

"Can We Really Talk?"

By

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November 4, 2008 will be the most significant date over the next hundred years. America has taken a huge step in realizing how inter-racial collaboration can make everything possible! Whites and People of Color locked arms at the voting polls to elect the first African American President of the Unified States of America. This historical event has placed Americans on a *Crash* course to talk about Race.

As President elect Obama becomes our 44th president, having constructive, rewarding and liberating conversation about race and its impact on adults and students in schools will become increasingly vital to closing the racial achievement gap.

The focus of this article is to provide the reader with the understanding and importance needed to develop Race conversation norms to ensure Whites and People of Color proactively discuss Race in schools. The article will provide some generalizations of how Whites and People of Color will enter and navigate the conversation of Race.

The article will also highlight how the conversation about race is not a means to an end but an opportunity for the adults to open the door to building powerful inter-racial relationships to support collaboration and student performance.

I urge the reader to read the content of the article in first person and not in third person. I challenge you to action in having an inter-racial conversation about Race.

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W.E.B De Bois, a prominent African American scholar writes in 1906, "The issue of America in the 19th century will be the color line and issue of Race". Interestingly, former President Clinton quotes, "I believe the greatest challenge we face...is also our greatest opportunity. Of all the questions of discrimination and prejudice that still exists in our society, the most perplexing one is the oldest, and in some ways today, the newest: the problem of race."

I believe the elephant is getting bigger in the living room and still nobody is noticing it. The issue of race and racism in our schools is being avoided like the plague. The most surprising piece about the elephant is that the students at our schools are ready to have this "courageous conversation." The need to engage in an *interracial conversation* about race and racism will shed much needed light to educators who are diligently strategizing on how to reach the heads and hearts of all of our students.

In my different roles as an educational consultant, K-12 administrator and university instructor, I've been inclined to share my thoughts and strategies about an agonizing topic. A topic that America's schools have had difficulty engaging in, a conversation about Race and its Impact on Student Achievement.

The desired outcome of this article is to inform educators why the conversation is needed and make suggestions on how to construct a healthy environment to have an interracial conversation about race. More importantly, the start of an interracial conversation of race in our educational system is a strategy to begin to close the academic achievement gap.

America is struggling with this concept and needs to make a valiant attempt to participate in an interracial conversation about Race and its effects on student achievement. The conversation occurs, too frequently in racial and cultural isolation.

Over the course of my educational career, I've had the opportunity to participate in many district-sponsored diversity and cultural awareness workshops. The district's intent ranges from addressing racial and social student unrest, to addressing the ever-present academic achievement gap between white students and students of color. I believe the attempt of school districts should be applauded, but the long range and systemic purpose of these workshops have not been clearly articulated to the mandated participants.

Many teachers are asked to participate in workshops where the issue of race and racism tends to filter in as a topic in solving many of the issues facing their district or school site. The atmosphere of the one or two-day workshop ranges from personal emotion, excitement, guilt, and anger. I would like to believe that the school district's purpose of engaging their employees in this type of staff development training is to provide strategies that will assist teachers of all colors to address the strength of diversity in their schools.

As written in many staff development articles across the nation, "one-shot" staff development is not an effective strategy for systemic implementation. Often it is a cause for skepticism when districts have not developed how to sustain the efforts of their diversity or equity staff development. Many White teachers and teachers of Color leave the workshop with different emotional connections. More often than not, there are no plans to process their emotion in a collaborative interracial environment.

Many teachers walk away with the feeling that the workshop serves very little purpose and it is more of a district check-off. The value of the workshop is lost. Teachers and administrators tend to process the information from the workshop in racial isolation. Unfortunately, this racial isolation does not promote an interracial conversation about race and student achievement.

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The information being shared within isolated racial groups is seldom shared across racial lines. My engagement in an interracial conversation on race with my white friends and colleagues is more of a monologue than a dialogue. I become the lecturer opposed to a participant in the conversation. Many of my White friends are very apprehensive to comment for fear of saying the wrong word and thinking that their comments will be viewed as being Racist.

Noteworthy, the fear of this conversation is shared by both Whites and with People of Color. Whites are fearful of saying the wrong words with the trepidation of offending People of Color or being called a Racist. People of Color are fearful, because of the emotional and personal information that may not be understood by Whites or more despairingly would be minimized.

This article is not to single out white educators, but calls attention to the absence of the Conversation of Race. The subsequent strategies that will eventually surface because of the interracial conversation is an untapped avenue in narrowing the achievement gap and more importantly improving the 3 P's - Policy, Practice, and Pedagogy. The collaborative interracial conversation about race and student achievement will inevitably shed light on the students who are achieving and the students that are not achieving in school.

Before we can close the gap, we must recognize not "ALL" of the students are experiencing school the same way. Being able to dialogue about students and student racial groups will open the door for traditional and non-traditional instructional strategies to closing the gap. Many times Race and Racism are not considered a factor for student achievement. This closes the door for the courageous conversation.

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The conversation becomes even more important in light of the following California School demographics. Over 85% of the teachers and administrators in California are white and over 63% are students of color. The "browning" of California schools will dramatically change the way we as educators and policy-makers do business.

The system will need to call to arms the 85% of the White educators and educators of Color to "REALLY" discuss together pedagogical strategies to close the achievement gap between the lowest performing and the highest performing groups in our school system. Starting, sustaining and developing action plans on race and its implications on academic achievement is a place educators dare to go and the disaggregated achievement data is telling us to go there!

"Can we close the achievement gap without really having an honest conversation about race and racism?" As States and local school districts disaggregate their achievement data, it becomes very clear and astounding that there is an achievement gap among Latino/African American and White students. Many would argue that the gap is rooted in the parent's education and socioeconomic factors. I do not discount the impact of these factors but I offer this, "If we do not engage in this interracial conversation we have not explored a critical strategy to closing the gap." Also when we begin to understand the impact of Race and Racism on all students, educators will critically analyze their practice and instruction.

As different racial groups engage in this courageous conversation it will be tough! It is imperative that "we talk" about this critical topic that is becoming overtly present in our schools. I would like to offer strategies that will assist in overcoming the obstacles that individuals will encounter during the conversation. Understanding that mutual respect of this engagement by the racial groups is critical in the first steps in initiating the conversation. The strategies I provide is only one perspective and some may connect to the strategies and others may not, nonetheless, I urge you to move forward with having the conversation.

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Understanding and respecting the different perspectives serves as one strategy for this "Courageous Conversation". Having the conversation is not a means to an end but should be embraced as part of the journey. On this journey, White People and People of Color will start at different levels of racial consciousness. As an African American male my level of racial consciousness will come from a different path than a White person because of our different life experiences. Not Right or Wrong, Just Different!

Whites will need to know that an interracial conversation about race from a person of color will be filled with emotion and passion. This emotion and passion should not be analyzed or intellectualized but rather listened to without judgment. Racism hurts everybody and many people of color encounter racism daily.

Part of the conversation is not to judge the story but to hear it. Some Whites will need to be resilient and understand the nature of the passion and emotion. Some Whites tend to personalize stories presented by People of Color and feel they are being personally attacked. This critical stage is where many Whites stop learning or refuse to continue the journey. Most attempts by Whites to continue the conversation is lost at this point. This is a stage that will take place; continue the journey!

Most people of color welcome the opportunity to have the conversation with White people. Unfortunately, People of Color are not as trusting to share their experiences with Whites for danger their personal information will be used against them. If the conversation is important, which I believe it is, trust by all must be established without persecution. More importantly, People of Color have to be resilient and collaborative with Whites as the conversation begins. No one should lead or dominate the conversation but be willing to meet the individual where they are on the journey. This understanding by People of Color will open the door for a “safe environment” and allow Whites to engage without persecution.

Due to the nature of the conversation there is no final stage or nirvana, so I do not attempt to illustrate what it looks like when all racial groups are engaged in the conversation. However, you will begin to notice that your relationship with a White person or person of Color will be deeper and the conversation about all students will take on greater meaning. Educators will be more equipped to develop culturally responsive policies, practices and pedagogy that will serve all kids and help the students who are most in need. More importantly, the notion of “No Child Left Behind” will take on different meaning.

As educators, we have attempted many programs and strategies to close the achievement gap. I offer having an interracial conversation about Race as a vehicle to craft different pedagogical strategies to narrow the gap. If courageous enough, the system of schooling will finally unleash the true power of *all* educators in solving many problems facing our schools.

I intentionally decline to delineate specific *instructional* strategies to close the achievement gap because they already exist. The “Will” to re-tool and use proven strategies for all students and specifically for students of color is critical to the conversation. My apprehension stems from educators hastily going directly to the strategies and minimizes the importance of the conversation and many will exclude the conversation entirely. The conversation is critical to the instructional strategies.



As Asa Hillard notes, "There are no pedagogical barriers to teaching and learning when willing people are prepared and made available to children". I believe the manner in which the conversation is initiated or re-introduced with "willing people" from different races will have contextual significance and powerful meaning to instruction.

I would like to challenge all educators to use this information to start or sustain the interracial conversation at your districts or school site. The courageous conversation starts with you!

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I welcome your thoughts and response to the article. Please feel free to e-mail me at: javius@edequity.com.

For additional support with sustaining the "Conversation" and transforming dialogue to instructional practice to "close the achievement gap" and other staff development support, please contact EDequity, Inc.:

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