

Anti-Racist Education: Pulling Together to Close the Gaps

by Enid Lee

I attended school in a time and a place in which being academically successful and being Black were not seen as contradictory states. That experience has no doubt influenced the stance I take as an anti-racist consultant working with teachers, schools and school districts across Canada and the United States to improve the academic performance of students of color and of African American students in particular. In many districts, this activity is referred to as “closing the racial gap” in academic achievement. In this essay I will describe the anti-racist framework and process which I use in helping parents, students, teachers and administrators close a variety of gaps created by systems of inequality in schools and society.

Three Gaps

Whenever I go to a school district, a major concern is the racial gap in academic performance. Generally African American, Latino/Hispanic and Native American students as groups are seen to be performing less well than White students and some Asian students as groups. This is one gap. However, there are at least two other equally important and related gaps which are seldom mentioned.

The second is the individual gap. Within the social groups of African American, Native American and Latino students, there are individual students who are experiencing a gap at the personal level. Some students of color, and a growing number of immigrant students, come to school as confident learners, with strong self-esteem, knowing more than one language in some cases, having several skills from home and community life ranging from mathematical to musical. When some students leave our schools they are less capable and less confident. Their self-esteem has been eroded by the experiences of subtle racism—the low expectations of teachers and the culturally invalidating classrooms they inhabit day after day. They have been

“de-skilled” because some of their skills are devalued or unrecognized. Too often they lose their “curiosity to know,” which is an essential characteristic of the engaged learner. They lose their belief in their ability to learn. Sometimes they lose the languages they knew when they came to school because their use has been discouraged in the school setting. In short, there is a major gap between the student’s state upon entering school and his or her state at the time of departure. It is the accumulation of these gaps at the individual level which results in the social group gap that concerns many school district officials and classroom teachers. To close the gap at the *group* level, we need to monitor and address the needs of *individual* students within the racial groupings we have in our school.

The third and most important gap is at the community level. There is a shortfall between the way we are now as nations and the way we could be if all cultural and racial communities were to achieve their full human potential. One of the outcomes in a society structured by racism is that certain communities are robbed of the basic conditions that other communities take for granted: a good education, long and healthy lives, and equal protection under the law. For example, when we look at the statistics offered by the Children’s Defense Fund in the *The State of America’s Children® 2005* (childrensdefense.org), we are reminded that *every day* in America:

- 2,756 high school students drop out
- 5 children or teens commit suicide
- 8 children or teens are killed by firearms
- 367 babies are born to mothers who received late or no prenatal care
- 4,356 children under 18 are arrested

These are disproportionately the experiences of people in communities of color. For example, Latinos

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accounted for 40 percent of all high school dropouts in 2004; however, they only made up 17 percent of the total youth population. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004.) Contrary to the myth of the model minority, Southeast Asian students have one of the highest dropout rates in some parts of the country. (*A Closer Look at Asian Americans and Education* by C. N. Le, 2001.) Incarceration rates for African American men increased to a rate of 21% in 2004. By their mid-30s, 6 in 10 black men who had dropped out of school had spent time in prison. (*New York Times*, March 20, 2006)

This gap at the community level is intimately related to the school-based academic gap at the group and individual levels. Whatever processes we engage in to close the gaps at schools must ultimately include the gaps we find at the community level. We simply cannot ignore the color-coded statistics that point to the ravages of institutional racism in our communities.

Definitions

I'm described as an anti-racist educator. Let me say something about the term "anti-racist." Sometimes people will not attend a workshop if it's called "anti-racist." In one city I asked people what went through their minds when they saw the title of a workshop I was presenting, "Building an Anti-Racist, Multicultural

Curriculum." Several people said they just ignored the word "anti-racist" because it was too severe. They came anyway because the workshop title had "multicultural" in it. I learned that part of the process of closing the gaps with an anti-racist approach is to use language that will give teachers and others a place to begin, while keeping them firmly focused on the task at hand—dismantling racist structures.

A White Canadian student linked racism and multiculturalism very well when he said, "Multiculturalism can work as soon as racism is abolished." *Multiculturalism* is the ideal state in which people's culture, language, heritage and humanity are fully valued and not mired in the kind of statistics reflected on the previous page. *Racism* is the use of institutional power to deny or grant people and groups of people rights, respect, representation and resources based on their skin color. Racism in action makes Whiteness a preferred way of being human. By Whiteness I am referring to the civilization, language, culture and the skin color associated most often with European-ness. *Racism* is reflected in a hierarchy in which beauty, intelligence, worth and things associated with Whiteness are at the top.

The school is one site in which this hierarchical arrangement of skin power is confirmed daily. It is also a site where it can be undone. We can contribute to the building of communities and societies in which all the ways of being human are equally valued. That humanity



includes our identities of gender, language, class, ability and sexual orientation. These other aspects of our identity are embedded in our racial identity. As we pay attention to dismantling the barriers that limit us on the basis of race, we must ask how sexism, classism and linguicism are part of this oppression called *racism*.

For example, how is racism a part of the linguicism that bilingual students face? If the Latino/Hispanic students we work with had their origins in Spain rather than Mexico or El Salvador, would they still be negatively stereotyped? Would school staff still be assuming that the parents of these children do not care about their education and that the students are not capable of succeeding? I think not. These students by and large are associated with countries deemed to be “third world,” which is a fondly used euphemism for countries and communities peopled largely by those with black or brown skin.

This relationship between race and language was brought home to me when a teacher told me the other day about a parent who was praising the school for a bilingual program. The parent was reported to have said, “It’s great you have a bilingual program, but it’s such a pity that the language you are teaching is Spanish.” When the teacher inquired as to why he thought that Spanish was an unfortunate choice, he replied, “It should be something like Russian. Look at who speaks Spanish around here: a bunch of drug pushers.” Race is entwined with every aspect of identity, and as we close gaps we must be mindful of the way in which racism itself seeps into every subject in schools. Anti-racism is a proactive strategy for dismantling racist structures and for building racial justice and equality. It must become a perspective that cuts across all subject areas and institutional practices.

Process, Framework and Principles

I do this gap-closing work in a variety of settings. They include on-site classroom consultations with individual teachers; schoolwide meetings of faculty, staff, parents and students; districtwide workshops; and in sessions with policymakers and consultants who support and inspire teachers’ work in schools. The approach that has the most immediate impact on the academic gap is the classroom consultation. There I observe the actual teaching, the content of the formal curriculum and the climate of the classroom or the informal curriculum, as it is sometimes understood. I discuss my observations with the teacher, always focusing on the curriculum and how it is experienced by individual students and groups, and the ways it is interconnected with the communities from which they come.



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After our conversations, teachers attempt new strategies and sometimes report immediate changes. A teacher shared with me that after one of our conversations about using language of high expectations, she spoke with her class about what she expected from them with respect to conduct and class work. She also invited them to talk about their expectations of her and exactly how she could help them meet these expectations. In addition, she publicly praised her class to anyone who dropped by. At first the students were quite unused to this praise. When she said, “They are good, hard-working kids,” the students would contradict her, exclaiming, “We are not really like that!” But the teacher persisted on both fronts in conversations with the students themselves and with the school community. She was pleased to report that over a six-week period, she saw a marked improvement in several of the students, their willingness to live up to her expectations, to work together and to produce work that could be proudly displayed for visitors.

This approach to work with teachers is based on a social, political and historical understanding of the issues of racism. In practice it is directed to the policies and structures in institutions; the professional and

personal growth of teachers; and their practice in classrooms, in hallways, in parent meetings and all areas of school life. Power and theories about the conflict that arises over the unequal distribution of that power are at the heart of the efforts to close the gaps. On an everyday basis, this anti-racist framework is undergirded by four principles:

1. The work must emphasize both the situational and the systemic inequalities.
2. The work must emphasize good teaching.
3. The work must emphasize the belief and realization that all teachers, and indeed everyone involved in educating our children, can learn to do what we do even better.
4. The work must identify inequalities based on race, as well as equity measures, as the path to racial equality.

Closing the Gaps

1. Situational and Systemic

Gaps are produced by systemic inequities and the related practice of individual teachers at very specific times and situations. Racism is systemic and not episodic and must be addressed as such. But every episode of racism must and can be confronted and interrupted at every turn as a means of reaching back to its systemic roots. I stress both of these aspects of change since an exclusive reliance on either the systemic or the situational will result in frustration and widening gaps. If we focus only on the situations in front of us, for example, on a group of students doing poorly on a test, we might overlook where key decisions are made, such as the use of time blocks in the school that affect the very situations we are trying to change. If we look only at the massive and oppressive systems in which we work, we become paralyzed, unable to make the changes which are right within our reach. With the urgency of the gaps before us, we cannot afford the luxury of choosing between the system and the situation. We must grapple with both at every moment of our lives.

Let me share a gap-closing story in which I had the privilege of participating. As part of its reform goal, a high school wanted to increase the number of African American and Latino/Hispanic students in Advanced Placement classes. The school, like so many others across the nation, although multiracial in its student population, was predominantly White in Advanced Placement classes. We wanted to close this gap in the school.

When this goal was discussed, concerns were expressed that this might mean lowering academic stan-



dards. It was quickly established that to the contrary, this effort was aimed at raising the standards. More students would be working at a higher level and more importantly, a more diversified group of students would be working at the higher level.

Because of my own anti-tracking stance, I hoped that this initiative would be one step toward eliminating the lower tracks in the school—a method of detracking the school by removing its lowest level classes. At that point, however, I was content to begin with the situations that seemed to require immediate remedy.

Some members of the guidance department felt that the absence of a certain kind of parental involvement was a major cause for the small number of students of color in the Advanced Placement classes. There was a sense that the parents of the African American and Hispanic/Latino students were not aware of the way the system worked. They did not attend the meetings at which the students made decisions about the subjects they were going to take. Working on the assumption that all parents, regardless of ethnic background, are interested in the education of their children, I encouraged the guidance department to come up with a communication strategy which they believed would be effective for the parent population they were targeting. They did. The school sent a special invitation to parents for a meeting to discuss the participation of their child in Advanced Placement classes. Each parent was given a specific time slot in which they were asked to attend a meeting.

The perception surrounding entry criteria to Advanced Placement classes also needed to be addressed. According to the counselors, expression of interest in the classes and a willingness to try were at

least as important as grades. A focus group with students revealed a variety of perceptions and realities about entry into this program. While there were some variety of experiences within groups, by and large the students' perceptions and experiences followed racial lines. White students appeared to have the same sense of the entry criteria as the guidance counselors. In contrast, some Hispanic/Latino students did not know that Advanced Placement classes were an option for them. They could not remember being actively encouraged to consider them. Some African American students indicated that they had to do a lot more than express interest; some felt that they had been actively discouraged from entering the program. Clearly there were several realities operating, as is often the case in any school. The guidance department decided to use the parent meeting to ensure that a consistent and strong invitation was communicated to the parents and their children.

At the systemic level, there was a redistribution of three key organizational resources: human beings, money and time. The principal freed up the necessary financial resources to allow the guidance counselors to remain until eight o'clock at night to accommodate more working parents. In this way more time was devoted to this important encounter between parents and the school. At about the same time, the faculty

voted to adopt block scheduling which can allow teachers to work individually with students and can allow students to have longer blocks of time to consolidate their learning.

But the parent meeting, which was a direct response to the situation, proved to be pivotal in changing the landscape at the school. The African American parents came in significant numbers. Some had to take several busses to get to the meeting. In the process of this change, once and for all (or perhaps at least for that moment) the stereotype of the disinterested parent was struck down. The African American parents encouraged and, in some cases, insisted their children sign up for the Advanced Placement classes. The number of students in the Advanced Placement classes increased by 30% that year. Over the past three years, the data reflect that this increase has been maintained.

There are many other pieces to this account, but what is clear is that as each situation arose, we attempted to address it and to look at ways of institutionalizing our efforts. For example, today there is systematic checking on the perceptions of students about entry requirements to the program and yearly monitoring of the percentages of student participation across racial lines. This gap has begun to close. The work must continue to make detracking and academic excellence a reality for all schools and all children.



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2. Emphasis on Good Teaching

Visiting hundreds of classrooms each year has confirmed for me the importance of good teaching in closing the gaps. In much the same way that a musician or a sports person is delighted to hear a fine piece of music or watch a beautiful hook shot, so it is with me when I see a lesson well taught. I am happy; I want to celebrate. I want to dance. In order to move beyond my subjective pleasure in this area, I will offer a composite picture drawn from several situations that include some of the elements of good teaching and their role in closing gaps at the social, individual and community levels.

The focus here is on one small aspect of teaching: questioning and eliciting answers. Simply by concentrating on the type of questions asked and the process used for inviting answers, we are able to increase participation and change the environment of the classroom. In many classrooms the questions asked are at the level of recall. Students are required to give back in their answers exactly what we have told them or what is recorded in the textbooks. It is not surprising to find that the result is sometimes frustration born of being silenced. I cannot tell you the number of times that I have sat in classrooms where kids keep putting their hands up and, because the questioning stops as soon as the first person demonstrates the ability to recall, do not have the opportunity to participate. One time a student who was sitting next to me, after putting her hand up for every question, stamped in frustration and said, “They never ask me!” Unfortunately the teacher heard only the stamping but not the statement that accompanied it. The student was reprimanded. Had the questioning and the method of questioning allowed for more participation, this instance of what was described as “bad behavior” might not have occurred. For example, students can make up the questions, present the questions, be allowed to comment on and extend other students’ answers, jot down their answers and share them with their neighbors or with the whole class. More voices. Deeper thinking.

The language we use to address our students and to help them extend their thinking is an important part of teaching. An algebra teacher said to me, “I never thought these kids could learn algebra, but I see them differently now, now that I have found a way to teach them.” I have seen this teacher work with students. One of the ways in which he encourages success is that he treats every student in the class like a mathematician. He says to them, “We mathematicians have many ways of solving problems. How would you as a mathematician yourself solve this?” This language in the classroom helps students build positive identities as learners. In keeping with this approach, he is able to use language well, to clarify what they have understood so far and to provide a question or an example that offers the

scaffolding to move them to the next level of thought. In contrast, I have heard teachers use unhelpful words such as, “Look at it, look at it,” when students are stumped by a difficult algebra problem. An alternative would be to use language that would help the student know how to look at it and some clue as to what they might be looking for. Affirming and clarifying language is part of good teaching and can help close gaps with individual learners.

Good teaching is made better when we create opportunities for our students to show us what they have accomplished outside of the school and when we incorporate their teaching into our teaching. A group of Hispanic/Latino students offered to show their art teacher the best art work in town which they thought had great potential for a school mural. This teacher took a walk with his students under a city bridge where he was shown some very elaborate artwork (which some would call graffiti) that they had helped to create. The teacher was able to use some of the under-the-bridge art in the above-ground work they did on the school walls. Not only did the teacher learn about the students’ work outside of school, he made use of it in teaching.

We know that linking students’ lives to the school and the formal curriculum in a serious way enhances our opportunities of reaching and teaching them. My mind goes back to the grade six teachers in a school in Manitoba, Canada. It has a significant population of Native Canadians, also known as First Nations. The team of grade six teachers used the video *For Angela* with all of their classes. This video portrays the experiences of racism and recovery on the part of a Native Canadian woman and her daughter living in an urban setting. There is an episode in which the young girl cuts her hair in order to avoid racist taunts. One teacher reported that after the post-viewing discussion, two of the First Nations students returned to school with their hair neatly braided and their heads held high. Their transformation was so significant that the rest of their classmates applauded when these students entered the room. The students shared the positive feelings they had derived from the discussion about the film. They shared experiences similar to those of the girl in the video and explained the importance of their braids. The video showing was just one part of a broader schoolwide anti-racist program, during which the staff had been discussing their expectations of academic achievement for students of the First Nations.

In addition to making links with students’ lives, good teaching, like that described here, must also validate and elevate the marginalized cultures and experiences that many inner-city, working class students of color bring into the classroom. Such an approach is essential to reducing the individual and group gaps with respect to academic achievement, and the com-

munity gap with respect to empowerment and self-determination.

In one classroom, children were reading about a tourist visiting a museum in Spain. The teacher wanted to help the students in her class make connections between this lesson and their own lives. Her questions went well beyond recall and introduced the element of application. She asked them where they would take someone who came to visit them in their communities. One student said, “I would take them to a shopping mall.” Another said “to a restaurant.” A third student indicated that she would take her guest to a local festival connected to the cultural and racial group of which she was a member. To these answers the teacher politely replied, “Yes,” “Mmm,” “OK.” At that point a bright youngster realized that this was not the kind of answer that the teacher was looking for. He answered, “the museum.” To that he got an affirming “Right.” The subsequent answers continued to reflect what one might call “high culture,” in



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comparison to the inner-city working class lived culture that was reflected by the earlier answers.

What difference, you might ask, does it make to academic achievement which examples are used and what culture is acknowledged, as long as the skill is acquired? The difference is: That which is validated by school becomes that which is worth knowing and writing about. Over a period of time, the teacher in this class began to validate more of what students brought into the classroom. She learned about their lives and made use of it in her teaching. The children’s communities began to be seen by the teacher and by some of the students as places of power and possibility; as places where OK things happened. The deficit language so often used to describe inner-city communities became less common and the students began to rely on the knowledge they had acquired in their communities. They wrote more about their communities. They began to write more and to

become more confident writers. In some instances, the test scores in writing even improved.

Very frequently I am asked about Black History Month and where that fits in helping to close the academic gap and in fostering racial harmony and equality in schools. I am in full agreement with the often-made critique that the add-on approach to Black History, Chinese New Year and Cinco de Mayo is unsatisfactory. I generally offer this strategy for integrating the curriculum, using Black History as an example: Do not wait until January or February to begin to work on Black History Month. Integrate the themes of Africa and African people throughout the year and throughout the curriculum in subjects from English to economics. Let us return to Carter G. Woodson’s plan which was to celebrate in February what has been done for the entire year. Black history would be integrated into the full curriculum. The community and its history would be raised to a level of respect. The gap between word and deed would be narrowed.

Finally, good teaching can remedy many of the discipline issues that contribute to poor academic performance. When students are engaged in challenging learning experiences they have less time to become discipline problems. Some philosophies of change focus on changing the student and leaving the learning environment as toxic as ever. The theory of change guiding my work emphasizes changing the context in order to change what the child does. The difference in these philosophies was made clear in conversations I had with two teachers. I asked, “What is it that you want to accomplish when you discipline a student in a particular way?” One teacher said, “I want to change the student. I want to deal with that student’s behavior.” The other teacher said, “I want to find a way of working with the environment in the classroom to bring out the best behavior out of this child.” The second approach would significantly lower the suspension rate in many of our urban schools and among students of color. It would also help to change the penitentiary-like atmosphere which pervades some urban classrooms. Schools could be converted into places where young people can learn from their mistakes. As one student said to me, “We want teachers to pull us up when we slip up, not kick us out.” He then asked, “To go where?”

3. All Teachers Can Learn

“All students can learn” is a common slogan in urban schools used to raise expectations and by extension academic performance. I believe it to be equally true that “All teachers can learn.” All teachers can become better teachers. I am convinced of this. Modeling a constructivist approach, co-creating staff development curriculum with the teacher participants,

I always begin with teachers' questions and comments. When I begin here, we can move forward together with gap-closing strategies for the students.

The most frequently asked question is: Well, Enid, do you believe that White teachers *can* teach Black kids? I suggest that the question which we want to consider is *what* it is that they can teach them. Clearly, in many circumstances, teachers of all backgrounds are teaching kids of all colors many things. It is really not whether they can teach these students, but rather what it is that they can and cannot teach them. One must recognize both strengths and limitations based on personal and collective racial history. What a good teacher does is acknowledge one's location and point students to other sources of support.

Also related to this knowledge of self in a social sense is the responsibility to educate ourselves about our students and the communities from which they come. One should also work actively for a more racially diversified faculty. Such a faculty can be a source of learning for students and teachers of all backgrounds.

In these discussions, I always ask teachers to look at the history of race and racism in education and the history of relationships between and among racial groups. This leads them to ask questions about power and also about the record of White-controlled school districts with regard to the education of Black and other students of color. Teachers have shown themselves willing and able to examine these questions, especially when linked to their immediate concerns. This examination helps them to have a better understanding of how we have come to be in these situations, and it is the beginning of an analysis of their practice as teachers within an institutional framework. This exploration then leads us to look at advantages and disadvantages that various groups have in society along racial and other lines. They also learn from stories about the growth and struggle of other White teachers who have taught Black and other students of color and have allowed themselves to be taught by those students and their parents. They not only learn, but they change their practice when they begin to chronicle their observations and experiences with their own students. Teachers are then able to see where their individual fears come from and are also able to recognize the resources they have at their disposal to make a difference in students' lives.

A very common statement that I hear is: I never noticed you were Black. It is generally meant in a complimentary way. As soon as I hear this, I know that we have a great deal of work to do in moving from the color-blind state to the color-conscious state. I understand that it is part of the socialization of many participants. It is an attempt to treat people of color fairly, but it is a misguided notion. We will never address racism



in education if we do not look at how skin color plays a part in what people do or do not receive or experience in the educational process.

Sometimes not noticing race if you are White means that you do not have to acknowledge the privileges and opportunities you have by virtue of your skin color. Sometimes not acknowledging race if you are a person of color means that you are denying the existence and perhaps pain of racism or that you want to have others focus on your strengths, your individual effort or your ability to be resilient. By addressing fears about skill and identity on the part of teachers, we are able to begin the process of freeing them up to learn from their students, from others around them, from their own history and the histories of other groups as they work to educate a multiracial student body for academic excellence and social justice.

4. Equity and Equality

The final principle is concerned with equity and equality, and their relationship to each other. Equity measures—or extra measures—must be taken in order to bring about the desired goals of fairness, same status and at least the same academic outcomes among students of color as are found among White students as a group. These outcomes are an important part of educational equality.

Equity is a rather misunderstood concept, even though it has been around in English law since at least the twelfth century. According to the *Hutchinson Encyclopedia*, “Equity is a system of law supplementing the ordinary rules where application of these (ordinary rules) would operate harshly in a particular case; sometimes it is regarded as an attempt to achieve natural justice.” The spirit of equity is at the heart of all gap-closing measures since inequity is being acknowledged if equity is being discussed. A participant in a workshop once put it in these words: “Equity does

not mean treating everyone in the same way. It means doing what ever it takes to get everyone to the same place.” This is difficult to convey, since many people feel that being equitable means “I treat everyone in the same way—red, yellow, blue, green, black.” This is a very popular statement in some educational circles. But in order to address, indeed, to change, the outcomes of a racist system, one simply cannot do the same with and for every group of students.

Many of the gaps we have talked about are the outcomes of a racist system and to change them requires equity measures. Let me list some other outcomes of a racist system in the four areas mentioned in my definition of racism—representation, respect, rights and resources. My top twelve examples are:

1. The under-representation and misrepresentation of people of color in learning material.
2. The under-representation of people of color on school faculties and in Advanced Placement classes.
3. The undervaluing and ignoring of home and community knowledge, language and experience of students of color in the teaching process.
4. The use of assessment procedures which never get at what some students of color know.
5. The absence of intellectual challenge in the learning activities given to some students of color.
6. The inadequate numbers of computers and even textbooks in some of their schools.
7. The poor maintenance of some of their school buildings.
8. The mechanisms for school governance which do not include their parents’ voices.
9. The concern about, if not the outright prohibition against, African American, Latino/Hispanic, Asian American and other students of color assembling to socialize at lunch and in other informal places.
10. The practice of punishing and frequently suspending students of color, particularly African American and Latino males, for minor infractions.
11. The miseducation of White students through inaccurate information in school materials and the structured inequalities that they witness in relationships and the institutional practices around them.
12. The unexamined myth that some cultural and racial groups do not value education and that the children from those groups do not have the intellectual ability to succeed in schools.

To overturn and alter these conditions and ideas, which have deep historic roots in the nation’s history, one simply cannot apply “the ordinary rules” of treating everyone in the same way and doing what we have always done. At best, the ordinary rules will perpetuate the situation. At worst, they will cause things to deteriorate. Equity measures, then, are required from every teacher, administrator, every secretary, every custodian, every business partner, every trustee, every person engaged in educating our children.

I provided several examples of teachers and administrators engaged in equity measures. Like the grade two teacher who told me that she checks her equity systems everyday, we must make sure that ours are ready and operating fully to roll back the years of racial injustice in our schools. We have numerous opportunities every day to do equity work. When we select learning materials, we can think of the current imbalance and of the damaging impact this has on students of every race. We can provide additional and corrective information. I think of a teacher who was preparing her students for one of the many tests that are given in public schools these days. They had to cover a rather Eurocentric account of Columbus’ activities in preparation for this test. After the teacher had reviewed the material with the students, she said, “I did not write this textbook and although I do not agree with what is here, we have to cover it for the test. Now that we are ready for the test, let us look at Columbus from another view.” These are some of the contradictory and difficult situations faced by teachers every day, but let them not prevent us from undertaking equity measures and working for real equality in all aspects of education.

Like the math teacher who used statistics on race and employment when teaching statistics one year, we too can find moments for equity in every subject area and all areas of school life. In addition to helping the students understand how statistics worked, he also helped them understand how the gaps of inequality are created. He helped them measure the resistance of communities in the face of these injustices and their struggle for dignity and self-determination. He also helped them to see their education as a tool to change things in their communities and not to be educated away from community interests as often happens with some of the brightest and most successful students of color. Some of the students of color have achieved a kind of academic excellence but have also become miseducated misfits, wanting to have nothing to do with the commu-



nities from which they came. This math teacher, with his equity work, was ensuring that his students learned that academic excellence included applications of one’s learning for community empowerment.

But “for how long must this equity work continue?” you might ask, as did a participant in one of the workshops I was conducting. He pointed out that I had said that equity had been on the books since the twelfth century and he was wondering why we had not brought everyone to the same place yet. I assured him that as soon as we had closed all of the gaps and that we had a mechanism in place to keep them from widening again, then we could stop, but not before that. Until then, we have to press on!

Pressing on to Victory

As I think of how long and hard the struggle is to close these gaps created by systems of inequality, I am reminded of a story by African American writer, scholar and historian John Henrik Clarke. The story reminds me of how costly it can be to try to close these gaps, but also how much dignity one can experience with each victory. In this story, a student in one of the southern U.S. states brought to school a picture

he had made of Christ painted black. The principal of the school displayed it in the hall. He thought that it was important that children incorporate their culture and their history and their race into their work. When the school district supervisor visited for an inspection, he was not amused by this display of what he called “nonsense, sacrilegious nonsense.” The story goes that when the supervisor questioned his judgment, the principal sternly replied that the time was long overdue for the world and certainly for the children in the school to know that African people had erected and enjoyed the benefits of a splendid civilization long before the people of Europe had a written language. The principal was eventually relieved of his responsibilities because he was told that he was not paid to teach such things in schools. That story was set in the 1940s. We are almost at the end of the twentieth century, and the same Eurocentrism that the principal and the student were trying to address then is still very much with us.

I hope that our own stories will be filled with many gaps closed at the individual, group and community levels. Every gap we close is a victory won and a small piece of our humanity regained. ✿

References available online at www.teachingforchange.org.