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The Early Years

"Is my skin brown because I drink chocolate milk?"

Think of your earliest race-related memory. How old were you? When I ask adults in my workshops this question, they call out a range of ages: "Three," "Five," "Eight," "Thirteen," "Twenty." Sometimes they talk in small groups about what they remember. At first they hesitate to speak, but then the stories come flooding forward, each person's memory triggering another's.

Some are stories of curiosity, as when a light-skinned child wonders why a dark-skinned person's palms are so much lighter than the backs of his hands. Some are stories of fear and avoidance, communicated verbally or nonverbally by parents, as when one White woman describes her mother nervously telling her to roll up the windows and lock the doors as they drove through a Black community. Some are stories of active bigotry, transmitted casually from one generation to the next through the use of racial slurs and ethnic jokes. Some are stories of confusing mixed messages, as when a White man remembers the Black maid who was "just like family" but was not allowed to eat from the family dishes or use the upstairs bathroom. Some are stories of terror, as when a Black woman remembers being chased home from school by a German shepherd, deliberately set loose by its White owner as she passed by. I will often ask audience members, "What do you remember? Something someone said or did? A name-calling incident? An act of discrimination? The casual observation of skin color differences? Were you the observer or the object of observation?"

In large groups, I hesitate to ask the participants to reveal their memories to a crowd of strangers, but I ask instead what emotions are

attached to the memories. The participants use such words as *anger, confusion, surprise, sadness, embarassment*. Notice that this list does not include such words as *joy, excitement, delight*. Too often the stories are painful ones. Then I ask, "Did you talk to anyone about what happened? Did you tell anyone how you felt?" It is always surprising to me to see how many people will say that they never discussed these clearly emotional experiences with anyone. Why not? Had they already learned that race was not a topic to be discussed?

If they didn't talk to anyone else about it, how did these three- or five- or eight- or thirteen-year-old children make sense of their experience? Has the confusion continued into adulthood? Are we as adults prepared to help the children we care about make sense of their own race-related observations?

Preschool Conversations

Like many African Americans, I have many race-related memories, beginning when I was quite small. I remember being about three years old when I had an argument with an African American playmate. He said I was "black." "No I'm not," I said, "I'm tan." I now see that we were both right. I am Black, a person of African descent, but tan is surely a more accurate description of my light brown skin than black is. As a three-year-old child who knew her colors, I was prepared to stand my ground. As an adult looking back on this incident, I wonder if I had also begun to recognize, even at three, that in some circles it was better to be tan than to be black. Had I already started internalizing racist messages?

Questions and confusion about racial issues begin early. Though adults often talk about the "colorblindness" of children, the fact is that children as young as three do notice physical differences such as skin color, hair texture, and the shape of one's facial features.[1] Certainly preschoolers talk about what they see, and often they do it in ways that make parents uncomfortable. How should we respond when they do?

My own children have given me many opportunities to think about this question. For example, one winter day, my youngest son, David, observed a White mother helping her brown-skinned biracial daughter put on her boots in the hallway of his preschool. "Why don't they match, Mommy?" he asked loudly. Absentmindedly collecting his things, I didn't quite understand what he was talking about—mismatched socks, perhaps? When I asked, he explained indignantly, "You and I match. They don't match. Mommies and kids are supposed to match."

David, like many three-year-olds (and perhaps some adults), had overgeneralized from his routine observations of White parents with White children, and Black parents, like his own, with Black children. As a psychologist, I recognized this preschool tendency to overgeneralize as a part of his cognitive development, but as a mother standing with her child in the hallway, I was embarrassed, afraid that his comment might have somehow injured the mother-daughter pair standing in the hallway with us. I responded matter-of-factly, "David, they don't have to match. Sometimes parents and kids match, and sometimes they don't."

More often, my children and I have been on the receiving end of a preschooler's questions. The first conversation of this type I remember occurred when my oldest son, Jonathan, was enrolled in a day care center where he was one of few children of color, and the only Black child in his class. One day, as we drove home from the day care center, Jonathan said, "Eddie says my skin is brown because I drink too much chocolate milk. Is that true?"* Eddie was a White three-year-old in Jonathan's class who, like David, had observed a physical difference and was now searching for an explanation.

"No," I replied, "your skin is brown because you have something in your skin called melanin. Melanin is very important because it helps protect your skin from the sun. Eddie has melanin in his skin,

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* With the exception of my own children's names, all names used in these examples are pseudonyms.

too. Remember when Eddie went to Florida on vacation and came back showing everybody his tan? It was the melanin in his skin that made it get darker. Everybody has melanin, you know. But some people have more than others. At your school, you are the kid with the most!"

Jonathan seemed to understand the idea and smiled at the thought that he was the child with the most of something. I talked more about how much I liked the color of his pecan-colored skin, how it was a perfect blend of my light-brown skin and his father's dark-brown complexion. I wanted to affirm who Jonathan was, a handsome brown-skinned child. I wanted to counter the implication of Eddie's question—that there was perhaps something wrong with brown skin, the result of "too much" chocolate milk.

This process of affirmation was not new. Since infancy I had talked about how much I liked his smooth brown skin and those little curls whenever I bathed him or brushed his hair. I searched for children's books depicting brown-skinned children. When Jonathan was one year old, we gave him a large brown rag doll, complete with curly black hair made of yarn, a Marcus Garvey T-shirt, and an African name. Olayinka, or Olay for short, was his constant companion at home and at the day care center during nap time. Especially because we have lived in predominantly White communities since his birth, I felt it was important to make sure he saw himself reflected positively in as many ways as possible. As many Black families do, I think we provided an important buffer against the negative messages about Blackness offered by the larger society.[2]

But Jonathan continued to think about the color of his skin, and sometimes he would bring it up. One Saturday morning I was cooking pancakes for breakfast, and Jonathan was at my side, eagerly watching the pancakes cook on the griddle. When I flipped the pancakes over, he was excited to see that the cream-colored batter had been transformed into a golden brown. Jonathan remarked, "I love pancakes. They are brown, just like me." On another occasion when we were cooking together, he noticed that I had set some eggs out on

the kitchen counter. Some of the eggs were brown, and some of them were white. He commented on the fact that the eggs were not all the same color. "Yes," I said, "they do have different shells. But look at this!" I cracked open a brown egg and emptied its contents into a bowl. Then I cracked open a white egg. "See, they are different on the outside, but the same on the inside. People are the same way. They look different on the outside, but they are the same on the inside."

Jonathan's questions and comments, like David's and Eddie's, were not unusual for a child of his age. Preschool children are very focused on outward appearances, and skin color is the racial feature they are most likely to comment on.[3] I felt good about my ability as a parent to respond to Jonathan's questions. (I was, after all, teaching courses on the psychology of racism and child development. I was not caught completely off guard!) But I wondered about Jonathan's classmates. What about Eddie, the boy with the chocolate milk theory? Had anyone set him straight?

In fact, Eddie's question, "Is your skin brown because you drink too much chocolate milk?" represented a good attempt to make sense of a curious phenomenon that he was observing. All the kids in the class had light skin except for Jonathan. Why was Jonathan's skin different? It didn't seem to be dirt—Jonathan washed his hands before lunch like all the other children did, and there was no change. He did often have chocolate milk in his lunch box—maybe that was it. Eddie's reasoning was first-rate for a three-year-old. The fact that he was asking about Jonathan's skin, rather than speculating about his own, reflected that he had already internalized "Whiteness" as the norm, which it was in that school. His question did not reflect prejudice in an adult sense, but it did reveal confusion. His theory was flawed, and he needed some help.

I decided to ask a staff member how she and the other preschool teachers were handling children's questions about racial differences. She smiled and said, "It really hasn't come up." I was amazed. I knew it had come up; after all, Jonathan had reported the conversations to me. How was it that she had not noticed?

Maybe it was easy not to notice. Maybe these conversations among three-year-olds had taken place at the lunch table or in the sand box, away from the hearing of adults. I suspect, too, that there may have been some selective inattention on the part of the staff. When children make comments to which we don't know how to respond, it may be easier simply not to hear what has just been said or to let it slip from our consciousness and memory. Then we don't have to respond, because it "hasn't come up."

Many adults do not know how to respond when children make race-related observations. Imagine this scenario. A White mother and preschool child are shopping in the grocery store. They pass a Black woman and child, and the White child says loudly, "Mommy, look at that girl! Why is she so dirty?" (Confusing dark skin with dirt is a common misconception among White preschool children.) The White mother, embarassed by her child's comment, responds quickly with a "Ssh!"

An appropriate response might have been: "Honey, that little girl is not dirty. Her skin is as clean as yours. It's just a different color. Just like we have different hair color, people have different skin colors." If the child still seemed interested, the explanation of melanin could be added.[4] Perhaps afraid of saying the wrong thing, however, many parents don't offer an explanation. They stop at "Ssh," silencing the child but not responding to the question or the reasoning underlying it. Children who have been silenced often enough learn not to talk about race publicly. Their questions don't go away, they just go unasked.

I see the legacy of this silencing in my psychology of racism classes. My students have learned that there is a taboo against talking about race, especially in racially mixed settings, and creating enough safety in the class to overcome that taboo is the first challenge for me as an instructor. But the evidence of the internalized taboo is apparent long before children reach college.

When addressing parent groups, I often hear from White parents who tell me with pride that their children are "colorblind." Usually

the parent offers as evidence a story of a friendship with a child of color whose race or ethnicity has never been mentioned to the parent. For example, a father reported that his eight-year-old daughter had been talking very enthusiastically about a friend she had made at school. One day when he picked his daughter up from school, he asked her to point out her new friend. Trying to point her out of a large group of children on the playground, his daughter elaborately described what the child was wearing. She never said she was the only Black girl in the group. Her father was pleased that she had not, a sign of her colorblindness. I wondered if, rather than a sign of colorblindness, it was a sign that she had learned not to be so impolite as to mention someone's race.

My White college students sometimes refer to someone as Black in hushed tones, sometimes whispering the word as though it were a secret or a potentially scandalous identification. When I detect this behavior, I like to point it out, saying it is not an insult to identify a Black person as Black. Of course, sometimes one's racial group membership is irrelevant to the conversation, and then there is no need to mention it. But when it is relevant, as when pointing out the only Black girl in a crowd, we should not be afraid to say so.

Blackness, Whiteness, and Painful History

Of course, when we talk to children about racial issues, or anything else, we have to keep in mind each child's developmental stage and cognitive ability to make sense of what we are saying. Preschool children are quite literal in their use of language and concrete in their thinking. They talk about physical differences and other commonly observed cultural differences such as language and style of dress because they are tangible and easy to recognize. They may be confused by the symbolic constructs that adults use.[5]

This point was brought home to me in another conversation with my son Jonathan. As a working mother, I often found trips to the grocery store to be a good opportunity for "quality" time with my then

four-year-old. We would stroll the grocery aisles chatting, as he sat in the top part of the grocery cart and I filled the bottom. On such an outing, Jonathan told me that someone at school had said he was Black. "Am I Black?" he asked me. "Yes, you are," I replied. "But my skin is brown," he said. I was instantly reminded of my own preschool "I'm not black, I'm tan" argument on this point. "Yes," I said, "your skin is brown, but *Black* is a term that people use to describe African Americans, just like *White* is used to describe people who came from Europe. It is a little confusing," I conceded, "because Black people aren't really the color black, but different shades of brown." I mentioned different members of our family and the different shades we represented, but I said that we were all African Americans and in that sense could all be called Black.

Then I said, "It's the same with White people. They come in lots of different shades—pink, beige, even light brown. None of them are white like this piece of paper." I held up the white note paper on which my grocery list was written as proof. Jonathan nodded his agreement with my description of Black people as really being varying shades of brown, but hesitated when I said that White people were not really white in color. "Yes they are," he said. I held up the paper again and said, "White people don't really look like this." "Yes, they do," he insisted. "Okay," I said, remembering that children learn from actual experiences. "Let's go find one and see." We were alone in the grocery aisle, but sure enough, when we turned the corner, there was a White woman pushing her cart down the aisle. I leaned over and whispered in Jonathan's ear, "Now, see, she doesn't look like this paper." Satisfied with this evidence, he conceded the point, and we moved on in our conversation. As I discovered, we were just getting started.

Jonathan's confusion about society's "color" language was not surprising or unusual. At the same time that preschoolers are identifying the colors in the crayon box, they are also beginning to figure out racial categorizations. The color-coded language of social categories obviously does not match the colors we use to label objects. People

of Asian descent are not really "yellow" like lemons, Native Americans don't really look "red" like apples. I understood the problem and was prepared for this kind of confusion.

What was of most concern to me at that moment was the tone of my son's question. In his tone of voice was the hint that maybe he was not comfortable being identified as Black, and I wondered what messages he was taking in about being African American. I said that if he wanted to, he could tell his classmate that he was African American. I said that he should feel very proud to have ancestors who were from Africa. I was just beginning to talk about ancient African civilizations when he interrupted me. "If Africa is so great, what are we doing here?" he asked.

I had not planned to have a conversation about slavery with my four-year-old in the grocery store that day. But I didn't see how I could answer his question otherwise. Slavery is a topic that makes many of us uncomfortable. Yet the nature of Black-White race relations in the United States have been forever shaped by slavery and its social, psychological, and economic legacies. It requires discussion. But how does one talk to a four-year-old about this legacy of cruelty and injustice?

I began at the beginning. I knew his preschool had discussed the colonial days when Europeans first came to these shores. I reminded him of this and said:

> A long, long time ago, before there were grocery stores and roads and houses here, the Europeans came. And they wanted to build roads and houses and grocery stores here, but it was going to be a lot of work. They needed a lot of really good, strong, smart workers to cut down trees, and build roads, and work on farms, and they didn't have enough. So they went to Africa to get the strongest, smartest workers they could find. Unfortunately they didn't want to pay them. So they kidnapped them and brought them here as slaves. They

made them work and didn't pay them. And that was
really unfair.

Even as I told this story I was aware of three things. (1) I didn't
want to frighten this four-year-old who might worry that these
things would happen to him (another characteristic of four-year old
thinking). (2) I wanted him to know that his African ancestors were
not just passive victims, but had found ways to resist their victimiza-
tion. (3) I did not want him to think that all White people were bad.
It *is* possible to have White allies.
     So I continued:

> Now, this was a long, long time ago. You were never a
> slave. I was never a slave. Grandmommy and
> Granddaddy were never slaves. This was a really long
> time ago, and the Africans who were kidnapped did
> whatever they could to escape. But sometimes the
> Europeans had guns and the Africans didn't, so it was
> hard to get away. But some even jumped off the boats
> into the ocean to try to escape. There were slave rebel-
> lions, and many of the Africans were able to escape to
> freedom after they got here, and worked to help other
> slaves get free. Now, even though some White people
> were kidnapping Africans and making them work with-
> out pay, other White people thought that this was very
> unfair, which it was. And those White people worked
> along with the Black people to bring an end to slavery.
> So now it is against the law to have slaves.

Jonathan was paying very close attention to my story, and when I
declared that slavery had ended a long time ago, he asked, "Well, when
they weren't slaves anymore, why didn't they go back to Africa?"
Thanks to the African American history classes I took in college, I
knew enough to say, "Well, some did. But others might not have been

able to because they didn't have enough money, and besides that, by then they had families and friends who were living here and they might have wanted to stay."

"And this is a nice place, too," he declared.

"Yes it is."

Over the next few weeks, an occasional question would come up about my story, and I knew that Jonathan was still digesting what I had said. Though I did not anticipate talking about slavery with my four-year-old, I was glad in retrospect that it was I who had introduced him to the subject, because I was able to put my own spin on this historical legacy, emphasizing both Black resistance to victimization and White resistance to the role of victimizer.

Too often I hear from young African American students the embarrassment they have felt in school when the topic of slavery is discussed, ironically one of the few ways that the Black experience is included in their school curriculum. Uncomfortable with the portrayal of their group as helpless victims—the rebellions and resistance offered by the enslaved Africans are rarely discussed—they squirm uncomfortably as they feel the eyes of White children looking to see their reaction to this subject.

In my professional development work with White teachers they sometimes remark how uncomfortable they, too, are with this and other examples of the painful history of race relations in the United States. As one elementary school teacher said,

> It is hard to tell small children about slavery, hard to explain that Black young men were lynched, and that police turned firehoses on children while other men bombed churches, killing Black children at their prayers. This history is a terrible legacy for all of us. The other day a teacher told me that she could not look into the faces of her students when she taught about these things. It was too painful, and too embarrassing. . . . If we are all uncomfortable, something is wrong in our approach.[6]

Something *is* wrong. While I think it is necessary to be honest about the racism of our past and present, it is also necessary to empower children (and adults) with the vision that change is possible. Concrete examples are critical. For young children these examples can sometimes be found in children's picture books. One of my favorites is Faith Ringgold's *Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky.*[7] Drawing on historical accounts of the Underground Railroad and the facts of Harriet Tubman's life, this story is told from the point of view of a young Black girl who travels back in time and experiences both the chilling realities of slavery and the power of her own resistance and eventual escape.

White people are present in the story both as enemies (slave-owners) and as allies (abolitionists). This dual representation is important for children of color, as well as for White children. I remember a conversation I had a few years ago with a White friend who often talked to her then preschool son about issues of social justice. He had been told over and over the story of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott, and it was one of his favorites as a four-year-old. But as he got a little older she began to notice a certain discomfort in him when she talked about these issues. "Are all White people bad?" he asked her. At the age of five, he seemed to be feeling badly about being White. She asked me for some advice. I recommended she begin talking more about what White people had done to oppose injustice. Finding examples of this in children's literature can be a challenge, but one example is Jeanette Winter's book, *Follow the Drinking Gourd.*[8] This too is a story about the Underground Railroad, but it highlights the role of a White man named Peg Leg Joe and other White allies who offer assistance along the escape route, again providing a tangible example of White resistance to injustice.

A Question of Color

All of these preschool questions reflect the beginnings of a developing racial identity. The particular questions my child asked me reflect-

ed his early experience as one of few Black children in a predomi-
nantly White community. Even in the context of all-Black commu-
nities, the color variations in the community, even within families, can
lead to a series of skin-color related conversations. For example, it is
common to hear a preschool child describe a light-skinned Black
person as White, often to the chagrin of the individual so identified.
The child's misclassification does not represent a denial of Blackness,
only the child's incomplete understanding of the adult world's racial
classifications. As preschoolers, my own children have asked me if I
was White. When I am misidentified by children as White, I usually
reply matter-of-factly, "I am an African American person. We come in
all shades of brown, dark brown, medium brown, and sometimes light
brown—like me."

The concept of *race constancy,* that one's racial group membership
is fixed and will not change, is not achieved until children are six or
seven years old. (The same is true of gender constancy.)[9] Just as
preschool boys sometimes express a desire to have a baby like Mom
when they grow up (and are dismayed when they learn they cannot),
young Black children may express a desire to be White. Though such
statements are certainly distressing to parents, they do not necessarily
mean that the child has internalized a negative self-image. It may, how-
ever, reflect a child's growing awareness of White privilege, conveyed
through the media. For example, in a study of children's race-related
conversations, one five-year-old Black boy reportedly asked, "Do I
have to be Black?" To the question of why he asked, he responded, "I
want to be chief of paramedics." His favorite TV show at the time fea-
tured paramedics and firefighters, all of whom were White.[10]

Though such comments by young children are not necessarily
rooted in self-rejection, it is important to consider what messages
children are receiving about the relative worth of light or dark skin.
The societal preference for light skin and the relative advantage
historically bestowed on light-skinned Blacks, often referred to as col-
orism, manifests itself not only in the marketplace but even within
Black families.[11]

A particular form of internalized oppression, the skin-color prej-udice found within Black communities is toxic to children and adults. A by-product of the plantation hierarchy, which privileged the light-skinned children of enslaved African women and White slaveowners, a post-slavery class system was created based on color. Historically the Black middle class has been a light-skinned group. But the racially mixed ancestry of many Black people can lead to a great deal of color variation among siblings and extended family members. The internal-ization of White-supremacist standards of beauty and the desire to maintain what little advantage can be gained in a racist system leads some families to reject darker-skinned members. Conversely, in some families, anger at White oppression and the pain of colorism can lead to resentment toward and rejection of lighter-skinned members. According to family therapist Nancy Boyd-Franklin, family attitudes about skin color are rarely discussed openly, but the messages are often clearly conveyed when some children are favored over others, or when a relative teasingly says, "Whose child are you?" to the child whose skin color varies from other family members. Boyd-Franklin writes,

> All Black people, irrespective of their color, shade, dark-ness, or lightness, are aware from a very early age that their blackness makes them different from mainstream White America. It sets them apart from White immi-grant groups who were not brought here as slaves and who have thus had a different experience in becoming assimilated into mainstream American culture. The struggle for a strong positive racial identity for young Black Afro-American children is clearly made more dif-ficult by the realities of color prejudice.[12]

We need to examine not only our behavior toward our children, but also the language we use around them. Is *black* ever used as a derogatory term to describe others, as in "that black so-and-so?" Is

darkness seen as an obstacle to be overcome, as in "She's dark, but she's still pretty," or avoided, as in "Stay out of the sun, you're dark enough already?" Is lightness described as defective, as in "You need some sun, girl?" Do we sing hymns in church on Sunday proclaiming our wish to be washed "white as snow"? Even when our clear desire is to reflect positive images of Blackness to young Black children, our habits of speech may undermine our efforts unless we are intentional about examining the color-coded nature of our language.

Related to questions of color are issues of hair texture, an especially sensitive issue for Black women, young and old. I grew up with the expression "good hair." Though no one in my household used that phrase often, I knew what it meant when I heard it. "Good hair" was straight hair, the straighter the better. I still remember the oohs and ahs of my White elementary school classmates when I arrived at school for "picture day" with my long mane of dark hair resting on my shoulders. With the miracle of a hot comb, my mother had transformed my ordinary braids into what I thought was a glamorous cascade of curls. I received many compliments that day. "How pretty you look," the White teacher said. The truth is I looked pretty every day, but a clear message was being sent both at home and at school about what real beauty was.

I now wear my hair in its natural state of tiny curls. It has been that way for more than twenty-five years. My sons are unfamiliar with Saturday afternoon trips to the beauty parlor, the smell of hot combs and chemical straighteners. Instead they go with me or their father to the Black-owned barber shop where Black men and some women wait their turn for a seat in the barber's chair. I admire their neatly trimmed heads, and they admire mine. I genuinely like the way my short hair looks and feels, and that sends an important message to my sons about how I feel about myself as a Black woman and, by extension, how I feel about them.

Though a woman's choice to straighten her hair is not necessarily a sign of internalized oppression, it does reinforce the notion to an observant child that straight is better. In her book *Sisters of the Yam:*

Black Women and Self Recovery, bell hooks relates a conversation she had with a Black woman frustrated by her daughter's desire for long blond hair, despite the family's effort to affirm their Blackness. Observing the woman's dark skin and straightened hair, she encouraged the mother to examine her own attitudes about skin color and hair texture to see what messages she might be communicating to her child by the way she constructed her own body image.[13]

Countering the images of the dominant culture is a challenge, but it can be done. Finding images that reflect the range of skin tones and hair textures in Black families is an important way to affirm a positive sense of Black identity. A wonderfully illustrated book for children that opposes the prevailing Eurocentric images of beauty is John Steptoe's *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale*.[14] As the story states on the opening page, "everyone agreed that Manyara and Nyasha are beautiful." These lovely brown-skinned sisters have broad noses and full lips, with hair braided in short cornrows.

Though it is easier than it used to be to find children's picture books depicting Black children authentically rather than as White children painted a darker shade, it may still be hard to find children's books depicting Black children with very dark or very light skin. A medium brown seems to be the color of choice. Decorating one's home with photographs of family and friends who represent a range of skin tones and hair textures is one way to begin to fill this representational gap.

"It's That Stuff Again": Developing a Critical Consciousness

From the time my children were infants, reading has been a shared activity in our family. I have always loved to read, and that love of books has been imparted to my children, who rarely leave home without a book to read on the way. I have worked hard to find good children's literature featuring African Americans and other children of color, but I have also introduced my children to some of the books I liked when I was a child, most of which only included White children.

When Jonathan was just learning to read on his own and had advanced to "chapter books," I introduced him to *The Boxcar Children* series of easy-reading mysteries that I loved as a child.[15] Originally written in the 1940s, these books feature four White children, two boys and two girls, orphaned and homeless, who lived in an abandoned railway car until they were found by their wealthy grandfather. From then on, they traveled with Grandfather and solved mysteries wherever they went.

Reading these volumes again with Jonathan, I had a new perception of them: how sexist they seemed to be. The two girls seemed to spend most of their time on these adventures cooking and cleaning and setting up house while the boys fished, paddled the canoe, and made the important discoveries. After reading several pages of this together, I decided to say something about it to my then seven-year-old son. I asked if he knew what sexism was. He did not, so I explained that it was when girls were treated differently than boys just because they were girls. I said that the girls in this story were being treated differently than the boys, and I pointed out some examples and discussed the unfairness of it. Jonathan wanted to continue the story, and I agreed that we could finish it, despite my new perception. What pleased and surprised me as we continued to read was that Jonathan began to spot the gender bias himself. "Hey Mom," he interrupted me as I read on, "there's that stuff again!"

Learning to spot "that stuff"—whether it is racist, or sexist, or classist—is an important skill for children to develop. It is as important for my Black male children to recognize sexism and other forms of oppression as it is for them to spot racism. We are better able to resist the negative impact of oppressive messages when we see them coming than when they are invisible to us. While some may think it is a burden to children to encourage this critical consciousness, I consider it a gift. Educator Janie Ward calls this child-rearing process "raising resisters."[16] And there are infinite opportunities to do so.

One such opportunity came in the form of a children's book of Bible stories, a gift from a friend. My son and I sat down to read the

story of Moses together. We hadn't gotten very far when I said, "You know, something is bothering me about this book." "What is it?" he replied. "You know, this story took place in Egypt, and the people in these pictures do not look much like Egyptians." "Well, what do Egyptians look like?" he asked. We turned to a children's world atlas and found that the photographs of the Egyptians in the atlas had noticeably darker skin and hair than the drawings in the book. Though we did not discard the book, we did discuss the discrepancy.

I do not point out every omission or distortion I notice (and I am sure that a lot go by me unnoticed), and sometimes my children don't agree with my observations. For example, when discussing with them my plans to talk about media stereotyping in this book, I offered the example of the Disney film *The Lion King.* A very popular family film, I was dismayed at the use of ethnically identifiable voices to characterize the hyenas, clearly the undesirables in the film. The Spanish-accented voice of Cheech Marin and the Black slang of Whoopi Goldberg clearly marked the hyenas racially. The little Lion King is warned never to go to the place where the hyenas live. When the evil lion (darker in shade than the good lions) takes over, and the hyenas have access to power, it is not long before they have ruined the kingdom. "There goes the neighborhood!"

My sons, now ten and fourteen, countered that the distinguished Black actor James Earl Jones as the voice of the good lion offset the racial characterizations of the hyenas. I argued that to the target audience of young children, the voice of James Earl Jones would not be identified as a voice of color, while the voices of the hyenas surely would. The racial subtext of the film would be absorbed uncritically by many young children, and perhaps their parents. Whether we agree or not, the process of engaging my children in a critical examination of the books they read, the television they watch, the films they see, and the video games they play is essential.

And despite my best efforts, the stereotypes still creep in. One Saturday afternoon a few years ago, after attending choir rehearsal at a church located in a Black section of a nearby city, my oldest son and

to recognize and speak up against unfairness.[18] The book suggests increasing levels of activism for developing children. Two- and three-year-olds are encouraged to use words to express their feelings and to empathize with one another. With adult guidance, four- and five-year-olds are capable of group activism.

Several years ago a group of seven-year-olds in a second-grade class in Amherst, Massachusetts, wrote letters to the state Department of Transportation protesting the signs on the Massachusetts Turnpike depicting a Pilgrim hat with an arrow through it. This sign was certainly a misrepresentation of history, and offensive to American Indians. The children received national recognition for their efforts, and more important, the signs were changed. I am sure the lesson that collective effort can make a difference will be remembered by those children for a long time.

As early childhood educator Louise Derman-Sparks and her colleagues write in *Anti-Bias Curriculum*,

> For children to feel good and confident about themselves, they need to be able to say, "That's not fair," or "I don't like that," if they are the target of prejudice or discrimination. For children to develop empathy and respect for diversity, they need to be able to say, "I don't like what you are doing" to a child who is abusing another child. If we teach children to recognize injustice, then we must also teach them that people can create positive change by working together. . . . Through activism activities children build the confidence and skills for becoming adults who assert, in the face of injustice, "I have the responsibility to deal with it, I know how to deal with it, I will deal with it."[19]

When we adults reflect on our own race-related memories, we may recall times when we did not get the help we needed to sift through the confusing messages we received. The task of talking to

our children about racism and other isms may seem formidable. Our children's questions may make us uncomfortable, and we may not have a ready response. But even a missed opportunity can be revisited at another time. It is never too late to say, "I've been thinking about that question you asked me the other day . . ." We have the responsibility, and the resources available, to educate ourselves if necessary so that we will not repeat the cycle of oppression with our children.

4

Identity Development in Adolescence
"Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?"

Walk into any racially mixed high school cafeteria at lunch time and
you will instantly notice that in the sea of adolescent faces, there is an
identifiable group of Black students sitting together. Conversely, it
could be pointed out that there are many groups of White students
sitting together as well, though people rarely comment about that.
The question on the tip of everyone's tongue is "Why are the Black
kids sitting together?" Principals want to know, teachers want to
know, White students want to know, the Black students who aren't sit-
ting at the table want to know.

How does it happen that so many Black teenagers end up at the
same cafeteria table? They don't start out there. If you walk into
racially mixed elementary schools, you will often see young children
of diverse racial backgrounds playing with one another, sitting at the
snack table together, crossing racial boundaries with an ease uncom-
mon in adolescence. Moving from elementary school to middle
school (often at sixth or seventh grade) means interacting with new
children from different neighborhoods than before, and a certain
degree of clustering by race might therefore be expected, presuming
that children who are familiar with one another would form groups.
But even in schools where the same children stay together from
kindergarten through eighth grade, racial grouping begins by the
sixth or seventh grade. What happens?

One thing that happens is puberty. As children enter adolescence,
they begin to explore the question of identity, asking "Who am I?
Who can I be?" in ways they have not done before. For Black youth,

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asking "Who am I?" includes thinking about "Who am I ethnically and/or racially? What does it mean to be Black?"

As I write this, I can hear the voice of a White woman who asked me, "Well, all adolescents struggle with questions of identity. They all become more self-conscious about their appearance and more concerned about what their peers think. So what is so different for Black kids?" Of course, she is right that all adolescents look at themselves in new ways, but not all adolescents think about themselves in racial terms.

The search for personal identity that intensifies in adolescence can involve several dimensions of an adolescent's life: vocational plans, religious beliefs, values and preferences, political affiliations and beliefs, gender roles, and ethnic identities. The process of exploration may vary across these identity domains. James Marcia described four identity "statuses" to characterize the variation in the identity search process: (1) *diffuse,* a state in which there has been little exploration or active consideration of a particular domain, and no psychological commitment; (2) *foreclosed,* a state in which a commitment has been made to particular roles or belief systems, often those selected by parents, without actively considering alternatives; (3) *moratorium,* a state of active exploration of roles and beliefs in which no commitment has yet been made; and (4) *achieved,* a state of strong personal commitment to a particular dimension of identity following a period of high exploration.[1]

An individual is not likely to explore all identity domains at once, therefore it is not unusual for an adolescent to be actively exploring one dimension while another remains relatively unexamined. Given the impact of dominant and subordinate status, it is not surprising that researchers have found that adolescents of color are more likely to be actively engaged in an exploration of their racial or ethnic identity than are White adolescents.[2]

Why do Black youths, in particular, think about themselves in terms of race? Because that is how the rest of the world thinks of them. Our self-perceptions are shaped by the messages that we receive

from those around us, and when young Black men and women enter adolescence, the racial content of those messages intensifies. A case in point: If you were to ask my ten-year-old son, David, to describe himself, he would tell you many things: that he is smart, that he likes to play computer games, that he has an older brother. Near the top of his list, he would likely mention that he is tall for his age. He would probably not mention that he is Black, though he certainly knows that he is. Why would he mention his height and not his racial group membership? When David meets new adults, one of the first questions they ask is "How old are you?" When David states his age, the inevitable reply is "Gee, you're tall for your age!" It happens so frequently that I once overheard David say to someone, "Don't say it, I know. I'm tall for my age." Height is salient for David because it is salient for others.

When David meets new adults, they don't say, "Gee, you're Black for your age!" If you are saying to yourself, of course they don't, think again. Imagine David at fifteen, six-foot-two, wearing the adolescent attire of the day, passing adults he doesn't know on the sidewalk. Do the women hold their purses a little tighter, maybe even cross the street to avoid him? Does he hear the sound of the automatic door locks on cars as he passes by? Is he being followed around by the security guards at the local mall? As he stops in town with 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. At ten, race is not yet salient for David, because it is not yet salient for society. But it will be.

Understanding Racial Identity Development

Psychologist William Cross, author of *Shades of Black: Diversity in African American Identity,* has offered a theory of racial identity development that I have found to be a very useful framework for understanding what is happening not only with David, but with those Black students in the cafeteria.[3] According to Cross's model, referred

to as the psychology of nigrescence, or the psychology of becoming Black, the five stages of racial identity development are *pre-encounter, encounter, immersion/emersion, internalization,* and *internalization-commitment.* For the moment, we will consider the first two stages as those are the most relevant for adolescents.

In the first stage, the Black child absorbs many of the beliefs and values of the dominant White culture, including the idea that it is better to be White. The stereotypes, omissions, and distortions that reinforce notions of White superiority are breathed in by Black children as well as White. Simply as a function of being socialized in a Eurocentric culture, some Black children may begin to value the role models, lifestyles, and images of beauty represented by the dominant group more highly than those of their own cultural group. On the other hand, if Black parents are what I call race-conscious—that is, actively seeking to encourage positive racial identity by providing their children with positive cultural images and messages about what it means to be Black—the impact of the dominant society's messages are reduced.[4] In either case, in the pre-encounter stage, the personal and social significance of one's racial group membership has not yet been realized, and racial identity is not yet under examination. At age ten, David and other children like him would seem to be in the pre-encounter stage. When the environmental cues change and the world begins to reflect his Blackness back to him more clearly, he will probably enter the encounter stage.

Transition to the encounter stage is typically precipitated by an event or series of events that force the young person to acknowledge the personal impact of racism. As the result of a new and heightened awareness of the significance of race, the individual begins to grapple with what it means to be a member of a group targeted by racism. Though Cross describes this process as one that unfolds in late adolescence and early adulthood, research suggests that an examination of one's racial or ethnic identity may begin as early as junior high school.

In a study of Black and White eighth graders from an integrated urban junior high school, Jean Phinney and Steve Tarver found clear

evidence for the beginning of the search process in this dimension of identity. Among the forty-eight participants, more than a third had thought about the effects of ethnicity on their future, had discussed the issues with family and friends, and were attempting to learn more about their group. While White students in this integrated school were also beginning to think about ethnic identity, there was evidence to suggest a more active search among Black students, especially Black females.[5] Phinney and Tarver's research is consistent with my own study of Black youth in predominantly White communities, where the environmental cues that trigger an examination of racial identity often become evident in middle school or junior high school.[6]

Some of the environmental cues are institutionalized. 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 often defend their tracking practices as fair and objective, there usually is a recognizable racial pattern to how children are assigned, which often represents the system of advantage operating in the schools.[7] In racially mixed schools, Black children are much more likely to be in the lower track than in the honors track. Such apparent sorting along racial lines sends a message about what it means to be Black. One young honors student I interviewed described the irony of this resegregation in what was an otherwise integrated environment, and hinted at the identity issues it raised for him.

> 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.

In addition to the changes taking place within school, there are changes in the social dynamics outside school. For many parents, puberty raises anxiety about interracial dating. In racially mixed com-

munities, you begin to see what I call the birthday party effect. Young children's birthday parties in multiracial communities are often a reflection of the community's 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, especially in predominantly White communities, 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 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" that those same White boys would date her White friends. For her, "that prom thing was like out of the question."[8]

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,

> The school drop-out, the teenage 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 poor urban adeolescent girls do not fit the stereotypes that are made about them.[9]

Resisting the stereotypes and affirming other definitions of themselves is part of the task facing young Black women in both White and Black communities.

As was illustrated in the example of David, Black boys also face a

devalued status in the wider world. The all too familiar media image of a young Black man with his hands cuffed behind his back, arrested for a violent crime, has primed many to view young Black men with suspicion and fear. In the context of predominantly White schools, however, Black boys may enjoy a degree of social success, particularly if they are athletically talented. The culture has embraced the Black athlete, and the young man who can fulfill that role is often pursued by Black girls and White girls alike. But even these young men will encounter experiences that may trigger an examination of their racial identity.

Sometimes the experience is quite dramatic. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is a classic tale of racial identity development, and I assign it to my psychology of racism students for just that reason. As a junior high school student, Malcolm was a star. Despite the fact that he was separated from his family and living in a foster home, he was an A student and was elected president of his class. One day he had a conversation with his English teacher, whom he liked and respected, about his future career goals. Malcolm said he wanted to be a lawyer. His teacher responded, "That's no realistic goal for a nigger," and advised him to consider carpentry instead.[10] The message was clear: You are a Black male, your racial group membership matters, plan accordingly. Malcolm's emotional response was typical—anger, confusion, and alienation. He withdrew from his White classmates, stopped participating in class, and eventually left his predominately white Michigan home to live with his sister in Roxbury, a Black community in Boston.

No teacher would say such a thing now, you may be thinking, but don't be so sure. It is certainly less likely that a teacher would use the word *nigger,* but consider these contemporary examples shared by high school students. A young ninth-grade student was sitting in his homeroom. A substitute teacher was in charge of the class. Because the majority of students from this school go on to college, she used the free time to ask the students about their college plans. As a substitute she had very limited information about their academic perfor-

mance, but she offered some suggestions. When she turned to this young man, one of few Black males in the class, she suggested that he consider a community college. She had recommended four-year colleges to the other students. Like Malcolm, this student got the message.

In another example, a young Black woman attending a desegregated school to which she was bussed was encouraged by a teacher to attend the upcoming school dance. Most of the Black students did not live in the neighborhood and seldom attended the extracurricular activities. The young woman indicated that she wasn't planning to come. The well-intentioned teacher was persistent. Finally the teacher said, "Oh come on, I know you people love to dance." This young woman got the message, too.

Coping with Encounters: Developing an Oppositional Identity

What do these encounters have to do with the cafeteria? Do experiences with racism inevitably result in so-called self-segregation? While certainly a desire to protect oneself from further offense is understandable, it is not the only factor at work. Imagine the young eighth-grade girl who experienced the teacher's use of "you people" and the dancing stereotype as a racial affront. Upset and struggling with adolescent embarrassment, she bumps into a White friend who can see that something is wrong. She explains. Her White friend responds, in an effort to make her feel better perhaps, and says, "Oh, Mr. Smith is such a nice guy, I'm sure he didn't mean it like that. Don't be so sensitive." Perhaps the White friend is right, and Mr. Smith didn't mean it, but imagine your own response when you are upset, perhaps with a spouse or partner. He or she asks what's wrong and you explain why you are offended. Your partner brushes off your complaint, attributing it to your being oversensitive. What happens to your emotional thermostat? It escalates. When feelings, rational or irrational, are invalidated, most people disengage. They not only choose to discontinue the conversation but are more likely to turn to

someone who will understand their perspective.

In much the same way, the eighth-grade girl's White friend doesn't get it. She doesn't see the significance of this racial message, but the girls at the "Black table" do. When she tells her story there, one of them is likely to say, "You know what, Mr. Smith said the same thing to me yesterday!" Not only are Black adolescents encountering racism and reflecting on their identity, but their White peers, even when they are not the perpetrators (and sometimes they are), are unprepared to respond in supportive ways. The Black students turn to each other for the much needed support they are not likely to find anywhere else.

In adolescence, as race becomes personally salient for Black youth, finding the answer to questions such as, "What does it mean to be a young Black person? How should I act? What should I do?" is particularly important. And although Black fathers, mothers, aunts, and uncles may hold the answers by offering themselves as role models, they hold little appeal for most adolescents. The last thing many fourteen-year-olds want to do is to grow up to be like their parents. It is the peer group, the kids in the cafeteria, who hold the answers to these questions. They know how to be Black. They have absorbed the stereotypical images of Black youth in the popular culture and are reflecting those images in their self-presentation.

Based on their fieldwork in U.S. high schools, Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu identified a common psychological pattern found among African American high school students at this stage of identity development.[11] They observed that the anger and resentment that adolescents feel in response to their growing awareness of the systematic exclusion of Black people from full participation in U.S. society leads to the development of an oppositional social identity. This oppositional stance both protects one's identity from the psychological assault of racism and keeps the dominant group at a distance. Fordham and Ogbu write:

> Subordinate minorities regard certain forms of behavior and certain activities or events, symbols, and mean-

ings as *not appropriate* for them because those behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings are characteristic of white Americans. At the same time they emphasize other forms of behavior as more appropriate for them because these are *not* a part of white Americans' way of life. To behave in the manner defined as falling within a white cultural frame of reference is to "act white" and is negatively sanctioned.[12]

Certain styles of speech, dress, and music, for example, may be embraced as "authentically Black" and become highly valued, while attitudes and behaviors associated with Whites are viewed with disdain. The peer groups's evaluation of what is Black and what is not can have a powerful impact on adolescent behavior.

Reflecting on her high school years, one Black woman from a White neighborhood described both the pain of being rejected by her Black classmates and her attempts to conform to her peer's definition of Blackness:

> "Oh you sound White, you think you're White," they said. And the idea of sounding White was just so absurd to me. . . . So ninth grade was sort of traumatic in that I started listening to rap music, which I really just don't like. [I said] I'm gonna be Black, and it was just that stupid. But it's more than just how one acts, you know. [The other Black women there] were not into me for the longest time. My first year there was hell.

Sometimes the emergence of an oppositional identity can be quite dramatic, as the young person tries on a new persona almost overnight. At the end of one school year, race may not have appeared to be significant, but often some encounter takes place over the summer and the young person returns to school much more aware of his or her Blackness and ready to make sure that the rest of the

world is aware of it, too. There is a certain "in your face" quality that these adolescents can take on, which their teachers often experience as threatening. When a group of Black teens are sitting together in the cafeteria, collectively embodying an oppositional stance, school administrators want to know not only why they are sitting together, but what can be done to prevent it.

We need to understand that in racially mixed settings, racial grouping is a developmental process in response to an environmental stressor, racism. Joining with one's peers for support in the face of stress is a positive coping strategy. What is problematic is that the young people are operating with a very limited definition of what it means to be Black, based largely on cultural stereotypes.

Oppositional Identity Development and Academic Achievement

Unfortunately for Black teenagers, those cultural stereotypes do not usually include academic achievement. Academic success is more often associated with being White. During the encounter phase of racial identity development, when the search for identity leads toward cultural stereotypes and away from anything that might be associated with Whiteness, academic performance often declines. Doing well in school becomes identified as trying to be White. Being smart becomes the opposite of being cool.

While this frame of reference is not universally found among adolescents of African descent, it is commonly observed in Black peer groups. Among the Black college students I have interviewed, many described some conflict or alienation from other African American teens because of their academic success in high school. For example, a twenty-year-old female from a Washington, D.C., suburb explained:

> It was weird, even in high school a lot of the Black stu-
> dents were, like, "Well, you're not really Black." Whether
> it was because I became president of the sixth-grade
> class or whatever it was, it started pretty much back

then. Junior high, it got worse. I was then labeled certain things, whether it was "the oreo" or I wasn't really Black.

Others described avoiding situations that would set them apart from their Black peers. For example, one young woman declined to participate in a gifted program in her school because she knew it would separate her from the other Black students in the school.

In a study of thirty-three eleventh-graders in a Washington, D.C., school, Fordham and Ogbu found that although some of the students had once been academically successful, few of them remained so. These students also knew that to be identified as a "brainiac" would result in peer rejection. The few students who had maintained strong academic records found ways to play down their academic success enough to maintain some level of acceptance among their Black peers.[13]

Academically successful Black students also need a strategy to find acceptance among their White classmates. Fordham describes one such strategy as *racelessness*, wherein individuals assimilate into the dominant group by de-emphasizing characteristics that might identify them as members of the subordinate group.[14] Jon, a young man I interviewed, offered a classic example of this strategy as he described his approach to dealing with his discomfort at being the only Black person in his advanced classes. He said, "At no point did I ever think I was White or did I ever want to be White. . . . I guess it was one of those things where I tried to de-emphasize the fact that I was Black." This strategy led him to avoid activities that were associated with Blackness. He recalled, "I didn't want to do anything that was traditionally Black, like I never played basketball. I ran cross-country. . . . I went for distance running instead of sprints." He felt he had to show his White classmates that there were "exceptions to all these stereotypes." However, this strategy was of limited usefulness. When he traveled outside his home community with his White teammates, he sometimes encountered overt racism. "I quickly realized that I'm

Black, and that's the thing that they're going to see first, no matter how much I try to de-emphasize my Blackness."

A Black student can play down Black identity in order to succeed in school and mainstream institutions without rejecting his Black identity and culture.[15] Instead of becoming raceless, an achieving Black student can become an *emissary,* someone who sees his or her own achievements as advancing the cause of the racial group. For example, social scientists Richard Zweigenhaft and G. William Domhoff describe how a successful Black student, in response to the accusation of acting White, connected his achievement to that of other Black men by saying, "Martin Luther King must not have been Black, then, since he had a doctoral degree, and Malcolm X must not have been Black since he educated himself while in prison." In addition, he demonstrated his loyalty to the Black community by taking an openly political stance against the racial discrimination he observed in his school.[16]

It is clear that an oppositional identity can interfere with academic achievement, and it may be tempting for educators to blame the adolescents themselves for their academic decline. However, the questions that educators and other concerned adults must ask are, How did academic achievement become defined as exclusively White behavior? What is it about the curriculum and the wider culture that reinforces the notion that academic excellence is an exclusively White domain? What curricular interventions might we use to encourage the development of an empowered emissary identity?

An oppositional identity that disdains academic achievement has not always been a characteristic of Black adolescent peer groups. It seems to be a post–desegregation phenomenon. Historically, the oppositional identity found among African Americans in the segregated South included a positive attitude toward education. While Black people may have publicly deferred to Whites, they actively encouraged their children to pursue education as a ticket to greater freedom.[17] While Black parents still see education as the key to upward mobility, in today's desegregated schools the models of suc-

cess—the teachers, administrators, and curricular heroes—are almost always White.

Black Southern schools, though stigmatized by legally sanctioned segregation, were often staffed by African American educators, themselves visible models of academic achievement. These Black educators may have presented a curriculum that included references to the intellectual legacy of other African Americans. As well, in the context of a segregated school, it was a given that the high achieving students would all be Black. Academic achievement did not have to mean separation from one's Black peers.

The Search for Alternative Images

This historical example reminds us that an oppositional identity discouraging academic achievement is not inevitable even in a racist society. If young people are exposed to images of African American academic achievement in their early years, they won't have to define school achievement as something for Whites only. They will know that there is a long history of Black intellectual achievement.

This point was made quite eloquently by Jon, the young man I quoted earlier. Though he made the choice to excel in school, he labored under the false assumption that he was "inventing the wheel." It wasn't until he reached college and had the opportunity to take African American studies courses that he learned about other African Americans besides Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Frederick Douglass—the same three men he had heard about year after year, from kindergarten to high school graduation. As he reflected on his identity struggle in high school, he said:

> It's like I went through three phases. . . . My first phase was being cool, doing whatever was particularly cool for Black people at the time, and that was like in junior high. Then in high school, you know, I thought being Black was basically all stereotypes, so I tried to avoid all

of those things. Now in college, you know, I realize that being Black means a variety of things.

Learning his history in college was of great psychological importance to Jon, providing him with role models he had been missing in high school. He was particularly inspired by learning of the intellectual legacy of Black men at his own college:

> When you look at those guys who were here in the Twenties, they couldn't live on campus. They couldn't eat on campus. They couldn't get their hair cut in town. And yet they were all Phi Beta Kappa. . . . That's what being Black really is, you know, knowing who you are, your history, your accomplishments. . . . When I was in junior high, I had White role models. And then when I got into high school, you know, I wasn't sure but I just didn't think having White role models was a good thing. So I got rid of those. And I basically just, you know, only had my parents for role models. I kind of grew up thinking that we were on the cutting edge. We were doing something radically different than everybody else. And not realizing that there are all kinds of Black people doing the very things that I thought we were the only ones doing. . . . You've got to do the very best you can so that you can continue the great traditions that have already been established.

This young man was not alone in his frustration over having learned little about his own cultural history in grade school. Time and again in the research interviews I conducted, Black students lamented the absence of courses in African American history or literature at the high school level and indicated how significant this new learning was to them in college, how excited and affirmed they felt by this newfound knowledge. Sadly, many Black students never get to

college, alienated from the process of education long before high school graduation. They may never get access to the information that might have helped them expand their definition of what it means to be Black and, in the process, might have helped them stay in school. Young people are developmentally ready for this information in adolescence. We ought to provide it.

Not at the Table

As we have seen, Jon felt he had to distance himself from his Black peers in order to be successful in high school. He was one of the kids *not* sitting at the Black table. Continued encounters with racism and access to new culturally relevant information empowered him to give up his racelessness and become an emissary. In college, not only did he sit at the Black table, but he emerged as a campus leader, confident in the support of his Black peers. His example illustrates that one's presence at the Black table is often an expression of one's identity development, which evolves over time.

Some Black students may not be developmentally ready for the Black table in junior or senior high school. They may not yet have had their own encounters with racism, and race may not be very salient for them. Just as we don't all reach puberty and begin developing sexual interest at the same time, racial identity development unfolds in idiosyncratic ways. Though my research suggests that adolescence is a common time, one's own life experiences are also important determinants of the timing. The young person whose racial identity development is out of synch with his or her peers often feels in an awkward position. Adolescents are notoriously egocentric and assume that their experience is the same as everyone else's. Just as girls who have become interested in boys become disdainful of their friends still interested in dolls, the Black teens who are at the table can be quite judgmental toward those who are not. "If I think it is a sign of authentic Blackness to sit at this table, then you should too."

The young Black men and women who still hang around with

the White classmates they may have known since early childhood will often be snubbed by their Black peers. This dynamic is particularly apparent in regional schools where children from a variety of neighborhoods are brought together. When Black children from predominantly White neighborhoods go to school with Black children from predominantly Black neighborhoods, the former group is often viewed as trying to be White by the latter group. We all speak the language of the streets we live on. Black children living in White neighborhoods often sound White to their Black peers from across town, and may be teased because of it. This can be a very painful experience, particularly when the young person is not fully accepted as part of the White peer group either.

One young Black woman from a predominantly White community described exactly this situation in an interview. In a school with a lot of racial tension, Terri felt that "the worst thing that happened" was the rejection she experienced from the other Black children who were being bussed to her school. Though she wanted to be friends with them, they teased her, calling her an "oreo cookie" and sometimes beating her up. The only close Black friend Terri had was a biracial girl from her neighborhood.

Racial tensions also affected her relationships with White students. One White friend's parents commented, "I can't believe you're Black. You don't seem like all the Black children. You're nice." Though other parents made similar comments, Terri reported that her White friends didn't start making them until junior high school, when Terri's Blackness became something to be explained. One friend introduced Terri to another White girl by saying, "She's not really Black, she just went to Florida and got a really dark tan." A White sixth-grade "boyfriend" became embarrassed when his friends discovered he had a crush on a Black girl. He stopped telling Terri how pretty she was, and instead called her "nigger" and said, "Your lips are too big. I don't want to see you. I won't be your friend anymore."

Despite supportive parents who expressed concern about her situation, Terri said she was a "very depressed child." Her father would

have conversations with her "about being Black and beautiful" and about "the union of people of color that had always existed that I needed to find. And the pride." However, her parents did not have a network of Black friends to help support her.

It was the intervention of a Black junior high school teacher that Terri feels helped her the most. Mrs. Campbell "really exposed me to the good Black community because I was so down on it" by getting Terri involved in singing gospel music and introducing her to other Black students who would accept her. "That's when I started having other Black friends. And I thank her a lot for that."

The significant role that Mrs. Campbell played in helping Terri open up illustrates the constructive potential that informed adults can have in the identity development process. She recognized Terri's need for a same-race peer group and helped her find one. Talking to groups of Black students about the variety of living situations Black people come from and the unique situation facing Black adolescents in White communities helps to expand the definition of what it means to be Black and increases intragroup acceptance at a time when that is quite important.

For children in Terri's situation, it is also helpful for Black parents to provide ongoing opportunities for their children to connect with other Black peers even if that means traveling outside the community they live in. Race-conscious parents often do this by attending a Black church or maintaining ties to Black social organizations such as Jack and Jill. Parents who make this effort often find that their children become bicultural, able to move comfortably between Black and White communities, and able to sit at the Black table when they are ready.

Implied in this discussion is the assumption that connecting with one's Black peers in the process of identity development is important and should be encouraged. For young Black people living in predominantly Black communities, such connections occur spontaneously with neighbors and classmates and usually do not require special encouragement. However, for young people in predominantly

White communities they may only occur with active parental inter-
vention. One might wonder if this social connection is really neces-
sary. If a young person has found a niche among a circle of White
friends, is it really necessary to establish a Black peer group as a refer-
ence point? Eventually it is.

As one's awareness of the daily challenges of living in a racist soci-
ety increase, it is immensely helpful to be able to share one's experi-
ences with others who have lived it. Even when White friends are
willing and able to listen and bear witness to one's struggles, they can-
not really share the experience. One young woman came to this real-
ization in her senior year of high school:

> [The isolation] never really bothered me until about
> senior year when I was the only one in the class. . . .
> That little burden, that constant burden of you always
> having to strive to do your best and show that you can
> do just as much as everybody else. Your White friends
> can't understand that, and it's really hard to communi-
> cate to them. Only someone else of the same racial,
> same ethnic background would understand something
> like that.

When one is faced with what Chester Pierce calls the "mundane
extreme environmental stress" of racism, in adolescence or in adult-
hood, the ability to see oneself as part of a larger group from which
one can draw support is an important coping strategy.[18] Individuals
who do not have such a strategy available to them because they do
not experience a shared identity with at least some subset of their
racial group are at risk for considerable social isolation.

Of course, who we perceive as sharing our identity may be influ-
enced by other dimensions of identity such as gender, social class,
geographical location, skin color, or ethnicity. For example, research
indicates that first-generation Black immigrants from the Caribbean
tend to emphasize their national origins and ethnic identities, dis-

tancing themselves from U.S. Blacks, due in part to their belief that West Indians are viewed more positively by Whites than those American Blacks whose family roots include the experience of U.S. slavery. To relinquish one's ethnic identity as West Indian and take on an African American identity may be understood as downward social mobility. However, second-generation West Indians without an identifiable accent may lose the relative ethnic privilege their parents experienced and seek racial solidarity with Black American peers in the face of encounters with racism.[19] Whether it is the experience of being followed in stores because they are suspected of shoplifting, seeing people respond to them with fear on the street, or feeling overlooked in school, Black youth can benefit from seeking support from those who have had similar experiences.

An Alternative to the Cafeteria Table

The developmental need to explore the meaning of one's identity with others who are engaged in a similar process manifests itself informally in school corridors and cafeterias across the country. Some educational institutions have sought to meet this need programmatically. Several colleagues and I recently evaluated one such effort, initiated at a Massachusetts middle school participating in a voluntary desegregation program known as the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity (METCO) program.[20] Historically, the small number of African American students who are bussed from Boston to this suburban school have achieved disappointing levels of academic success. In an effort to improve academic achievement, the school introduced a program, known as Student Efficacy Training (SET) that allowed Boston students to meet each day as a group with two staff members. Instead of being in physical education or home economics or study hall, they were meeting, talking about homework difficulties, social issues, and encounters with racism. The meeting was mandatory and at first the students were resentful of missing some of their classes. But the impact was dramatic. Said one young woman,

> In the beginning of the year, I didn't want to do SET at all. It took away my study and it was only METCO students doing it. In the beginning all we did was argue over certain problems or it was more like a rap session and I didn't think it was helping anyone. But then when we looked at records . . . I know that last year out of all the students, sixth through eighth grade, there was, like, six who were actually good students. Everyone else, it was just pathetic, I mean, like, they were getting like Ds and Fs. . . . The eighth grade is doing much better this year. I mean, they went from Ds and Fs to Bs and Cs and occasional As. . . . And those seventh-graders are doing really good, they have a lot of honor roll students in seventh grade, both guys and girls. Yeah, it's been good. It's really good.

Her report is borne out by an examination of school records. The opportunity to come together in the company of supportive adults allowed these young Black students to talk about the issues that hindered their performance—racial encounters, feelings of isolation, test anxiety, homework dilemmas—in the psychological safety of their own group. In the process, the peer culture changed to one that supported academic performance rather than undermined it, as revealed in these two students' comments:

> Well, a lot of the Boston students, the boys and the girls, used to fight all the time. And now, they stopped yelling at each other so much and calling each other stupid.

> It's like we've all become like one big family, we share things more with each other. We tease each other like brother and sister. We look out for each other with homework and stuff. We always stay on top of each other 'cause we know it's hard with African American

students to go to a predominantly White school and try to succeed with everybody else.

The faculty, too, were very enthusiastic about the outcomes of the intervention, as seen in the comments of these two classroom teachers:

> This program has probably produced the most dramatic result of any single change that I've seen at this school. It has produced immediate results that affected behavior and academics and participation in school life.

> My students are more engaged. They aren't battling out a lot of the issues of their anger about being in a White community, coming in from Boston, where do I fit, I don't belong here. I feel that those issues that often came out in class aren't coming out in class anymore. I think they are being discussed in the SET room, the kids feel more confidence. The kids' grades are higher, the homework response is greater, they're not afraid to participate in class, and I don't see them isolating themselves within class. They are willing to sit with other students happily. . . . I think it's made a very positive impact on their place in the school and on their individual self-esteem. I see them enjoying themselves and able to enjoy all of us as individuals. I can't say enough, it's been the best thing that's happened to the METCO program as far as I'm concerned.[21]

Although this intervention is not a miracle cure for every school, it does highlight what can happen when we think about the developmental needs of Black adolescents coming to terms with their own sense of identity. It might seem counterintuitive that a school involved in a voluntary desegregation program could improve both academic performance and social relationships among students by *separating* the

Black students for one period every day. But if we understand the unique challenges facing adolescents of color and the legitimate need they have to feel supported in their identity development, it makes perfect sense.

Though they may not use the language of racial identity development theory to describe it, most Black parents want their children to achieve an internalized sense of personal security, to be able to acknowledge the reality of racism and to respond effectively to it. Our educational institutions should do what they can to encourage this development rather than impede it. When I talk to educators about the need to provide adolescents with identity-affirming experiences and information about their own cultural groups, they sometimes flounder because this information has not been part of their own education. Their understanding of adolescent development has been limited to the White middle-class norms included in most textbooks, their knowledge of Black history limited to Martin Luther King, Jr., and Rosa Parks. They sometimes say with frustration that parents should provide this kind of education for their children. Unfortunately Black parents often attended the same schools the teachers did and have the same informational gaps. We need to acknowledge that an important part of interrupting the cycle of oppression is constant re-education, and sharing what we learn with the next generation.