

Color Blind or Color Conscious?

I've had many teachers say to me, "I'm not prejudiced. I don't notice any differences in these kids. I treat them all the same," and my question is, "The same as what?"

— an African American father

Many teachers aspire to be "color-blind" when interacting with their students. To notice the racial and ethnic differences among their students feels wrong to them, a sign perhaps of bigotry or prejudicial thinking. But from the child's point of view (and that of his or her parents), not noticing may mean that the educator is overlooking an important dimension of the young person's experience in the world and, even more specifically, in that classroom.

As the father quoted above observed, "If you're going to teach them all the same, does that mean that you don't recognize that they are black ... that they have an experience that is rich and that you can use to enrich this classroom?"

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**How schools
acknowledge
racial and ethnic
identities will
affect all students'
educational
experiences**

However, when dealing especially with adolescents, identity questions are very important to keep in mind. As children enter adolescence, they begin to explore the questions of identity, asking, "Who am I? Who can I be?" in ways they have not done before. For youth of color in particular, "Who am I?" includes thinking about Who am I ethnically and/or racially? What does it mean to be black or Latino or Asian?

Why are young people of color thinking about themselves in terms of race or ethnicity? Because the rest of the world is viewing them that way.

Shaping of Self-Perception

The concept of identity is a complex one, shaped by individual characteristics, family dynamics, historical factors and social and political contexts. Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am. Who do my parents say I am? Who do my peers say I am? What message is reflected back to me in the faces and voices of my teachers? My neighbors? The store clerks? What do I learn from the media about myself? How am I represented in the cultural images around me? Or am I missing from the picture altogether? As social scientist Charles Cooley pointed out long ago, other people are the mirror in which we see ourselves.

Our self-perceptions are shaped by the messages that we receive from those around us, and when youth of color enter adolescence, the racial content of those messages intensifies. For example, the young black boy that everyone thought was cute when he was seven may elicit a very different response from adults when he is a young man of 15. Though he may be the same good-natured person, now 6 feet tall and wearing the adolescent attire of the day, he may notice that women hold their purses a little tighter when they

see him or maybe even cross the street to avoid him.

He may notice the sound of the automatic door locks on cars as he passes by or that he is being followed around by the security guards at the local mall. As he rides in town on his new bicycle, does a police officer hassle him, asking where he got it, implying that it might be stolen? Do strangers assume he plays basketball? Each of these experiences conveys a racial message and his awareness of his racial group membership is heightened as a result.

Some of the key environmental messages are received at school. Though many elementary schools have self-contained classrooms where children of varying performance levels learn together, many middle and secondary schools use ability grouping or tracking. Though school administrators usually defend their tracking practices as fair and objective, there is a recognizable racial pattern to how children are assigned, which often represents the system of advantage operating in the schools.

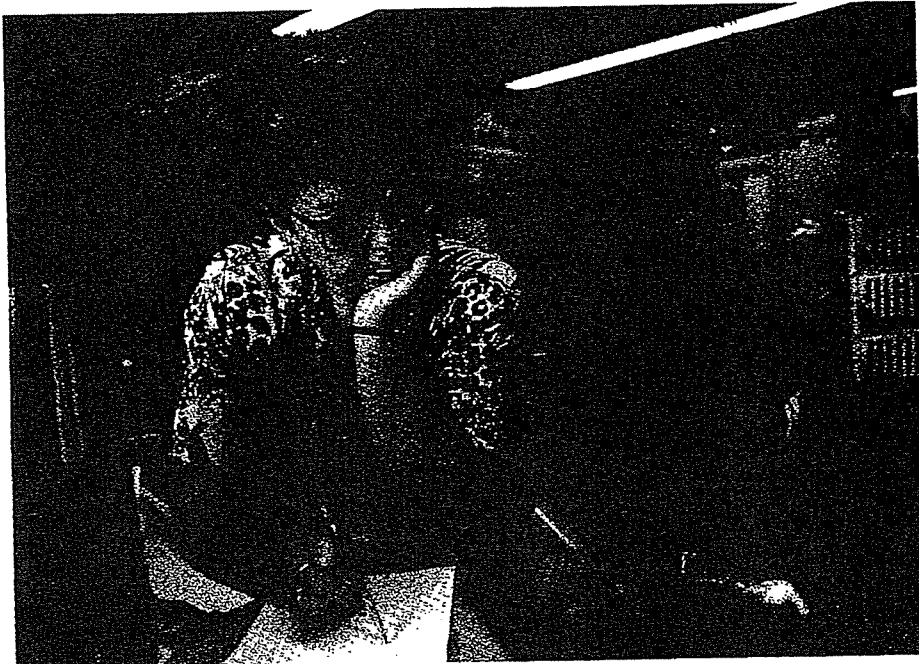
In racially mixed schools, black children are much more likely to be in the lower track than the honors track. Such apparent sorting along racial lines sends a message about what it means to be black. One young honors student in a middle-class suburban school I interviewed noted the irony of this resegregation in what he described as a "very integrated environment" and hinted at the identity issues it raised for him.

The teen-ager said: "It was really a very paradoxical existence. Here I am in a school that's 35 percent black, you know, and I'm the only black in my classes. ... That always struck me as odd. I guess I felt that I was different from the other blacks because of that."

Social Shaping

In addition to the changes taking place within school, changes are occurring in the social dynamics outside of school. For many parents, puberty raises anxiety about interracial dating. In racially mixed communities, you begin to see what I call the "birthday party effect." Young children's birthday parties in multiracial communities are often a reflection of that diversity. The parties of elementary school children may be segregated by gender, but not by race. At puberty, when the parties become "sleepovers" or boy-girl events, they become less and less racially diverse.

Black girls, in white communities especially, may gradually become aware



that something has changed. When their white friends start to date, they do not. The issues of emerging sexuality, and the societal messages about who is sexually desirable, leave young black women in a very devalued position.

One young woman from a Philadelphia suburb described herself as "pursuing white guys all throughout high school" to no avail. Since there were no black boys in her class, she had little choice. She would feel "really pissed off" when those same white boys would date her white friends. For her, "That prom

poor urban adolescent girls do not fit the stereotypes that are made about them."

Affirmation in Class

As these examples illustrate, during the high school years students of color are often experiencing a heightened awareness of the significance of race and racism and are trying to make sense of these experiences. This increased awareness may be accompanied by feelings of confusion or anger, alienation or sadness. Though they may not always seek out the help of teachers, educators who are color-con-

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Though black girls living in the context of a larger black community may have more social choices, they too have to contend with devaluing messages about who they are and who they will become, especially if they are poor or working class. As social scientists Bonnie Ross Leadbeater and Niobe Way point out in *Urban Girls: Resisting Stereotypes, Creating Identities*: "The school dropout, the teen-age welfare mother, the drug addict and the victim of domestic violence or of AIDS are among the most prevalent public images of poor and working-class urban adolescent girls ... Yet, despite the risks inherent in economic disadvantage, the majority of

conscious enough to notice their students are struggling with questions of identity can be helpful allies in the process.

Affirming identity in the classroom is a very useful place to start. All students should be able to see important parts of themselves reflected in positive ways in the school. Students want to find themselves reflected in the faces of other students and in the faculty. They want to see themselves reflected in the curriculum.

While middle-class white students can take such affirmation for granted, students of color often find that their experiences are peripheral to what happens in their classrooms. The color-blind teacher may not notice that some children are included and others are not.

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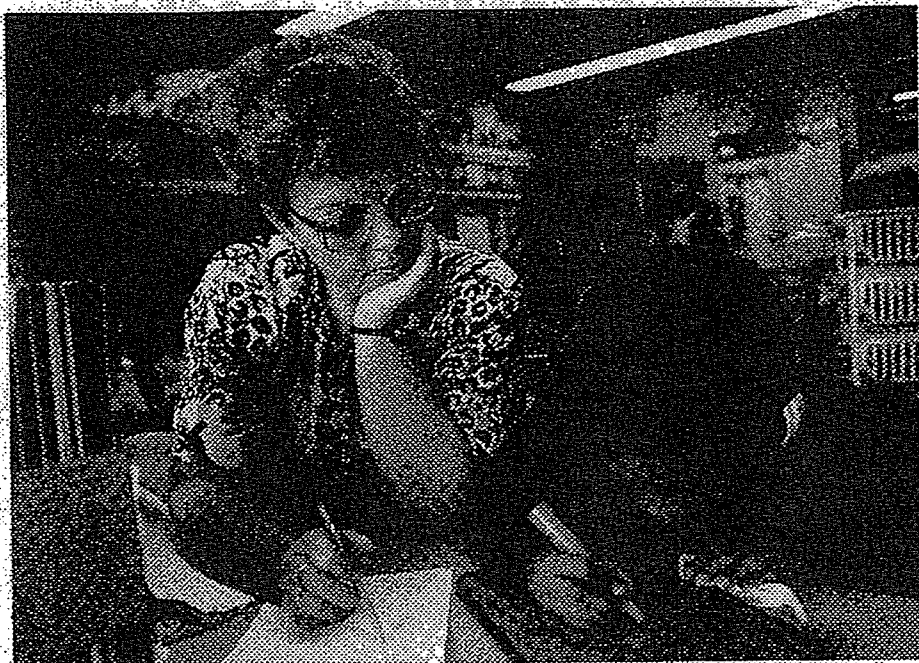
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Conversely the color-conscious teacher will actively seek out materials (classroom posters, literature, music, relevant newspaper clippings, etc.) that reflect the identities of his or her students in a positive way.

In addition, the color-conscious teacher may acknowledge the social meaning of race by engaging students in discussions about race and racism. While such discussions may seem to belong only in social studies or literature classes, even math and science teachers can incorporate such discussions into their content. Affirming identity can be as subtle as ensuring that the word problems include names like Juan and Lakisha as well as Tom and Jane or as overt as asking students to collect and graph data about stereotypical images in the media and debunking myths about the "biology" of race.

While teachers often are hesitant to engage students in conversations about race, ongoing classroom dialogue can help both white students and students of color begin to make sense of their race-related experiences. Educators who are able to talk about issues of race and racism with their students often



Beverly Daniel Tatum is the dean of Mount Holyoke College.

find that their relationships with students of color improve, and perhaps as a result, so does the students' academic performance.

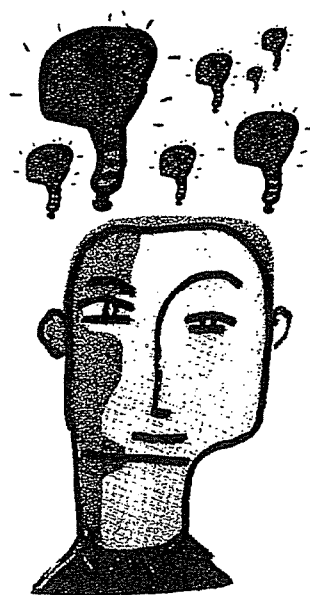
While not every student will respond positively to an educator's initiative to suggest culturally relevant reading material or to support the organization of clubs for students of color, many will see such efforts as a sign that the school is also a place for them. They no longer will feel invisible in the classroom.

Better Understanding

Educators who abandon color-blindness for a color-conscious approach may find as this white high school teacher did: "The most glaring mistake I have lived is that of embracing all my students without seeing their color. I used to be very proud that skin color didn't change my approach to my students and the intended curriculum in any way. I prided myself in my non-partisan approach of equality for all. I realize now that this lack of acknowledgment left my students thinking I did not recognize their identity."

As educators develop a better understanding of the significance of racial and ethnic identity in adolescence, hopefully it is a mistake that fewer of us will make in the future. ■

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