
Introduction

Why Alarm Bells Should Be Ringing in Our Heads

In July 2008, I received three e-mails and a telephone call that were similar to many others I've gotten during the last 11 years. The telephone call was from a school administrator in California. The e-mails were from district-level school administrators in Virginia, Florida, and California. They all wanted the same thing—help in doing a better job of educating African American K–12 students. Like countless educators throughout the nation, these administrators realized that in spite of the abundance of research on the achievement gaps, many teachers—perhaps even most—*still* need help in this area. Unfortunately, most teacher-preparation programs are *still* failing to adequately prepare teachers to work effectively with African American students and other students who have historically been shortchanged by the education system, and most professional development for teachers either doesn't last long enough to do an adequate job or fails to address this issue at all. This is disturbing because, in spite of the No Child Left Behind Act, recent statistics suggest that the public school system in the United States is failing an alarming number of African American, American Indian, Alaska Native, and Latino K–12 students.

- High school **dropout rates** have *decreased* for all racial and ethnic groups during the past 30 years. However, black and Hispanic students continue to have much higher dropout rates than whites. In 2006, 5.8% of whites, 10.7% of blacks, and 22.1% of Hispanics dropped out.¹
- High school **graduation rates** for the “Principal School Districts Serving the Nation’s 50 Largest Cities” range from 24.9% to 77.1%.²
- Suburban school districts tend to have much higher graduation rates than urban districts.³

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- In terms of **race/ethnicity**, the national average graduation rates were 76.2% for whites; 53.4% for blacks; 57.8% for Hispanics; 80.2% for Asian/Pacific Islanders; and 49.3% for American Indian/Alaska Natives.⁴
- In terms of **gender**, Asian/Pacific Islanders had the *highest* graduation rate for males (76.5%), and black males (46.2%) and American Indian/Alaska Native males (44.6%) had the lowest. Among females, Asian/Pacific Islanders had the highest graduation rate (82.1%), and American Indian/Alaska Natives (50%) and black females (59.6%) had the lowest.⁵

These statistics should alarm any concerned American, but especially educators, because the level of education a person attains largely determines the type of future that individual will have. Many of the social problems that plague our nation are linked to poverty, and of course, a good education is the only legitimate way that most low-income children will be able to escape from poverty. In fact, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, individuals who don't complete high school are twice as likely as those who do to end up living in poverty as adults, and those who don't complete high school are nearly six times more likely than individuals who earn a bachelor's degree to end up living in poverty as adults.⁶ More than 12 million U.S. children under the age of 18 live in poverty, and African American and Latino children are a lot more likely than white children to be living at or below the poverty level.⁷

Poverty is also linked to crime rates. During the past few years, on average, more than 2 million juvenile arrests have occurred each year in the United States.⁸ Furthermore, the U.S. Department of Justice reported the following:

- "If recent incarceration rates remain unchanged, an estimated 1 out of every 15 persons (6.6%) will serve time in a prison during their lifetime."⁹
- "Lifetime chances of a person going to prison are higher for men (11.3%) than for women (1.8%) [and higher for] blacks (18.6%) and Hispanics (10%) than for whites (3.4%)."¹⁰
- "Based on current rates of first incarceration, an estimated 32% of black males will enter State or Federal prison during their lifetime, compared to 17% of Hispanic males and 5.9% of white males."¹¹

According to the Children's Defense Fund, race and poverty are the two factors that most likely determine who will end up in prison, and black and Latino youth are a lot more likely to be arrested and incarcerated than white youth.¹² Unfortunately, because of various policies that have been implemented, the public school system now plays a vital role in "funneling" many black and Latino youth into the "school-to-prison pipeline."¹³ In other words, instead of equipping these youth from low-income backgrounds with an education that will enable them

to escape from poverty, the public school system contributes to ensuring that many will not only remain in poverty, but that some youth will never have a chance to improve the quality of their lives. As the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund concluded:

Criminal justice policy in the United States has for some time now spurned rehabilitation in favor of long and often permanent terms of incarceration, manifesting an overarching belief that there is no need to address root causes of crime and that many people who have committed crimes can never be anything but “criminals.” These policies have served to isolate and remove a massive number of people, a disproportionately large percentage of whom are people of color, from their communities and from participation in civil society.¹⁴

As a veteran educator with teaching experience in both underperforming schools and in universities, and as a researcher and education consultant who has listened not only to the concerns of educators but also to those expressed by African American students and African American parents, writing this book became my way of addressing an ongoing problem that I have devoted the last 11 years to tackling: How can educators do a better job of educating African American children?

If you’re a K–12 teacher, counselor, principal, or vice principal, this book can empower you. One of its main features is that you can use it in the privacy of your own home. However, if you are a teacher educator, you can use this book as a required or recommended text for prospective and current teachers. If you are an education consultant, mentor-teacher, or district-level administrator, this book will enable you to deal with any issues that *you* need to face about African American K–12 students and their parents. It will also allow you to provide quality in-depth professional-development training to small or large groups of educators *after* you have read the book, completed the exercises, and worked on your own personal roadblocks. Then, you can use the book to train new and veteran teachers. Here’s a summary of the benefits:

ELEVEN WAYS THAT THIS BOOK CAN BENEFIT READERS

The book will help you do the following:

- Increase your efficacy with African American K–12 students
- Uncover mental baggage that may impede your progress
- Examine your views about racism and race relations
- Identify the *personal* benefits of becoming a more effective educator of African American students
- Deal with obstacles to effective classroom management

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- Learn how to improve your relations with African American parents
- Tackle actual classroom scenarios and become aware of problems that some educators have had with African American students
- Learn the answers to questions that many educators have about African American students
- Compare your views to those of other educators
- Become a wiser, more effective, and more courageous educator
- Become committed to engaging in lifelong professional development

Besides the fact that you can use it for personal and professional development at home as well as in formal settings, this book is unique for several other reasons. First, it contains stories from teachers, parents, former students, and other individuals about their experiences. Second, it contains actual classroom scenarios. Third, each chapter contains exercises that I designed to help you (a) examine your personal beliefs about important issues and (b) become a better educator as a result of what you learn about yourself and these issues. I designed most of the exercises for you to complete on your own, but each chapter also includes a group exercise that you can complete with other educators. Fourth, throughout the book, I have included feedback from over 600 educators and individuals connected to schools in three distinctly different states—California, Texas, and Minnesota—which will permit you to compare your views and experiences with those of the respondents. Fifth, I have devoted an entire chapter to advice from teachers about how educators can prepare students for standardized tests. Sixth, Chapter 8 contains numerous questions from educators and other individuals for you to not only *read*, but also to attempt to answer based on the information that you learned from previous chapters.

MOVING FORWARD

INTRODUCTORY EXERCISE: AN ATTITUDE CHECK

(Note: You might need additional space for this exercise and others throughout the book. Therefore, you may prefer to record all of your answers in a journal that you can update and refer to on an ongoing basis.)

Before you read the next chapter, please answer the following questions:

1. How do you feel about reading a book that focuses on African American students?

2. Are you willing to engage in self-reflection as you read this book?

3. Are you willing to at least *attempt* to complete every single exercise to the best of your ability?

4. Will you try your best to answer every question and complete every exercise as *honestly* as you can?

5. Now, review your answers to the first four questions, and explain what your answers reveal about you.

6. Did any issue(s) surface that could prevent you from benefiting from reading this book?

If so, what do you need to do *before* you read the rest of the book?

Of course, I can't peer over your shoulder and read your answers. But I do know that if you sincerely want to increase your efficacy with African American students, you can. In other words, if you *choose* to, you can become a better educator of African American students. The choice is yours. If you want to learn some of the ways to do so, and if you are courageous and willing to engage in honest self-reflection, then get ready to turn the page. If you have chosen to accept this challenge, let me be the first to commend you for deciding to embark upon one of the most mind-changing and revolutionary journeys that you will take during your career as an educator.



