

OVERCOMING the
Achievement Gap
TRAP *Liberating
Mindsets
to Effect
Change*

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Nancy Kranich (2001) writes, “In order to maximize opportunities for access experienced by certain groups, a good society commits resources, and develops a collective desire to level the playing field” (p. 15). Equity is important if we are going to achieve the goal of learning equality. We have to examine our professional practice and mindsets and ask if our traditional practices and belief systems have been fair to all students. My goal is to prove that fairness and impartiality have been missing from the experience of many struggling students, especially for poor and minority students, and that educational professionals and our society in general are perfectly comfortable with the achievement gap. Our society tends to embrace the idea of equality as a dogma, but society has not embraced the idea of equity in service and environment in order to achieve the equality that we claim we desire.

What This Book *Isn't*

I feel that it is important to be clear about the aim of this book before diving deeply into the core of the arguments. My experience has taught me that people tend to become defensive when their core values are challenged. Teacher expectations of student performance is a thorny issue in American education because of the inevitable overlay of accusations that low expectations for some groups of students reflect racial, ethnic, or class-based prejudice.

An Attempt to Devalue the Past

This book is not an attempt to devalue all the hard work and effort that many have contributed in the past to achieving academic equality. In fact, I will celebrate those efforts and build on the scholarship of the past. However, one painful reality has to be accepted: the achievement gap still exists, and it is nearly as wide as it has ever been. This fact has to compel those who sincerely want to close the gap to rethink past strategies and build on that foundation in our efforts to eliminate this stain on society once and for all.

An Attempt to Place Blame and Cause Division

Whenever someone ventures into the issues of race and class, he or she is often accused of being a troublemaker or placing blame. I do not believe it is fair to make this accusation of the people who dare attempt to hold a society accountable for the ideals and values that it claims to embrace. My colleague and coauthor of *The Will to Lead, the Skill to Teach: Transforming Schools at Every Level*, Sharroky Hollie, has coined the term *offensive*, which means to be overly sensitive and easily offended. A society cannot explore complex issues if people are offensive (Muhammad & Hollie, 2012).

In 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. says in his historic “I Have a Dream” speech in Washington, DC:

In a sense we have come to our nation’s capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir.

This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked “insufficient funds.”

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check, a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. (as cited in Lewis, n.d.)

Those sacred words summarize my sentiments perfectly. I do not feel uncomfortable producing facts and challenging others to reflect

What This Book Is

The achievement gap is a very complex issue, and I do not want the reader to think I am trying to oversimplify the problem like the editorial in the *Detroit Free Press* (Editorial Board, 2014) and offer a canned one-size-fits-all solution. My hope is to stir up a debate and invite people to think in ways that we have neglected in the past.

An Attempt to Rekindle and Resurrect the Issue of Equality

When I wrote the book *Transforming School Culture: How to Overcome Staff Division* in 2009, very few people were talking about the issue of organizational culture as it related to student achievement. I even had some people tell me that people were not interested in the topic and that I should focus my writing in more specific and vogue areas like curriculum, assessment, and instructional strategies. I chose to ignore conventional wisdom and tackle the topic, and the result was a best-selling book that made people talk about their behavior and their organizational culture in a candid way. The attention that book received made others start to examine the topic of school culture, and now it *is* a vogue topic, with many authors, practitioners, and thinkers focused on developing a healthy school culture. I did not think that one book would solve the dilemma of creating student-centered school cultures, but I believed that I could make a provocative case that would force people to take the topic seriously.

The achievement gap is the new area around which I would like to examine and reshape the thinking and conversation by introducing the concept of *mindset*. There have been many avenues explored in the pursuit of achieving equality in education, and all of them have merit, but perhaps the way that we have thought about this issue has been all wrong. I want to explore this topic and encourage people to examine it and talk about it.

society—have to experience growing pains. Those who have benefited from institutionalized privilege have to recognize their privilege and become advocates for social justice and change. In a society that prides itself on being fair and just, providing every child with a solid educational foundation should not be controversial. Superiority and equality cannot exist at the same time. Students, families, and schools who are at the bottom of the achievement gap have to reflect on their own perceptions and behaviors to try to improve their own station. Closing the achievement gap has to evolve from patronizing talk to real action and sacrifice by all parties.

A Voice for the Voiceless

This book is not motivated by sales or critical acclaim. Rather, it comes from a personal obligation I feel as a professional and as a citizen. I have been blessed with a platform and a voice, and I must speak on behalf of those who have not. I have sold thousands of books and spoken to hundreds of thousands of professionals. What good is that level of power and influence if I do not use it to promote the greater good?

It is a bold attempt to challenge society, and more importantly educational practitioners, and declare that all people matter. Poor people matter. People of every race and culture have value. Non-English speakers matter. Disabled people matter. Homeless people matter. All people matter, and a quality education is a right, not a privilege.

The Achievement Gap Trap

As American citizens, we tend to live between two polarized concepts: the image that we want to project and the reality where we are most comfortable residing. We love to claim concepts like equality, fairness, and justice as cornerstones of our core value system, while simultaneously living in a society that is not equal and not fair and just to all. In education, in the space between those two polarized

realities lies a trap: the *achievement gap trap*. It is the zone between working to become an egalitarian school system and reaping the benefits of having a superior status to others or operating in a system with low expectations. Essentially, we know what to do, so why are we not doing what we know?

Stanford School of Business professors Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton (2000) address this issue as it relates to progressive change in business with a concept that they call the *knowing-doing gap*. They pose the question: Why don't companies act on the knowledge that they've gathered? Instead of an *achievement gap trap*, they refer to the barrier as a *small talk trap*. People tend to ignore change that is potentially inconvenient and challenging in exchange for dogma and rhetoric that make them feel better. These authors suggest that real change leaders attach action to concepts and theories to move people out of their comfort zones, instead of tickling their ears with small talk (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). I assert that a similar dilemma exists in our society as it relates to educational equality and the difficult changes that it requires. It resonates with our souls conceptually, but I question the collective will to endure the discomfort necessary to make it a reality. In this book, I want to educate educators and community members about the comfort zone that we have created and conclude by attaching actions to the theories to actually create change.

Chapter Overviews

In this book, I will examine past theories, practices, and movements with a critical eye to determine what is still relevant and what needs to be left behind. I will seek to prove that the modern academic achievement gap is more of a product of a prevailing *mindset* that perpetuates unequal learning outcomes as opposed to a product of factors such as funding, racial integration in schools, and public policy. The achievement gap has come to be seen as normal by schools and communities at the top and bottom of the academic

achievement scale, and it will take a new culture and a new way of thinking to truly eliminate the glaring inequality that we witness in public education.

Chapter 1 examines the history of the achievement gap and cultural and societal factors that have contributed to its creation. Chapter 2 will establish the need to shift to a practical application of equality to embrace the promise of egalitarianism, rather than rewarding individual merit. Chapter 3 examines the need for a new framework to effect cultural change and identifies three mindsets that are at play in the struggle to effect this change: (1) the superiority mindset, (2) the victim mindset, and (3) the liberation mindset. To truly overcome the achievement gap trap, schools must embrace egalitarianism and the liberation mindset. Chapter 4 takes a close look at the superiority mindset. I will explore the psychological and material advantages of feeling superior to others and how schools play a major role in some communities' and citizens' need to feel superior. I will examine historical and current trends that prove that superiority complexes exist and that they have a real impact in school and in the greater society. Chapter 5 examines the victim mindset. I will answer the question: "Why would anyone want to be a victim?" This chapter will detail the psychological benefits to feeling powerless and holding others responsible for one's current station in life. This mindset is as culpable as the superiority mindset. Victims of discrimination and unfair systems have to take responsibility to be an active partner in their own ascension and demand change from the external system that perpetuates the inequality. Finally, chapter 6 proposes an alternative to the superiority and victim mindsets: the *liberation mindset*. The liberation mindset is rooted in three key principles: (1) equality, (2) responsibility, and (3) advocacy. I will provide case studies from three different schools that have embraced these concepts and the phenomenal improvements they have achieved as a result. This chapter will end with a set of surveys and diagnostic tools for any school to use to assess where it is on the liberation mindset journey.

Each chapter builds on the argument for a totally new approach to closing the achievement gap. The journey begins by looking in the mirror and accepting some painful facts. Then, there is a transition into exploring our thinking and our collective mindsets and their connection to the historically stratified student achievement results. Finally, I propose a new way of thinking that requires cooperation between educators, community members, and politicians that replaces the old thinking that created inequality with a liberating mindset that gives each student a fair opportunity to receive a world-class education regardless of personal circumstance.

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