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Breaking the Silence

Ushering in Courageous Conversation About Race

Of all the civil rights for which the world has struggled and fought for 5000 years, the right to learn is undoubtedly the most fundamental. We must insist upon this to give our children the fairness of a start which will equip them with such an array of facts and such an attitude toward truth that they can have a real chance to judge what the world is and what its greater minds have thought it might be!

—W. E. B. DuBois (1949)

What is a child's right to learn? This is a fundamental question that we pose to you, the reader of this book. Our assumption is that most educators enter the profession believing that *every* child has the right to learn, whatever the child's race, culture, or economic class.

In reaction to the preceding quote, Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) asks, "How [can we] reinvent the system of U.S. public education so that it ensures a right to learn for all its students, who will enter a world in which a failure to learn is fast becoming an insurmountable defeat?" (p. 2). There is no time left for educators in the United States to let this question linger.

Of particular interest to us is the topic of race and its role in the education of this country's children. We believe that race—and thus racism,

in both individual and institutionalized forms, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged—plays a primary role in students' struggle to achieve at high levels. We are writing this book with hopes that the reader shares our moral understanding of this issue and is willing to engage with us to come to a deeper understanding of race and racism. Most educators inherently believe that racism is morally wrong. The challenge is to advance that moral position into real, comprehensive, cognitive, and intellectual foundations of understanding that will allow us to challenge racism in our everyday personal interactions and professional practices.

THE RACIAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP

The significant achievement gap that exists between Black and Brown students and their White and Asian counterparts has been publicized more than ever due to the impact of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation. This is indeed a *racial* achievement gap because the variance in performance exists between students of different skin colors. To begin addressing this *racial* gap—intentionally, explicitly, and comprehensively—is the purpose of this book.

With all of the recent attention to the achievement gap, which has been thoroughly investigated and evidenced in the work of Kati Haycock, Ruth Johnson, Belinda Williams, and countless other esteemed colleagues in the field, we are not asking *if* the achievement gap exists. Our intention is to move educators beyond acknowledging the reality of the racial gap toward developing a strategy for eliminating it. We want to illuminate a primary reason why the gap persists and propose a strategy for its elimination. Our primary and essential question to you is as follows:

> To what degree do you and your system have the will, skill, knowledge, and capacity to understand and address issues of race as they relate to existing racial achievement disparities?

Based on our experience, few classrooms, fewer whole schools, and far fewer entire school districts can offer up educators who are truly willing and prepared to address the racial achievement gap head-on. Considering that the racial composition of our student population is rapidly changing, how will educators who are the racial inverse of the emerging student population arrive at a new and necessary level of cultural proficiency and instructional effectiveness? Whereas the number of students of color continues to increase dramatically, the number of teachers of color is actually dropping. The 2000 census indicates that more than 72% of five-year-olds

enrolled in preschool in our most populace state, California, are non-White. Thus, there is a dramatic need to build interracial knowledge and understanding so that the adults in schools comprehend the needs of their children.

Essential Questions

Related to the aforementioned systemic preparedness question are three essential questions, adapted from *Understanding by Design* by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (1998, p. 179), that all educators need to address in their work in school:

1. What is it that students should know and be able to do?

2. How will we know when students know it and are able to do it?

3. What do we do when we discover that students don't know it and are not yet able to do it?

In this book, we take these questions further by framing them in terms of the personal and professional inquiry and action educators must consider as they address the racial achievement gap:

1. What is it that educators should know and be able to do to narrow the racial achievement gap?

2. How will educators know when they are experiencing success in their efforts to narrow the racial achievement gap?

3. What do they do as they discover what they don't yet know and are not yet able to do to eliminate the racial achievement gap?

Without asking these questions, educators are left searching—knowing there is a problem, but not knowing what to do about it.

External Factors

Frustrated by the racial achievement gap's existence, educators often blame social, economic, or political factors external to the school and unrelated to the quality of learning and teaching. We have found this kind of blaming to be insufficient at best and destructive at worst when trying to address racial achievement disparity. Families send their best children off to school each day, and it is the educators' responsibility to greet students with the highest quality instruction and emotional support possible.

In his article "The Canary in the Mine," Mano Singham (1998) disputes common and simplistic explanations that educators invoke to explain the persistence of the racial achievement gap. Among these are

The "liberal interpretation," which claims that "educational disparities are caused by socioeconomic disparities" (Singham, 1998, p. 10). However, as has been well documented elsewhere and will be evidenced later in this book, racial achievement gaps exist even among students within the same socioeconomic levels. In other words, poverty alone cannot explain the gap. Specifically, if this poverty explanation were valid, most students at similar family income levels would be performing at nearly the same level in school. In our work, we have discovered that poor White students, on average, out-perform poor Black students, and this pattern persists at the middle and upper income levels as well. Even more alarming are data that indicate poor White students may outperform middle-income Black and Brown students.

The "conservative" or "sociopathological model," which says that because the Civil Rights Movement removed legal barriers to Black advancement, "various social pathologies within the Black community (lumped under the euphemism 'Black culture') must be at fault" (Singham, 1998, p. 10). Thus, supporters of this model "tend to lecture Black Communities con-stantly about the need for a wholesale spiritual awakening to traditional virtues and the work ethic" (Singham, 1998, p. 10). The problem, how-ever, with this approach is that the White critics are—in essence—asking the Black community to just "act White." As Singham (1998) continues, "Given the behavior of Whites during the time of slavery, to ask Blacks to regard Whites as role models for virtuousness seems presumptuous, to put it mildly" (p. 10).

The "genetic model" is the third view put forth to explain the achieve-ment gap. For example, Herrnstein and Murray's (1994) *The Bell Curve* concludes that "educational disparity is a fact of nature, the result of long-term evolutionary selection that has resulted in Blacks' simply not having the genetic smarts to compete equally with Whites" (according to Singham, 1998, p. 10). Singham strongly refutes this view. Furthermore, this argument has been thoroughly debunked by extensive research, such as that presented by Kati Haycock (2003).

Educational Responsibility

To move beyond these refutable and hotly debated explanations and arrive at a deeper and more useful understanding of the racial achievement

gap, educators need to stop placing blame on the places and people beyond their control. By doing this, they will avoid faulting children for who they are and what their background is. We advocate a new strategy because it encourages educators to engage in difficult self-assessment and to take responsibility for what they can control: the quality of their relationships with colleagues, students, and their families, both in the classroom and throughout the school community.

According to Linda Darling-Hammond (1997),

The fundamental problem is that we have pushed the current system as far as it can go, and it cannot go far enough. If we care about all students and about the fate of the society as a whole, we cannot ignore real problems or merely seek to "get around" the present system. We must re-create it so that it, in turn, reshapes the possibilities for the great majority of schools. (p. 27)

Two decades earlier, Tomas A. Arciniega (1977) put it this way:

Public education has successfully shifted the blame for the failure of schools to meet the needs of minority students on to the shoulders of the clients they purport to serve. They have pulled off the perfect crime, for they can never be held accountable, since the reason for failure in school is said to be the fault of poor homes, cultural handicaps, linguistic deficiencies, and deprived neighborhoods. The fact that schools are geared primarily to serve monolingual, White, middle-class and Anglo clients is never questioned. (p. 123)

We believe that the racial achievement gap exists and persists because fundamentally, schools are not designed to educate students of color, and educators continue to lack the will, skill, knowledge, and capacity to affirm racial diversity. Consequently, educators need to begin a deep and thorough examination of their beliefs and practices in order to "re-create" schools so that they become places where all students do succeed.

Change is tough—any change! Thus, another primary challenge to addressing racial achievement disparity is that school systems struggle with change. If school systems truly care about *all* children, then why have they not been more willing to address the achievement gaps? How can educators in good conscience allow a racial achievement gap to persist? Are they unaware of some of the inherent racial inequities or racial biases in the system? Or are they perhaps conscious of the inequities but unwilling to address them? It certainly seems easier not to deal with the hard work of change because it requires educators to be innovative in

their search for a new solution and courageous in the face of those who wish to at least maintain and perhaps even perpetuate the status quo.

Janice E. Hale (2004) wrote recently that "it is hypocritical to talk about 'equal opportunity' when the system ensures never-ending advantages for upper-income White students" (p. 34). The disparity is easy to see; what remains invisible is a focused and concerted effort to adequately and successfully address the racial achievement gap.

THREE CRITICAL FACTORS

Through our fieldwork and research, we have defined three critical factors necessary for schools systems to close the racial achievement gap: passion, practice, and persistence. Without these critical factors, a system quickly disengages from an intentional desire to change how students are taught and supported in their learning. The three factors for closing the racial achievement gap can be described as follows.

Passion

Passion is defined as the level of connectedness educators bring to anti-racism work and to district, school, or classroom equity transformation. One's passion must be strong enough to overwhelm institutional inertia, resistance against change, and the system's resilience or its desire to maintain the status quo. Furthermore, passion is required to confront these challenges because our society as a whole—despite what may be said—continuously proves unwilling to support schools financially or politically to the degree that is needed to bring about deep and lasting change. But passion is insufficient if it is not translated into transformed relationships and practices that in turn prompt improved teaching and learning for every child, in every school, every day.

Practice

Practice refers to the essential individual and institutional actions taken to effectively educate every student to his or her full potential. Substantial knowledge and research-based practices exist about what works in the classroom for students of color. Educators need to develop and engage these skills. Because the most effective practices are infrequently amplified, the racial achievement gap might legitimately be seen as a teaching gap, even a racial teaching practice gap. Specifically, achievement disparities among White, Black, and Brown student groups can be defined as much by teachers' inability to recall and engage effective

strategies as it is by students' inability to master the standards. Again, our work in schools provides evidence that educators have an insufficient repertoire of instructional practices to effectively teach students of color.

Persistence

Persistence involves time and energy. Rarely do we dedicate sufficient time to address the racial achievement gap. Persistence at the institutional level is the willingness of a school system to "stick with it" despite slow results, political pressure, new ideas, and systemic inertia or resistance to change. A persistent school system institutionalizes real school change with effective leadership, classroom implementation, and community partnerships. Individual educators who are persistent remain focused on equity and closing the racial achievement gap regardless of which direction the educational reform wind is blowing.

THE STRATEGY OF COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION

These three critical factors provide a philosophical context within which we will introduce to you Courageous Conversation, a strategy for addressing the various impacts of race on student achievement. Engaging the strategy of Courageous Conversation begins with a deep-seated *passion* to address a multitude of race matters in education and a commitment to the Four Agreements of Courageous Conversation. Beyond this, educators will *practice* the Six Conditions of Courageous Conversation, which provide a road map for participating in and facilitating interracial dialogue about race. Finally, as an anti-racist leader, you will exercise *persistence* in exploring the role of Courageous Conversation in systemic equity anti-racism transformation, which creates the lasting structures within which to achieve equity in your classroom, school, or school system.

Organization of This Book

Courageous Conversations is divided into three parts reflecting the three essential characteristics of anti-racist leadership: Passion, Practice, and Persistence. Part I, "Passion: An Essential Characteristic of Anti-Racist Leadership," explores the landscape of educational reform and exposes the issue of race as a phenomenon that affects the lives and learning of all children. In these chapters, we help the reader to focus on race in lieu of the traditional topics—such as poverty, language, and learning disabilities—that have long occupied educators' attention and have resulted in only unsatisfactory incremental systemic changes.

Part II, "Practice: The Foundation of Anti-Racist Leadership," takes the reader on a step-by-step journey into the race conversation, providing the language, markers, tools, and insights necessary to begin and stay in the dialogue.

Finally, in Part III, "Persistence: The Key to Anti-Racist Leadership," educators learn about the leadership that is necessary to close racial achievement gaps. Specific strategies for teachers, schools, and districts to use in the implementation of systemic equity anti-racism transformation, are provided, including organizational ideas that help teachers develop better ways to teach and help schools to embrace the communities they serve. The book concludes with a description of the work of the Lemon Grove School District and its success in implementing a systemwide Courageous Conversation.

We have included in each chapter prompts and exercises designed to help readers personally reflect on what they've learned. Use these questions to guide deeper examination of your own attitudes, beliefs, and actions. You might also ask a trusted friend or colleague to join you in conversations that help you reflect on your own thoughts and feelings. These are critical in helping you to deepen your understanding of race, its impact on students, and your own abilities to engage in anti-racist leadership.

Likewise, at the end of each chapter are implementation exercises for focused school- and systemwide professional learning. These will guide you and your colleagues in the immediate and effective application of the Courageous Conversation strategy. Follow the guidelines to conduct safer and more productive dialogues and activities. We encourage you to provide Courageous Conversation Journals for each participant in the activities so that they can reflect back on their learning, growth, and challenges.

This book provides a foundation for those educational leaders at the system and school level who are willing and ready to begin or accelerate their journey toward educational equity and excellence for all children. This includes superintendents, board members, district administrators, principals, team and teacher leaders, and engaged members of the community. It is designed to assist in facilitating effective dialogue about the racial issues that impact student achievement.

Language of Race

The language that we use in this book to define and discuss racial matters is the language that we have discovered to be most effective in our work with thousands of educators in this country and other parts of the

world. We believe our language of choice will help you gain access to and find your voice in Courageous Conversations about race. Because language is at the heart of culture, it is essential that we establish common language around race while at the same time remain open to how our varied racial experiences shape our own vocabulary and comfortableness with the conversation in general.

The language surrounding racial issues has remained elusive precisely because constructive and Courageous Conversations about race occur infrequently in American culture. To address race, the language of race must become concrete so that school leaders can effectively guide the conversations that will assist them in eliminating the racial achievement gap.

As you enter into this conversation, please accept a certain degree of ambiguity regarding our use of language that defines and describes race. Working through the Six Conditions of Courageous Conversation in Part II, you will come to understand why we often refer to people's skin color rather than to their culture or ethnicity. Furthermore, we capitalize racial descriptors such as White, Black, and Brown. This is to acknowledge and place racial identity on a par with ethnic identity, such as Asian American and African American. Pay attention to when you experience personal dissonance with the terminology and take time to clarify what the words mean to you. Willingly use racial terms in your conversations to deeply examine race and its impact.

By using our framework, you can come to understand race in a personal and profound way. After this, you will discover how we translate these personal insights about race into practices that effectively narrow the racial achievement gap.

We are all learners, to some degree, in this examination of race. It matters not where you are on the continuum of racial understanding. What is important is your willingness to deeply explore your own racial identity and better empathize with the corresponding perspectives and experiences of the racial other. Consequently, we invite you, the reader, to join with us in this journey toward racial equity and anti-racist leadership.
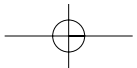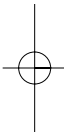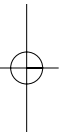
PART I

Passion

An Essential Characteristic of Anti-Racist Leadership

The key here is not the kind of instruction but the attitude underlying it. When teachers do not understand the potential of the students they teach, they will underteach them no matter what the methodology.

—Lisa Delpit (1995a, p. 175)

Teaching is a demanding profession. It requires remarkable skill, substantial knowledge, and significant effort. It would take little effort to describe the technical requirements of teaching, but teaching is not a technical job. The very best practitioner in education will fail without the right attitude. Attitude underlies everything necessary in successful teaching. But what is the right attitude for engaging in the effort to close the racial achievement gap?

Passion is the key. Having worked with thousands of educators, we have observed that those teachers and administrators who are most proficient at teaching *all* students of *every* race also have a tremendous amount of passion for the work they do.

For us, equity is a characteristic to foster. In a school that strives to close the racial achievement gap, educators work toward promoting high achievement among all students and equitably providing the type of

instruction that each student needs. When considering your own attitude, the following question should be posed: Is equity really your passion?

Just as people can become anti-racist once they begin to develop an authentic need to include people of many races in their personal life, school leaders can become truly passionate for equity work as they discover a will to succeed with students of color in their school. This will or desire manifests itself as the driving and emotional force behind the work they do. Leaders with such a passion will begin to see equity as an essential characteristic of their school's success. They will clearly notice inequities where they exist and willingly focus on correcting them.

Educators need to locate this passion in order to transform schools. Observing schools with leaders who are truly passionate about equity is an incredible experience. These are amazing and dynamic schools that exude a great sense of community and enthusiasm. In these schools, continuous learning by all and high expectations for everyone—including the teachers—are everyday experiences. Conversely, in schools lacking that sense of passion for equity, feelings of pessimism, failure, and hopelessness are omnipresent. These buildings are full of toxic adults who stave off meaningful reforms, and they are deadly places for the large numbers of children of color who typically attend them.

School leaders need to decide where they stand in relation to equity, and if they do not yet have passion for it, they must find some; passion is a prerequisite to succeeding in a school with a diverse racial population. Nowhere in our description of passion for equity do we suggest that the educator must be a person of color. Culturally proficient and courageous educators of all races can succeed with *all* students, but only after they locate and nurture their passion for equity work.

The essence of passion is engagement and willingness to change. There is little honor in holding back, limiting participation, accepting mediocrity, and finding comfort in the status quo. With passion, we engage our soul and our being in this work, along with our mind and our body. With passion, we reclaim our hope and belief in the possibility of a future devoid of racial injustice—a future governed by equity and anti-racism. With passion, we will survive the conflict, the lack of support, and the passive resistance that comes with challenging institutionalized racism in our schools. And with passion, we will have the strength not only to *stand up for* what is right for our children, but to *do* what is right for them as well.

Passion is the cornerstone of anti-racist leadership. Emboldened with *passion*, enabled with *practice*, and strengthened by *persistence,* we can create schools in which *all* students achieve at higher levels, achievement gaps are narrowed, and the racial predictability and disproportionality of high and low student achievement are eliminated.