
Preface

The world in which most adult Americans grew to maturity no longer exists. The Cold War is over. The domestic economy is global. The melting pot is boiling over. Our world is in flux. The arrival of the twenty-first century has ushered in not simply a new millennium but also a completely new and different globe (American Council of Education [ACE], 1995, p. 3; Friedman, 2008). Linking education to this new world, Rhode (2006) argues, “Academic institutions—universities, high schools, middle schools and elementary schools—are crucial in creating the informed citizens essential to democratic self-governance and the skilled workforce essential for prosperity in a competitive global economy” (p. 3). In addition, our legally free and fair society requires that academic institutions offer all children, regardless of race/ethnicity, income, geographic location, or language, the knowledge and skills to enable them to reach their fullest potential and have a flourishing life; by this, I mean a thriving and fulfilling life both inside and outside the bounds of the economy. In this sense, schools and teachers bear primary responsibility for creating equal opportunity for all (Rocha & Sharkey, 2007).

Schools and teachers—individually and collectively—have, especially since the 1960s, made efforts to accomplish this goal. However, many of the efforts have fallen short because they were often too narrowly focused in implementing staff development sessions dealing with the latest educational fad (e.g., assertive discipline) or they were too heavy handed (e.g., No Child Left Behind [NCLB]) in limiting teachers’ participation in the curriculum and pedagogical decision making.

For the most part, student achievement has increased for all students during the past decade; the achievement gap between both White students and students of color as well as students from low socioeconomic homes and those from middle to upper socioeconomic homes remains a complex, persistent problem (National Education Association, 2004). Also, since the National Commission on Excellence in Education’s publication of *A Nation*

at *Risk* in 1983, the academic achievement gap has created a storm of controversy at all levels of government and in all sectors of civil society. The achievement gap and the controversy surrounding it as well as the increased cultural, racial, and socioeconomic diversity in the United States and the influence of globalization demands that teachers come to teaching with more and different knowledge and skills, as well as a social justice orientation.

Finally, *Teach! Change! Empower!* brings the researched and best-practice ideas together that educators argue are critical for eliminating the academic achievement gap and that make the teaching/learning experience more rewarding for both teachers and students. *Teach! Change! Empower!* puts into practice ideas that have been vetted through discussion of diversity and power that challenge the achievement gaps: culturally relevant and rigorous curriculum, caring with a sociopolitical consciousness, community and culture of learning, cooperative professional development, democratic student involvement, high-quality teaching, and personal and program performance accountability. Each of the ten chapters uses one or more of these seven tested and researched ideas to help teachers eliminate the achievement gap in their classroom.

TEACHER INVESTMENT

Education (i.e., excellent public education) will not survive for your children and grandchildren if teachers do not significantly invest their energy and time in *good, old-fashioned teaching*. Miss Wilson, first grade, Mrs. Austin, fifth grade, Mrs. Jewel, eighth grade, and all my other teachers *demand* that I learn that lesson and finish every assignment; that I return homework, completed, with the pages neat and clean; and that I sit or stand up straight when I answered a question.

Teach! Change! Empower! is written for teachers who wish to engage in good public education; it is written to teach those who want to teach how to be effective for all students. While it is particularly great for teacher/leaders, teachers participating in staff development or for teachers who are working to become mentor teachers, the book effectively supports *all* teachers who are working to close the achievement gap and to assist students who are challenged by other gaps (e.g., economic, health) in classrooms where changes in student demographics are underway and in schools (especially in urban areas) where an increase in school segregation is taking place.

I pay attention to *gaps* in the plural because teachers deal with more gaps than merely achievement. In some classrooms, teachers deal with poverty and health needs by, for example, recommending and facilitating

access to social resources. I recognize that, in some schools, affirming diversity is often seen as taking time away from a “back-to-the-basics” emphasis and meeting the demands of the state curriculum standards. That said, I, along with an increasing number of teachers and researchers, believe that affirming and promoting diversity is integral to—and not a detractor from—closing the achievement gap. My belief is based on simple logic. For decades, if not centuries, students of color in U.S. schools have lagged behind White students. This difference in school performance between students of color and White students has been attributed to reasons such as innate IQ differences, cultural deficiencies, home background, social and economic disadvantage, and so forth. Policy and programmatic responses to eliminate these perceived reason(s) for achievement gaps, while often well meaning, for the most part marginalize or ignore (not appreciate) the diversity of the students. They, either directly or implicitly, see diversity as the cause of academic underachievement rather than *part of the solution*. This book learns from those mistakes and instead brings together both achievement and the affirmation of diversity, which is the foundational idea of culturally relevant pedagogy and fundamental to multicultural education.

This book is designed to encourage and facilitate positive learning experiences. It includes activities to promote social and professional growth. Through reading the book and participating in the activities, teachers will become more informed about teaching, themselves, and their students, as well as more knowledgeable about how other teachers and staff members can participate in closing the academic achievement gap.

The personal and educational change that I am calling for demands, not a short one- or two-hour event but short blocks of time over an extended period (e.g., a semester or school year). It is change that invites lifelong learning both in ourselves as individual teachers and in the institutions where we work. By participating in this learning process, teachers demonstrate unselfish and caring action as they undertake it in the best interests of their students. I am very much aware that structural barriers exist and that teachers will have a difficult time doing this work on their own; I am aware that some schools, districts, and policies oppose such work. Nevertheless, our children deserve a much better education than they’ve been receiving; the quality of their tomorrow depends on it. If teachers work on these changes with the support of other colleagues, they can become a force for change.