

Achievement Matters
Price

Why is it that a white guy writes the first review of this book, a year after its publication?

Mr. Price is absolutely right on the basics. Kids need to apply themselves in school. It teaches skills that are absolutely essential in life. How to acquire information, how to use it to form an opinion, and how to express that opinion. It also provides you with the foundation in mathematics and logic that is indispensable for thinking through problems both easy and hard.

His prescription is irrefutable. He calls for parents to be involved. Know what the school is teaching and how it assigns your child to a teacher. Know what the kids are doing after school. Know their friends. Know what they are watching on TV. Given that you can't keep them from listening to rap music, at least have an open discussion with them about the values being expressed.

He is right that black kids underperform kids of other races. They tend to become discouraged and adopt a defeatist attitude. More than that, kids who are not doing well spitefully drag down the kids who try, accusing them of "acting white." Everybody in education has wrestled with this set of problems, first to figure out what to do, and second to ascribe blame.

Here's where I take issue with Mr. Price. The blame invariably comes around to white folks. His book is full of charged words, among them racism, discrimination and low expectations. Many teachers of all races, based on their experience, come to have lower expectations of black kids. It is equally true that they are prudent to keep these opinions to themselves. But is this cause or effect?

Black authors, from Frederick Douglass through Larry Elder and Thomas Sowell, have made the same observations about African American students. Mr. Price points out that black kids tend to be channeled into special ed when the "act out" too much. He notes that after school programs are essential to keep kids from getting involved in crime and getting pregnant. He notes that there is a strong strain of anti-intellectualism in black popular culture. I cringe at the messages white kids pick up from black rappers and even from the Disney after-school programs with predominantly black casts. Was Bill Cosby the only black entertainer who offered a realistic and uplifting message? Do you ever hear of a similar problems with Vietnamese Americans?

Black students in the United States have higher levels of achievement than blacks anywhere else in the world. Brazil, with little acknowledged discrimination, is a disaster for blacks in terms of both education and income. Ditto the Caribbean, and the Caribbean coasts of Central American countries. The few native African scholars tend to work in the U.S. Some, like John Ogbu, embarrass the American black establishment with books like his "Black American Students in an Affluent Suburb: A Study of Academic Disengagement." Price could have provided footnotes when he disparaged "scientifically discredited" theories of intelligence. Can he reference authoritative rebuttals to the works of Murray and Herrnstein, Arthur Jensen and Philippe Rushton?

The school systems in the Washington D.C. area are mostly headed by black superintendents. Most have largely black boards and black faculties. There are many factors to discourage white teachers from working in these systems. A well-meaning teacher was chased out by angry parents in the "Nappy Hair" incident. The Washington Post chronicled the unfortunate experiences of some Ivy League liberal white teachers starting in the D.C. system. Teachers, black and white alike, are often intimidated and occasionally beaten up. Whatever the problems, it is hard any more to lay them at the feet of white administrators.

There is no disputing the widespread discrimination that existed under Jim Crow. On the other hand, there is no disputing that talented individuals like Clarence Thomas, Thomas Sowell, Condi Rice, Kenneth Chennault, Mr. Price himself and many, many others have overcome these difficulties to make sterling careers for themselves. I would call on Mr. Price to abandon blaming the white guy because it just isn't

useful. Society has changed a lot, and more name-calling isn't likely to result in further beneficial change. It obscures areas where progress can be made.

Teachers are only human. Each of us have only finite intelligence and finite energy. We allocate our energies to those efforts that will yield the greatest reward. Mr. Price is naïve to say "children are entitled to the best education possible." No, children will get the education they and their parents demand.

Mr. Price overlooks the excellent option of private schools. Most target about 10% of their tuitions for financial aid. All are committed to the vague term "diversity." They actively seek and give preferential admission to black students. The schools recognize that it is a stretch for the kids. The portion of tuition they still must pay is significant. They often have to travel across town. Kids and parents are cliquish, sometimes excluding or patronizing black kids. But the kids who can put up with this atmosphere gain the benefit of small classes and bright and well-meaning teachers. The schools go out of their way to arrange tutors and whatever other support the kids need. The kids learn the essential life skill of moving comfortably in white society. And even if, as is often the case, they do not do as well in school as the other kids, they find that their social skills and athletic abilities always earn them a respected place in the school community. I hope that Mr. Price can recognize that while it is certainly true that "achievement matters," different peoples realize disproportionate achievements in different fields.

The common denominators of success are hard work, respect for community and family values, respect for the individual, a willingness to see each person as an individual. Mr. Price is dead on when he talks about the importance of character. People of character don't blame others. They take responsibility for their lives.