

INTRODUCTION

School leaders are under immense pressure to enhance the educational opportunities and outcomes of Black, Latinx, and Native American students. Close the achievement gap. Reduce discipline disparities. Pay back the educational debt. Create equitable learning opportunities. Graduate students who are college and career ready. Foster a sense of belonging. Develop teacher cultural competency and empathy. Embrace diversity. Talk about race. Rewrite the curriculum to be more racially representative. Lead for social justice. Teach for equity. Dismantle racist structures. Understand systemic racism. I could go on. The problem is this: most White educators can't quite do, either individually or collectively, the things or achieve the outcomes that the current wave of racial equity reforms call for them to do because their racial knowledge and capacities to enact racial equity improvements are insufficient. They don't have all that it takes to improve their schools. Yet, the need remains urgent.

Stuck Improving is for educators who want to stop the violence of school-based racism; transform schools into racially equitable and affirming places for Black, Latinx, and racially marginalized students; and improve students' educational experiences and outcomes. The phrase *stuck improving* emerged over the course of a multiyear research partnership with a school I call Central Waters High School (CWHS) as I tried to reconcile administrators, teachers, staff, and students' struggles to make their predominantly White school community intellectually, socio-emotionally, and culturally affirm its increasing Black and

Brown student population. *Stuck improving* references the intersection of multiple phenomena. It is the experienced dilemma of making progress and not making progress in the pursuit of racial equity. It is the conscious discovery that racial equity is not a tidy concept. It is the conscientious pursuit of racial equity as an unending learning opportunity to improve oneself through challenging the violent conventions of white supremacy.

Throughout *Stuck Improving*, I help readers understand the complex process of building school capacity for racial equity improvement. I focus on what improving means in a white supremacist society where we're damned if we don't try and damned if we do. I surface invisibilized structural problems, behaviors, and thinking that are baked into US schools, such as meritocracy, exclusionary discipline, retributive punishment, and the pervasive disbelief that Black students possess valuable knowledge that can contribute to school improvement. In addition, I acknowledge the emergent racial consciousness that compels people to yearn for and pursue a racial equity vision that is ever expanding and therefore always just out of reach. I portray stories where people find themselves questing to achieve racial equity only to realize that racism by definition ensures that racial equity is elusive. I show people giving up. I give specific attention to how dilemmas, and in particular CWHHS's capacity to work within and through dilemmas, evidenced an ever-expanding capacity to enact increasingly progressive racial equity reforms. If educators are serious about creating racially equitable schools, they have to understand what it means for their schools to have the organizational capacity for racial equity change.

I want to convey to readers two things. First, most White educators' racial knowledge and their schools' capacities are insufficient and thus not able to enact racial equity change. Students are not empowered to participate and cocreate the design of their school's academic and social opportunities. Teachers refuse to break their scripts to become colearners with students. Administrators fear parental backlash. Teachers resist content that affirms Black and Brown people, refuse to partner with community members who are racially and ethnically dissimilar (if they even know them), and are fearful of delivering content to students on

topics that make them feel vulnerable. This does not have to be the case. Second, a critical part of racial equity work is developing the capacity to enact change through doing the complex and context-specific, devastating, cathartic, and uncertain work of pursuing racial equity. To do this, educators must understand the rich organizational racial resources that are present in their schools and learn how to cultivate and leverage these resources for the purposes of improvement.

A CAPACITY-FOCUSED PERSPECTIVE ON RACIAL EQUITY REFORM

School capacity refers to an interactive collection of organizational resources that support schoolwide reform, teacher change, and ultimately the improvement of student learning. In education and organizational studies, it is widely accepted that if an organization lacks the capacity to reform or improve in an identified area, even the best-laid efforts at improvement in that area are doomed to fail. The agreement that organizational capacity is important for school improvement has resulted in an increased focus on organizational leadership practices that indirectly impact student experiences and learning outcomes. Some of these practices include cultivating a school culture of data-driven instructional improvement, establishing effective teacher collaboration and learning routines, and cultivating organizational trust and collegiality.

Although leadership for data use, teacher learning, and collegial trust do not directly affect student experiences and learning outcomes (i.e., lagging indicators), the presence and strength of each are reliable leading indicators of what types of improvements one might plausibly expect to be accomplished in a given school. Data use, teacher learning, and collegial trust are organizational resources that correlate to teacher job satisfaction and performance. One is likely to find higher teacher job satisfaction and performance where the resources are well established and strategically leveraged. Notably, these leading indicators correlate with student experiences and learning outcomes. When they are combined with other organizational resources, such as a shared vision, well-crafted policies, distributed leadership, effective and reciprocal communication, well-defined goals, a culture of collaborative inquiry, and sufficient time

and structure to cultivate adult learning, one can reasonably expect to see a high performing school.

School leaders are attuned to the need to leverage resources (e.g., data) and build teacher capacities to improve schools (e.g., to use data for learning). However, school leaders give inadequate attention to cultivating specific organizational resources that are essential to building a capacity for racial equity improvement. *School capacity for racial equity improvement* is the interactive collection of organizational resources that support schoolwide racial equity reforms, teacher racial consciousness development, and improvement of learning experiences and outcomes for students of color. *Stuck Improving* focuses on this school capacity aspect of school-based racial equity work. CWHS leveraged and cultivated five resources as they attempted, with mixed success, to enact their school's racial equity improvement reforms, which include

- Black and Brown People's Influential Presence
- Curated White Racial Discomfort
- Courageously Confrontational Communication Culture
- Collective Awareness of Racial Emotions and Beliefs
- Race-Conscious Inquiry Cycles (Leadership)

Administrators, teachers, and educators more broadly need to understand these organizational racial resources because if they do not, they risk misunderstanding the complexity of trying to achieve racial equity change. In many districts throughout the United States, White people and predominantly White organizations are responsible for enacting equity reforms that they are insufficiently prepared to undertake. When given a task that seems nearly impossible, the easy option is to not try or, after trying, to quit. This tendency is pronounced among White people whose *professional charge* is to provide Black and Brown students with improved educational opportunities but who, beyond their professional life, have low stakes in ensuring Black and Brown children succeed in life. So if school communities don't get the outcomes they wanted, expected, or are told they must achieve, they give up. Before giving up, they feel stuck.

In the pursuit of racial equity, educators will face conventional problems of improvement and change management. They will also face the pervasive racism and white supremacy that shape all aspects of schooling in the US from school curricula to notions of appropriate behavior to beliefs about what constitutes success and failure. Crucially, the very White people who themselves are socialized by and benefit from racist institutions must actively dismantle the very system they are convinced benefits them. Schools like CWHS, its leaders and educators, cannot successfully implement racial equity reforms without building their schools' organizational capacity for racial equity improvement. White supremacy and racism insist on reasserting themselves into any antiracist actions or antiracist thinking that challenges its presence. So even when a school makes an improvement, a new, often more complex instance of racism will present itself. Similar to what we know about the relationship between organizational capacity and improvement generally, when schools fail to identify, cultivate, and leverage racial equity resources, even their best-laid efforts at equitable improvement are bound to fail. The presence and use of racial equity resources (or lack thereof) are reliable leading indicators of what types of improvements leaders, teachers, and staff could plausibly expect to accomplish in their school.

My simple point is this: racial equity improvement is vastly more complex than most school improvement research suggests. It requires more than developing an understanding of racism or preparing individuals to become antiracist. It requires creating organizational conditions which make racism visible and challenges white supremacy so that it becomes difficult for racist structures, policies, thinking, and behaviors to remain intact. *Stuck Improving* analyzes a racial equity reform process through presenting what CWHS tried, what trying looked and felt like, how their efforts evolved over time, and how what they learned in the process strengthened their resolve to continue their efforts. In the process of unpacking the collaborative racial learning and improvement processes that came to define our collective work, I pinpoint the organizational racial resources and constituent guiding principles that improve the educational experiences and outcomes of Black, Brown, linguistically, and opportunity marginalized student populations.

Research Setting

Thirty years ago, Central Waters was an almost exclusively White rural middle America town with about 7,500 residents. It was a tight-knit community where people knew one another, their children knew one another, and the ties between home and school blended seamlessly. In the past twenty years, the town grew into a sprawling suburb. It is a twenty-minute (forty-five with traffic) commute to Halsey, a mid-sized US city that is the state's political and educational center. Central Waters' appeal stems from its hometown feel, its strong economy, housing stock, and close proximity to Halsey, home to the world-class Halsey University, and the highly educated workforce the university attracts. In 2000, a powerhouse software development company located its global corporate headquarters in Central Waters, adding to its attractiveness by bringing with it some 15,000 jobs. The software company's relocation catalyzed a rapid period of economic growth, a housing boom, and influx of racially, socioeconomically, and ethnically diverse workers who were attracted to a multitude of skilled and unskilled jobs that followed the relocation. At the time, the demanded number of employees exceeded the number of Central Waters residents.

Today, Central Waters is regarded as a region that is composed of numerous towns that comprise what is now called Central Waters *Region*. The wide swaths of relatively flat developable land that surrounded the once-upon-a-time farming town offered affordable land for developers and are now dotted with residential developments, apartment complexes, and big-box retail, shopping, hotel, and entertainment districts that in-fill the miles of land that once distinguished the region's hodgepodge of small towns. Three- to four-lane highways, complete with medians, turning lanes, and traffic signals replaced the two- and four-way stop signs that previously dotted the Central Waters Region, creating a seamless interconnection between Halsey, Central Waters, and the multiple outlying areas that comprise its region. The simplest way to conceive of Central Waters is that it is now an extension of Halsey and a central town in its own right, mostly because its district serves the surrounding region. In the midst of the growth, Central Waters' Main Street and the original grocery store that served the town remain like relics of times

past. Along Main Street, a five-minute walk from the grocery store, sits Central Waters High School.

Central Waters High School is a resource-rich school that used to serve students who lived in the immediate vicinity of the school and whose parents also attended the school. As the Central Waters population increased and absorbed the region's school-aged children into the district, its schools' racial and ethnic diversification ballooned in comparison to years past. When I initiated the research that informed this book, Central Waters staff of nearly 200 adults served a racially diversifying student body of almost 1,600 students who come to school from vastly different geographic settings, ranging from Central Waters proper, regional towns, to Halsey. The school boasts a predominantly White but eclectic student body of White suburban students; White rural students; Black urban and suburban students; Latinx urban, suburban, and rural students; and Asian rural students, and so on. Immigrant and English language learners comprise a substantial portion of newcomers to the school. As for Black students, many of their families relocated to the region pulled by employment prospects and seeking a better quality of life that large cities throughout the region failed to offer Black families and children. The sprawling physical distance between the numerous students Central Waters served meant that students who went to school with one another literally lived separate home lives. The Central Waters administrative, teaching, and staff population remained virtually all White.

I first met Central Waters Regional School District's director of student services Suzanne at a state leadership conference in the summer of 2013. She and her colleague Ethan, an associate principal at the district's only high school, invited me to lead a professional development session about rethinking discipline approaches. Central Waters High School students brought with them a vast range of cultural experiences—Central Waters proper and region, students who lived on the southernmost edge of Halsey, and students who lived in unincorporated regions that are encapsulated within the region's sprawl. Yet despite an enviably diverse student body, a diverse regional economy, resource-rich district, and close proximity to a major university, Central Waters consistently failed to adequately serve its growing Black and Brown student population. Central

Waters High School's inability to leverage its wellspring of local resources makes the school more similar for Black and Brown students than different to its neighboring city Halsey, and numerous other suburban districts and schools throughout its state and indeed the United States.¹

In the 2011–12 academic year, the state's Department of Education mandated the district reduce disparities and improve all outcomes for Black and Brown students as part of a consent decree intended to correct racially disparate mistreatment of its Black and Latinx students. The consent decree scrutinized the districts' discriminatory practices and outcomes, which included racial discipline disparities, overplacement of Black students in special education, underrepresentation in college-track and advanced courses, and continued failure to graduate students who were college and career ready. I later learned that my workshop was one part of the school's effort, spawned by the consent decree, to address the numerous educational disparities that district schools produced. When we agreed to collaborate for the research project, several improvement efforts were newly underway to respond to the consent decree. These included partnering with an organization to racially integrate Advanced Placement courses and partnering with state technical assistance providers to implement Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports.

Research Partnership

In the fall of 2013, I formed what was initially a highly collaborative research partnership with CWHS to support their efforts to improve the school's culture and climate. The stated purpose of the larger study was to engage school administrators, teachers, and staff in a participatory design-based research project that would build the capacity of the school to improve educators' approaches to managing student discipline and ultimately improve schoolwide culture and climate. Over time, the project expanded to include a strong emphasis on developing the school community's capacity for racial learning. From the 2013–14 academic year to the 2015–16 academic year, I led a team of university-based research collaborators through a process of iterative development and implementation of racial-equity-focused professional learning opportunities. Over the three years, we used explicit modeling and gradual release of respon-

sibility approaches to build the capacity of CWHHS educators to take on the work of improvement planning and implementation.

By the 2016–17 academic year, I worked exclusively with the administrative team and formal school leaders to strengthen their capacity to lead their own equity change efforts. Throughout, I collected data to capture the school's conditions, outcomes, collaboration, and colearning. By the 2017–18 academic year, I completely withdrew from formal participation in the field. My research assistant and I continued nonparticipatory data collection, in the form of retrospective interviews, occasional school site visits, and progress monitoring of the school's efforts and outcomes, which I continued until December 2019.

Audience(s)

I wrote this book primarily for school-based educators of all races who work in school settings that employ White administrators, teachers, and staff members to serve disproportionately high Black and Brown student populations. My goal in writing this book is to push school-based educators to think differently and deeply about how to improve their *practices* and thinking in ways that will establish better organizational and learning conditions for Black and Brown children, who are and remain the population I am centrally committed to supporting. When I started this project, Central Waters High School employed only two Black people in a school of nearly two hundred employees. Therefore, much of what I cover in the book examines and analyzes White people's efforts to improve themselves, the school, and the educational opportunities and outcomes of Black, Latinx, and Native American students. In that regard, *Stuck Improving* is highly useful for White people to learn about what it means to be White while working in a school where racial equity is a priority. It is also highly relevant to Black and Brown educators who, like I am, are frustrated, angered, and jaded by White educators' continued failure of Black and Brown students.

For Black and Brown educators, the book offers insights into what our (Black and Brown people's) work with, loving critique of, and support for White educators might look like. The book positions us in the rightful place of possessing experiential racial knowledge that is invaluable and

sorely needed. If the increasing number of Black and Brown students are to stand a chance in schools that operate under the conventional norms of racism and white supremacy, White people have a lot of work to do. And for better or worse, Black and Brown people are bound up in and central to that work. If White educators can't quite do what is demanded of them (as study after study suggests), I believe educational researchers of all races can support racial equity change by producing relevant, accessible, and illuminating scholarship that compels White educators to improve their *practice* and thinking in ways that benefit Black and Brown students and that ultimately benefit themselves.

While I did not write this book with academics in the forefront of my mind, I do believe race scholars, educational researchers, anthropologists, and sociologists of education who are interested in antiracism, racial equity, and school improvement will find this book useful for both its methodological and conceptual contributions. I illuminate aspects that may appeal more directly to academic researchers, educational researchers, and race scholars through the use of chapter endnotes, methodological notes, and appendices.

BOOK ORGANIZATION AND CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

The book is organized into six chapters that each differently advance the book's three central arguments: schools must cultivate organizational racial resources to increase their capacity to enact equity change, racism reasserts and reveals itself anew, and making the effort be equitable and learning in the process is the primary way to increase the capacity for improvement. Each chapter explores a single organizational racial resource that reinforces the resources explored in other chapters. For example, the cultivation of Black and Brown Influential Presence contributes to the cultivation of Collective Awareness of Racial Emotions and Beliefs. Race-Conscious Inquiry bolsters a Courageously Confrontational School Culture and so forth.

Chapter 1, "Black and Brown People's Influential Presence," analyzes the emergence of *Voices Rising*, a social justice course that CWHS offered beginning in the 2018–19 academic year. I demonstrate how the

emergence of Voices Rising results from CWHS cultivation of Black and Brown influential presence.

Chapter 2, “Curated White Racial Discomfort,” demonstrates that discomfort, distress, guilt, confusion, and cognitive dissonance and related experiences are critically important, indeed foundational, for White educators to experience if we expect them to change their racialized ways of knowing.

Chapter 3, “Courageously Confrontational School Culture,” conveys the ubiquitous presence of racial violence at CWHS and explores how CWHS leaders and teachers developed a racial critique of their aversion to conflict, enabling them to shift toward a communication and problem-solving practice I call courageous confrontation.

Chapter 4, “Collective Awareness of Racial Emotions and Beliefs,” presents a series of self-talk exchanges and episodes that demonstrate how CWHS increased its collective awareness of racial emotions and beliefs. It demonstrates that making private thoughts and beliefs public in the form of self-talk is critical for learning and equity improvement.

Chapter 5, “Race-Conscious Inquiry Cycles (Leadership),” offers an overview of the iterative practice of initiating *race-conscious inquiry cycles* that partially fostered CWHS’s capacity to improve. I show the process we used to continually broaden the range of racial perspectives and representations that enabled the CWHS community to *see* problems in race-visible ways that allowed them to envision new possibilities for how to address them.

I conclude *Stuck Improving* with an exploration of how the increased capacities created new possibilities for CWHS.

This book reflects my attempt to convey how, in a white supremacist society, racial equity is perpetually within view and just out of arms’ reach. I wrote this book to be quiet, contemplative, and sobering. I intend for each chapter to evoke distinct emotions that relay the quiet day-to-day intensity that comes with thinking about and doing racial equity work in schools. I present no major triggering events or racial episodes that riled the school community. I do not report racial shouting matches or protests. Rather, I amplify the complexities and contradictions of trying equity work, bringing the organizationwide practice of inquiry-driven

racial equity leadership to the forefront of leadership and school improvement practice. Be clear. This book is about fighting against the myriad manifestations of racism and white supremacy in schools. So it is filled with instances of mundane racial violence—the sense of frustration, anger, loss, and hurt that white supremacy demands be ever present. I also show acts of courage and kindness, reconciliation, joy, and solidarity that white supremacy can never fully stamp out. I want readers to end this book knowing that working to make schools more racially equitable is very hard. And that it is worthwhile. To become stuck improving is to fight against the violence of racism. I do my best to make racism and white supremacy visible and to show how they might be continually challenged so educators can see how to do better. If educators use this book to make trouble for themselves, their schools, and local school communities, and in the process of doing so get stuck improving, I will consider my time and efforts as meaningful.