

[Image description: A white brick wall.]



Equity by Design:

**Whiteness: An Unexplored Barrier to
Your School's Equity Goals**

Angelina E. Castagno

Katie Pekel

Whiteness: An Unexplored Barrier to Your School's Equity Goals

This *Equity by Design* brief is intended for preK-12 school leaders who want to better understand the root causes of inequitable outcomes in their systems. Despite educators' often good intentions to effectively serve all students, there is ample evidence of ongoing disparities negatively impacting students of Color in U.S. schools (Castagno, 2014; Lewis & Diamond, 2017; Turner, 2020). Whiteness – defined as structural arrangements and ideologies of race dominance – is a significant barrier to

achieving educational equity in schools and districts, and Whiteness functions in every aspect of schooling. In our work with educators across the nation, we have observed an increased interest in understanding Whiteness. And, at the same time, we've observed a general resistance to meaningful conversations about what Whiteness is, how it shows up in schools, and what we can do about it. This brief is organized around these three topics (i.e., what is Whiteness, how does it function in schools, and what can we do about it), while also providing reflective prompts that school leaders can use to engage in additional learning about Whiteness. There is a robust body of research and literature on this topic, so this brief distills that into a concise and practical guide for school leaders.

As the title of this brief suggests, Whiteness is a key barrier to achieving educational equity. The term equity has become ubiquitous in U.S. schools. It's hard to find a school or a school leader who doesn't use, or feel they should use, the term. But in our work with schools, we find that most systems don't actually have a shared definition of equity. Before we can unpack Whiteness, we need a clear definition of educational equity so that all stakeholders know what it is we are working towards. Thus, our first question to school leaders is this: Does your school or district have a shared understanding of what equity means? And if the answer is no, what are you going to do about that? Shared

KEY TERMS

Access: All members of the educational community should have entrance into, involvement with, and full participation of resources, conversations, initiatives, and choices which are attentive to heritage and community practices (Paris, 2012).

Educational Equity: When educational policies, practices, interactions, and resources, are representative of, constructed by, and responsive to all people such that each individual has access to, can meaningfully participate, and make progress in high-quality learning experiences that empowers them towards self-determination and reduces disparities in outcomes regardless of individual characteristics and cultural identities (Fraser, 2008; Great Lakes Equity Center, 2012).

Meaningful Participation: Agency and voice are afforded to all members of a community, by intentionally centering members who have been historically on the margins including, but not limited to people living in under-resourced communities, people with dis/abilities, as well as racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse individuals. Multiple perspectives are pursued and valued (Fraser, 1998).

understanding is key because even if the leader has a deep sense of the necessary work to achieve equity, that may not translate to the rest of the school staff.

The [Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center](#) offers what we think is the most comprehensive and actionable definition of [educational equity](#). Educational equity is “when educational policies, practices, interactions, and resources, are *representative of*, constructed by, and responsive to all people such that each individual has *access to*, can *meaningfully participate*, and make progress in high-quality learning experiences that empowers them towards self-determination and reduces disparities in *outcomes* regardless of individual characteristics and cultural identities” (Fraser, 2008; Great Lakes Equity Center, 2013). Upon reading this definition, one will likely notice its humanizing approach. At its core, equity is about the humanizing of our fellow humans. We can point to countless examples historically of those in more dominant positions dehumanizing others. The enslavement and selling of people from the late 1600s until the mid 1800s comes to mind, but so too does lynching, separate bathrooms, boarding schools for Indigenous students, and housing covenants. These overt acts of racism and dehumanization have taken root in what we call ideologies, or the lenses through which people understand the world. When those with power consistently commit and/or ignore the dehumanization of others, it can become accepted and unquestioned. Equity requires the intentional disruption of this pattern of normalization, an acknowledgement of each person as fully human, and a redistribution of power.

KEY TERMS (cont.)

Positive Outcomes: Efficacy of solutions benefit all towards self-determination and the ability to act as contributing members in a democratic society and global community.

Representation: Ensuring adequate presence of all when making decisions to examine patterns of underlying beliefs, practices, policies, structures and norms that may marginalize specific groups and limit opportunity (Mulligan & Kozleski, 2009; Chen et al., 2014).

Whiteness: Whiteness, first, is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a ‘standpoint’, a place from which White people look at themselves, at others, and at society. Third, ‘Whiteness’ refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed (DiAngelo, 2011).

The connection between educational equity and Whiteness is that Whiteness gets in the way of equity. It prevents us, in explicit and sometimes hard to perceive ways, from chipping away at inequities in our systems because it either obscures or rationalizes those inequities. We explore how this happens below, but first we unpack the definition of Whiteness.

What is Whiteness?

Whiteness is not meant to refer to a particular group of people, although the concept does have roots in the identification and stratification of people according to race. Instead, Whiteness refers to structural arrangements and ideologies of race dominance (Castagno, 2014; Gillborn, 2005; Harris, 1993; Lee, 2005; Lipsitz, 1998). Racial power and inequities are at the core of Whiteness, but all forms of power and

inequity¹ create and perpetuate Whiteness. Whiteness maintains power and privilege by preserving and legitimating the status quo while simultaneously maintaining a veneer of neutrality, equality, and compassion.

Multiple scholars have written about Whiteness as a set of unearned privileges enjoyed by White people, a normalization of what is right, and a standard against which everything else gets measured (Castagno, 2008; Fine et al., 1997; Frankenberg, 1993, 2001; McIntosh, 1988; Roediger, 2000; Thompson, 1999, 2003). Other scholars have provided historical analyses of Whiteness – particularly how Whiteness has been conflated with property and individual rights through the law (Harris, 1993), how Whiteness has been possessively invested in by groups throughout history to secure their own interests and guard those interests against the encroachment of others (Lipsitz, 1998), and how Whiteness has evolved and taken on new forms depending on time and context (Duster, 2001). Clearly, history, law, and policy have conspired to veil the fact that Whiteness grants privilege and allows supremacy in areas like home ownership, wealth accumulation, and education. History, law, and policy have also allowed White people to claim, and genuinely believe, that equality exists (Blanchett, 2006; O'Connor & DeLuca Fernandez, 2006; Reid & Knight, 2006).

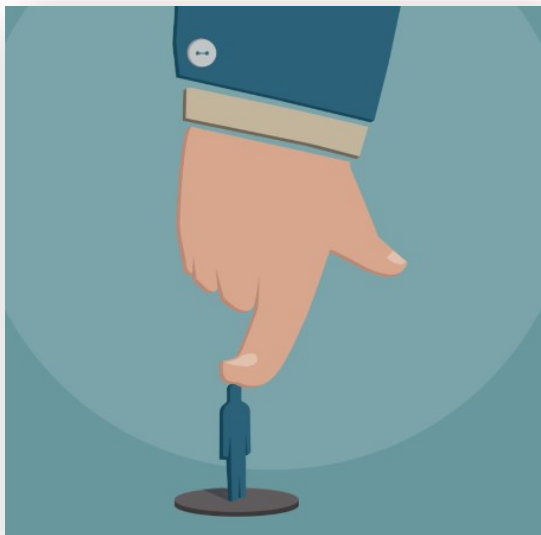
Michael Eric Dyson's (1996) work is especially useful for understanding Whiteness as an identity, an ideology, and an institution.

- Whiteness as an identity: This is about being a White person – and for some, passing as a person with White identity (i.e., phenotype) – and how one's White identity impacts daily life, relationships, ideas, and experiences. White people are almost always socialized into Whiteness as the norm, which makes it difficult to identify Whiteness and the ways it functions in daily life. Many people misunderstand Whiteness to be solely about identity, but we want to suggest that the next two domains are even more important.
- Whiteness as an ideology: Ideology refers to the shared worldviews, values, and assumptions that are dominant in a particular community or space. For example, the common American values of equality, color-neutrality², and individualism are examples of the ideologies of Whiteness.
- Whiteness as institutionalized: Whiteness is entrenched in places like schools, the judicial system, banking, housing, economic systems, etc. It's not just embedded in them, but these institutions were both built on Whiteness, and continue to operate in ways that reinforce Whiteness.

¹In other words, sexism, heterosexism, ablism, classism, linguicism, and racism all function to uphold Whiteness.

²We use the term "color-neutrality" rather than "colorblindness" because the later conveys ableist language.

Whiteness is a web of oppression and injustice that works through people, ideologies, policies, laws, norms, behaviors, and relationships. It is centrally about race-based oppression and injustice, but racism does not function in a silo. Race interacts with gender and social class and sexuality and language and religion and citizenship and disability. These interactions make Whiteness messy. But these interactions also permit multiple entry points for people to understand Whiteness. Our next question to you, then, is: What is your entry point for really understanding Whiteness? And, how can you create spaces for your staff to enter into learning about Whiteness?



[Image description: A graphic of a phenotypic white person's finger pressing down on a human figure.]

How is Whiteness Operationalized in Schools?

Whiteness shows up in schools in many ways, and it is often nuanced depending on specific contexts. In our work with schools and school leaders across the nation, we have observed the following common manifestations of Whiteness.

- **Silence, silencing, and coded language:** When we fail to name racial inequities and the ways race matters, we actually communicate that race does not matter and that racial inequities are nonexistent. This silence leads to further silencing of others within our systems. If leaders are silent on race, others can in turn feel race is not something to be discussed, and they are therefore silenced. Silencing also happens as a result of coded language—that is, when we talk around race and racial inequity by calling it something else like “changing demographics” or “those kids.” Silence and silencing allow school leaders to avoid potentially tough conversations (and subsequent action) about racial inequities and Whiteness.
- **Deficit ideologies and discourses:** Deficit thinking posits that poor outcomes are the result of students’ and/or their families’ deficiencies. When we place blame on students/families, rather than on our systems (such as schools), we reinforce harmful stereotypes and we fail to understand and take ownership of the ways our schools are responsible for poor outcomes. Deficit ideologies and discourses allow school leaders to displace accountability and, therefore, not make changes that would disrupt Whiteness and advance equitable outcomes.
- **Conflating equality with equity:** School leaders too often use the term equity when what they are really talking about is equality. Equality is sameness; it is doing the same thing regardless of context, need, or history. Equality is so engrained

as an American value, that it can be hard to set it aside in favor of centering equity in our leadership decisions and actions. But when we center equality – sameness – within a system that is currently unequal, the result is more inequality. This conflation of equality with equity allows Whiteness to remain invisible and to go unexamined.

Pursuing equity, as defined on the first page of this brief, is much more difficult, but it is also the only way forward given the patterned disparities in our schools.

- **Focusing solely on intentions, at the expense of understanding impacts:**

Very few school leaders (and probably none who are reading this!) want to cause harm to students of Color or otherwise contribute to educational inequities. Our intentions are well-meaning, but we cannot let this stop a deep examination of the impact we are having on students. Failing to look at impacts allows school leaders to assume good intentions are enough or even result in the right outcomes.

Leaders need to continually engage in critical self-reflection and examine their intent and impact in all they do.

- **Hyper-individualism:** Like equality, individualism is a core American value, but it often leads to a misunderstanding of the root causes of educational inequity. When school leaders focus too much on individuals, they default into narratives that center meritocracy and color-neutrality, which in turn lead to a lack of attention paid to systems that marginalize and harm students of Color.

At the foundation of each of these ways Whiteness is operationalized in schools is *Niceness* (Castagno, 2019). Niceness compels us to reframe potentially disruptive or uncomfortable things in ways that are more soothing, pleasant, and comfortable. This avoidance and reframing are generally done with the best intentions because most of us want to maintain the emotional comfort of others. But Niceness doesn't create the kind of connection and deep relationality that we need as human beings. Instead, Niceness puts up a barrier to our capacity to connect



[Image description: A photo of a phenotypic white person's hand separating four wooden blocks, which have an arrow painted across them.]

In other words, Niceness is not actually nice, good, or healthy for individuals and communities. The Niceness running through most school-based policies and practices is only good for Whiteness. Being able to identify when Niceness is at play can help school leaders name this phenomenon and disrupt it, which in turn will facilitate greater awareness of how Whiteness is operating within our schools.

What Can I Do to Disrupt Whiteness and Work toward Educational Equity?

Generally, when we know better, we do better. As leaders, it is incumbent upon us to create the conditions within which we all can learn about Whiteness. This will not be accomplished by assigning a reading, or by allocating one hour during your monthly meeting to the topic. Learning about Whiteness requires space to critically examine your own identities, biases, and relationships to racism. It also requires the cultivation (through practice, making mistakes, and thinking together) of your capacity to perceive Whiteness in the spaces you occupy. This learning needs to happen for each individual ([including yourself!](#)), and also collectively for your staff as a whole. But clearly, learning about Whiteness is not enough. It is also incumbent upon leaders to create the conditions within which change will occur. This begs the question: What is your plan to redress the harm that has been done by Whiteness, and to reorganize your system to advance educational equity?

One possible next step is to consider the various domains of your daily work as a school leader (Khalifa et al., 2016), and to reflect on how Whiteness is both informing those domains, and also reinforced in those domains. The following domains (Physical School Environment; Curriculum and Instruction; Communication; Student Engagement; Hiring, Recruiting, and Retention; Policies and Practice; Student Behavior; and Staff and Community) offer some reflective prompts to guide you, with hyperlinked corresponding resources.

Physical School Environment

Do students see themselves and others in your school, in pictures, in the teachers and staff? Are the cultures, customs, and values of Black, Indigenous and other peoples of Color incorporated throughout the year or are they isolated to a particular month or point in time? Are members of your community in your school, and do they feel comfortable and honored there?

Related Resources:

- * [Beyond Black History Month: Engaging a Multicultural Curriculum Year-Round](#)
- * [Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Learning Environments](#)
- * [Caring & Affirming Educational Environments](#)



Curriculum and Instruction

Are the lessons taught in your school centered in Whiteness and individual achievement? Do students see themselves and those who do not look like them in the learning materials? Are students encouraged to question and critique what they are taught and investigate the potential absent narratives in what they are learning? Are the pedagogies used familiar and/or comfortable for the educators or the students (and is the answer to this different for diverse subgroups of students)? Do the educators know the histories of the marginalized communities in your school?

Related Resources:

- * [Designing and Delivering Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Curricula](#)
- * [Assessing Bias in Standards and Curricular Materials](#)
- * [Teaching Towards Understandings of Intersectionality](#)
- * [Universal Design for Learning](#)
- * [Reframing the Achievement Gap: Ensuring All Students Benefit from Equitable Access to Learning](#)

Communication

Beyond translation of documents, how is your school engaging with families? Do you find yourself doing more sharing information than seeking it? In what ways are you listening and centering the voices of those who have historically been marginalized in schools? Do you know what families want for their children?

Related Resources:

- * [School - Family Partnerships: Creating Democratic and Responsive Schools](#)
- * [Parents/Caregivers As Authentic Partners in Education](#)
- * [Supporting Student Success through Authentic Partnerships: Reflection from Parents and Caregivers](#)



Student Engagement

Are students' voices valued and sought in both the classroom, and in school-wide governance and decision making? When students are removed from the classroom for behaviors, are the root causes or triggers to those behaviors examined? Are students' experiences in the school sought out and understood (i.e., through student climate surveys, focus groups with students, etc.) as part of a regular course of action, or only when a problem arises? What opportunities do you create to cultivate students as leaders, and which students have access to these opportunities?

Related Resources:

- * [Student-Led Activism: Disrupting Institutional Oppression](#)
- * [An Equity Toolkit for Inclusive Schools: Centering Youth Voice in School Change](#)
- * [Equity Connect! Centering Student Voice in Leading for Equity](#)
- * [Empowering Students to Become Agents of Social Change](#)

Hiring, Recruiting, and Retention

Are there practices in place that ask applicants' understanding of race, Whiteness, and oppression? Do you ensure that a culturally responsive and affirming environment is present for teachers of Color (i.e., affinity groups, mentoring, collegial trust, educator autonomy)? Are there specific programs like Grow Your Own, teacher residencies, or financial incentives for recruitment? Have policies that affect the retention of teachers of Color been actively challenged at the bargaining table?

Related Resources:

- * [Reexamining Workforce Diversity: Authentic Representations of Difference](#)
- * [Grow Your Own Special Programs: Contributing More Than Diversity](#)
- * [Diversifying Minnesota's Educator Workforce](#)



Policies and Practice

Are policies and practices examined through multiple perspectives, and especially in ways that center the perspectives of those who experience the most harm and marginalization in the school (i.e., students of Color, students with disabilities, etc.)? Is Whiteness hidden and/or unexamined in the creation of policies and practices? When developing policies and practices, are issues of oppression, discrimination, and race neutralized in discussions?

Related Resources:

- * [Developing Authentic Socially-Just Spaces at the Systemic Level](#)
- * [Critical Reflections on Policy](#)
- * [Engaging School Communities in Critical Reflection on Policy](#)
- * [Policy Equity Analysis Toolkit](#)

Student Behavior

Are disciplinary decisions made as a result of a “cookbook of consequences” that are steeped in White, middle-class expectations? Have parents and community members been engaged in defining behavior expectations and potential consequences? Have restorative practices been used as a part of addressing student behavior? Do you and your staff understand the relationship between restorative practices, equity, and Whiteness?

Related Resources:

- * [Systemic Approaches to Eliminating Disproportionality in Special Education](#)
- * [Students are Not Their Behavior: Returning to the Roots of Multitier Systems of Behavior Support](#)
- * [Who's Not Coming Back to School? The Pushout](#)
- * [Centering Equity in Social Emotional Learning](#)



Staff and Community

Have staff been provided ongoing professional learning opportunities related to racism, equity, and Whiteness? Have you created safe spaces (not to be conflated with comfortable spaces) where staff can examine Whiteness, their own positionality, and how Whiteness operates in schools?

Related Resources:

- * [Considerations for Professional Development in Equity-Oriented Practices](#)
- * [Centering Equity in Educator Professional Learning](#)
- * [Engaging Teachers As Social Justice Actors](#)
- * [Developing Critical Consciousness through Professional Learning](#)
- * [Developing Critical Consciousness through Professional Learning](#)
- * [Leadership Practices for Transformative Change Towards Equity](#)
- * [Toward a More Liberatory Approach to Family Engagement](#)

We know that most school leaders want to see all students succeed. If the goal is to reduce or eliminate inequities, we have to understand Whiteness and how it functions in schools. As you and your team grow your capacity to perceive Whiteness functioning within your system, you will likely develop your own reflective prompts to extend those above. The key is structuring time and space for this work to happen, and also for the work of making necessary systemic changes. Whiteness gets in the way of educational equity, so equity goals may never be realized without meaningful engagement with what Whiteness is and how it is showing up in our schools.

About the Authors

Angelina E. Castagno, PhD. is a Professor of Educational Leadership and Foundations, and the Director of the [Institute for Native-serving Educators](#) at Northern Arizona University; the Executive Director of [Just Perspective, LLC](#); and a former Technical Assistance Specialist with the [Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center](#). Her teaching, research, and consulting focus on equity and diversity in U.S. schools, and particularly issues of Whiteness and Indigenous education. She is an Associate Editor for the [Journal of American Indian Education](#) and has authored or edited four books and numerous articles in peer reviewed national and international journals. Her most recent book is [The price of nice: How good intentions maintain educational inequity](#).

Katie Pekel, EdD, is the Principal in Residence at the University of Minnesota where she leads the [Minnesota Principals Academy](#), a legislatively funded executive development program for school leaders; the [Executive PhD program](#); and the [Urban Leadership Academy](#). Dr. Pekel has served at all levels of K-12 education including as a high school English teacher, an elementary principal and a middle school principal. She has collaborated with Dr. Muhammad Khalifa in the development of the [Culturally Responsive School Leadership Academy](#) and Dr. Kim Gibbons on numerous research to practice presentations and projects. Dr. Pekel recently has led numerous [state-wide surveys](#) regarding the impacts of the pandemic on K-12 education in Minnesota, and a state-wide project on [diversification of the educator workforce](#).

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About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

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