

1 Educational Inequity: How We Got Here

Years ago, I was sitting in the back of a first-grade classroom, pen and paper at the ready to capture everything I could while observing a teacher in the launch of her new reading block.

I looked around the classroom at the students settling in, and I quickly observed that about one in four children in the class were students of color. With a flick of the teacher's hand, the students began to assemble on the carpet, each one with a whiteboard and a marker. I could tell right away that they were very familiar with this particular routine.

The teacher began the reading block with a read-aloud of *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. Immediately, when she showed the front cover of the book, a boy with deep brown eyes and black hair called out, "Teacher, teacher, that's a *con dê*! That's a con dê!"

"It is?" the teacher inquired. "Is that how you say 'goat' in Vietnamese?"

"Yes," the same student responded. "My um, um, *bà ngoại* has lots of them!" he announced.

The teacher, not wanting to miss the teachable moment, inquired, “Oh, your bà ngoại . . . Thanh, do you want to tell the rest of our friends what a bà ngoại is?”

He smiled at the chance to teach the class and announced proudly, “That means um, um grandma!”

The teacher started the read-aloud, and I noticed that all the students were leaning in, anticipating the story. When the teacher got to the book’s repetitive chorus, “Trip-trap, trip-trap went Billy Goat’s hooves as he walked across the bridge,” another student—this time a little boy with what looked to be a fresh-cut afro mohawk and a wide smile that showed one tooth missing—proudly repeated the chorus aloud with the teacher. She turned and admonished him with a look. When the teacher got to the chorus again, right in unison with her, the boy chimed in.

This time, the teacher stopped reading and said his name sharply, “Mitchell,” and then gave him the signal to be quiet. Mitchell immediately shrugged his shoulders, and his silly grin faded into a pout as his chin dropped down to his chest. He deflated a little bit, sinking into the floor and picking at the carpet to avoid eye contact.

At that moment, for reasons that were not immediately apparent to me, I was drawn to Mitchell. It wasn’t as if I hadn’t seen that kind of interaction before in my 15 or so years as an educator. Likely, I had even been the initiator of a similar disciplinary exchange. But it was the glimpse of how quickly and palpably Mitchell’s demeanor changed, how clearly diminished he became, that caught my attention. I saw in that moment how his light was instantly turned off, and I saw an all-too-familiar feeling that I now can articulate as shame settling in. The shrugging of his shoulders and then the self-soothing behavior of picking at the carpet spurred up an angst in me that, if I was being honest, I hadn’t felt since I was in grade school.

I made a note in my journal to circle back with the teacher to discuss the relationship she had with Mitchell and to see if she had noticed the shift in his demeanor following her correction. I was acutely aware that Mitchell's teacher had misinterpreted his outburst as unruliness, rather than as the exercise of a deeply cultural Black practice of choral reading. While she took time to celebrate the cultural and linguistic differences of Thanh, her actions toward Mitchell, just a moment later, had signaled both to him and to the other children that his cultural practices, and by this I mean Black cultural practices, had no place in her lessons.

I glanced at the other students to gauge their reactions to the teacher's reprimand. Had her harshness with Mitchell impacted their own desire to speak up in class? Even in that moment, as I analyzed Mitchell and his classmates, I struggled with an internal argument, to push away what I observed as classroom behavior management, or to lean into the uncomfortable gut feeling of incremental marginalization that laid beneath the teacher's action.

I decided to stay for the entire school day and shadow Mitchell from afar. Several times during the reading block activities, I noticed that Mitchell and his Black and brown classmates who had assembled after the read-aloud in a corner of the classroom, were scolded by the teacher to "watch their noise level," or questioned about whether they were "on track." These were all seemingly normal interactions between a teacher and students, but for me, in this moment, it had moved beyond the standard classroom procedure into a two-way mirror. I was observing Mitchell's adverse reactions to the teacher's constant reprimanding, while simultaneously being reminded of dominant cultural rules of interaction and how they played out, not only in this classroom, but in classrooms across the country. In reprimanding Mitchell during the read-aloud, this teacher had further solidified the disconnect between the cultural language patterns that many students in her classroom were familiar with and "proper" classroom language. Mitchell's cultural language

could have been utilized to further all of their learning. What I know now is that this teacher was oblivious to the fact that seemingly minor classroom management actions were conveying a message about whose culture was worthy of being included in instructional practices.

I flashed back to my memories of second grade and that feeling of wanting to sink into the classroom floor, when the teacher had either ignored me or reprimanded me about a rule that I had forgotten or had not even been aware of. I connected to the feeling of shame that I could sense Mitchell was having, that same feeling that had been conveyed to me over and over again as a student maneuvering through classrooms in which I was one of very few students of color, sometimes the only one. In my own education, I had grown accustomed to the persistent shadow of a feeling that I was treated differently because of the color of my skin. When I was young, I simply identified it as “Teacher don’t like me.” As I grew older, I knew which white teachers tolerated me, which ones despised me, and which ones would physically slink back if I walked up to them. I wondered if I was witnessing the birth of that same shadow in Mitchell.

The expression on Mitchell’s face signaled an all-too-familiar surge of humiliation. As a child, encountering a world in which at any moment you are made to feel ashamed or to endure constant reminders that you are discounted, can inflict calluses of sadness that often turn into anger and defiance, or worse, isolation and defeatism. I was also reminded of how those moments led me to my current path: to resolve the explicit and implicit barriers that bias and racism build in our students, ourselves, and the systems in which we serve.

This moment of Mitchell shrinking into himself would resonate even more deeply later in my career, when I read the stats on Black students’ disproportionate achievement or the school disciplinary crisis facing Black and brown students.

From Moment to Movement

I had originally been sent to Mitchell's classroom by the suburban school district office where I worked as an early-childhood specialist. In 2005, we wanted to begin preparation for our annual summer professional development (PD) series for elementary teachers. My assignment was to observe a sample of the school's reading blocks, get a sense of how teachers were implementing readers' and writers' workshops, and report back on what possible professional development topics would be pertinent to ensure that the reading blocks were being implemented with fidelity. The district was struggling with an ever-increasing proficiency gap in reading scores, even after overhauling the former expectations of English Language Arts (ELA) instruction and adopting new schedules, curriculum, and support practices.

However, Mitchell's reaction to the teacher that day pushed me into a much broader observation about the small and insidious ways our education system is encoded with deep bias against Black children and other students of color. And when I say "small," I do not mean inconsequential. In fact, it is these ostensibly small interactions, in the details of teaching and learning, that make the biggest difference in the way Black and brown students perceive themselves, how teachers see them, what is expected of them, and their own agency and worth in education and their world beyond.

There are many things one could surmise about what was driving the interactions between Mitchell and his teacher. At first, the exchange seemed to be predicated on discipline; as a teacher early in my career, I would have very quickly validated why there seemed to be such a focus on correcting his behavior. However, having witnessed the patterns of overemphasis on behavioral correction for students of color in various systems, I had a grounded belief as to why Mitchell's teacher was "keeping an eye" on him.

According to research, the overzealous disciplining of Black and brown children in schools plays a significant role in the pathway to low achievement, lack of foundational skills in reading and math, and—the most distressing outcome—incarceration. Black students account for just 15% of all public school students, but they represent about 39% of students suspended from school—an overrepresentation of 23%.¹ In 2014, preschoolers were included in the Civil Rights Data Collection on school discipline, and Black children were found to account for 18% of preschool enrollees and nearly half (48%) of all preschoolers suspended. This disparity contrasted discouragingly with white students, who made up 43% of the preschool population but only 26% of those subject to suspension.² When students experience just one standard deviation of a higher suspension rate, their likelihood of being arrested or incarcerated increases by 15% to 20%.³ The problem of over-disciplining Black children like Mitchell is systemic, and it begins with the smaller interactions I witnessed in this teacher's classroom. However, it also occurred to me that she probably had never considered how her actions fit into larger patterns of over-disciplining Black and brown children.

I was then, and am now, deeply aware of the systematic disenfranchisement that Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other students of color face in most educational settings, the pressing messages they receive, both implicitly and explicitly, about the value of their non-dominant cultural social norms and communication styles. This awareness is one of the foundational reasons why I went into education in the first place. My hope was, if nothing else, to serve as a small beacon of light to the students of color I encountered on their educational walks. In my eyes, Mitchell's innate, and honestly adorable, urge to respond chorally to the line of repetition the teacher was reading aloud was not distracting or worthy of disciplinary attention.

This was the same reaction I was having in my own head, but I knew enough about social dominant norms not to say it aloud.

After all, choral reading—or call and response—is a part of so many Black cultural spaces I’ve inhabited in my life. It’s a part of church, community rituals, memorials for loved ones, and even movie watching. Augusta Mann explores this important cultural language pattern in her “Touching the Spirit” framework.⁴ Touching the Spirit highlights for educators a research-based teaching modality focused on supporting students from the Black and African American cultural background. Mann’s work suggests that when we meaningfully incorporate children’s cultural practices, we enrich and deepen classroom learning. She is far from alone in these assertions: educational research and recognition of choral response and the devaluation of cultural linguistic differences has existed for decades, along with culturally responsive teaching research from Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings in the 1990s.⁵

However, like many educators, Mitchell’s teacher may not have thought that she could be carrying the legacy of America’s educational history in her ideologies about Black students, and about Mitchell in particular. She did not consider that not only does good pedagogy need to be grade-level-appropriate, but that it also has to be engaging, it must affirm children’s identities, and it must be meaningful to them. Simply put, this lack of consideration is the outcome of unconscious bias or implicit bias.

Unconscious or implicit bias is the set of automatic and unconscious stereotypes that drive people to behave and make decisions in certain ways. It is the mind’s way of making uncontrolled and automatic associations between two concepts very quickly. Much has been said in recent years about implicit bias and its impacts on all aspects of our society, but the most important thing to remember about bias is this: If it is left unchecked, one’s lexicon of prejudgments will continue to deepen and drive harmful behavior. We are all bombarded daily with messages from our upbringings, media, and, dare I say, skewed or incomplete understandings of history. Many of these images

and messages teach us to simplify, to dismiss, and to ignore the nuances and humanity in the people around us. To counteract these messages—especially as educators—we must continuously and vigilantly interrogate how they are woven throughout our interactions with children and how they inform our academic and behavioral expectations.

Every moment that teachers, administrators, communities, and even families leave their bias unexamined, Black children and other children of color are robbed of their educational freedom. As educators, we must consider how our cultural lenses define liberty both for ourselves and for the students we serve. We will return to the story of Mitchell and his teacher, but to examine our personal biases, first we have to understand where they come from. This begins with understanding the history that brought those biases and presumptions into being and shaped them into what we bring into our classrooms every day.

The Foundation of Bias and the Educational System It Upholds

I've always been struck by the idea of our country's beginnings as the womb of liberty. This metaphorical image of the crucible that is a womb, signals that this country's origins, our national DNA, is a concoction of all the events that led to our nation's founding. This means that the theft of Indigenous tribal land throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is as much a part of that beginning as the colonists' drafting of their intentions for the colonies of the United States. It means that realities of chattel slavery and vicious slaveholding exist in the legacies of George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, alongside their accomplishments as pioneers of democratic thought.

The word "liberty" signals to me that the colonists, and certainly the drafters of the Declaration of Independence, despite their hypocrisies, knew that the undergirding principle of freedom could not be sacrificed. Our nation's founders and leaders have relied on the

strength of this defining purpose to wage wars and bargain treaties for centuries—all in the name of liberty.

Upon close examination, liberty, simply stated, means the power to make choices. History has shown us the value of the choices that liberty affords. The colonists' denial or curtailing of choice was a theft of liberty enacted upon the Indigenous communities as they became victims of the colonial land acquisitions and Manifest Destiny—the audacious, blithe, and violent assumption that colonial expansion was the inevitable entitlement of the colonizers. Choices were taken from the Africans who were violently stolen from their homes and forced to power the economy of this pilfered New World. Centuries later, agency, freedom, and any semblance of home were completely annihilated when the United States government made the audacious decision to create internment camps for Japanese Americans during World War II. I often say that history begets legacies, those legacies have legs, and they walk into our classrooms every day. These foundational choices of our nation are just a few of many steps that take us down the long and winding road leading to the schoolhouse, and to the birth of systemic policies, practices, and procedures that nourish unchecked beliefs about students of color.

Other writers have documented the wider, often ignored, histories in American public schooling today. Depending on educators' own educational backgrounds, some of it may be familiar while other parts are still unknown. But a close look, not only at the beginnings of American systems of subjugation and erasure, but at the foundations that they created in public schooling, is important if we are ever going to work to build a new vision for education.

In the late 1700s, pseudosciences were crafted throughout the Western world to establish the concept of race as a biological fact. Many of the social and biological theories born out of the European "Enlightenment" were used to further entrench the belief that enslaved Africans were of inferior intellect and were unworthy of

education. The Enlightenment philosopher John Locke suggested that people of African descent were a subspecies of human because it was believed African women procreated with apes.⁷ The Swedish scientist and creator of the modern taxonomy system, Carl Linnaeus, classified Africans as *Homo sapiens afer*, declaring them “sluggish, lazy. . . . [c]rafty, slow, careless. Covered by grease. Ruled by caprice.”⁶ These ideas continued their legacies across the Atlantic, as scientists like Samuel Morton, the father of American anthropology, declared that the white race had “the highest intellectual endowments” in the human race, allegedly due to the size of their skulls.⁷ All of this rhetoric offered fodder not only to further the horrors of slavery, but to extend its legacy far beyond abolition.

For enslaved Africans, whose forced labor powered the economy of the colonies and set this country on its productive economic course, access to the schoolhouse was something systematically and brutally denied. In 1739, a rebellion of enslaved Africans began in South Carolina, and as it swept south to Florida, those rebelling killed 20 enslavers. When the rebellion was ultimately quelled, it ushered in an age of anti-literacy laws.⁸ These laws sought to prevent future rebellions and organizing by ensuring that enslaved people caught reading were subjected to a host of punishments, ranging from sale, whippings, removal of their tongues, and death.⁹ Thus, by controlling the means to education, the white ruling class sought to moderate the actions and limit the power of enslaved Africans. Even as the Constitution was being conceived and later drafted, enslaved Africans were being actively legislated out of any of the freedoms this vision of liberty—again, the ability to make choices—afforded.

There is more to understand about the degree to which enslavers would go to ensure their enslaved people remained illiterate. Along with terror, through physical violence, slave owners used slave codes to control their human property. These codes were laws used against the enslaved—drafted and enforced based on the idea that enslaved

people were not people, but property. Not only did being literate come at the risk of one's life as an enslaved person, those caught *teaching* enslaved Africans how to read could also be subjected to fines or jail time. In Virginia, for instance, the law stated "That if any white person or persons assemble with free negroes or mulattoes . . . for the purpose of instructing such free negroes or mulattoes to read or write, such person or persons shall, on conviction thereof, be fined in a sum not exceeding fifty dollars, and moreover may be imprisoned at the discretion of a jury, not exceeding two months."¹⁰ For enslaved or free persons of color, the penalty was up to 20 lashes.¹¹

In the state of Georgia, this happened to Reverend James Simms, who in 1861, was fined by the city of Savannah for teaching enslaved people how to read.¹² Reverend Simms was a free Black man who was repeatedly fined by the city, but he chose fines rather than give up on ensuring his people gained liberty through learning. As previously mentioned, in the 1700s and 1800s, slave codes came to include anti-literacy laws, which continued to rely on legislation to curtail learning opportunities for enslaved people. While enslaved people were allowed to learn "figures," reading was off limits. Since literacy was liberty, then illiteracy was necessary to ensure enslavement.

Abolitionist Frederick Douglass provides a window into understanding the degree to which education was held as a commodity that was used to advance some and restrict others, namely by advancing learning for white citizens while strategically and legislatively ensuring that Black enslaved individuals were forbidden to learn. The formerly enslaved Douglass describes how he came to understand the importance of literacy by overhearing his master, Auld, exclaim to his wife, when he caught her trying to teach Douglass how to read, that Douglass's literacy would only spoil him and make "him unfit to be a slave."¹³ Douglass understood that if something as seemingly innocent as sounding out words to read a

story could make his master so infuriated and afraid, then that thing must be of great importance.

It is important to recognize that Douglass is a significant part of our national understanding of slave narratives, in part *because* he was able to learn how to read and write. Douglass's story is an anomaly not because he was exceptional in his understanding of the deep importance of reading, but because he did not receive the most extreme punishments many enslaved people suffered when they attempted to usurp their enslavement through literacy. Had he received the punishments many enslaved people did when attempting to write or read, his story too might have been lost to time. Literacy's illegality for enslaved people was not simply a cruel feature of enslavement; it was constructed by white slaveholders and politicians to subvert organizing and insurrection against chattel slavery.

The stories of Douglass and other enslaved people help illuminate how America has arrived at this place of uneven literacy development among groups of students. We learn from Douglass the significance of the power dynamic at play when those who can control the learning of others do so in such a way as to ensure illiteracy for people they do not believe deserve the right to learn. Anti-literacy laws may seem decades, even centuries removed from our current experiences as educators; however, examining these histories affords us an understanding of how the racism and biases that shaped these laws can remorph and reform themselves across time. When we become more attuned to the history of our field, we begin to understand these cycles of implicit bias, and we can use that knowledge to dismantle and end them. We will continue to explore how this history impacts our contemporary understanding of education beyond linguistics and literacy, but first, I want to return to Mitchell's school to illustrate just how fraught that history makes our current communications when we try to confront it in our classrooms and with other educators.

Teaching Mitchell

As I wandered back to the classroom after the students' lunch break, I started playing in my head the conversation that I wanted to have with Mitchell's teacher. I had met her several months prior at a professional development session I had facilitated for the district. She'd approached me after the session, saying she was interested in strengthening her teaching skills in early literacy and very much wanted to support the students in her classroom who were struggling with their literacy development, writing skills, and participation in class. My initial interaction with Mitchell's teacher at that PD session was front of mind after my observation of her classroom later, as I was trying to calculate how to bring up my observation of Mitchell's reaction of shame to her reprimand of his choral reading practice in the classroom.

As we sat down to discuss my observations of her classroom, she was eager to know what I thought of her reading language arts block. Given my knowledge around coaching, I started the "feedback sandwich" with what I had observed that I thought went really well: the students knew the routines, it only took small signals to get their attention, and she had effectively organized her 180-minute reading blocks. The lesson had also been well thought out, with reading centers supporting the students' current grade-level standards.

Then I took a breath, and started the most difficult part of the feedback with a question. "Did you notice the way that Mitchell shifted? And by shifted, I mean Mitchell's demeanor. Did you see how it changed after you reprimanded him for choral reading aloud with you?"

I could tell that the question caught her off guard because she leaned back in her chair, and squinted her eyes as if her vision had suddenly gone out of focus. She responded, "Oh, Mitchell. He's my special little boy." It was her turn to make a feedback sandwich.

She continued: “Yes, sometimes I find it really hard to keep him focused. If I’m honest, he was one of the students I had in mind when I walked up to you at the end of your professional development session. But notice his demeanor? No, he’s my chatty kid, the student for whom I’m always having to bring his attention back to the class.”

I listened as she unfurled the reasons why she had responded as she had. I took it in as she gave background on her relationship with Mitchell. I really tried to listen to understand and push down my own assumptions. But what I was really pushing down was my “spidey sense” of encountering biases as a person of color. I was really pushing down the frustrations I had been accustomed to ignoring for many years.

When she was finished, I spoke. I explained how observing Mitchell’s reaction to her seemingly simple disciplinary action, caused me to pause and to not only notice the shame he experienced but the triggering effect it had on me. I shared that these interactions between her and Mitchell had awakened a revelation. Perhaps it was the culminating years of having taught first grade myself, then becoming a literacy coach, or maybe it was my many years of training leaders in creating equitable environments for all students that was fueling our conversation. But for the first time, on this critical point, I saw clearly. The reality was that what I had originally seen as a phenomenon of Black and brown students’ engagement in classrooms, was actually a failure of cultural awareness and the influence of deep bias in teaching. I saw how these interactions had even impacted my own navigation of school as a Black student.

I listened intently to Mitchell’s teacher’s protests and asked her if I could offer up a different perspective of the dynamics between her and Mitchell. I provided her with the definition of implicit bias and described how all of us are victims of racism’s smog. We inhale it on a daily basis through images, media, and the layers of who we are. Family dynamics, religious perspectives, political affiliations, and

experiences inside and outside of our immediate communities all shape the bias we bring into our classrooms.

She shared with me that she didn't agree with my assessment of bias, because she didn't see color. She further explained: "If someone were to ask me about the race of my students I would really have to stop and consider each child individually and tally up my considerations. Is that being 'color blind' or is it simply looking at students as individuals with individual learning challenges?"

Again, I sat there pushing down my own bias alarm and asked her permission to challenge her thinking. I began by reading back to her my observation notes, specifically the part where Thanh offered up his story about his bà ngoại having goats. I read aloud her response and the encouragement she gave Thanh in the moment: to not only share with the class, but to teach his classmates what the word "bà ngoại" meant. I told her that at that moment she used Thanh's cultural tools to support the teaching and understanding of the text. I then read her my observation notes when Mitchell began to chorally read aloud with her. I asked her if she was familiar with the cultural context from which Mitchell used the unwritten cultural norm to join in chorally with a repeated text. I gave her examples of how it's used in some Black churches, civic meetings, and in homes. I asked her if she considered his reading aloud chorally in a cultural context.

She sat quietly for a moment and then stated, "I don't think I ever considered African-Americans as having a culture. I just assumed my cultural context was theirs. I mean they don't speak another language and I guess I assumed culture was a specific language and traditions of culture from a specific region in the world. From what I understand, African-Americans don't have any of that."

And in just a few short sentences, she had unearthed her own bias and excavated an assumption that is at the heart of much of American education: that Black children do not have culture, only pathology. Because of her unconscious bias, Mitchell's actions could not be

evaluated in the same cultural context as Thanh's. America's educational DNA ensured that his joyful choral response could only be coded as misbehavior and unruliness.

Whether or not we know it, there is cultural DNA encoded throughout the American education system, built upon the foundational beliefs about Black people's educability—or lack thereof. To varying degrees, this encoded anti-Blackness and white centrality also impacts our views about the intelligence of Indigenous, Latinx, and other children of color. We often do not learn these histories of how this belief came to be. However, our lack of awareness does not negate the reality that we are also governed by the subtleties of this belief system flowing through the DNA of our educational system and even ourselves. Such ideological DNA has shaped laws, policies, and practices, which in turn have yielded the disparate and inequitable outcomes that we have become accustomed to, take for granted as absolute, and continue to exacerbate today.

Denaturing Our DNA

Inequity is *core* to American education, simply because our educational system was built with inequity and cultural theft encoded in its DNA. Knowing this helps us understand why, despite endless decades of education reform, America's education system remains egregiously inequitable, with predictable student outcomes that fall along established societal fault lines. As we consider an authentic, lasting way out of these entrenched, accepted educational inequities, there must be a real discussion to unwind the racialized encoding that got us here.

As a nation, we have been led to believe that school is the great equalizer, that it provides equal avenues for all children to advance in our society. Unfortunately, data and centuries of lived experience have shown us school is anything but that great equalizer.¹⁴ While the

history of slavery and anti-literacy laws are foundational to racial inequity in education, there is more to learn about how we “got here.” To fully understand, we have to explore the conditions that allowed those historical anti-literacy laws to morph and compound in the century and a half since enslavement. We must spend some time decoding the underpinnings of our education system so we can see our way forward to creating and ensuring that education becomes the equalizer every student deserves. We have to see how the details of educational injustice began, so that we can get to the details of its opposite: truly just teaching and learning.

Unfortunately, navigating classroom settings that are so deeply steeped in unconscious bias requires Black students and many students of color to internalize the dominant cultural norms. In order to survive in school, they must tuck away who they are, their home language, their ways of communicating, the working norms of their communities, and rules of engagement. For students of color, this forced disconnection is compounded over and over again, in classroom after classroom, school after school, year after year. Coupled with other explicit messages that tell Black and brown children that certain subjects or opportunities are not designed for them, our educational system, more often than not, constructs a pipeline of exclusion and harm.

Some students of color, like myself, got the home lessons of “how to conduct themselves in public.” And by that, my mother *actually* meant “around white people.” Some friends and colleagues have shared with me that there was no home lesson about this type of cultural assimilation. Thus, they found themselves learning lessons in their day-to-day interactions with teachers and other adults in the building. But for every student, including Mitchell, family and community culture does not drop off when they enter their school buildings. More importantly, it precedes them with every action they initiate. Mitchell will continue to exhibit behaviors and functions

grounded in his culture. As educators, it is our job to build classrooms in which Mitchell's culture is celebrated and not penalized.

So . . . how do we get past the structures that continue to hold so many Black and brown students back? How do we move past the current education model that centers white cultures as normative and all other cultures as outside of that acceptable norm? How do we instead design something that allows Black and brown students to be their fully realized selves, with educators who've chosen to engage in work whose purpose is to build students up instead of erasing them, their languages, and their cultures?

As simple as it sounds, we have to make a collective decision to do so. We need to make a decision that what we *say* we believe gets enacted in real time, in real ways, with real students. Of course, this sounds simple enough, yet the historical data, which continues into the present despite decades of reforms that were ostensibly equity-minded and driven, tells a different story. At UnboundEd, we have received countless requests for information about "how to teach Black children," other children of color, and children of different languages and dialects; these inquiries seem like they will never end. In 1897, W.E.B. DuBois discussed the question posed around his existence as a Black man in America; he wrote that underlying his every interaction with non-Black people was the persistent question "How does it feel to be a problem?" Over 120 years later, the question of "how to teach Black children" continues this pathologizing. We continue to struggle to address the learning needs of students who seemingly "deviate"¹⁵ from the dominant norm, without interrogating the norms we now know to be encoded with the same DNA as slave codes and anti-literacy laws.

Such norms have created a racialized caste system in America. In this caste system, those who do not hold the "correct" racial identity, experience compounded negative economic and political outcomes throughout their lives. The reality is that in order to support a

fabricated racial caste system, the land holders and politicians who helped forge our nation's founding identity simultaneously enshrined racism and anti-Blackness, and forced illiteracy into law. The cognitive dissonance of that truth is one we must grapple with, both as a nation and as educators who have actively chosen to be in this marvelous field.

To upend the legacy of relegating Black people to the educational margins, we must also own our underlying beliefs and understand how those beliefs shape the advancement of what we ask our students to consume as materials worth learning. We know that historically Black students (as well as Indigenous, Latinx, and other students) have not had equitable access to an education that is on grade-level, engages their minds, affirms their identities, or is meaningful to them. The question now becomes, how do we look this history in the face, understand what it has meant for groups of people, and strategically once and for all create a new DNA line to leave a legacy of equity and academic achievement for all students?

Often educators ask me for something more concrete to use in their classrooms to work toward the goals they have for their students and themselves in racial equity work. Too often educators receive the message to “fix this” or “fix that” in making their classrooms equitable and safe places for children to learn, without ever being given the tools to do so. This is one of the reasons why UnboundEd will provide access to our Anti-Bias toolkit (you can find the link at the end of this book), and why I will be referencing its tools throughout. In this way, educators can access our foundational professional development lessons to bring our ideas into practice in classrooms.

As we move through this book, you will work through these historical legacies and explore ways to create a new DNA lineage to reshape your legacy toward a more just education. You will help unearth the cognitive dissonance that those who are attempting to

disrupt systems of power must grapple with. You will examine the details of your teaching and learning to better understand where you've been and where you are now, so that you can move forward. You will more clearly evidence your beliefs in the intellectual capacity of every child you have the opportunity to teach and unwind the long road of inequity to which you might have inadvertently been contributing.