Part I

The Student Experience

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Joaquin's Dilemma

Understanding the Link Between Racial Identity and School-Related Behaviors

When I am asked to speak or write about the relationship between racial identity and academic performance, I often tell the story of my elder son, Joaquin. Joaquin did extremely well throughout most of his early schooling. He was an excellent athlete (participating in soccer, basketball, and wrestling), played piano and percussion, and did very well in his classes. My wife and I never heard any complaints about him. In fact, we heard nothing but praise about his behavior from teachers, who referred to him as "courteous," "respectful," and "a leader among his peers." Then suddenly, in the tenth grade, Joaquin's grades took a nosedive. He failed math and science, and for the first time he started getting into trouble at school. At home he was often angry and irritable for no particular reason.

My wife and I were left asking ourselves, "What's going on with our son? What's behind this sudden change in behavior?" Despite my disappointment and growing frustration, I tried not to allow his behavior to drive us apart. I started spending more time with him, and I started listening more intently to what he had to tell me about school and his friends. As I did, several things became very clear to me. One was that all of the friends he had grown up with in our neighborhood in South Berkeley (one of the poorest areas of the city) were dropping out of school. These were mostly Black, working-class kids who didn't have a lot of support at home or at school and were experiencing academic failure. Even though

Joaquin came from a middle-class home with two supportive parents, most of his reference group—that is, the students he was closest to and identified with—did not.

The other thing that was changing for Joaquin was his sense of how he had to present himself when he was out on the streets and in school. As he grew older, Joaquin felt the need to project the image of a tough and angry young Black man. He believed that in order to be respected, he had to carry himself in a manner that was intimidating and even menacing. To behave differently—too nice, gentle, kind, or sincere—meant that he would be vulnerable and preyed on. I learned that for Joaquin, part of his new persona also involved placing less value on academics and greater emphasis on being cool and hanging out with the right people.

By eleventh grade, Joaquin gradually started working out of these behaviors, and by twelfth grade, he seemed to snap out of his angry state. He became closer to his family, his grades improved, he rejoined the soccer team, he resumed playing piano, and he even started producing music. As I reflected on the two years of anger and self-destructiveness that he went through, I came to the conclusion that Joaquin was trying desperately to figure out what it meant to be a young Black man. As I reflect on that period, I realize that like many other Black male adolescents, Joaquin was trapped by stereotypes, and they were pulling him down. During this difficult period, it was very hard for me to help him through this process of identity formation. While he was in the midst of it, the only thing I could do was talk to him, listen to him, and try to let him know what it was like for me when I went through adolescence.

As a high school student, I had coped with the isolation that came from being one of the few students of color in my advanced classes by working extra hard to prove that I could do as well as or better than my White peers. However, outside the classroom, I also worked hard to prove to my less studious friends that I was cool or "down," as we would say. For me this meant playing basketball,

hanging out, fighting when necessary, and acting like "one of the guys." I felt forced to adopt a split personality: I behaved one way in class, another way with my friends, and yet another way at home.

The Emerging Awareness of Race

Adolescence is typically a period when young people become more detached from their parents and attempt to establish an independent identity. For racial minorities, adolescence is also a period when young people begin to solidify their understanding of their racial identities. For many, understanding the significance of race means recognizing that membership within a racial category requires certain social and political commitments. Adolescence is often a difficult and painful period for many young people. And for young people struggling to figure out the meaning and significance of their racial identities, the experience can be even more difficult.

Awareness of race and the significance of racial difference often begins in early childhood. We know from psychological research that the development of racial identity is very context dependent, especially in the early years. Children who attend racially diverse schools or reside in racially diverse communities are much more likely to become aware of race at an earlier age than children in more homogeneous settings.[1] In the latter context, race is often not a defining issue or a primary basis for identity formation. When children see their race as the norm, they are less likely to perceive characteristics associated with it (for example, physical appearance) as markers of inferiority.

In contrast, children who grow up in more integrated settings become aware of physical differences fairly early. Interacting with children from other racial and ethnic backgrounds in a society that has historically treated race as a means of distinguishing groups and individuals often forces young people to develop racial identities early. However, prior to adolescence, they do not

usually understand the political and social significance associated with differences in appearance. For young children, being a person with different skin color may be no more significant than being thin or heavy, tall or short. Differences in skin color, hair texture, and facial features are simply seen as being among the many differences that all children have. In environments where racist and ethnocentric behavior is common, children may learn fairly early that racist speech is hurtful.[2] They may know that calling someone a nigger is worse than calling that person stupid, but they may not necessarily understand the meaning of such words or know why their use inflicts hurt on others.

In 1999 I was conducting research with colleagues at an elementary school in East Oakland. We were interested in understanding how the practice of separating children on the basis of language differences affected their social relationships and perceptions of students from other groups. As is true in many other parts of California, East Oakland was experiencing a major demographic change as large numbers of Mexican and Central American immigrants were moving into communities that had previously been predominantly African American. As is often the case, schools in East Oakland serve as the place where children from these groups encounter one another, and at several of the high schools there had been a significant increase in interracial conflict.[3]

In the elementary school where we did our research, we found that most of the Black and Latino students had very little interaction with each other. Although they attended the same school, the students had been placed in separate classes, ostensibly for the purpose of serving their language needs. From our interviews with students, we learned that even very young children viewed peers from the other racial group with suspicion and animosity, although they could not explain why. Interestingly, when we asked the students why they thought they had been placed in separate classrooms, most thought it was to prevent them from fighting. We also found that the younger Mexican students (between ages five and eight)

saw themselves as White, and the Black students also referred to the Mexican students as White. However, as the children entered early adolescence (age nine or ten), the Mexican youth began to realize that they were not considered White outside this setting, and they began to understand for the first time that being Mexican meant something very different from being White.

Depending on the context, it is not uncommon for minority children to express a desire to reject group membership based on skin color, especially during early adolescence. As they start to realize that in this society to be Black or Brown means to be seen as "less than"—whether it be less smart, less capable, or less attractive—they often express a desire to be associated with the dominant and more powerful group. This tendency was evident among some of the younger Mexican students in our study. However, as they grew older, the political reality of life in East Oakland served to reinforce their understanding that they were definitely not White. As one student told us, "White kids go to nice schools with swimming pools and grass, not a ghetto school like we go to."

In adolescence, awareness of race and its implications for individual identity become even more salient. For many young men and women of color, racial identity development is affected by some of the same factors that influence individual identity development in general. According to Erikson and other theorists of child development, as children enter adolescence, they become extremely conscious of their peers and seek out acceptance from their reference group.[4] As they become increasingly aware of themselves as social beings, their perception of self tends to be highly dependent on acceptance and affirmation by others. For some adolescents, identification with and attachment to peer groups sometimes takes on so much importance that it can override other attachments, to family, parents, and teachers.

For adolescents in racially integrated schools, racial and ethnic identity also frequently take on new significance with respect to friendship groups and dating. It is not uncommon in integrated

settings for preadolescent children to interact and form friendships easily across racial boundaries—if their parents or other adults allow them to do so.[5] However, as young people enter adolescence, such transgressions of racial boundaries can become more problematic. As they become increasingly aware of the significance associated with group differences, they generally become more concerned with how their peers will react to their participation in interracial relationships, and they may begin to self-segregate. As they get older, young people also become more aware of the politics associated with race. They become more cognizant of racial hierarchies and prejudice, even if they cannot articulate the political significance of race. They can feel its significance, but they often cannot explain what it all means.

Between 2000 and 2003, I worked closely with fifteen racially integrated school districts in the Minority Student Achievement Network (MSAN). At the racially integrated high schools in MSAN, students often become much more aware that racial group membership comes with certain political commitments and social expectations. In these schools, high-achieving students of color (like my son Joaquin) are sometimes unwilling to enroll in Advanced Placement courses or engage in activities that have traditionally been associated with White students because they fear becoming estranged from their friends. If they appear to engage in behavior that violates racial norms, they may be seen as rejecting membership in their racial group and run the risk of being regarded as a race traitor. For this reason, I have urged the districts in MSAN not to rely on the initiative of students to break down racial barriers but to put the onus on school leaders to take steps that will make this border crossing easier and more likely.[6]

Theories of the Identity-Achievement Connection

For educators, understanding the process through which young people come to see themselves as belonging to particular racial categories is important because it has tremendous bearing on the

so-called achievement gap. Throughout the United States, schools are characterized by increasing racial segregation[7] and widespread racial disparities in academic achievement.[8] Blatant inequities in funding, quality, and organization are also characteristic of the American educational system. Despite overwhelming evidence of a strong correlation between race and academic performance, there is considerable confusion among researchers about how and why such a correlation exists.

The scholars whose work has had the greatest influence on these issues are John Ogbu and Signithia Fordham, both of whom have argued that Black students from all socioeconomic backgrounds develop "oppositional identities" that lead them to view schooling as a form of forced assimilation to White cultural values.[9] Ogbu and Fordham argue that Black students and other "nonvoluntary minorities" (such as Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans, and others whose groups have been dominated by White European culture) come to equate academic success with "acting White." For these researchers, such perceptions lead to the devaluation of academic pursuits and the adoption of self-defeating behaviors that inhibit possibilities for academic success. In this framework, the few students who aspire to achieve academically must pay a heavy price for success. Black students who perform at high levels may be ostracized by their peers as traitors and "sellouts" and may be forced to choose between maintaining ties with their peers or achieving success in school.[10] This would explain why middle-class minority students like my son Joaquin would underperform academically despite their social and economic advantages.

My own research challenges Ogbu and Fordham's "acting-white" thesis. While carrying out research among high school students in northern California, I discovered that some high-achieving minority students are ostracized by their peers, but others (like me) learn how to succeed in both worlds by adopting multiple identities. Still others actively and deliberately challenge racial stereotypes and seek to redefine their racial identities by showing that it is possible to do well in school and be proud of who they are.

Claude Steele's work on the effects of racial stereotypes on academic performance helps to provide a compelling explanation for the identity-achievement paradox. Through his research on student attitudes toward testing, Steele (twin brother of the more conservative Shelby) has shown that students are highly susceptible to prevailing stereotypes related to intellectual ability.[11] According to Steele, when "stereotype threat" are operative, they lower the confidence of vulnerable students and negatively affect their performance on standardized tests. Steele writes, "Ironically, their susceptibility to this threat derives not from internal doubts about their ability but from their identification with the domain and the resulting concern they have about being stereotyped in it."[12] According to Steele, the debilitating effects of stereotypes can extend beyond particular episodes of testing and can have an effect on overall academic performance.

Race in the School Context

Stereotypes and Expectations

As Steele's research illustrates, in the United States, we have very deeply embedded stereotypes that connect racial identity to academic ability, and children become aware of these stereotypes as they grow up in the school context. Simply put, there are often strong assumptions made in schools that if you're White, you'll do better in school than if you're Black; or if you're Asian, you'll do better at school than if you're Latino. These kinds of stereotypes affect both teachers' expectations of students and students' expectations of themselves.

One of the groups most affected by these stereotypes is Asian Americans. There is a perception in many schools that Asians are "naturally" academically gifted, especially in math. This stereotype is based on the following notions: (1) that Asians are inherently smart (either for genetic or cultural reasons), (2) that they have a strong work ethic, (3) that they are passive and deferential toward

authority, and (4) that unlike other minorities, they don't complain about discrimination. These perceptions make up what is often called the "model minority" stereotype.[13]

One of my former students, Julian Ledesma, now a researcher in the Office of the President of the University of California, has been doing research on the model minority stereotype at a high school in Oakland, California. He started his work by interviewing various teachers and students about who they believed were "the smartest kids." In nearly every case, those he asked reported that the Asians were the "smartest" students. Even Asian students who were doing poorly in school reported that Asians were the smartest. The surprising thing about their responses to this question is that the average grade point average for Asians at the school was 1.8.

One reason for the gross misconception at this school is that Asians were overrepresented in the honors courses and among students with the highest ranks in their class. Yet these successful students were not representative of Asians as a whole at the school. Overall, Asian students were dropping out in high numbers and not doing very well academically. The school where Julian did his research also had a considerable gang problem among Asians. Yet because the stereotype is so powerful, students and teachers at the school were more likely to regard the majority of Asian students as the exceptions, and the smaller numbers who were successful as the norm.

The stereotypical images we hold toward groups are powerful in influencing what people see and expect of students. Unless educators consciously try to undermine and work against these kinds of stereotypes, they often act on them unconsciously. Our assumptions related to race are so deeply entrenched that it is virtually impossible for us not to hold them unless we take conscious and deliberate action.

Sorting Practices and "Normal" Racial Separation

Beyond these stereotypes, there are also the sorting practices that go on in schools that send important messages to students about

the meaning of racial categories. For example, in many schools, the remedial classes are disproportionately Black and Brown, and students often draw conclusions about the relationship between race and academic ability based on these patterns. They might say to themselves, "Well, I guess the kids in these 'slow' classes are less smart than those other kids who are in the honors classes." They also notice that the students who are most likely to be punished, suspended, and expelled also are more likely to be the darker students.

In addition to reinforcing stereotypes, grouping practices, which teachers and administrators say are not based on race but on ability or behavior, often have the effect of reinforcing racial separation. Unless the adults in a school are conscious of how this separation influences their own perceptions and that of students, over time this separation may be regarded as normal. For example, Black students may assume that because there are no Black students in advanced or honors courses they cannot excel academically. Of course, Black students can distinguish themselves in sports because there are numerous examples of Black individuals who do. Similarly, White students may assume that they should not seek academic assistance from tutorial programs, especially if those programs primarily serve Black or Brown students. When the norms associated with race take on a static and determining quality, they can be very difficult to undermine. Students who receive a lot of support and encouragement at home may be more likely to cross over and work against these separations. But as my wife and I found for a time with Joaquin, middle-class African American parents who try to encourage their kids to excel in school often find this can't be done because the peer pressures against crossing these boundaries are too great.

The racial separation we see in schools might also be seen as an element of the "hidden curriculum," an unspoken set of rules that "teaches" certain students what they can and cannot do because of who they are. There are aspects of this hidden curriculum that are

not being taught by the adults. It may well be that students are the ones teaching it to each other. No adult goes onto the playground and says, "I don't want the boys and girls to play together." The girls and boys do that themselves, and it's a rare child who crosses over. Why? Because those who violate gender norms are often ostracized by their peers. The girls who play with the boys become known as the tomboys, and the boys who play with the girls become known as the sissies. Although the children are sanctioning each other without instruction from adults, they are also engaging in behavior that has been learned from adults—not explicitly, but implicitly. Adults can reinforce narrow gender roles by promoting certain activities such as physical sports for boys and other things such as dance for girls.

With respect to race, children receive messages all the time about beauty standards. Who are the favored students, and what are their characteristics? Who are the people who get into trouble a lot, and what are their characteristics? Much of the time preferential (or nonpreferential) treatment is very much related to race.

In many schools, there may not be many explicit messages about race, but students receive implicit messages about race all the time that informs what they think it means to be a member of a particular racial group. When they see Black students overrepresented on the basketball team but underrepresented in Advanced Placement courses, or Latino students overrepresented among those who've gotten into trouble but underrepresented among those receiving awards, they get a clear sense about the meaning of race. The hidden curriculum related to race presents racial patterns as normal and effectively reinforces racial stereotypes. When it is operative, it can completely undermine efforts to raise student achievement because students may believe that altering racial patterns simply is not possible.

Too often, educators assume because of the choices Black students make about who to socialize with, which classes to take, and so forth that they are anti-intellectual.[14] However, the vast majority of Black students I meet express a strong desire to do well in school.

The younger students don't arrive at school with an anti-intellectual orientation. To the degree that such an orientation develops, it develops in school and from their seeing these patterns and racial hierarchies as permanent. Because a great deal of this behavior plays out in schools, educators can do something about it.

What Can Educators Do?

Understanding and debunking racial stereotypes, breaking down racial separations, and challenging the hidden curriculum are challenges not just for teachers but for principals, administrators, and entire school communities. In addition, there are a number of things educators can do to support their students' positive racial identity development.

First, educators can make sure that students are not segregating themselves—sitting in racially defined groups in the classroom. For teachers, this can be as simple as mixing students and assigning them seats. Or if work groups are created, students can be assigned to groups in ways that ensure that students of different backgrounds have an opportunity to work together. This approach to race mixing is often far more effective than holding an abstract conversation about tolerance or diversity. By working together, students are more likely to form friendships naturally, and as students gain familiarity with one another, they may be more willing to break racial norms. If teachers let students choose, they will more than likely choose those whom they perceive to be "their own kind."

Second, educators can encourage students to pursue things that are not traditionally associated with members of their group. If students of color are encouraged by adults to join the debating team or the science club, play music in the band, or enroll in advanced courses, it will be possible for greater numbers to challenge racial norms. Extracurricular activities in particular can serve a very important role in this regard and give young people a chance to get to know each other in situations that are not racially loaded. As is true for work groups, in the course of playing soccer or writing for

the newspaper, students can become friends. Research on extra-curricular activities has shown that sports, music, theater, and other activities can play an important role in building connections among young people and breaking down the very insidious links between racial identity and academic achievement.[15]

Third, teachers can find ways to incorporate information related to the history and culture of students into the curriculum. This is important in helping students understand what it means to be who they are, an essential aspect of the identity formation process for adolescents. Literature—novels and short stories—can be very effective in this regard because it can help students to identify and empathize with children who may be from different backgrounds. Field trips and out-of-class experiences that provide students with opportunities to learn about the experiences of others can also help in expanding their horizons.

Finally, an effective teacher who is able to inspire students by getting to know them can actually do a great deal to overcome antiacademic tendencies. They can do this by getting students to believe in themselves, by getting them to learn how to work hard and persist, and by getting them to dream, plan for the future, and set goals. Over and over again, when you talk to students who have been successful, they speak about the role that significant adults have played at various points in their lives.[16] They talk about how these adults helped them recognize their own poten-tial and how they opened doors that they previously did not know existed.

I believe there are many young people who are crying out for supportive relationships with caring adults. Differences in race, gender, or sexual orientation need not limit a teacher's ability to make a connection with a young person. In my own work with students and schools, I have generally found kids to be the least prejudiced of all people. They tend to respond well to caring adults regardless of what they look like. However, they can also tell if the adults who work with them are sincere, and those acting out of guilt and faked concern can generally be detected.

Today most social scientists recognize race as a social rather than as a biological construct. It is seen as a political category created largely for the purpose of justifying exploitation and oppression.[17] For many adults and kids, especially those of mixed heritage, the categories often do not even correspond to who they think they are. Rather than being a source of strength, the acquisition of racial identities may be a tremendous burden.

For many years to come, race will undoubtedly continue to be a significant source of demarcation within the U.S. population. For many of us, it will continue to shape where we live, pray, go to school, and socialize. We cannot simply wish away the existence of race or racism, but we can take steps to lessen the ways in which the categories trap and confine us. Educators, who should be committed to helping young people realize their intellectual potential as they make their way toward adulthood, have a responsibility to help them find ways to expand identities related to race so that they can experience the fullest possibility of all that they may become.