

Foreword

When I was first approached to write the foreword for this book, my inclination was to decline. Like many people, I have an impossible schedule that hardly allows for any additional tasks. However, when I had an opportunity to read the manuscript, I understood why I had to make room in my schedule to write this foreword. Almost all of the conversations about schools today focus on the need to be more rigorous, to be more accountable, and to close the achievement gap that exists between the United States and her international peers, between rich and poor children within the United States, and between White and Black students (and other students of color) in this nation. Of those concerns, only the last one seems to deal directly with the question of race. In truth, all of them deal with race—just as almost everything in our society does.

One of my reasons for wanting to write this foreword is quite personal. I live in a city that prides itself on its tolerance and activism on behalf of people who have experienced discrimination, disadvantage, and exclusion. It is one of the few places in the country that started study circles on race where scores of community members came together week after week to discuss race and racism in the city. However, once the school district decided to take a serious look at racism, we began to see just how difficult it is to engage with notions of race and racism. Let me be clear—the district is filled with teachers, administrators, and others who have good intentions and goodwill toward all students, regardless of their race, language, and ethnicity. But those good intentions (and goodwill) do not help teachers and other educators deal with the problems of race and racism that pervade our schools at every level.

Another reason I was prompted to write this foreword is the result of having recently viewed the feature film *Crash*. This is a film about the intersecting racial, ethnic, and class lives of people in Los Angeles. It is dramatic, compelling, and raw, and yet for all its intricacies, it leaves out the most salient intricacy—the way power organizes and deploys race and racism. Instead, in *Crash*, we have a story of multiple levels of prejudice and bigotry—everyone is complicit. We have no way to think about the

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structural and symbolic systems that make race so available to us. We can leave the theater believing that “it’s everybody’s fault” and not clearly examine how systems of power are operating to keep the current social order intact. As elegantly as the film is crafted, at base, *Crash* leaves us with a sense of despair about race and ethnic relations in the United States. It reinscribes the notion that individual actors bear sole responsibility for our current racial state and that there is little we can do about it. However, this volume offers another vision for educators.

Race is the proverbial “elephant in the parlor.” We know it’s right there staring us in the face—making life uncomfortable and making it difficult for us to accomplish everything we would really like to do—but we keep pretending it isn’t. As one African American community activist once said, “Don’t you realize how much better we could be, how much farther along we could be, if we didn’t invest so much time and energy into racism?”

From my perspective, this volume, *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Attaining Equity in Schools*, is an attempt both to expose the elephant and to get it moved out of the parlor. The beauty of this volume is that it is designed to help lay people—teachers, administrators, parents, community leaders, and even university professors—begin to engage in the emotionally and psychically difficult conversations about race.

Some people believe that talking about race only “makes it worse.” We have all heard those who say, “If you would only stop talking about race, people wouldn’t be racist,” or “You’re the racist because you keep bringing it up!” That’s akin to saying, “I wouldn’t have cancer if I didn’t go to the doctor!” Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton have offered us an important book, providing us with empirical data and well-constructed exercises to help us think through the ways that race affects our lives and our professional practices.

One of the surprising aspects of the book is how freely the authors offer assistance for which they could be handsomely compensated. Much of the work in this book reflects their ongoing professional practice, and yet, they have seen fit to make it widely available. This is a testimony to their passion and concern about healing the racial divides that pervade our schools, communities, and the nation.

I love the notion of “courageous conversations.” Think about what it implies. I can think of numerous times in my life when I have had to have a courageous conversation. Typically, I have had such a conversation with someone in whom I am deeply invested—my spouse, my children, my parents—and I deeply care about the outcome of that conversation. When I needed to talk to a teenaged son about steering clear of drugs, it was a courageous conversation. I did not want to appear cavalier—that is, “Just say no”—because I wanted him to take me seriously. I did not want

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to be a stern, disciplinarian—"If I ever catch you using drugs I will ground you for a year"—because I didn't want him to feel he could never come to me with questions and concerns. I needed to have an honest conversation about how he could address peer pressure and take his own stand and about how much his staying healthy and pursuing his life dreams meant to our entire family.

I think the same thing obtains in a school setting. Singleton and Linton are suggesting that teachers have to be willing to have courageous conversations with people with whom they share their professional lives. They have to care about the people and the environment. They cannot continue to make polite conversation or issue polemic dictums. They need to have real, authentic, hard conversations—courageous conversations—if they are ever to address the disease of racism that is so prevalent in U.S. life.

In the recent book *Color Mute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School* (Pollock, 2004), the author describes how people in one U.S. high school struggle to talk about race—at the most basic levels. We do not know what to call each other or if we should call each other anything that has a racial designation. But Pollock demonstrates that even when we avoid talking about race, we are talking about race; that is, even in our avoidance of the subject, we are engaging it. This is similar to David Roediger's (1999) assertion in his book, *The Wages of Whiteness*, that even in his all-White German American neighborhood, race was never absent. Furthermore, in a study of teachers teaching early literacy (Ladson-Billings, 2005), my colleague and I observed teachers regularly talking about students' failure to read without ever mentioning race. Almost all of the struggling students were Black or Latino. It was not until six months into the project that teachers recognized the salience of race in the students' achievement. At this point, we were able to deal honestly deal with the students' academic issues.

Each of the authors referenced above provides theoretical, conceptual, and empirical evidence about the ways race operates, both in the school and in the society at large. Singleton and Linton complete the circle by providing practical and practice-based strategies for confronting race in open and honest ways. However, it is important to point out that this is not a recipe book. This book requires the readers to think critically and confront their own deeply held ideas and perceptions about race. My sincere desire is that after you have had an opportunity to read this volume, you will, indeed, engage in some courageous conversations about race.

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