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

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 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 authentic relationships to emerge in identity safe schools.

IDENTITY SAFETY: DEFINITIONS AND RESEARCH

Research on stereotype threat offers yet another piece in the puzzle as educators seek to understand the causes of underperformance in their efforts to close achievement and opportunity gaps. Teachers ask for concrete, practical tactics to use in order to reduce and manage these identity pressures in real classrooms.

Claude Steele's wife, Dorothy Steele, also a researcher, understood the need to identify concrete ways stereotype threat could be reduced in practice. Along with her husband, she set out to identify an antidote to stereotype threat and supply teachers with approaches to counter negative and racially based stereotype threat in their classrooms, supplanting curriculum with a blueprint for positive, identity-based strategies. They coined the term "identity safety teaching" in which "teachers strive to assure students that their social identities are an asset rather than a barrier to success in the classroom. And, through strong positive relationships and opportunities to learn, they feel they are welcomed, supported, and valued as members of the learning community." (Identity Safe Classrooms, n.d.)

The Steeles gathered a team of Stanford researchers to observe and analyze the practices of teachers in 84 integrated elementary classrooms in an urban school district in Northern California during the 2001–2002 school year. The Stanford Integrated School Project (SISP) (D. M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013) engaged classrooms that had a makeup of at least 15% from each of three ethnic groups, Black, Latinx, and White. The researchers identified 14 behaviors, or "factors," representing a range of teaching strategies and approaches that researchers understood could lead to warm and inclusive classrooms, positive classroom relationships, a challenging and accessible curriculum, and diversity as a classroom resource.

The outcome for applying these conditions would, potentially, result in a classroom where all students could thrive and feel safe, leading to an experience that the Steeles and colleagues termed "identity safety," so named to emphasize the idea that people need to feel safe and free from threats to their identity in order to give their best performance. Trained observers, with negligible knowledge about stereotype threat or identity safety, visited each of the 84 classrooms. Two different observers visited each class three times each equipped with a classroom observation form detailing 200 criteria for their observations. Coupled with a student questionnaire designed to ascertain student comfort in terms of their sense of belonging, motivation to learn, perceived agency and interest in their work, and more, researchers resolved to identify the best paths forward for creating an identity safe classroom (D. M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2016).

Their extensive data revealed in detail how identity safety practices influence student performance and a sense of self in a favorably significant way. They learned that students in classrooms where identity safety was practiced performed higher on standardized tests compared to students in lower identity safe classrooms. The correlation between how the students felt about school and their performance was also established with the student questionnaires. Those from identity safe classrooms enjoyed school more and performed significantly better than their counterparts.

The implications of their findings are promising for educators. Understanding how to address stereotype threat in the classroom in a way that creates happy learning places for students and teachers *and* addresses the negative impacts of systemic racism is a substantial win-win.

This bottom-up research model identified 14 factors that described specific behaviors of the participating teachers that resulted in creating identity safety in their students. The next question involved investigating ways to translate what was revealed in research and further describe the components of identity safety for teachers to apply in their classrooms.

Research on Identity Safety Continues

In 2006, I (Becki), along with Dr. Dorothy Steele's support, began my doctoral studies to describe the SISP identity safety factors in detail and identify effective ideas and approaches for classroom access. I worked for one year with a study group of elementary teachers to identify, organize, and describe what was learned from Steele's research. With Dorothy, we named four domains and condensed the evidence-based factors into 12 supporting components that captured the essence of the attitudes and behaviors observed in successful teachers from the research. We translated the concepts along with examples of concrete strategies to ease practical application in the classroom. Dorothy and I brought their ideas into a book for elementary teachers, *Identity Safe Classrooms, Grades K–5: Places to Belong and Learn* (2013). Working in the field with teachers from grades K–12, I heard secondary teachers requesting specific strategies for middle and high schoolers. I partnered with Alexandrea Creer Kahn and Amy Epstein, resulting in a second book, *Identity Safe Classrooms, Grades 6–12: Pathways to Belonging and Learning* (2020).

The four domains and 12 components of identity safety that serve as the framework for application of identity safe teaching in classrooms also serve as useful guidelines to transform all levels of school culture. Drawn straight from the SISP research, they are the bedrock of identity safety practice. We will highlight them throughout the book and apply them to the wider perspective for the whole school.

The Four Domains and 12 Components of Identity Safe Classrooms (D. M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013)

Domain 1: Student-Centered Teaching

1. Listening for Student Voices: To ensure that students are heard and can contribute to and shape classroom life

2. Teaching for Understanding: To ensure students will learn new knowledge and incorporate it into what they know

3. Focus on Cooperation: Rather than focus on competition, to support students in learning from and helping others

4. Classroom Autonomy: To support students in responsibility and feelings of belonging

Domain 2: Cultivating Diversity

5. Using Diversity as a Resource for Teaching: To include all students' curiosity and knowledge in the classroom

6. High Expectations and Academic Rigor: To support all students in high-level learning

7. Challenging Curriculum: To motivate each student by providing meaningful, purposeful learning

Domain 3: Classroom Relationships

8. Teacher Warmth and Availability to Support Learning: To build a trusting, encouraging relationship with each student

9. Positive Student Relationships: To build interpersonal understanding and caring among students

Domain 4: Caring Classrooms

10. Teacher Skill: To establish an orderly, purposeful classroom that facilitates student learning

11. *Emotional and Physical Comfort* so each student **feels safe and** connected to school and to other students

12. Attention to Prosocial Development: To teach students how to live with one another, solve problems, and show respect and caring for others

Research on identity safety continues. Stephanie Fryberg (2016), professor at the University of Michigan and a member of the Tulalip Tribes, along with Mary Murphy (personal communication, September 20, 2018), professor at Indiana University, feature identity safety aligned with growth mindset in their research on creating culturally responsive spaces and belonging for all students. Stanford professor and director of the Learning Policy Institute (LPI), Linda Darling-Hammond and colleagues (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018) focus on identity safety as an essential element in educating the whole child to create "a caring, culturally responsive learning community in which all students are valued and are free from social identity threats that undermine performance," explaining that "identity-safe classrooms promote student achievement and attachments to school" (para. 19).

Research on stereotype threat and its remedy, identity safety, have sparked further study as researchers develop identity safety experiments and case studies where positive contact and role models were found to promote identity safety (McIntyre, et al., 2003; Purdie-Vaughns, et al., 2008). In "How to Help All Students Feel Safe to Be Themselves," Ondrasek and Flook (2020) highlight an LPI case study at the Social Justice Humanitas Academy (SJHA) in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). There, researchers observed trusting classroom relationships, attention to prosocial development, incorporating diversity as a resource, and other identity safety components in action, leading to improved achievement and a high graduation rate. Students who were surveyed reported that they "feel safe at school."

Making It Happen

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR AN IDENTITY SAFE SCHOOL CULTURE

In this book, we focus on bringing each of the components, and the guiding principles that support them, to life across a school campus—from the front office to the classrooms, yards, lunchrooms, and auditoriums—weaving them into a school culture to create safety and inclusion for students of all backgrounds, especially students of color and students with varied gender identities.

In the books *Identity Safe Classrooms, Grades K–5* (D. M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013) and *Identity Safe Classrooms, Grades 6-12* (Cohn-Vargas et al., 2020), we introduce identity safety as an antidote to stereotype threat and offer a detailed overview with vignettes and examples of teaching strategies for each of the domains and their respective components. We explain that identity safe teaching is an

approach and not a program. We refer you to both those books for more information on teaching strategies.

To create a meaningful approach for implementation, we developed the identity safe components into a set of guiding principles that apply to both the classroom and the school. The principles draw from the components and are presented in a condensed form. Further in this chapter, we will elaborate on each of these guiding principles in their capacity to manifest the ideals of an identity safe school culture.

Identity Safety Guiding Principles

1. **Colorblind teaching** that ignores differences is a barrier to inclusion in the classroom.

2. **To feel a sense of belonging and acceptance** requires creating positive relationships between teacher and students and among students with equal status for different social identities.

3. **Cultivating diversity** as a resource for learning and expressing high expectations for students promotes learning, competence, and achievement.

4. **Educators examine their own social identities** to feel a sense of identity safety and convey that feeling to students, creating an identity safe environment for them.

5. **Social and emotional safety** is created by supporting students in defining their identities, refuting negative stereotypes, and countering stereotype threat, giving them a voice in the classroom while using social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies.

6. **Student learning** is enhanced in diverse classrooms by teaching for understanding, creating opportunities for shared inquiry and dialogue, and offering a challenging, rigorous curriculum.

7. **Schoolwide equity** flourishes for everyone in identity safe schools where the climate, the structures, practices, and attitudes prioritize equity, inclusion, and academic growth for students from all backgrounds. Leaders demonstrate emotional intelligence; attend to student needs; address racism, bias, and privilege; and serve as the architects of ongoing change.

These principles can be seen as individual trees in the woods. With the principles in mind, we can pull back to observe and manage the entire forest. From this vantage point, we can see where and how the principles are working together to support the greater culture that permeates the entire system. We can also identify the areas that need attention.

CULTURE IS EVERYTHING

In their article "Good Seeds Grow in Strong Cultures," Saphier and King (1985) describe a culture as the structure, process, and climate of values and norms that channel staff and students in the direction of successful teaching and learning. The culture of a school is the confluence of a wealth of moving parts that are continually interacting. Using the lens of systems thinking, we consider the way all aspects of a school are connected and impacting each other. In an identity safe school culture, many elements move and dance in harmony with all its parts, ensuring that learning takes place in the context of student well-being. The interplay of safety, inclusion, and acceptance forms a culture where every child has a place within it and feels safe in giving their best effort.

Identity safe leaders start by examining the existing school culture from a broad and comprehensive view. In nature, the regeneration of an ecosystem depends primarily upon the interactions of diverse creatures and plants; so does the health of our human ecosystem rely principally on our diversity and interdependence. When we think about the health of a tree, we don't limit our vision to the leaves or the branches. Topical treatment will not necessarily heal a sick tree, nor will it transform an unhealthy school culture. To get to the roots of the illness, we seek to understand in depth the extent that the system, or school, has intrinsically supported racist and biased attitudes, which are often embedded in quiet policies that seek deliberate camouflage from probing eyes. To find them and enact change, we dig deeper to investigate an entire range of practices and key into those that are provoking inequity. Identity safe leaders work in a continual process to transform school culture by taking a systems approach.

School leaders are required to attend to multiple levels of school operations simultaneously. Their lens encompasses all events and people in the community, from the student to the custodian to all materials and supplies, to helpful organizations outside the school. While at first glance this superpower may engender intimidation, it is a skill and, much like a muscle, it can and needs to be developed.

A fuller investigation of identity safety principles and applying them across the school as useful guides and resources can anchor our understanding for connecting the individual parts into a broader and more manageable view.

THE PRINCIPLES OF IDENTITY SAFETY AS A SYSTEMIC APPROACH (COHN-VARGAS, ET AL., 2020)

Principle One: Colorblind teaching *that ignores differences is a barrier to inclusion in the classroom.*

You have an opportunity to leverage your power to incorporate the voices of everyone in the school in a shared vision, and to do so is to invite their success and yours. Part of the vision involves the power of building trusting relationships where diverse identities are not ignored and all members of the community have a voice and feel they can contribute without leaving any aspect of their identity at the door.

Many educators—and sometimes entire schools—claim to be "colorblind" in an uninformed attempt to undo the effects of racism and bias. However, in a society that operates on a foundation of white supremacy, it is a mistake to think that racial differences and attitudes can be erased by ignoring them when these same attitudes are negatively influencing treatment in the justice system, housing, schools, and all social sectors. A colorblind school climate does not eradicate racism in the school, and will, instead, serve to bolster white supremacy. As we have shown in the section about stereotype threat, racist attitudes in the greater society continue both in overt and covert ways. Those who are different from the mainstream culture are acutely aware of it. Having their identities ignored can trigger mistrust, sap energy, and provoke feelings of anger, grief, inferiority, or shame. For White students, a colorblind environment allows them to maintain privilege. They often get away with petty crimes and other antisocial behaviors that are often dismissed by the phrase "kids will be kids." In many cases, they presume their gains are won fairly in a meritocracy, but in reality they often have many more options than students of color, and the deck is stacked in their favor. A colorblind environment serves to keep it that way.

SISP research found that colorblind classrooms negatively impacted student identity safety (D. M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013). An identity safe approach highlights differences in a way that validates diverse student identities, while searching for and rooting out inequalities with an honest commitment to address and supplant them with equity and inclusion. In subsequent chapters, we model ways to move from a colorblind to an identity safe culture.

Principle Two: To feel a sense of belonging and acceptance *requires creating positive relationships between teacher and students and among students with equal status for different social identities.*

Each student benefits from knowing that there are trusted adults on campus who care about them and their lives. Each adult needs to feel that the leaders have their back based in a culture of trust and respect. Every parent/caregiver deserves to feel included and valued.

Researchers have discovered that even children who have lacked care in early childhood can, by forming positive relationships with at least one person, mitigate

A Word About the Benefits of Diversity for White Students

When we talk of diversity as a resource, we refer to embracing students from all backgrounds—and we explicitly mean all races, including both students of color and White students. The inclusion of diversity in the curriculum helps to drive identity safety for all. A recent study in the journal *Child Development* (Society for Research in Child Development, 2013) demonstrates that students feel safer in school when they are educated in a diverse setting. Rather than teaching through a colorblind approach where some cultures are ignored, students who learn about different cultures and backgrounds feel a greater sense of comfort with their differences. It is important to understand that a growing body of research shows that White students benefit greatly from experiencing diversity in the classroom. We know that White students, as well as students of color at all income levels, enjoy increased motivation, critical thinking, and creative problem-solving from learning cooperatively alongside others with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. If we understand that *all* of our students are affected when *some* of them feel unsafe as a result of stereotype threat, then we are closer to grasping the level of synergy that flows between them. Some students will meet threats to their identities—or threats to the identities of other students in the classroom—with disengagement and discouragement, and still more will become aggressive and exhibit inappropriate or bullying behaviors. A safe environment is threatened for everyone when we ignore the identities of some (Wells, et al., 2016).

White students can develop the attitudes and behaviors that counter bias and racism while learning to accept students from many cultures and backgrounds. This will enable them to take a stand in fighting racism. Over the last four years, the voices of right-wing extremists, neo-Nazis, and racists have been amplified in mainstream media reports. An identity safe school can not only provide students of all backgrounds the skills and mindsets to navigate the world they live in and will work in, but also to feel a sense of hope and agency to be a full member of that world.

the effects of some of their earlier experiences (Werner, 1995). Children who suffer from continued negative stereotyping and biased treatment at school will often come to the conclusion that education will not serve them. With a long history of oppression, unequal conditions, and forced assimilation, many students and their communities have good reason to mistrust both the greater system of society and its brainchild, education, and by association those who work in it. As schools analyze their cultures, they can root out systemic tendencies that undermine trust and

create winners and losers. The evidence is revealed in the grading and tracking systems that sort and select students, marginalize students of color, and subsequently limit opportunities that impact their future lives. Efforts to repair trust form a major part of system-wide culture and climate improvement.

A culture of equal status is grounded in cooperation and collaboration. Indigenous, African, Asian, Latin American, and other cultures have built collective societies that thrive on interdependence. When students come to us from these cultures, often their values and life experience are at odds with the individualistic values that drive competitive school environments in the United States (Hofstede, 1980, 1991). Incorporating more collaborative approaches, teamwork, and intentional efforts to understand the collective cultural values will create a space of belonging for students from diverse backgrounds. Integrating cooperation in classroom practices will also benefit students from dominant cultures who perhaps have not developed these values. In the SISP identity safe school research, fostering cooperation was an important factor that led to identity safety (D. M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013).

Each chapter in this book highlights the power of building trust, opening dialogue, promoting collaboration, and creating belonging for every adult and child in a school community.

Principle Three: Cultivating diversity as a resource *for learning and expressing high expectations for students promotes learning, competence, and achievement.*

Cultivating diversity is a way of life that permeates a school culture. In the SISP research, this factor was a defining quality that was evident in classrooms where students felt a greater sense of identity safety. Leaders can work to ensure educators are prepared to bring it into every classroom, to incorporate it in curriculum design and pedagogy, and beyond the classroom in hiring. Also, diversity can be prioritized in the process of selecting materials to purchase for the library and underscoring it as part of the wide range of schoolwide activities and after-school programs. It includes the installation and inclusion of rituals, symbols, presentations, and rules that reflect and honor the multiple cultures, languages, genders, and full identities of all students and their families. We serve our shared ideals in the conferring of titles and awards, the honoring of elders, and the construction of codes of behavior. With your attention centered on this goal, you can attract a diverse team to develop a vision and plan for cultivating diversity with safe practices integrated throughout the school.

By holding and promoting high expectations for adults along with students, identity safe leaders communicate and model a belief in the abilities of everyone in the community and support each person in reaching their goals. Just as high expectations with scaffolded support for academic progress have been found to improve

achievement, holding high expectations for the way students treat one another improves the culture and climate of a school (Good, 1981). Often the role of disciplinarian falls to leaders. Bringing in an awareness of restorative practices on a schoolwide basis shifts the focus from punitive discipline to repairing harm and accommodating healing.

Cultivating diversity and high expectations are themes we delve into and highlight with examples throughout all chapters of this book.

Principle Four: Educators examine their own social identities *to feel a sense of identity safety and convey that feeling to students, creating an identity safe environment for them.*

To initiate the process for realizing identity safety and anti-racism, leaders, staff, and students begin by looking at their own identities, backgrounds, and values. The work for change includes recognizing and accepting our individual identities with all its attendant and marvelous complexities, and honoring the same in others. This includes uprooting internalized oppression and racialized and bias-based trauma. White people can seek to recognize the often hidden yet pervasive qualities of privilege, implicit bias, and white supremacist culture, and progress further to accept accountability for their own advantages and work for social justice. We want to highlight that we do not hold the assumption that White educators are explicitly biased or racist. We believe that most educators deeply care about their students and intend to be fair, including those who purport to be colorblind (D. M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013). We are saying, however, that white privilege is an embedded system worthy of personal investigation because it profoundly affects the lives of people of color (and their children). It deserves our attention. With an open mind, we are better qualified to serve needs in order to realize transformation for all students.

To aid in the undoing of these inhumane and destructive processes, leaders can begin by providing a forum for continual self-reflection as a regular practice. Staff, students, and families can engage in activities that encourage sharing identities with one another, and engaging in exercises to recognize and release old biases, attitudes, habits, practices, and structures that are inconsistent with compassionate, equitable systems (P. Noli & E. Porter, personal communication, July 22, 2020).

In Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, specific examples and vignettes will offer ideas for self-reflection processes and suggest protocols.

When we take an honest look at history to understand what brought us to this moment, we can learn why it matters. By examining patterns of overt (e.g., lynching, Jim Crow laws), and covert inequities including the "war on drugs" that led to mass incarceration of Blacks, we inevitably come face to face with the reality of how certain entrenched school protocols operate to both launch and perpetuate the pipeline to prison system.

Principle Five: Social and emotional safety *is created by supporting students in defining their identities, refuting negative stereotypes, and countering stereotype threat, giving them a voice in the classroom while using social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies.*

In the SISP research (D. M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013), attention to prosocial development emerged as an important factor practiced in classrooms where students felt identity safe. This attention to prosocial development is fostered through SEL instruction but goes beyond teaching social and emotional skills. It embraces an environment where students are treated with respect and in turn are supported in feeling that who they are and what they think matters.

Prosocial development is fostered by supporting the physical, emotional, and intellectual well-being of each individual. In Chapter 3 we will offer strategies to ensure adults in the school are prepared to meet SEL needs as well as reduce the presence of implicit and explicit bias. In Chapter 5 we will explore ways to expand the school into the community to serve the many needs of families and to support the SEL and well-being of the students.

Principle Six: Student learning *is enhanced in diverse classrooms by teaching for understanding, creating opportunities for shared inquiry and dialogue, and offering a challenging, rigorous curriculum.*

The SISP research highlighted a constellation of factors that lead to student agency in classrooms where students felt identity safety and achieved at higher levels. These included *listening for student voices*, *teaching for understanding*, *fostering cooperation*, and *student autonomy*. *Identity Safe Classrooms, Grades K–5* (D. M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013) and *Identity Safe Classrooms, Grades 6–12* (Cohn-Vargas et al., 2020) are steeped in strategies and examples of how to design student-centered instruction to promote rigorous learning and student agency. By working with staff, leaders' tangible support will make this a reality by ensuring that educators have the resources and training they need to provide an innovative and rigorous and inquiry-based curriculum with critical thinking and project-based learning. In Chapter 3, we give more examples for adult learning to ensure educators are prepared to teach in a way that promotes Principle Six. In Chapter 6, in the section "Starting the Year Together: A Schoolwide Effort," we offer some entry points for launching student-centered identity safe practices in the classroom.

Principle Seven: Schoolwide equity *flourishes for everyone in identity safe schools where the climate, the structures, practices, and attitudes prioritize equity, inclusion, and academic growth for students from all backgrounds. Leaders demonstrate emotional intelligence; attend to student needs; address racism, bias, and privilege; and serve as the architects of ongoing change.*

Leaders can incorporate multiple fields of knowledge from many sources in goal setting, planning, implementing, evaluating, and improving the school. Involving diverse stakeholders (including students) in decisions will garner support from all school groups and mitigate resistance. Throughout the process, leaders navigate their communities through sustained efforts by asking hard questions, opening dialogue, listening attentively, and incorporating anti-racist curriculum. When conflicts erupt among members of the school community, leaders take bold steps to draw on mutual empathy that springs from listening, understanding, and applying fair treatment. This process can allow people the breathing room and support to become accountable for their mistakes and repair any harm done.

To foster a strong culture, leaders build on diversity as a resource in the many schoolwide activities, daily practices, and rituals where students and adults have a chance to shine. When these routines authentically reflect the full community's cultural assets, a collective and healthy group identity can be established.

Attending to the broad view with an eye on all aspects of the school culture stands out as the single most powerful way to transform your school. You most likely will find many positive aspects of your school climate as you first explore your own beliefs, then branch out to consider the effects of the practices, policies, and people in your school upon identity safety (e.g., friendly teachers, effective teaching and learning, positive discipline practices). You may also discover areas that are lacking and in need of attention.

A few possible areas can signal a need for change in order to become identity safe.

Consider how you might change some of the conditions below:

- A staff of predominantly White teachers with mostly people of color as paraprofessionals and custodial staff

- A disproportionate number of White students in advanced placement and a disproportionate number of students of color in special education

- Staff who feel uncomfortable discussing race with each other (or with students)

This overview is central to your role as a leader in an identity safe school as you develop an eye for equity in all aspects of culture and climate. Throughout each of the chapters, we will highlight ways to infuse and implement an identity safe culture in your school, closing the gap between ideas and practice.

Drawing From Identity Safe Research and Equitable Practice for Change

Thus far, we presented the research that undergirds the concept of identity safety, shared the components that lead to identity safety, and applied it to a set of principles that can guide your school. Working together to forge a shared and transparent theory of change will help tremendously in defining the path to becoming an identity safe school. Developing a theory of change starts with thinking about how and why transformation is needed and what can be done to realize the desired changes in your school environment. From there, the process includes attracting diverse stakeholders, drafting long-term goals, and working backwards to identify how to reach the goals. In that way, all stakeholders understand the link between the current collective performance and what you can accomplish together as you transform your efforts into an identity safe experience for all involved.

A WORD ABOUT THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

The leaders from Interaction Associates (2019) posit that to make enduring change requires a three-pronged focus on *results, process*, and *relationship*. If these areas are not in balance, then changes will be short-lived—if they make it off the ground at all.

Results

Transformative change is about results arising from a set of goals and a plan of action that leads us forward. However, without an effective process, results are sporadic and disorganized at best. Also, if there is too much focus and pressure to get results without considering relationships, people can become brutally competitive or highly critical. To achieve an identity safe school culture, we keep our eyes on this goal, make a plan, monitor it, and note progress as we advance.

Process

Change efforts that lead to results require attention to process—how we are doing and what we are doing—throughout planning and implementation. If the process is inclusive of the voices and ideas of diverse stakeholders, it is more likely to realize success: a greater span of perspective and knowledge will inform the work, and invested participants will work harder. Nevertheless, too much focus on the process can lead to endless hours spent in meetings without a successful conclusion or foreseeable results, which is frustrating at best. Additionally, without attention to relationships, people who are left out of the process will not feel represented and will not commit to making needed changes.

Relationship

Finally, forging respectful relationships based on acceptance and compassion will create positive experiences, motivating people to enroll and commit to the work for desired outcomes. Unless relationships are positive, the best intentions will be tainted with doubt and a lack of trust. Supportive and positive relationships are an essential ingredient for change, but they need to be incorporated into an inclusive process that leads to sustained results.

Identity safe school leaders keep their eyes focused on student needs and academic and social and emotional growth of students, as they develop an inclusive process and build relationships of trust and equal status. We will take the discussion of how to create transformational change further in Chapters 2 and 7.

IDENTITY SAFE PRACTICES SUPPORT A RANGE OF STUDENT IDENTITIES

Identity safe practices are also greatly beneficial to students who are stigmatized for a variety of reasons beyond race. Their needs are met as their identities are validated and by ensuring they are not subject to harassment, bullying, and exclusion.

The identities and roles of women and men are changing across the world. As children grow up, they come to learn about and experience themselves as gendered beings, absorbing the societal stereotypes. School can play a part in breaking down barriers that limit females in reaching their full potential and limit males in developing the capacity to express feelings and vulnerability. An identity safe school can serve to challenge societal norms that inhibit children from freely expressing their gender identities. As part of our practice, we take the time to consider how we model for and communicate about gender with students.

For LGBTQIA+ students, "Don't ask, don't tell" is akin to colorblindness, erasing their identities and harming their well-being. To see yourself reflected in the curriculum and portrayed as valued members of society is essential for LGBTQIA+ students and those who are questioning gender identity and sexual orientation. Gay-Straight Alliances have done so much to support these students in school. However, often the validation of LGBTQIA+ identities is never touched upon in the classroom. These students will come to feel identity safe when educators incorporate curriculum and literature that addresses gender differences, when they meet LGBTQIA+ role models, and when their identities and gender expressions are openly acknowledged and accepted as part of their daily lives across the grades.

Immigrant children and English learners have specific academic needs to be able to fully participate in the classroom community. Efforts to draw from their

cultures, validate their languages, and celebrate bilingualism as an academic and economic advantage, as well as provide English language development (ELD) pedagogy, offer them access to classroom life.

Physically disabled, learning disabled students, and students on the autism spectrum each have unique learning styles. Often, they are stigmatized simply by the special education label. Yet, there are so many aspects of their social identities that can be celebrated and integrated into their classroom experience. Their unique academic needs can be addressed while giving them opportunities to contribute and fully share in classroom life.

Students with religious backgrounds that do not match the majority of students also benefit from an identity safe environment. Muslim students report frequently being called "terrorists" and Jewish students describe having had coins tossed at them. Often, adults are not aware until an incident occurs that impacts the entire school. In an identity safe environment, these students will not feel the need to hide their identities or put up with teasing and bullying. The values that are expressed and continually articulated will promote empathy and understanding across these and many other differences.

Given its prevalence among students, the causes of and resolution for trauma deserve our attention and study. Without comprehensive understanding and trauma-informed practices, identity safety will not be possible. We will examine trauma in general before focusing on racialized trauma.

IDENTITY SAFE SCHOOLS INCORPORATE TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

The ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], n.d.) longitudinal study delivered a warning to educators and health providers that 70% of the U.S. population has experienced some level of adversity by the time they reach school age. The study revealed the long-standing impact of trauma on health and relationships. Children growing up in segregation and poverty, in particular, are found to have endured greater negative impacts upon their health and well-being.

Self-regulation refers to a person's capacity to control thoughts, feelings, and behavior. In a Duke University report (Murray, et al., 2016), *Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress Report 4: Implications for Programs and Practice*, it states that self-regulation plays a significant role in a person's well-being, producing effects that last a lifetime. The capacity to self-regulate positively impacts all aspects of health, including physical and emotional health as well as social and economic status. Conversely, Hamoudi, et al. (2015) explain that when adversity manifests as children are developing a sense

of agency, the process and the development of self-regulation is disrupted. When exposed to toxic stress for long periods of time, a child's stress hormones become dysregulated with long-lasting effects—not only to physical and mental health, but extending as well to a person's spirit and zest for life. If we do not feel seen and valued, we are especially prone to being triggered into a fight–flight–freeze response in which self-regulation is extremely challenging. In classrooms that are not identity safe, this plays out with students who cannot focus, lack impulse control, get into frequent conflicts, or have trouble learning and retaining new information.

Students who arrive at our schools after experiencing childhood trauma need even greater doses of guidance and support to allow them to adapt and thrive in school. With the right attention, they can make great strides. Interdisciplinary teams of teachers, counselors, and paraprofessional staff can learn about and help students through somatic and self-regulating practices such as yoga and mindfulness. Social and emotional learning in the classroom and counseling groups can help them manage their emotions. We can scaffold their experiences as they learn to trust themselves, affirming and attending to their internal sensors and responding in healthy ways to both stress and threats. A caring relationship can improve achievement for students who have experienced trauma. Community school models with wraparound services can address some of the external stressors of poverty and unsafe environments.

All our best efforts cannot resolve these issues, however, without addressing the root causes of trauma. Looking deeper to create an identity safe space, we consider the ways racial and other forms of discrimination cause trauma. The ongoing threats to a person's (or child's) well-being as a result of supremacist policies and beliefs generates racialized trauma. Over time, white supremacy can produce extreme effects on people subjected to daily microaggressions and abuses. Our bodies retain and reenact history, passing on both our trauma and resiliency to new generations. In *My Grandmother's Hands*, Resmaa Menakem (2017) writes about the power of culture, describing a process where our bodies actually absorb the expressions of culture, including trauma and its mitigating cousin, resilience. His grandmother had short stubby fingers from picking cotton, beginning as a four-year-old child. He describes the trauma stored in her body as visceral, a cultural byproduct of white supremacy. The trauma induced from the cotton burrs cutting her fingers was matched by the way they healed. Her fingers adapted to the constant injuries with a new shape: stunted but tough and prepared for the daunting tasks ahead.

Discrimination experienced by a child—or by a child's parents—catalyzed by media coverage of unarmed Black and Latinx people being shot by police or others becomes a significant source of anxiety and stress. A destructive barrage like this will in time impact a person's ability to self-regulate.

Measuring the Impact of Racism on the Health of Black People

In an interview on CNN (Zakaria, 2020), Harvard Public Health Professor David Williams described the causes of the disproportionate death rate from COVID-19 for Black citizens. Williams explained this as part of a pattern evidenced over the last 100 years where Blacks have a higher death rate than Whites for every leading cause of death (e.g., heart disease, diabetes, hypertension). In addition to the impact of poverty, Williams and colleagues have done significant research on the impact of discrimination on the health of Black people at all socioeconomic levels. In one 2018 study, researchers identified the states where unarmed Black men were shot and killed by police. They found that mental health outcomes worsened for not only friends and family of the deceased but for the entire Black populations across the region for the following three months.

In order to determine the impact of what Williams describes as everyday incidents where Black people are treated with disrespect, given poor service in stores, or addressed like ignorant children or in condescending manners, he developed the "Everyday Racism Scale" (D. Williams, 2016). The scale is a tool designed to capture feelings of devaluation and day-to-day indignities suffered repeatedly by Black people. Using it, researchers found that discriminatory treatment causes stress that shows up in higher infant mortality rate, high blood pressure, and heart disease, and it can predict premature mortality.

Researchers J. M. Williams and Bryan (2013) studied African American students who achieved at high levels and found specific factors associated with both their achievement and their engagement with school. A stand-out factor involved their access to at least one warm and caring adult who knew them well. This can include a positive relationship with a teacher, coach, principal, or counselor, as well as peers and school friends. Even when negative factors threatened their well-being, in some instances, peers motivated one another to keep trying. When educators held them to high standards, when they taught lessons that linked to their interests, learning was accessible and interesting. Some of these students also benefited from athletics, clubs, and other extracurricular activities that drew them to school. In another study titled "The Long-Run Impacts of Same Race Teachers," researchers at Johns Hopkins University and American University found that if Black students had only one Black teacher by third grade, they were 13% more likely to enroll in college. That statistic jumped to 32% if the student had two Black teachers (Camera, 2020).

It is part of a leader's role to raise the awareness of adults on campus to these conditions and offer strategies for addressing them in and outside the classroom. Trauma-informed practices include mindfulness, somatic practices, and other tools for helping traumatized students learn. As part of creating an identity safe school, we can ensure staff come to understand the impact of trauma as well as racialized trauma and take steps to address it (Menakem, 2017).

Rising to Challenges/Avoiding Pitfalls

This book is a call to action to step up to the ongoing challenge of creating identity safe schools. In each chapter we define specific ways to rise to this challenge and stay the course. This chapter focuses on the importance of knowing and understanding the root causes of inequities in our society and schools, and in refuting white supremacy and stereotype threat, without which we are ill-equipped to promote change. For optimal results, we encourage leaders to dig deep into the principles of identity safety to both comprehend and appreciate their power to transform an entire school. These pages are dedicated to showing you how to accomplish this.

As we embark on the path of equity, we aim to keep a vigilant eye open for common pitfalls. A common mistake among educational leaders involves treating equity as a separate practice from teaching and learning. This occurs in schools with many students of diverse backgrounds, as well as those with a majority of White students whose educators often do not feel this topic is relevant for their population. This pitfall unfolds through "drive-by" equity workshops that happen once—sometimes after a racist incident—and then are forgotten by the leaders until another racist event rocks the school.

Change cannot find fertile ground through episodic or superficial treatment. An ongoing exploration and discussion of equity is insufficient without engaging actions to dismantle inequitable practices and policies. If staff participate in diversity workshops that ask them to self-examine without investigating the impact of implicit and explicit bias on students, unpacking systems of oppression and understanding power, privilege, and equity will not develop.

Equity-focused work is initiated on an interpersonal level before leading to concrete actions and steps to ensure success. Leaders support and monitor educators in this courageous work to carry it—complete with concrete strategies—into their practice. On the other side of the scale lies a well-intended but overwhelming desire for action following a controversial or distressing event, such as an act of hate. An attitude of panic or disquiet can overshadow a deeper awareness of the

issues, often leading to rushed and harried solutions. Unless educators examine the historical antecedents and broader concerns, changes will be superficial and short-lived.

Another common quick fix is the hiring of a "diversity consultant," coordinator, or "dean of diversity" as the sole representative to reflect the diversity of the student body. Without engaging the entire school community, these efforts can be meaningless and/or can place the burden of change on one person. Also, placing people of color into token roles or positions is not only unfair to those persons but is a recipe for marginalizing the issues and stunting the change process. Leaders can diversify hiring, draw in families, and invite their voices into the leadership process.

A pitfall to be avoided occurs when members of one ethnic group are pitted against another. Sometimes referred to as the "oppression Olympics," this process describes a competition for "who has suffered more." These attitudes are neither healthy nor healing. Leaders can work to ensure that compassion is not viewed as a pity party. They can make it clear that the suffering of each person or group should not be compared with another person or group. We model and encourage all shares with a spirit of humility and acceptance.

While the path toward equity can involve these and other unanticipated pitfalls, it is still a meaningful process to witness empathy and compassion grow and strengthen our connections. We will guide you through the processes that both mitigate and heal those tense moments, creating opportunities for mutual growth.

Closing the Gap Between Ideas and Action

In this chapter we presented the research on stereotype threat and identity safety and the domains and components that emerged from the research. This is foundational to understanding the principles that guide implementation. The rest of this book will present ways to take these ideas and put them into practice in your school. We present approaches to examine identity safe systems that are at play in the school.

Chapter 2, "Leadership for an Identity Safe School," describes the power of equity-focused leadership along with the skills and habits of identity safe leaders.

In Chapter 3, "Adult Learning in Service of an Identity Safe School," we present identity safe intrapersonal, interpersonal, and institutional staff learning experiences as well as structure and routines that draw from research on adult learning.

In Chapter 4, "Data and Assessment for an Identity Safe School," we highlight identity safe practices for gathering, analyzing, and using data as well as strategies for formative assessment and grading.

In Chapter 5, "Identity Safe Partnerships With Families and the Community," we describe ways to support and involve parents/caregivers and partner with the greater community.

In Chapter 6, "Coherence and Congruence: Schoolwide Systems and Activities to Support Identity Safety," we highlight an identity safe approach to additional systems: classroom practice, prevention and intervention, behavior and discipline, staff wellness, and schoolwide activities.

In Chapter 7, "Planning and Implementing Schoolwide Identity Safety," we offer an inclusive process for planning the path forward for the whole school.

The process of working to dismantle white supremacy and creating social justice becomes a mission of courage, more meaningful through our collective effort. In each chapter, we will offer concrete suggestions for moving from ideas into action.

How to Use This Book

Our first two identity safe books (D. M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas, 2013; Cohn-Vargas et al., 2020) focused on approaches for teachers in classrooms grades K–5 and 6–12. We provided a wealth of specific strategies across the domains and components that emerged from Dorothy Steele's (2012) identity safe teaching research. This book will not replicate the material in them but rather will develop the ideas for application at a schoolwide level. Educational leaders can enjoy multiple access points for implementing identity safety in this book. We recommend that you read the introduction completely. Once you have determined where your staff and school can reap the highest benefit, you may choose to either read sequentially or, after assessing both your areas of strength and areas for growth, approach the related chapters accordingly and apply the identity safety ideas and principles within. You can return to and access different chapters at different times in an order that addresses your needs. As your understanding broadens, and when you see a culture of identity safety taking root in your school as more people climb on board, you will be able to enjoy many self-perpetuating benefits that define a caring community. You can also join with your staff or with colleagues to engage in book study groups, which can greatly expedite implementation with shared understandings promoting ideas and action. Share this book with other members of your school district and community to invite contributions and talents outside your school and widen the influence of an identity safe culture.

HOW THE BOOK CHAPTERS ARE ORGANIZED

- Each chapter starts with a section titled **Why It Matters,** detailing an aspect of schoolwide identity safety supported with research about why it is important. Aspects of an Identity Safe School Culture are also highlighted in this section relevant to the topic of the chapter.

- **Making It Happen** follows, which includes specific examples and vignettes demonstrating how to implement the ideas. For this, we offer what we call *examples and non-examples*, providing both positive strategies as well as examples to help us avoid falling inadvertently into traps of implicit bias and practices that exclude others. We will highlight the ways educational leaders may unintentionally sabotage their efforts through unconscious acts or colorblind behavior, and we laud examples of identity safe practices.

- **Rising to Challenges and Avoiding Pitfalls** is a section featuring some of the more complex aspects of identity safe leadership. Here, we focus on potential mistakes—and highlight some of our own that manifest when we neglect to operate with an identity safety lens.

- In **Closing the Gap Between Ideas and Action,** we summarize some key points in the chapter and present ideas for implementation.

- **Check Yourself** questions are included in each chapter to challenge our thinking as we reflect on our practice.

- **Using the Tools** ends each chapter with an activity for leaders that will also serve to move the work forward for their school. The tools we identify (reflections, surveys, and self-evaluation tools) can be used in study groups with other leaders, or independently for introspection. Either way, they are designed to support leaders in identifying and evaluating progress in order to advance to new levels of understanding and practice.

ABOUT OUR TERMINOLOGY

In identity safety, each word we employ conveys our belief system and attitudes regarding race and equity. We have been very intentional in our use of terminology, while recognizing that language about race and identity and labels that are commonly used in schools are continually evolving. To that end, we take care to

emphasize the organic and transformative nature of identity, and by extension, the acronyms and terms that describe them. We represent them here as a moment in time while recognizing the freedom for them to change as new identities unfold within the natural medium of identity discovery. Because identity is fluid and flexible, the words we choose or that others impose on us require that as leaders, we continue to create an ongoing space for dialogue and understanding, to unpack the power of language. A tenet of identity safety honors the choice for people to self-identify, regardless of external perceptions of one's culture or group membership.

For our work here, we chose to capitalize the racial designations of Black, Brown, White, and Indigenous. We use the term "Black" to indicate people of African American, Caribbean, and African backgrounds. The term "Latinx" refers to people with heritages that draw from Mexico, Central and South America. We take note that some Latinx people are Black or Asian, and we honor their self-designation. The term "people of color" indicates Black, Latinx, Indigenous, South Asian, Asian, and people of mixed heritage.

We use the term LGBTQIA+ (an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Agender, Asexual, and additional emerging identities). We use the word "they" for people who identify as gender neutral or transgender and have selected that pronoun for personal and public use. In another usage, they/them/their can describe an individual (e.g., Each student can choose the book that they want). This usage is accepted by the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This language is more inclusive and is being used increasingly in common parlance.

We frequently refer to equalizing status in the book. By this we mean efforts are made to ensure that people of varied social identities are afforded an equal measure of respect and value, and they are treated fairly. Efforts are also made to undo policies and procedures that perpetuate inequity.

With an intent to express inclusivity, we chose to use the comparatively lengthy term "parent/caregiver" to describe parents, grandparents, foster parents, and all the people who serve as guardians of our students. Finally, we have opted to frequently use the word "educator" to ensure we are including all educational roles including teacher, administrator, paraprofessional, counselor, coach, and others.

WHO ARE THE EDUCATIONAL LEADERS WHO WILL BENEFIT FROM THIS BOOK?

This book is for anyone and everyone in a school community who thinks about and cares to take action to influence the school culture. These are individuals who

are willing to become architects for identity safe spaces, both in and outside the classroom. Leaders can emerge from any group within the school community, including roles both traditional and less so. Principals and assistant principals, superintendents, directors, and teachers are likely candidates, but parents, paraprofessionals, and even community leaders can successfully catalyze and lead efforts to affect change.

The Many Paths to Leadership

Principal leader: Lorraine Monroe (1997), an African American woman, founder, and former principal of the Frederick Douglas Academy in Harlem, transformed her school through opportunities for personal and academic growth resulting in 98% of students attending college.

Campus supervisor leader: Janet worked as a campus supervisor at a large elementary school. Beyond keeping students physically safe, she helped them feel pride in their identities. On one occasion, she organized a luncheon where students read their poems to the mayor. On another occasion, she brought students to meet the Black Caucus in the state capitol.

Teacher leader: After the protests for the police murder of George Floyd, Kelly Palma, a high school teacher, approached her principal and asked for a staff meeting devoted to discussing the impact of racism. That led to Kelly facilitating that meeting and extending it into a four-part series on microaggressions, implicit bias, and comfort zones. They plan to continue the professional development into the next semester.

Parent leaders: Black parents at Design 39, a school in San Diego's Poway district, formed a group called "Small and Mighty" in an effort to improve belonging and inclusion for their children. They approached their principal, Joe Erpelding, and together created training for the teachers, addressed the district principals at a meeting, and held online discussions with the parent community, which led to ongoing efforts to better serve Black students within the district.

Student leaders: In response to a sexual harassment incident at their Richmond, California, high school, a team of peer leaders designed and led a Gender Awareness Day with the whole school community. The day was an extremely powerful learning experience for students, staff, and parents/caregivers and has since become an annual event.

This book is for anyone within a wide variety of roles in the school community who is willing to approach identity safety with a long-term commitment. This person will be ready to include many voices, inviting others to contribute and participate in decisions, ask the hard questions when needed, and facilitate transformation. In other words, anyone with the will to do so can step forward.

Check Yourself

Throughout the book we pose many questions for readers to ask themselves and to reflect, and we also provide *check yourself* questions. We believe that to move beyond the status quo and investigate fairly some of the widely held illusions that our society holds for all groups requires us to challenge ourselves to probe more deeply.

- What am I doing to refute and counter stereotypes and address stereotype threat with students?

- What can we do to learn about systemic racism and uproot it in our school?

- Are we providing role models that demonstrate people of all backgrounds and gender identities in nontraditional careers?

- Are we helping students gain the necessary social skills to treat one another with respect and be prepared to have healthy consensual sexual relationships?

- Are we teaching history from the perspectives of people of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ members of society?

Using the Tools

Stepping Into the Work

The very crux of what it means to be a school leader who orchestrates within the community with magnanimity, deference, and grace for all its members is epitomized in the principles and practices of identity safe ideas. This book is intended to introduce you to them, and educational leaders can then further avail themselves of the many resources in each chapter. These resources will carry you further toward a deeper understanding of all the aspects for an identity safe school. Take the time to learn more about identity safety, stereotype threat, privilege, microaggressions, and anti-racist education, and you will prosper in your ability to inform

all your actions in a way that will resonate with and benefit those who depend on your support. You can use the following questions to reflect on your practice as an identity safe educator and leader and refer to them as you read the book.

Educate Yourself

1. How can you broaden your education about identity safety? What topics are still unfamiliar to you? Which ones have you studied but may need to update or explore further in order to address it with full cognizance in your school?

Ask Yourself

1. What are your areas of strength as a leader?

2. Can you identify areas where you will benefit from more growth?

3. What will you do to bolster your areas of growth?

Know Your School Community

1. Who do you consider your allies at your site?

2. Who have you not reached out to yet? How can you connect with these persons?

3. Who are your mentors or people you can confide in either at the school or in your personal life?

4. How can you frame all community members in a positive light when they are the topic of discussion?

5. How can you guard sensitive information in ways that respect those for whom the information affects?

Assess Your School for Identity Safe Practices

1. In what ways does your school already embody identity safe principles? Consider classrooms, the schoolyard, and your school families.

2. What areas on your campus can you recognize that need attention? Where does it feel unsafe, and what can you do?

Assessing your school will be more fully examined in Chapter 7.

Pace Yourself

You can start small and grow. Change can be a slow process, depending on who is on board and the level of change that is needed. Especially in the beginning when

meticulous attention is required, it can make perfect sense to take it a step at a time. To begin, you can ask yourself

1. What are your starting points?

2. How will you measure progress?

3. What entry points can you use in your school practices and policies to initiate and implement different aspects of identity safety?

Entry points for identity safety are explored fully in Chapter 6.

In each case, these processes will lead to changes that positively impact your entire school community, including students and families from all backgrounds. Students of color, those from low-income families, and others who have experienced stereotypes due to their English learner status, students in special education, and those with other differences may recognize considerable benefit. White students and those from privileged backgrounds will also gain substantially, both academically and emotionally, from the caring environments of identity safe classrooms.