

A Historical Analysis of Education Leadership During Texas School Desegregation

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Viewing Racial Literacy on a Gradient

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Abstract

During U.S. school desegregation, education leaders played crucial roles that showcased their capacity to humanize their Black students. Their actions, we posit, reveal their level of racial literacy. Using oral history interviews and archival records, we examined school desegregation implementation through a racial literacy lens. We analyzed school district leadership in 1970s central Texas alongside Black students' resistance to white supremacist and antiBlack domination. We show how a white male leader's difficulty to see, hear, and heed his educational community largely explains Black desegregating students' resistance to sub-humanization. In this, we argue that the way leadership views a community determines how it interprets said community's concerns and the extent to which it can lead and humanize that community. This account adds to critical race research that links identity and education leadership, building on new racial literacy perspectives that situate it on a continuum with hegemonic and counter-hegemonic at opposite ends.

Keywords: school desegregation, racial literacy, superintendent, critical race theory, Texas

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Introduction

School desegregation in the U.S., particularly its implementation, showcased one of critical race theory's (CRT's) most simple yet profound premises: that the civil rights movement failed to eliminate white supremacy and antiBlack racism (Bell, 2004; Crenshaw et al., 1995). In this process, education leaders played critical roles that illustrated potential dangers of their under-developed ability to view as fully human their Black students, whose resistance against oppression has historically marked Black freedom struggles (A. James-Gallaway, 2021a). A vital tool apt for facilitating such awareness is racial literacy, which we conceptualize as one's understanding of social, cultural, legal, environmental, economic, and political manifestations and consequences of racism individually and institutionally.

Critical race theorists (Guinier, 2003, 2004; Guinier & Torres, 2002) and education leadership scholars (Horsford, 2011, 2014; Radd & Grosland, 2018) have explored high racial literacy's mitigating effects on white supremacy and antiBlackness. We name antiBlackness, or "antiBlack racism, as structural or institutional acts and supporting ideologies that oppress, subjugate, or subordinate Black peoples" (A. James-Gallaway, 2023b, p. 222), and white supremacy, normalized patterns of white racial advantage structured in domination and oppression (Gillborn, 2005), to specify how racial oppression affects Black peoples. Scholarship has shown that antiBlackness and white supremacy have precluded education leaders from creating institutional equity in the continued struggle to meet the needs of Black students (A. James-Gallaway 2023a; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This body of work, however, has yet to examine through a racial literacy lens the leadership of white superintendents in implementing school desegregation or to consider how Black students navigated this power struggle. Understanding this facet of school desegregation is important because Black students tended to find themselves in districts led by white superintendents due to the wide-scale displacement of Black education leaders after the 1954 *Brown* decision (Tillman, 2004).

The purpose of this article is to examine the school desegregation implementation process through a racial literacy lens that emphasizes school district leadership in 1970s central Texas. We investigate a white male superintendent who implemented school desegregation, a policy intended to advance racial equality; this district leader, however, was unsupportive of this policy, making his efforts to enforce it especially fraught. In telling this story about a white male leader's difficulty to see, hear, and heed his entire educational community, we

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also characterize how Black desegregating students responded to his leadership, highlighting their resistance against white supremacist sub-humanization. Highlighting Black students' perceptions allows us to illustrate how they struggled against racial oppression and understood the structural dynamics of their subjugation. We argue that the way leadership views a community determines how it interprets said community's concerns and, ultimately, the extent to which it can lead and humanize that community; furthermore, we demonstrate that Black students displayed resistance to white supremacist, antiBlack domination. This finding contributes to scholarship on how school desegregation upheld white supremacy and proved ineffective at establishing racial equality, work that clarifies the role of sub-humanization in the history of Black education and the part low, or hegemonic (Chávez-Moreno, 2022), racial literacy played in furthering antiBlack oppression. Additionally, this article nuances scholarly conceptualizations of racial literacy (Chávez-Moreno, 2022), challenging the binary frame commonly used to label folk as either literate or illiterate to propose that we consider it on a continuum.

To achieve our aims, this paper is structured as follows. In the next section, we review relevant literature on education leadership and school desegregation and then introduce our theoretical lens, racial literacy as nestled within CRT. To follow, we describe our methodology, then provide a historical narrative of school desegregation implementation involving LaVega Independent School District, its Black students, and its superintendent, Henry Cranfill. While numerous studies have briefly remarked on the various leadership obstacles that curtailed the school desegregation implementation process, our focus on this superintendent is novel as there is no other study, to our knowledge, that specifically interrogates how a white male superintendent imbued with white supremacist ideology implemented school desegregation. The historical narrative we offer showcases this figure and is animated with details about his educational, professional, and personal background; these details help show how a privileged white man with low racial literacy poorly implemented school desegregation in his school district. These circumstances created a situation in which Black students turned to resistance as a form of psychic self-preservation and agency, key principles of CRT in education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In part, their resistance is an important part of our wider narrative that illuminates a counter-story against white supremacy in school desegregation. To close, we discuss racial literacy's utility, underscoring the importance of historical perspectives.

Research on K-12 School Desegregation and Educational Leadership

K-12 School Desegregation

School desegregation's complicated legacy involves widescale Black school closures and the systematic termination of Black educators (Bell, 2004; Siddle Walker, 2000; Cecelski, 1994). Research has demonstrated that from 1954 to 1968, many southern school districts embarked on a feat of political maneuvers around desegregation that kept their schools in good standing to receive federal funding by shuffling around paltry numbers of students (Bolton, 2005). Mounting federal pressure obligated these non-compliant school districts to begin eliminating dual school systems by the late 1960s, systems that underfunded Black education. As a result, this key part of the civil rights movement has typically defined school desegregation's historical significance by emphasizing the role of race and racism in the 1950s and 1960s.

Some school districts, like many in Texas (Schott & Marcus, 1982), waited until the 1970s to desegregate, indicating the Lone Star State's important yet under-examined lessons about the messy ways this policy unfolded (A. James-Gallaway, 2021a, 2021b). For instance, its prolonged evasion resulted in the federal government in 1970 placing virtually the entire state under court order to desegregate (Schott & Marcus, 1982). However, extant research on the state (e.g., Ladino, 1996; San Miguel, 2001) has produced an underdeveloped understanding of smaller, less well-known places like the Waco area, k-12 Black students' experiences, the school desegregation processes, and educational leadership.

Educational Leadership, the Superintendent, and School Desegregation

Research on superintendents and issues related to racial inequity establish that white supremacy and antiBlackness are continued problems (Grace, 2023). As one of the most public-facing positions in educational administration, the superintendency represents a political role that is in part shaped by a leader's self-efficacy (Whitt et al., 2015), capacity to make politically neutral decisions (Khalifa et al., 2014), and willingness to emphasize why they and their district are *not* racist (Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015).

Although most educational leadership scholars have attended to more contemporary issues in education vis-à-vis Black students and African American education, some have examined historical matters

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around school desegregation, namely, Horsford (2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2014), Tillman (2004) and Karpinski (2006). Horsford's body of work highlighted the ways Black American superintendents, who attended segregated schools as pupils and subsequently led desegregated districts as administrators, sought to destabilize inequity to counter dominant narratives about school desegregation as a panacea for Black education. The field, however, knows little about white leaders who might have been less effective in managing school desegregation.

Given the studies of contemporary battles in Texas (Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015; Khalifa et al., 2014), historical exploration of this state can help identify potential roots of these longstanding issues. Mired in bureaucracy while working to balance competing demands, superintendents have technically been accountable to all populations in their districts despite some prioritizing certain subsections. These struggles characterize a long history of Black dispossession (Cecelski, 1994). For instance, recent Texas school closures directly implicated superintendents, illustrating how this process placed them at odds with other community stakeholders (Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015; Khalifa et al., 2014). By examining how educational leaders wrestle with equity, educational leadership scholarship can benefit from more nuanced understanding of the white superintendents who governed districts during the tumultuous school desegregation process.

Critical Race Theory, Racial Literacy, and Sub-humanization

Racial literacy is fitting for this project because its roots in CRT, which strives to “understand how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America” for social redress (Crenshaw et al., 1995, p. xiii), make it expansive enough to analyze institutional and societal nuances of white supremacy and antiBlack racism. Furthermore, school desegregation's prominence in CRT scholarship (e.g., Bell, 2004) make it apt for examining poor racial literacy in school desegregation. Since growing out of critical legal studies in the late 1970s and in the mid-1990s being adopted by education researchers (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), CRT has grown in use across education subfields such as educational administration (e.g., Khalifa et al., 2013); its application in history of education scholarship, however, is still emerging (A. James-Gallaway & Ward Randolph, 2021; A. James-Gallaway, 2022b; A. James-Gallaway & Turner, 2022). Racial literacy's foundation in CRT: (1) accepts that race is socially constructed but yields material benefits to people racialized as white while depriving people of Color from the advantages of whiteness; (2) is instructive across each education level and area;

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and (3) clarifies interlocking systems that sustain white supremacy throughout society (Crenshaw et. al., 1995; Guinier, 2004). As a dynamic tool useful for illuminating race-based abuses of power, racial literacy helps showcase the conscious or unconscious enactment of white supremacy and antiBlackness in education alongside its opposition to racial liberalism (Oto et al., 2022).

Racial literacy, we contend, can clarify how racialized groups differently comprehend race and racism across social institutions (Guinier, 2004). Racial literacy emphasizes the institutional, rather than individual, dimensions of racial oppression. “Properly deployed,” critical race theory legal scholar Guinier (2003) argued, “racial literacy... [signifies] the ability to read race in conjunction with institutional and democratic structures” (p. 120). Therefore, our conceptualization of racial literacy requires one to practice reflexivity in shaping their praxis according to the sociohistorical significance of race and racism (A. James-Galloway, 2022a, 2022b).

Education leadership researchers have engaged racial literacy to examine how institutional racism influences leadership in K-12 schools (Horsford, 2011, 2014; Radd & Grosland, 2018). Horsford’s (2011, p. 2014) foundational work identified how racial literacy can create racially competent educational leaders, who are prepared to foster equitable student achievement, challenge discriminatory school policies and practices, and take into account the historical context of the local community they serve. This work has shown that the cultivation of high racial literacy promotes Black humanization, opposes racial liberalism, and connects race and power (Guinier, 2003, 2004; Guinier & Torres, 2002).

Thus, we assess racial literacy not in a binary (e.g., racially literate/racially illiterate), but as a gradient, akin to a continuum. This act is crucial because one’s low racial literacy is connected to their promotion of hegemony, whereas their high racial literacy is linked to the perpetuation of counterhegemony (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). The racial literacy gradient places hegemonic racial literacies on one end and counterhegemonic racial literacies on the other, situating the two as diametrically opposed. The space in between the two points clarifies where one’s racial literacy stands relative to both ends of the continuum (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). For example, race-evasive discourse would sit near the hegemonic racial literacy end on this gradient, and antiBlack discourse would sit squarely on the hegemonic end of the spectrum. In contrast, messages that promote racial diversity, equity, and inclusion would sit near the counterhegemonic racial literacy end, but they would be surpassed by more direct counterhegemonic Black feminist or critical race messages. This continuum situates racial liter-

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acy on a gradient that is more conducive to mapping how subtle shifts in the application of racial knowledge relate to one another.

Because virtually everyone can practice racial identification, even if one refrains from ascribing meaning to these differences, most everyone has some level of racial literacy. Therefore, distinguishing and interrelated factors of racial literacy include the level to which one: (1) acknowledges racial difference; (2) recognizes the sociohistorical significance of race and racism in a given national or geographic context; (3) practices reflexivity by critically analyzing how their identities, and those of others, allot or deny power or privilege; and (4) adapts their praxis (i.e., social navigation) based on these understandings to further racial justice.

Sub-humanization and racial literacy are connected. Wynter (2003) proposed that to be considered fully human (i.e., Man) in western society, one must be a white man. This view situates Black people as inherently sub-human, making Black women and girls doubly so. By society granting only white men full humanness, according to this logic, it discourages them from granting the same to other groups and from viewing their white maleness as the reason for their access to institutional power. Thus, the inability to recognize race as structurally significant is directly linked to the level of racial literacy one possesses. Bringing together these perspectives, we build on both the individual and institutional dimensions of racial literacy (Chávez-Moreno, 2022; Laughter et al., 2023) to analyze education as a structure and Superintendent Cranfill as a leader within it; we do so to underscore how both elements worked together to uphold white supremacy and antiBlackness. These perspectives spotlight how whiteness, as a racial identity, is socially constructed yet affords material benefits, which help to sustain racial hierarchies via the subjugation of people of Color broadly and Black people specifically. As we show, Cranfill's superintendency during desegregation reveals how his low racial literacy motivated his sub-humanization of the Black students in his school district.

Method/ology

Positionality

The first author's hometown is Waco, Texas, the locale under investigation. Her Black racial identity and P-16 public schooling in Texas inspired this project and her work more broadly, which explores historical questions about African American struggles for educational justice. The second author, a Black man, grew up in southern and Midwestern middle-class areas yet attended chronically underserved,

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predominately Black schools (C. James-Gallaway, 2022). These experiences inspire his research, which centers on race and P-20 education stakeholders of Color. Collectively, our experiences as former K-12 educators who worked in predominately Black schools informs our research on racism in education and concern with Black education.

The Project

This article comes out of a wider project that used historical methods and focused on Black students' experiences with school desegregation implementation in Waco, Texas. It sought to highlight everyday experiences of this policy through the perspective of Black students who desegregated in the 1970s. To analyze Black students' experiences, however, other actors, such as school leaders, were examined, which provided a richer, more complex image of the oppression students faced.

The part of the project on which we focus in this paper provides insight from Black students whom the superintendent of focus led during the 1970-1971 school year in LaVega Independent School District (LVISD). Coupled with primary source evidence that characterized Superintendent Henry Cranfill, Black pupils' oral history recollections animated the extant historical record and informed our analysis of Cranfill's leadership during a hectic school year. Our guiding question was: In LVISD's implementation of school desegregation, what did the superintendent's leadership reveal about his attitude toward Black students? A sub-question we sought to address was: In this context, how did Black desegregating students understand and respond to said leadership?

Evidence and Participants

Oral history interviews, a primary part of this project, link our evidence collection process and narrators (i.e., participants). They represent primary historical sources gleaned from a recorded interview with a witness to or participant in an event (Yow, 2014). These interviews make more comprehensive and supplement the historical record and, aligned with CRT, can elevate the experiential knowledge of people of Color (Bell, 1992; A. James-Gallaway & Turner, 2022), who often challenge mainstream, white supremacist narratives (C. James-Gallaway & Baber, 2021).

Oral history interviews and written records complement one another because they are not in competition and together construct a more dynamic and complete image of the past (Portelli, 1991). Despite conventional beliefs, the written record can be fallible (Portelli, 1991).

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Therefore, rather than measuring narrators' memories as fact repositories, oral history interviews supplemented the historical record of school desegregation in and around Waco and provided a sense of what these events meant to some of the individuals who experienced them. To strengthen the connection between the historical record and memory, we evaluated consistency between interviews by comparing them to one another and assessing how they enriched or extended written records. Unlike social science methods, historical and oral history methods discourage the use of pseudonyms because historical writing is expected to be transparent, so it helps make more complete the historical record (Yow, 2014).

The first author conducted oral history interviews from 2018 to 2020 with twenty-one former students and educators. To qualify for the study, narrators had to identify as Black and have schooled or worked in Waco-area school districts from the late 1960s into the early 1980s; they also needed to have attended and/or worked in both a desegregated and a segregated school. Narrators' average age at the time of the interview was sixty-four. Local high school alumni and church networks were used to contact potential narrators, as well as purposeful snowball sampling. Interviews, six of which were conducted in-person, four by video conference, and eleven by phone, included eight men and thirteen women and averaged ninety minutes.

Oral history interviews largely directed the search for written records. The first-hand insight from narrators guided where and for what to look in archives. Thus, the conduction of archival research involved collecting materials, such as newspaper articles, that animated the school desegregation implementation process. From pertinent school districts, written documentation was gathered, including school board minutes, memoranda, official correspondence, graduation records, promotional brochures, and legal documents from the 1950s-1980s to understand the trajectory of school desegregation implementation and key actors.

Analysis

Analysis overlapped with data collection and was guided by CRT, making apparent the endemic nature of racism and the significance of narrative. Once interviews were transcribed, the notes, or reflexive research memoranda (Charmaz, 2008), taken during interviews and archival visits were revisited; these memos captured how interviews were processed and connections made to the extant literature and previous interviews. As noted, interviews directed the search for relevant primary sources (Brundage, 2018), which showed a strong current of educational leadership material. Our use of historical methods for evi-

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dence analysis involved creating a timeline of events around the theme of education leadership. Then, oral history interviews were segmented into discrete pieces and ordered chronologically. To animate and nuance this timeline based on written documents, oral history interviews were inserted.

Once the initial examination of archival material illuminated a chronological image of the school desegregation process, re-analysis of interview transcripts from 1970-1971 in LVISD was conducted. Then, re-examination of written documents helped construct a more detailed timeline of events. Interview transcripts were then simultaneously re-read and re-listened to before revisiting analytic memos from interviews and archival trips and notes taken during interviews. From this process emerged broad themes (e.g., seeing, hearing, heeding, sub-humanization) that were reconciled with the larger body of evidence. Last, interviews were re-compared to one another and analyzed in the context of relevant primary and secondary sources. This iterative process shaped a narrative about racial literacy in educational leadership during the implementation of school desegregation in Waco.

School Desegregation's Collateral Damage

The narrative below blends secondary scholarship with our original research, including background information crucial to a critical narration of the past that provides a fuller, deeper characterization of the place under study and its ethos.

Antiblackness and School Desegregation in Waco, TX

Waco, a hallmark of central Texas, is representative of places across the U.S. with protracted legacies of systemic violence against African Americans, occurrences that CRT understands as normal given the permanence of racism in the U.S (Bell, 1992). A number of the participants who contributed to this study recalled the regular and brutal lynchings that occurred at the beginning of the 20th century in and around Waco (Bernstein, 2006; Carrigan, 2004), recollections that stoked in them fear about attending school with white students. This area also served as a hub of Ku Klux Klan activity (Bernstein, 2006; Carrigan, 2004).

The central Texas city of Waco and its neighboring city to the east of Bellmead offer insight into what a federal representative from the Office of Civil Rights, called “a rather unusual situation, wherein part of [Bellmead’s LaVega] school district lies in another city,” Waco (LVISD meeting minutes, 1968, p. 5). In 1970, Census records indicate Waco’s population was 95,326, and Bellmead’s was 7,698. Histor-

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ically, east Waco was part of LVISD, which included the segregated Estella Maxey Place housing project and various neighborhoods with single-family homes, where most Black LVISD students lived. In the late 1960s, LVISD's Black student population was 48%, a critical mass that during school desegregation incited outrage from Bellmead's rural working-class white population, who constituted the remainder of the district's students (LVISD meeting minutes, 1965, 1970). Discussing racial literacy in the context of white supremacy and class differences, Guinier (2004) underlines that "using race as a decoy offers short-term psychological advantages to poor and working-class whites, but it also masks how much poor whites have in common with poor blacks and other people of color" (p. 114). Living on the cusp of two school districts, African Americans persisted despite attending Waco-area schools that refused to comply with federal orders to desegregate until the 1970s (Newman, 1976).

Until the mid-1950s, LVISD had historically neglected to provide a high school education for its Black students. This inadequacy signaled the district's disinterest in humanizing its Black students by failing to furnish an equal education, that is, by failing to supply a resource it had for decades given to its white students. After going without a Black high school in LVISD for decades, in 1956, African Americans witnessed the erection of George Washington Carver School (G.W. Carver). Conspicuously, the school, led by principal J. J. Flewellen for its entire life, opened just two years after the Supreme Court passed the *Brown* verdict. This timing suggests LVISD was trying to avoid efforts to desegregate by finally working to equalize school resources (Bolton, 2005). The Black community also used the secondary school for adult education purposes, and it was one half of a cross-town rivalry with Waco's only other segregated Black high school, Alexander James Moore High School. Local African Americans regularly and enthusiastically supported G.W. Carver by, for example, fundraising to send its award-winning band to compete internationally, competitions they regularly won by a landslide ("Carver band," 1967; Later, 1967).

Buttressing AntiBlackness: Who Was Henry Lee Cranfill?

The superintendent leading LVISD, however, had little to do with these humanizing feats that unfolded amid Jim Crow. Cranfill spent significant time in predominately white areas of Texas, where patterns of antiBlack racial terrorism were commonplace. The following sketch of Henry Cranfill's life contextualizes his developmental experiences as a school leader in small, rural, white parts of Texas. One of eight children ("H. Lee Cranfill," 1966), Henry Lee Cranfill, Jr. was born in 1917 in Erath County, Texas, which is about 75 miles from Bellmead,

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and died in 1992. His 1935 graduation from LaVega High School suggests that his family had moved closer to Waco in the preceding years (“Diplomas handed out,” 1935). His tombstone at Waco Memorial Park cemetery notes that he was a Sergeant in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II.

Marrying Irma (née) King after high school, Cranfill led a traditional white Southern life. In the 1940s, the Cranfills had three children, Carol, John, and Charles, all of whom graduated from LaVega High (“Miss Cranfill,” 1965; “Miss Hilary Lynne Booth,” 1969; “Central Texans,” November 12, 1970). Virtually all their high school classmates were white, as each child graduated before LVISD desegregated, when it was practicing a form of racial segregation that dehumanized its Black students in giving them a separate and unequal education (A. James-Galloway, 2020). Newspaper records portray his family’s relatively prominent social standing in the Waco community. For example, local newspapers published each of his children’s lengthy, photo-inclusive engagement, rehearsal dinner, and wedding announcements alongside regular mentions of Cranfill’s recreational hunting activity and his membership on local advisory boards (“Central Texans,” 1970; “UF contributors’ meeting,” 1972; “Miss Cranfill,” 1965; “Large 9-point,” 1967; “Miss Hilary Lynne Booth,” 1969). These depictions indicate an adherence to white southern custom that dictated a segregated personal life guided by strict gender roles, practices that upheld white supremacy, patriarchy, and antiBlackness, as well as classism while reflecting the authority Cranfill assumed as a white male patriarch.

In 1952, Cranfill left “China Spring [a small city minutes from Bellmead that adjoins Waco to the northwest] to succeed B. B. Parham as [the school district of] Oglesby’s school chief” (“Coryell County,” 1952, p. 3). Cranfill served as Oglesby’s superintendent before joining LVISD in 1963 as the district’s curriculum director (LVISD meeting minutes, 1963). By the following year, the board had instated him as superintendent, and Cranfill remained in this position until he retired one year early after the 1972-1973 school year at the age of 55 (“La Vega school head,” 1973).

In 1970, federal mandates came to a head, requiring LVISD to unify its racially separate school system; this move represented high racial literacy on the part of U.S. law and those working to enforce racial equality mandates. Simultaneously, Cranfill publicly refused to desegregate his district, reflecting his lack of preparation to equitably manage a school district trying to dissolve its dual schooling systems (Harris & Washington, 1968). How Cranfill saw and heard his Black students directly contributed to why he worked to implement school desegregation in the way he did—in a way that intended to sustain

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white supremacy. Reaching this point foreshadowed the Black Waco community's short-lived enjoyment of joyous occasions at G.W. Carver. By the early 1970s with Cranfill as superintendent, federal court orders forced LVISD, which had three Black and four white schools, to fully desegregate. In secret meetings with attorneys and district judges, the LaVega Board of Trustees, which included Cranfill, was still deliberating the logistics of desegregating their non-compliant district a week before the 1970-1971 school year started (LVISD meeting minutes, 1970). The school board exercised incredible white supremacist power that reflected how racism was institutionally embedded in LVISD's power structure (A. James-Gallaway, 2023a).

School Desegregation and AntiBlack Violence

Just one year earlier, the board had pushed out LaVega High School principal Tom E. Pratt. His resignation was "a protest to the board's action in revoking a previous decision to follow desegregation guidelines" ("La Vega principal quits," 1969). In response to the board halting plans to desegregate again and again, Pratt resigned, a move representative of moderate white opposition to the board's efforts to prolong segregation. As noted above, immediately following the 1954 *Brown* decision to desegregate schools, LVISD's school board decided to build the only Black high school it would ever have, G. W. Carver, which opened in 1956. Part of a broader strategy to lessen the gap between Black and white educational programs, equalization schools like Carver represented an attempt by whites to quiet the protests of local Black residents by giving them a resource they had long been requesting, in this case, a high school (Bolton, 2000). Opening a Black high school in 1956 was highly symbolic and problematic in that it epitomized white refusal to comply with federal school desegregation requirements, and it underscored how poorly white powerholders regarded Black education (Anderson, 1988). This refusal, white powerholders hoped, would be bolstered by a Black community who was pleased to have a new school, decreasing their likelihood to agitate for deeper equality via desegregation. Therefore, Pratt's withdrawal also highlighted antiBlackness, which largely accounted for white refusal to attend formerly segregated Black schools.

Without formally notifying the Black community served by G.W. Carver, LaVega administrators shut down the district's only Black high school just days before the 70-71 school year began. They, however, never admitted to Black students or their families that they had done so. As detailed elsewhere (A. James-Gallaway, 2020), oral history interviews revealed Black students had to learn of G.W. Carver's closing through the local news, community meetings, word-of-mouth, or

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redirection after showing up for the first day of school. Even the only Black member of the LVISD school board, Rev. La Dell Thomas, admitted “he did not know the school board was going to present a plan to the court” for approval to close Carver (“La Vega reviews complaints,” 1970, 1A). This episode reflects how keen white board members were to use surreptitious deception in the interest of white supremacy and antiBlackness. Evidently, the white school board majority sought to maintain white dominance throughout each facet of the school desegregation implementation process, something Texas school boards would continue to do in the coming years (A. James-Gallaway, 2023a). As a result, suddenly, 1300 Black students found themselves rerouted from G.W. Carver to the district’s previously all-white schools (“LaVega boycott continues,” 1970). In contrast to G.W. Carver, a 14-year-old school, the district forced Black students to attend LaVega High, which was more than sixty years old and lacked sufficient space for all students. Although Black students’ repeated attempts to relay their concerns about the closure went unseen and unheard for weeks, the board ignored their expressions of distress (“Negro pupils,” 1970).

Generally, narrators interpreted the contextual factors surrounding the decision to close G. W. Carver as deeply personal. Many students reported feeling intentionally disrespected by Cranfill, whom they viewed as hating and therefore targeting the Black community. Narrators had some faint, broad sense of school desegregation, but their material experience with it was virtually non-existent because LVISD, like many other southern school districts, held out as long as possible to desegregate. Although some narrators understood that school desegregation might bring them better educational resources, most in this study viewed the end of segregated Black schools unfavorably (A. James-Gallaway, 2022b).

Within the first two weeks of the school year, other issues confronted African American students in LaVega schools. Black pupils faced a hostile climate that “made it so we couldn’t learn nothing,” according to a 2019 interview with former La Vega High School student and walkout participant Michael Bass. Black students’ poor treatment was exacerbated by what many saw as discriminatory dress code demands, the firing of a Black coach, and lunch policies that did not provide them space to sit or time to eat—a situation made worse in local businesses closing their shops to Black patrons during students’ lunch hour (“La Vega boycott continues,” 1970). During a 2018 oral history interview with former La Vega High School student Wanda James, she noted how this dehumanizing practice “made you feel like less than a person.” These sentiments and events spurred Black students’ strong sense of protest. Walkout participant Marshall Baldwin’s recollections,

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based on a 2016 oral history interview, align with contemporary messages of civil disobedience that supported Black students' decision to openly challenge their abuse (Graham, 2006).

Administration's willful ignorance provoked G.W. Carver students' anger, and many decided to display their discontent in a clear, concerted act of resistance: a walkout. These factors motivated African American pupils to unite in this, by most accounts, leader-less, spontaneous show of force, which started at LaVega High around 10am on September 14, 1970 ("LaVega boycott continues," 1970). Hours later, about 130 of these former G.W. Carver students marched approximately three miles back to their former school ("LaVega boycott continues," 1970). Thereafter, many students boycotted school for the rest of the week (Matthews, 1970).

Absolving Whiteness Due to Black Resistance

In response, white male administrators wielded their power, threatening to use physical violence to control Black students. Specifically, superintendent Cranfill grew outraged. His fury was directed at Black students, who refused to sit idly by while the district devastated their educational legacy. Uninterested in working to understand why his Black students were so upset, Cranfill called their list of demands "fantastic" ("Negro pupils," 1970, p. 6); Black students had organized this list to guide redress for the school closure and their mistreatment. In Black students making demands of Cranfill, they threatened his sense of white male authority and challenged the white supremacist status quo. On the day of the walkout, Cranfill commented, "I wish I had 100 National Guardsmen, but they say you can't have them unless local protection breaks down I guess someone will have to get killed first" ("Violence feared," 1970, p. 3). Cranfill's remarks harken back to President Dwight Eisenhower calling in the National Guard to in 1957 to facilitate the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas (Anderson, 2010). Wishing for either law enforcement to suppress student dissent or death, Cranfill struggled to manage the blowback from the part he played in closing G.W. Carver. Cranfill went on to express, "I don't think the situation can get much worse without bloodshed" ("Violence feared," 1970, p. 3). Cranfill's language squared with white Waco mobs' lynching rhetoric (Bernstein, 2006) in his wishing physical harm upon dissenting Black students. Despite high student participation in the subsequent boycott that resulted in a near 50% absenteeism rate, LaVega High School principal Donald Richardson declined to close the school while "hop[ing] no one g[ot] kill[ed]" (Royals, 1970, p. 1A). This wish tracks with Cranfill's cries of bloodshed. Commentary from both Cranfill and Richardson was laced

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with a mocking tone indicating their belief that Black students were innately violent and bloodthirsty, a belief that served to justify using physical violence against them.

On Tuesday, September 15, 1970, *Waco News-Tribune* reported the following details around the walkout (“LaVega boycott continues,” 1970). Involved students had delineated thirty-five grievances and “vow[ed] not to return to LaVega High until the phased out Carver High [was] reopened” (p. 1). In response, superintendent Cranfill labeled his Black students “impossible,” language that once again invalidated them and their concerns (p. 1). Cranfill also admitted he believed “they are just unhappy with integration, the loss of their symbolism, and the loss of their own identity with Carver High School” (p. 1). Embedded in Cranfill’s comments was the condescending assumption that Black students had nothing about which to be upset, indicating his inability to see how race and racism influenced the power he exercised as a white male superintendent or the institutional reach of white supremacy. Black students debunked Cranfill’s assumptions, expressing aspirations for their former school; “they didn’t care if Carver opened as a high school or junior high as long as it opened If Carver was converted to a junior high school then high school age students would willingly attend La Vega” (p. 1). While they understood the necessity of change, former G.W. Carver students were unwilling to accept the school’s complete end. In many ways, these Black students showed dynamic leadership capacity and high racial literacy that Cranfill lacked, exhibiting level-headedness and self-determination.

Disrespect Is Earned When Respect Is Not Received

The superintendent’s indignities persisted. Cranfill ended the year by sending numerous notes to local and state law enforcement agencies, thanking them “for the wonderful and efficient cooperation extended us during the troublesome school year” (LVISD meeting minutes, 1971). These notes are unique because Cranfill had not previously expressed this kind of gratitude. These notes demonstrated that he viewed Black students as troublesome, warranting law enforcement’s assistance in controlling them. As a white male district leader, Cranfill struggled to humanize the Black students in the district he led, an issue linked to the inherent power and privilege he enjoyed as a white man.

Marshall Baldwin’s (2016) interaction with Cranfill at his 1971 graduation ceremony captures many Black students’ feelings at this time.

When I got my diploma, I went to shake Cranfill’s hand, and I didn’t. And every Black kid after me did the same thing, just got the diploma and walked off. And I wasn’t—consciously, I wasn’t trying to start nothing, but I remember what I had been through the past year, I

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remembered that. You [Cranfill] were one of those in power that could have made a difference, and you didn't. You turned your back to it. You turned a deaf ear to it. You just let things go the way they shouldn't—that they went. Had you stood up and said, "Wait a minute, we can do better," see, I would have had a lot more respect for him. But he didn't. So, I didn't feel like I needed to shake his hand. (p. 42)

Black students saw no use for decorum with Cranfill given his leadership. Declining to shake Cranfill's hand at graduation en masse represented a formal accusation that Cranfill had misused his power; it also reflected that Cranfill had made his Black students feel that he saw them as sub-human. In subverting conventional expectations at their graduation ceremony, Black students exposed Cranfill as a school district leader with incredibly poor racial literacy, that is, as one who lacked the ability to identify the institutional dimensions of racial power or how he upheld them (Guinier & Torres, 2002). Black students saw why Cranfill struggled to hear their concerns and heed their advice. This episode demonstrates the importance Black students placed on giving the respect one expects to receive, and it clarifies why Cranfill's white supremacist, antiBlack leadership did not warrant a handshake.

Seeing, Hearing, Heeding: Leveraging Hindsight with Racial Literacy

Viewing Cranfill through a CRT and racial literacy lens (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Guinier, 2004) exposed him as the standard rather than the exception and typified the structural antiBlack racism that pervaded the school desegregation process. Cranfill, whose actions were unremarkably violent—by history's standards and today's—did not operate in a vacuum. His accomplices were regular people who sat on the school board, taught in classrooms, readied their children to learn each day, and led their respective schools in LVISD. Cranfill's behavior suggests he had decided to (only) lead the white part of his district—seeing (only) them as fully human—while disregarding the educational needs of the Black part of his district. His commitment to sub-humanize Black people motivated this strategy. Moreover, Cranfill's allegiance to the white stakeholders in LVISD was undeniable. His white racial identity, his masculine gender identity, and his middle-class identity motivated his refusal to grant African American children a humanizing education. As a white working-class area with few Black residents, Bellmead was characterized by numerous figures like Cranfill, who saw Black students and their pleas to be fully humanized as threats to the prevailing social order (Guinier, 2004; Roediger, 1991).

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This article extends research on how maleness and whiteness shaped school district leadership and how they historically positioned leaders to neglect Black students and their pleas for dignified treatment. Overlapping with other systems of oppression, racial exclusion, white supremacy, and antiBlackness have historically played a chief role in determining access to essential resources—both material and symbolic (Harris, 1993; Mills, 1997; Roediger, 1991). Cranfill's leadership practices were informed by his white, male, middle class identity, which unfolded in a white working-class context that was deeply hostile to African Americans. This hostility transferred to Black students in his district and proved detrimental.

This article makes a salient departure from much extant racial literacy scholarship by examining an ardent white supremacist, who promoted a hegemonic social order (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). Poor racial literacy was evident in administrators denouncing Black students as fully culpable for the turbulence around school desegregation rather than leaders admitting their role in its mismanagement. In particular, Cranfill's misrecognition of his Black students as the problem, not the white supremacist, antiBlack systems he upheld, indicated his poor racial literacy. His brash language reflected his awareness of the reasons Black students were upset, but his poor racial literacy allowed him to label their concerns trivial. Such dismissal exemplifies Cranfill's struggle to deconstruct the significance of race and his belief that Black people lacked the civil, human right to protest. Low racial literacy prevented him from acknowledging the ways desegregation disproportionately burdened African Americans (Cecelski, 1994; Tillman, 2004; Walker, 2000) and obscured his understanding that he had disregarded his Black students' humanity and their race-based grievances. In contrast, Black students' actions were rooted in robust racial literacy, of the counterhegemonic ilk (Chávez-Moreno, 2022), that helped them identify their superintendent as a major source of their trouble. Their acts of defiance, punctuated by the walkout and their refusal to shake Cranfill's hand at graduation, portray their willingness to resist sub-humanization.

This case furnishes new insight on school desegregation dynamics in central Texas with a critical eye toward the superintendency, Black education, and racial literacy. By building and applying well-developed racial literacy, Cranfill could have bypassed much of the chaos in which he found himself embroiled. This competency would have supplied him with the tools necessary to ensure his school community was humanized, seen, and heard, actions linked to a faithful heeding of their woes. Allegiance to white supremacy, however, undercut his leadership and tarnished his reputation. Reflecting on his leadership's

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inadequacies, Cranfill could have challenged his white supremacist outlook and used his power to register Black student dissent legitimate and worthy of engagement. Had Cranfill worked to *see* the full humanity of his Black students, he would have likely been able to *hear* their cries for dignified treatment—conduct that would have, at least, notified them of their school’s closure, or, at best, solicited their thoughts on the matter. Seeing and hearing in such a way could have led to Cranfill’s *heeding* his Black students’ concerns. Perhaps he would have been unable to single-handedly save the school, but his advocacy might have inspired compromise or motivated school personnel to treat them more humanely; it most certainly would have shown Black students that he cared about them and afforded him more handshakes at graduation.

Implications and Conclusion

Although Cranfill’s issues cannot be fully explained by his poor racial literacy, this perspective nuances understanding of white supremacist education leadership. Education scholars, therefore, can benefit from paying greater attention to how one sees, hears, and heeds the communities one studies and/or serves. Ignoring historical context not only compromises humanizing research; it also contributes to the sub-humanization of historically marginalized and underserved peoples (Yoon, 2018). Although instrumental, well-developed racial literacy alone is not a panacea for racial justice. While we posit it as an initial step toward educational equity and justice, it is part of a wider social justice praxis.

Teacher and school leader preparation programs can learn from this historical episode, ensuring that they are intentional about challenging the status quo of white supremacy and antiBlackness, encouraging the development of high racial literacy (King, 2022; Oto et al., 2022). We have shown how LVISD’s educators declined to view Black students as thinkers or valuable contributors to a new school climate that should have welcomed and included them. In this narrative, Cranfill and the larger white LaVega community disregarded Black humanity, much like the lynching mobs that murdered numerous Black Wacoans decades earlier (Bernstein, 2006). Racial literacy helps illuminate that white supremacy and antiBlackness emboldened those in power to disregard the interests of Black children.

Our illustration reveals that white supremacy and antiBlackness determined whose concerns were valid and worthy of thoughtful response. This episode stresses the significance of race alongside other social identities in shaping educational experiences, as Cranfill’s white racial identity, masculine gender identity, and middle-class status con-

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verged to create a worldview with white middle-class men at the center and presumptively impoverished Black communities on the periphery. In this historical account, the superintendent refused to register Black students' cries for dignity in part because he did not view their humanity as equal to his. Thus, his poor racial literacy undermined their efforts to be seen, heard, and heeded. Black students' replies, however, demonstrate how they refused to succumb to Cranfill's and LVISD's efforts to subjugate them.

Recent events demonstrate that political leadership in the state of Texas is actively and ardently upholding hegemonic racial literacy. The Lone Star State has passed laws that restrict teaching about race, diversity in K-12 classrooms alongside the legislative dismantling of multicultural, diversity, equity and inclusion programs on higher education campuses (Legal Defense Fund, n.d.). These restrictions have both a long history and significant implications for the school and district leaders expected to implement them (C. James-Gallaway & Dixon, 2023). While practitioners and scholars adjust to this new normal, counterhegemonic racial literacies remain vital to the continued subversion of these white supremacist policies. Subversion might look like education leaders, as well as other practitioners and scholars, engaging reflexively to more deeply understand the structures in which they work to identify opportunities for resistance, practicing what some scholars describe as equity-mindedness (C. James-Gallaway & Wilson, 2023). Additionally, education leaders, other practitioners, and scholars must consider the needs of the racially marginalized communities they may serve, no matter their size. That is, if a small number of Black students are in a predominantly white school setting, it is vital to consider how their needs might be equitably centered. This could mean practitioners do a deeper dive into how they support or undermine Black students in such an environment.

Ultimately, we have demonstrated how a more nuanced understanding of white supremacy can foster better appreciation for Black students' resistance to it and efforts to sub-humanize them. In racially hostile settings with long legacies of racial violence, Black Waco students navigated oppressive contexts that sought to sub-humanize them, rendering them unworthy of humanizing perception, interpretation, or reaction. Thus, Cranfill's antiBlack actions paralleled the same notions of disposability and cruelty that had murdered countless Black people in Waco and beyond. The continuation of these issues across society underlies our call to heighten racial literacy toward counterhegemonic ends (Chavez-Moreno, 2022) in education as a vital step toward prioritizing Black dignity in education administration. History shows us such is long overdue.

Note

¹ After drafting an early version of this manuscript, the first author drew on the seeing, hearing, heeding framework we present here for a book chapter (A. James-Gallaway, 2022a).

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