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

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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.