

Listen In on Our *Courageous Conversations About Race* Book Chat

Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania, for the Book Chat group

On March 2nd, armed with our agreed upon norms, 53 of us began a text-based reflective journey with an electronic “Block Party” about these quotes from the preface of *Courageous Conversations About Race* (chat members agreed to share their thinking publicly, but I have removed names because individual confidentiality is one of our norms).

“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.” (page xiv)

Well, this is why I want to engage in these conversations. I don't know if this quote reflects the truth but I am willing to spend a significant amount of time exploring the intersection because thus far it doesn't seem like other strategies have worked well to reduce the connection between race and achievement. Perhaps by having these conversations unforeseen ideas will emerge in the area of “what I don't know that I don't know.” So, it's worth the effort to me.

All the quotes are strongly stated assertions: “we will never...,” “just believe me,” etc. As premises to operate from, I think they can successfully frame these conversations in ways that are a healthy break from the “business as usual” discourse of schools. They are for me promising working hypotheses rather than “the truth.” -M

“White people, emotionally moved by what they have heard, often approach him (Glenn) 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.’” (page xiv)

This is the quote that resonates for me largely because there are many times when I have been the only person of color in a room full of intellects from the dominant race. The subject is a very intellectual discussion on teaching and learning. I will interject a comment about race and its impact on me or students in classrooms pertinent to what is being discussed and what was an intellectual discussion becomes charged with emotion. First there is silence. More often than not after the silence someone will pick up the thread of the intellectual conversation and carry on as if I did

not say anything. I wonder if I am crazy. Did I not speak? Am I not speaking a truth that needs to be explored deeply in order for us to do our best work in schools? Invariably, someone will come up to me after the meeting and say “I am so glad you said what you said.” I smile, but I am wondering “Why in the H E double hockey sticks did you not acknowledge or expand on what I said?” Another response after the meeting is often a need to negate what I might have said. That conversation starts off with “You can't possibly feel that way.” or “Things are not that bad, are they?” Once someone shared with me after such a meeting that white people, including the speaker, were/are afraid of being called racists that is why they shy away from conversations on race. Once I wanted every white person to stand up in a crowd and shout “I am a racist!” Great! Now let's get on with what could be a substantive and courageous conversation about race . . . -C

As a white ally, I feel stung by the “truth”/pain of a colleague of color's experience when I have to reckon with my piece of responsibility, my role in causing the pain. In the heat of the moment, I may not know what to say. In my discomfort, I may welcome the chance to just move on as if nothing has been said, or happened. What I am learning, and it is an ongoing process of learning, is that it is precisely at those uncomfortable moments that I need to slow down and acknowledge what was said/happened and own the fact that I don't know how to respond . . . that I need to think about it, or talk more with colleagues about it. As a coach/facilitator, I am working on holding the space & time for these admittedly intense and awkward conversations because I know that it is only by working in this risky zone that I/we can move forward. Concretely, this means changing the agenda and being willing to go beyond the tried-and-true steps of the protocol, if the protocol's not working. Based on conversations C and I have had in our work, I know that this willingness to “hold the space” is part of her definition of having her back. -D

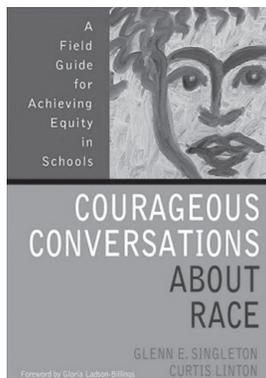
“Courageous Conversation, as a strategy, begins with the premise that, initially, educational leaders collectively view themselves and the schooling enterprise to be inherently non-racist. In fact their tightly held beliefs and understandings regarding the significance of race make it difficult for teachers to comprehend, examine, and (continued on page 19)

Courageous Conversations...

(continued from page 6)

rectify the very ways in which race dramatically impacts achievement.” (page xv)

I have used this quote to help teachers become open to the “race” conversation. I find that the teachers with whom I work find it difficult (as mostly white, middle-class folks) to look at race. They go first to class/poverty, family conditions, individual characteristics etc. I have some teachers who proudly share that they are “color-blind” in their classrooms. Given these experiences, I think that the quote is accurate in that most (white) educators do not easily embrace conversations focused on race . . . -E



This quote hits home for me. I have spent all of my life teaching in one school district. From my perspective, although many educators might view themselves as non-racist, I don't believe that the vast majority have delved deeply into what we really think and believe about race. As a white person it has taken me years to learn how to have conversations about race. Yet, I know that as I examine my beliefs, I have learned that each day means a new encounter and deep personal reflection. I am sorry to say that many, if not most, of my white colleagues don't and/or can't examine tightly held beliefs. I know for a fact that this has an impact on our students, an impact so severe that many, probably most, have suffered and will continue to suffer because of our inability to deal with this issue. -W

I wonder if we really DO “collectively view [our]selves . . . to be inherently non-racist” - or if we (collective {white} “WE”) really think about it at all most days. The urgency of the now has a way of overpowering the important things. Even when we do take time to reflect and discuss, such as in work sessions and CFG meetings, I find raising questions about race and inequities brings a lot of silence. It's a silence that doesn't seem to be emotionally laden, but rather blank, like there's no connection. It doesn't seem to even be a delayed reaction, but rather a lack of comprehension. -K

“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 . . . 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 . . . As a . . . 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.” (page xvi)

I have chosen to highlight this paragraph because it reminds me that my work begins with critical self-reflection that is both emotional and intellectually demanding. And, that this self-reflection is in service of engaging in dialogue that will lead to actions toward equitable (transformative) policies, practices and behavior. This notion challenges me to stay grounded and focused on what the authors of this text are inviting me to do. Namely, be courageous enough to begin by interrogating my own assumptions (beliefs, values and feelings) provoked by the text and make them as transparent as I can as part of the ensuing online discourse. For me this allows the possibility that I can grow in my sensitivities and insights in participating in critical discourse - having an open mind, learning to listen empathetically, “bracketing” premature judgment, and seeking common ground. This requires that I bring whatever emotional intelligence I have (self-awareness, impulse control, persistence, zeal and self-motivation, empathy and social acumen) to help assess alternative beliefs, and participate fully and freely in critical-dialectical discourse. I am excited to have a chance to practice this sort of communicative learning because of the emphasis on critical self-reflection in assessing and navigating the knowing and not-knowing to make a more dependable working judgment on the actions I need to take. -V

Our conversation has slowed down during this peak vacation and travel season, but we are not calling it to a close. We share this sound bite from our chat in the hopes that our reader-colleagues will begin to have similar conversations in their local contexts. In the next issue, two colleagues have agreed to share their thoughts about “white talk and color commentary” as it is posed in the text and in their lives. Stay tuned! ■

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