

**“Courageous Conversations” by Glenn E. Singleton and Curtis Linton
Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2006**

Reviewed by Karen Schulte, Senior Associate, Ray.Taylor and Associates

Schools working on closing the achievement gap seem to be divided into two “camps”: those focusing their efforts on improving curriculum and instruction and those focusing their efforts on examining racism and its impact on student achievement. Viewing solutions to the achievement gap in this way – as an either/or proposition – has not, in most places, yielded the intended results.

Singleton and Linton have developed a process they call *Courageous Conversations*. They describe this process as a lens focused on race and racism, through which educators may examine their classroom, school and district practices. This process is systemic in nature and provides a way to encourage educators to remain focused on the impact race and racism have on student achievement, while at the same time providing a way to discuss specific practices and necessary changes. The authors believe that schools can’t just focus on curriculum and instruction, nor can they focus only on racism, but both must be examined if we are going to make changes that improve student learning for all and close achievement gaps. They state, “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” (page 5).

This book is intended for building leaders – both administrators and teachers – who will be in a position to facilitate staff discussions and activities. Each chapter provides specific information and activities to share with staff. Although this may seem too formulaic to meet individual school needs, it does offer a framework from which to work. “With *Courageous Conversations* as the prevailing strategy for discourse, educators are invited to examine more closely theories and practices aimed at closing the racial achievement gap. *Courageous Conversations* lifts the unconscious veil of color blindness and silence and requires educators to develop their color consciousness in a way that is humane and productive” (page 214).

Courageous Conversations are defined as a strategy for deinstitutionalizing racism and improving student learning. Passion, practice and persistence are viewed as necessary for school systems to close achievement gaps. Passion within an organization must be strong enough to “overwhelm institutionalized inertia, resistance against change, and the system’s resilience or its desire to maintain the status quo” (page 6). Practice refers to the actions necessary to educate every student, including classroom instructional skills and building and district practices. Persistence, focusing time and energy over a significant period of time, is necessary to achieve any meaningful change. *Courageous Conversations* require these three factors.

Additionally, Singleton and Linton identify four agreements necessary to build the foundation for *Courageous Conversations*. Participants must agree to:

- stay engaged,
- speak their truth,
- experience discomfort, and
- expect and accept non-closure. (page 17)

These create the environment and build the culture necessary to enable educators to have difficult conversations about their experiences with race, attitudes about race, and the impact they see race having on student achievement.

The authors also identify six conditions required for *Courageous Conversations*:

- Conversations must be personal, local and immediate.
- Race must be isolated as a cause of achievement gaps, while recognizing that other variables may also contribute.
- Race must be seen as a social and political construction – and multiple experiences and perspectives of participants must be honored and accepted.
- Conversations must be monitored and facilitated to be effective. This includes monitoring the number of participants, time allotted for participants to speak, listen and reflect, prompts for discussions and developing an environment that will enable all participants to meaningfully be a part of and stay engaged in the conversation.
- Participants must come to agreement about a working definition of race.
- Participants must be willing to examine the role of Whiteness and its impact on achievement gaps. (Page 19)

Chapter 1 describes achievement gaps, provides supportive data and gives an overview of the process used for *Courageous Conversations*. Chapters 2 and 3 discuss race as a construct, racial consciousness, and explain the four agreements necessary to hold *Courageous Conversations*. Chapters 6 through 10 explore the six conditions of *Courageous Conversations* in depth. All of these chapters provide supportive and practical information as well as activities and processes to use with staff. Each chapter ends with a racial autobiography to illustrate a point and provide another way to approach dialogue.

Lastly, Chapters 11 through 13 explore the role of leaders in initiating and continuing *Courageous Conversations*. The end goal of these efforts is that “educators will have the time and support they need to develop, apply, reflect, revise and master the necessary knowledge and skills to guarantee success for all students” (page 212). The structures necessary to have in place for schools to effectively focus their efforts are described. Schools are asked to form Equity Teams who will facilitate *Courageous Conversations*. As the conversations become deeper, CARE Teams (Collaborative Action Research for Equity) are formed to “support teachers in discovering the challenges that exist in their relationships with students of color and then to improve their instructional delivery accordingly” (page 233). Finally, community members are involved in this process through the development of PASS Groups (Partnerships for Academically Successful Students).

This book offers schools a roadmap with specific and practical ideas for not only facilitating discussions about race and racism, but to also move beyond the generalities most usually associated with these efforts to a specific and focused process of identifying changes in instructional practices. “Teachers will often say ‘Give me a strategy,’ but there are two inherent problems with this request: (1) teachers are not situated to be learners, and (2) they do not understand equity and anti-racism. If a teacher is just handed a culturally responsive strategy without first establishing the language or ability to talk about race, that strategy will most likely be used ineffectively, if at all, because the teacher does not understand it or believe in its relevance” (page 232).