Confronting colorblindness
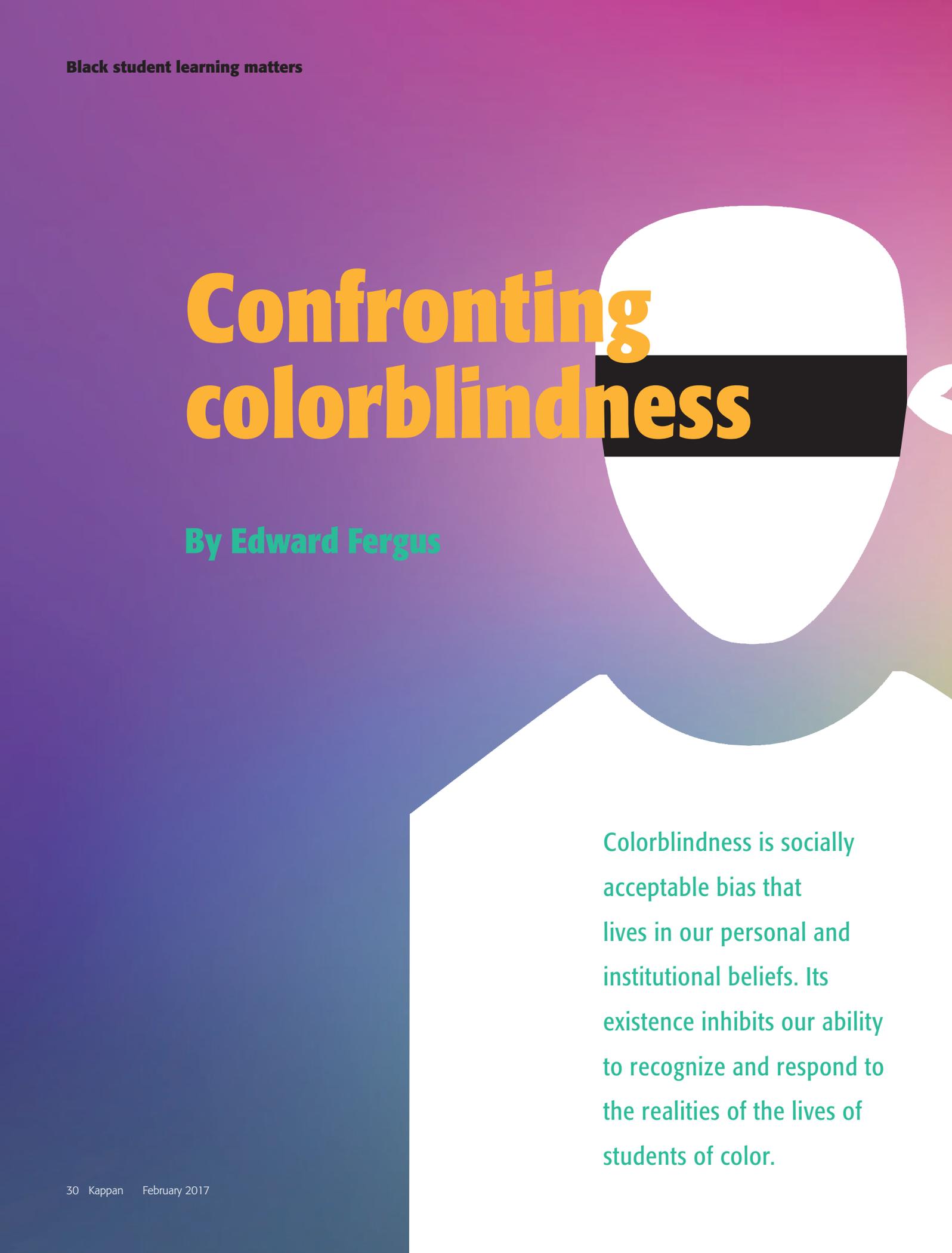
By Edward Fergus

Colorblindness is socially acceptable bias that lives in our personal and institutional beliefs. Its existence inhibits our ability to recognize and respond to the realities of the lives of students of color.

D uring a fall opening conference day for a school district, I provided a keynote on different forms of bias, with a focus on the notion of colorblindness. I said that racial/ethnic minority groups perceive colorblindness as a way for whites to ignore the social reality of people of color while whites perceive colorblindness as a magnanimous gesture that does not judge individuals by skin color or other external markers.

"Not seeing that I am a black Latino male means that you are omitting the basis for some of my lived experiences," I said to the group.

After the presentation, the superintendent, with whom I had developed a great friendship, approached me about her own confusion about colorblindness. "Eddie, I don't see your color, and I don't treat you that way," she said.

I responded candidly to her. "If you are not seeing my color, that means you are treating me like yourself, which means that at some point I will do or say something that does not fit the image of the white woman you were treating me like," I said.

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Colorblindness is socially acceptable bias that lives in our personal and institutional beliefs. Based on my research of teacher beliefs, an important component of colorblindness to understand is the manner in which it dangerously sustains a white cultural frame for looking at everything (Fergus, 2016). More specifically this cultural frame is predicated on social identity experiences in which discrimination or marginalization are non-elements of everyday life and allows interpreting the world as such. It frames how teachers view an argument between a white and black student in the hallway or when reprimanding Mexican-American students for talking Spanish in the hallway or when continuously identifying black students for wearing "nice" or matching clothes and not sufficiently for their good academic performance. In those examples, a white cultural frame omits all social realities other than a white social identity.

> Colorblindness dangerously sustains a white cultural frame for looking at everything.

In school, colorblindness can send a message to children that everyone shares the same cultural experience. For example, when we reviewed the 28 novels read by children from 6th through 12th grade in one district, we learned that none of the principal characters in those books were either black or Latino. This means all children — not just black and Latino children — are learning that black and Latino people do not play major roles in literature or life. Translating colorblindness into curriculum also can telegraph messages to children that the cultural experience of being white and middle class is the desired standard.

Colorblindness, according to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) emerged after the civil rights era, although society also embraced this ideology as a way to absorb immigrants during the early 1900s. After the civil rights era, individuals embraced colorblindness in the belief that this would help end discrimination by ensuring that we no longer would see race or ethnicity as a barrier between individuals. Bonilla-Silva highlights three features of a colorblindness ideology:

- Individuals believe they are minimizing the presence of racism by omitting race, gender, and other identities as valid social descriptors, saying, for example, "I don't see color."
- Individuals believe they are benefitting individuals when they disregard their social identities or group affiliations.
- Individuals believe they are reducing discrimination when they focus on the commonalities between individuals.

But colorblindness also allows its practitioners to rationalize racial inequality. Adherents of colorblindness would argue that certain situations arise due only to natural conditions or the cultural behaviors of certain groups. For example, a colorblindness belief attributes residential segregation in urban and suburban communities to the ability of individuals to afford a home and are blind to the subtle practices and processes of realtors limiting home or apartment views (Ondrich, Ross, & Yinger, 2002) or banks quoting higher interest rates on loans (Fishbein & Bunce, 2001) to low-income and racial/ethnic and linguistic minority groups. Colorblindness underlies some explanations of limited diversity in employment hiring even though numerous studies document patterns such as differential response to individuals based on race association to a name (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004) or black applicants with no criminal record being offered low-wage jobs at lower rates than white applicants with criminal records (Pager, Western, & Bonilowski, 2009).

A current example of colorblindness can be seen in how some charter schools and charter advocacy groups frame the need for school choice. Specifically, charter school proponents suggest that charter schools are necessary because regular public schools are governed in ways that limit innovation, which prevents them from hiring the best teachers and using the best strategies. However, they fail to acknowledge that innovation is absent because of how society has historically devalued the education of marginalized populations. This omission among charter advocacy groups demonstrates a colorblind frame for rationalizing their approach. And some would argue that colorblind rationalizing sets the stage for developing school-based strategies that focus on "fixing" psychological and behavioral dispositions of youth and their families, such as parents signing attendance contracts, requiring students to demonstrate how to sit in a chair, adopting school mission statements that say "There are no shortcuts in life." Thus, a colorblindness belief prevents an individual from understanding how the historical nature of discrimination, politics, policy, and economics marginalized racial and ethnic minorities and subsequently limited access and opportunity. Furthermore, such a belief prevents educators from understanding that black and Latino student misbehaviors are sometimes responses borne out of despair, anger, frustration, and fear of continuous marginalization. As Bonilla-Silva describes, these colorblindness frames operate as cul-de-sacs that allow individuals to misinterpret the world and make them unable to see themselves as privileged because they never have to experience or imagine marginalization.

From colorblindness to color consciousness

No area of work is more difficult than reformulating the beliefs and worldviews of educators as school districts try to develop, implement, and monitor an equity perspective and pedagogical lens. Practitioners must be able to know how to engage, lead and/or manage these conversations so they are constructive. To do so, leaders must understand two critical dynamics of race dialogues before engaging in staff development based on colorblindness: the protocols of race dialogues that co-opt their productivity and how to manage the comfortable and uncomfortable tensions individuals experience in these race dialogues.

Protocols of race dialogues

Derald Wing Sue (2013) identifies three conversation protocols that get in the way of having productive race conversations: academic, colorblind, and politeness. Each protocol operates differently with the goal of managing these dialogues so that white

practitioners, specifically, do not experience guilt or fragility (DiAngelo, 2011).

The *politeness protocol* is the societal expectation that we avoid talking about certain topics — such as religion, money, and race — in "mixed" company. The politeness protocol helps manage race dialogues from being discussed and/or being carried forward by many participants in any conversation.

The *academic protocol* insists that we omit emotions from any race dialogue. It's the old adage of "let's not get emotional" or "just keep it to the facts without emotion." Avoiding emotion is another form of oppression. Requiring marginalized individuals to share their narrative without emotions is inappropriate; the experiences of marginalization leave an individual with emotional scars.

The *colorblind protocol* refers to universalizing the experience of marginalization. This is often heard in the form of "I grew up poor and white with black people, so I understand," or "I experience similar marginalization because I am gay." This protocol presents two concerns. First, it creates an oppression Olympics conversation that stalls our ability to discuss each form of oppression. Second, universalizing oppression makes race a null or unimportant conversation point.

Sample colorblindness statements

#1. I try to ignore skin color in order to view minority students as individuals.

#2. Sometimes I wonder why we can't see each other as individuals instead of race always being an issue.

#3. I try not to notice a child's race or skin color in the classroom setting.

#4. It is rude when Latino students speak Spanish in the classroom.

Comfortable and uncomfortable tensions

Educators often wonder what they can do regarding race and racism. Mica Pollock and colleagues (2010) suggest that teachers break down their responses into three tensions: personal, structural, and strategies. First, individuals can ask questions of themselves such as, how often do I engage with others different from myself, what is my level of comfort with others different from myself, what is my racial memory, what are the cultural artifacts that define me, and who are my affinity groups? Second, they can explore how an individual can make a difference

within specified structural conditions, such as segregation, oppression, and racism. Finally, they can introduce equity into actionable activities in their classrooms and schools.

Colorblindness assumes that social identities, specifically race, are constantly downplayed by individuals who are outside of a specific racial/ethnic minority group. The following activities are intended to provide practitioners an opportunity to think about how their colorblindness emerges from their limited personal experiences.

Racial memory activity. This activity helps practitioners consider their initial memories about race and ethnicity and how those memories frame their current thinking. Practitioners spend 10 to 15 minutes writing about an event for one or each of the three stages — elementary years, middle and high school years, and college years and beyond. Once complete, practitioners pair up and begin sharing some of the memories. Some guiding questions for this discussion are: What did you learn at each stage? Who did you learn it from? How do you think today? Allow 15 to 20 minutes for this discussion. The facilitator then reconvenes the large group and discusses the following questions: What did you learn from the reflections exercise? What racial memories are your students developing? How do we help students develop healthy racial and other identities?

Seeing your race-life journey. This activity allows practitioners to discuss the racial and ethnic composition of their personal friendships. The facilitator begins by identifying a large room such as a cafeteria or a gym in which practitioners can move around easily and have conversations. The facilitator labels the four corners of the room with the following titles: black and black ethnics, white and white ethnics, Latino/a, and Asian and Pacific Islander. (Note: Adapt these labels so they're appropriate for the racial and ethnic groups in your community.) The facilitator then guides practitioners to begin in the middle of the room and asks them to think about their elementary-age close friendships and to move to the corner of the room that contains the label of the racial and ethnic group that primarily identifies their close friendship circle. Once practitioners are in these corner groups, facilitator asks them to discuss the following question: What are some positive memories you have about these friendships? After five to 10 minutes of conversation the facilitator continues with middle, high school, college, and adulthood. At the end of the last grouping, practitioners stay in their areas and consider the following questions: What did you notice about your life journey regarding your close friendships? What are some of the themes in

the memories shared? Did some of you stay in the same corner for most of your life journey? If so, what does that have you thinking about your life journey? Did some of you move in or out of various corners? If so, what does that have you thinking about your life journey? The facilitator wraps up this activity with a conversation with practitioners about what it means for them to work with racial/ethnic minority student populations when they do not have enough prior close friendship experiences that assist in providing mental schemas.

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Looking at your bias. Practitioners go online and complete the Implicit Association Test (IAT) (https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html). Practitioners can bring the results from the test to the next staff development or grade-level meeting and engage in a conversation about the findings. The group should engage the following types of questions: How do you feel about the results? Are these findings surprising? If so, how; if not, why not? Can you think of examples of when these biases show up in your day-to-day interactions?

Moving from colorblindness to colorbrave. During a staff meeting, have practitioners watch the following Ted Talk by Mellody Hobson in which she discusses moving away from being colorblind to being colorbrave: www.ted.com/talks/mellody_hobson_color_blind_or_color_brave?

As a follow-up, practitioners can take Hobson's definition of colorbrave and apply it during professional learning community meetings, grade-level collaborative meetings, staff development, and such.

Summary

Colorblindness is a complex belief system. Those who embrace colorblindness do so with good intentions, believing that they are moving beyond race to see individuals as merely themselves and not as representatives of a race or ethnicity. But refusing to recognize race means that persons of color, in particular, cannot be fully understood because a significant part of their experience is being ignored. In a broader sense, refusing to recognize race presents a danger because that refusal allows groups to deny the presence of institutional racism or discrimination and place sole responsibility on individuals or groups.

Educators play a unique role in responding to this. They can model for students what it means to be color conscious and not colorblind. They also can demonstrate why major educational reforms should focus on disparity.

As U.S. society continues to diversify, students will need cross-cultural tools as part of their social and emotional development. Educators can model for youth and create school cultures and climates that emphasize cross-cultural skills. The Every Student Succeeds Act appears to be encouraging more attention to social-emotional learning in schools, which gives educators an opportunity to support students in developing competencies such as social awareness.

But practitioners also must be brave in confronting discrimination and bias in school processes head-on — for example, disproportionality in special education, suspension, gifted/AP/honors programs, and achievement. But, for some educators, that requires a big leap. In one recent case, for instance, while reviewing data on disparity patterns with school district leaders, an assistant superintendent paused the data review and said they were uncomfortable talking about subgroup data because they grew up being told that saying "black" is inappropriate. This leader's discomfort with even naming racial/ethnic groups demonstrates how difficult it would be to engage educators in a conversation where the black experience could even be discussed.

Pretending that the color of someone's skin has not shaped their experience in life is not an appropriate response for educators. But educators must be aware of bias-based beliefs and put those front and center as they develop practices and policies. Otherwise we run the risk of building more educational reforms that see marginalized populations as the problem. **K**

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