

By doc peterson Review of Courageous Conversations About Race

Format: Paperback

I live in a rapidly gentrifying part of town as my neighbors of color become fewer and fewer and more people like me move into it. What was once a predominantly African-American, working-class neighborhood is transforming into an upper-middle class and increasingly white neighborhood. Sadly, the neighborhood schools remain largely segregated, my new neighbors sending their children to other schools in the city or to private schools, my African-American neighbors sending their children to the schools close by. I find this disturbing. What I also find disturbing is the "achievement gap" between children of color and White kids. Previously I had attributed this "achievement gap" to socio-economic differences and a lack of parental involvement in schools. I was wrong to think this, as Singleton and Linton address pointedly in their book. What causes this gulf - and more importantly, how it can be eliminated - has been a hot-button issue nationally with the passage of "No Child Left Behind" and locally as school districts seek to address this problem. Singleton and Linton suggest that the most effective place to begin is with a hard, cold look at the issue of race in American schools specifically and American society at large. A caveat - any meaningful discussion of race is going to be uncomfortable and disturbing for all parties, regardless of race. Singleton and Linton provide the context in which to have these discussions, with the intent that participants (regardless of race) come to an understanding if not necessarily consensus on the impact of racial relations in education.

The issue, they contend, is that our public school system has been created by and for Whites. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that "White" is the norm in American society - that White people, given their position as the dominant race and culture in America don't have to think about race unless they want to (as compared to those in the minority who are confronted with the issue of race daily). Further, given the position as the dominant race in America, Whites have privilege accorded them much in the way that men have privilege accorded them based on gender. As with the feminist movement, if things are to change, it will have to be by actions of the dominant group to make this happen much as the passage of the 19th Amendment had to be passed by the male-dominated Congress. This argument particularly resonated with me.

Looking beyond the educational implications, *Courageous Conversations* is provoking in broader social terms. As the authors write, "the belief that White people are accorded advantage just based on skin color is foreign and threatening to their strongly held notion that White people achieved their superior status because they 'earned it' exclusively through hard work. These tendencies are embedded in the White racial culture and perspective." It was an uncomfortable revelation to recognize that my perception of "normal", of "success" and even the very cultural capital I had by virtue of my being White (and male) had something to do with the education I received, the values I have and the way in which I perceive others and the wider world. The issue becomes more important and more pressing when one considers that within the next generation Whites will no longer be the majority race in America. We as a nation need to have an honest discussion about race and how it impacts every facet of life in this country, and the sooner the better. This book is an excellent place to start, even though its primary audience is educators.

Where does one go from here? Singleton and Linton write, "Understanding how, when, and where race intersects with schooling allows educators to learn from each other and engage their students. Only through this heightened engagement of our students of color will school systems experience transformation that ensures success for all students. The purpose is not to accomplish gradual change in this work but to urgently and radically embrace the possibility of eliminating the racial achievement gap." I certainly hope so. A recommended read