Literature Review: *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*

Megan Mallon

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Dr. Be Stoney

Kansas State University

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Racism is a serious issue that has plagued America throughout its young history as a country.   In *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* (1997), Dr. Beverly D. Tatum approaches the topic of racism and its influences. Tatum (1997) explains that racism can be formed from both ignorance and omission of information (p. 6-7). Adding to this explanation, the author of *Multicultural Education* adds that racism is not only a set of beliefs, but is also "practiced when a group has the power to enforce laws, institutions, and norms based on its beliefs, which oppress and dehumanize a group" (Banks, 2010, p. 447). As educators, there are several things we can do to fight racism and its influences. It is important to be informed on how to examine the racial identity of children, and to provide a classroom that is a racially diverse environment. Additionally, by reaching out to parents, a school can include the entire community in the benefits of multicultural education.

While exploring the racial identity of students, Tatum (1997) explains that children may deemphasize their race, in an attempt to blend in with the majority of other students (p. 63). This is likely to happen in elementary school, particularly with the third graders I work with. Eight and nine-year-olds begin to develop a social awareness of others around them, and often do not want to be considered different. If this is the case, it becomes necessary to help my students understand the importance of embracing their race and culture, even though it may be different from their peers. One way that students may attempt to embrace this is by sitting at the cafeteria table with other students of similar race. While Tatum (1997) says this is appropriate, she also explains the importance of seeking alternative ways for students to connect with their racial identity (p. 71). I think technology could be particularly helpful in this regard. With the vast resources available on the Internet, as well as technology such as webcams and videoconferencing, there are many opportunities for students to connect with people of color throughout the community-and the world! This would provide students the opportunity to see adults of their same race in successful positions, such as a politician, community leader, or thriving career person. It would also be an excellent opportunity for students of all racial identities to learn about the culture and lives of others.

According to Tatum, people go through several stages in their understanding of racial identity. One model Tatum (1997) shares is Jean Phinney's Model of Adolescent Ethnic Identity Development (p. 132). The first stage in this model is unexamined ethnic identity, and this is the stage that most elementary students would fit into. While some students may evolve out of the first stage as they grow older, some students have trouble moving past this phase, as was evidenced by Perry in *Shades of White* (2002). Perry talked with a variety of high school students who were still unable to adequately describe their own racial identity (p. 68). It is important to start these examinations of racial identity early on. As an educator, I have a responsibility to create an environment that is acceptable of all racial diversity. One way to do this is to make sure that the curriculum supports appropriate views of different cultures. Tatum (1997) gives the example of changing a social studies curriculum to include a modern understanding of Native Americans (p. 153). I appreciated this example, as I teach a unit about Native Americans with my district curriculum. I like the idea of bringing in families or community members that can give a true and detailed look at the realities that their

culture faces. Another way to create an accepting environment is to keep up a continued dialogue with your students. Tatum (1997) shares a wonderful idea about a way to visually demonstrate how things can be different on the outside, yet the same on the inside (p. 35). She showed her son a brown egg and a white egg, and then broke each egg open to show they looked the same on the inside. I think this is an excellent and concrete example for young students. Often with children, it is simple examples such as this that can start conversations. Once these conversations have begun, it goes a long way in stopping the fear of racial differences that some children learn early on. As Tatum (1997) says about many of her students,

> Some white students are afraid of their own ignorance, afraid that because of their limited experience with people of color they will ask a naïve question or make an offensive remark that will provoke the wrath of the people of color around them (p. 195).

As we have revealed in our class sessions this semester, adults are often scared to express what they are really feeling. This comes from years and years of avoiding any discussion of race, and many times that fear starts in childhood. Another example is the men from the *Color of Fear* video, which Tatum (1997) discusses (p. 198). Children do not have years of personal experience with race as the men in the video do, but that does not mean they have never had any experiences of race (whether they are a white child or a child of color).

While it is so important to begin these conversations about race with students, we also have to recognize that their parents may not yet have been educated on racial issues. As Tatum says, not all adults go through the racial identity process at college, possibly because they never attended college (p. 81). If there are parents at a school who did not have the chance to start this process of recognizing their own racial identity, a valuable opportunity presents itself. I think it would be a great possibility to have a community night at the school, and give parents, or even community members, an available venue to gather with other adults of various cultures and learn from each other. Tatum explains that some adults may choose to raise their children in communities where they are surrounded by other families of their same race (p. 86-87). I do not think all parents would be able to do this, however. Adults with a lower SES may not have the means to move their family; they may have to stay in a particular area to be near extended family or to be near a job. This is yet another reason that we should provide opportunities at school for both students and parents to explore their racial identity.

There is not always a perfect answer when it comes to teaching about and fighting against racism. As Tatum so aptly states, "in teaching about racism, a sincere, though imperfect, attempt to interrupt the oppression of others is usually better than no attempt at all" (p. 132-133). Whether we are assisting students in examining their racial identity, creating an accepting and diverse classroom environment, or reaching out to parents, it is our responsibility as educators to make a conscious effort every single day to teach in a caring and accepting way. In *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* (1997)*,* Tatum provides valuable insight to the process of understanding

racial identity that students go through, and how we as educators can support that process.

References

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