Why Are All the Black

A Conversation with Beverly Daniel Tatum

Educators and students themselves need to explore racial stereotypes, beliefs, and perspectives if classrooms are to become places where equity is valued, author Beverly Tatum says.

John O'Neil

You call your recent book* "Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" and Other Conversations About Race *(Basic Books 1997). What's the significance of the title?

The question is one I'm asked over and over again when I do a workshop on racial identity at a racially mixed school. Educators notice that kids often group themselves with others of the same race, for reasons I'll explain later. But people have other concerns as well. How do we talk to young children about race? How do we address these issues with our colleagues? How do you even engage in conversations about such hot topics as affirmative action without alienating one another?

Why do we have such problems discussing racial issues? Is it because we don't really understand one another's experiences?

I think that's part of it. It's interesting to watch people's reactions when they are really forced to experience being in the minority. One of the exercises that I ask white students and educators to engage in is to create a situation in which they will be in the minority, for a short period of time. A common choice, for example, is to attend a black church on a Sunday morning. Another is to go to a place where you know there's going to be a large Spanish-speaking population.

Usually, whites are very nervous and anxious about doing this. Some are even unwilling to do it alone, so they find a partner to go with, which is fine. But it's just interesting to me how fearful people are about this kind of experience. When they come back, they often report how welcomed they felt, what a positive experience it was. But I do point out to them how worried they were about their own discomfort. And I hope that they develop a greater sense of understanding of how a person of color might feel in an environment that is predominantly white.

Some people suggest that race relations among kids are much improved, compared to our generation or our parents'. What do you see?

Young children do interact across racial lines fairly comfortably at the elementary school grade level. If you visit racially mixed schools at the elementary level, you will see kids interacting in the lunch room and on the playground. To the extent that neighborhoods are segregated, their interracial friendships might be limited. But you see much more cross-racial interaction at the elementary level than you do at the junior high or high school level.

Why?

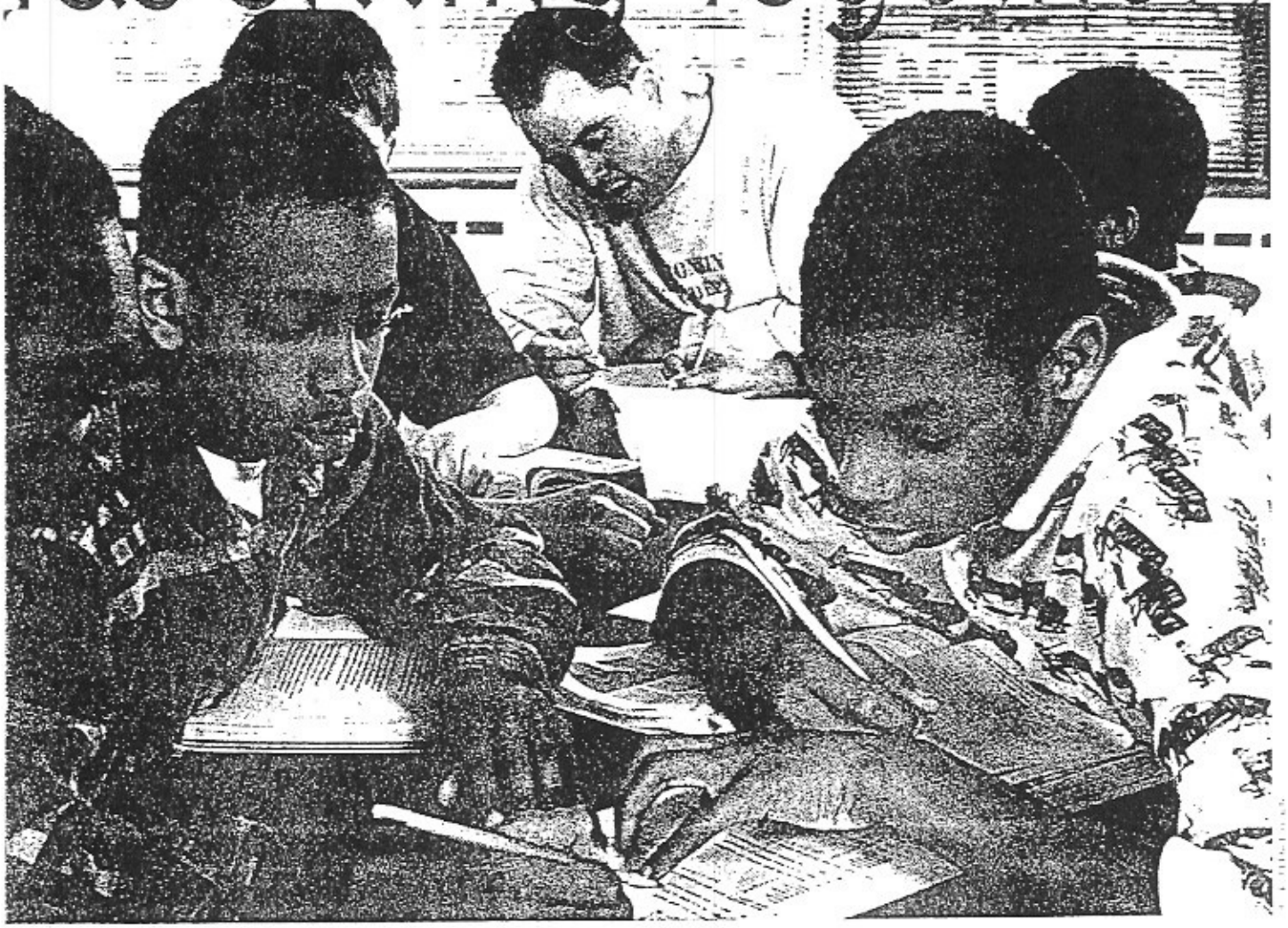
I think the answer has to do with the child's transition into adolescence. Adolescents are searching for identity; they're asking questions like: Who am I in the world? How does the world see me? How do I see others? What will I be in the future? and Who will love me? All those questions of identity are percolating during that time period. And particularly for adolescents of color, these questions cannot be answered without also asking: Who am I ethnically? Who am I racially? and What meaning does this have for how people view me and interact with me?

Can you give an example of how these issues might emerge in students of color?

Sure. Imagine a 7-year-old black boy who everybody thinks is cute. So he's used to the world responding to him in a certain way: Look at that cute kid!

Now imagine that same kid at 15. He's six feet tall, and people don't think he's cute anymore. They think he's dangerous or a potential criminal: maybe people are now crossing the

Kids Sitting Together?



street to avoid him. So the way he sees himself perceived by others is very different at 15 than at seven. And that 15-year-old has to start figuring out what this means. Why are people crossing the street when I walk down it? Why am I being followed around by the security guards at the mall? And as that young person is trying to make sense of his experience, in all likelihood he is going to seek out and try to connect with other people who are having similar experiences.

As a result, even the young person who has grown up in a multiracial community and had a racially mixed group of friends tends to start to pull away from his non-black friends, his white friends in particular. This happens, in part, because their white friends are not having the same experiences; they're not having the same encounters with racism. And, unfortunately, many white youth don't have an understanding of how racism operates in our society, so they're not able to respond in ways that would be helpful.

The example I used was of a black boy, but a similar process unfolds among black girls or children of another race or ethnic heritage.

What about white students? What are they experiencing during this time of self-identification?

They can be confused and hurt by some of the changes. For example, it's not uncommon for a white student in my college class on the psychology of racism to say: "You know, I had a really close black or Latino friend in elementary school, and when we went to junior high she didn't want to hang around with me anymore." The student reporting the story usually is quite confused about that; it's often a very hurtful experience.

The observation I make is that, again, many white students are oblivious to the power of racism and the way that it's operating in society. And so when their friends are starting to have encounters with racism, they don't necessarily know how to respond. An example from my book is when a teacher makes a racist remark to a young black female. Afterward, her white friend comes up to her and says, "You seem upset, what's the problem?" So she explains what upset her to her friend, and the friend says, quite innocently, "Gee, Mr. Smith is such a nice guy. I can't imagine he would intentionally hurt you. He's not a racist, you know."

So white students might discount it because they can't identify with it?

Exactly. They can't identify, and also in many situations people who try to comfort often end up invalidating the person's feelings, by saying things like, "Oh, come on, it wasn't that bad." What happens is that you withdraw from the conversation. The feeling is "Well, you don't get it, so I'll find somebody who does." It would have been a very different response, however, if this young white student understood stereotypes and the reality of racism in society and told her friend, "You know, that was a really offensive thing he said."

Should teachers or principals be concerned when students self-segregate? Should they actively seek to integrate the groups?

During "downtime" like lunch or recess, students should be able to relax with their friends, regardless of whether or not those friendship groups are of the same race or ethnic groups. However, it is important to create opportunities for young people to have positive interactions across group lines in school. So structuring racially mixed work groups—for example, by using cooperative learning strategies in the classroom—can be a very positive thing to do.

Similarly, intentionally working to recruit diverse members of the student body to participate in extracurricular events is worthwhile. We need to take advantage of every opportunity we have to bring young people together where they can work cooperatively as equals toward a common goal. Sports teams are a good example of the kind of mutually cooperative environment where young people often develop strong connections across racial lines, and we should look to create more such opportunities in schools. Unfortunately, school policies like tracking (which tends to sort kids along racial lines) impede rather than facilitate such opportunities.

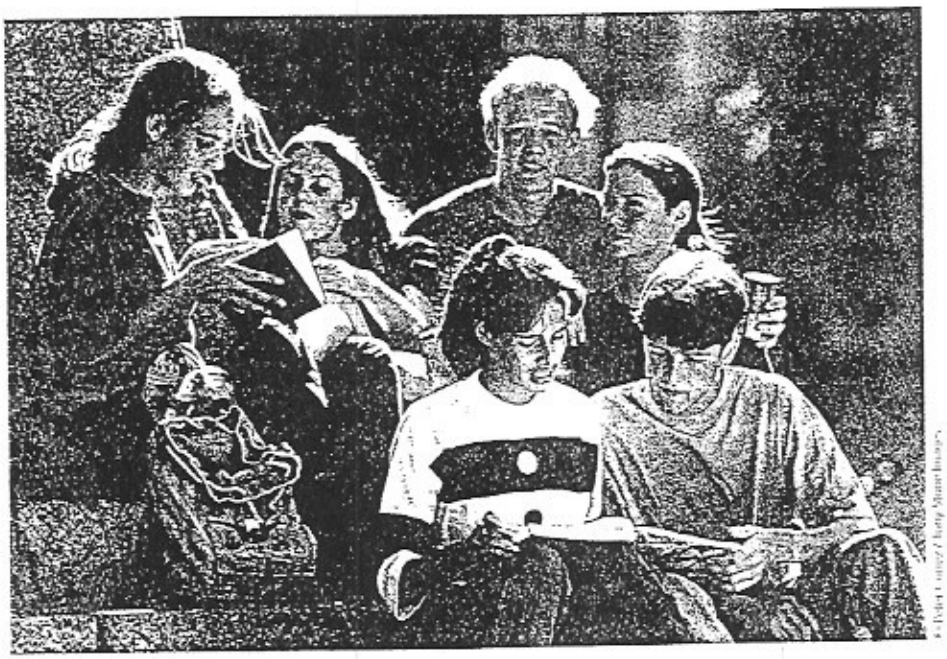
You've talked with students of color who attend integrated schools but find themselves isolated in honors or advanced classes. What are those students experiencing in terms of their identity?

Even in racially mixed schools, it is very common for young people of color, particularly black and Latino students, to find that the upper-level courses have very few students of color in them. And, of course, honors chemistry is only offered during a certain time period in the day, which means you might also be taking English and other courses with the same kids. And so those students in honors chemistry or advanced algebra may find that their black or Latino peers accuse them of "trying to be white" because they're hanging around with all white kids. So to the extent that you're frequently in the company of white students, and your black classmates who are in the lower tracks see you as somehow separating yourself from them—it's a hard place to be.

What can educators do to support the healthy development of kids as they work through these issues?

I think students of color really need to see themselves reflected in positive ways in the curriculum. And that probably sounds very obvious, but the fact is that too often they don't see themselves reflected in the curriculum.

When and how they see themselves reflected in the curriculum is so important, though. To use African Americans as an example: Most schools teach



about slavery, and for many black students that's a point of real discomfort. Their experience of that is that the teacher's talking about slavery and all the white kids in the class are looking at us, to see what our reaction is. I'm certainly not suggesting we shouldn't teach about slavery, but I think it's important to teach it in an empowering way. Teachers need to focus on resistance to victimization. Students of color need to see themselves represented not just as victims but as agents of their own empowerment. And there are lots of ways to do that. You can talk about Sojourner Truth, you can talk about Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and so on.

At the same time, I think white children need to be helped to understand how racism operates. Inevitably, when

you talk about racism in a predominantly white society, you generate feelings of discomfort and often guilt among white people because they might feel that you're saying that white people are bad. What do we do? In these discussions, we need to include examples of white people as agents of change. Teach students about the abolitionists. Teach students about Virginia Foster Durr, who was so active during the Civil Rights movement. All children need to learn about those white folks who worked against oppression. Unfortunately, many white students don't have that information.

Some people have suggested that the school curriculum be heavily focused on cultural heritage: that black students need an Afrocentric curriculum, and so on. What's your perspective?

It's important to have as diverse a curriculum as possible because all students need to be able to view things through multiple perspectives.

A high school teacher told me recently that the young white men in her English classes were reluctant to read about somebody's experience other than their own. For example, she had the class read *House on Mango Street* (Cisneros 1994), a book about a young Chicana adolescent coming of age in Chicago. These young men were complaining: "What does this have to do with me? I can't identify with this experience." But, at the same time, they never wonder why the Latino students in the class have to read Ernest Hemingway. We need to help them develop that understanding. All of us need to develop a sense of multiple perspectives, regardless of the composition of our classrooms.

The teaching ranks are predominantly white, even though the student population is becoming increasingly diverse. What does this mean for efforts to increase racial understanding?

It makes it harder, but it's not impossible. We should be working very hard to increase the diversity of the teaching pool, and many teacher education programs are trying to do that. Still, we need to recognize that it's going to be a long time before the teaching population reflects the classroom population. So it's really important for white teachers to recognize that it is possible for them to become culturally sensitive and to be proactive in an antiracist way. Many white educators have grown up in predominantly white communities, attended mostly white schools, and may have had limited experiences with people of color, and that is a potential barrier. But what that means is that people need to expand their experiences.

Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children, by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) is a great resource. I often encourage educators I work with to read that because she profiles several teachers, some of them white. Those are teachers who probably didn't grow up in neighborhoods or communities where they had a lot of interaction with people of color, but, one way or another, they have really been able to establish great teaching relationships with kids of color. So it certainly can be done.

We can't just aspire to be prejudice-free. We need to examine how racism persists in our institutions so we don't perpetuate it.

You train teachers to work on issues involving race in their schools. What kinds of things do they learn?

For a number of years, I've taught a professional development course called Effective Anti-Racist Classroom Practices for All Students. It's basically designed to help teachers recognize what racism is, how it operates in schools, and what the impact of that is personally and professionally. So the focus is not just the impact of racism on the racial identity development of the students but also on the teachers. I've found that teachers who have not reflected on their own racial identity development find it very difficult to understand why young people are reflecting on theirs. So it's important to engage in self-reflection even as we're trying to better understand our students.

The course also looks at stereotypes, omissions, distortions, how those have been communicated in our culture and in our classroom, and then, what that means in terms of how we think about ourselves either as people of color or as whites. And, finally, what we can do about it. I talk in my book about racism as a sort of "smog." People who aren't aware of it can unwittingly perpetuate a cycle of oppression. If you breathe that smog too long, you internalize these messages. We can't really interrupt that process until it becomes visible to us. That's the first step—making the process visible. And once it is visible, we can start to strategize about how we're going to interrupt it.

Many teachers have been caught short by a racist incident or comment in their classroom. It often happens suddenly, and the teacher may be at a loss for how to respond. How have you handled it?

Well, I've been teaching a course on the psychology of racism since 1980, so I feel like I've probably heard it all.

It is a difficult situation, because you want the classroom to be a safe place,

where students can say anything, knowing that only by opening up will they get feedback about their comments and learn another perspective. At the same time, you want the classroom to be a safe place for someone who may be victimized by a comment.

One time, a white student in my class made a very offensive remark about Puerto Ricans being responsible for crimes. Well, one of the things I've learned is that it really helps to validate somebody's comment initially, even if it is outrageous. So I said something like: "You know, I'm sure there are many people who feel that way, and if you've been victimized by a crime, that's a very difficult experience. At the same time, I think it's important to say that not all Puerto Ricans are car thieves." From there, you can move into how making such statements can reinforce stereotypes.

It must be hard to make it a teachable moment for everyone in the class.

Absolutely. One time I was observing somebody else's teaching when there was a similar kind of incident—a student made comments that the teacher thought were inappropriate, but she didn't know how to respond. So she didn't respond to them. After the class, we talked, and she said she felt terrible—she knew she should have done something, but she didn't know what to do. And we talked about what the choices might have been.

Even though she felt badly about how she handled it, those moments can be revisited. So in this particular case, the teacher opened her next class by saying: "You know, in our last class something happened that really bothered me, and I didn't say anything. I didn't say anything because I wasn't sure what to say, but in my silence I colluded with what was being said. So I would really like to talk about it now." And she brought the class back to the incident, and it was not an easy conversation. But I think it really deepened the students' understanding—both of the teacher herself and of how racism operates, because it showed how even well-intentioned people may unwittingly contribute to perpetuating the problem.

Young children do interact across racial lines fairly comfortably at the elementary school grade level. But you see less cross-racial interaction at the junior high or high school level.

Although integrated schools have been a goal for decades, current statistics show a growth in schools that are nearly all-black or all-Hispanic. What do you see as the likely impact of the trend toward even more racially identifiable schools?

It's a very difficult issue from a number of perspectives. The continuing pattern of white flight is one of the main reasons that schools resegregate. A lot of money is put into a busing plan, and then white families leave the school. So now many people are asking questions about whether it's a good idea to spend all that money transporting kids instead of just using it to improve the neighborhood school, regardless of who attends it.

Many parents of color experience this as a double-edged sword. They're offended by the notion that children of color can only learn when they are in classes with white kids. They know there is nothing magical about sitting next to a white kid in class. On the other hand, the reality of school funding is that schools with more white students receive more financial support.

And so the question that I hear people asking now is: Can separate ever be equal? That's one I don't have the answer to!

President Clinton has called for a national conversation about race. Do you think we're ready for one, and will that move us forward?

Well, conversation is a really positive thing, and the fact that the president himself has called for one should not be underestimated. At the same time, these conversations are hard to have, and many people are not ready for them.

Real progress is being made in

Structuring racially mixed work groups, for example, by using cooperative learning strategies in the classroom, can be a very positive thing to do.

starting conversations at the local community level. Many grass-roots organizations are encouraging this kind of dialogue. For example, an organization in Connecticut has a program of Study Circles.[1] They actually have a guidebook for facilitating conversations about race. Using the guides, people come together and begin to discuss the questions together to improve their understanding. Also, many houses of worship encourage cross-group dialogue, whether it means interfaith dialogue or cross-racial dialogue.

It's sometimes frustrating for people who have been doing this work for years, because it may seem like there's talk, talk, talk and it doesn't go anywhere. However, I do think that when you engage in open and honest dialogue, you start to recognize the other person's point of view, and that helps you see where your action might be needed most. So if people engage in dialogue with the understanding that dialogue is supposed to lead somewhere, it can be a very useful thing to do.

We can't afford to forget the institutional nature of racism. And so it's not just about personal prejudices, though obviously we want to examine those. We can't just aspire to be prejudice-free. We need to examine how racism persists in our institutions so we don't perpetuate it. ■

[1] For more information, contact Study Circles Resource Center, P.O. Box 203, 697 Pomfret St., Pomfret, CT 06258; tel: 203-928-2616, fax: 203-928-3713.

References

Cisneros, S. (1994). *House on Mango Street*. New York: Random House.

Ladson Billings, G. (1994). *Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African-American Children*. San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass.

Beverly Daniel Tatum is Professor in the Department of Psychology and Education, Mount Holyoke College, S. Hadley, MA 01075. **John O'Neil** is Contributing Editor of *Educational Leadership*.