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# Introduction

*Race matters. Race matters in part because of the long history of racial minorities being denied access to the political process. . . . Race also matters because of persistent racial inequality in society—inequality that cannot be ignored and that has produced stark socioeconomic disparities. . . . This refusal to accept the stark reality that race matters is regrettable. The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to speak openly and candidly on the subject of race, and to apply the Constitution with eyes open to the unfortunate effects of centuries of racial discrimination. . . . As members of the judiciary tasked with intervening to carry out the guarantee of equal protection, we ought not sit back and wish away, rather than confront, the racial inequality that exists in our society.*

—Hon. Sonya Sotomayor, Supreme Court Justice (2014)

I decided to dedicate the first edition of *Courageous Conversations About Race* to Wendell “EJ” Singleton, the youngest member of my extended family. Then, I spoke of how my family lovingly sent a precocious, inquisitive boy off to school for the first time. EJ started school with pride and joy, but—like so many young African American boys—he was greeted by a system that did not expect much from him and had already determined much for him. In two short years of formal schooling, EJ had been labeled a failure, special needs, at risk, and ADD. History suggests that EJ will find it virtually impossible to shake loose from these deficit descriptors. Nearly a decade later, as I sit down to revise *Courageous Conversations About Race*, EJ, now a senior in the Baltimore public school system, is poised to graduate after a long and perilous journey through institutions determined to make him an unfortunate statistic.

Then and now, my reasons for writing this book remain the same. EJ and the many Black, Brown, Southeast Asian, and Indigenous children who will continue to attend US public schools deserve qualified and skilled teachers who love them instead of fear them. These students deserve competent instructors who understand, value, and affirm their colorful African American, Latino, Indigenous, Asian, and other cultures. They are owed a procession of teachers and administrators who will be skilled in drawing out their innate brilliance, curiosity, and creativity.

Roughly 40 years ago, also in the Baltimore public school system, Mrs. Hall, Mrs. Sandifer, and Mrs. Thomas, to name only a few, effectively taught me in the way my cousin EJ deserved to be instructed. Why is it, then, that EJ's professional educators, more often than not, proved to be incapable of meeting his academic, social, and emotional needs?

For 14 years, my family has worried about EJ's spirit as he traveled the mean streets of Baltimore into the meaner hallways of his public schools. The daily affirmations EJ recites became a weak defense against a system that predetermined him to be incapable of achieving at a high level. Rather than point out all that is wrong with our schools and the adults who inhabit them, however, this book has been written to support educators and assist them in meeting the needs of EJ and the thousands of other students of color and indigenous students like him.



Given the increasing number of young Black males growing up in Baltimore, Chicago, Sanford, Jacksonville, and Ferguson who have not lived to see their high school graduation day, I feel the greatest sense of relief that EJ is alive, and also my family is relieved that he is finally done with a traumatic, protracted episode in compulsory schooling. Thus the untimely and unexplainable killings of Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, and Michael Brown, as Dr. Ladson-Billings so eloquently explains in her foreword, reveal America's most despicable racial circumstance and perhaps the boldest indication that our society is not advancing toward an end to racial injustice. In this wealthy, technologically advanced, highly educated nation, more and more of our darkest children are dying on the streets, literally. Still, this uncontested reality polarizes adults along racial lines, not as we attempt to discover meaningful solutions to these brutal slaughters, but in our racially balkanized expression of beliefs and determinations regarding the cause of these senseless deaths. I am fed up with this aspiring beacon of the free world being positioned in an interracial holding pattern, in which our highest leaders across the various sectors practice, as Dr. Barbara Sizemore wrote, "walking in circles." This book is my contribution toward breaking that cycle of cross-racial silence, ignorance, mistrust, judgment, and assassination.

## **MORE WALKING IN CIRCLES: AFFIRMATIVE ACTION**

Back in 2003 when Curtis Linton and I began writing the first edition of *Courageous Conversations About Race*, the US Supreme Court had just ruled on its latest challenge to the use of affirmative action in university admissions processes. *Grutter v. Bollinger* involved a racial discrimination claim by Barbara Grutter, a White female applicant who was denied admission to the University of Michigan Law School. The court ruled that race could be considered in the admissions process when other factors were being evaluated, and that such consideration did not amount to the kind of racial quota system that was determined to be unconstitutional under the 1978 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*.

Persistent legal attacks on Affirmative Action, espousing the belief that such policies award preferential treatment to students of color, fail to acknowledge and calculate the benefit White students receive from university systems steeped in residual racism. By this I mean institutions in which the faculty composition, perspective, teaching method, and culture are decidedly and overwhelmingly White. Nearly a decade later as I revise *Courageous Conversations About Race*, the most threatened federal policy in our nation continues to be Affirmative Action. And while we can celebrate our first Latina Supreme Court Justice, the Honorable Sonya Sotomayor, being confirmed to the bench, her lone voice does not ring loud and strong enough to roll back the tide or calm the resistance of those intent on abolishing the only regulatory process that successfully challenges systemic racism and offers remedy to the resulting centuries of federal government sponsored and perpetuated racial inequality.

On June 24, 2013, the Supreme Court decided on the case of *Fisher v. University of Texas*, in which two female high school students argued that they had been unfairly denied admission to the university's entering freshman class because they were White. Ms. Fisher's case is the latest claim that follows the growing and predictable assaults on the use of Affirmative Action in higher education, often by White females, who may be failing to recognize the importance of racially diverse perspective and experience in the nation's undergraduate, graduate, and professional schools. Without a vigorous Affirmative Action mandate, not only would people of color (and women) possibly not be serving as justices on the highest court in the land, but more personally, I definitely would not be in a position to write this book today.

But despite the indisputably positive impact of affirmative action, persons of color who persist through to graduation more than pay the fullest price each day in the academy, as we stare down predictably low institutional expectations, isolation from family and peers, and racial humiliation. Simply put, race matters, and racism is alive and well in 2014 just as it was in 2006 when the first edition of *Courageous Conversations About Race* was published. And as Justice Sotomayor states, "The only way to stop discrimination based on race is to talk openly and candidly on the subject of race. . . . We ought not sit back and wish away, rather than confront, the racial inequality that exists in our society."

## THE BACKDROP FOR COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION

A consequence of federal legislation such as the No Child Left Behind Act, and more recently, Race to the Top and Common Core State Standards, has been a heightened awareness among educators and the general public of the statistical gaps in achievement between White students and most students of color and indigenous students. I believe that a primary and essential way of addressing these gaps is to create a culture and provide structures that encourage ALL educators to discuss race openly, honestly, and as safely as possible in the school environment.

Contrary to popular assumption, this is an issue of concern not only to educators and families who are people of color or indigenous but to all; the welfare of all students—no matter what their race—depends on *all of us* succeeding at this conversation.

This is a book about race and, specifically, talking about race. In schools, as well as in other agencies and institutions, race plays a primary role in sustaining if not widening the omnipresent achievement gaps. But educators have not been willing to enter into discussion about this extraordinarily complex and emotionally charged topic. Thus collectively, we as educators have also not become very skillful at talking about race, and therefore we have failed to develop the requisite capacity to examine and address the impact of race on learning—neither our own learning nor that of our students. I write this book to provide a protocol and strategy—Courageous Conversation—that educators can use to engage, sustain, and deepen the conversation about race in their schools.

With so much written in the area of achievement disparity, the last thing the field needs is another book pointing out the obvious—that we have not quite figured out how to educate all children well. What I offer, instead, is a detailed, thoughtful, ongoing, and influential strategy for having conversations about race that advances our understanding of how and why the racial achievement gap persists in most schools, across all economic levels, and among native speakers of English and English learners alike. It is precisely because few educators have explicitly and unapologetically investigated the taboo intersection of race and achievement that I offer this book. My rationale is quite simple: We will never eliminate racial achievement disparities unless we have conversations about race.

I have been keenly aware of my own racial identity as a Black American since I was in the seventh grade, but growing up White, my former coauthor, Curtis Linton, was unaware of his equally powerful racial identity until he began working with me while producing and writing a program for *The Video Journal of Education* entitled “Closing the Achievement Gap.” I coauthored the first edition of *Courageous Conversations About Race* with Curtis Linton, because I believed that many readers might better relate to the racial narrative and experience of a White person. While I still believe this to be true, I also want readers to consider that much of the slow racial progress in the United States is precisely due to White people’s inability and/or unwillingness to listen to and learn from people of color and indigenous people about that which afflicts and affects us on a daily basis. Curtis discovered in our writing journey that another challenge for many White people, educators included, is their overall lack of trust in people of color and especially in our ability to honestly share our truths about race. After he made this discovery, Curtis developed a more expansive, less distorted personal racial consciousness. Simply because he chose to start believing me, as a Black man, and my narratives depicting race and racism in my life, he was able to understand, in a more profound way, how race impacts his life and, more recently, the lives of his two adopted children of color.

This conundrum of White disbelief, as well as the almost universal challenge many of us face when trying to learn from racially marginalized people, is one reason I have continued to advance some critical insights of Curtis Linton in this second edition. Although Curtis didn't actively participate in this revision, his story of an evolving racial consciousness was meaningful to many readers of the first edition. Another reason I will continue to introduce Curtis's voice is because he has visited hundreds of the most effective schools and school systems across North America, documenting on video their effective practices and creating training resources that help to duplicate those successes elsewhere.

Purposely in this latest edition of *Courageous Conversations About Race*, I am also insisting that all readers, White, indigenous, and of color, develop greater proficiency in learning from a Black person. Today, Curtis and I continue to use this very important skill and awareness to guide us in our mutual racial discoveries as well as in our racial equity leadership development. Within this context, we work closely to come to a better understanding of our own separate and interdependent racial experiences. While Curtis continues to view his personal and professional work through a lens of racial equity, his focus has not been specifically on developing and advancing Courageous Conversation.

Since publication of the first edition of *Courageous Conversations About Race*, I have guided thousands of educators all over the world in examining themselves racially, and I have helped leaders develop the culture and structure necessary to eliminate racial achievement disparities. I have guided my talented and skilled team at Pacific Educational Group (PEG) to focus exclusively on discovering ways to perfect this method for talking about race and to determine how it gets incorporated as a framework in systems of education and beyond. Today, PEG develops and leads Courageous Conversation communities of practice throughout the preK–12 and higher education sectors in the United States and Canada as well as in universities across Australia and New Zealand.



To provide some background information about my work, I introduced Courageous Conversation in a two-day seminar entitled *Beyond Diversity*, which I developed and first facilitated in 1995. Nearly two decades later, hundreds of people continue to enroll in the *Beyond Diversity* seminar each week, be it in its traditional, face-to-face format or through the more recently produced online platform. For many in a room or online, it is the first time they have ever been encouraged to openly and honestly discuss race with someone of a skin color different than their own. At the seminar's conclusion, the facilitator offers participants some concluding thoughts to answer some predictable yet unspoken queries. Many White people, emotionally moved by what they have heard, ask, "So what do I do now?" "How can I stop being racist?" "How can you forgive me for having been racist?" "How can I fix this?" My answer in 1995 and now, almost 20 years later, is still quite simple and still viewed as profound: "Just believe me."

*Just believe me*—is that all? Believe me when I say that I experience racial profiling almost daily. Believe me when I say that my White neighbors treat me differently or more accurately, “deficitly.” Believe that I am a victim of lowered expectations, that I am accused of succeeding *only* because of affirmative action, and that I actually have a lifetime of accumulated racist and racially discriminatory experiences.

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 rectify the very ways in which race dramatically impacts achievement.

Unfortunately, the racial situation in schools only mirrors what takes place in the larger society. John Dewey suggested that schools must be the engine of social transformation. In this second edition of *Courageous Conversations About Race*, I have set out to redefine the educational context and then provide the content and process for educators to grapple personally with race as a critical sociopolitical construct. In our work with a variety of schools, districts, universities, agencies, and regional programs, my team at PEG and I have found that Courageous Conversation effectively enables leaders to develop and operate from a transformed racial philosophy that guides their policy analysis, institutional restructuring, and programmatic reform. Such exceptional racial equity work, beginning with Courageous Conversation, in education systems will certainly have a dramatic and positive impact on the broader society and our larger world.

As educators engage in, sustain, and deepen interracial dialogue about race with each other and with students and their families, systems then can truly support all children in achieving at higher levels. As schools work toward equity, they will narrow the gaps between the highest- and lowest-performing groups and eliminate the racial predictability regarding which groups achieve in the highest- and lowest-performing categories.

## **A DECADE OF LEARNING: THE NEW EDITION OF *COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE***

*Courageous Conversations About Race* is divided into three parts reflecting the three essential characteristics of racial equity leadership: *passion*, *practice*, and *persistence*. In the first part, “Passion,” the book begins by exploring the landscape of educational reform and exposing the issue of race as a most devastating phenomenon impacting the lives and learning of all children. I urge my readers to maintain an unwavering focus on race, rather than income level or other variables of difference that may be more comfortable topics of discussion. The next series of chapters, “Practice,” takes the reader on a step-by-step journey into the race conversation, providing the language, markers, tools, and insights necessary to begin and stay in the dialogue. Finally, in “Persistence,” educators will learn about the leadership that is necessary to eliminate racial achievement gaps.

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. This includes superintendents, board members, district administrators, principals, teacher leaders, and members of the broader community. 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. At the end of each chapter, you will find implementation activities that you can use with your colleagues to lead them in discussing the impact of race in the classroom. If you are a leader at the school or district level, this book will guide you in engaging your staff in a conversation about race as a first step in eliminating racial achievement disparities.

As you address the prompts and complete the exercises I have carefully embedded in each chapter, you will feel a surge in your own will, skill, knowledge, and capacity to lead others through the same journey. Although I urge you to avoid involving others too soon in your own developmental process, I realize and predict that at some point you will not be able to resist ushering your friends, family, and colleagues into a Courageous Conversation. I have witnessed this process unfold for thousands of educators over the past two decades.

Closing the teaching and learning gap requires that teachers think about their craft differently. As EJ graduates from high school, his teachers, both past and future, certainly have their work cut out for them, as many of them need to envision and practice pedagogy in ways that they have never seen or experienced before. But a teacher's faith in undiscovered potential, along with an unwavering belief that our families really do want the best schooling for our children, can sustain them in this work.

I am writing a second edition of this book in the hope that our readers embrace what I view as a moral imperative to arrive at a deeper understanding of race and racism. I suspect most educators already believe that racism is morally wrong. The challenge for us is to advance our shared moral position into a realizable and comprehensive foundation for challenging systemic racism each day, whenever and wherever it appears. Our students deserve nothing less.

Given the magnitude of race as a topic and the long history of racial achievement disparities, no one book can solve this educational problem and address the broader societal issues that underlie it. What this book can do is get us pointed in the right direction by engaging, sustaining, and deepening the conversation about race, racial identity development, and systemic racism. In contrast to the first edition of *Courageous Conversations About Race*, the book you now hold offers more than a decade of developed insight from working around the world with educators, community members, students, and families at differing levels of will, skill, knowledge, and capacity to talk about race. From this inspiring work, I have been able to craft new ways in which Courageous Conversation practitioners and facilitators can bolster our courage, enhance our skills, and accelerate our achievement of results. The second edition offers more focused and relevant voices from a diverse group of racial equity leaders in the form of racial autobiographies and through

links to online videos accessible through QR codes. Finally, this book introduces the reader to St. Paul Public Schools, a Minnesota school system that has, for more than four years, stayed on track with Courageous Conversation and consistently implemented the Systemic Racial Equity Transformation Framework with fidelity. More than ever, it is my hope and belief that thoroughly immersing yourself in this text and practicing Courageous Conversations will create the lasting foundation on which magnificent new relationships between teacher and student are built and higher achievement is gained.

To my ancestors and elders who have provided the historic foundation on which my contemporary understanding and insights about race are built, I thank you. I also recognize that without the patience, practice, and persistence of our partner districts and other educational leaders throughout this nation and around the world, I could have never discovered the deep and lasting impact of Courageous Conversation in today's schools. My most sincere acknowledgment of the many who have contributed greatly to this book is seen in my efforts to capture their work and words in a thoughtful and thorough way. Writing about these transformative dialogues represents my hardest work yet. But the greatest learning also occurs as we engage, sustain, and deepen the interracial conversation about race in schools and districts. Through this transformative work, student success will increase, racial achievement disparities will disappear, and you will personally be impacted as you deepen your discovery about the impact of race in your life. And now, it is time for you to join me on this journey to a new possibility!