

Courageous Conversations About Race:

A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools

Book Review by Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

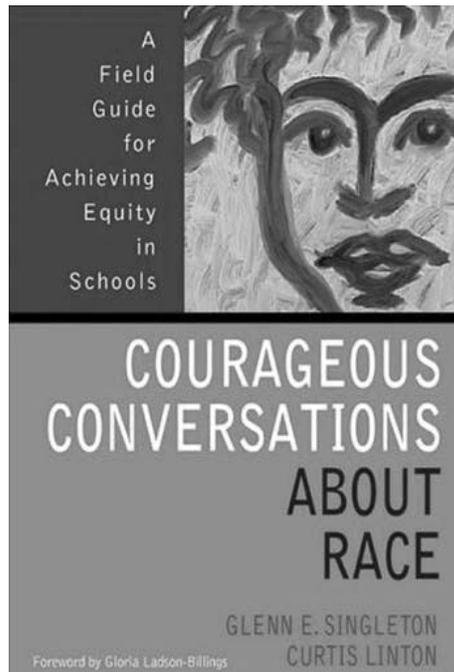
Glenn E. Singleton and Curtis Linton design transformative professional development for school districts. Singleton is African-American and Linton is white. These two leaders have formed a working alliance and friendship based on their mutual passion for having courageous conversations about race in order to address its impact in our schools today. They frame their book as a personal/professional inquiry that is guided by the following essential questions:

- What is it that educators should know and be able to do to narrow the racial achievement gap?
- How will educators know when they are experiencing success in their efforts to narrow the racial achievement gap? And...
- 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?

It is the third question that has preoccupied my thinking since I read the announcement for this new book a few weeks ago. It has set me to wondering about my responsibility as a white educator to break with not knowing, to interrupt the "ignorance is bliss" syndrome that allows me to check in and out of being aware about racist inequities in our schools and society. It means I have to seek out and hold spaces for the "courageous conversations" that these authors define as a conversation that:

- engages those who won't talk,
- sustains the conversation when it gets uncomfortable and
- deepens it to the point where the talk is linked to authentic changes in practice (Singleton & Linton 2006)

The authors then go on to outline four norms or agreements and six conditions for courageous conversations that act as a protocol of sorts to help guide this necessarily uncomfortable journey of racial discovery. They present the process of total engagement in these conversations about race as a



compass that embraces the components of emotional (feeling), moral (believing), intellectual (thinking) and social (doing) as equivalent parts of a foundational whole. The compass graphic is then revisited by participants as part of an ongoing self-reflective process that encourages self-monitoring and full participation by each member.

The book also offers specific strategies and activities that groups, such as CFGs, can use to breathe new life into their commitment to hold themselves in the risk zone where real change and growth can occur. Prompts in the book set the stage for provocative, Discourse II conversations that go beyond admiring the problem and can lead to viable changes in our practice with our students.

I haven't finished reading this book, it just arrived yesterday in the mail, but I know in a way that touches all the points of the compass the authors describe that this is going to be a critical resource for me in this next period. Lately, I've felt overwhelmed by recent developments like the murder of Sean Bell by the police in New York and the profiling and violent arrest of the Iranian student by campus police at UCLA. This book has already helped me to proactively own what I don't know as a white educator in a way that empowers me to step up as an ally and an advocate. Cornel West describes what I've been feeling lately as being "... trapped in the narrow framework of the dominant liberal and conservative views of race in America, which with its worn-out vocabulary leaves us intellectually debilitated, morally disempowered, and personally depressed...(West 2001). I don't do disempowered well and I welcome this book and its strategies as a much-needed support in my efforts to hold myself accountable for the interruption of educational inequities and the creation of equitable opportunities for each student.

If you purchase this book and are interested in developing an ongoing online conversation about the way you are using it, e-mail nsrf@nsrfharmony.org. We can start our online chat in January. ■

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