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Gary R. Howard's " We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools" Essay Sample

Introduction

While many Western countries, especially the United States, are traditionally represented as a democratic society, with equal opportunity for all, a brief review of Western history indicates that this has only been a dream for many citizens, especially in education. In the United States, for example, the confinement and extermination of Native Americans, the slavery of African Americans, and the exploitation of Hispanic and Asian minorities in the country mirror a social system of inequalities that still permeate most aspects of the American society. Thus, it is not surprising that there is enduring debate about significant issues that largely affect cultural diversity in education.

In order to respond to and resolve such tensions the reevaluation of structures of knowledge, organizing principles of institutional life, and cultural patterns of relationships, is required. The enterprise is exhilarating to some but deeply threatening to others. Still, a cultural transformation is well under way in many classrooms. Academic communities are primarily the environments for productive dialogue on the subject of how learners can better understand their ethnic differences and negotiate the boundaries of those differences, how the current scholarship is redefining areas and opening up stimulating new fields of investigation, and how to build more inclusive academic institutions.

However, in spite of the civil rights legislation in the United States since the 1950s, the national goal of providing ethnic minority populations with equal access to quality institutions of education and opportunities for academic success has yet to be realized. Despite the country's changing demographics and the inevitable "browning" of its population, many contemporary learners from ethnic minority groups confront a diminution of their security, status, and identity as they pursue higher education. This shows that problems, issues, and opportunities related to diversity and multiculturalism in education are paramount today.

The rest of this paper reviews Gary R. Howard's book *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*. The review focuses on the author's discussion of the dominance paradigm. It also tackles Howard's urge for personal and professional transformation in teaching in a multicultural classroom. Finally, the review briefly discusses the implications of Howard's book to instructional practices and how the book inspires my relationships with racially and ethnically different students.

Overview of the Book

In *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know*, Howard provides an approach for developing anti-racist identity for White teachers that will make their teaching of ethnic minority learners better. Howard's book is premised its title, a quote taken from Malcolm X. In this book, the author states that White teachers cannot be effective teachers of ethnic minority learners until they have profoundly investigated and confronted their own racial identity.

In knowing one's identity, educators should recognize the suffering of the ethnic minorities because of the past and present White dominance. The author frames his discussion using the theory of social dominance, explaining how the history has witnessed and is witnessing one group exerting supremacy over another.

Primarily, Howard's goal is to create educators who have high appreciation and understanding of the values and cultures of people of color who are often discriminated. Therefore, the main purpose of *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know* is to alert teachers of the need for multicultural school instructions and curriculums along the line of the ever increasing numbers of ethnic minority students in the United States who are being taught by White teachers.

Social Dominance Theory

One of the prevailing perspectives in *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know* is Howard's explanation of the "social dominance paradigm" which holds that the racial dominance of Whites is deeply rooted on their position in the society as the possessors of "truth and rightness." The author also maintains that the motivating forces behind such dominance include the assumption of the legacy of privilege and the luxury of ignorance. In this paradigm, Whites, as a hegemonic group, do not view themselves as being affected by membership in a particular group or cultural conditioning.

In addition, these hegemonic groups do not consider themselves as having a perspective or a culture. Howard suggests that, in the dominance paradigm,

Whites are simply the bearers of the "truth." This social dominance paradigm is supported by the idea that ethnic minorities are invisible in the society and that the dominant Whites carry status and privilege. Throughout the Western history, the dominant group used several methodologies to establish dominance and control. Such methodologies include violence and warfare, disease, religion, land theft, alienation, and education, among others. However, Howard makes it clear in the book that the enemy is dominance itself, not White people. This distinction becomes blurred at times specifically because of the overpowering convergence of Whiteness and dominance in Western nations.

In *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know*, Howard suggests a number of healing strategies that White educators can use in dealing with a multicultural classroom environment. One of the major strategies is the honesty in the teaching of history. In my observation of typical classrooms, many White educators, because of the difficulty in removing bias, are having hard times in teaching and constructing history for their students. Another strategy is for the White educators to develop empathy concerning the experiences of those learners from different cultural backgrounds, as well as those who come from different cultural advocacy.

Personal and Professional Transformation

We Can't Teach What We Don't Know reveals Howard's voyage from the conventional White values and norms to a perspective informed by multiculturalism. The author's journey began in the 1960's when he was a

volunteer teacher and mentor for young ethnic minority students who were in the lower socioeconomic class. His experience in the inner city of New Haven, Connecticut gave Howard insight about the predicament that his students and their families faced. In Chapters 1-3, Howard describes his personal and professional transformation: from a state of total ignorance regarding the realities of race in education toward a deeper understanding of racism and the social dominance paradigm.

Howard's journey is characterized by three phases of development. First, as an adolescent and young adult immersed in the ignorance of the White supremacy myth. Second, as an antiracist evangelist. And third, as the executive director of the Reach Program. Howard's Reach program was founded in the 1980's with the primary aim at training educators of all colors, particularly the White ones, regarding the philosophy and principles of multiculturalism. This program aimed at helping educators become culturally sensitive and competent in the multicultural classroom. In Chapters 4-6, the readers are encouraged to follow Howard down the path of transformation. The author suggests that White educators can achieve healing and social transformation process by exhibiting advocacy, empathy, honesty, and actively participating in anti-racism initiatives.

In Chapter 7, Howard describes the concrete practices and beliefs of the transformationist White educators. The author states that race is an important factor in the delivery of education, and that change in the system begins with the White educators. Overall, the book is very practical as one relates to the realistic ways of becoming a transformationist White teacher

through one's relationships, thinking, teaching practices, and behavior. In Chapter 8, the author concludes that the path towards a transformationist White orientation is difficult since this effort may result in cognitive dissonance as one reflects upon formerly held beliefs about White dominance and race. If one perseveres, however, there will be personal and professional renewal and hope.

Implications

Howard's *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know* suggests that it is very important for educators to set a research agenda focusing on culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM). Educators need to should focus on ethnically diverse classrooms and the kinds of managerial practices that are most effective in such settings. They should identify what types of cultural conflicts can arise in classrooms that might make it more difficult to have a caring, safe, and orderly environment. They should also recognize that strategies vary depending on the particular cultural group involved. Educators should also identify the most appropriate approaches when learners in one particular classroom come from a variety of cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, the book inspires White educators as to how they can be best prepared for organizing and managing the culturally diverse classrooms they will encounter. In following Howard's assumptions in the book, White teachers must sensitize their students to their own stereotypes, assumptions, and biases so that they undergo authentic personal and

professional transformation instead of simply learning to mouth the socially appropriate responses. Moreover, White teachers need to provide cultural content knowledge without perpetuating stereotypes and essentializing cultural differences. Finally, Howard's *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know* inspires White educators in providing opportunities for their students to gain awareness of the broader political, economic, and social context in which educators, students, and educational institutions exist.

Reference

Howard. G. R. (1999). *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*, 2nd Edition. New York: Teachers College Press.