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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Belonging and Inclusion in Identity Safe Schools*, by Becki Cohn-Vargas, Alexandra Creer Kahn, Amy Epstein, Kathe Gogolewski.

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# An Introduction to Identity Safe Schools

## Introduction

Identity safe schools stand firmly in the belief that students of all backgrounds deserve a welcoming school environment that both recognizes and invites them to participate as fully and equally valued members of the classroom and school. When their diverse social identities are respected, they feel connected to each other and their community. The sense of belonging that arises works to negate feelings of alienation, indifference, and separation from others.

Indeed, “the problem of the 21st century is the problem of ‘othering,’” john a. powell (lower case intentional) declares, encapsulating the bulk of our challenges under this label, which bears credence when he details its effects (powell & Menendian, 2016, para. 1). *Othering* can be described as the exercise of determining how one group is different from another, coupled with an intent to isolate and dominate the other group with constructs of inferiority. Whether expressed in global, national, or local contexts, othering occurs when one group experiences discrimination or exclusion due to their social identity (race, ethnicity, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status, other forms of difference leading to discriminatory practices). The consequences are far-reaching, powell says, leading to a wide range of discriminatory practices, from microaggressions and bias-based bullying to acts of violence and hate, to even extreme cases of murder and genocide. He identifies white supremacy as the catalyst driving these reprehensible developments, based on the false belief that White people are superior. Harvard and Princeton studies show that 75% of White Americans hold subconscious biases with pro-White and anti-Black beliefs (Butler, 2014).

The Othering and Belonging Institute (n.d.) offers a path forward and away from acts of othering through “Targeted Universalism,” which is described as an approach that sets universal goals for all people. The next step involves identifying targeted processes and strategies to fulfill the goals, determined by how different groups are situated within their cultural systems and geographic locations. Applied to education, Targeted Universalism calls on us to move beyond programs tacitly aimed at fixing kids or families—as if they were broken—to focus instead on fixing the “structural conditions and ways of relating to each other that contribute to persistent inequities in our schools and communities” (Osta, 2020, para. 1). Targeted Universalism “focuses on removing structural barriers, increases access to opportunities, and advances the well-being and thriving of whole communities of people” (Osta, 2020, para. 6).

Bettina Love (2019), author of *We Want to Do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*, proposes that educators approach their calling with the urgency of an abolitionist incorporating racial justice in that we expose and apply an authentic history of oppression and violence as well as resistance, joy, social change, and activism. She emphasizes that we not only love the students but also embrace and learn about their culture.

### Systemic Racism and Schools

Since their inception, schools have served to replicate systemic racism, which is pervasive and expressed across all walks of society. This is evidenced in curriculum, policies, behaviors, and attitudes—both intentional and unconscious. It occurs in hiring practices that discriminate against Black and Latinx teachers, in the unfair distribution of resources and growing segregation in schools. It is perpetuated through the disproportionate suspensions and expulsions of Black and Brown students, which propel them into the “school-to prison pipeline” (Villenas & Zelinski, 2018). When low expectations and rote teaching persist, students of color internalize self-defeating feelings of inferiority (Dusek & Joseph, 1983; Lightfoot, 1978; Rong, 1996). Christopher Emdin (2016, para. 7) states that “teachers who hold within themselves perceptions of the inadequacy of students will never be able to teach them to be something greater than what they are. Teachers cannot teach someone they do not believe in.”

Strides have been made over the past 100 years to counter these dismal practices. In the United States, historical events like the civil rights movement, Black Power, the women’s movement, Gay Pride, and Black Lives Matter have served as aspirational developments working toward an equitable society. However, there has also been a backlash that has hindered progress: attacks on affirmative action, mass incarceration of Black people, resegregation, redlining practices in housing,

holding children of undocumented immigrants in cages, and more. Countervailing forces have eroded public education by promoting vouchers that serve to further segregate students.

This failure for equity to manifest systemically is evident in both public and private institutions and policies, as well as our educational systems—in the latter, spanning from the elementary grades through college. While many people understand that students of color often do not receive an equal education, few realize the degree to which education is designed to maintain white hegemony. By the time students reach top universities, the disparity has reached high levels of exclusion. Legacy acceptances (students who get accepted to universities because family members have previously attended) offer a huge advantage to White students by not requiring top grades and scores. In a study that included 30 elite colleges, researchers discovered that students who enter with a legacy enjoy a 45% increased chance to get accepted (Bergman, 2020).

For students of color who break through those barriers and arrive on a college campus, the oppression does not necessarily end. A simple Google search reveals the common ritual of White students parading “blackface” at universities, including Virginia, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and California (Google, n.d.-a). At the University of Virginia (UVA), the practice has continued since the 1800s (Gates, 2019). This phenomenon was considered “normal” behavior by many Whites until recently and sends an ongoing and blatant message of white supremacy to White students, which can cause deep humiliation and trauma to Black students. In the last year, high school students in Minnesota, Maryland, Illinois, California, Colorado, and Boston either wore blackface at school events or posted blackface online, sometimes accompanied with racial slurs (Google, n.d.-b).

These systems, practices and attitudes of white supremacy are replicated when schools disproportionately honor White students by highlighting their accomplishments and honoring their culture—including holidays, heroes, and dominant historical narratives—while punishing students of color with an exaggerated number of suspensions and expulsions, failing grades, tracked classes, and over representation in special education. The pattern of favoritism is clear—it’s not the result of an accident nor a random act. One principal described his daily dilemma when he observed “a row of Black students who have gotten in trouble, sitting in my office each day at lunchtime.” The level of negative cultural bias that sent these students to the principal is deeply embedded in our culture, to the extent that often Whites do not see it, even while it exists as an ever-present reality for people of color.

Change is the only compassionate choice open for educational leaders who champion equity. Schools can and must do better. We can flip this script. Many studies

have shown that when educators believe in the high potential for students of color, when students feel cared for and their identities valued, when the curriculum is challenging and rigorous with scaffolds and supports in place, achievement and well-being flourishes. (Flores-González, 1999; Hébert & Reis, 1999; Hilliard, 2003; Lee, Winfield, & Wilson, 1991). This encapsulates the vision for identity safe schools.

Dismantling systemic racism is work in progress by continually identifying, examining, and supplanting the white supremacist attitudes that produce these biases with narratives and practices that promote equity and inclusion. As we work toward creating an identity safe school, we seek to unravel the ideas of othering, implicit bias, and privilege with an intent to dismantle white supremacy, sexism, transphobia, and other systems of oppression. We embrace targeted universalism to right past wrongs and fill unrealized needs. We celebrate student identities with a joy and richness for all the forms of diversity available within our common humanity.

## **OUR STANCE: FOR WHOM DO WE ADVOCATE?**

As we write this book during the unique days of the pandemic—coupled with large-scale protests against racism—we want to offer an explicit and clear articulation of our stance and purpose. Research on identity safety focused on the need to address pervasive stereotypes that plague students of color, particularly Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students whose academic achievement and well-being has endured continual threats from racism both inside and outside the school. We seek to redress these wrongs by supplanting systemic racism with systemic equity in the school. We address issues of intersectionality, as well. For example, we recognize that school experiences for a White gay student are not the same as experiences of a Black gay student, who—in addition to homophobia—suffers the indignities of racism. Identity safe research reveals that a non-colorblind climate of belonging and acceptance serves students of all backgrounds, especially those who are deemed to be different in some way. However, our content and many of our examples are intentionally designed to spearhead efforts to disrupt racism and white supremacy.

We offer this book to educators who seek to go deeper into these issues and create equitable policies by bringing identity safe teaching into practice across schools. We must serve these students, who have been targeted unfairly for so long. We believe the time is now.

## **PATHWAY TOWARD EQUITY**

When schools seek to shift the balance of power to give voice and influence to the diverse members within our school community, when members are comfortable in their expressions to each other because they know they are valued, when they are

welcomed with equal status and treated fairly in the school culture, we will have inclusion. Without this treatment, equity will not manifest. And beyond inclusion, there is an additional and intentional step up to become identity safe, which is specific to diversity. This quality embraces multiple perspectives in a community and supports the diverse needs of students, their teachers, and families. It acknowledges and honors a range of differences, including ethnicity, racial identity, religion, gender, and social groups.

Equity is reflected in student outcomes, when all students of all backgrounds are progressing at an equally high rate. We will know schools are equitable when outcomes are not predicted by race or any demographic factor, and all students receive the support they need to reach their full potential for learning and contributing. When we see equity expressed at all levels in a school culture, we can know our challenges will include finding ways to support the wills of the many who want to make contributions. Our time can be spent connecting diverse individuals and groups to leverage their support.

Identity safety has a particular flavor that can be seen, felt, and heard the moment we arrive on a campus. We will know equity has found a home when—in addition to high achievement of students of all races and ethnicities—we see a student stand up for a peer being bullied, or when students volunteer to raise funds for Special Olympics; when we see racial and gender diversity reflected in the student body government. Equity will triumph when high school students of all gender identities feel safe enough and motivated to join the LGBTQIA+ Alliance. These possibilities and more, when experienced within the school culture, are clear reminders that a school is successfully supporting identity safety.

## **Identity Safe Leadership: What It Is and Why It Matters**

The work of identity safety emerged as a way to counteract the debilitating effects of stereotype threat. By grasping the pervasive damage of stereotype threat we come to understand the import for identity safety as an antidote, so we begin with an overview of the research. Theories of systems thinking and change management strengthen the efficacy when transforming an unsafe school culture to an identity safe one. We will interweave these ideas throughout the book, underscoring their interdependence.

### **STEREOTYPE THREAT**

In his article “Thin Ice” (1999), Claude Steele defines “stereotype threat” as “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (para. 10). He

goes on to add, “Everyone experiences stereotype threat. We are all members of some group about which negative stereotypes exist, from White males and Methodists to women and the elderly. And in a situation where one of those stereotypes applies—a man talking to women about pay equity, for example, or an aging faculty member trying to remember a number sequence in the middle of a lecture—we know that we may be judged by it” (para. 10).

Steele and colleague Joshua Aronson had previously developed studies to research the impact of stereotype threat and found that the simple fear of being judged by a negative stereotype can impair performance, inducing self-defeating behaviors from projected and perceived vulnerabilities (C. M. Steele, 2011). They designed one experiment to explicitly test stereotype threat by administering a test to both Black and White students using difficult items from the verbal Graduate Record Exam (GRE) in literature. Both Black and White students had been statistically matched and vetted for equal abilities via SAT scores. They told students that the test diagnosed intellectual ability, triggering a stereotype for Blacks that they were less intelligent than their White peers. They found that “when the test was presented as a test of ability, Black students performed dramatically less well than White students” (C. M. Steele, 1999, para. 17). When the exact same test was framed as a lab test that did not measure ability, Black students performed as well as Whites.

## The Power of Stigma

“A Class Divided” (Peters, 1985), a *Frontline* TV episode better known as “Blue Eyes, Brown Eyes,” is a classic film featuring a third-grade teacher from Iowa who created a simulation for her students to illustrate first-hand the emotional effects of racism on children of color. While we stress the urgency to refrain from carrying out a simulation like this that clearly targets children’s esteem, we can learn from it. On the first day, the teacher required all brown-eyed children in the class to wear bulky collars around their necks to easily identify them. She proceeded to stigmatize them with comments attesting to the superior intelligence and ability of blue-eyed children. She hammered home the point that blue-eyed children are smarter, neater, and nicer than brown-eyed children, while the brown-eyed children shrank into their seats. The next day, she reversed her proclamation, telling them that she had lied to them the day before, the truth being that brown-eyed people were superior. “The brown-eyed people get five extra minutes of recess,” she announced. “You blue-eyed people are not to play with the brown-eyed people.” In both cases, the children deemed to be

inferior took on defeated behavior, performing poorly both in and out of the classroom. Conversely, the “superior” children not only performed better but belittled members of the other group.

The video dramatically demonstrates how fast stereotype threat can impact behavior when a person is stigmatized. When the teacher initiated a phonics lesson with the stigmatized group, it took them 5.5 minutes to complete their task. Once they were freed from their collars, they finished it in a mere 2.5 minutes. The teacher informed them, “You went faster than I ever had anyone go. Why couldn’t you get them yesterday?” A student replied, “It’s about those collars.” Another added “My eyes kept rolling around.” The teacher chimed in, “And you couldn’t think as well.” Another collared student stated simply, “We’re dumb.” In just a single day of wearing the collars, these students internalized an entirely new and untested view of themselves as inferior and unworthy.

The threats that arise from treatment as a second-class citizen due to a person’s background (race, class, gender, disability) can negatively impact performance even when individuals do not believe the stereotype applies to them. Their success can be thwarted by the fear that others will judge them by the stereotype. This is understood when realizing that the effect is not sourced from the low esteem of single individuals.

Negative messaging also shows up in external sources and includes information, both subtle and not-so-subtle, that members of an entire group are judged as “less than” other groups. These messages are so pervasive as to permeate the atmosphere to the extent that it is always “in the air.” People of color hear messages that they are less intelligent, more violent, and even destined to live in poverty. Women hear messages of powerlessness and weakness, characterizations that proffer a misperceived and limited scope of options. Many additional research studies have demonstrated that stereotype threat damages the performance of people categorized by social class, gender, age, and many other stereotypes (C. M. Steele, 2011).

It is incumbent upon educators to adopt a proactive stance and guard against stereotyping that will affect their students. This includes those with autism and other disabilities, those who do not speak English as a first language, and those from low-income homes, as well as others who do not fit white supremacist standards. Without proactive treatment to counter negative stereotypes, the unspoken messages that prevail include “You do not count” and “My teachers and peers will believe the stereotypes” and “It does not matter if I do not believe it. It will affect me.” Being the subject of stereotypes also erodes student trust in their teachers and in their education. Counteracting and refuting stereotypes of all kinds, positive and negative, will open the space for authenticity and true value to emerge in identity safe schools.