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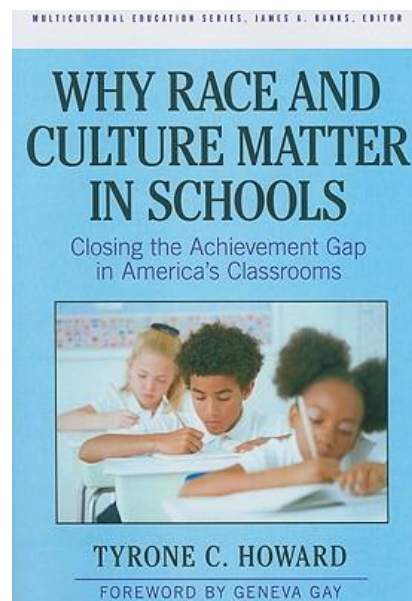
Howard, Tyrone C. (2010). *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Classrooms*. New York: Teacher College Press.

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For another review of *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools* see Veda Jairrel's review at <http://www.edrev.info/reviews/rev1081.pdf>

Reviewed by Roderick L. Carey,  
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Perhaps the most important debate raging among education-stakeholders at all levels is how to close the *achievement gap*. The educational achievement gains made by non-White students, particularly Black and Latino children between the post-desegregation years of 1970 – through the late 1980s were significant. During this time, the achievement gap between Blacks and Whites was lessened by 50%, and the gap between Latinos and Whites was diminished by roughly 35%. However, since the late 1980s, the achievement gap has widened, and only



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recently has there been evidence of some diminishing gaps among certain demographics in specific locations. While promise is evidenced in data from some school districts and among a handful of charter schools, large-scale findings suggest that the school achievement levels between Whites and non-Whites is staggeringly uneven. Perhaps even more frustrating is that few educational researchers and policy analysts agree on the causes, and even fewer agree on the most appropriate and wide-reaching solutions.

As a result, the achievement gap is seen as one of the most perplexing educational issues of the last two decades. The wide variances in schooling experiences, educational attainment, and eventual educational and career outcomes that exist between White students and their non-White counterparts is at the forefront of educational researchers agendas, and it is at the center in the discussions of educational leaders pushing for school reform policies and practices. However, while issues like school practices, teacher quality, and high stakes accountability are often scrutinized and critiqued as seemingly simultaneous causes and solutions for Black and Latino student successes and failures, what is often missing from the discussion of the achievement gap is an investigation into the role that race, racism, and culture play in the achievement or underachievement of non-White students. This volume does just this, and does it exceedingly well.



Tyrone C. Howard is Associate Professor of Education at the University of California Los Angeles Graduate School of Education and Information Studies. He serves as the faculty director of the social justice-centered teacher education group called Center X and is the Founder and Director of the Black Male Institute at UCLA. He received his PhD in Curriculum & Instruction from the University of Washington.

Howard provides a most thorough analysis of the current status of K-12 public schools, the diversity that encompasses the student and teacher make-up of these schools and the difficulties that continually perplex educators in addressing the academic and social needs of students considering the implications of race and culture. Drawing from the most current demographic data sets, Howard's previous research studies, personal accounts from his own fifth grade classroom, and even his son's experiences with cultural misunderstandings, the author presents a stunning account of the achievement gap from a macro to micro level. *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools* provides relevant data, reviews the most pertinent studies from across the educational research spectrum,

while all the while inserting clear and vivid images in readers' minds of not only where we are now, but also where we could be with greater cultural and racial understandings.

In the *Series Foreword*, series editor and globally acknowledged multicultural education scholar James A. Banks (2010), situates this timely and much-needed work among the other gems from the *Multicultural Education Series* from Teachers College Press. Banks then contextualizes the achievement gap in its complex history of cultural deficit explanations, which have continued to "color" discussions of racial, gender, linguistic, and religious diversity in schools over the last 50 years. In this regard, Banks highlights succinctly what Howard eventually explores in depth in the valuable and informative literature reviews offered in the earlier chapters particularly.

In the *Foreword*, Geneva Gay (2010), internationally regarded scholar of diversity and education, offers her own insights into the need for a more clear consideration of race and culture in the discussion of the achievement gap. Gay expertly weaves in her own commentary on the issues of race, culture, and school achievement while simultaneously highlighting various areas of the book that confront the issues that have for so long been hushed by too many educators.

In his *Introduction*, Howard (2010) immediately discusses what he calls "the myriad of social, cultural, economic, and historical factors that have affected different groups in the United States" (p. 2) and posits race and culture as primary units of analyses for this particular volume. After outlining the book, Howard then challenges the widely held Black-White dichotomous language that has permeated educational discourse for far too long. This Black-White dichotomy, according to Howard, has created a binary that elevates the status of Whites over their non-White counterparts through uneven comparisons and shortsighted approaches to the complexity of racial, cultural and socio-economic factors that influence the schooling experiences of U.S. schoolchildren. Howard further contextualizes the problem of the achievement gap in chapter one, by presenting a thorough literature review of some of the most widely cited research

that has addressed the disparities in educational achievement levels among various groups. Centering his early discussions on how the achievement gap has been measured (e.g. reading and math standardized scores, graduation rates) and moving to how national indicators like “the nation’s report card” have continually noted how students from various racial, cultural, and socioeconomic groups have lagged behind certain other groups, Howard then begins a detailed analysis of the various presumable causes of the gap. Citing current data, and providing some useful graphs and tables drawn from information taken from the National Center for Education Statistics, Howard investigates how academic issues like early reading and mathematic levels impact schooling outcomes. Howard then investigates less-academic factors like school retention, suspensions, dropout rates, access to gifted and AP placement, and students’ SAT scores as a foundation for his review of the literature on various explanations for the gap. Beginning with the eugenics movement, and moving to discussions centered on deficit-based thinking, cultural mismatch theory, and stereotype threat, perhaps his greatest success is his in-depth consideration of Ladson-Billings’ (2006) notion of the “education debt” and its implications for a more thoughtful consideration of the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral implications of the achievement gap in a society that claims justice as a pillar of democracy.

In chapter two, Howard, in a remarkably succinct manner, digs into the changing racial and ethnic demographics of the United States, and places these eye-opening statistics squarely within the contexts of American schools. After unpacking these demographic shifts nationally and regionally, the author situates the discussion on the teachers who work within these increasingly diverse settings. The author references his previous work in what is considered the “demographic divide” (Gay & Howard, 2000) whereas teachers realize the startling truth that they will encounter students from cultural, ethnic, linguistic, and social class backgrounds drastically different from their own. Considering this truth, Howard (2010) uncovers the reality that the mostly “White, middle class, monolingual, and female” (p. 41) teaching force is discouragingly underprepared to work in these increasingly diverse school settings. Instead of merely posing the problem, Howard offers readers some tangible

solutions. By noting numerous ways educators can re-think and re-frame teacher training, Howard offers suggestions for fledgling and experienced teachers to make classrooms places more conducive to the culturally and ethnically diverse students that are appearing more and more.

In chapter three, Howard tackles the issue of culture, a widely used and widely misunderstood construct in American educational discourse. After reviewing numerous researchers' positions on culture, Howard settles on his own definition and asserts how important it is that educators consider this important facet that greatly impacts schooling. Positing the importance of Bourdieu's (1986) assertions on cultural capital, and the Yosso's (2005) "cultural wealth" work, which builds upon the early cultural capital work in a more non-deficit oriented way, Howard reviews a widely-utilized approach to educational discourse called sociocultural theory. With these more foundational works as a backdrop, the author then delves into the work of researchers that have tried to intersect cultural theories into practice. Highlighting the "cultural modeling" framework of Lee (2006, 2007), the "funds of knowledge" approach to classroom discourse by Moll et, al. (1992), Nasir's (2000, 2002) connections between cultural knowledge and mathematic subject matter learning, and Howard's (2001) own research on culture-cognition in urban elementary schools, the author does a thorough presentation of some of the most important recent contributions to understanding how well cultural understandings can intersect with student learning for more optimal outcomes. While the literature review is very useful in providing empirical evidence regarding how impactful it is to marry students' cultural understandings to those understandings valued and assessed in the classroom, Howard provides a particular jewel in the chapter through the inclusion of series of reflection questions. These questions are geared toward classroom educators, and if utilized can provide meaningful bases for teachers to concretely ponder how student learning at home and in their neighborhood contexts can intertwine with pedagogical decision making. In the next chapter, Howard narrows in even more to discuss how to consider culture in practice and, more specifically, how to utilize students' cultures in classroom teacher decision-making.

Chapter four highlights the widely recognized facets of culturally responsive pedagogy as a response to - and possible remedy for - the achievement gap. Howard asserts that this approach is not exemplified simply in teaching practices, but embedded in teacher and administrator beliefs and commitments to students and their cultures. Howard (2010) also identifies a shift in culturally responsive pedagogy from “conceptual theory to grounded practice” (p. 71). As a result of this shift, various teachers, as noted in works by educational researchers and scholars, have implemented this teaching approach and have found great successes in their instruction of students of color. Howard explains the importance of recognizing that culturally responsive pedagogy is not a new concept and amidst the critiques, is not solely for students of color. Describing experiences from his own research, Howard draws attention to the role of culturally relevant pedagogy in impacting academic achievement, increasing test scores, and bolstering graduation rates and college enrollment. Merely recognizing the success of these programs for replication is insufficient; rather, the significance of this approach dwells in the belief and commitment of teachers who have the desire to see all students succeed, but need the pedagogical tools to make it a reality.

In chapter five, Howard unpacks the prominent role of race in academics more broadly and schooling more specifically. Howard describes four distinct ways in which race is interrogated in education and society, concluding that race is central, however, it should be presented in balance with understandings of institutional and societal factors that also influence student outcomes. In addition to the interrogation of race, Howard provides a thoughtful, historical overview of racism in the United States. As seen throughout the volume, Howard’s approach to presenting theory is highlighted through the insight of other scholars and provides various perspectives of what racism is and how its characteristics unfold in society and schools.

Howard (2010) notes that critical race theory, which “places race at the center of the discussion of the achievement gap in education” (p. 98), interestingly can be used to empower students of color not only to recognize, but also openly discuss and share their own views on race and the impact it has on their academic achievement, thus

eliminating the pervasive and damaging colorblind ideology. By using examples of empirical works on race and voices from actual students, Howard helps to stress and support the significance of race in education and learning. Howard makes a call for researchers, practitioners, and educational leaders to begin to talk explicitly about race. In addition, Howard (2010) pushes scholars to more readily incorporate race in the research of topics, where race may not be obviously a variable, and to move into a post-racial paradigm “that recognizes the human connectedness that binds all citizens and calls for the interrogation and interpretation of human behavior to be tied to individual characteristics, as opposed to group classifications” (pp. 109-110). Howard proposes that acknowledging race is not only significant in moving toward academic achievement for all students, but remembering to keep racial understandings in balance with other factors that play a vital role in students’ education is also key.

In chapter six, Howard positions cultural competence and racial awareness as central components of developing equitable systems for student success. He poses that developing educators’ and researchers’ critical self-reflexivity serves an essential role in rupturing normalized practices that too often perpetuate habits of dominant privilege. According to Howard, such self-reflection should explicitly focus on issues like cultural and racial experiences, biases, ways of knowing, and practices to examine their roles in perpetuating racism and cultural intolerance both in classrooms and research. Howard describes how such self-reflexivity occurs in his own preservice teacher classrooms to promote discourse examining preservice teachers’ own beliefs and perspectives of race as well as how race plays a role in the schooling process. This detailed account provides readers with descriptive evidence and examples of how his theoretical propositions manifest in real-world contexts, a drawback too often found in other theoretical research on preparing teachers for diverse classrooms.

Written within a framework of action and hope, Howard’s final chapter concludes with an examination of four schools, successful in their commitment to supporting high academic success for diverse student populations. Chosen for their high minority and low-income populations, these

public and charter schools demonstrated consistent student improvement over a two-year period. In his analysis, Howard identifies five specific components contributing to their students' success. These practices and ideologies provide a framework for attending to racial, cultural, and academic contexts of teaching and learning. Howard's examples of successful schooling provide hope and urgency for all educators; his call to attend to widespread inequities creating and perpetuating the academic achievement gap echoes through his statistical examination of today's realities as well as illustration of the inevitable future consequences should we fail to respond accordingly.

In *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools*, Howard presents a remarkably thorough work that highlights the puzzling and arguably complex topics of race and culture that intertwine with the causes and solutions of the achievement gap. Moreover, he does so in an engaging manner and presents a book that deals with challenging topics in a clear and accessible way. His tone is serious, but not angry; he is critical, but does not cast blame, and as a result, Howard keeps readers from various political and social positions wanting to read more and more about these previously silenced topics.

While seasoned scholars of school achievement disparities would benefit from his overview and updates of 20 plus years of research, this book would be most beneficial to graduate students who are beginning to grapple with issues of race, class, culture, and equity in their fledgling research. This book is scholarly in tone, but is very approachable for not only educational policy makers, school leaders, and professional developers who are seeking a historical and theoretical overview of how race and culture impact educational practices, but also for teachers who look for first-hand accounts of the pedagogical benefits of directing more attention to the lives and stories of their increasingly diverse classrooms.

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Though previously working as former elementary and secondary teachers in schools in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia, reviewers Roderick L. Carey, Wyletta Gamble and Laura S. Yee are currently second year doctoral students in the Minority and Urban Education program within the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Maryland College Park. Roderick is currently interested in contextual influences on the school achievement of Black and Latino students in urban settings. Wyletta's research interests include the role and impact of mentoring on African-American female educators and students. Laura is interested in issues of classroom equity for the professional development of teachers.



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