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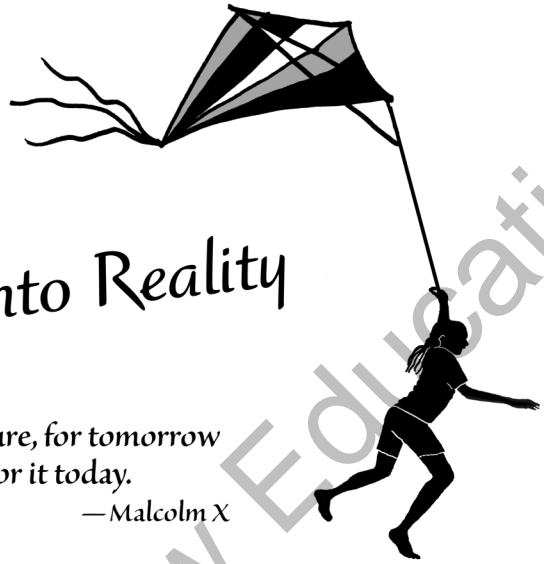
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Chapter One

SOAR_{ing} into Reality

Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today.

—Malcolm X



It was the day that turned my head around and flipped my teaching world upside down. I have not forgotten that day—and I hope I never will. The noise in the halls after last period had barely settled when Jabari, a seventh grade student, strode into my classroom and disarmed me with this question: “Ms. Campbell, why is it that white kids seem to be able to read and write better than most black kids?”

I stood there with a blank look on my face, not knowing how to answer. Wow, what a question—and from a 12-year old! I already had a growing awareness of academic discrepancies between mainstream white students and students designated as “at risk” or “disadvantaged.” But there, in the presence of a child who felt and expressed that discrepancy with such laser sharpness, the issue became real. I fumbled with an inadequate answer to Jabari’s question. As I did, its urgency grabbed and shook me. It has not left my mind or heart since. Suddenly, the achievement gap had a face and a voice. That face was right here—in my face. And that voice was pleading to my ears.



The Reality Check

The achievement gap is generally defined as a disparity in academic performance among groups—often identified by race, ethnicity, and income level. If we as educators (and the general public) have our eyes open, we have seen plenty of evidence that this gap is widening in America, and that it poses grave problems for our society. The *How? What? and Why?* questions about the discrepancies in achievement for disadvantaged students have long plagued and puzzled my school district, though I cannot say those questions have been at the top of our list of concerns. Recently, something happened that turned our abstract puzzlings to compelling challenges. If not for an unexpected change in our student population, I would never have heard Jabari’s question that sent me (and several colleagues) soaring. We were launched into reality—to the absolute NOW necessity of successfully addressing this academic puzzle. And we had to do more than “address it.” We had to solve it!

As a homogeneous suburban district in which most families were middle to upper class and the majority of students went on to college, Hopkins School District had been on the periphery of working to close any achievement gaps. Our district was considered to have very progressive educational programs and, as claimed in its mission statement, to be “a caring community committed to equity and excellence for all learners.” This admirable goal leapt off the pages of the promotional material and website into the real world. Low income housing and a program called “The Choice is Yours” (CIY) added new dimensions to the student body and new challenges to our staff. As our demographics began to change, our stated beliefs were put to a reality test.

The Changes

The CIY project (The Choice is Yours) has had an unmistakable impact on our school and district. In 2001, parents in the nearby metropolitan school district, with the aid of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), sued the state. They alleged that the second largest school district in the state (the largest inner-city school system in the state) was not providing an adequate education for students. As a result, the CIY project, an urban to suburban transfer program, was created. This program now gives low-income students (those who qualify for free or reduced lunch) the choice to attend any of nine suburban choice school districts reputed to provide the best educational opportunities in the area. The state is responsible for the cost of transportation. There are 500 openings for CIY students in the suburban schools each year, with growth to approximately 2,080 at the current time (2009). The majority of students come from an area in the inner city that is heavily populated by African Americans.

For suburban districts such as mine, the achievement gap no longer lingered near the bottom of the list of educational goals. Instead, the gap became a sudden and stark reality—one we couldn't just mention occasionally or put off until another time. As the nine suburban schools accepted CIY students, they all began to recognize and experience the effects of this change on the transitioning students and the schools. Not only were those students facing the realities of adapting to new schools and new districts. They were stepping into the weightier challenges of bus travel, a different student population, and classes in predominantly white, homogeneous classrooms. In addition to social, emotional, and cultural changes, these students were meeting a set of academic expectations different from their previous experiences.

The achievement gap became a sudden and stark reality—one we couldn't just mention occasionally or put off until another time.

The new demographics presented our school community with an achievement gap and an economic gap.

Many of their families chose to take part in the CIY program because of low test scores on state and national exams, large class sizes, and poor school climate in the inner city schools. Parents saw the suburban schools as havens with safer school climates, more challenging

curricular requirements, and greater opportunities for art and extra curricular programs. Now it was up to us (the suburban districts) to meet the expectations and provide the anticipated services.

District and school demographics changed in another way. For the first time, students of poverty were included in our numbers. Because ours had been such an affluent district for so long, we had not worked with children who live in poverty. We had much to learn about the hidden disadvantages that affected the achievement of these students. These are some of the things we did not know:

- Students from low-income homes inherit a lack of access to opportunities and resources that places them at a disadvantage throughout their educational experiences (Payne, 2003).
- Educators recognize the importance of prior knowledge in the ability to advance and succeed. This lack of prior knowledge places students at a disadvantage in their learning (Delpit, 1995). For example, when a teacher or a lesson refers to the theater, the children who have gone to a cultural theater have an advantage over those who have never been to events out of their own neighborhood.
- Lack of educational vocabulary and visualization are hidden factors in the ability of students to be successful in classes (Hale, 2001). Because they don't know the terms or even the vernacular of education, students' abilities are often underestimated.
- With fewer opportunities for language acquisition, it becomes more difficult to obtain the continuing education, employment, and other resources needed to move out of poverty (Engle, 2005).

These factors often mask a student’s true capabilities. We think the student is lacking ability, when in fact, there is great potential. These hidden disadvantages had now fallen into our laps to address.

Commitment to Closing the Gap

The CIY project and the new low-income project in our area presented unfamiliar dynamics in our school. These compelled the school community to embrace diversity and respond to different educational needs. Addressing the achievement gap, which includes addressing the issues surrounding poverty and its consequences to educational readiness, became a major focus for our school district. School leaders recognized the importance for all students to move forward in their education, following the belief that “Education is key for poor people,” as stated by Bill Cosby and A. F. Poussaint in their book *Come On People: On the Path from Victims to Victors* (2007). Before the CIY students entered our school, several significant strategies and programs were already being implemented to address diversity issues. They included staff development activities such as:

- Pacific Education Group (PEG)—An equity team of teachers was created within each school in the district to explore and discuss equity and race. Equity teams became coaches and instructors for their peers regarding the achievement gap and racism.
- National Urban Alliance—Teachers learned specific literacy strategies to engage all students and help them achieve at a higher level.
- Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED) classes

“We will eliminate the achievement gap in our district. Not narrow it, not close it; we will eliminate it. No exceptions. No excuses.”

– Michael Kremer, former Superintendent, Hopkins (Minnesota) School District

- Developing small learning communities among staff members to continue to explore equity and the achievement gap
- Forming literature circles focusing on race and eliminating the achievement gap

Our commitment to helping all students remained paramount as stated by the superintendent: “We will eliminate the achievement gap in our district. Not narrow it, not close it; we will eliminate it. No exceptions. No excuses.”

The Roots of SOAR

As we moved into the new reality of working with a different mixture of students, these initiatives and staff development programs all proved to be helpful. They created awareness, increased knowledge, and brought diversity to the forefront in our school district. After these “crash courses” in the realities of the achievement gap, I was personally in a whole new place:

- I was passionate about my goal to help prepare my students to become future citizens—citizens who have the basic understanding and knowledge necessary to contribute to society.
- I was keenly aware of the high dropout rate among minority students. (*Time Magazine*, in 2006, put this national dropout rate among Latino and African American students at nearly 50 percent.)
- I was troubled by the risks of this kind of a dropout rate—that our society will eventually lack citizens with the necessary skills to contribute in a manner that benefits society as a whole.
- I was heartsick at the terrible waste of potential that happens when students drift away from the benefits of education.