the RACE CARD

H. Richard Milner IV

Leading the Fight for Truth in America's Schools

CORWIN

Thank you

FOR YOUR

INTEREST IN

CORWIN

Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from The Race Card.

LEARN MORE about this title!

CORWIN

Introduction

A few years ago, a group of parents, community members, and policy advocates invited me to share recommendations from my research about ways to support minoritized communities in education. This diverse, but mostly white, group was concerned about racial unrest and potential backlash after the killing of George Floyd at the hand of the state. "Liberal minded" and "forward thinking" were the words used by the group to describe themselves to me prior to and during my visit with them. They prepped me by sharing that they did not want to focus on race or the Floyd murder, *per se*, but on poverty, economic disparities, drug addiction, and lack of opportunities for many in their community. They preferred and guided me to prepare my presentation for a much broader conversation about "minority groups," and they wanted specific recommendations about ways to help students "do better" in schools. They pleaded: we must do something in our communities and especially our schools to quell the injustices and social unrest facing the nation. Moreover, they were concerned about deep political divisions and lack of solidarity that seemed to be tearing up the United States of America.

Maintaining my professional obligation and commitment to equity, I prepared and focused my remarks on Black students, students living below the poverty line, students whose first language was not English, recent immigrant students, Muslim students, and LGBTQIA+ students. I also attempted to focus on important and necessary intersections of these students' experiences and identities as I invited those in attendance to imagine equitable policies and practices. In fact, I talked with the group about many of the issues I explore within and throughout the pages of this book.

Drawing from well-substantiated research, I attempted to map and share with the group complexities of the issues we face as a nation, sprinkled with recommendations on what they could (and should!) do in solidarity to make society and schools better. But it appeared that the group wanted simple, fixed, and definitive answers. And they wanted solutions

disconnected from the *realness of racism*. Racism is not a playing matter. Racism is serious, as it hurts and harms the bodies and capacities of those who experience it—young people, educators, families, and communities.

As I presented, those in attendance engaged in sidebar conversations with and among each other reflecting on the data, insights, and recommendations I shared on slides. Although I could not hear their comments between and among themselves during my presentation, their concern became clear to me. After I finished my presentation the very first comment from a participant (with head nods from most of the others in the room) was, "This presentation feels like you are 'playing the race card.'" A bit stunned and disappointed by the comment, my response was firm and resolute and sets the stage for this book: "Yes, I certainly am." *Play the race card.* School leadership committed to centering racial justice requires that we amplify and intensify focus on race, not shy away from it. I reflected: Why should I somehow lie about, move away from, or be afraid to speak truth in this space (or any space) about the lingering and enduring effects of racism in society and education? Moreover, what does it mean to "play the race card," and who decides when such a card is being played? Why do some people feel uncomfortable or disconnected from discourse, interactions, policies, and practices when issues of race and racism are interrogated in the United States?

> Why should I somehow lie about, move away from, or be afraid to speak truth about the lingering and enduring effects of racism in society and education?

The general sentiment in the room was that when we "play the race card," deeper divisions emerge. Although they had good intentions, the group wanted me to placate and ponder to a group of unnamed Americans whom they believed they needed on their side to make social progress. These Americans were those who did not want to think, talk, or engage in race but, in the eyes of the participants, "good [liberal] people" who could help advance our agenda of educational opportunity for all. They wanted to repair the social unrest in America, which was precipitated by racism, whiteness, and anti-Black racism, by not engaging in these very issues that brought us to this moment. How can we address racism and improve policies and practices in schools and society when we do not "play the race card"?
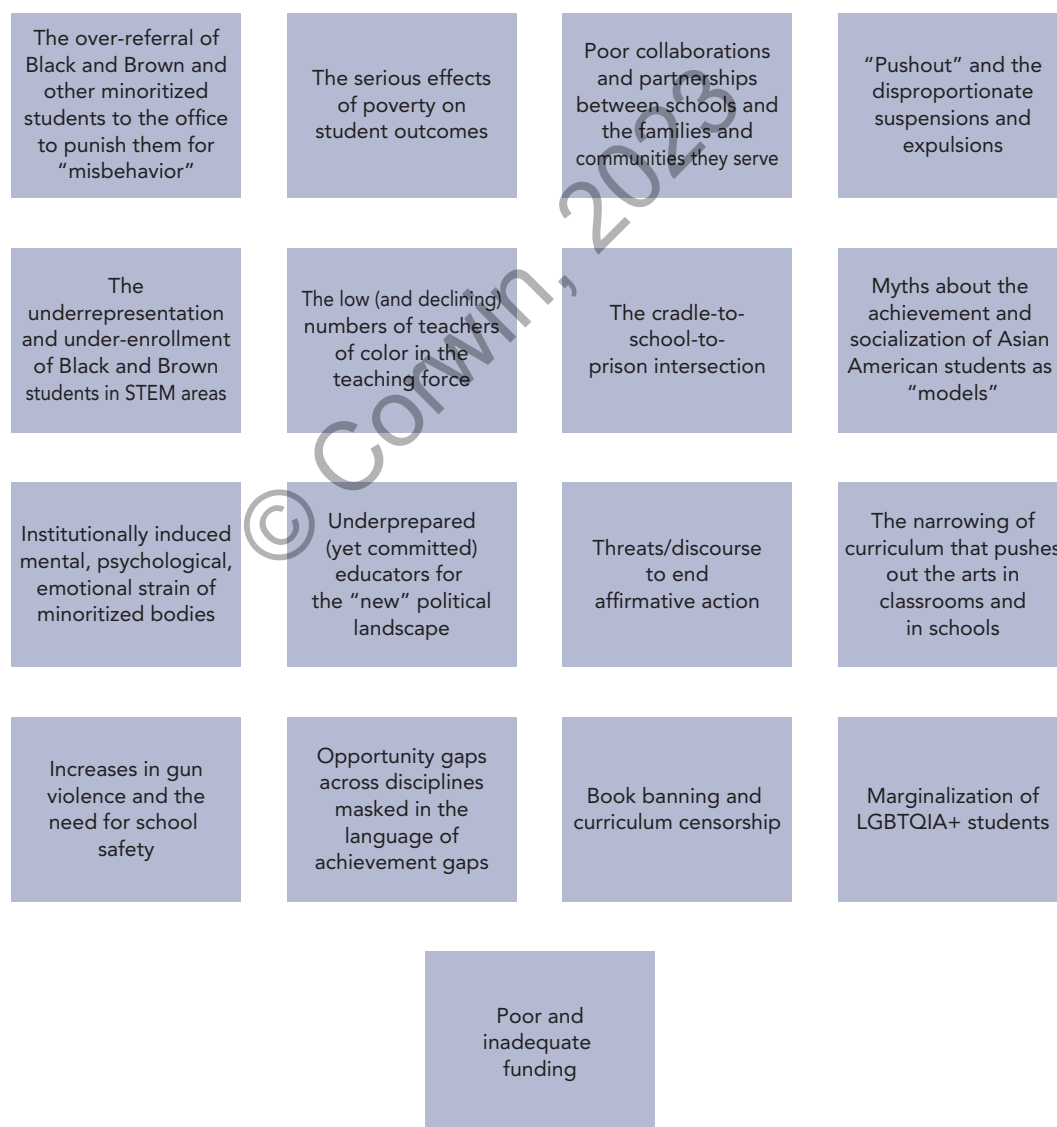
> They wanted to repair the social unrest in America, which was precipitated by racism, whiteness, and anti-Black racism, by not engaging in these very issues that brought us to this moment.

Also, when one suggests that another is "playing a race card," it sends the message that the race card player is somehow being deceptive, disingenuous, conniving, and unfair. I disagree with this view of what it means to play the race card. When people invoke race and racism in the spirit of improving conditions for young people and other minoritized communities, there is nothing deceptive or disingenuous about

naming the conditions that continue to hurt and harm. So, yes, we must play the race card.

What I call opportunity imperatives (Figure 1.1) capture many of the issues I covered during my presentation. I invite readers of this book, and school leaders specifically, to consider the breadth and depth of these issues and their intersecting relationships to race and racism. Although this list is not exhaustive, school leaders must understand the complexities of the matters in Figure 1.1 to make schools more welcoming, restorative, transformative, healing, and racially just spaces.

FIGURE 1.1   Opportunity Imperatives

The over-referral of Black and Brown and other minoritized students to the office to punish them for "misbehavior"	The serious effects of poverty on student outcomes	Poor collaborations and partnerships between schools and the families and communities they serve	"Pushout" and the disproportionate suspensions and expulsions
The underrepresentation and under-enrollment of Black and Brown students in STEM areas	The low (and declining) numbers of teachers of color in the teaching force	The cradle-to-school-to-prison intersection	Myths about the achievement and socialization of Asian American students as "models"
Institutionally induced mental, psychological, emotional strain of minoritized bodies	Underprepared (yet committed) educators for the "new" political landscape	Threats/discourse to end affirmative action	The narrowing of curriculum that pushes out the arts in classrooms and in schools
Increases in gun violence and the need for school safety	Opportunity gaps across disciplines masked in the language of achievement gaps	Book banning and curriculum censorship	Marginalization of LGBTQIA+ students
	Poor and inadequate funding		

To be sure, all the issues in Figure 1.1 intersect with issues of race and racism—a central focus of this book. And school leaders should "play the race card" in their quest to study, design, and improve tools, mechanisms, systems, policies, and practices to help our students have a chance at experiencing more humanizing educational contexts.

As I presented to the group, I explicitly (and unapologetically) focused on race, racism, whiteness, and anti-Black racism. Put simply, I played the race card—at least in the minds and hearts of those in attendance. And I firmly support leadership practices that play the race card.

But What Do I Mean by Race?

Critical race theorists have argued that race and racism are everywhere, operating at all times, and that—perhaps most importantly—racism is a permanent dimension of the fabric of U.S. society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) and education (Milner, 2020a, 2020b). It is well-accepted and understood that race is socially constructed (Bennett et al., 2019; Boutte, 2016; Farinde-Wu, 2018; Gooden & O'Doherty, 2014; Laughter, 2018; Milner, 2015; Sealey-Ruiz, 2016). In addition, race is phenotypically and physically constructed (Fergus, 2017; Harper & Donnor, 2017; McGee et al., 2016; Monroe, 2013; Singer, 2016). That is, in constructing race, people examine and interpret the physicality and outside, phenotypical markers of individuals. Race is also contextually, geographically, place-centered, and spatially constructed (Alvarez, 2017; Green, 2015; Morris & Monroe, 2009; Pearman, 2020; Tate, 2008; Williams, 2018). For instance, race is conceptualized differently across continents and space. Race is also legally constructed (Bell, 2004; Harris, 1993; Lynn & Dixson, 2022), as laws and policies influence what we know and do in society. And race is historically constructed (Alridge, 2003; Anderson, 1988; Milner & Lomotey, 2014; Walker, 1996), as historical moments and movements such as slavery, eugenics, reconstruction, Jim Crow, redlining, desegregation, and busing influence policy and practice. Still, Leonardo and Manning (2017) explained, "While race is socially constructed, and not 'real' as a scientific classification system, it has real material and affective impact on people: the way they think, speak, and act in the world" (p. 20).

> Race is far more than skin color.

It is important to note that *race is far more than skin color*.

Thus, throughout this book, when I refer to race, I am referring to a construct—much more nuanced, deep, robust, and intricate than simply skin color alone. School leaders working to transform their school environments toward racial justice understand they must have and/or possess insights about the constructs, ideas, and ideals they pursue. Race is one of those terms that is often invoked but rarely understood in

educational discourse, policy, and practice. This is a problem and must be addressed.

And What Is Racism?

Berman and Paradies (2010) define racism as "that which maintains or exacerbates inequality of opportunity among . . . groups. Racism can be expressed through stereotypes (racist beliefs), prejudice (racist emotions/affect) or discrimination (racist behaviors and practices)" (p. 217). Moreover, racism is a practice of injustice and discrimination that works to maintain white supremacy and the white status quo. It is important to note that racist acts through power may emerge intentionally or unintentionally (Carter, 2007). Whether intentional or unintentional, racism is a vicious practice that can leave people of color in schools, workplaces, and society marginalized and traumatized where white people are assumed to be the ideal norm by which others should be compared or measured. Racism attacks and harms. Racism is an action verb that works through power structures and power moves guided by beliefs and mindsets of people to control the social order.

Having worked with thousands of teachers, young people, family and community members, and school leaders over the years, most of these people have not been intentionally (or even overtly) racist. Educators do not tend to get into the work of teaching to practice racism. However, due to implicit biases, stereotypes, misnomers, unexamined preconceived notions, and historical prejudices that are reified, unintentional racist practices are devastating for young people and adults alike, as white people practice normalized practices that cause profound harm against racially minoritized bodies. Whether intentional or unintentional, racism is real in the lives of people, and school leaders have a chance to help change and transform a racist trajectory of a place or space.

This book is dedicated to helping school leaders bring out the very best of all educators in pursuit of racial justice and the co-creation of school spaces that make a positive difference for all. Although other school leadership books focus on race and racism, I am also including related constructs of whiteness and anti-Black racism as central features of what must be considered in any contemporary effort and agenda leading toward racial justice and racial equity in schools.

But What Is Whiteness?

Race, racism, and whiteness are practically, empirically, and conceptually connected. Race, racism, and whiteness have been conceptualized in relation to place—the ecological nature of schools and communities (Cabrera et al., 2016; Diamond et al., 2021; Milner, 2015, 2020a).

Moreover, studies have examined issues of race, racism, and whiteness in the context of teacher education (Alvarez, 2017; Alvarez & Milner, 2018; Annamma, 2014; Bennett et al., 2019; Milner, 2008; Milner & Howard, 2013; Sleeter, 2017) and mathematics education (Beatty & Leyva, 2016). Beatty and Leyva (2016) advanced three interrelated features—institutional, labor, and identity—in their developing framework to address whiteness in the context of mathematics education. Moving beyond simplistic, myopic framing of whiteness, these researchers argued "whiteness must . . . counteract the mechanisms and institutional ways in which [w]hite supremacy in mathematics education reproduces subordination and advantage" (Beatty & Leyva, 2016, p. 76).

Evans-Winters and Hines (2020) explained that "whiteness is a socially constructed concept that centers white people and white things—whiteness is a person, place, thing and idea. Whiteness is an action word and it is status quo, the norm of society, and cannot exist if there is not [an] element of power, domination, and oppression" (p. 4). Indeed, whiteness is a noun and an action verb. Whiteness is about how white people use their bodies to enact particular kinds of actions and practices. But whiteness can manifest not only through the practices of white people but also through the actions of others as well. In this way, whiteness can be executed and practiced through the bodies of anybody, including people of color. This is why we see so many Black school leaders practicing harmful practices in schools. Castagno (2013) maintained that "whiteness refers to the structural arrangements and ideologies of racial dominance within the United States. Racial power and inequities are at the core of whiteness, but all forms of power and inequity create and perpetuate whiteness" (p. 101). As communities of color embrace ideological, historical, contemporary, and otherwise paradigmatic ways of knowing and being, they too can perpetuate whiteness as they have been kidnapped into believing that whiteness steeped in subordination is what should be practiced and advanced in schools and society.

In addition, whiteness can be conceptualized as an "ideology of White supremacy that works through discourses" (Fylkesnes, 2018, p. 25). More than an individual act, action, practice, or behavior, whiteness is "deeply embedded in systems" (Sleeter, 2017, p. 165). Whiteness has become a "norm against which others are judged but also a powerful, if sometimes unconscious, justification for the status quo" (Castagno, 2013, p. 102). Thus, whiteness is about more than the bodies in which we were born; it is more than our physical characteristics. Whiteness is about how subjugation, supremacy, oppression, marginalization, harm, otherness, and conceptions of inferiority are practiced and carried out through actions. This book employs a dynamic way of thinking about whiteness and white practices that manifest through the behaviors of white (and other) bodies.

In this way, rather than white individuals feeling ostracized, unable to advance justice, or outside of the collective committed to racial justice, individuals across racial and ethnic backgrounds must be in the work of racial justice and the disruption of whiteness if we have a fighting chance to create the kinds of schools where racial minoritized students are honored, validated, and valued. Tanner (2019) stressed the need for whiteness to be addressed as a "complicated problem for white people" (p. 186). To be sure, rather than expecting and continuing to burden people of color to solve the challenges we face in education and society due to whiteness, it is a necessary responsibility of white communities to address whiteness. But whiteness has to also be addressed within communities and cultural practices of people who see whiteness as the sole way of existing in schools and society. In short, whiteness is less about what people embody as much as what they believe, know, understand, and practice. Whiteness is also about how white people flex their phenotype and their physically perceived dominance in the social world. And whiteness is about how people of color, albeit unintentionally and unawarely, adopt and embrace whiteness as a way to maintain an inequitable status quo. Whiteness contributes to anti-Black racism.

But What Is Anti-Black Racism?

Anti-Black racism takes racism to an even deeper, insidious level. The Black body is seen as a problem in the social world, and policies and practices are enacted to work against the spirit, mind, hopes, and dreams of Black people. Racism is so deeply ingrained in the fabric of U.S. society that Black people experience it across many confluent aspects of their lives. Dumas (2016) explained that

> antiblackness marks an irreconcilability between the Black and any sense of social or cultural regard. The aim of theorizing antiblackness is . . . to come to a deeper understanding of the Black condition within a context of utter contempt for, and acceptance of violence against the Black. (p. 13)

Anti-Black racism creates conditions, structures, and systems that almost guarantee outcomes that place Black people in the most precarious positions. To shed light on Dumas's (2016) insights regarding the contempt for and violence against the Black, Blackness, and the Black body, school punishment practices are often anti-Black. School grading policies and reward systems are often anti-Black. School dress code policies and expectations are often anti-Black. School curriculum practices are often anti-Black. School instructional practices are often anti-Black.

Florida's Department of Education decision to reject an Advanced Placement course covering African American Studies is an example of

anti-Blackness on a systemic level. Stating that the course indoctrinates students to a political agenda suggests that there is something particularistic about a course in which students learn about Black people that would necessitate a kind of understanding and agenda contrary to the white-centric, colonized ways in which students experience other courses. Moreover, these inside-of-education anti-Black systems of racism are exacerbated by a serious movement in the United States to ensure the circumstances of Black children do not improve but worsen for them. As I am hopeful this book will be an educative tool to support leaders in building knowledge, attitudes, understanding, and insights about race, racism, whiteness, and anti-Black racism, Table 1.1 is designed to summarize major dimensions of constructs discussed throughout this book.

TABLE 1.1   Summarizing Race, Racism, Whiteness, and Anti-Black Racism

RACE	RACISM	WHITENESS	ANTI-BLACK RACISM
• Is much more than skin color. • Is one of the most difficult topics to discuss in education but one of the most important. • Is socially constructed. • Is historically constructed. • Is legally constructed. • Is phenotypically constructed. • Is geographically and spatially constructed. • Is often seen as a sociological imperative but should be considered in all aspects of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and relational practices.	• Occurs through power forces intentionally and unintentionally. • Is practiced through oppressive stereotypes, values, and beliefs deeply ingrained in society. • Is perpetuated through the prejudging of others based on explicit and implicit assumptions. • Is practiced by individuals who create structures and systems of racial injustice. • Results in a vicious cycle of violence, harm, trauma, and hurt of racial minoritized groups.	• Can be understood as a noun and a verb. • Is not only about white people but also concerns how all people act, behave, and move within and through society. • Is the norm against which others are compared. • Rejects, frowns on, and dehumanizes thoughts, beliefs, and practices that fall outside the white gaze. • Maintains an inequitable white status quo. • Indoctrinates white people into believing they are entitled to practicing white supremacy. • Creates a dominant lens in conceptualizing, prioritizing, and enacting curriculum, instruction, assessment, and relationship practices.	• Moves racism to an elevated level of hate for the Black body. • Advances deep contempt, harm, and disdain for Black people, their worldviews, and their practices. • Solidifies violence against the Black body through implicit and deeply ingrained hostility that is practiced and passed down through generational harm. • Intently studies any possible serious gains and improvement of Black communities in order to disrupt, distort, and end them by any means necessary.