How Racial Identity Affects Performance
Chapter Six

I.   How We Identify Ourselves: Why Race Matters
II.   Stages of Racial Development
III. Implications for Teachers
IV.   Conclusion: Building Supportive and Responsive Classrooms

Mrs. Johnston, a white woman, comes to pick up her black daughter, Lucy, from kindergarten. Josie, Lucy's classmate, says to her teacher, "Ms. Potts, they don't match." Ms. Potts says, "Shhhh! That's not polite to say."

Mr. Dillon discusses slavery with his third graders as part of their American history lessons. One of his African-American students, Patricia, asks a question: "Did the slaves fight back?" Mr. Dillon says, "How could they? The white people had weapons."

Ms. Katz is used to Alex, a seventh grader, behaving well in her class. One day, Alex starts wearing a hat and a big, puffy coat to class, angrily taking them off only after Ms. Katz tells him to do so twice. He starts challenging the class assignments, asking, "Why do we have to do this?" Ms. Katz calls Alex's mother and tells her that Alex is being disruptive.

Eduardo, a ninth grader, comes into Ms. Singh's class furious. "Ms. Moore's a racist," he fumes. "She gave me a D on this paper." Ms. Singh responds, "You shouldn't throw words around like that. Ms. Moore wouldn't be teaching here if she were a racist."

Mr. Leonard gets Sandra, his top science student, a chance to attend a special summer camp for high school juniors in the state capital. When he shows her the brochure, Sandra says she doesn't want to go. Mr. Leonard is annoyed because he's gone to a lot of trouble to help Sandra, and she appears to be ungrateful.

> **Additional Readings** 📖
> Along with this chapter, please read the Noguera excerpt found on the Institute Info Center within TFANet, and the Tatum chapters found in the Related Reading section:
> - "How Racial Identity Affects School Performance" by Pedro Noguera from the *Harvard Educational Letter*
> - "The Early Years" and "Critical Issues in Latino, American Indian, and Asian Pacific American Identity Development" from *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* by Beverly Daniel Tatum

In the last chapter, we explored the "knowledge base" of ourselves – how we may harbor biases and enjoy privileges that will influence our approach to teaching. In this chapter, we are expanding that discussion to the *development* of identity – both in teachers and students – to see how who we are and how we think about our place in the world changes over time.

The ways in which your students *think* and *feel* about the issue of race and their own racial group membership – hereafter called their "racial identity" – may significantly affect their achievement. It may influence whether individual students tune you in or out, whether they believe they can achieve, whether they believe that school will support or degrade them. As you may have already surmised from the vignettes above, how a teacher treats the issue of race in the classroom can greatly impact a student's development.

How Racial Identify Affects Performance

A discussion of students' racial identity development is complicated by the fact that a teacher's approach to decision-making in the classroom and in the community will be shaped by his or her *own* racial identity development. Ms. Potts might have been taught never to talk about race and feels everyone should be "color-blind" and "just get along." Mr. Leonard may have never thought that he thinks about the world in ways different than Sandra, and that Sandra may be apprehensive about going to a place where there may not be other people who look like her - or where people might subtly question how she got to be there. Keep these teachers in mind as you read through the chapter, and think about the ways in which they might begin to shift their perspectives in order to serve their students effectively.

Racial identity development, both for us and for our students, is all about shifting perspective. Psychologists have developed various theories describing stages of racial identity development that relate to a person's age and his or her life experiences. By understanding these stages – and the potential feelings and attitudes often associated with them – we as teachers can be better equipped to help students navigate their identities and expand their views of their own potential.

> *I didn't realize when I entered my classroom how much I did have in common with my students. On the surface, it isn't obvious that a white woman from the Midwest, a graduate of a liberal arts college and decidedly upper-middle class, would have much common experience with a group of teenagers in rural North Carolina—and it was obvious on the first day my students didn't think I had much in common with them either! Over the next few days, though, I began to remember experiences I had lived through that allowed me to connect with my students on a different level, things that they couldn't see about me at first glance. When they found out that I was the child of a teenage mother, that I was raised for the first seven years of my life in near-poverty, that I too was from a rural area, relationships began to build and strengthen. Even if I had not shared those facts, or had not realized myself how similar we really were, I know that we would have found common experiences somewhere. Though the obvious differences are the easiest thing to see, the human experiences are where we truly are able to connect with our students on a higher level.*
>
> **Crystal Brakke, North Carolina '99**
> **Vice President - Institutes**
> **Teach For America**

As we proceed, we will survey some scholars' theories on these stages, their implications, and the ways in which you can help students develop a positive self-image, a sense of malleable intelligence, and an internal locus of control. We will follow racial identity development theory through adulthood, so that you can consider how your understanding of your own racial identity will affect the ways in which you present and address issues of cultural pertinence in the classroom.

I. How We Identify Ourselves: Why Race Matters

Do you think of yourself as smart? Do you attribute your success to hard work? How we think about ourselves makes a huge difference in how we perform in the classroom. During childhood, we are bombarded by messages that will ultimately help to form our self-concept during adolescence. As race relations expert and Spelman College President Beverly Daniel Tatum points out in her book, *Why Are The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria,* adolescence is the stage when we finally have the cognitive ability to reflect on who we are and what we might become. As we sort out these questions, we come to decide whom we will date, what professions we'll pursue, where we will live, and what we believe.[56] In order to formulate our responses, we focus on aspects of our identity that are salient to us, and we examine these aspects in others in an attempt to form our sense of self.

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[56] Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race.* New York: Basic Books, 1997, p. 20.

Part of students' self-understanding and self-esteem in the classroom involves what psychologists call our "racial identity." Racial identity is not your race, but rather how you *think* about your race. Columbia University Professor Robert T. Carter puts it this way: "The term 'racial identity' refers to one's psychological response to one's own race; it reflects the extent to which one identifies with a particular racial group and how that identification influences perceptions, emotions, and behaviors toward people from other groups." [57]

I have found that my African-American students are constantly striving to define blackness. I know this all too well for I've been through the very same struggle myself.

In their attempts to uncover a definition of blackness, they see me—a light-skinned African American woman who to them appears racially ambiguous. I expected their questions about my ethnicity; after all I have been met with them throughout my life. They want to know if I am Black, Hispanic, or mixed so they will be able to "figure me out." I use such questions to facilitate discussion about race. I share my experiences and my family's experiences. I am an open book and they are grateful for it. My African American students want to be black, to act black, to sound black. I feel it is my job to show the beauty and the diversity of the African American experience. It is not any one thing. It does not make you more or less black to come from the inner city or speak using slang. Theses are only facets of the Black experience—they do not encompass the whole. To suggest otherwise is to do a disservice to all who have come before us. We read texts that examine race and race-mixing such as Their Eyes Were Watching God and The Color of Water. We talk about race. We do not run away from it. Part of being effective is teaching students to value themselves and one another. Our discussion and reading facilitate this.

Dara Crocker, New Jersey '02
Vice Principal
Newark Public Schools

Theories of racial identity development are pertinent to teachers because depending on how you think about the role of race in who you are and how others view you, you can either develop very positive or negative perspectives on your ability to be successful. Clearly, those perspectives impact students' relationships with their teacher and their school work. In the late 1960s, Iowa classroom teacher Jane Elliott developed a now famous experiment with her students, telling the blue-eyed children that they were less capable than their brown-eyed peers. Very soon afterwards, students began to internalize the meanings associated with the labels of superiority or inferiority to which they had been assigned, dramatically affecting their academic performance.[58] Within a half-hour, blue-eyed Carol transformed from a "brilliant, self-confident carefree, excited little girl to a frightened, timid, uncertain little almost-person," Elliott later reported. The labels had fundamentally shaped the children's behavior.

We come to think of ourselves through lenses that have proven meaningful to our lives. During one activity commonly used in diversity seminars, participants are asked to select the label that they would use to identify themselves, if they could only pick one. What might you say? Often participants choose "college graduate," "daughter," "gay," "Catholic," "Asian-American," or "black." Only rarely does anyone say "white." Tatum has seen similar dynamics play out in the classes she leads.[59] She reports:

> Researchers have found that adolescents of color are more likely to be engaged in an exploration of their racial or ethnic identity than are White counterparts. Why do Black youths, in particular, think about themselves in terms of race? 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

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[57] Carter, Robert. "Reimagining Race in Education: A New Paradigm from Psychology." *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 102, No. 5, October 2000, p. 874.
[58] Peters, William. *A Class Divided: Then and Now.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987.
[59] Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race.* New York: Basic Books, 1997, pp. 20-21.

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 convey a racial message. At ten, race is not yet salient for David, because it is not yet salient for society. But it will be.[60]

Tatum explains why, for some white individuals, race may not be a significant piece of identity that influences their larger self-concept. "In the areas where a person is a member of a dominant or advantaged social group, the category is usually not mentioned," she points out. "That element of their identity is so taken for granted by them that it goes without comment. It is taken for granted by them because it is taken for granted by the dominant culture."[61] In the last chapter, during the discussion of privilege, you began to consider what aspects of your identity – race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, class, language – you might take for granted. In *whatever* way you represent a dominant or advantaged social group, you may not be able to see the very real and important dimensions that shape the lives of people different from you.

Ignoring students' backgrounds is like ignoring a huge piece of what makes them who they are. My students knew I was white, and I knew they were not, and we all knew we had a lot to learn from each other. Once we got that out of the way and acknowledged our differences, then we were able to have some really amazing discussions.

Jessica Murphy, Greater New Orleans '99 Behavior Specialist, Indianapolis Public Schools

This means that teachers for whom race was never a salient piece of their identity development may fail to recognize the significance of race in their students' lives. Professor Carter notes that this is most likely the case for white teachers: "Whites generally do not see themselves as members of a racial group. To the extent that their own racial group membership is deemphasized, so too is their awareness regarding the impact of racism on their own psychological development. Consequently, they do not understand or appreciate the significance of race or racism in the lives of People of Color."[62] When this occurs in the classroom, teachers may avoid conversations or topics related to race because they are uncomfortable talking about it or do not see its importance.

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[60] Ibid. pp. 53-54.
[61] Ibid. p. 21.
[62] Carter, Robert. "Reimagining Race in Education: A New Paradigm from Psychology." *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 102, No. 5, October 2000, p. 874.

But, as we'll see later in the chapter, many students need just the opposite; they need their teachers to *affirm* their racial identity while *acknowledging* and helping them *navigate* the challenges that students of color face. Fulfilling these needs would be difficult, if not impossible, for a teacher who did not recognize the importance of racial identity – or the nuances of its development in children and adolescents. On top of this, you will need to think about how students may perceive your race and interpret your responses to conversations about race.

Tatum and Carter's findings help us as educators of all different backgrounds in two important ways: (1) we learn that race matters more in self-identity development for some people than it does for others, (2) we learn that teachers who are less aware of their own racial identity may have more difficulty understanding *why* it matters to some of the students they teach. In this next section, we will discuss how that difficulty might decrease over time – and what that means for a teacher's instruction and interaction with students.

II. Stages of Racial Development

Some teachers claim to be figuratively "color-blind" in the classroom. In this way of thinking, color is perceived to have no bearing on instruction, how teachers relate to students, and how people in schools communicate with one another. This may be because, as noted earlier, these individuals have never thought about the significance of race in their own lives; others adopt this viewpoint because they think it is impolite or inappropriate to talk about race.

According to most psychologists, these perspectives are part of a developmental process or continuum that we move along as we expand our understanding of racial identity.   In fact, some scholars have proposed a patterned cycle of racial identity awareness – one for white people, who typically begin to understand their "whiteness" after adolescent development, and another for people of color, who often begin that process much earlier in life. Below, we will critically explore one set of these theories that suggests some possible stages that individuals may go through as they engage their racial identity over time.

Of course, as with most theories of psychological development, any proposed system of racial identity development does not precisely describe the development of every person in every case. And, perhaps more importantly, delineating this process into "stages" is not intended to impose a value judgment on our, or our students', many different perspectives and experiences. Our individual experiences may lead to different ways and patterns of thinking about our racial identity, and what is mapped out below is just one (or actually several) racial identity theorists' ways of thinking about the process individuals go through as they consider their own racial identity.

Moreover, Carter reminds us that members of the same race do not have the same racial identity. "Simply that someone is Black, White, or Latino does not tell us about the nature of his or her psychological involvement in his or her cultural group," he writes. "And indeed, what is more important for each person within the context of the school environment is his or her psychological orientation to his or her race; that is, that person's own racial identity of other educators and students."[63]

In this respect, these stages are intended to be considered critically. You should consider whether you find them to be useful tools for your thinking about broad psychological processes; they should not be viewed as cut-and-dry blueprints for how all people have understood their racial identities since the dawn

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[63] Ibid. p. 875.

of time.   With that context in mind, we are asking you to look at these stages with the particular purpose of thinking about how your and your students' racial identity will affect your interactions and decisions in the classroom and the community. Do these stages inform your thinking about that question? Do they seem recognizable to you? Where might you place yourself along one of these spectra? Where do you think your students are? How could you know? How does your students' racial identity development impact your instructional and managerial decision-making?

The origin of these ideas comes from psychologist William Cross, who developed a theory of African-American racial identity development in the 1970s. Other scholars have since expanded upon Cross's work, and although they use slightly different terms, psychologists believe that members of other American racial minorities often experience a similar process of identity awareness. This does not discount the fact that, as Professor Prichy Smith points out in *Common Sense About Uncommon Knowledge*, "important differences in attitudes, values, and behaviors distinguish ethnic groups; these differences affect the socialization of children within their own group and the attitudes and responses to other groups." [64] And, as mentioned above, considerable variation of perspective and experience does, of course, occur for individuals within any one of these groups. The general premise of this research is simply that members of different minority groups may experience similar underlying feelings *about* their identity and their relationship to the majority.

The chart that follows is a synthesis of several interpretations of Cross's original model. Review it critically. Does this approach to thinking about racial identity resonate with you? Why or why not? If you are a person of color, which aspects of this model align with your own experience? Which do not? And, as you examine this proposed framework, think about two things:
   (1) If you were a student at one of the first two stages, what might you need from your teacher?
   (2) If you were a teacher at each of the stages, what would that suggest about how you would respond to issues of race in the classroom?

Stages of Minority Racial Identity Development

Stage	What It Looks Like
Pre-encounter	In this phase, the individual idealizes the dominant identity or does not recognize the relevance of race. An African-American child might express a desire to be white. A child from a Spanish-speaking family might not want to learn Spanish.
Encounter	The individual encounters racism and is made to feel inferior, realizing that race alone can lead to negative treatment. The individual may develop a mistrust, or even hatred, toward the dominant group as a result.
Immersion-emersion	Exposed to new thinking about his or her race, the individual becomes engaged in self-research, ignoring the dominant group and beginning to develop a positive self-image. The individual might pursue ethnic studies in college, unlearning negative stereotypes about his or her racial group and discovering, as Tatum puts it, "there is more to Africa than Tarzan movies."[65]
Internalization	The individual is able to represent him or herself with a sense of confidence, security and pride in multiracial settings.
Internalization-commitment	The individual makes a commitment to promote his or her community within the larger society.

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[64] Smith, G. Prichy. *Common Sense About Uncommon Knowledge.* American Association of College Teacher Educators, January 1998, p. 28.
[65] Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race.* New York: Basic Books, 1997, pp. 76.

A similar (but different) framework is proposed for White people who (as members of a majority system) may not confront their race in the same way as members of minority groups. White people, some suggest, may have a different process of racial identity understanding.[66] Do you agree? Whether you identify as White or as a person of color, consider critically the following proposed stages of identity development. Do these stages ring familiar? How would you change them to more closely match your own experience with White persons' racial identity development? Also, please continue to consider the same two questions from above:

(1) If you were a student at one of the first two stages, what might you need from your teacher?
(2) If you were a teacher at each of the stages, what would that suggest about how you would respond to issues of race in the classroom?

White Racial Identity Development

Stages	What It Looks Like
Contact	The individual sees nothing wrong with the status quo. Often claiming "color-blindness," he or she is oblivious to racism and participates in it.
Disintegration	The individual, sometimes as a result of moving to a new place or beginning a friendship or romantic relationship with a member of another race, begins to see a system of racism at work, resulting in feelings of shame or confusion. He or she might start pointing out acts of prejudice or discrimination to others, or may try to ignore racism.
Reintegration	If the individual has attempted to point out acts of prejudice, he or she may find him or herself isolated from friends and may retreat into old patterns of accepting the status quo. If the individual has tried to ignore racism but cannot, he or she might blame people of color for their plight in society, absolving white people (and thus him or herself) of responsibility for ending racism. They are engaged what Professor Lawrence Bobo calls "laissez-faire racism," where they are conscious that oppression exists but do nothing about it.
Pseudo-independence	Often as a result of cross-racial interactions, the individual ultimately cannot ignore the system of privilege afforded to white people – and becomes paralyzed by his or her guilt. He or she may try to escape "whiteness" by befriending members of minority groups, pointing out the ways in which he or she is also subject to discrimination, and securing assurances that he or she is not racist.
Immersion-Emersion	The individual seeks new information about what it means to be white, searching for alternative, positive models as opposed to "victimizer."
Autonomy	The individual now views being white as a positive opportunity to dismantle oppression and makes a commitment to do so.

While we must again emphasize that these stages are not necessarily linear but rather fluid, and that they do not necessarily apply equally well to everyone, one of the benefits of these identity development theories is that they help place some of the attitudes we have either felt or witnessed into a larger framework. These theories lay bare and offer explanations for some of the reluctance, fear, anger or shame that different people feel when thinking or talking about race – an important hurdle to clear if we're going to be able to speak openly and supportively to students about their own self-image.

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[66] Ibid. p. 93.

How Racial Identify Affects Performance

Examining these processes is also useful because it allows us to see the ways in which people, both of different races and within the same race, can differ in their understanding of racial identity. Here are some important ideas to think about with respect to the charts we've just examined:

- Depending on a student's race, age and particular circumstances, racial identity can play a big part in forming his or her attitudes and behaviors. In this way, racial identity affects learning and motivation for learning. For instance, a student in the "Encounter" phase of minority racial identity development might internalize the stereotypes about her racial group and begin to question her ability to perform well on academic tasks that say they measure her natural ability.

- All of us go through stages of racial identity development. The transition from one state to another is an unpredictable time spurred by interactions and events that create shifts in our thinking. As a result, teachers may find themselves working with students who are, without warning, coping with particular and important aspects of their identity development.

- Teachers are going through stages of racial identity development themselves, which can affect the responses that they may give a student who raises issues of race in the classroom. According to scholar Robert Carter, "Whites [in the Reintegration and Pseudo-independence stages] do not see how they are using their own racial background and experiences as the standard for other racial groups…People of Color [in the Immersion-Emerson stage] are overzealous due to the fact that they are still in the process of evolving a positive internal racial identity, so they also distort information and tend to be less able to be balanced in their understanding of complex racial relationships."[67] We must all be conscious of the ways in which our own perspectives influence the ideas we advance and approaches we use in our classrooms.

- Because of the different stages and patterns of racial identity development, students may be at a different stage – or a completely different system – than their teachers, meaning that teachers should avoid applying their own feelings onto a child's experience.

> *I explained color difference as follows to my five and six-year-old first graders: I would hold up two pieces of construction paper, one black and one white. Then I would hold my forearm next to a first grade student. Our conversation sounded like this:*
> *"Faith, what color is the paper on the right?"*
> *"Black"*
> *"And what color is the paper on the left?"*
> *"White"*
> *"What color is your arm?"*
> *"Dark brown"*
> *"And what color is my arm?"*
> *"Light brown"*
> *"What color is your blood?"*
> *"Red"*
> *"And what color is mine?"*
> *"I think it's red?"*
> *"So what does that make you think?"*
> *This type of direct observation allowed our "family" to start talking about the real issues of the color line - in first grade! This dialogue allowed us to analyze all of our differences and similarities including race.*
>
> **Justin May, Greater New Orleans '00**
> **Second Grade Teacher, Addison Northeast**
> **Supervisory Union**

- Given the developmental nature of racial identity, all teachers can play an important role in shaping a student's sense of identity and pride.

In this next section, we will zoom in on the racial identity development of children and adolescents of color, and the ways in which teachers can help or hinder this process.

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[67] Carter, Robert. "Reimagining Race in Education: A New Paradigm from Psychology." *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 102, No. 5, October 2000, p. 887.

Young children and pre-encounter experiences. Remember Ms. Potts, from the beginning of our chapter? She thought it was a better idea to silence the dialogue about race than to attempt to explain the diversity of families. Race can be a confusing concept for young children. They observe physical differences between one another at a very early age, but they do not yet have the social or historical vocabulary or abstract thinking capabilities to understand why they hear terms like "black," when they are looking at someone more tan-colored. They will be listening intently to stories that describe the physical appearance of characters. Who is described as beautiful? How children hear adults talk about identity (or not talk about it) ends up shaping their future perceptions and attitudes.

As students learn about slavery or oppression – sadly, the only place that many children see people who look like them represented in the curriculum – it is important for teachers to ensure that students do not see members of their race cast as weak and docile masses, but rather individuals who often found ways to resist persecution. Mr. Dillon, from our fourth grade example, didn't realize that Patricia might have asked her question about whether slaves "fought back" with the hopes of exploring and dignifying slaves' struggle for independence (as opposed to as a criticism). In a different example, from whose perspective is the story of Thanksgiving – or the era of colonization – usually told?

Adolescence. There is no stage more critical to identity formation than adolescence. Starting with the pioneering psychologist Erik Erikson, researchers have explored this phase of human development as the time in which children begin figuring out who they are and the people after whom they would like to model themselves.[68] When thinking about students of color, then, it is important to dissect the messages that they are receiving about who they can and should become.

First, what are these messages, and where do they come from? Tatum points out that the media soaks children with limited and often negative role models to emulate:

> 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 grow up to be like their parents. It is the peer group, the kids in the cafeteria, who holds 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-representation.[69]

She contends that, if you were just to watch television, you might think that African-American children only grow up to be teenage welfare mothers, drug addicts, criminals, athletes and rap artists. Students also look around their school and begin to notice certain "environmental cues" that imply differences between races. In racially integrated schools, students may see the racial lines upon which schools with "ability-grouped" classrooms are drawn. They may see that students who look like them are severely under-represented in honors classes and over-represented in special education. They may see that they are not taken seriously when they believe a prejudicial incident has occurred.[70]

How do students interpret these images and messages? You will get a personal account of what this might look like as you read Pedro Noguera's piece, "How Racial Identity Affects School Performance"

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[68] Erikson, Erik. *Childhood and Society.* New York: Norton, 1993.
[69] Tatum, Beverly Daniel. *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race.* New York: Basic Books, 1997, pp. 760.
[70] Ibid. pp. 56-57.

from the *Harvard Education Letter*. In it, he describes how his teenage son, Joaquin, grappled with what it meant to become an African-American man. Noguera shows how Joaquin's journey to discover himself represents the struggles of many children of color who attempt to negotiate the personas they believe are expected of them. Ms. Katz may have failed to recognize similar issues with Alex, in our example at the beginning of the chapter.

As Noguera points out in his piece, researchers see a *variety* of responses to the many, often conflicting messages about what it means to be a minority student, and there is scholarly disagreement over the meaning of these responses. As you read, it may be helpful to think about these concepts as coping mechanisms that adolescents of color may use during the "encounter" phase of their racial identity development, in which students begin to understand the existence of racism and fold that understanding into their identity.

For another perspective on the variety of ways that adolescents develop their racial identity, in an excerpt from Beverly Daniel Tatum's chapter, "Critical Issues in Latino, American Indian, and Asian Pacific American Identity Development" (Chapter 8 of "*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*"), Tatum explains some ways in which Latino and Native American students seek to develop a racial identity throughout their adolescence in a society where they have been subject to racial and cultural oppression. Tatum focuses on high schoolers from each of these racial/ethnic groups in turn, identifying key issues that those students face when struggling to define themselves and determine what part their racial identity will play in that definition.

Stereotype threat. As you read about briefly in *Teaching As Leadership*, Claude Steele and Joshua Aaronson have shown that students perform poorly when they believe that the task they're completing may confirm a negative stereotype about them. African-American students told that a standardized test was measuring their ability performed worse than African-American students told that a test was a "non-evaluative problem-solving task."   The mere fact that standardized tests have a history of a racial performance gap, the researchers were able to conclude, negatively affected the African-American students' test-taking strategies; the students second-guessed themselves and worked inefficiently.[71] Aaronson and Salinas have seen similar results with Latino students.[72]

In a more recent study, Aaronson and Steele were able to induce poor math performance in white male students, who do not normally suffer a societal stereotype in that domain.   This study showed that stereotype threat "is a predicament that stems from quite normal responses to the low and demeaning expectations that come to the individual in the form of negative stereotypes."[73]

While the stereotype threat is not likely to disappear given the negative messages pervasive in our society, you can ensure that your classroom is a place where students are inundated with the images and achievements of people who look like them. Joshua Aronson (one of the psychologists involved in identifying the stereotype threat) and several of his colleagues have also documented the effects of teaching students about the malleable nature of intelligence, which leads students to discard society's messages about their purported deficiencies.[74] A third important strategy for curbing the effects of the stereotype threat is being clear about your expectations for success on all assignments and tests that you

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[71] Steele, C. M. & Aronson, J. "Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African-Americans." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Vol. 69, No. 5, 1995, pp. 797-811.

[72] Salinas, M.F. & Aronson, J. *Stereotype Vulnerability, Attributional Ambiguity and Latino Underperformance.* Paper presented at the annual convention of the Western Psychological Association, April 1997.

[73] Aronson, Joshua, et al. "When White Men Can't Do Math: Necessary and Sufficient Factors in Stereotype Threat." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology.* Vol. 35, 1999, p. 44.

[74] http://www.psychologymatters.org/aronson.html, accessed 1/31/07.

give. Outlining exactly what students need to do to prepare for an assessment will help show students that it is their effort – rather than some race-based ability quotient – that will determine their score.

Disidentification. A related adolescent response is called "academic disidentification," in which students who do not experience consistent academic success lose their investment in doing well because, if they were to pin their self-concept on good grades, they would constantly let themselves down. In order to preserve their dignity, they no longer identify academic success as an indicator of their self-worth. Researchers have found that African-American and Latino students disengage more often than their white and Asian counterparts, asserting that students are "disidentifying" from academic success as a defensive mechanism against the stereotype threat.[75] Tracking students in ossified ability groups, which often leads to rote-based, repetitive instruction, has contributed to disidentification; teachers need to ensure that all students receive an engaging, challenging curriculum and have the opportunity to advance quickly to new material when they have mastered certain objectives. By carefully gauging current performance levels and by matching assignments appropriately to have students experience consistent success while still maintaining high expectations, teachers may be able to counteract this debilitating phenomenon.

Oppositional behavior. According to some scholars, students in the "encounter" phase might also respond to poor treatment by deciding not to engage in the expected work. In his book, *I Won't Learn From You*, Herbert Kohl writes, "To agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major loss of self. The only alternative is not to learn and reject the strangers."[76] Nilda Flores-Gonzalez synthesizes research from the 1980s and early 1990s on how a profound doubt in the American meritocracy can cause students to shut down:

> Proponents of this view argue that students develop identities in opposition to school culture when they believe that high school graduation will not improve their socioeconomic status, and/or the behaviors required from academic achievement are deemed incompatible with their racial/ethnic or class identity. Low achievers are said to have developed a critical consciousness that rejects the false promises of the educational system. These students may have a high regard for education, but they do not believe that it is a means for social mobility. For them, hard work in school does not necessarily translate into success later in life because structural forces such as gender, class, and ethnicity circumscribe one's opportunities.[77]

So, how does a teacher prevent and reverse this "oppositional culture" in and for his or her students?

Students need support by having someone with whom to talk through concerns and help them see that they are not alone. Educators argue over the extent to which teachers should proactively bring up the ways in which students will face oppression growing up; some believe that children do not need to be reminded of the discrimination they may face in society. But teachers must support their students as they experience anxiety or frustration about bias and privilege in the outside world. Rather than simply telling Horatio Alger stories of people "picking themselves up by their bootstraps," teachers can lend their ears to students' frustrations, as well as develop forums and spaces in which students can discuss and ally on these issues together.

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[75] Steele, Claude. "Race and the Schooling of African-American Americans." *The Atlantic Monthly.* Vol. 269, No. 4, April 1992, pp. 68-78.
[76] Kohl, Herbert. "I Won't Learn From You: Confronting Student Resistance." *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice.* Milwaukee: Rethinking Our Schools, 1994*,* p. 134.
[77] Flores-Gonzalez, Nilda. *School Kids/Street Kids*: Identity Development in Latino Students. New York: Teachers College Pr., 2002, p. 8.

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In her essay from *Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement Among African-American Students,* Theresa Perry notes that success means somehow negotiating the dilemmas that characterize the notion of achievement for many students of color. Perry poses four questions that she believes students must be taught to ask themselves:

> How do I commit myself to achieve, to work hard over time in school, if I cannot predict (in school or out of school) when or under what circumstances this hard work will be acknowledged and recognized?

> How do I commit myself to do work that is predicated on a belief in the power of the mind, when African-American intellectual inferiority is so much a part of the taken-for-granted notions of the larger society that individuals in and out of school, even good and well-intentioned people, individuals who purport to be acting on my behalf, routinely register doubts about my intellectual competence?

> How can I aspire to and work toward excellence when it is unclear whether or when evaluations of my work can or should be taken seriously?

> Can I invest in and engage my full personhood, with all of my cultural formations, in my class, my work, my school if my teachers and the adults in the building are both attracted to and repulsed by these cultural formations—the way I walk, the way I use language, my relationship to my body, my physicality and so on? [78]

These questions, Perry argues, require African-American students to summon extra emotional, social and physical strength to remain committed to success. She writes, "The task of achievement requires that you and others believe that the intellectual work that you engage in affirms you as a social being and is compatible with who you are."[79]

Such strength is difficult to maintain on your own, and students of color may avoid big competitions or gifted programs in which they do not see their peers included. Susan Asiyanbi '01, now the Philadelphia Institute Director, taught fourth grade math in Newark, New Jersey. She describes what this looked like in her classroom:

> *One of my students, Aaliyah, was a very bright young girl. She was very strategic in her thinking and her ability to break problems down. Aaliyah was content with doing the minimum to get by because she had always done so. During class discussions, Aaliyah often questioned the use of committing hard work, knowing her background would always be a product that stifled her growth. Knowing that Aaliyah felt this way, I made sure to prove to her that she could actualize her dreams. I forced her to apply for summer programs and competitions. As she began this process, the pressure was on for her to focus and really dedicate time and energy to succeeding. Competing and working with others from different schools and backgrounds was just what Aaliyah needed. This was the first time she felt she could not only keep up, but do just as well as anyone else despite societal conditions and/or community and racial background.*

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[78] Perry, Theresa, et al. *Young, Gifted and Black*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003, p. 4.
[79] Ibid. p. 6.

The "acting white" hypothesis. You have already learned about some of the work by John Ogbu, who suggests that some minority students reject academic success because they would be seen as "acting white." Tatum makes similar conclusions in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Other scholars have shown that successful African-American students deemphasized attributes that would signal their "Blackness" and asserted that race was not an important part of their identity.[80]

While this may be true for some students, more recent studies have suggested that "racial/ethnic minorities do not necessarily associate school success with 'Whiteness,' nor are they subjected to peer pressure that leads to not doing well."[81] Flores-Gonzalez argues that it is not necessary to give up one's background in order to be academically successful, indicating that students learn to manage both a "school" identity and a "home" identity at once and that these are not contradictory or incompatible.[82] In a recent critique of the "acting white" hypothesis, the University of Pennsylvania's Vinay Harpalani pointed to data that showed students who were judged to be in the "pre-encounter" phase of Cross's racial identity development were less academically successful than those shown to have attitudes of the "internalization" stage. This means that students who more strongly associated themselves with positive African-American identity performed better than those who viewed themselves from a Eurocentric frame of reference.[83] Scholars have recently made similar arguments for encouraging native Spanish speakers to maintain their home language, rather than simply abandoning it for English.[84] Native American students, once asked to deny their heritage and adopt the goals and values of Western education, show progress in schools where children are encouraged and shown how to use Native knowledge and language while also pursuing national curriculum standards.[85]

> *I will never forget the time one of my students told me I was the only white person they had met who they liked. It was devastating. Obviously I wanted my students to like me, but not at the exclusion of the rest of my race. We talked about why they felt that way, and I challenged them to think about whether they think they might like my parents or siblings. We talked about why we like people, and why we do not sometimes. We made it a continuing conversation.*
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> **Cate Reed, DC '00**
> **Project Manager (via Broad Residency),**
> **Pittsburgh Public Schools**

Harvard sociologist Prudence Carter suggests that, while some students of color may not wish to relinquish their own clothing, styles and language, they do not necessarily see their culture or race in opposition to academic success.[86] In fact, in one national study, scholars found that African-American students had higher aspirations than their white peers.[87] It may be that adults, looking at students who project an outward appearance that is different from white, middle-class "norms," come to presume and perpetuate the idea that those students are not interested in success. Ask yourself: Are there certain assumptions you hold about what an intellectually curious student looks or sounds like?

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[80] Fordham, S. "Racelessness as a Factor in Black Students' School Success: Pragmatic Strategy or Pyrrhic Victory?" *Harvard Educational Review,* Vol. 58, No. 1, 1988, pp. 54-83.

[81] Flores-Gonzalez, Nilda. *School Kids/Street Kids*: Identity Development in Latino Students. New York: Teachers College Pr., 2002, p. 9.

[82] Ibid.

[83] http://www.urbanedjournal.org/archive/Issue%201/Commentaries/comment0001.html, accessed 7/1/2010. For a Miami-specific example refuting the "acting white" hypothesis, see http://www.fiu.edu/~iei/index/working3.html, accessed 7/1/2010.

[84] Nieto, Sonia. *Affirming Diversity, 4th ed.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2004, pp. 214-216.

[85] Lipka, Jerry. "Schooling for Self-Determination." ERIC Digest, EDO-RC-01-12, January 2002.

[86] http://www.ksg.harvard.edu/inequality/Seminar/Papers/Carter.pdf, accessed 7/1/2010.

[87] Ainsworth-Darnell, James W. and Downey, Douglas B. "Assessing the Oppositional Cultural Explanation for Racial/Ethnic Differences in School Performance." *American Sociological Review.* Vol. 63, No. 4, August 1998, pp. 536-553.

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Culturally specific challenges. While many of the aforementioned issues may cross racial lines, it is important to highlight that children from different racial groups face stigmas and challenges particular to their own experiences. For example, the "model minority myth," which lumps Asian Americans together into a single group of super-intelligent, hard-working future scientists and mathematicians, creates unrealistic and limiting expectations and masks the very real problems of gangs, high dropout rates, and the more meaningful patterns of success and struggle apparent when you disaggregate "Asian-Americans" by country of origin. Asian-American children also face the problem of being seen as "perpetual foreigners," rather than having their long and complex history as contributors to America affirmed in school.

In many immigrant groups, children must come to grips with school's demands to assimilate (which often reject and demean their native language), while deciding where there is still a place for their own ethnicity. Native Americans, for whom school has a history of being an instrument of forced assimilation, face the additional challenge of a curriculum that often represents their identity as something primitive and museum-like rather than modern and relevant. Native American male adolescents also have a suicide rate that is more than 150 percent higher than the national average.[88] Many biracial or bicultural students face the challenge of a society that expects them to pick (or places them in) one race or the other, all the while not being fully accepted into either one.   Indeed, the existing theories for racial identity development do not fully accommodate individuals of biracial backgrounds, given the complexities and individual circumstances involved.[89]

It is crucial for you to investigate the particular challenges facing students in your school through additional reading, as well as conversations with colleagues and community members.

In first grade, Angel had more character than many of the adults I know. He often manipulated assignments to better highlight his interests. He carefully considered the topics of his journal entries and relentlessly researched new interests in the school library – seeking the supervision of adults who could answer his many questions and the partnership of his classmates to whom he could teach his newfound knowledge. Angel loved to talk – and in these conversations with adults and his peers, his English language fluency rapidly improved. One morning Angel came to school with an uncharacteristic crease across his brow. He greeted me, "Buenos dias maestra," which was the first of what was to be an entire day of Spanish-only participation. My students often conducted their social conversations in Spanish, but Angel refused to participate in any class discussion that called for English responses. After school I pulled Angel aside to inquire about the shift. With prodding in English and then Spanish, he eventually revealed that he had had a dream that he had forgotten how to speak Spanish. Afraid that his dream would come true and that in turn, he would no longer be able to speak to his mother, he was determined to speak only in Spanish. At the mature age of 7 Angel was aware of the impact that learning academic English could have on his status in his family. At age 7, Angel was frightened to learn what his mother didn't know.

Kate Sobel, Los Angeles '98
Principal, Camino Nuevo Charter Academy

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[88] The Surgeon General's Call To Action To Prevent Suicide, 1999.
http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/calltoaction/calltoaction.htm, accessed 7/1/2010.
[89] Root, Maria. "The Biracial Baby Boom: Understanding Ecological Constructions of Racial Identity in the 21st Century." In *Racial and Ethnic Identity in School Practices: Aspects of Human Development*, by Sheers and Hollins, Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum Associates, 1999.

III. Implications for Teachers

You may feel daunted by the section you just read. There are so many forces that complicate the assumptions students of color make about their potential academic success. How can you as a teacher reverse it all?

Before the prospect of these psychological phenomena gets too overwhelming, it's important to start by acknowledging that many things are out of your control. In the next two years, you cannot stop America from pre-judging the abilities of students who we know can absolutely succeed, or Hollywood from perpetuating messages that stereotype our children and shake their confidence in themselves.

But you do control everything that goes on in your classroom. You control how you choose your instructional content and strategies, how you interpret and respond to your students' behaviors, how you communicate your confidence in your students, and how you address your students' own comments and feelings about race when they arise. Here are some initial strategies—that apply both to developing your classroom and to pushing your own thinking—to consider when creating a classroom that conveys that all students can achieve:

- **Scaffold instruction.** By starting with simpler concepts and building up, you can help students build confidence in their abilities by ensuring that you are analyzing assessments and developing instruction that meets students where they are. Students are far more likely to exert effort when they believe that they have a chance to succeed – a belief you can build by helping students experience smaller successes first.

- **Show your students how they can succeed in your classroom.** Be transparent about your criteria for assessments and your grading methods. This way, students can believe that their work in your class will be evaluated based on their effort, not on a race-based perception of their ability.

- **Show your students how they can succeed in the outside world.** Help students learn the steps they need to achieve their dreams. Some may not have the opportunity to take college tours – let alone know words like GRE, LSAT or MCAT, or the processes that go along with college and graduate school admissions. Expose your students to people of different professions, and ask these guests to share how they reached their positions. You'll not only be sharing some valuable strategies, but you'll be demonstrating that you believe they can be successful.

- **Do your research.** Don't know much about history? Deepen your understanding of your students' background and their past. Share what you learn with your students, and not just on Black History or Hispanic Heritage Month, but throughout your curriculum. Highlight the ways in which the past is laden with multicultural stories of intellectual curiosity and resistance through education. You'll be building a counter-narrative to the messages your students may be receiving from other sources. Along those lines, examine the perspective from which your textbooks and school celebrations view historical events. For example, you might challenge the traditional notion that Columbus "discovered" America by noting that indigenous people had lived in this hemisphere for centuries.

Having Community Meetings was the most effective method of researching my students' backgrounds and cultures. Giving the children the opportunity to interact in a respectful, group-building setting allows them to open up. Daily they reveal to me some insight – whether it is a colloquialism of the region and its meaning or their definition of love. During a Community Meeting they always educate me and one another.

Brianna Twofoot, Delta '04
Field Organizer, Maine Civil Liberties Union

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- **Look within.** Perhaps you have a very narrow conception of what a "good student" looks like. Just because students dress or speak in a certain way does not mean that they are not interested in success. Take a hard look at your own preconceived notions – and talk honestly with students – before making judgments about them.

- **Don't hide from conversations about race.** Instead of saying "if you work hard, you will succeed" to students who communicate a lack of faith in the system, acknowledge the wrongs of the past and point out the ways in which people have resisted and overcome societal stigmas. Truly listen to your students and hear their concerns, without defensiveness. Call in "backup" in the form of community members or recent alumni from your school who can demonstrate the strength and perseverance that they used to be successful. When possible and appropriate, integrate lessons about race, identity and stereotypes into your curriculum. In one example, educator Linda Christensen had her students write poems in the style of Margaret Walker's "For My People," to respond to stereotypes head-on. You'll find an article about Christensen's "Lesson on Addressing Stereotypes" on pages 3-6 of the **Diversity, Community, & Achievement Toolkit**; this Toolkit can be found online at the Resource Exchange on TFANet. ✄

IV. Conclusion: Building Supportive and Responsive Classrooms

This chapter has argued that, for students of color, racial identity represents a significant aspect of self-perception and self-esteem. This chapter and its accompanying articles aim to give you a broader understanding of the ways in which your students may be thinking about their racial identity – and the impact of their perceptions on their larger sense of self and, as a result, their academic performance.

At several stages of development, the teacher has the opportunity to help students navigate their self-understandings by being supportive and responsive in a number of ways. As a teacher of younger students, you can jumpstart the identity development process by affirming your students and their racial background through positive stories and explanations of human differences. For adolescents, you can counteract the degrading messages that influence students' self-perceptions, critically examine biased and stereotyped texts, consistently communicate your confidence in your students' abilities, and celebrate their rich intellectual heritage.

We have also brought up the racial identity development that you yourself may be going through. Depending on your current feelings about your own racial group, you may believe that there is no need to focus on racial-cultural differences. If that is the case, this chapter has hopefully spurred your thinking about the ways in which the psychology of racial identity makes a significant impact on teaching and learning.

Please pause in your reading and read "How Racial Identity Affects School Performance" by Pedro Noguera, which can be accessed by visiting the Pre-Institute Work page on the Institute Info Center within TFANet. Please also read both "The Early Years" and "Critical Issues in Latino, American Indian, and Asian Pacific American Identity Development" by Beverly Daniel Tatum, which are found in the Related Readings section. 📖