

# Conversations about race need to be fearless

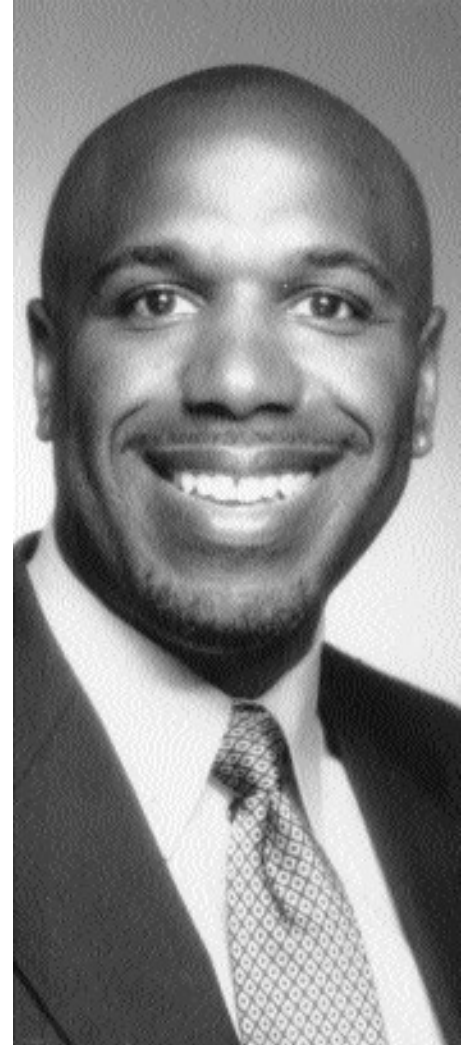
*Educator promotes honesty and courage to make education equitable*

By DENNIS SPARKS

**J**SD: I thought about your advocacy for courageous conversations about race when I read this passage in Linda Ellinor and Glenna Gerard's book, *Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation* (John Wiley & Sons, 1998):

"Our continuing existence depends on a diversity of life that surrounds and quite literally inhabits us. And still we have an innate distrust of diversity. It is fear that makes talking about diversity so difficult. Fear that I will say something that will offend you or reveal my ignorance or prejudices. Fear that you will think less of me after I speak. ... We need to be and feel heard, to be willing to listen without feeling that we must change to conform to another's way of thinking and being. Until we can create a place for such conversations to occur, I doubt we will be able to create new ways of being together that honor us all."

**Singleton:** Typically, white people fear that they will say something that will be viewed as offensive or will be misinterpreted by people of color. My



Glenn Singleton

experience, however, has been that when people speak from a place of personal truth and risk being uncomfortable, only then do their interracial relationships deepen. It's important that white people move past their fear of offending and being corrected to a place where they can understand the points of view expressed by people of color. People of color need to recognize that their experiences are unique and to have patience and compassion as we try to translate them to a white audience. Absent such a conversation, we

form inaccurate views about what others are thinking and/or experiencing.

### CONVERSATIONS BY RACE

**JSD:** In preparing for this interview, I learned how much many African-Americans withhold in cross-racial conversations. Here are three examples. An editor's note in an early 2002 issue of *Black Issues in Higher Education* noted that black cultural centers on college campuses provided "a place where we could enjoy each other's company and talk honestly and openly about what was going on around campus." By implication, the writer was saying that she didn't feel she could talk honestly in other campus settings. In *It's the Little Things* (Harvest Books, 2002), Lena Williams and Charlayne Hunter-Gault discuss in detail what blacks say to each other about whites but not to whites. In a *New Yorker* article from earlier this year, Henry Louis Gates Jr. says this about a manuscript purportedly written in the 1850s by Hannah Crafts, an escaped slave: "Crafts writes as an opinionated, keen insider, capturing the way black people talked to, and about, each other when white auditors were not around."

**Singleton:** Race is the hardest topic to discuss in our society. In interracial company, I am far more likely to be private and somewhat guarded in sharing my racial experiences because a powerful voice outside of me says my experiences are not valid. People of color often develop a couple of different personas, play multiple roles, and wear masks because we know that our honest expressions may be viewed by white people as rude or overly emotional.

### SACRIFICING OUR SELVES

**JSD:** In interracial settings, we all give up our authentic selves.

**Singleton:** Absolutely. My white counterparts sacrifice their authentic

### GLENN ERIC SINGLETON

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**Education:** Bachelor's degree in communications from the University of Pennsylvania and master's degree in administration and policy analysis from the Graduate School of Education at Stanford University.

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**Accomplishments:** Singleton has appeared on ABC's *Good Morning*

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*America*, has hosted and produced educational programs for cable access television and has written numerous articles on equity, institutional racism, leadership, and staff development for national journals, magazines, and newspapers. He teaches a graduate seminar on educational equity at the University of California, Berkeley and San Jose State University to aspiring urban principals. Singleton is a nationally recognized keynote speaker and consultant to a variety of educational consortia, school reform, and support provider organizations.

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selves when they have feelings they don't express. This lack of authentic discourse is destructive to our relationships. We want to get to a place where our true thoughts can be shared and difficult questions can be asked.

### MICRO-AGGRESSIONS TAKE A TOLL

**JSD:** I'd like to pursue this a bit further. In *It's the Little Things*, Williams writes: "(M)y actions ... are the result of the cumulative effect of a lifetime of racial slights and injustices suffered because of my color." Williams describes what psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint calls micro-aggressions, "the things you experience every day that then add up and take their toll."

**Singleton:** That really resonates personally with me. Some days I'm less able to cope. People of color are like pres-

sure cooks walking around with racial pressure building inside. For me, courageous conversation is a valve that slowly releases that pressure so that I don't explode, which will appear inappropriate, overly aggressive, or emotional. Black Americans, and other people of color for that matter, require healing places to deal with these micro-aggressions. That's what black cultural centers on campuses provide. That's why informal and formal caucuses of black educators at conferences and meetings are important. Without these safe spaces, we don't have opportunities to slowly release that pressure. It's also important that we have opportunities to heal by talking honestly and openly about these micro-aggressions in the moment and in the multiracial settings in which they actually occur.

## SPEAKING OUR TRUTHS

**JSD:** Williams also observed that, “Whites said they are often afraid to speak openly and freely around blacks, fearing that a misstep or a word taken out of context would place them in the awkward position of having to defend their words, actions, and race.” As you well know, honest conversations about race and many other important but potentially divisive and emotionally laden topics are rare in schools because of fears that conflict and anger will surface and irreparable harm may be done. The culture of most schools runs contrary to the norms of such conversations — speaking our truths, listening deeply to one another, and raising conflict rather than avoiding it. Is the creation of such a culture a precondition to courageous conversation about race, or does having the conversation change the culture?

**Singleton:** If it’s considered to be a precondition, I am afraid we’ll never get there. The prevalent norms are that we not speak our truth. It’s important in these conversations that we agree that as we have these conversations, we agree to stay engaged with each other and committed to the expression of our truth. It’s also important that we understand we will be uncomfortable. Ultimately, we want to create safe conditions in which educators can be uncomfortable. Courageous conversations are clearly not an institutionalized practice in schools. Therefore, they are a gamble. But we are not experiencing each other fully if we do not communicate our honest and sincere perspectives and ideas. I challenge folks in the districts in which I work to have these conversations to better understand our multiple truths and to move to a deeper understanding of how we racially affect each other and how that impacts the schooling of our students.

Courageous conversation is an essential prerequisite for addressing the very significant and difficult challenges we face in closing the racial achievement gap. These conversations also help educators become more passionate learners

## HOW TO HAVE A COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION ABOUT RACE

Commit to four points for engaging in, sustaining, and deepening interracial dialogue about race. We will:

- Stay engaged;
- Speak our truth;
- Experience discomfort;
- Expect/accept nonclosure.

themselves and more productive in their work. If we really want to close the achievement gap, we are going to have to engage in courageous conversations to understand the barriers to higher achievement faced by students and adults of color. Part of what I’m talking about here is understanding whiteness. People of color are constantly explaining or defending their racial perspective and

**“People of color are constantly explaining or defending their racial perspective and experience. White educators need to examine and investigate their racial experience if we are to move ahead. When we begin this discussion, those who are white may feel called to define and perhaps defend their racial experience. White people often don’t see themselves as racial beings, so I can see why it’s uncomfortable to learn that others have been thinking about their white identity a lot longer than they have.”**

experience. White educators need to examine and investigate their racial experience if we are to move ahead. When we begin this discussion, those who are white may feel called to define and perhaps defend their racial experience. White people often don’t see themselves as racial beings, so I can see why it’s uncomfortable to learn that others have been thinking about their white identity a lot longer than they have. Because people of color understand at a deep level that we cannot transcend the racial hierarchy of our society unless we have courageous conversations, it behooves all of us to make those conversations productive.

It’s important, though, to remember that this is not a conversation that is quickly over and done. We will not be finished at the end of this interview, Dennis. I hope we come back for more conversation, and that’s what we need in schools. I work at all levels of the school system, and I’ve found that when you invite adults and students to participate in this gratifying discourse, they never want to return to the old ways of engaging.

## CLOSING THE GAP

**JSD:** You mentioned the problem of the achievement gap. Some experts say the solution is to ensure that every student has a qualified and caring teacher. Others say the solution is to provide a culturally sensitive curriculum. Still others argue that it’s mostly a problem of poverty, not race.

**Singleton:** Race and racial conditioning are always happening. Therefore, it always has to do with race. As racial beings, our race is always there; it’s always playing a role. Good teaching and good curriculum are keys to quality schooling. The question is who and what defines quality teaching and quality curriculum. I believe the goal of schooling is to prepare students to thrive in a multiracial, multiethnic democracy. What that means is not only understanding our own culture, but also having the ability to negotiate unfamiliar cultures. Therefore, good teaching means

presenting a multicultural perspective and providing the skills for negotiating various cultures. If we accept that as the goal of American education, then we have a different view of quality teaching than the one present in our system.

### EXPERIENCING WHITENESS

**JSD:** In the Winter 2001 issue of *American Educational Research Journal*, Amanda Lewis observes that “anti-racist or critical multicultural education says that although we cannot ignore social, cultural, and home factors, much of the blame must be located in institutionalized racism in the classroom, school, and society.” Later she says, “It is essential to talk about how race operates even in settings where people say it is not important. Race matters as much in (almost) all-white settings ... perhaps even more so. ... (I)t is crucial that whites learn more not only about the reality of racial inequality, but also about their own role in its reproduction.”

**Singleton:** Absolutely. For example, students at a predominantly white suburban school who have an entirely white experience in advanced placement classes are unconsciously learning that white equates to smarter. Students are, perhaps unconsciously, developing a sense of white supremacy because the absence of people of color signals to them that people of color aren't smart. In addition, they don't learn how to interact with people of color and their perspectives on color, which further nourishes the seeds of racism.

### THE RULE OF RESPECT

**JSD:** An unpublished study by Charles Payne and Mariame Kaba, “So Much Reform, So Little Change: Building-Level Obstacles to Urban School Reform,” reports that the quality of social relationships in high-poverty schools correlates highly with the improved academic performance of students. More specifically, the study found that “the quality of social relationships proved to be one of the best predictors” and that “social trust is the key factor associated with improving schools.” The researchers

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note, “In our worst schools, the basic web of social relationships is likely to be severely damaged. Such schools can be angry, discouraged places, where people trust only those in the personal clique.”

**Singleton:** There's only one rule that's necessary in schools, and that's the rule of respect. Respect is at the heart of successful social relationships. But it's important to understand how respect may look and feel different across racial borders. To effectively show me respect, you must understand what my experience is all about. As my teacher, I need you to understand that as I come to the school each morning I go through a number of racial tests. If you don't understand where I'm coming from, I will feel less safe in your classroom and in my relationship with you. And so I'm going to distance myself from the tasks you as my teacher want me to perform. I see that happen every day with students and teachers. Most educators claim they respect and love the kids, but if they don't truly understand what they're going through and their need for healing in a society that's so intense in its racial oppression, then they are not respecting that child. Through curriculum and instructional choices, teachers must communicate that their students' experiences matter to them and that those experiences are valid.

### MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

**JSD:** Your work assumes that there are multiple, valid perspectives on situa-

tions rather than a single correct view.

**Singleton:** That's precisely the difficult paradigm shift that I am seeking. What nourishes me in this work is that I see people learning how to engage with perspectives different from their own without needing to judge someone as wrong. The challenge in society and certainly in schools is creating a space in which my perspective of color can sit beside yours — and to allow those perspectives to interact. That's hard work. It is courageous just to get in touch with your own perspective and to express it. You then have to be even more courageous to listen carefully to the viewpoint of another and allow that perspective to deeply influence your own.

In race, this courageous interaction is critical. As a white man, Dennis, you don't walk down the street and experience it as I do. And while you can never have my experience, you can believe me when I express to you that something remarkably different is happening to me. Once you accept and affirm that different experiences exist, your own perspective and life will be changed. And that's what I'm asking of teachers and administrators.

Teachers do not have to have the daily experiences of urban black kids in order to affirm their reality and create classroom conditions that support their needs. White teachers who understand that theirs is not a universal experience can recognize their students' racially unique experiences and incorporate this understanding into curriculum and instruction.

Through the power of a Eurocentric education, some educators of color have lost their racial perspective or have greatly devalued the importance of these cultural connections in the classroom. So teachers of color may also say they have trouble understanding their nonwhite students. That means it's important for educators of color to be aware of how students see us as part of a white educational machine.

### BETTER LEARNING AS THE RESULT

**JSD:** Exactly how do courageous

conversations about race among adults translate into better educational experiences for students?

**Singleton:** When adults engage in interracial discourse, they become clearer about how they and others are perceived racially. As a result, when I am talking to someone of a different race I can interact more fully and authentically. Similarly, when courageous conversation becomes the classroom norm, a student of color can say how distant he or she feels from a white text or from an activity, thus offering a teacher information that might challenge her initial perspective that the student is purposely disengaged or perhaps simply lazy. Courageous teachers go back to the classroom with greater will, skill, knowledge, and capacity to educate the students of color who strug-

gled to relate to a strictly white classroom context. Because they do not fear conversations about race, they can transform instruction by making it both challenging and accessible for all students.

#### **COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS**

**JSD:** Are there particular skills or dispositions that are important in leading these conversations?

**Singleton:** Principals start the process by becoming more aware of their own racial identity. It begins as a personal journey. As principals become more comfortable in examining their own racial perspectives and experience, they find they are more willing to engage their teachers in this conversation, first informally and then formally. They give personal examples of how they have perpetuated a racial achievement gap and

call on staff members to consider how they also might be doing so. These principals express a vision for change in which race no longer predicts student achievement. They guide staff members through discovery of their own racial experiences and how they unconsciously bring them into the classroom.

This conversation we are having, Dennis, is why I am doing this work. It is a healing conversation, one that is rich for me because it affirms me and does not insult you. This kind of conversation nurtures us as human beings and creates the possibility for us to be more productive and interdependent in our lives and in our work. It liberates us just as it liberates teachers and students in schools. Seeing this liberation occur in schools brings me joy. ■