

Preface

This book is dedicated to Wendell “E. J.” Singleton, the youngest member of co-author Glenn Singleton’s extended family. Three years ago, the family lovingly sent a precocious, inquisitive boy off to school for the first time. E. J. arrived with pride and joy, but—like so many young African American boys—he was greeted by a system that did not expect much from him, yet had already determined much for him. In two short years of formal schooling, E. J. has been labeled a failure, special needs, at-risk, and ADD. History suggests that E. J. will find it virtually impossible to shake loose from these deficit descriptors.

We are writing this book because E. J. deserves qualified and skilled teachers who love him instead of fear him, as do his many friends in Baltimore public schools and students of color like them throughout this nation’s schools. These youngsters deserve competent instructors who understand, value, and affirm their colorful African American, Latino, Asian, and other cultures. They are owed a procession of teachers who will be skilled in drawing out their innate brilliance, curiosity, and creativity.

Roughly 30 years ago in the very same public school system, Mrs. Hall, Mrs. Sandifer, and Mrs. Thomas, to name only a few, effectively taught Glenn Singleton in the way his cousin E. J. deserves to be instructed. Why is it that E. J.’s teachers are not capably meeting his academic, social, and emotional needs?

Every day, Glenn and his family worry about E. J.’s spirit as he travels the mean streets of Baltimore into the meaner hallways of his public school. The daily affirmations E. J. recites each morning are becoming a weak defense against a system that predetermines him to be incapable of achieving at a high level. Rather than point out all that is wrong with our schools and the adults who inhabit them, however, this book has been written to support educators and assist them in meeting the needs of E. J. and the thousands of other students of color like him.

Based on publicity generated by the No Child Left Behind Act, educators are acutely aware of the statistical gaps in achievement between White students and most students of color groups. We believe that the

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primary and essential way of addressing these gaps is to create a culture that encourages educators, both Whites and people of color, to discuss race safely and honestly in the school environment. Contrary to popular assumption, this is an issue of concern not only to educators and families who are people of color but to all; the welfare of all students—no matter what their color—depends on *all of us* succeeding at this conversation.

This is a book about race. In schools, race plays a primary role in sustaining if not widening the achievement gap. But educators have not been very good at talking about race and its impact on learning. We write this book to provide a strategy—Courageous Conversation—that educators can use to open up the conversation on race in their schools.

With so much written in the arena of achievement disparity, the last thing the field needs is another book pointing out the obvious—that we have not quite figured out how to educate all children well. What we offer, instead, is a detailed, thoughtful, ongoing, and influential strategy for having conversations about race that deepen our understanding about how and why the racial achievement gap persists in most schools and at all economic levels. It is precisely because few educators have explicitly investigated the taboo intersection of race and achievement that we offer this book. Our rationale is quite simple: We will never eliminate the racial achievement gap unless we have conversations about race.

We, the authors—Glenn Singleton, who is Black, and Curtis Linton, who is White—have used this strategy to guide our own mutual racial discovery. Within this context, we have worked closely to come to a better understanding of our own and our separate individual racial experiences. Glenn was already very aware of his own racial identity as an African American, but growing up White, Curtis was unaware of his equally powerful racial identity until he began working with Glenn while producing and writing a program for *The Video Journal of Education* entitled “Closing the Achievement Gap.”

Curtis's initial engagement in this work came at the end of the first day of one of Glenn's seminars, *Beyond Diversity*. For many in the room, it was the first time they had ever been encouraged to openly discuss race with someone of a skin color different than their own. At the end of the day, Glenn offered the participants some concluding thoughts. He said that White people, emotionally moved by what they have heard, often approach him at the end of these seminars and ask, “So what do I do now?” “How can I be anti-racist?” “How can you forgive me for having been racist?” “How can I fix this?” Glenn's answer is simple but profound: “Just believe me.”

Just believe me—is that all? Believe Glenn when he says that he experiences racial profiling almost daily. Believe him when he says that his

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White neighbors treat him differently. Believe that he is a victim of lowered expectations, that he is accused of succeeding only because of affirmative action, and that he actually has a lifetime of racist and racially discriminatory experiences.

To believe and trust this person of color was Curtis's first level of understanding. He acknowledged that even though his experiences as a White man have been very different, he does not have the right to reinterpret Glenn's life, to justify the actions of others who are White, or to claim that Glenn does not actually experience what he claims he does. Curtis feels obliged to believe Glenn, to listen to him, and to treat him like the equal human being that he is.

Since that time, as we have worked together, we have deeply and personally reflected on, examined, and discussed the impact of race, first in our own lives and then in the culture at large. Curtis is White. Glenn is Black. The two of us exist on opposite ends of the American racial binary. Because of this, our individual racial experiences are dissimilar, and yet we are friends and colleagues. The key to our successful friendship and collaboration is our willingness to communicate openly, honestly, and respectfully about race. And in believing and trusting each other across racial categories, we can begin addressing the issue of race within our schools.

For nearly two decades, Glenn Singleton has guided thousands of educators in examining themselves racially, and he has worked closely with hundreds of school systems throughout the United States, helping them develop the culture and structure necessary to close the racial achievement gap. Over the past 10 years, Curtis Linton has visited hundreds of the most effective schools and school systems across North America, documenting on video their effective practices and creating training resources that help to duplicate those successes elsewhere. In writing this book, we have drawn on both of our experiences and related expertise to provide educators with a research-based strategy that they can use to understand race and address racism in their schools.

Courageous Conversation, as a strategy, begins with the premise that initially, educational leaders collectively view themselves and the schooling enterprise to be inherently non-racist. In fact, their tightly held beliefs and understandings regarding the significance of race make it difficult for teachers to comprehend, examine, and rectify the very ways in which race dramatically impacts achievement.

Unfortunately, the racial situation in schools only mirrors what takes place in the larger society. John Dewey suggested that schools must be the engine of social transformation. In *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools*, we have set out to redefine the

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educational context and then provide the content and process for educators to grapple personally with race as a critical sociopolitical construct. In our work with a variety of schools, districts, and regional programs, we have found that Courageous Conversation effectively enables educators to develop and operate from a transformed racial philosophy that guides their policy analysis, institutional restructuring, and instructional practice reform.

As educators engage in, sustain, and deepen interracial dialogue about race with each other and with students and their families, systems then can truly support all children in achieving at higher levels. As schools work toward equity, they will narrow the gaps between the highest- and lowest-performing groups and eliminate the racial predictability regarding which groups achieve in the highest- and lowest-performing categories.

Courageous Conversations is divided into three parts reflecting the three essential characteristics of anti-racist leadership: *Passion*, *Practice*, and *Persistence*. In *Passion*, the book begins by exploring the landscape of educational reform and exposing the issue of race as a most devastating phenomenon impacting the lives and learning of all children. We go on to help the reader focus on race in lieu of the traditional topics, such as poverty, language, and learning disabilities, which have long occupied our attention and resulted in only unsatisfactory incremental systemic changes. The next series of chapters, *Practice*, 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 *Persistence*, educators will learn about the leadership that is necessary to close racial achievement gaps. They will finish the book by investigating the work of the Lemon Grove School District and its success in implementing a systemwide Courageous Conversation.

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. As you progress through each chapter, you will be prompted to reflect on your learning and, in particular, your own racial experience. At the end of each chapter, you will find implementation activities that you can use with your staff to lead them in discussing the impact of race in the classroom. As a school or system-level leader, this book will guide you in engaging your staff in a conversation on race as a first step in closing the racial achievement gap.

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As you address the prompts and complete the exercises we have carefully embedded in each chapter, you will feel a surge in your own will, skill, knowledge, and capacity to lead others through the same journey. Although we urge you to avoid involving others too soon in your own developmental process, at some point, you will not be able to resist ushering your friends, family, and colleagues into a Courageous Conversation. We have witnessed this process unfold for thousands of educators over the past decade.

Closing the teaching and learning gap requires that teachers think about their craft differently. E. J.'s teachers certainly have their work cut out as most of them need to envision and practice pedagogy in ways that they have never seen nor experienced before. But a teacher's hope in the unseen, along with an unwavering belief that our families really do want the best schooling for our children, can sustain them in this work.

We are writing this book in the hope that our readers embrace what we view as a moral imperative to arrive at a deeper understanding of race and racism. We suspect most educators already believe that racism is morally wrong. The challenge for us is to advance our shared moral position into a realizable and comprehensive foundation for challenging institutional racism. Our students deserve nothing less.

Given the magnitude of race as a topic and the long history of racial achievement disparities, no one book can solve this educational problem and the broader societal issues that underlie it. What this book can do is get us pointed in the right direction by engaging, sustaining, and deepening the conversation about race, racial identity development, and institutional racism. It is our hope and belief that having Courageous Conversations will create the lasting foundation on which magnificent new relationships between teacher and student are built and higher achievement is gained.

To our ancestors and elders who have provided a historic foundation on which our contemporary understanding and insights about race are built, we thank you. We also recognize that without the patience, practice, and persistence of our partner districts and other educational leaders throughout this nation, we could have never discovered the deep and lasting impact of Courageous Conversation in today's schools. Our most sincere acknowledgment of the many who have contributed greatly to this book is seen in our efforts to capture their work and words in a thoughtful and thorough way. Writing about these transformative dialogues represents our hardest work yet. But the greatest learning also occurs as we engage, sustain, and deepen the interracial conversation about race in schools and districts. Through this transformative work, student success will increase, the racial achievement gap will close, and you will personally be impacted as you discover yourself racially. And now, it is time for you to join us in this journey of possibility!