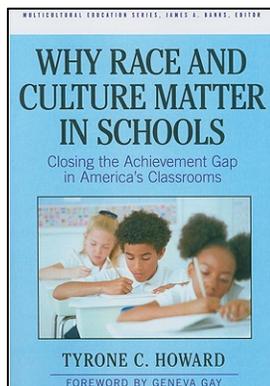# Professional Book Review

Howard, T. C. (2010). *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Classrooms.* NY: Teachers College Press. 181pp., ISBN: 139780807750711 (pbk). $27.95.

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Author Tyrone C. Howard's introduction to his book provides an overview of what he hopes to accomplish within the book, namely, to expose the details of what the achievement gap is and the (faulty) reasons people give to explain it, and to offer hope and practical action points that educators at every level can use to eliminate the gap. In a time where government often names poor teaching as the primary explanation, Howard lists poverty as one of the most significant reasons for the achievement gap. Children living in poverty have difficulty learning due to increased health concerns, because of poor living conditions and a lack of suitable health insurance; also to blame is a difficult home life due to overworked parents, frequent moving, and even homelessness. Addressing these issues, however, is beyond the scope of the book and beyond the scope of educators' power. Howard recognizes that, while poverty plays a major role, teachers must nevertheless be outfitted to address other, changeable factors. One of these factors is recognition of race and culture within schools.

The first chapter defines and describes the achievement gap and some popular explanations for its existence. While education is considered the great normalizer, a way to achieve the American dream, that dream is often only realized by those in the racial and cultural majority, or White Americans; education is not equitable, as evidenced by the disparity in standardized test scores, high school graduation rates, and other benchmarks between African American, Native American, Asian American, Latino, and White students, even from the same socio-economic level. Numerous, compelling statistics are given from the National Assessment for Educational Progress from 2007. Howard discusses gaps in retention, suspensions, and expulsions. Drop-out and graduation rates and access to accelerated courses also show wide gaps between races. Popular explanations for the gap include the eugenics movement, which hypothesized that there was a biological reason for Whites to be superior, and deficit-based thinking, which posits that certain groups of people are unfit for academic success and unlikely to measure up, the measuring stick, of course, being European manners of being.

Howard focuses Chapter 2 upon changes in demographics. This chapter powerfully conveys a sense of urgency in addressing the achievement gap. Data are given to show how America is becoming more diverse, and classrooms

reflect this. Because minority groups are growing in numbers, teachers must be equipped and empowered to consider race and culture in their practice. This is especially important considering that the vast majority of teachers are White, middle-class, native-English-speaking women (p. 40).

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 discuss the implications of culture and race on students' learning. The culture of schools often clashes with the culture of students' home lives; this can make students feel as though they are leading two separate, conflicting lives. Rather than assimilation, Howard argues that the culture of schools needs to change to reflect an attitude of value for varied and rich cultures. While some schools' practices of multicultural education have been limited to a one-day cultural fair with music and food, others have been successful in implementing more holistic approaches where educators recognize the cultural capital that students possess and include students' cultures throughout the school. Howard includes lists of questions to ponder for educators wishing to expand their recognition of the role of culture in learning (p. 64, p. 74) as well as a list of principles to consider when striving for culturally responsive pedagogy (p. 70). It would benefit every educator, pre-service or veteran, to reflect on these prompts.

Included in the discussion about culture and race is the concept that both are exceedingly varied and complex. For example, the name "Latino" describes people from over a dozen countries, each having its own history, traditions, and culture. "Asian Americans" may be first-generation immigrants or feel completely American in culture. This complexity is what creates the need for knowing others individually and not making assumptions based upon their group affiliation. Instead of studying the facts about a group's culture, Howard suggests that it is wiser to personally get to know one's students, seeking to learn how their culture informs their worldview. This cultural competence involves significant self-reflection with an aim to understand one's own awareness of his or her culture, its impact on the classroom, and its effect on one's treatment of others. Chapter 6 covers the many facets of cultural competence as laid out by the National Center for Cultural Competence, such as the ability to manage the dynamics of difference and conduct ongoing self-assessment (p. 112). Howard highlights the value of critical self-assessment concerning race and culture, while conceding that it is difficult and possibly painful to face one's own views, especially for Whites who are often unaware of their own culture and rarely discuss it. He offers principles to focus self-assessment on various aspects of race and cultural competence (p. 116, p. 125-127).

After six chapters describing the significance of the problem of the achievement gap, discussing the nuanced definitions and effects of race and culture, and impressing a sense of urgency upon the reader, Howard fills Chapter 7 with discussion about four schools that are indeed succeeding at closing the gap. He identifies five characteristics needed for success: visionary leadership, effective teaching practices, academic support, acknowledgement of race, and community support (p. 130). The leaders of the schools are dogged individuals, determined to achieve their vision of improving their schools, student by student.

The teachers are driven to see each of their students succeed through rigorous, focused work and individual personal knowledge about, and attention to, each student. Academic support is individualized and exhaustive, including after school tutoring and lunch time meetings with teachers. There is explicit acknowledgement of race at each school, with strong value placed upon cultivating freedom and willingness to discuss possibly uncomfortable subjects. Finally, parents are expected to be involved in the motivation and accountability of students, and the school leaders find ways for families to participate, whether by volunteering in a classroom or attending a high school preparation seminar. These five components have led to the four schools showing significant, enduring improvement in students' learning.

Howard concludes his book with relevant issues for further study and questions upon which to reflect. The reader is left with a feeling of urgent, personal, moral responsibility to participate in the cause. *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools* gives educators at all levels an excellent primer on the achievement gap, its causes, and remedies.