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

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During a mundane, and admittedly tedious vocabulary lesson with my fifth grade class, I began defining the word “impoverished,” which had appeared in an assigned magazine article. I suggested synonyms -- “down and out,” “destitute,” “neglected,” -- but met a sea of unresponsive faces. Finally, Daveonna flashed me a bright smile, “Oh, Ms. J. You mean *ghetto*!” Suddenly 32 students came alive in a riotous discussion of “ghetto’s” finer shades of meaning in urban culture, and this linguistically and racially diverse group of students brainstormed at least ten related terms from English slang, Spanish, and standard English, including *barrio*, *low-class*, *projects*, *tugurios*, and *homemade*. The lesson ended with a conversation about how these words are often used negatively to define groups of people who may or may not be “impoverished.”

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I wish that I could say that highly engaging, student-centered lessons like these occurred everyday in my classroom, but they did not. Yes, I taught my students the required 5th grade content and academic skills, but were my lessons *transformative*? Did they challenge my students to rethink how they viewed the world and to question the injustices that they saw in their own lives? How culturally responsive was my teaching, *really*?

In *Why Race and Culture Matter in Schools: Closing the Achievement Gap in America's Classrooms* (2010), Tyrone C. Howard begins to help educators answer such questions. He presents an in-depth look at two important variables that influence how students and teachers experience schools: race and culture. For readers who are not as well versed in these topics and in how they relate to schools, Howard systematically presents the data, literature, and theory to help them get there. While the connection to teacher practice is tenuous, the book offers an excellent overview to help us understand what happens when mostly White, monolingual educators teach a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse student body.

For most people who pay attention to U.S. education, the most powerful symbol of why race and culture matter in schools is the achievement gap. Howard pointedly avoids defining the gap as a black-white construct, but instructs us to look broadly at the differences in achievement between student groups such as African American, Native American, and certain Asian American and Latino students on the low end of the performance spectrum, and primarily White and various Asian American students at the upper end of the spectrum. Early in the book, Howard contextualizes the achievement gap within the complexity of the nation's ever-changing demographics, identifying the racial and ethnic shifts taking place in the country, and showing how these changes are transforming schools. Howard contends that the nation is not making necessary adjustments to deal effectively with the changing identity of its citizens. Echoing the pioneering work by Geneva Gay, Gloria Ladson-Billings, and James Banks that began in the 1970s, Howard asks, "Are educators prepared to teach in diverse schools?" and the implicit follow-up question, "If not, how can we better prepare them?"

Howard then plunges into the theoretical heart of the book, presenting conceptual frameworks for understanding culture and race in schools. Declaring that there is a need to “thoroughly examine culture in a new way,” (p.51) Howard draws upon sociocultural and historical theory to demonstrate how culture influences thinking and learning in schools. He then guides the reader through early discourse about race and schooling, the impact of critical race theory, and current empirical works that examine race and schools. Finally, he centers our attention on the cultural discontinuity that occurs when mainstream academic culture (which tends to be Eurocentric, English speaking, heterosexist, and middle class) conflicts with students’ personal and cultural knowledge, and makes the case for how culturally responsive teaching can help to bridge this gap.

At this point, Howard veers away from theory, and tiptoes into practice, asking the question: How can we help novice and experienced educators and researchers acquire, maintain, and build the cultural competence and racial awareness required to teach in schools? Howard quickly reveals that acquiring these skills is not an easy task because teachers must radically alter their ways of thinking about who they are and the work that they do. Specifically, they have to gain a comprehensive understanding of what cultural knowledge is and how it plays out in teaching and learning situations. They must conduct ongoing critical self-reflection and must develop a consciousness about how race is manifested in society. To demonstrate how difficult and painful this reflective process is for educators, Howard includes a case study about pre-service teachers in a teacher-credentialing program who are asked to grapple with deep-seeded notions about race and privilege. Oddly, he does not include a comparative case study on professional development provided to *current* teachers. I find this surprising since it is important to acknowledge the resistance that administrators and outside consultants often confront when they try to build teachers’ cultural competence and racial awareness. In many teachers’ eyes, the problem is with the students, not the instructor, so self-reflection is a waste of time. It would have been valuable to include examples of how school leaders build the trust required for teachers to question long-held notions about themselves and their students.

Throughout the book, Howard attempts to balance the theoretical and pedagogical aspects of teaching a racially diverse group of learners. His chapters on theory are convincing, and it is clear that he is one of the leading thinkers on the topic. Yet, the chapters on practice are weaker. For instance the five examples of successful schools presented in his final chapter are cursory, as Howard offers few specifics on what makes these schools so successful. For instance, he identifies “Effective Instructional Practices” as one of the most single important variables in student achievement outcomes, yet only devotes three pages to it. “Visionary Leadership” receives two pages. Similarly, in the “Teaching in Action” section of Chapter 4, Howard presents case studies of two teachers working with racially diverse student populations; we learn about one teacher’s writing program and another teacher’s math lessons. While the brief descriptions of teaching strategies are interesting, the reader is left wanting far more information about the teachers’ thought-processes, approaches, and challenges. In order to truly convey the complexity of teaching in racially diverse classroom, the case study sections of the book need to be fleshed out. When they are combined with the theoretical chapters, the book ends up feeling lopsided.

Why Race and Class Matter in Schools is a valuable resource to teachers, administrators, and teacher educators who desire a conceptual framework for understanding the role of race and culture in schools. It is not, however, a step-by-step guide for how to build more culturally responsive classrooms and close the achievement gap; those looking for a book of strategies with rich examples should turn to other options.

About the Reviewer

Erika Moore Johnson is a doctoral student in Curriculum Studies and Teacher Education at the Stanford University School of Education. She earned her master’s degree in education from the University of California, Berkeley and her bachelor’s degree in anthropology from Amherst College. She is a National Board Certified Teacher and taught for ten years in elementary schools in East Palo Alto and San Leandro, California. Her current research

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