

Teach! Change! Empower! Solutions for Closing the Achievement Gaps by Carl A. Grant. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2009. 152 pp. ISBN 9781412976497.

Kathleen Blake Yancey (1998) tells us the art of reflection “brings with it an underlying promise: that can provide a means of bringing practice and theory together” (p. 7). In this spirit Carl A. Grant presents *Teach! Change! Empower! Solutions for Closing the Achievement Gaps*. In this workbook-like text, Grant stresses reflection as a way for teachers to self-identify and correct perspectives on his conjoined subjects of academic achievement gaps and the affirmation of diversity. He advocates for students he sees as marginalized by the public school system, defining academic achievement gaps as socioeconomic, political, and environmental concerns which “frequently cause some students to dissociate with academics” (p. 7). He paints a picture of poverty and prejudice complicating students’ lives, burdening them with a lack of self-esteem and feelings of resignation, and he absolutely sees race, gender, and social class playing a continuing role in the creation of these gaps. He backs his assertions with a list of studies and journal articles (published by the Brookings Institute and the National Center for Education Statistics, among others). As an instructor in a widely diverse and economically depressed area, I see daily what Grant alludes to as bright, sometimes gifted, people struggling through a mire of esteem issues in order to pass classes at the community college level.

Grant uses reflection prompts, self-knowledge quizzes, and step-by-step “Action Plans,” encouraging teachers to honestly consider relations between academic achievement gaps and issues of race (p. 9) and whether personal experiences with diversity create cultural miscommunication in the classroom. He seems, at times, to expect miracles of objectivity. Pierre Bourdieu (1991) wrote that aspects at the foundation of habitus are often “transmitted without passing through language and consciousness” (p. 51), which we might take to mean that we can never be sure we are being completely honest, even with ourselves. Grant does make it clear that educators should work in groups (p. 1), and that the encouragement of colleagues may lead to greater candor. But in our politically correct, hyper-polite society, whether co-workers will point comfortably to one another’s inner bigot is questionable.

While Bourdieu (1991) saw teachers as part of that “long and slow process to [the] acquisition” of the dominant language of the state (p. 51), Min-Zhan Lu (1992) teaches that the primary goal of education is *not* forcing students to “passively internalize” the dominant culture (p. 896). Like Lu, Grant refuses to accept that educators must be complicit in the mindless assimilation of their students. Instead, he asks that we examine our own “social markers”: those cultural and biological traits—gender, race, and social class—that make us who

we are (p. 19), then force ourselves to address the elephant in the room by “taking a deliberate and active stance to support the histories, cultures, and equitable inclusions in schools and society of different socio-cultural groups” (p. 20). We cannot continue to lump Malcolm X in with Thomas Jefferson as though they spoke from the same social context.

In Chapter 4 Grant presses teachers to look beyond traditional “markers of achievement”—academic assessment and athletic accomplishments (p. 50): “your discovery of [students’] other gifts and talents will be critical while encouraging them to persist in their quest to achieve overall success” (p. 52). The reflection questions and action plan here ask teachers to examine and address the multiple learning intelligences of their students and, in Part III, Grant shares examples of some “multimodal” projects (p. 114). In Example I, “Story Time,” for instance, the instructor selects books “pertaining to race, class, gender, or disability” (p. 113) then develops assignments that allow student expression through writing, drawing, and role playing (pp. 114-115). In “Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key,” Yancey (2004) points out that “as [students] move from medium to medium, they consider what they move forward, what they leave out, what they add” (p. 314), and an excellent lesson in critical thinking might also excite the different learning styles of individual students.

Though Grant’s text might be too lightweight and his tone a little too much like a cheerleader at a high school basketball game to stir up a revolution on its own, his mandate that “teachers teach students with the expectation that gradual or immediate change is inevitable” is apt (p. 49). And, in the hands of believers, it’s an excellent place to start. Lu (1992) writes that “students’ attention needs to be drawn to the politics of [their] decisions” in order to make those decisions from “a position of being more fully informed” (p. 179); this is true for educators as well. We teachers can no longer afford to insulate ourselves from difference and hide behind politically correct jargon if we want to remain relevant in a technologically driven global community. Working through Grant’s exercises as I read—as a middle-aged, middle-class white woman who constantly questions her authenticity in teaching to multicultural classrooms—I felt inspired to begin re-thinking my own lesson plans. Indeed, *Teach! Change! Empower! Solutions for Closing the Achievement Gaps* might not start a revolution, but it certainly could move one from “theory to practice.” On that basis alone, Grant’s text is more than worth the modest purchase price, and I feel I can highly recommend this book.

References

Bourdieu, P. (1991). *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Lu, M-Z. (1992). Conflict and struggle: The enemies or preconditions of basic writing? *College English*, 54(8), 887-913.
- Yancey, K. B. (1998). *Reflections in the writing classroom*. Logan: Utah State Univeristy Press.
- Yancey, K. B. (2004, December). Made not only in words: Composition in a new key. *College Composition and Communication*, 56(2), 297-328.

Reviewer

Rhonda J. Turner is currently in the masters of English program at Colorado State University-Pueblo. Her work focuses on conflict, struggle, and diversity in the classroom. She also teaches composition and fundamentals of writing classes at the university and serves as an adjunct instructor of basic writing and technical writing at Pueblo Community College.