

Brown Plus 50 Counter-Storytelling: A Critical Race Theory Analysis of the “Majoritarian Achievement Gap” Story

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This essay provides a Critical Race Theory (CRT) analysis of current discussions of the “achievement gap” as the latest incarnation of the “white intellectual superiority/African American intellectual inferiority” notion that is a mainstay of “majoritarian storytelling” in U.S. culture. A critical race counter-story chronicles both the historical development and maintenance of the “achievement gap,” along with efforts of African Americans to secure access to education. The process by which the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision was subverted as a historical intervener in systemic access to equity in educational opportunity for African Americans is discussed. This essay concludes with principles to promote successful academic achievement of African American children.

At the 50th anniversary of the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) decision in which the Supreme Court outlawed unequal educational opportunity, the nation is engaged in a great discussion about differences in academic achievement between African American and white school children. The Justices of the Supreme Court of the United States of America concluded 50 years ago “that in the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (p. 495¹). Today, the children of that generation of African Americans, on whose behalf the NAACP sought admission to schools with white children, are accused of not performing as well as those white children with whom they are now schooled, often in those same schools deemed superior by the Court.

The NAACP hailed the *Brown* decision as a great victory for African Americans, believing it would pave the way to improved education for African American children. For Thurgood Marshall and others, *Brown* was to have been the great equalizer. *Brown* was meant to settle, once and for all, differences in access to educational opportunity and presumably, the resulting differences in academic achievement. In the *Brown* decision, the Justices noted that at the time of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision, which their ruling overturned, education of Negroes was almost nonexistent, and practically all of the race were illiterate. The *Brown* decision itself was based on cases coming to the court

from the States of Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia, and Delaware. In each of the cases, minors of the Negro race seek the aid of the courts in obtaining admission to the public schools of their community on a non-segregated basis. In each instance, they had been denied admission to schools attended by white children under laws requiring or permitting segregation according to race (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954, p. 488).

The plaintiffs from these states were suing school systems and states for the failure of the system to provide an education that would allow them to perform at the level of their white counterparts. Supreme Court acceptance of these cases was indication that the preponderance of evidence was on the side of the Plaintiffs. School systems did not provide the resources required for high-level academic achievement for African American children.

The current discussion has changed from a focus on unequal educational opportunity provided by systems, to deficit theorizing about unequal performance of African American children, with a focus on the failure of African American children to perform at the level of their white counterparts. How did the discussion change from a focus on unequal educational opportunity, as described by *Brown*, to a focus on unequal performance between African American and white children, described as an “achievement gap?” Educational researchers, program developers, and educational policymakers currently demonstrate keen interest in examining these differences from a deficit perspective, that is, from the perspective of the “failure” of African American children to perform the same as white students. This “achievement gap” discussion seems particularly damning to

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African Americans who fought hard to gain access to what they thought would be better schooling. For 50 years (minus the “all deliberate speed” years of bus burnings, boycotts, and school closings to avoid integration), African American children have attended schools with white children. The “achievement gap” discussion highlights the fact that, on those indices being reported, they have not caught up.

In this essay, I provide a Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Taylor, 1998) analysis of the deficit theorizing that characterizes current discussions of differences in academic achievement between African American and white children. The CRT methodology of “counter-storytelling” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002b) is juxtaposed against “majoritarian achievement gap storytelling” to examine that discussion, using the *Brown* Supreme Court decision as an historical intervener. I contend that while *Brown* was meant to level the playing field in access to educational opportunity leading to a leveling of academic achievement, it has been subverted to serve the process by which African American efforts to secure the resources required for high level academic achievement has been effectively sabotaged. I further contend that part of that subversion has been the implicit use of *Brown* to support the “achievement gap” discussion as the most recent incarnation of the “white intellectual superiority/African American intellectual inferiority” notion that is a mainstay of mainstream American culture.

A discussion of the tools of “majoritarian achievement gap storytelling” is followed by a counter-story that tracks a historical accounting of both the “intellectual inferiority mythology,” and the efforts of black people to obtain access to academic achievement opportunity. Principles to promote successful academic achievement of African American children conclude this article.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY AND MAJORITARIAN “ACHIEVEMENT GAP” STORYTELLING

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a useful theoretical framework for an examination of the current discussion of differences in academic achievement between African American and white children, as well as the context for my categorizing the “achievement gap” discussion as majoritarian storytelling. CRT is a race-based form of oppositional scholarship that was developed in the late 1980s because of the perceived failure of traditional civil rights litigation to produce racial reform that could change the subordinated status of people of color in U.S. society (Crenshaw, 1999; Delgado, 1995; Fernández, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002b; Taylor, 1998). A primary goal of CRT is the transformation of those “structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominated racial positions in and

out of the classroom” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002b, p. 25). CRT seeks to create the circumstances that eliminate the capacity of race to predict schooling and life outcomes, and is based on a commitment to social justice, racial emancipation and societal transformation (Fernández, 2002).

Epistemologically, CRT places race and racism at the center of analysis (Fernández, 2002). It privileges and makes central the experiential knowledge of subordinated people. By placing race and other socially constructed categories at the center of analysis (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002), a key theme of naming one’s own reality or the notion of voice emerges in the work of CRT theorists. Several tenets undergird this emphasis. First, according to CRT theorists, much of reality is socially constructed. Second, the reality most often constructed and made known is based on a silencing of subordinated peoples. Third, the process of naming or giving voice to the reality of subordinated peoples interrupts the power of the dominant group to name reality for others (Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995). This in turn, helps to transform the structures that produce and reproduce relationships of domination and subordination. Finally, CRT “challenges dominant ideology that supports the deficit theorizing prevalent in educational and social science discourses” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002a, p. 156).

CRT scholars challenge the traditional claims of “neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy as camouflages for the self interest of dominant groups in American society” (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002, p. 170). They insist on subjectivity and the reformulation of legal doctrine to reflect the perspectives of those who have experienced and have been victimized by racism firsthand (Delgado, 1988). CRT theorists posit that any “story” that claims to include or refer to the lives of subordinated peoples is incomplete until it takes into account and includes the voices of those people who have lived the experience of subordination (Delgado, 1988; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001).

Methodologically, CRT represents a paradigm shift in discourse about race and racism in education by challenging existing methods of conducting research on race and inequality. Specific methodologies of CRT include counter-storytelling, parables, narrative analysis, and a conceptualization of “majoritarian storytelling,” or the “master narrative,” all aimed at coming to a better understanding of the role of race and racism in American life (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). For the purposes of this analysis, I focus on the CRT conceptualization of “majoritarian storytelling” and “counter-storytelling.”

Majoritarian “Achievement Gap” Storytelling

Majoritarian stories are the description of events as told by members of dominant/majority groups, accompanied by the values and beliefs that justify the actions

taken by dominants to insure their dominant position. The commonly accepted "history" of the United States is one such story.

Majoritarian stories, according to Solórzano and Yosso (2002b), "generate from a legacy of racial privilege . . . indeed white privilege is often expressed through Majoritarian stories" (p. 28). Delgado and Stefancic describe majoritarian stories as the "bundle of presuppositions, perceived wisdoms, and shared cultural understandings persons in the dominant race bring to the discussion of race," and which "privileges people in positions of domination" (cited in Solórzano & Yosso, 2002b, p. 28).

According to Delgado Bernal and Villalpando (2002), the dominant group justifies its power with stock explanations that construct reality in ways that maintain the privilege of the dominant group. The mythology of the intellectual superiority of Whites and the inferiority of African Americans as maintained by Herrnstein and Murray (1994) and Jensen (1969) is one example. If African Americans are intellectually inferior and Whites are superior, it is but a small step to declare that superior intellectual capacities obviously deserve a greater share of power and wealth.

Specific tools used in the construction of majoritarian stories serve to obscure white privilege and cause it to appear as normal, natural, and ordinary. These tools include such devices as fostering invisibility, making assumptions of what is normative and universal, promoting the perspective that schools are neutral and apolitical, promoting the myth of meritocracy, endorsing the notion that there is equal educational opportunity for all, referencing dominants as "people" while "othering" subordinates (Delgado, 1995; Solórzano, 1977; Yosso, 2002). Not only do these tools obscure white privilege, they also obscure the ways people of color are subordinated by the rules, policies, and everyday procedures of organizational and institutional life. Typically, majoritarian stories are constructed so that responsibility for their own subordination falls on the subordinated people.

Invisibility. Majoritarian stories get much of their power from their invisibility. According to Delgado (1988), white people do not see their understanding of reality as a specific perspective but rather as the truth. Majoritarian stories are not viewed as stories at all. Rather, they are viewed as history, policies, procedures, rules, regulations, and statements of fact. White students achieve higher scores on certain standardized tests than African American students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). This "statement of fact" renders invisible certain realities of tests including the people whose experiences, history, and culture form the content of the test, the people who design and construct the test, the people on whom such tests are validated, and so on. It further obscures the historical reality that while white students benefited from the first Yale scholarship,

African American involuntary servitude on a Rhode Island plantation produced the revenue that funded that endowment (Dugdale, Fueser, & Celso de Castro Alves, 2001). While white students enjoyed the benefits of education at Yale and other institutions of higher education, David Daggett, founder of the Yale Law School and Chief Justice of the Connecticut Supreme Court along with other Yale faculty and staff led the movement to prevent a school for African Americans in Connecticut (Dugdale et al., 2001).

Scores reported by the National Digest of Education Statistics (for example, National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.) (SATs, mathematics proficiency levels, reading test scores) and other indicators of academic achievement fail to reveal the reality that despite the *Brown* decision and even while attending schools with white children, African American children continue to receive a very different education from that received by white children. They are more frequently disciplined, detained, suspended, and expelled (Gordon, Della Piana, & Keleher, 2000). They are less likely to be assigned to honors and advanced placement classes and are more likely to find themselves in special education and vocational tracks (Hilliard, 1992). Indeed, African American children are more likely than white children to attend schools that have no advanced placement and honors classes at all (Darling-Hammond, 1997). When the University of Michigan's admissions procedure awarded six points to students who participated in advanced placement and honors classes (*The Providence Journal*, 2001), the ensuing white privilege was rendered invisible. African American children are more likely to live in communities that have lower tax bases with which to finance schools (Taylor & Piché, 1991). The policies, procedures, rules, and regulations that result in these substantively different in-school experiences between African American and white children seem natural and normal, and seem to be seldom questioned by teachers, counselors, principals, and other school personnel.

Invisibility of white privilege is maintained by what is not discussed as well. When white students achieve higher scores on certain standardized tests than African American students (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1998), this is labeled an achievement gap. Certain ethnicity groups of Asian students achieve higher scores on standardized tests than white students (NCES, 1998), yet there is no discussion of an achievement gap between white students and Asian students. There is no inference that white people may be inferior to Asian people, either culturally, intellectually, in their communities, or in their family lifestyle or values. It is the privilege of white people to avoid discussion of differences in academic achievement between white students and certain groups of Asian students, and to keep unspoken and invisible any suppositions of the intellectual inferiority of white students.

Normative and Universal. Majoritarian stories present the experience of the dominant group as normative and as universal (Calmore, 1995). They assume that what is true and in the best interest of the dominant group is true for everyone and in everyone's best interest. Biology textbooks and Crayola packaging describe the skin of white people as "flesh color." Brown and other hues of skin are rendered something other than "flesh." Humans are typically depicted with blond hair and blue eyes. White children can experience Sally, Dick, and Jane of the Basal Readers as confirming and validating representations of themselves as those who are normal. African American children more likely find themselves cast as other, alien, and not normal, or more likely, rendered invisible and not cast in the curriculum at all. In addition, white children are presented as the standard of comparison for all children. As stated previously, the "achievement gap" refers to test score differences between African American and white children, even though certain Asian children achieve higher test scores in certain subject areas than white children (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

Schooling as Neutral and Apolitical and the Myth of the Meritocracy. Majoritarian storytelling presents schools as neutral institutions and schooling as apolitical. This obscures the role of schools in maintaining the existing social order (Hopkins, 1997). CRT theorists view "traditional school curriculum as having an unacknowledged political agenda, which is implicitly organized to privilege white people" (Yosso, 2002, p. 102).

The myth of meritocracy is a primary tool of majoritarian storytelling. This myth has several supporting components, including notions of (1) neutrality, (2) colorblindness, (3) objective standards of performance, (4) equal opportunity to meet the standards of performance, (5) fair methods of assessment and evaluation, (6) neutral and objective reporting of performance results, and (7) the allocation of merit to those whose performance meets the standards specified (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

A staple notion in majoritarian storytelling, neutrality is the first component in the myth of the meritocracy. In majoritarian achievement gap storytelling, schools purport to be completely race neutral. This negates the recognition or implication of race and racism in the disproportional placement of white students in honors and advanced placement classes and African American students in special education and vocational classes. The neutrality mythology negates recognition that disproportional disciplinary outcomes in schools with African American students suspended and expelled at double their rates in the school population could not happen accidentally or coincidentally. While schools purport to be race neutral, they continue to produce raced results in participation rates and achievement outcomes. School results on almost every indicator reported can be reliably predicted by race in these presumably race

neutral schools. Further, there is no acknowledgment of the ways that a traditional curriculum "limits access to knowledge and perpetuates inequality" (Yosso, 2002, p. 102).

A second component of the meritocracy myth is the notion of colorblindness. A corollary of neutrality, the notion of colorblindness allows white people to maintain their commitment to "never see color." Teachers proudly claim that they do not see color in the classroom, while the preponderance of African American students in those same classrooms are failing. "Those of you who are not sure that you belong here" my daughter's honors trigonometry teacher commented on the first day of school, "should check with me at the end of class to see where you belong" (Love, 2004). This teacher claims that she does not see color in the classroom, and that it was entirely coincidental that she was looking in the direction of the only two African American students in the class when speaking these words. I observed an honors Spanish class at a widely recognized private preparatory school in New England where the teacher posed a question and asked every student in the classroom to respond, except the two African American students in the class. When asked in earlier conversations about strategies to make the classroom multicultural, this teacher responded with a claim to "not see color" in the classroom (Love, 2004).

The stance of colorblindness is a way to insist that race does not matter and to dispute and deny the experience of African Americans, while preserving the privilege of white people to be surprised when race is mentioned. White people are surprised when African Americans name race as a factor in a situation or event and respond with indignation (Parker, 1997). They claim that the black person "pulled the race card" (Crenshaw, 1999), as though (1) the people in the situation are raceless, (2) race has no history on impacting relationships, (3) decision making on the basis of race does not occur, and (4) if race were not named, it would have no effect on the immediate circumstances and outcomes. Whites behave as though naming race is what makes it matter. Further, the inability (or refusal) of white people to consider race and racism and their impact on outcomes is a privilege available only to white people (Terry, 1975).

A third notion in the meritocracy myth is the presumption of objective standards of performance to which all students have equal opportunity to measure up. As an example, a popular World History textbook devotes 69 of 111 chapters to Europe and 40 chapters to Japan, China, Asia, Southeast Asia, Korea (the Asian spelling begins with the letter "C"), India, the Middle East, Africa, South America, Central America, Latin America (their terminology), the Americas, and Islam (Farah & Karls, 2001). The publishers of this text apparently see nothing odd about a history of the world that devotes more than three-fifths of its space to Europe, home to 10% of the world's

population and even less of the world's landmass, and less than two-fifths of its space to the rest of the world, the 90% of the world's population who occupy the majority of the world's land space. Nevertheless, majoritarian storytelling contends that these standards of performance are objective and fair, can be applied without regard to race/ethnicity, and do not favor white students.

Fourth, the meritocracy mythology is built on the presumption that every student has equal access to educational opportunity and therefore, an equal opportunity to meet the standards of performance. This presumption ignores the "academic apartheid or apartheid of knowledge" (Yosso, 2002, p. 97), as well as the lack of a "culturally relevant pedagogy" (Ladson-Billings 1992, p. 95) to which students are subjected in schools.

Black students are further penalized by the lack of rigorous curricula in many of the schools that they attend (Alderman, 1999; Kozol, 1991). In majoritarian achievement gap storytelling, the disadvantage is shifted from the system, which fails to provide a rigorous curriculum, to African American students, whose performance reflects their lack of engagement with rigorous curricula. The students are then labeled disadvantaged, rather than the system being labeled as faulty for its failure to provide a rigorous curriculum for the students.

Fifth, the myth of a meritocracy is built on the notion of fair and objective methods of assessing student performance. In the majoritarian achievement gap story, instruments, such as the Iowa Basic Achievement test, SAT, ACT, and state mandated instruments, such as the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), provide objective, race free, culturally neutral measures by which student performance is assessed. Majoritarian claims of objectivity mute discussion about potential test bias that privilege white students over African American students.

Neutral and objective analysis and reporting of the data is a sixth notion central to the myth of the meritocracy. The hundreds of tables presented by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NCES, 2002), formerly the National Center for Education Statistics' *Digest of Education Statistics*, demonstrate the differences in scores between African American students and their white counterparts on almost all indices examined. There are differences in reading proficiency levels (Table 114), mathematics proficiency levels (Table 124), science proficiency levels (Table 130), SAT scores (Table 133), high school graduation rates (Table 141), as well as high school dropout rates (Table 105). Such purportedly neutral, objective reporting of the data obscures the possibility of flaws inherent in the data itself, and does nothing to expose inherent flaws. The quantities of data gathered and presented by National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and other such agencies masks the fact that, according to many experts (for example, Ford, 2002) standardized tests can reveal only a portion of the learn-

ing and the potential for learning of a given student. Not only that, the sheer quantity of data demonstrating the superior performance of white children over the performance of children of color leads to reaffirm the "intellectual superiority inferiority" myth.

When critics point out that certain tests, such as MCAS, tend to discriminate on the basis of race, education officials work on changing the spin rather than on changing the system. For instance, in the state of Massachusetts, white students made up 80% of the class of 2003, but were 55% of those who had not passed the MCAS. African American students made up 8% of the class, but were 18% of students who did not pass the MCAS (Zehr, 2002). In response to growing criticism of the system,

Massachusetts education officials released data that they hope will counteract what they say is a false public perception that most students . . . who haven't yet passed the States [sic] high school exit exam are members of minority groups . . . the data presented in several tables, show that 55 percent of students . . . who haven't passed . . . are white (Zehr, 2002, p. 1).

This seems a direct effort to obscure the fact that black and Hispanic students are overrepresented among those who failed the test.

The meritocracy myth hinges on two primary beliefs. The first is the belief that the system is fair and people "get what they deserve based solely on their individual efforts" (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando, 2002, p. 171). The second belief is that the system is fair and the fact that certain people did not get more proves that they did not deserve more. In majoritarian achievement gap storytelling, students who either work harder or who are smarter, measure up to high standards. The converse is implied. Those who do not measure up to these high standards either did not work as hard or are not as smart. In either case, they are obviously not as deserving as those who are smarter or who work harder. Students who are smarter and who work harder merit more, and the system is designed to ensure that they receive what they merit: a high school diploma, admission to top-rated schools, and merit scholarships, not set-asides, or minority scholarships. In some states, such as Massachusetts, the meritorious are guaranteed admission and scholarships to the state's four-year colleges and universities. Some states plan to assist potential employers by distinguishing the meritorious students from their undeserving peers. Those who do not measure up have a mark placed on their transcript, like Hawthorne's "scarlet letter" (1850, 1969), so that unsuspecting potential employers will not unknowingly and inappropriately reward them with a job that they do not merit. Governor Robert Ehrlich, Jr., of Maryland ("Bucking a national trend") finds that his proposal to "shift funds away from

the state's merit based scholarship program to one that awards aid based on student financial need" may be a tough political sell to middle-class voters, whose children benefit from the merit based scholarships. Though "students in Maryland's need-based programs are nearly as likely to earn a degree in five years as students in the merit based program," the national trend continues to strongly emphasize "merit-based" financial aid (p. 9).

Equal Opportunity. Equal opportunity, popularized as EEO (equal educational opportunity and equal employment opportunity) since the *Brown* decision, is a major component of majoritarian storytelling. Equal opportunity means that everyone has an equal opportunity to reap the rewards of society. Horatia Alger can pull herself up by her bootstraps, and every boy can grow up to become President. In majoritarian storytelling, if African Americans worked harder and fixed the things that are wrong with them (their culture, their language, their community and neighborhoods, their families, their ethics, their values), they too could have their fair share of the American dream.

Majoritarian achievement gap storytelling describes a variety of ways that African American students and their families could be fixed to improve their academic achievement. Changing their culture is often cited in this form of storytelling. The academic achievement of African American children differs from that of white children because African Americans have a "culture of poverty" (Center on Hunger, 1995), or an "oppositional culture" (Ogbu, 1981), or according to John McWhorter, they "belong to a culture infected with anti-intellectual strain, which subtly but decisively teaches them from birth not to embrace school work too whole-heartedly" (cited in George, 2000, p. E1). In majoritarian achievement gap storytelling, African American students might achieve more academically if they changed their study habits, or could feel less threatened by stereotypes (Steele, 2003), or had chosen parents and guardians more involved in schools. Other majoritarian storytellers suggest that if African American children would do something about their oral language development and learn Standard American English (Beaulieu, 2002) they could perform as well as white students. In this equal opportunity strand of "achievement gap" majoritarian storytelling, African Americans are encouraged to change their work ethic, for as Ogbu (1990) contends, they "have not developed a widespread effort optimism or a strong cultural ethic of hard work and perseverance in the pursuit of education" (p. 53).

"People" and "Others". Majoritarian storytelling reserves the designation "people" to refer to Whites. In the process, African Americans, Native Americans, Latina/o Americans, and Asian Americans become the "other" (Kumashiro, 2000). The process of "othering" began for Africans on the European ships bringing them to the Americas. Journals of ship captains, doctors and mates

on those ships were already distinguishing between "the people" and "the Africans" (Harding, 1981). Modern usage in educational literature and in the media continues this practice and refers to Whites as people while an identity label is typically attached to all "others." This process of "othering" enables the reduction of peoples of color in everyday discourse so that they are easily rendered invisible and unimportant. A further consequence is the isolation and distancing of white people from people of color and their experiences by the majoritarian nature of this everyday language of "othering." Kumashiro (2000) describes how this process of "othering" in schools is reflected through the treatment of students in and by the schools, and through the assumptions and expectations held by educators toward certain students.

COUNTER-STORYTELLING

Counter-storytelling developed "as both a method of telling the story of those experiences that have not been told (that is, those on the margins of society), and as a tool for analyzing and challenging the stories of those in power and whose story is a natural part of the dominant discourse—the majoritarian story" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002a, p. 156). Unlike fictional storytelling, counter-storytelling is not about "developing imaginary characters that engage in fictional scenarios. Instead, the "composite" characters, as developed, for instance by Solórzano and Yosso (2002b) "are grounded in real life experiences and actual empirical data and are contextualized in social situations that are also grounded in real life, not fiction" (p. 36).

Counter-storytelling serves several important purposes. First, it changes the form and content of research and conversations about events, situations, and societal participation. Discussions about academic achievement, for instance, start from different premises and examine the same data with different goals in mind. It can do so because counter-storytelling situates and centers race as a filter for the examination of prevailing stories and constructions of reality (Fernández, 2002). By doing so, it can serve as a tool "for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002b, p. 32). Counter-storytelling can make the assumptions made by the dominant culture more visible and explicit (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002b) and therefore available for examination. In addition, counter-stories enable the discourse to move beyond the broad label of racism, which can cover a wide range of behaviors at the individual, system, institutional and societal levels to reveal specific experiences and circumstances that limit and subordinate. Counter-storytelling helps to undo ethnocentrism and the "dysconscious conviction of viewing the world in one way" (Delgado Bernal & Villalpando

2002, p. 172). By listening to the counter-stories of people of color, white people can gain access to a view of the world denied to them by white privilege and white domination. Telling their own story provides people of color psychic and emotional barriers against the damage caused by majoritarian stories that, for instance, blame people who are targeted by racism for their own subordination (Horsman, 1981).

Of particular significance, counter-storytelling provides a means for members of subordinated groups to address those circumstances where the prevailing conception of justice provides no language or means by which the marginalized person can express how he or she has been injured or wronged in terms that the system will understand (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

MILES LEACH SCHOOL COMMUNITY FORUM: BROWN AND THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

I add to the counter-storytelling tradition by bringing community members as well as elementary and secondary school students into a constructed discourse about schooling and academic achievement. A variety of data sources inform the development of the counter-story I present in this article. These include biographical and autobiographical analyses, focus groups, individual interviews, the personal and professional experience of the researcher, along with the existing literature (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002a). For some of the dialogue, I use the “autobiographical reflections of the author, juxtaposed with . . . critical race analysis of legal cases and within the context of a larger sociopolitical critique” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002b, p. 32) along with historical sources including the *Brown* (1954), *Plessy* (1896), and the *Dred Scott* (1856) Supreme Court decisions. I use published accounts of interviews or speeches of certain historical figures, such as Thurgood Marshall and Zora Neal Hurston. My primary data source for Miles Leach, the central figure in this counter-story, is the collection of notes and memories from my own family discussions, the public record of his work in the community (for example, the deed to three acres of land that he dedicated to the Miles Leach School), and discussions with community members about his legacy.

I use the device of a Community Forum to present this counter-story of African American educational struggles and academic achievement. This construct works for several reasons. Such forums were actually used by Miles and other community leaders to address problems faced by the people of the community. The Miles Leach School grew out of such a community forum.

The Miles Leach Schoolhouse (on Oakwood Bayou in Southeast Arkansas) is the setting for this community

forum. The time is the present. Many people are gathered, including people who got their first eight years of schooling in the two rooms of this school. Mr. Justice Thurgood Marshall, the former NAACP Legal Defense Fund attorney who successfully argued the *Brown* case before the United States Supreme Court and later became a member of the Supreme Court, may be the most easily recognized story character. Miles Leach (the author’s great-grandfather) is probably unknown outside the state of Arkansas and best known in the small rural community he founded and organized. Other story characters include the black novelist Richard Wright, the well-known anthropologist Zora Neal Hurston, current figures including U.S. Representative Maxine Waters, educational researcher Asa Hilliard, and a New York City mother who drives her children four hours each day to attend P.S. 184M, a Chinese magnet school in New York City (Zhao, 2002).

I stare out the window of this small plane bringing me on the last leg of my journey to this latest conference on closing the achievement gap. Three steps to the tarmac and a short walk in the hot southern sun leads me to and through the small airport. I join two other conference participants in a prearranged taxi taking us to the retreat center conference site.

As I emerge from the taxi, I notice a row of similar vehicles waiting to unload their passengers. The sight of the hillside running rampant with honeysuckle, wisteria, and wild fragrant roses reminds me of the flowers with which we decorated our two-room elementary school house each graduation day when I was a child. I turn toward the conference center and instead find the Miles Leach Schoolhouse. I hardly have time to wonder how I got here for there is a buzz in the air as people gather. The schoolyard is filled with people, some I know, but many are unfamiliar to me. I notice that many well-known educators, researchers, and activists that I expected to see at the “Achievement Gap” conference are walking toward the doors of the schoolhouse. Some of those gathered, like the woman from New York City whose children learned Chinese at P.S. 184M, I recognize only from a photo in the *New York Times*. In a great wash of color and surrounded by people seeking her attention stands Zora Neale Hurston, the anthropologist and novelist, completely at home under the huckleberry tree.

People jostle to get in the door of this school where the largest graduating class was 21. I walk quickly to the school, hoping to get a seat. As I enter the room, my heart and my eyes are filled with pleasure, for there in front of the room is my great-grandfather, the founder and builder of the school and for whom the school is named—Miles Leach. It seems that Miles has called a “community forum” to discuss the academic achievement of African American children.

The front seats are all taken and great-grandchild or not, I must be content with a seat at the back. I strain my neck, looking around to see who has answered the call to the forum. I remember the stories told by my mother and her sisters, of “called” forums where community issues were decided, community members taken to task for their transgressions, and where the needs of the school were discussed and decided. I remember the teachers who lived in our home during the school week when I was young, a tradition started by Miles Leach. A startling array of people is gathered for this forum, and I am anxious to hear what they will say.

Welcome to the Forum

“Welcome,” Miles is saying, as my attention is again drawn to this family and community legend who has come to life. “Welcome to this forum on the academic achievement of our children. At the 50th anniversary of the historic *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) Supreme Court decision, there is a great national discussion about the differences between the achievement of African American children and the achievement of white children. I have called for all members of the community to put their best thinking forward about this issue, for I believe that no greater issue faces us. Let us think together and see what we will do.

“Many could not make the trek to Oakwood Bayou today. I am pleased to see all who came. I begin by acknowledging the pioneering work of our brother and friend, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall who has joined us today for this Forum. I see others of you who have contributed mightily to the struggle to obtain educational opportunity for African American children and I give you my thanks.

“Welcome to the Miles Leach School. This school stands as a testament to the value that the black community has always placed on education and academic achievement. It is a testament to the reality that African Americans have historically put our best resources toward the education of our young people. Members of this community built this school; they felled the trees, sawed the timbers, cut the joists and put this school together, plank by plank, by two by four. Generations of black children learned their ABCs in these two rooms and they and their children and their children’s children have gone out to leave their mark upon the world. Lawyers and doctors, teachers and preachers, legislators and lawmen, farmers and bankers, they have figured out ways to participate in the world’s economy.”

What is the Gap?

“Today they say that there is a gap between the performance of African American children and white

children. Data from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NCES, 2002) show that African American students lag behind their white counterparts in reading proficiency levels, mathematics proficiency levels, science proficiency levels, SAT scores, high school graduation rates, college matriculation rates, as well as college degree recipient rates. They say not only is there a gap, but that the gap is persistent and grows (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Even our students with socioeconomic advantage who attend otherwise effective schools, do not do as well academically as their white peers” (Ortman & Thandiwe, 2002).

Guidelines for the Forum

“I thought that building schools would help my people catch up,” Miles continued. “I am sure,” he said, addressing Justice Marshall who sat in a chair to his left, “that you thought that the *Brown* decision would make the decisive difference in the academic achievement of black children. Equity in educational opportunity continues to elude our people. It is our tradition to consider the voices of everyone before deciding on a course of action. I invite everyone here to join this discussion as you see fit, following four guidelines. First, sit in one of these chairs when you want to join the conversation,” Miles said, pointing to a semi-circle of chairs at the front of the room. “Second, speak when I acknowledge you. Third, when you are finished with your say, or when someone stands behind your chair, please return to your bench so that others may enter the discussion. The fourth is a contextual guideline. The discussion today proceeds from the premise that the education of African American children has been impacted by circumstances and consideration specifically connected to race. Not coincidentally, but specifically by race or the prevailing notions about race. Our analysis today should be equally cognizant of race and prevailing notions about race, and their impact on the education of African American children.”

Reframe the Issue

“You have heard the problem,” he told the crowd. “As we look back these 50 years to the *Brown* decision, they say that there is an achievement gap. What say you of this accusation, and what are we going to do about it?” Several people stood and walked to the waiting chairs. Some I did not know, but I recognized Asa Hilliard immediately. Asa spoke as he walked, partly to the group, but primarily to Miles.

“The first thing we must do, Elder Miles,” he said, “is to reframe the issue. Yes, there are differences between the academic achievement of African American and white children when you consider the national averages, but this does not, in and of itself, constitute an achievement

gap. We can equally well demonstrate that we have a resource gap," Asa continued, "or an expectations gap, or a teacher efficacy gap, or a relationship gap, or a commitment gap. There are varied ways that this issue can be framed. Let us consider how we want to do this, since we know that the framing of the issue determines strategy development."

Models that Don't Work

A woman received a nod from Miles and spoke up. "I agree that this issue deserves careful framing. In addition, I want to examine the origins of the problem. To find a solution that is strategic and has any chance of making a difference, we must clarify the origins of the problem and examine its historical complexities as well as current manifestations. If we look only at current manifestations, our plans will fail."

"That is true," another agreed.

"We know that many solutions have been proposed, but any proposal that has any chance of working must address the historical roots of this problem. Look at the solutions that have been proposed. Some solutions focus on who sits next to whom in the classroom: desegregation, integration, and busing. Some focus on the overall organization of the school: model schools, magnet schools, theme schools, schools of choice, vouchers, Afrocentric schools, schools for black males (Hopkins, 1997). Some focus on more explicit curricular reforms: Ebonics curriculum, culturally relevant pedagogy, African immersion initiatives, Afrocentric curriculum (Asante, 1991), culturally responsive curriculum (Hilliard, 1992), multicultural curriculum (Grant & Sleeter, 1989), and early literacy interventions (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Some have tried to 'fix' the children, focusing on increasing self-esteem and oral language development for AAVE (African American Vernacular English) speakers to teach them SAE (Standard American English) skills (Beaulieu, 2002). Some tried to get the parents involved. This catalogue only begins to enumerate the plethora of programs and models that have been developed to improve the academic achievement of African American children. It seems clear that if we do not address this problem at its historical root, then any program, model, or plan is but window dressing on the set, not a bona fide effort to heal the problem."

Historical Roots of African American Academic Achievement

A few "here-heres" from the crowd encouraged the woman and, with another nod from Miles, she continued. "Let's go back," she said, "to the beginning, to the time when Africans were first brought to this continent. Only from there can we appropriately track these differences in academic achievement."

"We were there from the beginning," several voices rang out from the crowd.

"Then come on up," Miles told them, "and take a seat in the circle."

"When Africans were brought to the shores of these Americas," a woman began, "we were forced into a system of indentured servitude. The status of Africans soon changed, and on the basis of race alone, we were pressed into involuntary servitude for life. Africans were placed by statute in perpetual and inheritable bondage. Friends," she said, looking around the school, "I specifically use the language that appropriately describes the condition of my people. I do not use the term slave to describe my people because they were not slaves. They were Africans held in the bondage of involuntary servitude. To call them slaves is to misidentify African people with the condition of slavery in which they were kept. Europeans deliberately misnamed Africans and called them slaves to avoid acknowledging the humanity of these people they kept in a condition of slavery."

"We Africans," a man took up the story, "waged an every day battle against our condition. Plantation owners tried to force us to become slaves in every way they could, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. We had a choice. We could 'live free or die,' as the revolutionary patriots are reputed to have declaimed, or we could live where we were and aid the survival of our people. Plantation owners had munitions, the land, and all the resources. We had nowhere to run. Our efforts at rebellion were squashed for lack of resources, not for lack of will. That didn't work. A bit of land in Florida was given to some of us by the British when they left these shores after the revolutionary war. White plantation owners came to that place and killed everybody there (Harding, 1981). We were clear that we had only ourselves to rely on for the survival of our people. Many of us found our way north to freedom. Many of us chose to die. The rest of us faced the horror of bondage and adapted to the conditions in which we found ourselves. We were able to do this because our sense of self was derived from being, not from our life situation. We survived slavery because we were not identified with it and did not take our identity from it."

A big sigh from varied parts of the room reminded me to take a deep breath. A third speaker stood up, waited a few minutes before continuing the tale. "Africans demonstrated two overriding desires. One was for freedom and a close second was for literacy. We risked life and limb to secure both. Medgar Evers, you will recall, followed the same tradition, giving his life in pursuit of education. The colonists developed extraordinary measures to insure that Africans had no access to literacy. In the minds of the colonists, if Africans could be kept illiterate, they could be kept in a condition of involuntary servitude."

"Involuntary servitude was a practical economic matter. It clashed, however, with principles of enlightenment and rationalism. Involuntary servitude was a contradiction to ideals of democracy, freedom, and fraternity. It was a contradiction to the beliefs and values of liberty and equality so dearly cherished by the colonists. Not only that, involuntary servitude was incompatible with Christian principles of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. (These founders did not include women in their statement of principles.) This contradiction between their ideals of freedom, democracy, liberty, and fraternity and their practice of holding humans in perpetual bondage led the colonists to seek a justification that 'placed the onus for black slavery on the blacks themselves; they were slaves because their inability best fitted them to be slaves' (Horsman, 1981, p. 103).

"Thomas Jefferson joined his contemporaries in the creation of a justification that would leave Europeans less culpable in their own conscience for this grievous violation of their own values and beliefs. That justification was embodied in the fabrication of the twin myths of the 'intellectual inferiority' of Africans and the 'intellectual superiority' of white people. Based on nothing more than his suspicion alone, Jefferson posed, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 'as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind' (cited in Horsman, 1981, p. 101). Jefferson's suspicions embodied both the 'intellectual inferiority' mythology, as well as presaged the 'nature vs. nurture' debate of modern times. In recent years, the debate has been whether African Americans do not perform as well as Whites because they are biologically inferior, or whether they were made inferior by their environment, parenting practices, and culture.

"By decree and without any evidence, the ideology of the intellectual superiority of white people and the intellectual inferiority of African Americans became part of the attitudes and beliefs of U.S. culture. Josiah Nott decreed in 1844: 'History and observation both teach that . . . the Mongol, the Malay, the Indian, and the Negro, are now and have been in all ages and places inferior to the Caucasian' (cited in Horsman, 1981, p. 116). This is how the achievement gap was originally created. By declaration!

"While declaration might be sufficient to create this gap, more sophisticated tools would be required to sustain it. Phrenology, the once 'credible science that character could be determined from the shape of a person's skull' (Lang, 2002, p. 50) was employed in the maintenance of the gap. In its efforts to insure that there would be no schools for Africans in the state, the Connecticut General Assembly secured the expert testimony of a Hartford phrenologist to 'testify that Negroes could not be educated beyond a certain level and could never be fit

citizens' (Lang, 2002, p. 50). Eugenics was used to scientifically 'prove' the superiority of Europeans over all other humans (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994). This was soon followed by I.Q. testing (Jensen, 1969) which consistently and reliably demonstrated the superiority of Whites over African Americans. Achievement testing, whether by historical accident or by design, produces the same results as I.Q. testing, eugenics, phrenology, and laws prohibiting education among African Americans; the production of data demonstrating the superiority of Whites and the inferiority of African Americans. Achievement testing has the added benefit of fitting well with the myth of the meritocracy.

"The colonists, however, had a worry. What if, rather than being inferior, Africans proved to be equal or superior to Whites? Benjamin Banneker, without benefit of access to any education, developed a working clock and was key in the survey and design for Washington, DC, the nation's capitol and was one of the first Americans to accurately predict a solar eclipse (Lincoln, 1967). Onesimus encouraged inoculations for small pox during the 1700s because he recalled the success of the practice of inoculation in Africa. John Hammond wrote poetry that was widely read throughout the colonies and Phyllis Wheatley remains one of New England's best known poets (Lincoln, 1967). If Africans continued to invent, develop, write, and produce without benefit of any education or training at all, the myth would fall apart and along with it, the justification for the dominant position of Whites and the enforced bondage of Africans. In order to protect the myth of the intellectual inferiority of Africans, the colonists developed extraordinary and sometimes draconian measures to eliminate any possibility of literacy among Africans. Literacy among Africans was made illegal by colonial statutes and efforts to gain literacy were subject to punishment up to and including dismemberment and death (Lincoln, 1967). As Henry Berry of the Virginia House of Congress declared, 'We have closed every avenue through which light may enter their minds. If we could only extinguish the capacity to see the light, our work would be complete' (cited by Horsman, 1981, p. 101). Maintaining the achievement gap was high on the priority list of the colonists.

"The 'intellectual inferiority of Africans' mythology was only one part of the rationale created to justify the bondage of Africans. The colonists developed other ideologies to distance themselves from Africans so as to preserve both their belief in fraternity, equality, and brotherhood while maintaining the practice of involuntary servitude. The notion that Africans are not fully human was one such notion propagated during the early colonial era (Jordan, 1968). The 'three-fifths' provision of the constitution of the United States stipulated that African Americans would be counted as three-fifths of a person for the purposes of electoral representation, while white people would be counted as one whole person

(U.S. Constitution, 1778). When the Founding Fathers adopted the 'three-fifths' provision, they were adopting a notion that had already been popularized by theologians and scientists of the time (Horsman, 1981). Similarly, colonists employed a process of 'othering' to further distinguish between and distance themselves from Africans. The designation 'people' became reserved for Whites, and Africans became the 'Other.' This capacity for distinguishing and distancing themselves from Africans reached a notorious high in 1856 with the ruling of Chief Justice Taney in the Dred Scott Decision. Taney declared, "The question before us is, whether the class of persons described . . . compose a portion of this *people* . . . [W]e think they are not, and that they are not included, and were not intended to be included." Taney further ruled, "[I]t is true, every person and every class and description of persons, who were at the time of the adoption of the Constitution recognized as citizens in the several States, became also citizens of this new political body; but none other; it was formed by them, and for them and their posterity, but for no one else . . . In the opinion of the court . . . the language used in the Declaration of Independence, show[s], that neither the class of persons who had been imported as slaves, nor their descendants, whether they had become free or not, were . . . acknowledged as a part of the people' (*Scott v. Sanford*, 1856, p. 407) In the words of the court, Whites were people; African Americans were not and could never become 'people.'"

"So it is," the first woman in this trio spoke again, "on the basis of race alone, Europeans forced Africans into bondage, then used race to create a mythology to justify and explain that bondage. The heart of that justification has been repeated throughout the history of the United States in one form or another. It is my opinion," this woman declared, "that the current discussion of the achievement gap is merely a disguised version of that same mythology. If you couple the achievement gap discussion with the myth of the meritocracy, you have a full justification for the continued domination of white people and the subordination of African Americans. Ultimately, the gap is not in the data but in the judgments we make about the data, the inferences we draw from the data, and the conclusions we reach in response to our judgments and inferences."

Another woman signaled and was acknowledged by Miles. "African Americans had no real access to education prior to the Civil War," she began.

"I should know," Miles interrupted. "My father taught me to read and write. He paid for his literacy with one hand and considered the price cheap. That dismemberment did nothing to slow his thirst for learning, or his efforts to pass his learning along to me."

"You were on a plantation in the South," the woman continued. "Things weren't much better in the North. My uncle was part of a group that tried to open a school for

young black men in New Haven near Yale University in 1831. The townspeople rejected the plan to open the school by a vote of 700 to 4 (Lang, 2002, p. 51). A newspaper editorial against the New Haven school was typical of the sentiments of the time. 'What benefit can it be to a waiter or coachman to read Horace, or be a profound mathematician?' (Lang, 2002, p. 48). The editorial argued that education would only increase Negro discontent. Philadelphians congratulated New Haven on its 'escape from the monstrous evil' of a Negro education. Noyes Academy in Canaan, New Hampshire opened in March of 1835 and by summer, the town had voted to close the school. On August 10, a demolition crew hitched a long train of oxen to the Noyes Academy and dragged it off its foundation. According to one account (Lang, 2002), the students were still inside. In Connecticut, a gubernatorial candidate threatened to prosecute African Americans who attended school under a colonial pauper law and punish them with fines and flogging. The governor declared, 'We are not merely opposed to the establishment of that school in Canterbury, we mean that there shall not be such a school set up anywhere in our state' (Lang, 2002, p. 50). Among the people vehement in their public opposition to education for African Americans was Andrew Judson, the federal judge who presided over the Amistad trial (Lang, 2002, p. 51). The idea of education for African Americans 'was scandalously at odds with the nearly universal belief of Whites in their own superiority'" (Lang, 2002, p. 47).

Miles was listening intently to this exchange and a range of emotions seemed to chase each other across his face. "Just as my father predicted," he said, "this nation came to blows over the institution of slavery. The ensuing Civil War provided cover for my departure from that plantation. When I left, I carried the plantation moneybox with me. I was bound and determined to build a school for black children. No more stealing away in the middle of a moonlit night, trying to find enough light to study by. My people were hungry for freedom and they were hungry for learning and they have been reaching for both ever since."

Richard Wright was standing at this point, making his way to the front of the room. He took a vacant chair and barely waited for Miles to acknowledge him before beginning his story. "I speak," he said, "with the backup of 'Twelve Million Black Voices' when I tell you: We wanted to go to school and we wanted to learn (Wright, 1941). Between Mister Jim Crow, sharecropping, and the demands of Queen Cotton, we never had a chance. Mississippi almost got the best of us before we could get away from her. We heard about that school you built for black children," he said, nodding toward Grandpa Miles. "Way over in Mississippi, we heard about your school and we yearned to be there. The nearest school to us was 28 miles. When we could go to school, we started our walk at three in the morning. The school bus carrying two white kids always

passed us in the dust during the last mile of our journey. I'd say, 'When could we go to school?' because most of the time we couldn't. Though weather-worn and pine-built, our schoolhouse was a haven to people thirsty for knowledge. In Mississippi, black people got caught in the system of sharecropping and a clash between Queen Cotton, her demands for production, and our desire to go to school. Our school was closed seven months of the year.

"Even when the school was open for the full term, our children would not have time to go. We cannot let them leave the fields when cotton is waiting to be picked. When time comes to break the sod, the sod must be broken. When time comes to plant the seeds, the seeds must be planted; and when the time comes to loosen the red clay from about the bright green stalks of the cotton plants, that too must be done, even if the school is open. Deep indebtedness kept us on those plantations and the laws of Queen Cotton kept us in the fields. The seasons of the year form the mold that shapes our lives, and who can change the seasons" (Anderson, 1988; Wright, 1941).

"It wasn't just Mississippi," added another voice. I did not know this person. I found myself wanting Grandpa Miles to ask each speaker to state his or her name. I wondered whether there was a registration list so that we might know all of these people who were gathered here today. "I came from the Carolinas," this man was saying, "and some of my people were from Virginia. We caught holy hell trying to get an education for our children. There were no schools for the great majority of our children and those that existed were organized to suit the needs and interests of white planters. Southern white people considered education a distraction for their laborers" (Anderson, 1988, p. 150).

"My folks were in Boston," another voice chimed in, "and things were not much better. White people were busy implementing the *Plessy* decision and pushing out the few black children who were in school. After *Plessy*, they set up a completely separate school system for black children, and our schools have never been equal to the schools for white children."

"At least you could go to school," another man said with an obvious effort to hold back a burst of emotion. "My daddy left town under cover of darkness because he sent his children to school instead of to the field. That white man came to our house and said we ought to be in the field 'cause N—s didn't need to be in school to pick cotton.' Well, my daddy told that man what was on his mind. He left town right after that. When the white folks came back with their sheets that night, my daddy was already gone. We lost our farm, our home and our way of life because we wanted an education. My daddy never bought another house from that day to this. He said white folks would beat you out of it."

Considering this lament, Miles spoke to the group. "I tell you," he said, "the years following the *Plessy* decision were hard years for African Americans seeking

equity in participation in the life of this country. It was especially hard for those seeking educational opportunity. The hopes that sprang up with freedom and flamed with the few schools established by church groups and the Freedmen's Bureau were quickly dimmed."

"Dimmed, but not extinguished," said a man coming from the back. "I am M. H. Griffin and I worked as a Rosenwald agent for the state of Alabama." (Anderson, 1988, p. 161) This will get interesting, I thought. Grandpa Miles had no use for Rosenwald. Rosenwald was the philanthropist who had led the campaign to restrict the education of black people to the kind of jobs he thought appropriate for their station in life. Classes in mop, broom, and mattress making, cooking classes, industrial arts, and agricultural education were thought to be suitable. Grandpa Miles kept Rosenwald out of Miles Leach School and provided the funds himself to pay for teachers and supplies. Miles acknowledged Griffin who declined the seat and spoke as he stood.

"Contrary to popular belief," he began, "Rosenwald did not pay for the schools for African Americans in Alabama. African Americans raised the money to pay for the schools themselves. They raised the money at tremendous sacrifice. I can tell you about an old lady over in Autauga County," Griffin continued. "She told me, 'I have only one copper cent, and it goes for the children of Autaugaville.' The sacrifice that these people made trying to get education for their children was astonishing. At Boligree in Greene County, the community leader did not have the resources you had," he said, looking at Miles. "But he had the same commitment and dedication to education. He started the fundraising rally for the school by saying, 'We never had a school in this vicinity. Most of our children have grown to manhood and womanhood without the semblance of an opportunity to get an insight into life.'" Griffin was old and seemed to bend as he spoke. It was as if telling the story of what he had witnessed in those back counties of Alabama brought back the burden and the grief. "The first person to contribute at that rally," Griffin continued, "was an old man who had seen slavery days. He had all his life's earnings in an old greasy sack. He slowly drew that sack from his pocket, and emptied it on the table. This old man said, 'I want to see the children of my grandchildren have a chance, and so I am giving my all.'" Tears glistened in Griffin's eyes as he spoke. I noticed that other eyes in the room had that same glistening.

Griffin was not finished with his story. "The sacrifice that woman in Autauga made was an inspiration to me, for she obviously gave all she had in the world. The folks in that community raised more than \$200 that night. Two hundred dollars was more than any single one of them earned in any given year. Even so, you understand that \$200 was not enough money to build a school. I didn't know what we would do. Those people organized fundraising clubs, and at the next rally, they

brought more. I tell you," Griffin continued, "I have never seen greater human sacrifice made for the cause of education. Children without shoes on their feet gave from fifty cents to one dollar. Old men and women, whose costumes represented several years of wear, gave from one to five dollars. The more progressive groups gave from \$10 to \$25. When the rally closed, we had the handsome sum of \$1300. Now we were at our [wit's] end," said Griffin, "for the colored people had done all in the range of human limitation for the school, and yet we lacked more than \$1000 with which to qualify the project. Our next big question was, 'Where shall we get the rest of the money?' Those Colored men offered to pawn their cows and calves and promise their future herds. They raised \$1000 in this way, and we started out for a contractor. That school was completed in the fall of 1921" (Anderson, 1988, p. 162).

"Your story tells the measures of our intention to get an education for our children," Miles commented. I noticed that some of the people around me had that combined look of remembered outrage and satisfied delight. Griffin slowly made his way to his seat at the back. Miles paused a minute to acknowledge the hush in the room before nodding to the next person to speak.

"Since we are tracking the so-called achievement gap, I want to add my story to help understand how this gap has been maintained." This speaker stood tall and proud, and spoke with the diction of someone with education and money. "The struggle waged by African Americans for elementary and secondary education was the first part of the story. Getting higher education was a challenge as well. Even though church and philanthropic groups built a few black colleges, and a few others were built through the Morrill Land Grant Act (1862), very few of those schools had graduate and professional schools."

Three other men came up to join him as he spoke. "I had to sit in a roped-off section of the classroom to go to graduate school," one said.

"They built a special classroom for me on the campus of the white school and I had to wait for teachers to come to that classroom to teach me," said another.

In a half-joking manner, the third said, "I had it luckier than either of you. They built a whole school for me just to keep me out of the classroom with Whites."

At this point, Thurgood Marshall spoke and all eyes immediately turned to him. "The experiences you describe," he said, "were some of the cases we brought before the Supreme Court in 1953. They might build a whole school for African Americans, but no way will they make it equal. We knew that and we got the Supreme Court of the United States to say that. That is why the *Brown* decision of '54 was so pivotal. The highest Court in the land joined with us in acknowledging that African Americans had a right to the same level of educational opportunity as white people. We knew that African American children could not get the same education as

white children while forced into separate schools. We knew then as we know now, separate can never be equal."

Miles seemed alert to the charge of energy in the room and he spoke without missing a beat. "Mr. Marshall, we owe you a great debt of gratitude." Miles gave the air of speaking not only for this crowd, but also for African Americans everywhere. "Too long were we relegated to roped-off sections of classrooms and schools segregated by law. Your faith in and commitment to African American people led you to push the court to acknowledge our constitutional right to the best education that the system had to offer."

"The best education that the system had to offer," Mr. Marshall said as he took up the discussion, "was in classrooms where white children sat. The only way I could be sure my kid was getting an equal education," he continued, "was for him to be in the same classroom with the Whites" (Wiley, 1994, p. 30).

"Color! Color struck!" Those words rang out from the back of the room and Zora Neal Hurston, quiet up until that moment, entered the discussion. Tall, dark, and daringly beautiful, she stood at the back of the room, eyes blazing, and made no move to take a chair in the circle.

"That's where you made your first mistake," she said. "The whole matter revolves around the self-respect of my people. How much satisfaction can I get from a court order for somebody to associate with me who does not wish me near them? I regard the ruling of the United States Supreme Court as insulting, rather than honoring my race" (Staples, 2003, p. 2). Zora glanced around the room with a look that was almost defiant. I remembered that she was known for saying exactly what she thought and didn't mind that people were upset by her frank pronouncements. Many folk had been upset with her declaration that she was offended by the *Brown* decision. "I reject any notion that black children want or need to be in the classroom with white children in order to learn," she continued. "Black children go to school wherever they can and they learn whenever they are provided an opportunity. Black children don't care what color children are sitting next to them; they care whether there is a teacher interested in teaching them."

"That was the point of *Brown*," Ed Wiley, a writer from *Emergence Magazine* spoke up. "Black children deserve qualified teachers, books, laboratory materials and supplies, and yes, even rooms with desks, chairs, and a roof. Through the *Brown* decision, the Supreme Court effectively removed the underpinnings of the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision upholding the doctrine of 'separate but equal.' That doctrine, you all know, was used to rationalize racial segregation and America's version of apartheid. In that system, white people had the best of the books, buildings, materials, and supplies, while African American children got them when they were of no further use to white children. We even got the milk that was too old and sour for white children to drink. Everybody

here is familiar with that rigid system of racial separation and we all know the harm it caused. We know black children did not have the resources they needed and we wanted resources for our children."

"Oh yes, we know the harm caused by Mister Jim Crow," another said. "We also know the harm caused by making black children believe that they learn best when sitting next to white children."

"*Brown*, and its companion cases," Wiley interrupted, "was never about the color of the children African American students sat beside. It was always about equal access to educational opportunity. It was about opening the doors of the American Dream to African American people. It was about removing all doubts about the purported racial inferiority of black children."

The Great Equalizer

"These were indeed our hopes for *Brown*," Mr. Marshall said quietly. "*Brown* was to be the great equalizer. We know that black children can learn anywhere under almost any circumstance. We didn't want them to have to continue to do it that way. We wanted black children to have access to the same resources that white children have access to. Chief Justice Warren himself noted that black people accomplish to the highest levels when given a chance. Warren stated in the ruling that at the time of the passage of the 14th Amendment, 'any education of Negroes was forbidden by law in some states' (p. 490). Warren went on to note, 'Today, many Negroes have achieved outstanding success in the arts and sciences, as well as in business and the professional world' (p. 490). Neither the court nor I entertained any notion that black children were inferior to white children," Mr. Marshall finished emphatically.

"And yet," another speaker inserted, "by focusing on the notion that the 'policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group,' (p. 494) the court inadvertently left its ruling open to be used in support of the ideology of white supremacy."

Brown's If . . . , Then . . . Proposition

"It is a great historical irony that *Brown* has been subverted to support the ideology of white supremacy," said a speaker sitting near the old iron stove. The conversation was moving all over the room at this point, and some speakers got into the conversation before they could get to the front of the room and take a chair. "Implementing *Brown* with a focus on busing has promoted the idea that *Brown* was about integration and getting black children into classrooms with white children. From that has come this notion that black children cannot learn on their own, but only in the presence of white children, that same

speaker continued. The court ruled, and I quote:

Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon colored children...the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group...Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to retard the educational and mental development of negro children and to deprive them... We conclude that in the field of public education, the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal (*Brown*, 1954, p. 495).

The court started with a focus on 'segregation with the sanction of law,' but made too long a leap into the terrain of 'inherent inequality.' If the court had kept its focus on prohibiting segregation sanctioned by law, this decision might have been less susceptible to misuse by the historical forces of white supremacy. Unfortunately, the 'inherent inequality' coupled with 'denoting the inferiority of the negro group' ruling has left us with a case of 'if . . . , then . . . ' logic, the meaning of which is not easy to ignore, even for elementary school children on their early morning bus ride. The message of the ruling can be elaborated as follows:

If separate educational facilities are inherently unequal, and
 If all black schools are inherently unequal to all white schools,
 and
 If all the resources in the two schools are exactly equal, and
 If the only difference between these unequal schools is that
 black schools are attended by black children while white
 schools are attended by white children; in other words,
 the race of the children in the schools makes the schools
 unequal, then
 The black children in the black schools make the black schools
 unequal.
 Therefore, it is the black children themselves that lead to
 these schools being characterized as 'inherently unequal'
 schools.
 Unequal schools are considered inferior schools.
 Therefore, black children make black schools inferior.
 Therefore, black children are inferior.

There was a hush in the room as people considered the implications of the equation this speaker had outlined. I watched Mr. Marshall to see what expression he would present, but his face betrayed no obvious sign of emotion as he reflected on the words of this last speaker.

Miles broke the silence with a tone that I had learned was characteristic of Miles, the community leader. "We cannot take responsibility for what people will do with the tools we create to improve our situation in this society. We work with the tools available to us, and if they become subverted, then we have to face that and do what we can."

Mr. Marshall broke through his inner reflections and, looking troubled but determined added, "It was clearly never in my mind and certainly not a part of the NAACP strategy to remotely suggest that black children were in any way less capable than white children. Our goal was to get the courts to advocate for black children. We wanted the Court to acknowledge that state enforced segregation violated the constitutional rights of black people. We wanted the Highest Court in the land to mandate that resources be provided for the education of black children. Surely, you know, there was no way that white people would voluntarily spend the dollars on the education of black children that they spend on white children. Look at schools today. The discrepancy in spending between school systems populated by black children and those populated primarily by white children is vast (Kozol, 1991). Our goal was to get the United States Supreme Court to say that black children had a right to the same education that white children receive. The only way we could figure out to make this happen was to get black children in the same classrooms that white children were in."

Interest Convergence

At that moment, Derrick Bell walked in the doors of the schoolhouse. He took a quick look around the schoolhouse before making his way to the front of the room. He bowed in a gesture of respect to both Miles and Supreme Court Justice Marshall before addressing the group. "*Brown* was meant to be the great equalizer and my thanks to you, Mr. Marshall, for your efforts on behalf of African American people. You would have to possess a very broad view to understand the convergence of interests that made it necessary for the United States government to agree to desegregation at that time (Bell, 1980). You could not have predicted, Mr. Marshall, that the *Brown* ruling would be brought to serve the interest of the dominant group, or that it would be used to prop up the ideology of white supremacy."

"What do you mean?" Justice Marshall asked.

"I mean," continued Bell, "precisely that the Supreme Court ruled to eliminate the 'Separate but Equal' doctrine because it could do nothing else. Think about it. The U.S. was engaged in a bitter cold war with the Soviet Union. People in Africa, Latin America, and Asia were fighting for independence and throwing off the colonial yoke. The Soviet Union was right there with those former colonies seeking to extend its influence. It was easy for the Soviet Union to say to the people of these newly emerging nations of Africa, Latin America, and Asia, 'Observe the place that the U.S. legally reserves for Black and Brown peoples.' The Soviet Union was happy to ask the black and brown peoples of these newly emerging nations whether this democracy characterized by U.S.

apartheid in the form of legal segregation, suited their vision for their future. The U.S. was losing the Cold War and needed to change things at home in order to turn things around in the international arena. What was the Supreme Court going to do?" Bell asked rhetorically. "Tell the world, 'Yes, we believe in segregation of people on the basis of race. We even mandate it by law. Now let me help you with your independence?' That strategy could not serve the national interests of the U.S. Only a decision for desegregation could give the U.S. a chance to win the Cold War. The *Brown* decision was a weapon in the war to win allies among the black and brown peoples of the world. Academic access by black children in the United States was still to be won, district by district, classroom by classroom, and child by child.

"Think about it, the *Brown* decision included no immediate provisions for enforcement of the ruling. The very people who created, supported, and benefited from segregation were now called on to enforce the elimination of segregation, with no penalties or consequences for failure to enforce the ruling. This was clearly not about ensuring academic achievement for black children."

"What this conversation tells us," Miles said, his voice ringing clearly over the assembled crowd, "is that we have more work to do. The Supreme Court of the United States ruled for *Brown* in 1954 and then ordered the desegregation of schools with 'all deliberate speed.'" His voice softened as he looked at Mr. Marshall. "Obviously one decision is not going to undo the damage of 335 years of enforced segregation and deliberate racism. I believe that we can all agree, however, that the *Brown* decision was a significant historical intervener. *Brown* put something in motion that cannot be reversed. African Americans will never return to the custodial closets or the cotton fields. *Brown* legitimized and legalized the notion of equity in access throughout the society, including equity in educational opportunity. *Brown* gave us another leg to stand on. *Brown* set the stage and indeed, became the catalyst for the Civil Rights Movement, which has forever changed the landscape of the American polity. There is no question that African Americans have a different level of access to participation in U.S. society because of *Brown*. That we do not have equity in access to educational opportunity also is clear.

"The children of Topeka are back in court (Turner, 1994). They have the same grievance today that they had 50 years ago: The system is not providing the same education for them that it provides for white children. We must decide what route we shall take from here. What are we to do next?"

Strategic Planning

"I will tell you what to do next," Asa Hilliard said as he stood to speak. "First, we will start by recognizing

that we have gotten much from *Brown*, but we shouldn't expect much more. Like all good traditions, *Brown* is to be built on, not stood on. Accomplishing the goals of *Brown* led us in the direction of integration. We can reassess at this juncture and determine what course suits the achievement aspirations of black children best."

"Thank you, Dr. Hilliard," Miles said. "This seems both wise and prudent. It may be the case that a system that has put so much energy and resource into proving that black people are inferior should not be expected to suddenly behave in ways that result in our performing on par. Perhaps we have to establish our own educational plan. What do we know that can be taken into account in determining how to support the academic achievement of African American children? What principles and guidelines can we pull from what we know?"

"We know we don't need new models, programs, and interventions," Asa replied. "We have enough data to tell us how to support high academic achievement for African American children."

"That's right," stated Ms. Gamble, the woman from New York. "We know that it doesn't matter who our children go to school with and what cultural background their classmates bring to school with them." I remembered the *New York Times* article describing Ms. Gamble's two children who speak Mandarin, a Chinese language that is 'famously difficult to master.' "I send my children to school with Chinese children, Latino children, Korean children, Black children and white children, all at Shuang Wen School," stated Ms. Gamble. "Shuang Wen has the resources, the curriculum, and the will to teach my children and get them excited about learning. I am very satisfied with the education my children are getting at Shuang Wen School. To make it happen, I leave home at 6:45 every morning, spend hours in traffic, and pick my children up from school every day. Why do I go to such lengths?" Ms. Gamble literally waved the rhetorical question at the group. "The Shuang Wen School ranked 3rd among 1000 New York City elementary schools in Math in 2002 (Zhao, 2002). Its students ranked 23rd out of 1000 in English. There is no achievement gap at Shuang Wen School. When my son started Shuang Wen in the second grade, his classmates had already studied Mandarin for two years. Some of us were worried about whether he could catch up. My son's teacher, Li Ron Wu, had faith in him. Ms. Wu said, 'You can do it, Paul Michael. You can do it, Paul Michael. You will do it, Paul Michael.' Now Paul Michael's Chinese is on par with his classmates. As far as I can see, where there are teachers who believe in the ability of children to learn, teachers who believe in their own efficacy as a teacher to teach, teachers who are willing to create a curriculum that excites and engages children as learners and co-creators of knowledge, then our children excel in their academics."

Maxine Waters stood up at this point. "You might have heard that I oppose HR 2210. I oppose that legislation

because it would 'begin the dismantling of Head Start, the most successful early education program in the history of the United States' (Waters, 2003, p. 11). Representative Waters went on to add, "For nearly 40 years, Head Start has helped low-income children. Children who participate in Head Start are excited to go to school, to open a book and begin reading. They become active learners and there is a stark difference between those enrolled in Head Start and those who are not."

"Nobody here has told my story," Betty Ruth said, walking to the front to take a seat in the circle. "Let me tell you about my personal achievement gap. I received straight As my first three years of school. Then Mama let Ms. Daisy Bates talk her into sending us over to the white school as part of the desegregation movement (Bates, 1987). Apparently everybody assumed that the education at the white school was better than the education at the black school. Quite frankly, I am still recovering from the experience of going to that white school. First, my teachers took my 'straight A' report card and changed all my grades to Bs and Cs. When Mama asked why they changed my report card, they said they were 'told' they could not send any report card over to the white school with all As on it. Mama didn't protest. She told me, 'Don't worry about it. Go on over there and show them (white people) what you know. Let them be surprised at how smart you are.' My Mama didn't know that white teachers give black children grades that are consistent with their view of black children, and they mostly think that black children are inferior. White teachers give us the grades they want us to have, not the grades we earn. Nowadays, they call it grade deflecting. Most of the time, the grades they think we should have are based on their racialized expectations about our intellectual capacities as black children, not on our actual performance. Not only that, I have witnessed white teachers who get upset when a black child performs so well, they can't give them a low grade. As for me, I never recovered my 'straight A' average. My personal achievement gap occurred overnight."

"Seems that there are a number of principles in that story," Asa Hilliard commented. "Students perform better when teachers are aware of their racialized perceptions of their students, when teachers demonstrate awareness of racialized assessments of pupil competence, when grading practices reflect consistency and fairness, and when teachers and students have the opportunity to examine the impact of internalized racism on their interactions, on their expectations of each other and of themselves."

After a few additional key principles were listed, Miles asked Dr. Hilliard if he would be willing to summarize the principles and disseminate them to everyone present. People were to put their names on a roster before leaving the school and Miles asked people to return for Forum II on the first of next month. After thanks and

appreciations, the forum is ended. I stand to go up front and speak with my great-grandfather, but am pushed outside the double doors of the schoolhouse by the exiting crowd. My taxi driver is waving frantically for me. It seems that I must rush if I am to make it to the airport on time. With deep regrets, I leave without having a conversation with Miles, but think that I will come early for the next Forum to have time with him.

REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This story provides an alternate perspective for understanding the current discussions of the “achievement gap.” Participants in the Miles Leach Forum provide a perspective on the origins of the achievement gap discussion and the purposes served by the discussion that has potential to assist educators to change how they enter and interact with that discussion.

Solórzano and Yosso (2002b) raise the question: “Does the dominance of a racial group require a rationalizing ideology?” (p. 24). Participants in the Miles Leach Forum described the historical development and maintenance of the ideology of white supremacy as a rationalizing justification for racism. They experienced a society deliberately structured to deny to them the entitlements, privileges, and opportunities for participation that are available to white people, strictly on the basis of presumed racial group membership.

In addition, members of the Forum described the process by which the data enlisted in support of that ideology is produced and reproduced across the generations. The achievement gap discussion, according to the participants in the Miles Leach Forum, is the latest effort to organize data in support of the ideology of white supremacy. That there are differences in the academic achievement of African American and white schoolchildren was not disputed. The organization and presentation of that data in ways that support the ideology of white supremacy was a key concern of members of the Forum.

They noted that when Africans were first brought to the Americas, there was no discussion of an achievement gap. There was, however, a systematic effort across legal, economic, and social systems to insure that Africans had no access to education. In the present time, African American student access to education that might lead to parity in results continues to be systematically limited, despite the *Brown* decision. The Supreme Court held in the *Brown* decision, “Where a State has undertaken to provide an opportunity for an education in its public schools, such an opportunity is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms” (*Brown*, 1954, p. 493). While the initiating concern of the Supreme Court in *Brown* was equal educational opportunity, the case turned on “the constitutionality of segregation in public

education” (p. 495). As a result, the attention and resources of the nation were diverted from equal education for African American children and directed to desegregating schools and classrooms. The educational attainment of African American children was given back burner attention.

Consistent with historic trends, the current “achievement gap” discussion is not a focus on the educational attainment of African American children; rather it is a focus on their failure to perform at the same level as white children. This failure analysis or deficit perspective is rooted in a belief in white supremacy, produced by adherence to the concepts of white supremacy, and perpetuates the ideology of white supremacy.

While one more conference on the achievement gap might be one too many, the Miles Leach School Forum on African American academic achievement suggested strategies with potential for actual change.

Find, Fund, and Implement Programs and Pedagogies that Work

Asa Hilliard (1998), Ron Ferguson (1998), and Pedro Noguera (2003) are among a growing group of researchers who report on what actually works to facilitate academic achievement among African American children. Hilliard specializes in studying cases where the academic achievement of African American children equals or exceeds that of white children. Unfortunately, Hilliard has found that when the academic performance of African American children exceeds that of white children, too often the personnel are re-assigned or fired and those classrooms and schools are closed. We do not need new programs. Instead, a priority will be to consistently fund and implement those programs, curricula, and pedagogies that have demonstrated their success in securing excellence in academic achievement among African American children.

Find Teachers who are Willing and Able to Teach African American Children

Listening to the voices in that schoolhouse reminded me of the key role played by teachers in the academic success of African American children. Clearly the experience of the people in my Miles Leach community forum indicated strenuously that where there are teachers who believe in the ability of children to learn, teachers who believe in their own efficacy as a teacher to teach, teachers who are willing to create a curriculum that excites and engages children as learners and co-creators of knowledge, African American children learn.

Adequately Fund African American Academic Achievement

According to the Fellowship of Racial Reconciliation (2004), 33.1% of all African Americans, 30.6% of Latinos, and 18.8% of other people of color live in poverty, as compared to 9.9% of white residents. White children more often live in communities that have resources to adequately fund education. African American children more often live in communities that cannot adequately fund education. The provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) mandate the allocation of funds to ensure that every child achieves at certain minimum standards. Some states have already requested exemption from this mandate claiming that the cost to equalize education would be prohibitive. While the cost to equalize hundreds of years of inequities might seem excessively high, the cost of failure is higher. According to the Justice Policy Institute (Zeidenberg & Schiraldi, 2002), state spending on prisons between 1985 and 2000 increased by 166% (over \$20 billion) while state spending on education increased by 24%. During that same period, "38 states and the federal system added more African American men to their prison systems than they added to their respective higher education systems" (Zeidenberg & Schiraldi, 2002, p. 2). In 2000, 13 states had more African American men in prison than in college. While putting black people in prison might more easily maintain white supremacy, the long-term health of the nation is jeopardized in the process. The convergence of interests between funding for African American academic achievement and the future well-being of the nation favors an increase in spending on the education of African Americans.

Deconstruct the Master Narrative and Create Counter-Stories

Educators and policymakers, teachers, students, parents, and community members will find that an increased ability to deconstruct the master narrative and create counter-stories will increase their capacity to create system changes that enable improved academic achievement. An increased capacity of educators to grapple with the history of racism and white privilege will undergird success in changing the climate of schools so that they no longer re-enact the master narrative. Policymakers and funding agencies will appropriate the funds necessary to make substantive change when they decipher the ways that, against their intention, schools work to recreate systems of disadvantage and unearned privilege.

The following questions can serve as guidelines for deconstructing the master narrative and creating counter-stories.

1. In any master narrative (such as policies, programs, or scholarly research), how has the experience of subordi-

nated people been represented? How is their experience made invisible, minimized, trivialized, and/or distorted? How can the experience of subordinated people be made visible? How might the recounting of this experience be different if done by an African American?

2. What is the evidence of the perspective of subordinated people in this narrative? How might the perspective of subordinated people differ from this story version? What would happen if white people understood this experience from the perspective of African Americans?
3. What purposes, beyond information sharing, are served by this story? How would those purposes be differently served by different versions of the story? How is a war of rebellion, for instance, different from a war of independence or a war for secession, or a civil war or a revolutionary war? What are the different purposes that are served by these different ways of naming a war between members of the same nation?

Challenge the Master Narrative

Confront the present time consequences and implications of the historical legacy of the master narrative. The ideology and principles of white supremacy denied not only education for African Americans on pain of death and segregated African Americans into separate and vastly unequally funded schools, it also resulted in widely differential performance in schools today, and explains that difference as deficiencies of African Americans. Significant change can occur when educators and policymakers at every level practice challenging the ideology that explains differences as deficiencies of a people.

Counter the Master Narrative

Counter the master narrative by examining the history, social studies, law, legal jurisprudence, sociology, psychology, and so on from the perspective of subordinated peoples. That master narrative has framed our socialization and continues to shape our perspective. The database that informs our understanding of the world is corroded with the master narrative. The analysis that we bring, the questions that we ask, and the research we design to answer those questions are rooted in the master narrative. A perspective from which to counter the master narrative can be found in the stories told by students of color, their parents, and their communities.

Change the Language

Change the language we use to describe the problem we face from one that places responsibility for the consequences of generations of white supremacy on the shoulders of those targeted by white supremacy. Find language that is not rooted in deficiency theory to explain the circumstances and what must be done.

Students of color have a rich history of excelling at academics. Educational systems can change to promote that excellence. Critical race theory suggests that the voices of those who have been marginalized and subordinated provide a necessary dimension for this change process.

NOTE

1. All references to cases pages in the text are to the official reporter, for example all U.S. Supreme Court cases are cited to pages in the U.S. Reports.

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