his past work, we listened to the positive references and gave less weight to those who provided scant information about his work relationships.

When we hired the candidate, whom I will call Willie, we brought him onto a few of our staff teams and provided support through induction and mentoring. Initially, Willie offered new insights and seemed to work well with peers. As his initiative at work waned, however, even when expectations were re-communicated, Willie’s collaboration turned into accusations of unfair treatment. Within a few years, even some of his closest allies found it difficult to team with Willie. I found myself at a loss to provide him with support that would make a difference for staff members and students. I kicked myself for having participated in a hiring process where
I contributed to overlooking concerns we may have otherwise unearthed from Willie’s past references. Although this can happen with any candidate who seems to fill a need, it can negatively affect my veteran colleagues of color when I overlook concerns simply because a candidate is a person of color. More importantly, it hurts progress made toward racial justice for students.

Intense scrutiny of colleagues of color or projecting from one individual onto the whole demographic group represent two common ways I notice that racism shows up in our mostly-White district. This unearned disadvantage for staff members of color runs counter to the social privileges White staff members receive (Yancy, 2017), whether earned or not. Moreover, my own racism can involve positive consideration of an individual simply because of his skin color. Nevertheless, no matter how many times overlooking a red flag burns me in collegial relationships with White colleagues, I will likely still defend a hire and work to build a more inviting and welcoming workplace for new hires of color. However, I will also listen carefully, with a more critical ear, to references in the future. Let me make a special note to the reader here: the hiring missteps happen so rarely, the benefit to students seems worth the risk. Moreover, the racism experienced by staff members of color greatly outweighs any betrayal I may feel personally from a broken relationship, as well as the energy I must spend rebuilding social influence with my peers.

**Learning and Healing**

When I work directly with students and staff members of color on racial equity and social justice, I witness pain due to racism first-hand and sense how this oppression undermines my own humanity (Freire, 2000; Warren, 2010). Although it may seem people of color stand as the only victims of injustice, the words of Dr. King again remind me, “Injustice anywhere is a threat
to justice everywhere” (King, 1963, p.1). In a local Institute for Racial Healing I attend and in our district-level Hidden Curriculum courses, speakers share the nature of Race as a Social Construct; at the same time, presenters provide messages regarding the Oneness of Humankind. These two concepts contrast colorblindness and blind spots when overlooking color. Humankind is truly one race; thus, I argue no educator can experience wholeness when some students and colleagues suffer from racial injustice in school systems.

Freire (2000) agrees that the oppressor—e.g. a White educator involved in institutional racism—experiences her own dehumanization because of the ongoing, virtual violence of the oppressive situation. More specifically, I feel anguish when I hear people of color share their stories of the dehumanization and oppression as they receive negative messages through microaggressions, stereotype threat, and even invisiblization in school. Some of this violence appears symbolic and psychological, but the anguish I experience affects me psychosomatically. When acute, symptoms show up as racing thoughts and a piercing ache in my heart. The accumulation of these stories over time develop into tightness in my upper back and neck muscles. The manifestation of this trauma in my body drives me to search for an escape. Temporarily, I choose exercise, deep massage, or mindful meditation practice.

I can only imagine the impact on people of color with whom I work, as well as students in our schools. I want to run from the trauma of racism and recognize that the privileges I hold include retreating into my own skin and spending time or money on myself. One of my goals in this endeavor, therefore, involves working to eliminate the ways in which I personally and professionally contribute to racial injustice. Only then can I even begin healing from racism. Additionally, I hear a calling to collaborate with White peers who understand that we, too, need to heal from the racial injustice in our schools and communities.
This project might compare to training for a marathon that I never actually run. For example, I start the training regimen slowly and steadily. After quite some time in training, I feel strong. Then I push a little too hard and end up with an injury. Therefore, I must effectively pull back, heal a bit, reexamine my strategy, and begin building stamina again. The goal remains forever in sight, yet, always unattainable.

They see that we must all take responsibility for ending suffering, not just for our own individual freedom, but for that of others as well.

~Williams, 2000, p. 65
CHAPTER SIX

STRATEGIES FOR WORKING WITH THE SELF AND OTHERS

In the United States, we promote individualism over collectivism in scholastic achievement and in society (Hammond, 2015). Diaz agrees that we take promotion of the individual over the collective to extremes (Tippett, 2017). This may explain why I find it so frustrating to lead for racial justice in a system whose foundation stands upon the myth of meritocracy. Many staff members in our school district steadfastly commit to achieve success in their work. This means achievement often relies upon the hard work of individuals instead of deep collaboration within our leadership community. I believe, though, I must depend on myself in concert with others. I need White colleagues to join me in these efforts toward achieving equitable outcomes for all and yet, I cannot suggest how others should develop their own racial consciousness. However, I can promote a common language for staff and the broader community.

Learn the Language

The vocabulary I use about marginalization and racial justice expands as I learn more about racial oppression and my own identity. Nevertheless, self-criticism erupts when I speak as if I know something about what it feels like to be mistreated based on skin color. Warren (2010) adds, “Most whites live their lives segregated from people of color… [Thus,] they have little direct experience with the operations of institutional racism” (p. 6). Therefore, I avoid complete self-flagellation. Alternatively, my confidence grows when I stand ready and able to publicly admit my mistakes and use appropriately strong language in working for racial justice.

Individuals alone may not create institutional racism; however, we do contribute to its reproduction if we remain unaware or lack the language to describe how it plays out. As I
continue to learn, I feel a greater urge to name what I see as racial injustice across my organization. Early on, however, some of the terms relating to unintentional oppression or marginalization eluded me until I chose to educate myself.

Peggy McIntosh’s (1990) term, *White privilege*, exists in my vocabulary and has for decades. Initially, however, I struggled with the concept as I considered how much hard work I did to traverse the barriers I faced. The unearned advantages I held sat in my blind spot. As a young adult, therefore, I lived with the myth of meritocracy. Today, however, I understand this term more profoundly and am able to acknowledge many unearned advantages as a White woman. New words, like “microaggressions,” entered my vocabulary in recent years and immediately rang true for me, as I recognized I had committed them myself.

Derald Wing Sue’s (2010) concept of *microaggressions* became easy to understand because I could think of many I carried out over the years. Additionally, I experienced gender microaggressions myself as a female administrator. Transferring my own experiences into understanding what people of color experience proved little difficulty, although I recognize gender-based and racial microaggressions differ. The challenge I faced recently involved finding the words to match the level of impact on the receiver, whereas the prefix “micro-” seemed to minimize it, especially as I heard stories of the cumulative effects of microaggressions for people of color. This helped me conceptualize the symbolic violence of so-called *microaggressions*.

Toshalis (2010) describes symbolic violence in education as a means for exercising power. This violence need not be physical or overt. Toshalis (2010) quotes Bourdieu, stating that instead of being explicit, symbolic violence arises through, “silent and insidious, insistent, and insinuating [injunctions]” (p. 188). As such, symbolic violence operates in schools in ways that reproduce the myths of meritocracy and racial superiority (Toshalis, 2010). Therefore, when we
communicate using language that reinforces racial stereotypes rather than choosing counter narratives, educators reproduce this oppression toward students of color. The resulting violence limits student access to seeing the full range of future possibilities for themselves.

Some of my colleagues, and certainly other Whites in social settings I frequent, may believe the language I use is too dramatic or extreme. On the other hand, the outcomes for students of color in our schools and for people of color—especially for those who identify as Black and Latin@—serve as evidence of hostility and domination from Whites. This statement brings me to acknowledge how White supremacy simmers in our school hallways and classrooms today. We purport a society and educational system that involves fairness and social equity. Nevertheless, I no longer believe we provide equal access and fair treatment, which compels me to uncover the ways I contribute to this system of injustice. Warren (2010) agrees that, “Progress toward racial justice will require moving whites from passivity to action against racism” (p. 7). I worry this passivity represents White fragility and stands as one of our greatest barriers to real justice in schools and society.

Remember, DiAngelo (2011) defines fragility as, “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (p. 57). When I observe the fragility someone expresses through active or passive resistance, I no longer feel as much anger toward that individual, which was part of my response just a few years ago. For instance, I remember becoming angry with colleagues during a budget discussion in a leadership team meeting.

Our superintendent and business manager forecasted the budget numbers for the coming school year and added teaching positions to match increasing enrollments. During our meeting, I remarked that we might never close our achievement and opportunity gaps if we continue to
budget as we always had. In response, I heard statements from three colleagues about all of the actions they took to address racial equity in the past year. Although I refrained from speaking up again, internally I desired to share with colleagues that my response to our process was not an attack on any of their work as individuals. Instead of fueling further resistance by expressing frustration, I remained silent in hopes of promoting reflection without producing more guilt or fear.

Now I attempt to help White colleagues experience cognitive dissonance related to institutional racism. Warren (2010) describes the cognitive dissonance that moved me to action. For example, I wanted to refute the fact that my school district intentionally would produce such disparate student outcomes by race. I kept hearing statements about how public schools succeeded at what they were designed to do, i.e. serve White students in ways that produced advantage over others. Although I did not want to believe it, evidence of this cropped up in academic engagement, school partnerships with families, and unequal access to activities. These built-in disadvantages for students of color pricked my brain regularly, despite the lack of alignment with my stated mission as an educator.

*We can’t let ourselves off the hook by saying we didn’t know because asking the questions, no matter how difficult, is our responsibility.*

~Williams, 2000, p. 101

When colleagues conduct reflection and critical questioning on their own terms, without peer judgment, it seems more effective. Therefore, if I ask provocative but non-threatening questions, as Williams (2000) promotes in the quote above, I might minimize fragility and still facilitate cognitive dissonance for others. I do not proclaim to hold the skill of asking good
questions, but I still try. I create questions by flipping statements that surface in my thinking first and then work to ask them with authenticity.

An example of this took place with a colleague who suggested that we should coach students of color before they speak to the teaching staff. He worried about teachers’ defensive reaction to students when they share their stories of microaggressions and marginalization. Rather than act on my natural inclination to disagree, I asked him, “What if instead we coached the teachers on how they could listen to the students without becoming defensive? I wonder if teachers are ready for that step.” In the past, my colleague expressed frustration with my statements of disagreement. His response to the question, “Maybe they are ready,” demonstrated an openness I had not previously felt. Using an inquiry-based approach helped improve my interactions with this colleague—required if I hope to keep White peers at the table during difficult conversations. Woodson (2000) recommends this in his quote below for those who wish to achieve equity.

\[\text{The only question which concerns us here is whether these “educated” persons are actually equipped to face the ordeal before them or unconsciously contribute to their own undoing by perpetuating the regime of the oppressor.}\]

\[\text{~ Carter G. Woodson, 2000, p. xv}\]

Develop Emotionally Intelligent Responses

One of our schools sits more than ten miles from some of the neighborhoods it serves and figuratively, it locates much further away. The long bus drive from one neighborhood takes students from high-density housing in a racially diverse area within a city out to farm fields surrounding a school with very few other students who identify as Black or Latin@. Additionally, the lack of racial diversity among staff members at the school compounds the
challenges these students face in making the daily trek out to the country. As I work to support both students and staff members, I sometimes struggle to respond to staff with empathy.

When student behavior issues arise with these children, if they are angry or disrespectful, especially if they are physical in nature, building administrators often contact the police. I wonder if we would make that call if the students were White or if their families had greater financial means, given that White, affluent parents more often challenge disciplinary actions we take. For some of these incidents of misbehavior, we prohibit students riding the bus to and from school and expect the family to figure out transportation. Each time I work with the administrators on these situations, I observe creative brainstorming and problem solving and know they care deeply about the students. I ask many questions but rarely the one in my head, “Would our actions and the disciplinary results be the same if this student were White and/or financially well off?”

I wish to avoid criticizing others when they work daily in the school trying to support both students and the staff members. Instead, I reflect on my actions as a former principal and wonder how I might handle the situation with Ty differently today. I also worry about the students and consider how it must feel to have White people meting out consequences. I wonder what family members perceive as administrators communicate with them about the incidents and decisions. In order to brainstorm, I talk it over with other colleagues who serve as administrators of color in capacities meant to enhance student and family engagement. Because I sometimes respond with amplified emotions but want to support progress toward racial equity, I look for ways to remain grounded. This goal turns me toward strategies for developing inner calm.

In early 2016, I began learning about the practice of daily meditation. Researchers, Newberg and Waldman (2009) find that regular meditation results in physiological shifts in the
brain leading to changes in emotional responses. What we control exists only within ourselves in the present moment. These scholars note consistent and intense meditative focus increases blood flow to the frontal lobe and anterior cingulate, areas of the brain responsible for critical thinking and for producing empathic feelings, respectively (Newberg & Waldman, 2009, p. 19). When I react, without pausing to use a more mindful response, I judge others instead of providing support or moving forward in a collaborative manner. When I consistently practice mindfulness through meditation and other informal activities, I respond more frequently as the type of leader I desire to be. An effective response proves especially important with the significant challenges that surface in working toward racial justice. Although I accept the fact that colleagues and others may label me for speaking out against racial injustice, I do not want them to avoid me for acting intolerant or reacting in a caustic manner.

When anger emerges about actions I perceive to be racially unjust, mindfulness helps me notice the emotion and pause before responding. When I react, I judge. If I can extend practices like compassion and loving kindness, I respond with empathy (Salzberg, 2014). An example of this took place when a White teacher confided to me that he sensed racial equity faced significant barriers at the administrative level in his building.

For years, I worked with this teacher and his administrators on equitable practices, so my initial emotional response included a quickening pulse and a mind that raced toward anger. I recognized the unproductive nature of spouting my discouragement and decided instead to communicate optimism. I shared observations about movement we have made toward racial justice, along with reminders that we are all on a journey. In addition, I noted an openness to learning I witnessed from his administrators. The teacher walked away feeling recharged to advance the work with colleagues in his building. Had I not responded mindfully, he might have
left deflated and feeling hopeless instead. We both commented on feeling a sense of urgency but acknowledged the long journey toward racial justice.

Like this teacher, I need to know I can depend on others for ongoing support and encouragement. I recognize the source of my frustration towards others often relates to my own errors in racist thinking, actions, and statements. It helps, therefore, to have close colleagues with whom I can share my vulnerability and brainstorm better ways to respond. I know my angry response may arise from the profound hurt I incur as a member of a school system that perpetuates racial injustice and from the knowledge that I play a part.

Sometimes this hurt and resulting anger surfaces for unidentified victims of racial injustice. For example, in response to a student video post by White high school students containing the “N-word,” a staff member suggested the need for a plan to support the White students. As frustration swelled in me about the lack of supports considered for the students of color victimized by this hate speech, I held my anger in check. Instead of blaming the staff member, as I would have previously, I attempted to consider the ways Whiteness produced this sort of response and focused my energy on the problem and not the person. For situations like this, danger exists when we attempt simple solutions. In fact, the White students did need support and so did our students of color. This staff member’s email may have omitted the latter; however, the blame I placed on the individual served neither group of students. Instead, I held a duty to recognize my own past complicity and respond with loving kindness for everyone involved in the situation. Feedback to the individual using an empathic approach served as a step toward an improved future systemic response. As Salzberg (2016) explains, this meant I must love the person—despite the actions and statements—rather than like them.
When incidents like the video and the staff response arise, it reminds me that racism wells deep within individuals, including me, and the system. Though we acknowledge racism persists, many staff members dislike the label placed on us as a “Racist, White District.” Most certainly, staff members all across our district want to see the label removed. Interestingly, as I attempt to expose our system’s racism, colleagues sometimes place similar labels on me, from “Racist” to “All about Equity.”

Labeled, Like It or Not

*One solution I did learn was to be sure to have friends who are not white, because they will not marginalize you for speaking out about race.*

~James Loewen, 2015, p. 31

As Loewen (2015) infers from his message above White friends may peg other Whites working toward racial justice. I often experience labeling and marginalization for being “All about Equity.” Sometimes the tag raises a roadblock; at other times, it serves as a resource. Whether this helps our district make progress or not can depend on how I respond to others labeling me and how I label myself.

For many years, I approached discourse among the leadership team by calling myself a troublemaker. I raised the topic of racial injustice cautiously and often apologized for bringing it up as I sensed colleagues’ discomfort. When I discussed this approach in a graduate course on leadership, one of the sapient professors, Dr. Tom Fish at the University of St. Thomas, responded compassionately and told me not to place this negative label on myself. He claimed I was doing what I should to help expose injustice, which did not deserve a negative label. Until then—somewhere in my upper 40’s—I unconsciously labeled myself without considering the ramifications. In addition, the apology itself became problematic.
More recently, for instance, in a small community circle with district colleagues, we discussed what to do when we offended someone during a difficult conversation. As the circle keeper, I started by stating I would probably apologize and ask how I might approach the subject without hurting my colleague’s feelings. Another White colleague remarked that she worries the apology itself could negate what needs surfacing, especially from a marginalized point of view. Her comment reminded me that an apology often comes from White, middle class expectations. Moreover, I realized that my comprehension of racial injustice is partial (EACCW, 2005). In other words, when might we have expected a colleague or student of color to apologize for offending someone in rejecting oppression? At times, even common norms proved problematic.

During our summer equity institutes, we use community agreements to create an environment for rich dialogue about race. Facilitating these equity conversations becomes dicey when White staff members or students believe other participants direct comments toward them. Although we design the community agreements to create a safe space, the leadership circle conversation provokes me to consider moving toward brave spaces instead. Kathy Obear (awarela.org) suggests we use norms that encourage bravery in order to hold authentic dialogue and to prepare ourselves to hear stories that may make us uncomfortable. In so doing, we would not require people of color to apologize for sharing truth about their experiences of racial injustice. Arao and Clemens (2013) state Whites often invoke the common guidelines for safe spaces when they become uncomfortable and want, “to discount, deflect, or retreat from a challenge” (p. 135). I would rather engage in authentic dialogue about race and experience discomfort than expect a colleague or student of color to refrain from sharing their truth. However, colleagues on the leadership team fall along a spectrum of preparedness for these potentially provocative conversations.
Upon closing the circle I described above, free-flowing discourse included the suggestion that apologizing might remove guardedness of the listener so they hear a message with openness. We had not yet developed brave spaces where people could speak their truth about experiencing racial injustice. Thus, I wondered how I might help the receiver—i.e. a person I offended during a difficult conversation on race—hear me without having to negate my point with an apology.

Now when I sense that I offended someone, I try approaching a colleague one-on-one in a less formal, more private setting as soon after the incident as is reasonable.

**Recognize When to Address a Colleague Directly**

When we have district initiatives related to racial equity and social justice, I find it paramount that we administrators work collaboratively and not at odds with each other. One of the areas we focus on, for example, involves racial diversification of staff through the hiring process. When a leadership team vacancy occurs, we follow the regular practice of having a district-level administrator participate with building-level leadership in the hiring process.

Among our leadership team members, it appears we have consensus on expanding the racial diversity of our staff, with a particular emphasis on certified staff. Nevertheless, it rarely plays out in individual interview and hiring processes in a way that shifts staff demographics. Many reasons for this may include aforementioned White fragility, along with a desire for autonomy in decision making by our building leaders.

The following anecdote from a hiring process provides an example of our struggle. A district-level colleague who identifies as Black met with a building-level leader in preparation for the hiring process for a dean of students position. Deans serve on the district leadership team; therefore, we typically include a district director on the interview team. The building-level administrator, I will call Peter, mentioned to my district-level colleague, Johnny, that racial
equity sometimes results in regression of our work. For instance, Peter felt I interfered in the hiring process when another Black district leader recommended a candidate via email. I responded by asking Peter to let us know which district-level leader the building-level team wanted to involve in the hiring process. Peter assumed I was directing him to include a specific colleague of color. Though Johnny’s role in the district made him a good choice to serve on the team, I held no intention of directing Peter whom to include.

Upon hearing the assumptions Peter made about what I supposedly implied with my email response, I wondered about a possible miscommunication between the principal, I will call Mike, and Peter. In other words, although Mike asked me to let him know who I thought should serve on the team, Peter (new to the district) may not have known about our process when hiring for a leadership team position. Nevertheless, I found myself discouraged that Peter: 1) made the assumption I require it be a specific colleague of color, and 2) Peter did not prioritize a diverse hiring team. For these reasons, I felt the need to speak to Peter directly about his assumptions.

Regularly, I feel paralyzed in these situations. I want to reach resolution with a colleague (Peter, in this case) but also want to ensure my actions maintain the health of our team and do not marginalize colleagues of color further. Warren (2010) suggests, “White activists often feel stuck between the worlds of whites and people of color” (p. 21). At times, I check in with colleagues of color before considering possible actions, in hopes that the outcome might be good for people on both sides of the color line. Often as I work through a situation like this one with Peter, though, it can leave someone like Johnny feeling deflated.

My text communication with Johnny, as follows, provides further clarification:

J: Peter told me to pump the breaks and our colleague can sit on the panel. No need for further discussion my friend...

L: Ahhh. I hope you know I appreciate you and your passion and resilience!
J: Quickly fading! … Can you imagine having to come to work everyday living a lie? Sometimes I hate having my lens because it’s filled with darkness and hopelessness for black kids in public schools… the power structure will do what it wants when they want and that’s obvious. I’m tired and what has happened the last few hours confirmed a lot of things for me. That’s all I got!

L: Sorry if I played a role in hyping it up too much or spinning it.

J: It’s not your fault, Laura. It’s just our reality and I have to accept that.

Maybe because I live with White privilege, I cannot accept this as our reality. I cling to the belief that the culture of our school district can improve for people of color. A sense of hopelessness surfaces when I think about how far we really are from racial justice or how its complexity seems to depend on the racial identity development of every individual involved in these interactions. Sometimes this lack of hope swells up as an ache in my chest and a lump in my throat. I stand on the verge of a good cry alone in a quiet place. Then I remind myself of the racism Johnny and others face daily, and my determination and stamina return. For example, Junot Diaz describes the radical hope he holds because of the survival, including the contributions of genius, people of color contribute to society despite the continuous battle against hegemonic structures (Tippett, 2017).

Elimination of the achievement gap requires an all-hands-on-deck approach (Smith et. al. 2001). Yet, when some White colleagues think I push too hard for racial justice, my hope wanes. I find that White fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) keeps us from having necessary, difficult, and direct conversations with each other. I believe we could make significant progress, however, if we commit fully to our district’s equity community agreements, listed below (adapted from our work with the National Equity Project, 2015):

- Stay engaged
- Speak your truth
- Listen for understanding
- Experience discomfort and stay curious
● Expect and accept non-closure
● Maintain confidentiality
● Withhold judgment (no blame, no shame, no guilt)

We utilize these agreements during our professional development activities, but sometimes fail to abide by them in our daily work with each other. For example, when I examine each agreement critically, I find myself at fault with a few on a regular basis. I can easily stay engaged, speak my truth, listen for understanding, experience discomfort and stay curious. However, it proves significantly more difficult to fulfill the last three. Most often, my sense of urgency for a just institution gets in the way.

In the situation described above, I realized the need to have a one-on-one conversation with Peter. I approached the conversation by assuming positive intentions and trying to place myself in his shoes. I hoped to convey to Peter that diversity of thought on the interview committee helps us make better hiring decisions. I wondered if I could help Peter imagine himself in Johnny’s place. Our conversation proved less challenging than I thought it would. Nevertheless, Peter shared, as I often hear from colleagues, he believed the situation had “nothing to do with race.” Based on Johnny’s text messages, he experienced the situation as race-based.

When Peter states our district equity work could move us backwards and then claims that I implied he must include a specific colleague of color on the team, race plays a role. Alvarez, Milner, and Delale-O’Connor (2016) state, “racial discrimination and racial incidents are prevalent in schools... and there is strong evidence that people of color experience high-stress levels and exposure to traumatic events as related to both overt and covert racism” (p. 29). Situations may exist when an incident is related more to individual behavior than it is to race, but the distinction frequently proves difficult to make. Alvarez et. al (2016) add, “We rarely question
our own ways of knowing because we often see them as truth” (p. 37). I admit I cannot always
tell when my own actions involve racism. Indeed, I hear all too often from White educators
referring to responses from students and staff members of color, “They’re just being too
sensitive, seeing everything as race-based.” In fact, I often forget that U.S. present-day society
emerges out of racial oppression throughout our history (Takaki, 2008; Yancy, 2017).

I regularly observe what I perceive as racism in others but fail to recognize it in my own
thoughts or actions. In a generic way, I can acknowledge myself as a racist actor. The question of
whether an action or statement has to do with race surfaces frequently in my mind. This, in and
of itself, may be racist. I find it easier to observe the racist actions of others and I cannot remain
silent when colleagues of color experience negative assumptions about their work or their
intentions. Racial injustice takes many forms (Bonilla-Silva, 2013) and often is at play even
when unintended (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). At the same time, it proves quite challenging for
those of us living with the myth of meritocracy to comprehend this perspective (Rutstein, 2001).
In order for me to understand my part in institutional racism when I do not experience it directly
I must use a reflective lens at all times.

**Finding Critical Humility and Self Love**

This project follows a dialectic pattern—it is both *not* about me and *all* about me. The
SPN, as described earlier, requires that I study my experiences through my thoughts and actions
related to leading for racial justice. In other words, my story matters (Nash & Bradley, 2011) and
I hope sharing it might influence the leadership strategies others attempt. By explaining how I
sustain the work, I wish to encourage White leaders to mobilize and stay the course. In sharing
some of my most frequent errors, I intend to help others avoid them. Educators commonly hear
that most people learn more from their failures than from successes, and that proves true over
and again for me in racial justice work.

**Critical Humility.** Many reflective questions surface when I look inward. How do I hope others perceive me with regard to race, privilege, and equity? What layers of identity do I bring into conversations that help promote racial justice or result in barriers? The European-American Collaborative on Challenging Whiteness (EACCW, 2005) asks people to reflect upon how they might perpetuate the very phenomenon they wish to change.

I find the greatest challenge for me, therefore, exists when a colleague suggests that I tone it down on the topic of racial justice. If I do so, I wonder how that either undercuts our progress or, alternatively, offers a strategic approach to sustaining changes in practice. If I maintain my intensity with this colleague and others, might it simply halt us in our tracks as an organization? The latter implies I hold a sense of superiority among my peers, one component of White privilege (EACCW, 2005). In fact, walking a fine line between critical humility and self-love requires both reflection and forgiveness—a form of loving kindness for myself (Salzberg, 2014).

**Self-Love.** At the same time I use critical humility, Hay (2004) encourages that I practice love for myself and not hold onto unproductive guilt. If I fail to speak up during moments when microaggressions occur, I feel a sense of guilt. If I *do* speak up and White colleagues deflect the conversation or revert to practices or statements that reinforce racism, that seems unhelpful, as well. Modeling my own racism (Brookfield, 2014) may prove unhelpful if colleagues have already pegged me as overly sensitive on the topic.

I frequently wrestle with my thoughts and emotions as I consider the racial injustices experienced by students and staff members of color. I travel roller coasters of compassion and anger with colleagues and myself. Ever since the days of my youth, I experience motion sickness
on roller coasters. The unease I feel with regard to the motion sickness from racial injustice is
more one of gut rot or a wringing of the stomach. Instead of the contents of my stomach rising up
through my esophagus, it feels more like doing a headstand, where the acids from my stomach
press upon my heart. Therefore, it takes daily work to maintain emotional balance and listen for
understanding.

Reverend Angel Kyodo Williams explains how the anger we feel often emerges from a
sense of helplessness related to the complexity of achieving social justice (Salzberg, 2016). The
immense grief she describes resonates with me as I grow in my understanding of what I
previously thought was anger about racism. I recognize I hold the privilege of choosing this
roller coaster ride (EACCW, 2005), whereas people of color cannot escape it. When it comes to
statements from White colleagues, I work toward compassion. Some of the norms of
collaboration we utilize from the Center for Adaptive Schools help hold me accountable,
including: 1) Pausing, 2) Paying Attention to Self and Others, and 3) Presuming Positive
Intentions. I would like to call these “skills” rather than norms, because even as a seasoned
educational leader, I fail to practice them consistently during difficult conversations with
colleagues.

Ahead of time, I must forgive myself, knowing I will err in my attempt to model the way
toward racial justice, and try anyway. If I allow fear of failure to maintain its grip, racism will
not diminish within or around me anytime soon. When I remain emotionally grounded and
engage in these conversations, I often hear colleagues say, “I’m not racist.” Of course, no one
wants others to think of him or her as racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). In reality, not staying the
course results in more entrenched individual and institutional racial injustice. I certainly feel
better when I practice imperfectly than when I allow fear to paralyze me.
Working with Colleagues, both White and Non-White

I care deeply about my colleagues, especially the longer I work with each of them; yet, perceptions among White leaders about how race impacts our students’ experiences and outcomes differ significantly. A bridge or liaison, therefore, may be necessary for our mostly-White team to make progress together. Sometimes I feel responsible to serve as a liaison who facilitates others’ learning through listening. Nevertheless, it may be impossible to facilitate racial identity development in others. They must first want that for themselves.

Strong cross-race relationship requires reciprocity (Unger, 2014). I wonder if one way to bridge the divide is to ask one colleague to be patient with the other in given situations. Thus, I continue to support colleagues in building stronger relationships with each other across racial lines and I try to do the same. The following interpersonal experience provides insight into one example of the need for reciprocity and collegial support.

Recently “A.J.,” a colleague who identifies as African American, earned his bachelor’s degree, which garnered a bump in both position and salary. Before this, A. J. worked in the district for several years full-time as a support staff member, coached after school, mentored many youths of color in his community, and concurrently took night classes. Upon learning of A.J.’s commitment to students and the district and his interest in becoming a certified educator, I asked other directors if we could assist him in paying for his night classes through our Grow Our Own, i.e. racial diversification efforts. As a result, A.J. and I held regular check-in meetings for support. Over time, A.J. began to share stories of his experiences in the district.

When I reflect upon the accumulation of negative experiences A.J. has had with colleagues over the years, I stand amazed by his grit and stamina. Mind you, A.J. does everything in his power to connect the most marginalized students to school in a positive way.
Moreover, students from all backgrounds find A.J. approachable. Given all of this, imagine my emotional reaction when I learned that one of my leadership team colleagues congratulated A.J. upon earning his bachelor’s degree by saying, “Hey man, good job. Now you’ll have to act the part.” Good thing A.J. did not reveal which colleague said this. Had I followed my instinct and responded immediately, I may have severed a collegial relationship important for making progress on racial justice.

In the middle of an incident that seems infused with racism, I tend to respond viscerally. I work to contain my emotions and to refrain from reacting with judgment. If I come off harshly with a colleague or act as if I know the answer, my White colleagues shrink away. On the other hand, when I am too tentative in my response, colleagues of color may walk away disappointed and further dejected.

I feel good about my leadership in these messy situations only when I respond mindfully, so my actions align with my intentions to treat all people with respect. Usually this means I attempt to ask questions I hope will help expose potential racism and provoke reflection. With questions rather than answers, I hope to facilitate movement that does not marginalize students or staff members of color further. For example, as a district director, I recently supported a principal with a staff-to-student situation.

A White support-staff member, I will call Tom, walking with a Black male student, I will call Donny, attempted to guide Donny toward making good choices by telling Donny he hung around kids who influenced him negatively. Tom told Donny, “You shouldn’t hang around those clowns.” The student then asked Tom whom he meant when he said, “Clowns.” As they passed by another Black male student in the hallway, Tom said, “Like him.” Donny immediately went over to this other student I will call James, and told James that Tom called him a clown. James
then approached Tom and asked him if he told Donny that he was a clown. Tom said, “Yes. You are a clown.” Another staff member who overheard the verbal exchange reported the incident to the principal. As the building leader worked through the incident with Tom, James, and James’ parent, he faced several challenges and asked for support from the district level.

James, said student, was new to the building and had often exhibited misbehavior early in the year, which resulted in the creation of a behavior intervention plan. James’ parent became frustrated with the frequent calls home to report consequences for James, including suspensions. Over time and with a great deal of effort from all parties—the school administration and other staff, James, and his parent—the school-home relationship improved, as did James’ behavior at school. Then, this situation between Tom and James occurred. Because the label of “clown” used for James by Tom came about unexpectedly and without provocation, all of the work to build these relationships quickly unraveled. The principal and human relations director investigated the incident immediately and disciplined Tom for it, but the damage was done. James and his parent no longer trusted school staff members, including the principal.

This principal faced other challenges from his mostly-White staff related to the incident. As building administration utilized more restorative practices with students, staff members questioned the effectiveness of these behavior consequences. In this situation between Tom, Donny, and James, many staff members responded to the investigation of Tom’s behavior by wearing black shirts to school. They reportedly did this to show solidarity with Tom and to communicate frustration with the administration’s restorative approach. The principal’s next moves with his staff and with James’ family mattered, as did my work to guide him. It was important, therefore, to keep my emotions in check, no matter the level of anger I felt toward
Tom and the other staff members’ behavior. They likely did not consider the symbolic message sent to James and his family with the black shirts.

In these situations, I had to remind myself of mistakes I made with students like Ty. At the same time, I wanted to help keep staff members from making the mistakes I did 17 years ago. Frustrated, I had wished the staff members had learned from the professional development we conducted in the past three years. However, I realized learning about race and equity in general proved easier than participating in a specific incident. I attempted to support the principal and a leader of color while they partnered with the family, but I doubted our potential for success. In the end, James’ parent requested a transfer to another school in the district because of her lack of trust in the staff. Rebuilding the family’s faith in the system, therefore, had to begin anew with another staff and building administrative team. Fortunately, one principal learned from the other leader regarding strategies for building relationships with James and his mom, so not all efforts were wasted.

**Balancing Expectations for the Individual with Support of the System**

The district Leadership Team agreed to expand staffing to include new support staff in the schools for students of color disenfranchised in our system. With new staff members of color in place, we worked for these roles to be flexible enough to meet the needs of students. The design of the positions involved direct support of students of color and collaborative professional learning with teachers to enhance cultural and linguistic responsiveness. We believed teachers would welcome feedback from their new colleagues in these supportive roles. Nevertheless, as leaders we failed to carry out the advance communication needed so that teachers fully understood the purpose of the roles. Moreover, we underestimated the amount of support and direction necessary for these new staff members of color in the first year. As one member of the
District Equity Leadership Team (DELT) who recommended the new positions, I held some responsibility for this failure.

In addition, my role as director involves supporting students, staff, and administrators in our secondary buildings. When strife between staff members arises, in part because I failed to promote strong communication up front, I hold some responsibility for that strife. On the other hand, I directly supervise neither the building administrators nor the new staff members or teachers. Therefore, this work requires that I balance my sense of individual responsibility with strong collaborative practices among colleagues. I liken this to using professional capital, as Fullan and Hargreeves (2012) describe this concept.

Professional capital raises the collective level of practice of educators so the system improves for all students. The research Fullan and Hargreeves (2012) share demonstrates that when a strong individual teacher joins a school with weak collaborative practices, the individual stagnates and cannot improve the system for students. On the other side of the coin, when an average teacher joins a school with a strong collaborative community, the individual teacher’s practice improves. I would suspect progress toward racial justice across the school and district follows a similar pattern. Our system, therefore, must expect, support, and inspect collaboration for racial equity and social justice in order for students and staff members of color to experience real and consistent improvement.

**Working Alone, Working Together**

In speaking with a leader of my state’s professional organization for administrators about leading for racial justice, I realize structural and policy changes may prove easier than identity development. By this, I refer to staff members’ identities as White educators. In fact, my own White racial identity evolves daily, and sometimes regresses. Understanding this provokes self-
scrutiny related to Rutstein’s (2001) characterization: “Even for whites who openly oppose racial bigotry, but who, deep down, feel superior to people of color” (p. 51). Although I work toward a more positive White racial identity, I understand feelings of superiority may still arise in me from time to time. I acknowledge I have a lot of work yet to do on my own identity development, which never ends. I also need to work with White colleagues on implicit bias, stereotyping, and redesigning teaching and learning using responsive practices. Moreover, I must work with colleagues of color by continuing to learn about racism and by increasing support.

With regard to working with all colleagues, I often experience what an American Indian woman describes as “two-canoe.” This graduate school classmate, who lives near her reservation and travels to the cities for coursework, says other American Indians use the term “two-canoe” for her because she attempts to live in both worlds—their world on the reservation and that of Whites. Although I cannot live in the world of people of color, I often feel split between worlds in a way that proves challenging to explain. Malott et. al. (2015) characterize it well in the quote below. I suppose it also parallels my former work as a high school principal, where few colleagues hold the same position or understand it on an experiential level.

Malott et al. (2015, p. 338)

Efforts at same- and cross-racial relationships were plagued with challenges related to their antiracist beliefs and/or actions, leaving them, at times, frustrated because they felt isolated or disconnected from others.

When I work with White staff members on issues relating to racial justice, my approach must include inquiry rather than judgment or disdain (EACCW, 2005). Delving deeply into the topic for the past several years results in viewing situations differently than I did in the past. Not everyone has the privilege to take classes, read books, and dialogue with people of color, even
when they desire racial justice in our system and across our society. Thus, I sometimes feel nearly alone among White colleagues in this work. It does help, however, to participate in the District Equity Leadership Team (DELT) and to have a few long-time White mentors with whom I can identify and communicate (Warren, 2010). In working with peers across racial lines, I also keep one foot in the other canoe.

As a White educational leader, I will never comprehend all that my colleagues who identify as Black and Latin@—or students and families of color—have to endure. However, I can always listen and demonstrate compassion. Although I do not belong to these racial identity groups, I see my role as helping other Whites find a way to relate to the oppression and marginalization experienced by people of color in our educational institution. Additionally, I retain a sense of duty to examine structural and policy barriers they face and know I must collaborate with others to alter or remove them. With my colleagues of color, I can listen and strategize approaches to overcoming the barriers they face, but I cannot do that work for them. Finally, with peers who identify as Black and Latin@, I sometimes just need to offer space that I do not enter as a White person.

Even though they may be sincerely concerned about racism, their methodology suggests they are not yet free of the type of paternalism endemic to white supremacist ideology.
~ hooks, 2000, p. 13

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Liberal paternalism shows up often in Whites engaging in racial justice work (Warren, 2010). Scholar bell hooks (2000) warns well-meaning Whites against this tendency in the above quote. I must recognize that my extroversion and my fix-it mentality get in the way if I fail to hold these traits in check when working with colleagues of color. Especially when a new
colleague, student, or family of color enters the picture, patience and listening practices become paramount. As an educator and a leader of many years, I have come to learn that I cannot solve others' problems for them. I can, however, work with colleagues and take an inside-out approach (NEP, 2015) in order to reduce racial injustice in our institution and in myself, respectively. Inside-out work requires I practice critical humility, before and while trying to change the system.

**Conclusion: Take the Cold Anger Approach**

This work is complex and daunting, so I regularly question whether my efforts result in any substantive change. I find myself taking two steps forward in leading for equity and then feel as if I am pushed one step back. I do know that in this work to achieve racial justice in myself and across our institution, one never *arrives* at the destination. Nevertheless, I recognize small successes when colleagues call with increasing frequency to bring up racial injustice they notice and then ask me for advice with actions they might take. On the other hand, when I look at our annual student data, it reminds me repeatedly that we, as a collective system, lack a sense of urgency for change.

With certainty, I cannot accomplish the necessary changes alone. I need colleagues in all types of positions, from support staff members to leadership team members, and those of all backgrounds working in collaboration to create lasting change (Smith et. al., 2011). I return to hopelessness at times when people who resist making a change look to blame me. However, stubbornly pressing onward alone will not work in these situations. I can reflect on my approach and motivation, but I also must work with peers in a way that keeps staff members working *through* the challenges and not succumbing to White fragility.
Anger can be a motivator, but only when utilized appropriately. Thus, my anger must focus on the issue of racism itself and not on individuals. Warren (2010) describes how some White activists take the cold anger approach. He describes this as, “a way to combine passion with the kind of cold, strategic calculation necessary to be effective” (p. 53). I acknowledge this anger emerging within me arises from sadness about racial oppression of our young students, in particular. Many colleagues likely carry this sadness, too. Salzberg (2014) explains that mindfulness practice can help me recognize, “Beneath...anger, what I [long] for [is] a beautiful vision for justice, for peace, [and] for equality” (p. 81). This vision of a just future requires passion, endurance, and strategic action.

~Mark Warren, 2010, p. 90

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CHAPTER SEVEN
SUSTAINING THE WORK

During a YWCA Summit on Racial Justice a few years ago, I attended a session with Dr. Hazel Symonette. A gifted speaker and long-time advocate for racial justice, Dr. Symonette played a figurative tape as she repeated the phrase, “Self-care is activism.” She went on to mention the work of many local and national civil rights activists who burned out because they did not balance their activism with self-care. I since modified the tape for myself to read, “Self-care sustains activism.”

This path exhausts me emotionally at times. On top of the usual reasons that educational leaders lose sleep, I choose to use my privilege 1) to interrogate my thinking, 2) to investigate and expose the ways racism lives in our system, and 3) to strategize actions for improving racial justice, alone and with colleagues. I lack the answers to this complex and evolving injustice, and thus, require continuous learning. I regularly examine a variety of perspectives and then solidify my own. I remain grounded, however, by knowing my purpose and by practicing self-care.

If people skimp on their inner work, their outer work will suffer as well.
~Parker Palmer, 2000, p.91

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Know Your Why

In stating the purpose for my study above, I mentioned a comedian named Michael Jr. (2015). He states that knowing your why results in your what having greater impact. When I think of students like “Ty” and others who walk our halls today, I long for them to experience our schools and system in positive ways like my own children did. My purpose as an educational leader includes helping our collective staff, including myself, see every student for the promise and possibility within him. I believe our job involves enhancing students’ interests and hope in
their future. Until we do that for every parent’s child, and even then, we have racial justice work yet to achieve.

This project, while daunting, also serves as a privilege. I believe in the work of my district because we publicly name our challenges with racial justice, even as we celebrate small successes. In some school districts in which I have served, we could only discuss socio-economic class injustice—lack of resources that disadvantage some students and families. In other words, I could not explicitly address racial injustice in some of those schools and communities. Presently, however, I hold the privilege of working in a district where the board of education, the superintendent, leadership team members, and many other staff members all name racial equity as a goal. I feel honored to work in such a district and believe it fits well with my professional purpose and life’s mission. This type of vision can change, however, when the leadership of a district shifts.

**Impermanence and Permanence**

A polarity stands between mindfulness practices and racism. In working toward emotional intelligence through meditation practice and other leadership strategies, I learn that thoughts and emotions are impermanent. I can choose to let them take over and decide to respond or I can reflect on them and do nothing. With regular meditation practice, I can become more strategic and emotionally intelligent, and therefore, more effective in my response or nonresponse (Newberg & Waldman, 2010).

Racism at the individual, institutional, and structural levels, on the other hand, proclaims permanence (NEP, 2015). Our ancestors built racial oppression into this country (Takaki, 2008; Yancy, 2017). It survives and even thrives because of White supremacy well beyond the walls of
my body, the district, and our nation’s schools. No matter how long and hard I work on my White racial identity or expose racial injustice in our educational system, it will continue to exist.

My ability to recognize and understand the permanence of racism brings some peace of mind, or equanimity. I feel a sense of freedom from my “fix-it” mentality in this permanence. This positive freedom allows me to sustain the work in collaboration with others in a way that maintains balance for my mental health. Put another way, I realize I will continue to make mistakes in working toward racial justice, but I can forgive myself and begin again. In this way, the concept of impermanence supports my mental stability and sustainability of the work. By not ruminating on all of the “should-haves,” I can instead move on in order to try another approach.

When someone knocks me down or I become discouraged, mindfulness practices improve my resilience (Salzberg, 2014) and my ability to maintain a focus on racial justice work. The quote below (2014) explains the balance of passion and self-care needed to sustain these efforts.

*The combination of compassion and equanimity allows us to profoundly care, and yet not become overwhelmed... because of that caring.*

~Sharon Salzberg, 2014, p. 126

**Resilience**

Mistakes on my part happen on a regular basis. In the world of Whiteness, I understand that continuous improvement toward perfection crumbles as a myth (EACCW, 2005; Kivel, 2011). Nevertheless, I cling to the hope that I can make fewer mistakes over time when it comes to my own racism. Meditation practice helps me build resilience and patience (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). Resilience means I get back up whenever I err in working toward racial justice. Practicing patience improves my ability to persist (Kabat-Zinn, 2005) when anger related to racial injustice, marginalization, or oppression swells within me. Resilience and patience together offer me
endless opportunities to try new strategies to address ongoing challenges, like facing my own racism.

I must practice critical humility in order to fully examine and acknowledge when my thoughts and actions result in racial injustice. On the flipside, recognizing that I can never fully rid myself of racism provides the humility I need to keep trying. Just when I think I have a solid understanding of this issue, I make another mistake. Nash and Viray (2014) offer one way to heal—by “pausing to reexamine what is of utmost importance to me in my day-to-day struggle to exist with integrity, dignity, style, and grace” (p. 30). Returning to my sense of purpose in facing racism enhances my resilience even when I continue to make mistakes. Moreover, resilience requires a balance of self-compassion and accepting the limits of what I can achieve.

Salzberg (2014) describes equanimity as the spacious stillness that can acknowledge things the way they are. This does not mean I simply have to accept racism in myself or racial injustice in my educational institution. Absolutely not! It simply means I do my best each day to interrogate my thinking and actions related to race and to expose racialized structures, policies, and actions across our institution. Equanimity solidifies my resilience, allowing me to sustain the work over the long haul. Alternatively, when I find it difficult to still my mind because of a racial incident, another strategy that helps ground me is self-care.

**Self-Care**

I practice self-care in several ways when my work takes an emotional toll. I eat well, I exercise regularly, and I utilize mindfulness practices to stay healthy. For many years, I engaged in the first two strategies for self-care to mitigate the impacts of stress from my job as a high school principal. Serving in public educational leadership parallels the emotional turmoil of parenting in part, but consists of additional pressures for meeting the needs of so many different
groups of people in any given situation. Additionally, when people make public claims about your work as an educational leader, it is often impossible to counter the claim to defend yourself publicly. I simply must stay true to my core values and take good care of myself in order to sustain the work. Thus, mindfulness practices are strategies I added in recent years to enhance my self-care routine.

Mindfulness practices offer a wide array of choices, so I can integrate some activity into my daily schedule every day of the week. I regularly use mindfulness activities such as gratitude practice, meditation, stretching, simple breathing techniques, self-awareness, and pausing to notice the present moment. Not only do I find these activities bathe me in self-care, but practiced daily over a long period, they improve my ability to interact with others more intentionally (Harris, 2014; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Newberg & Waldman, 2010; Salzberg, 2014). After a few years of daily practice of relatively short duration—five to ten minutes—I noticed marked improvement in my interpersonal skills in addressing high-stakes issues related to racial injustice. In other words, I frequently leave emotionally charged exchanges more satisfied with my own behavior than I have in the past.

For me, self-care involves as much mental fitness as it does physical. As a former exercise physiologist, I understand the need to take care of my nutrition, strength, flexibility, and endurance. As I age, I increasingly notice the mind-body connection. With improved equanimity, i.e. emotional balance or peace of mind, due to regular meditation I feel a greater sense of well-being overall. When addressing the pain of racial injustice, it demands inner strength and emotional endurance. Daily practice prepares me to be more successful in this endeavor.

The key strategy to calming the lizard brain is to practice relaxation and mindfulness.
~Zaretta Hammond, 2015, p. 54
Mental Preparation for Success

Working toward racial justice in an educational system requires preparation for remaining calm while engaging in difficult conversations on a regular basis. Thinking about the racial injustice our students of color experience can produce anxiety and put me into fight or flight mode (Hammond, 2015; Hay, 2004; Newberg & Waldman, 2010). The more I practice meditation, the greater ability I have to envision a productive conversation with a colleague. Hammond (2015) suggests, “By thinking through [what sets you off] in advance you [can]...keep your amygdala in check” (p. 67).

Two short years ago, I may not have maintained calm during a meeting with district colleagues. Our district leaders prepared to communicate some changes to our formal operating structures. As we discussed the upcoming shifts, we strategized communication for the rest of the leadership team. Johnny reminded the rest of us that perceived changes in the power dynamics, especially for him and Marcus, might result in resistance from some colleagues. Another leader stated that the words “power” and “resistance” caused her alarm. She asked that those specific terms not be used as we planned communication of the organizational changes. Johnny simply cautioned us, based on what he experienced as he took on a district-level position. He did not suggest we use those words with the broader leadership team members.

My White colleague’s request produced the all-too-familiar tightening in my chest, a clenching of my jaw, and the rounding of my shoulders. I assessed my quickening pulse and rising emotions, took a deep breath, and proceeded calmly to state a vision I held for us as a team of district-level leaders. I shared, “In time, I would hope that our Black colleague could communicate with us using whatever words he chooses to use that resonate with his experience.” Without consistent meditation practice for the last 20 months, my emotional level may have
prevented me from speaking, because I did not want to produce hurt feelings. On this occasion, I succeeded in speaking from a place of loving kindness for all of my colleagues, despite the frustration I felt.

Sometimes, I still react without practicing mindfulness. When the outcome is less positive than intended, I return to meditation practice and other self-care activities and begin again. I meditate daily and I hold a weekly guided practice at work with a group of staff members. Together, we discuss the positive changes we notice in ourselves from regular meditation practice.

One of these employees, I will call Autumn, who attends my guided meditation session each week, shared a change she noticed as a result of her regular practice. Autumn told our group she was proud of her response with a colleague who used strong language with her. She remarked that the old Autumn, before practicing mindfulness, would have told her colleague to, “Back off!” Instead, she said she noticed herself becoming agitated in the dialogue, but then sensed that her colleague was speaking under duress. When I asked Autumn what specific practice she used from our sessions, she stated that she tried using compassion and loving kindness. She shared that it worked to keep her from responding so abruptly. She told our group that she felt pleased with her newfound ability to react this way.

Autumn’s self-reflection and sense of pride offer me hope, knowing difficult conversations related to racial injustice lie ahead. I want to be able to refrain from becoming impatient, angry, or judgmental toward others. I find it easier when I know residual racism remains hidden in my brain no matter how hard I work to recognize and dispel these thoughts. Therefore, when racial remarks arise from colleagues, I want to treat the speaker with compassion and still help facilitate reflection on how these comments reinforce racism. If I can
keep my cool and ask the speaker to explain the meaning of her remarks, I feel more satisfied with my own actions.

In order to prepare myself when I anticipate a difficult conversation on the horizon, I must examine my intentions and consider options for responding to colleagues (Salzberg, 2014). When I presume positive intentions from them, I use responses that demonstrate genuine compassion, even if I dislike what they say. Another recent example that comes to mind involves a teacher who wanted to continue a reading activity that called for superficial responses from students about their books. She stated that she wanted students who read poorly to be able to access the activity. We discussed getting students of color engaged in the activity; thus, I perceived the words she chose, “students who read poorly,” as coded for “students of color.” I knew her intentions were positive, so I remained patient. Nevertheless, I inquired how she and other teachers involved in the activity might prepare and expect every student to respond to authentic and meaningful questions about their books, even if it meant providing them with a more accessible text. Following the conversation, I checked in with meeting participants to ensure I respectfully challenged the notion that some students cannot answer deeper questions about what they read.

As Lewis and Diamond (2015) find, despite our best intentions to close gaps, we treat some students differently than others. In addition, Hammond (2015) asks that we prepare every learner for productive struggle. I feel better about my response in conversations where educators excuse some students from meaningful learning if I treat those colleagues with respect even as I question their coded language. Aguilar (2016) offers many examples of ways to prepare for and approach these types of conversations directly, yet respectfully. I recall many conversations in my past leadership experience when I wish I had known these strategies and prepared to use
them with a mindful approach. My goal in every future conversation where I need to address racial injustice, therefore, involves confronting the issue while leaving my colleague’s sense of professional integrity intact. In conversation with other educational leaders across my professional network, I hear similar hopes for undertaking racial justice work with staff members in their school systems. Freire’s (2013) words, below, describe the vision I have for my work and that of other White educational leaders across the state and nation.

Radicalization involves increased commitment to the position one has chosen.
It is predominantly critical, loving, humble, and communicative, and therefore a positive stance.
~Freire, 2013, p. 9

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This narrative describes my experiences with leading for racial justice, but it is not only about me. First and foremost, many colleagues in my district collaborate with me in this work toward achieving racial equity and social justice. In fact, no leader can do this work alone. If a leader experiences alienation or marginalization in this work, she largely finds herself leading no one. Alone, she becomes a lightning rod and progress grinds to a halt, as people, unhappy with the change initiatives, can point blame in her direction. Thankfully, as the DELT’s collective impact gains ground in our mostly-White system, additional staff members continue to join in the work, distributing the weight across tens, and even hundreds, of others.

Few cultures in the world rely on individuals to accomplish tasks alone. Hammond (2015) explains that many students and families in our ethnically diverse school systems in the U.S. come from cultures and countries that value collectivism. The United States stands in a class of its own with the way our society promotes individual competition over cooperation and collaboration, even in our schools (Hammond, 2015). In order to make significant ground in eliminating opportunity and achievement gaps and increasing racial justice across schools and districts, we must work together to flip that notion on its head. While I need to examine my own biases and work against stereotyping, I also have to work in collaboration with every colleague possible to promote racial justice in our system. Moreover, the societal tide pushing against progress requires collective action in order to expand racial justice beyond my individual school district’s boundaries.

An organization that helps educational leaders like me build a network of support for racial justice in schools is the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN). This network
exists to turn individual interest into a broader movement, where peers learn from the mistakes and successes of educators in school districts across the nation. Dr. Madeline Hafner, MSAN’s Executive Director, planted seeds for our district’s leaders to team up by introducing a colleague and me to the work done in the Arlington Public Schools (APS) (Smith et. al., 2011). Their story of narrowing achievement and opportunity gaps provides an example of outside-in work, as opposed to my narrative research on working from the inside out. The leaders of APS explain that eliminating achievement gaps must involve every staff member (Smith et. al., 2011). Both routes offer strategies for working toward racial justice in school districts. My story matters (Nash & Bradley, 2011) because it sheds light on experiences other White educational leaders may have exposing and addressing racism in themselves and in mostly-White districts across the United States.

**Just Like Me**

No two people are exactly alike; however, every one of us holds biases as well as hopes. One mindfulness practice I learned, called “Just Like Me,” asks participants to consider the struggles and dreams we hold as human beings. Using this activity, I move from the more technical approach of critical humility toward considering collegial interactions on a more emotional level, knowing that they, too, want racial justice in our school system. Understanding others are “just like me” in having imperfections and hopes helps me use less judgment and sustain the fight for racial equity. This work challenges me because of the injustice I witness on a regular basis. Although we may disagree on how to address injustice, I know others are just like me in their desire to participate in eliminating it, or at least in seeing it end. Moreover, our district context mirrors that of many across the nation, where staff members just like us want to lead their institutions toward racial justice and the liberation Freire (2000) describes below
It is in its dialectical relations with reality that I shall discuss education as a constant process for the liberation of human beings.  
~ Freire, 2000, p. 129

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From My Context to That of Educational Leaders Elsewhere

I work in a growing district with increasing racial diversity. On many measures of student performance and staff satisfaction, our district performs very well. Moreover, demographic changes and student performance parallel the characteristics in three of five districts in which I worked. All of these districts have sufficient resources. Many people consider the districts strong school systems, as they serve most students and families quite well. Nevertheless, I often share when facilitating adult learning, “My present district is a good district, but we will never be great until we serve all students and families very well.”

When we disaggregate the data by race in these past and present larger districts, students of color, particularly those who identify as Black, African American, or Latin@, do not benefit from our system in ways similar to most of our White, Indian, or Asian students. Moreover, school data appears to be the most disparate by race and ethnicity in states like Minnesota and Wisconsin (WCCF, 2013). Unfortunately, this scenario describes too many schools and districts all across the United States (NRC, 2004).

The so-called achievement gap may be more appropriately designated an educator or system performance gap with our students and families of color. Although educators cannot fix the larger societal challenges families of color face (Shapiro, 2004), we do have influence in schools with our colleagues and with the youth in our charge. In other words, this personal
narrative research calls White colleagues to action if they have a desire for racial justice in their schools and districts.

**White Educational Leaders Like Me**

I network with many White educators who communicate a similar vision of racial justice for students in their schools and districts. Therefore, I hope other leaders can learn from this story, from my mistakes, and perhaps from some of my strategies for sustaining the work. Every individual must undergo her own racial identity development. The internal discovery, emotional work, and intellectual process differs for each of us. On the other hand, Helms’ (1990) phases of White racial identity development likely offer insight for most Whites working toward racial justice. I purport that educators will struggle to lead this work effectively until they undergo necessary internal excavation and willingly model their own racism (Brookfield, 2014). Many White educational leaders I know agree the road is long and winding and bumps or potholes will surface on their journey.

**White Liberal Mindfulness**

White educators should avoid colorblindness as they consider introducing mindfulness into school systems. Based on emerging science of the brain’s response to meditation and other mindfulness practices, it appears that people of all ages, income levels, and cultural backgrounds can reduce stress and enhance wellbeing through regular practice. Nevertheless, we must learn from our history of racial oppression to approach implementation of this initiative thoughtfully. For example, Dr. Angela Rose Black (2018) suggests that very little research on mindfulness has been conducted in communities of color. Moreover, she cautions liberal educators who might want to fix the struggles of students suffering from racism. Through the program, Mindfulness for the People, Dr. Black offers differentiated training to people of color and to Whites to ensure
all leaders implement mindfulness with both understanding and intention. Indeed, I wish to avoid mistakes of the past and work with colleagues, students, and families of color, rather than doing something positive to them. Anytime Whites intend to take action for people of color, we maintain a system of White supremacy. This trap is all too common for educators, and I plan to look out for it as I continue on my journey.

A Lifelong Journey

If you are like me, you put your mind to a task and then work at it until you succeed. In working toward racial justice, however, no end exists. I may improve my White racial identity, but face no guarantees that I will always act consistently as anti-racist (Helms, 1990). Indeed, Malott et. al. (2015) find White racial identity development, “Ongoing and nonlinear” (p. 336). Many interactions in my school district lie ahead that will serve to advantage some students over others. Colleagues and I will agree and disagree on specific strategies for working toward racial justice in our schools and system. At times, I will succeed in using a mindful approach during difficult conversations. Other occasions will leave me dissatisfied with my response.

Choosing to work for racial equity and social justice is a never-ending endeavor, rife with emotional turmoil. The alternative, however—pretending not to notice the disparities—is not an option. Some time ago, I put these lenses on and now I cannot remove them. Many mostly-White schools and systems exist across the United States that have disparate outcomes for students of color (Michael, 2015; Rutstein, 2001). Based on the work of many scholars (Michael, 2015; NEP, 2015; Smith et. al., 2011; Theoharis, 2009), I surmise many educational leaders in those systems envision and act to achieve equitable outcomes for all students. Some of those leaders may also identify as White leaders working toward a more positive racial identity, just like me.
As we hone our awareness, we must always maintain vigilance based on the words of Kivel (2011) below.

*Racism is everywhere, influencing us at every turn.*

~Paul Kivel, 2011, p. xv
CHAPTER NINE

THE NEED FOR CONTINUED RESEARCH

Use of the Scholarly Personal Narrative method of research makes sense as I reflect upon this journey of racial justice work as a leader who has served in several different school systems. Presently, I work in a district publicly willing to acknowledge our failings. Moreover, we recognize the need to involve staff members from all types of positions in this effort. Our district leads the way, among few others, in providing continuous professional development designed to address racial injustice in school systems. The professional development we conduct includes an equity institute that parallels the National Equity Project’s (NEP, 2015) approach to leading from the inside out. Additionally, my District Equity Leadership Team (DELT) colleagues offer “hidden” curriculum courses that use the various lenses of race, ethnicity, language, and gender to examine materials and pedagogy. Although the SPN approach works well for studying my experiences, additional research using a different methodology would offer insight into any of these professional learning activities.

Opportunities for Future Research

Case studies could occur for any of the individual professional learning activities. Gathering feedback from all of our equity institute participants on their ability to recognize and interrupt implicit bias offers one example. Another case study might involve teachers taking our courses, the History and Structure of the Hidden Curriculum: the Black-White Binary or the Latin@ Experience. Other forms of qualitative narrative research could occur using interviews of colleagues who identify as White leaders doing similar work on racial equity and social justice. Moreover, we could examine how students perceive changes teachers make in their classrooms related to curriculum and instruction.
The Hidden Curriculum courses also offer an opportunity for quantitative research. Over time, we could measure changes in student performance outcomes in the classrooms of teachers who take this course. A researcher might consider aggregate student data to find the impacts on all students in these classrooms. Moreover, research may highlight changes in student performance outcomes by race and ethnicity in these classrooms following teachers’ participation in the courses. Many potential approaches to research exist on the topic of disparate school performance outcomes. In fact, a researcher could examine the cumulative effects of multiple efforts made toward racial justice within one school or district.

**A Personal Narrative Research from Whose Perspective?**

I lead racial justice work in collaboration with a team of people, called DELT or the District Equity Leadership Team. The DELT includes leaders at the district level from a variety of racial/ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. We also contribute to this team from different positions and educational experiences. In other words, some of our team members moved through positions from within the district and some of us bring experience from other districts. We team up with leaders at the building level and across school systems who represent a wide variety of identity backgrounds, lengths of tenure, and district experiences.

This particular research project comes through my perspective and experiences across districts and positions. I share a narrative from having served in three districts as a high school administrator, including two where I was the principal. At present, I hold a position as a district-level director with five years of experience in the district. How I respond in given situations and how others respond to me likely correlates with many factors, including my formal position, my work experiences, my race, my age, and my gender. Therefore, some of my findings may result from these specific aspects of my identity. Nevertheless, I assert that much of what I experience
in leading toward racial justice mirrors that of other White educators. Additionally, I find that sustaining leadership of any major work in education often involves knowing when to push and pull and requires maintenance of personal health and wellness.

Although my audience for this SPN likely consists of mostly White leaders, it would be interesting to learn about similar research conducted by leaders of color. One inquiry I hold, for example, is how a leader who identifies as a person of color in a mostly-White school district exposes racial injustice and sustains the fight for equity. I assert that theories from the likes of Ladson-Billings (2005) and Yancy (2016) would be viewed from the lens of the other rather than the self. Of course, Helms’ (1990) White Racial Identity Development Theory would not apply, but another racial identity development theory might. Moreover, I would never suggest a person of color use a regular exercise and mindfulness practice regimen in order to sustain leadership for racial justice. In fact, I often wonder how staff members of color endure racial injustice in mostly-White school systems and still maintain their health and wellness. By listening to people of color and learning about their stories, I plan to continue learning about forms of racial injustice and ways I might interrupt it in myself and within my sphere of influence.

**Eight Implications for White Leaders**

This personal narrative research project serves as one attempt to inform my thinking and that of others. Here, I employ strategies to expose racial injustice and to sustain these efforts over time. This work requires looking in the mirror, treating others with respect, building alliances, and practicing self-care. The following eight themes highlight this learning experience:

**First, unearth your thinking and conduct your own identity work** (Helms, 1990; Kirwan, 2014). I recommend that every educator take the Harvard University Implicit Association Test (IAT). Leaders, in particular, make many decisions each day that affect
students, families, and staff members and they must understand how unconscious bias influences these decisions. Moreover, knowing your why improves the impact of your what (Michael Jr., 2015).

**Prepare to encounter White fragility** (DiAngelo, 2011). Many people I know claim they despise racial injustice. These same people sometimes resist the very change needed to achieve greater racial equity. We often fail to see the ways we exhibit White fragility when a specific racial equity challenge arises and swirls around us. As a leader, familiarize yourself with the signs of fragility and prepare to work through, rather than around, the discomfort.

**Refrain from bludgeoning colleagues and instead model your own racism** (Brookfield, 2014). Use critical humility as often as possible. Notice all of the ways racism lives within you and reveal this thinking to others. Minimize judgment and maximize empathy in order to collaborate with peers more effectively.

**Know when to maintain pace and when to slow down** (NEP, 2015). If you step out on the plank to lead a change initiative for racial justice, be sure not to move too far alone. As my colleague Johnny often says, “We must move slow to move fast.” I erred more than once with eager action when leadership peers were not ready. Know when to reset and regroup.

**Understand when and how to work with other White staff members and when to build cross-race alliances** (Warren, 2010). Get comfortable with two-canoe, where you never fully sit in one or the other. Just like people of color who learn to code-switch (Delpit, 1993), White leaders must work differently with White peers and with colleagues of color. Building support through a professional network helps you sustain two-canoe when it seems most lonesome.
Consistently take care of yourself. When leaders fail to take good care of their physical and mental health, they lack the energy and creative capacity to serve others well for the long haul (Aguilar, 2016; Salzberg, 2014). Activism of any kind requires endurance to achieve progress. Educational leadership in and of itself demands balance and self-care to maintain effectiveness in serving others. Leading for racial equity and social justice adds complicated layers braided with intensity. Enhanced emotional intelligence (Aguilar, 2016), self-care practices (Hay, 2004), and stealth-like mindfulness (Salzberg, 2014) are, therefore, not selfish, but necessary ingredients.

Practice meditation every day. This parallels marathon training. Daily meditation practice changes the brain over time (Hammond, 2015; Newberg & Waldman, 2010; Wolkin, 2005). Improving your ability to be mindfully aware in the present moment helps align your actions with your intentions (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). There will be no competitive performance at the end of this training; yet, frequent opportunities to use your developing response skills arise, guaranteed by the pervasiveness of institutional racism.

Commit for life. Our kids deserve it. Leading for racial justice extends beyond school systems where educators have a significant sphere of influence. Every student in our schools deserves the same chances for success that leaders would want for their very own children (Theoharis, 2009). Because of the layers of racism that live within us, in our schools, and in society today, leaders should advocate for every child as they would for their own.

Advocacy for All Our Kids

This project focuses on attaining racial justice in school systems; however, as a district leader I aim to serve students from all backgrounds equitably. Students experience marginalization in our school system for a variety of reasons beyond race and ethnicity. For
example, one colleague’s child struggles with gender identity, as do other students in our system. Many of our staff members and these students’ classmates lack understanding about gender as a spectrum. For example, a few teachers still separate boys and girls for some learning activities. Moreover, within our district, and most likely across the nation, social pressures on boys and girls differ based on a traditional understanding of gender as a binary—one is either male or female, period. These social constructs press in on students from many sources, including peers, staff members, community members, and sometimes even from parents. Leaders like me, therefore, need to keep learning about our own identity through relevant topics like gender, which may marginalize some students. A leader’s job involves ensuring that every child receives support, encouragement, and learning opportunities that provide appropriate challenge.

Gender identity is just one example of several that may result in marginalization of students and families. I cannot focus solely on racial justice to the exclusion of all other forms of marginalization and oppression. Students in our school system also experience sidelining based on socioeconomic status, religion, body type, political persuasion and more. Some of what I learned through this research project can transfer to any of these forms of exclusion. For example, a district leader’s ability to understand layers of cultural identity allows her to support teachers in improving relationships and lesson design (Hammond, 2015). Layers of cultural identity have to do with concepts well beyond race or ethnicity.

**Transformational Leadership for Our Students**

Students who experience marginalization and oppression need bold leadership from administrators and teachers willing to fight for equity and racial justice. In fact, I argue all of our students need leaders willing to address these social issues in schools. Today’s student performance data continues to demonstrate that our leadership does not ensure students from
every racial or ethnic background receive an equitable chance at success (Ladson-Billings, 2005; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Macleod, 2009; NRC, 2004; Rutstein, 2001; WCCF, 2013). In addition, our White students need social justice leadership (Theoharis, 2009) for success beyond their school-age years. All students and families deserve courageous school and district leaders willing to stand up against the living, breathing, racial injustice in our educational institutions.

Educators can help transform their schools and systems by leading from the inside out (NEP, 2015). Transformational leadership requires continuous work on the self and in collaboration with colleagues in all positions across the institution (Smith et al., 2011). This demands we take a stand for kids and families, and maintain that position even when the work becomes unpopular or overwhelmingly difficult. Moreover, attaining racial equity across educational institutions requires artful coaching of staff teams using effective emotional intelligence (Aguilar, 2016). Finally, promoting racial justice demands passionate and sustained leadership from White activists over the long haul (Warren, 2010).

What we are creating is an endless army of energetic, compassionate warriors that understand how to use their gifts and skills to actualize and maintain a better world for themselves and for others. ~Williams, 2000, p. 100

Conclusion

Williams (2000) describes a beautiful vision for schools and the society of the future in the above quote. When it comes to racial equity and social justice in education, significant work remains in most, if not all, systems across the United States. I find that the most imperative work I must conduct involves looking in the mirror using critical humility. This includes interrogating my own biases and stereotypes. I need to continue the development of my racial identity and
must come to know my layered self with an intimacy that involves confidence in exposing my racism for others to witness.

Whether we realize it or not, we all need to heal from racism. Thanks, in part, to the generosity of people like Richard Davis, who opened his home and his heart to others for years, I am starting to heal. Because of leaders of color working on healing justice, like Dr. Black (2018) and Prentis Hemphill (2017), I can continue to heal toward racial justice. In addition, I appreciate the societal critiques of Whiteness and mindfulness, along with the regular conversations with peers of all racial identities that provide me with infinite learning and healing opportunities.

This project changed me. A few decades ago, I held White guilt and relatively little awareness of the levels of racial injustice in school systems. As a White individual, I needed to prove myself, especially to people of color. Nevertheless, through this transformative journey, researching racism, my racial identity development, and my leadership story, I learned a great deal about my own racism. My ability to heal strengthened even as I acknowledged the racism buried deep within me. Additionally, I gained confidence by understanding that I will always make mistakes in working toward racial justice.

Formerly, racist statements and actions from others and racialized structures and outcomes in our system boiled my blood until I began daily meditation practice. Although my emotions still sometimes get the best of me, I now often pause before responding and humbly choose an approach that leaves me with greater hope for our collective impact. Today I can confidently say that I regularly practice anti-racism as I attempt to become the White individual and leader I long to be.

I understand the requisite, relational work with White colleagues and with educators of color using emotional intelligence. For this reason, and in order to achieve sustainability, the
strategies I use include exercise and good nutrition, along with ongoing meditation and mindfulness practices. Although I acknowledge the permanence of racism, I still intentionally commit and plan to heal from this work, personally and professionally, until the day I die.

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