We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know

White Teachers, Multiracial Schools

SECOND EDITION

GARY R. HOWARD

Foreword by Sonia Nieto

Teachers College, Columbia University
New York and London

An earlier version of Chapter 1 appears in Becoming and Unbecoming White: Owning and Disowning a Racial Identity, Christine Clark and James O’Donnell (Eds.). Copyright © 1999 by Christine Clark and James O’Donnell. Reproduced with permission of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., Westport, CT.

A portion of Chapter 7 is adapted from an earlier article by the author, “School Improvement for All: Reflections on the Achievement Gap,” published in the Journal for School Improvement, Volume 3, Issue 1, Spring 2002. It is used here with permission from the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement, Tempe, Arizona.

Published by Teachers College Press, 1234 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, NY 10027

Copyright © 2006 by Teachers College, Columbia University

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission from the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Howard, Gary R.
We can’t teach what we don’t know : white teachers, multiracial schools / Gary R. Howard ; foreword by Sonia Nieto.—2nd ed.
p. cm. — (Multicultural education series)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
I. Title. II. Multicultural education series (New York, N.Y.)
LC212.2.H68 2006
370.117—dc22 2005052986

Printed on acid-free paper
Manufactured in the United States of America
Introduction

I fundamentally believe that educating all children, even those who are poor and non-White, is an achievable goal, if we truly value all children. Of course, that is the real question: Does American society truly value all of its children?
—Pedro Noguera, City Schools and the American Dream

Three grandchildren have come into my life since the first publication of this book in 1999, each of them bringing various combinations of multiracial, multicultural, and multi-religious identity into our family. The issues that galvanized my passion for equity and social justice during the final four decades of the 20th century have now been refocused and personally intensified by the arrival of these children, energizing me for more work in the new century we and they are now creating.

In addition to my personal deepening of engagement over the years, I also sense a renewed urgency in our nation for addressing the central theme of this book, namely, the necessity to prepare a predominantly White teaching force to work effectively with an increasingly diverse student population. Since the first edition of this book, I have been invited into hundreds of school districts to address what is often seen as a disconnection between White teachers and students of color in our nation’s classrooms. Whether in urban settings, where a high percentage of racially diverse students has been the norm for many years, or in suburban and exurban districts, where educators are now experiencing rapid growth in student diversity, the issue is equally clear: we have much work to do in creating the kinds of schools that work well for children of color.

The federal No Child Left Behind legislation, which has also come on the scene since the first publication of this book, has added to the current climate of increased urgency. While there are many problems with this federal mandate, not the least of which being that the increased accountability comes with tragically insufficient funding (Mathis, 2003), the primary benefit is that schools are now forced to pay attention to those students who are not achieving, and to disaggregate their achievement data by race, as well as other dimensions of difference. In spite of this increased...
focus on the achievement of diverse students, however, the NCLB legislation places little or no emphasis on increasing the cultural competence of teachers to work effectively with children from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds (Gay, Dingus, & Jackson, 2003; National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004). Politicians may do all they want to increase testing and accountability requirements and consequences, but if we as a nation fail to raise the cultural competence of our teachers to work effectively with diverse students, then the entire reform effort becomes merely a hollow exercise in futility. The politics of accountability have certainly intensified, but deep engagement and financial investment in the authentic issues of pedagogical transformation are still missing. That deficit is the focus of this book.

Partly as a result of the NCLB legislation, but even more so because of the long-term persistence and insistence of parents and educators of color, we are now paying more attention to the race-based academic achievement gap in our nation’s schools. The National Assessment of Educational Progress consistently reports that the average eighth grade student of color performs at the same level of academic proficiency as the average fourth grade White student (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003). Likewise, NCES reports a four-year reading gap between African American high school students and their White counterparts.

Some teachers, politicians, and educational leaders, wishing to avoid or minimize issues of race, would prefer to attribute the achievement gap to socioeconomic differences alone. While it is true that poverty correlates highly with school failure (Barton, 2004), it has also been repeatedly demonstrated that race functions independently of economics, evidenced by the fact that even middle and upper-middle class students of color fall below their low income White and Asian peers on most measures of academic achievement (R. Ferguson, 2000; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Noguera, 2003). Because school success is so highly correlated with success in life, this race-based disequilibrium in academic achievement has become one of the core social justice issues of our time.

My work in the multicultural and social justice arena began over 40 years ago when I became embroiled in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Since then my journey has led me into multicultural teaching, curriculum development, writing, training, school reform activism, and the creation of the REACH Center for Multicultural Education, an organization that has for the past 30 years published classroom materials and designed staff development programs that are used internationally. I offer this book as a practitioner’s account of being engaged for most of my personal and professional life with issues of race, social justice, and diversity in education. In my work I have been a fellow traveler among
Introduction

thousands of other teachers and activists from all racial and cultural
groups throughout the world who are seeking to map new routes to social
healing. The fact that I am White has colored my journey in a particular
way, and it is from this perspective that I write.

The original motivation for writing this book was embodied in an en-
counter I had while working with teachers in a school district that was ex-
periencing rapid demographic change. Over the course of five years, this
school system had grown from a 10% Hispanic student population to over
40%. I had been invited to deliver the opening day address to the entire
school staff. The intent was to help teachers deal with the multicultural im-
lications of their changing school population, and to address the unavoid-
able evidence that their schools were not effectively serving the academic
achievement needs of Hispanic students. Following my keynote, I spent
considerable time working with the high school faculty to help them de-
velop more inclusive teaching strategies. In the past, Hispanic students had
attended only one of the district’s two high schools, while the other, which
was seen as more “elite,” had remained primarily White. With the changing
demographics, however, both schools were experiencing rapid growth in
Hispanic population. After the workshop, a White teacher who had taught
in the “good” high school for 20 years came up to me with a puzzled look
on her face, and said, “What I want to know is why are they sending these
kids to our school?” I asked, “You mean the Hispanic kids?” She nodded,
and I said, “Hispanic kids are coming to your high school because they
live here; they are a part of your community.” She walked away shaking her
head, obviously disenchanted with my response. Evidenced by this teacher
and others I have encountered in my travels, it must sadly be acknowledged
in response to Noguera’s query in the opening quote, there are still many
educators in our nation’s schools who do not value all of our children.

DIVERSITY IS NOT A CHOICE

“Why are they sending these kids to us?” Projected onto the larger edu-
cational scene, the answer to this question is simple: They live here. The
growing presence of diversity in our public school population is the face
of our future. While experiencing the largest influx of immigrant children
since the turn of the last century (Banks, 2006), public schools are also
dealing with more language and religious diversity than most teachers
are trained to embrace effectively in their classrooms (Eck, 2001; Garcia,
2005).

Children of color and multicultural complexity, like the new grandba-
bies in my family, will continue to come in ever-increasing numbers into
our nation’s classrooms. In the United States the population of students of color reached 30% in 1990, 34% in 1994, 40% in 2002, and will continue to increase throughout the twenty-first century (Hodgkinson, 1991, 2001, 2002; National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996, 2003). At the same time, Whites represent 90% of public school teachers, a figure that will remain high or possibly grow in the next few decades (Gay, Dingus & Jackson, 2003; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2003; National Education Association, 2003). In addition, some 40% of schools in the U.S. have no teachers of color in their classrooms (National Collaborative, 2004). The picture is clear: For the foreseeable future, the vast majority of teachers will be White while the student population will grow increasingly diverse. The need for teacher preparation is obvious, particularly given the fact that most practicing and prospective White teachers are themselves the products of predominantly White neighborhoods and predominantly White colleges of teacher education (Nieto, 1996). And, unfortunately, the reversal of desegregation efforts that has occurred since the early 1990s has resulted in the increasing re-segregation of our nation’s schools and produced a growing educational apartheid that virtually assures that most future White teachers will continue to come from racially isolated White schools and communities (Hardy, 2004; Kozol, 2005; Orfield & Lee, 2004).

Thus, at the present time in American public education we are faced with three simultaneous statistical realities: (1) our teacher force is mostly White, (2) our student population is highly diverse and growing in children of color, and (3) children of color are precisely the students most at risk of being caught on the negative end of the achievement gap. These statistics beg the question: Is there a causal relationship between the over-representation of White teachers in our classrooms and the under-performance of children of color in our nation’s schools?

Diversity is not a choice, but our responses to it certainly are. And to date, all indicators point to the fact that our responses have not been adequate to deal with the full range of issues presented by the complexities of teaching in a multicultural nation. As I conduct my workshops with teachers throughout the United States and Australia each year, I ask participants, “What evidence is there that we have not yet solved the problems of racism and inequality in our schools and society?” Their answers are many and varied: disproportionate academic outcomes for different racial groups, increasing incidents of racially motivated violence and hate-group activity, inequalities in educational funding, inadequate preparation of teachers to deal effectively with increasing diversity, curriculum that remains Eurocentric and monocultural, political manipulation of ethnic and racial fears and hostilities, and resistance from educators, school boards, and communities to face the realities of their changing populations. Jonathan Kozol (2005) speaks passionately and insightfully to these
issues in his new book, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, the title itself speaking to the depth of the social justice challenges facing us in our schools today. I find that many of my White peers in education, and certainly most of those from other racial and cultural groups, are not unaware of the issues facing us. We are, however, almost universally frustrated and confused regarding the solutions. It is the intent of this book to provide possible pathways to those solutions, not the least of which is to assure that the disproportionate presence of White teachers in our nation’s classrooms is not causally related to the disproportionate presence of children of color in the lower quartiles of academic achievement.

While being interviewed by a National Public Radio affiliate, I was asked, “Given all of the years that you and others have been working in multicultural education, and all the energy we have invested in civil rights initiatives over the past 50 years, why haven’t we solved the problems of racism and inequality?” I was struck by both the simplicity and the profundity of this question. Why, indeed, do social justice and real change still remain so illusive?

In the face of a teacher population that is primarily White and culturally isolated, a student population that is increasingly diverse, and educational outcomes that reflect persistent inequalities across racial differences, this book is my attempt to search for a deeper understanding of the personal and social dynamics that have made the process of healing so difficult. My work with educators in many different settings has convinced me that we have neither gone far enough in our analysis of the issues nor deep enough in our design of possible responses. We have dealt with the “what” and the “how” of multicultural teaching and learning, but we have not adequately addressed the “why” and the “who.” Too often as White educators we have seen the problems as “out there,” and we have conceptualized our role as one of “helping minority students.” Seldom have we helped White educators look deeply and critically at the necessary changes and growth we ourselves must achieve if we are to work effectively with the real issues of race, equity, and social justice.

**THE INNER WORK OF MULTICULTURAL TEACHING**

At the close of the 20th century, President Clinton called for a renewed national conversation on race. Many activities were engaged around this topic, and since that time school districts throughout the nation have invited educators, students, and parents into the process of racial dialogue. I wondered then, and continue to question now, whether mere “conversation” will be enough. We seem to be able to talk incessantly about race
without achieving real change. As one of my African American colleagues said to me after being invited into such a process in his school, “I’m tired of all this talk about a dialogue on race. What I want is to see the day when people quit calling me a ‘nigger.’”

As compelling as the need for an ongoing conversation on issues of race may be, my friend’s comment suggests that talk alone may be inadequate to the task. I am convinced there is a prior and equally compelling need for White people, particularly White educators in the United States and other nations of the West, to look within ourselves and realign our deepest assumptions and perceptions regarding the racial marker that we carry, namely Whiteness. We need to understand the dynamics of past and present dominance, face how we have been shaped by myths of superiority, and begin to sort out our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors relative to race and other dimensions of human diversity.

It is essential in this inner work of multicultural growth that we listen carefully to the perceptions others have of us, particularly students, parents, and colleagues from other racial and cultural groups. They can help us see ourselves in a clearer and truer light. We cannot fully and fruitfully engage in meaningful dialogue across the differences of race and culture without doing the work of personal transformation. If we as White educators are not deeply moved and transformed, there is little hope that anything else will significantly shift. We must assume that we will be changed in the process of engagement and dialogue. We cannot help our students overcome the negative repercussions of past and present racial dominance if we have not unraveled the remnants of dominance that still lingers in our minds, hearts, and habits. Over the years I have come to the conclusion that there will be no meaningful movement toward social justice and real educational reform until there has been a significant transformation in the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of White Americans. As Malcolm X reminded us years ago, “We can’t teach what we don’t know, and we can’t lead where we won’t go.”

The inner work of personal transformation has been the missing piece in the preparation of White teachers, and it is one of the central themes of this book. Too often we place White teachers in multicultural settings and expect them to behave in ways that are inconsistent with their own life experiences, socialization patterns, worldviews, and levels of racial identity development (Alba, 1990; Fine et al., 1997; Nieto, 1999, 2003; Sleeter, 1994; Vavrus, 2002). Too often we expect White teachers to be what they have not learned to be, namely, culturally competent professionals. I have attempted in this book to provide a conceptual framework whereby we can more adequately understand, support, and promote the personal transformation of White educators.
THE OUTER WORK OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

As important as the inner work of personal growth is, however, it must be balanced with a vision of multicultural education as a process of social change and transformation (Banks, 2004; Sleeter, 2001). If we as White educators merely turn inward and deal only with our own needs for cultural awareness and racial identity development, we are in danger of perpetuating the kind of privileged non-engagement with the real issues of social justice that has characterized Whites for far too long (Sheets, 2000).

The second major theme of the book, therefore, is an examination of the role White educators can and must play in understanding, decoding, and dismantling the dynamics of White dominance. Throughout the book I have attempted to hold in creative tension these two essential and inherently related themes: the personal transformation of White educators and the social transformation of the arrangements of White dominance. Each of these themes is a critical factor in any authentic movement toward the elimination of the achievement gap.

During one of my annual fund-seeking visits to Washington, DC, I discovered on a morning walk that the statue from the top of the Capitol dome had been removed by a large crane and placed in a congressional parking lot. One of the workers informed me that the statue, which is named “Freedom,” was scheduled for major refurbishing before being returned to its perch above our nation’s seat of power. I was pleased to discover that around the base of Freedom’s form were inscribed the words E Pluribus Unum.

This scene presents a fitting image for a nation that is still attempting to live up to its founding principles. “Out of the Many, One” has remained an illusive vision for us as a people. Too often the political operatives wielding power beneath our nation’s dome seem more intent on using our differences against us rather than inspiring us to embrace both our unity and our diversity. It seemed appropriate that we ought to regularly polish the face of Freedom and reread the words inscribed by generations past.

Our task as educators is similar to that of the craftspeople assigned to Freedom’s face-lift. The conserving function of education is to inculcate into the minds and hearts of each new generation those fundamental values and principles that define our unique character as a nation. The transforming function of education, on the other hand, is to critically interpret those founding values in the light of ever-changing social realities and to continually challenge the discrepancies between our stated beliefs and our national behavior (Parker, 2003).

As multicultural educators we embody both the conserving and the transforming functions of education. In this sense our work is inherently
We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know

political (Freire, 1970; Parker, 2003). We seek to continually renew and inform our students’ commitment to the ideals of pluralistic democracy, and at the same time we diligently speak out when those ideals are violated in actual practice. Likewise, we teach our students the basic principles of “freedom and justice for all,” and we seek to empower them to identify and address the many realities of injustice and inequality they see enacted in their everyday lives.

Among White educators I have observed considerable confusion and tentativeness in our willingness and ability to embrace these dual functions of education. In a scene that has been repeated many times in my workshops, a White middle school teacher came to me during a break in our session and said, “I feel really uncomfortable being here as a White person. When we talk about all of the racism and oppression that has happened to people of color in this nation, I feel guilty and blamed. I don’t know what my role in discussions of race ought to be. As a White teacher I feel insecure, and I don’t know if it’s my place to bring these issues up with my students.”

In this book I have attempted to avoid the “blame-and-shame” approach to multicultural education that has sometimes exacerbated the insecurities of White educators. It is important to acknowledge, however, that no matter how gentle and inclusive we may try to be, many White people will respond in ways similar to the teacher quoted above. In preparing White educators for both the personal and the social dimensions of transformation that must take place if we are to live and teach effectively within the context of racial diversity, it is essential that Whiteness “be re-negotiated as a productive force within the politics of difference” (Giroux, 1997b, p. 297). I have devoted considerable space throughout the text to exploring the relationship between Whiteness and social dominance, but I have attempted to do so in a way that unhooks us from the rhetoric of blame.

As White educators, we often suffer from the “dysconscious racism” that makes it difficult for us to see the full impact of our own social dominance (J. E. King, 1991). However, if we take seriously Cornel West’s (1993b) challenge to “speak the truth to power,” then we must face our feelings of inadequacy, discomfort, and guilt. We must seek to transform both ourselves and the social conditions of injustice that continue to stifle the potential of too many of our students from all racial, ethnic, cultural, and language groups. The goal for White educators is not to become “politically correct” in the simplistic and cynical tone that term has come to engender, but rather to become “personally conscious” in our role as concerned White educators committed to social healing and positive change.

And it is not only White educators who need to take on the inner and outer work of personal and social transformation; the challenge applies
equally to our colleagues from other racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. As Nieto (1998) has pointed out from her extensive experience in multicultural teacher preparation:

> We cannot assume that, simply because of their marginal status in society, African American, Latino, Asian, and American Indian prospective and practicing teachers and others different from the majority can teach students from other backgrounds. . . . [Teachers] from backgrounds other than European American are also largely unprepared to teach students from groups other than their own. (p. 5.)

Many of the things I will say to and about White educators throughout this book could be equally applied to teachers from other racial and cultural groups. However, because Whites represent such a large majority of the teacher population, because we are often poorly prepared to engage the deep issues of multicultural teaching, because so many of us feel uncomfortable with our role as educators in diverse settings, and because we have an opportunity to make a unique and significant contribution to healing the wounds of past and present oppression, I have chosen here to specifically address my White colleagues.

**ORGANIZATION OF BOOK**

Throughout the book I have attempted to bridge the language of theory and the language of practice. The book is designed as a weaving fashioned from two textures of yarn: the texture of personal experiences and stories drawn from my many years in the field, and the texture of research drawn from the rich literature related to multicultural education and social justice (Banks & Banks, 2004). By intersecting the warp of practice with the woof of theory, I have attempted to achieve a level of relevance, interest, and meaningfulness for practicing and prospective teachers, while at the same time highlighting salient features of the academic literature related to issues of social dominance, racial identity development, and transformational teaching. The many anecdotes included in the text present the raw truth of lived experience and the validity of our many personal stories. Likewise, the numerous references to the research literature provide the collective conclusions that grow from more detached analysis. By thus weaving together the diverse textures of theory and practice, I have attempted to hold in creative tension both the personal and the social dimensions of transformation. Neither texture of yarn is more valuable than the other because each is essential to the overall strength and cohesion of our work as transformational leaders and educators.
In Chapter 1, I offer my own story of personal transformation. I describe how I grew from a state of almost complete ignorance and isolation concerning the realities of race and toward greater understanding of racism, social dominance, and the need for deep changes in our society. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature related to social dominance and other theoretical constructs that can help us understand the methodologies of White supremacy. Chapter 3 offers a deeper examination of the roots of racism and social dominance, wherein three central components of the dominance paradigm are identified and deconstructed for the benefit of White educators who wish to critically examine their own personal and pedagogical assumptions regarding race and cultural differences.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus to a consideration of social action and change, exploring how White educators can effectively contribute to the process of healing and social transformation related to issues of race, dominance, and the role of White teachers in multicultural schools. Chapter 5 provides an overview of research related to racial identity development, detailing many of the central issues of personal transformation that face White teachers who wish to grow toward greater multicultural competence. Chapter 6 further explicates the process of personal transformation by setting forth a practitioner’s model for mapping and supporting the formation of authentic and transformationist White racial identity.

Chapter 7, which is newly added to this second edition, carries the major themes of the book into the context of the classroom and current issues of school reform, highlighting the actual beliefs and practices of transformationist White teachers. The concluding chapter brings the personal and social dimensions of change together into a single transformative vision that can hopefully guide our work into the future. The central unifying intent throughout the book is to encourage, inspire, and inform White educators in our efforts to become a healing force in the lives of our students and a catalyst for change in the communities we serve.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Even though I have chosen to deal primarily with issues of race in this book, it must be acknowledged that similar processes of social dominance and oppression function across all major dimensions of human difference, including gender, religion, language, age, sexual orientation, social class, and ability. Partly from the need to achieve a manageable scope for the book, but primarily from the reality of race as a central marker in my own life, I have selected race as my focus here. Still, much of the analysis and
many of the conclusions presented could be equally applied to other dimensions of diversity and social justice.

It must also be acknowledged that I cannot “prove” everything I say in this book. Much of what I share here comes from my experiences with the thousands of educators and students I encounter each year in my work throughout the United States and Australia. Their stories and their voices have informed and shaped my thinking and guided my reflections throughout the text, and occasionally they have led me beyond the horizons of established research in the field. At particular locations within the text I have chosen to enter this unmapped territory precisely because it offers rich possibilities for exploration and future research. What we have learned and documented to date has not led us to our desired goal of equity and social justice, so it is essential that we push beyond the edges of the known, to discover those places where healing and hope are still possible.

I have been inspired in my writing by the many passionately committed teachers I have met throughout the world and by the hundreds of letters and personal stories I have received from readers of the first edition of this book. I have seen the results of your extraordinarily good work in the bright eyes and ready smiles of students from all racial, ethnic, cultural, and language groups. There is much compassion, joy, deep learning, and transformation happening daily in classrooms throughout the world. By exploring in this book the painful processes and outcomes of racism and social dominance, I have intended not to overshadow this good work but hopefully to bring more of its healing light into the lives of children everywhere. In this spirit, I look forward to the day when we can stand together as educators and offer the actual outcomes of our teaching as indisputable evidence that we do, indeed, value all of our children. That day is not yet here.