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Beginning the Journey

Welcome to our journey to understand better the multiracial students who walk through our classroom doors. By choosing to read this book, you're expressing your interest in learning more about them.

What interests you about multiracial students?

Your response above sets a goal for your learning, and your interest takes you on a journey to learn what you *don't know you don't know*, opening your mind to learning about the experiences of those who are not like you. This is necessary for educators in a diverse classroom where oftentimes relationships fail to develop due to a lack of understanding between teachers and students. Terrell and Lindsey, in *Culturally Proficient Leadership* (2009), state "educators and students treat one another differently because of the lack of shared experiences" (p. 9). If there is a lack of shared experiences, how do we learn about each other? How do we share our experiences? One way is through our stories, and in this book you will read the stories of students, educators, and others whose stories differ from your own. By reading and sharing lived experiences, hopefully we can bridge differences and create powerful relationships that sustain learning.

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I am aware that students who identify as belonging to more than one race share experiences that differ from my experiences. As an educator, I am interested in learning what those experiences might be and how I can better understand and support these students. I am on a journey to learn *what I don't know I don't know* about race. As you take this journey with me, I will make explicit my thinking and ask you to reflect upon your own.

I must offer a disclaimer here since my experience has been limited in the following ways: I was born and raised in the Midwest and taught 30 years in public schools there. Even though I was an active member of the International Education Consortium and traveled abroad to study African literature, it wasn't until the past several years that I actively worked with educators and students outside the Midwest region. Therefore, my journey involves more interaction with African Americans than with any other ethnic group except my own white culture. It also means my knowledge base is limited about many of the diverse cultures that compose our country. With that being said, I do believe that my journey offers you an opportunity to examine racial issues that plague our educational system and society. I offer what *I know I know* and suggest the means for you to learn and do the same.

HOW DO WE BEGIN THE JOURNEY TO UNDERSTAND RACE?

Our journey to understand race begins by thinking, writing, and looking at our own racial histories and by sharing them with others. Ideally, we will share our stories with colleagues and build a trusting community of educators with whom to travel this road. If you are in a school district not quite ready to do that, you can continue your own journey with the help of this book and others. But we have to do our own work. In *Courageous Conversations About Race*, Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton (2006) state that we “cannot talk about race collectively as a nation, family, or school until we have individually talked about race in our own lives—personally, locally, and immediately” (p. 76). The following is an attempt to be personal, local, and immediate about my racial history, and I invite you to do the same with yours. My children, Leah and Reeve, share their stories and so does Brenda, the mother of my grandbaby.

RACIAL HISTORY

Think back over your life. Can you think of the first time you were aware of racial identity?

My first awareness of racial identity occurred when I entered the school bus on the first day of kindergarten. The first person I saw was Lloyd, the man who drove the bus to kindergarten. Lloyd did not look like me. My parents called Lloyd a “Negro.” This is my first memory of people being identified by others based on physical features such as skin color.

My first memory was positive, and I saw Lloyd as a trusted adult who took care of me. However, just having the children call him “Lloyd” rather than Mr. Williams may have bestowed on us a liberty we would not have taken if he were white. I seriously doubt that black children of the 1950s in this small Southeast Missouri town would have been allowed to have called a white bus driver by his first name.

When I think about my racial history, I, as this white person, begin to think of the presence of people of color in my life; for I don’t think of my “whiteness” as having a “racial history” without the presence of color. You may or may not do the same.

I outline my history in contrast to those who don’t look like me rather than in comparison to those who do. I do this because—to me—my racial history is about my presence within the environment of whiteness until a person of color enters that environment.

Lloyd is the only nonwhite person with whom I recall interacting until I entered eighth grade. That winter in 1958, Cecil, a black male, joined our class during basketball season. One night after a victory, the coach took the team and the class supporters to the Southern Café. When they would not serve our star player, the coach stood up and marched us out the door. This experience was my first encounter with discrimination. I remember standing in the kitchen and telling my mom about the event, but I can’t remember her reaction.

One black male attended my high school, and that was the extent of my experience, until college, with others I identify as belonging to a different racial group. In college I had a black girlfriend, but we were not close friends, and my entire social network was white and Christian. My life was extremely insular throughout my childhood and adolescence.

I married in college and lived for the next decade in the suburbs of St. Louis. My daughter, Leah, was born in 1969, and she entered her parents’ world where our church was White, our schools were White, our neighborhoods were White, and our lives were White. I assumed my husband was monoracial, but at some point, Leah’s grandparents informed us that her great-grandmother was Cherokee.

Leah shares her story:

Leah Ancona, White/Cherokee Indian, Born 1969
Bonnie Davis’ Daughter
Architect, St. Louis, Missouri
Written narrative

When my mom first asked me to write for her book on mixed-racial heritage, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to because I wasn’t sure I really fit with her topic. You see, when I was a child, my mom told me I was part Indian, feather-not-dot.

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I remember this from when I was about eight or nine, and the only experience I had with Indians at that time was Tonto from the Lone Ranger, which I watched faithfully each morning before school. Tonto was so cool. He had a pretty horse named Scout; he rode with the Lone Ranger; and he got kidnapped a lot, but he always got away. Having never actually met an Indian, I thought he was pretty neat, and if I was like him, I figured I was lucky. When I told my friends I was an Indian, they weren't so sure, so I explained that I could prove it. You see, I have a birthmark on my arm that I had never seen on anyone else, so I told my friends it was my Indian mark. It proved that I wasn't like them. I was special.

Part of me always wanted to be a real Indian. Because as I grew up, I knew I wasn't really Indian. My mom kind of looked Indian, which helped fuel my fantasy, but she told me it wasn't from her side. I didn't really relate to my dad, so I wasn't sure if he knew any Indians. I didn't. And I desperately wanted to. Around this same time, my mom met and married a black man, and I became black. Of course I didn't really, but my school was all white, and they wanted to stay that way, so when my new dad came to pick me up from school, it immediately got noticed. The only black person in my school was a girl my age who was adopted, and she had been at this school since first grade. I can only imagine how she was treated before I arrived in fourth grade, but I know she was the meanest person in the entire school to me. I think she felt she finally had someone to treat as she had been treated for being different. When my brother was born, I could not have been happier. I took him everywhere I could, and nothing would please me more than being able to tell people he was my brother. Let me tell you, we got some looks with this little boy, looking so much like his dad, hanging on to my hand and walking down the streets of white suburbia. He was special, and I loved it.

At school, being treated black sort of sucked. My classmates called me names and took every opportunity to tease me about things I could not control. I was completely outcast from the popular group, and the one other girl I mentioned made it her mission to make me miserable. I knew when it was time to go to high school, I was going to find some place with some Black people so I could fit in, and that's just what I did. While all the other girls from my grade school went to the various all-white Catholic girls' schools in town, I had a friend who found one in the city that had 50% black people. Fifty percent! I was going there so I could be with people like me; the problem was that they weren't. They were all either black or white. What was I? I was white, Indian, or black, depending on the audience, and I had no idea what to check on the "race" box on the standardized tests. I only knew I wanted to be anything but "White" or "Caucasian" because I was special and those terms just didn't fit.

I actively pursued relationships with the black girls in my school, and they just didn't know what to think of me. They didn't know who this crazy little white girl from the burbs, who wanted to listen to their music and be a part of their group, was. I was the only white girl in the OABC (Organization for the Appreciation of Black Culture) and had fun dancing to The Time during the annual talent show. I figured the white people didn't want me because of the color in my family, so I didn't want them either. I wanted to be with a group who would want me, and I figured the black girls were my best bet. I had a father who was black and a brother who was half black, and surely, they

would want me in their group. But they didn't. You see, I wasn't black. I didn't share a common history. I wasn't special like them.

As I started looking at colleges, I was told I could get scholarships if I told people about my Indian background. I contacted my grandparents I hadn't seen in years, and they wrote the history of their side of the family, as much as they knew, and told me about my family. A relative from the past married an Indian woman on the Trail of Tears, and they had children eventually leading to me. I really was part Indian. I really was special.

I threw myself into being Indian during college. I joined the Native American organizations on campus, becoming president of them both during some part of my college career. I went to conferences about Native Americans and met a ton of amazing people. I participated in PowWows and recruited for my school from the local Indian junior college. And then I started to learn the real American history. I learned what whites had done to the native people when they came to this country. I met Russell Means, and he told me about what it was like growing up "Indian" and fighting for his rights in American Indian Movement (AIM) in the 1970s. He explained how important it is for Indians to look Indian and be proud of their culture. He also told me I should not have cut my hair, a poor decision I made just before his visit, because American Indians wear their hair long and proud. And while I worked for seven years on Indian issues, I felt like a fraud. After all, I knew I was just a little bit Indian and was it really fair to take away from someone who needed more than I and was more than just a little Indian? Was I really special?

After I graduated college, I joined the work force, and while I had my Minority Engineering achievements on my resume, I did not present myself as anything other than white. Why would I? I looked white, and I didn't have to face the typical issues of people of color. I didn't feel it was right for me to use this side of my background as a way to get something extra. What I found was it was a whole lot harder being a woman in my profession than anything else. So today, I represent myself as who I am: White, Native American, woman, architect, brunette, short, and all the other things that make me who I am. I do have a mixed heritage, and I do fit within my mom's book after all, because I am not any one thing or any one identity. I am special.

What did you learn from Leah's story?

Leah describes the complexities she faced from the mixed heritages found in her family, and her racial history echoes complexities found in the narratives throughout this book. I seldom thought of Leah as having a mixed heritage; however, since there was proof enough for her to receive a scholarship based on her Cherokee heritage, I was happy to receive the college help at a time when I was a single mother and living on one teacher's salary.

My first marriage ended, and two years later I met and married a black man. I found his world to be very different from my own. Even though that is an extremely naïve statement, I had no reason to think otherwise until I became involved with him. Since I did not have black friends and taught in a school district with no diversity, I remained as isolated as in my childhood. I knew I needed to learn more.

My son, Reeve, was born in 1979, and soon I faced experiences I would have never known in my all-white world. In the hospital, the nurse marked “Caucasian” on my son’s paperwork without asking. Weeks later, as I changed his diaper in a department store bathroom, a Black woman noticed the black and blue spot at the base of his spine and like a fortune-teller foretelling his future, she whispered ominously, “He must be biracial because he has the *mark*.” The mark disappeared, kinky hair replaced my son’s straight birth hair, and his skin darkened as he grew. I was now the mother of a biracial child in my White world (paraphrased and quoted from pp. 45–48, *How to Teach Students Who Don’t Look Like You: Culturally Relevant Teaching Strategies*, 2006).

As the mother of a biracial child, I wanted to learn all I could about what that meant for my child and for me. I also wanted to learn how my son felt about being identified as biracial. But mostly, I avoided that conversation as Reeve was growing up because I was uncomfortable with it. Instead, I resorted to taking Reeve to countless multicultural events, hoping these experiences would make him comfortable in his difference. Fortunately, Reeve has grown to be an intelligent, reflective man, and when I asked him to write a piece for this book, I hoped he would, but I respected his right to refuse. He sent me the following:

Reeve Emanuel Davis, Mixed African American/White, Born 1979
Bonnie Davis’ Son
Government Employee, Washington, DC
Written narrative

I guess I don’t think about it too, too much. I’ve been considered Black basically my whole life, so it’s something I’ve learned to adapt to. I’m guessing that is a common trait to all mixed people of any ethnicity or race—adapting. You learn to be black enough to be part of one category and white enough to be part of another (if that’s what your mixture is). If you ask if this makes one schizophrenic, I would say no, just smarter and provides a good ability to improvise. This is not a new concept or strange whatsoever. Your average black or Latino is probably used to acting one way in the corporate world versus how they would act in the real world amongst friends and family.

And then the term mixed. What the hell does that mean? If you are half Irish and half Cuban, what are you? And why do certain groups of people get labeled that and others don’t. For example—Black, White, Puerto-Rican, Asian. . . . Most Puerto Rican’s are in fact of mixed heritage, but for some reason, their ethnicity is on par with other people’s race. Why is that? If you look at a census form, many say Hispanic and are lined up among other racial categories. So could you not be a white Puerto Rican? And if you claim you are

Hispanic, and your ancestors are from Spain, are Spanish people from Spain not considered Anglo Saxon or White like most other European groups?

Why even get lost in all that madness of labels? Most mixed people would say the best you can do is to be you because many people won't understand that you fall outside of the categories . . . seems to be a foreign concept to them.

Maybe it's for simplicity sake. Yes, I would say I'm black because I won't get quizzed on what my background is. And there's not always a lot of time to sit down and discuss this topic every time someone asks you, nor should you have to.

I'm not going to lie; I honestly think trying to find some commonality among other mixed people is a little bit of a lost cause. Interesting, yes, but I am going to see you as a person and not our common bond as being mixed. This is because I am almost sure the way you grew up and your background is different from mine. I think a lot of mixed people attempt to break down their background in order to better explain themselves to the world. ("Oh, my dad is German and Italian, and my mother is Haitian and Native American.") If I do this, it's out of interest of my background, but not so I can spew a long explanation at someone when asked, "What is your background?" Not remembering exactly what the question was (but the topic was race), my black friend once told me, "No, you're a nigga," as if to verify my racial category. I think that's pretty solid evidence of what I am physically perceived as, wouldn't you agree?

Overall, I would say I like it. I can get along or be accepted by almost anyone, and there are many places around the heterogeneous world where I blend right in. The challenge is being able to keep up the act. For example, I basically look like a light-skinned African American man. I bet I could go to a place, like say, Morocco, and blend in relatively well. However, my Arabic skills are nonexistent, and my French is only, "aussi, aussi." So maybe I would fit in if I were mute—but anyway, the moral is I think most mixed people would say it is an undeniably positive feeling to be around people who look like you and blend in. This is an experience that I felt in Brazil, a feeling of belonging, but guess what? I only speak "um puoco" of Portuguese, and people growing up there would have a completely different story growing up than I, so how do we relate?

The negative is that there is never complete satisfaction of belonging. You're a drifter, a gray space, a neutral color, not loud enough to offend anyone either which way.

What did you learn from Reeve's story?

Reeve's final two sentences tug at this mother's heart. The lack of belonging he writes about continues as a strong theme throughout the narratives found in this book.

LEARNING WHAT I DIDN'T KNOW I DIDN'T KNOW

Because I now felt a need to learn more about “what I didn’t know I didn’t know,” I searched for mentors, books, and organizations to guide me. I worked with the Anti-Defamation League program, A World of Difference, and began to facilitate workshops for them in the 1980s.

The high school where I taught was desegregated in 1984, and the black students new to my classes taught me more about issues of race. I was able to observe incidents that my husband and these students experienced that had never happened to me as a white woman. In particular, I remember Donna’s story. Partway through the first year of the desegregation program, a teacher brought Donna to me and asked if I, an English teacher, would proofread a letter she had written to the school board. I read her letter and wept. Donna described how she and the other students of color had been placed in remedial classes and were largely ignored by both teachers and students. This was a pivotal experience for me and caused me to become a teacher ally for the desegregation students. Through my work with the students, I continued to learn more of what I *didn’t know I didn’t know*.

Donna, described above, taught me more about racial identity. She identified as a biracial girl, and she often passed for white in classrooms of all white students. She described the difficulties she faced as she sat in a classroom where the students did not identify her as biracial and were willing to make disparaging remarks about the other desegregation students in her presence. She also felt she received privilege due to her appearance that the other students in this historical desegregation movement were denied. She felt guilty about this. Donna caused me to begin to think about issues of racial identity in more complex ways and how a system of privilege might be bestowed upon some students in our classrooms with or without our knowledge. Donna challenged my assumptions about multiracial students.

My assumptions continue to be challenged, and I am now privileged to be the grandmother of a child possessing multiple heritages with a skin color blend of all. Below is her mother’s story:

Brenda Álvarez, Mexi-Rican/Borimex, Born 1976
Bonnie Davis’ Granddaughter’s Mother
Senior Public Relations Specialist, National Education Association,
Washington, DC
Written narrative

I’m the product of a Mexican mama and a Puerto Rican papa. I like to say I’m Mexi-Rican or a Borimex. I always thought that since I was made up of two ethnic groups, I would be in a position of large-scale acceptance amongst my people. However, when coming of age, this combination proved to be damaging to my self-perception.

My parents separated when my mama was two months pregnant with me. As a result, I grew up listening to her talk about how Puerto Ricans aren’t nice people, how I should never bring a Puerto Rican kid to the house and, more important, I shouldn’t tell people I’m Puerto Rican. My mama wasn’t the only one who told me to stop telling folks I was Puerto Rican, but my brother as well. One day, my brother heard me tell a group of neighborhood White kids that I was Puerto Rican.

He immediately called me into the house. As soon as I walked in, he grabbed me by the shoulders and with tears in his eyes said, "Don't be telling people we're Puerto Rican! Don't you know White people don't like Puerto Ricans?!" As a little brown girl I never realized that other brown people belonged to other ethnic/racial groups.

Negative comments about being Puerto Rican were not just in my home but in the playground as well. At school, Mexican kids had no qualms about calling me a spic. In fact, one day, a White kid called my girlfriend a spic. Her response to him was, "I ain't no spic. I'm not Puerto Rican." She then went on to explain to me that Puerto Ricans are spics, and Mexicans are wetbacks. I remained silent.

I carried this silence with me for years. Instead of telling people to go to hell, I accepted their word as truth. I began to loathe the very idea of my Puerto Rican blood. I felt wrong. I felt negative. Soon enough, I stopped telling people I was Puerto Rican. Puerto Rican kids weren't as offensive. They were just less inclusive because I didn't speak like them; I didn't live in a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood, or I didn't look Puerto Rican.

During my junior high and high school years, I stifled my voice because I didn't know where I belonged. However, I eventually rediscovered myself during my late college years. I exposed myself not just to Puerto Rican culture but also to all cultures. The more I stepped outside of my comfort zone, the more I was able to close the gap of my identity crisis. I eventually capped my insecurities after a trip to the island where I met my papa. After 24 years, the mystery of who and what made me was sealed the instant I saw my eyes on his face.

I now look at the whopping eyes of my five-month-old daughter, Eva Salomé Álvarez Davis. She is Mexican; she is Puerto Rican; she is White; and she is Black. Yet, when I look at her, I don't see any of this. All I see is a little girl who has the potential to enjoy life and to develop her own thoughts; I see a little girl who will be confident in her skin regardless of ethnic and racial backgrounds; and I see a little girl who will benefit from being multicultural and who will cross all boundaries despite color and language.

I'm excited to be her mama.

What did you learn from Brenda's story?

The above narratives share some of the blended histories in my family. Now, it is time to think about your own.

Write about the first time you met someone with a different racial identity than your own.

Write about a family member or other loved one who has a different racial identity than yours.

Since we are on a journey to understand how mixed-race identity operates within the context of racial classification and plays out in our classrooms, writing our racial histories is critical to our understanding. In writing our racial histories and keeping them personal, local, and immediate, we lay the groundwork for a continued journey to racial literacy. It offers us the process and the product to challenge our assumptions about others, and in this case, multiracial students. Since this book focuses on multiracial students, ultimately, we are searching to better understand the multiracial experience.

That all sounds fine, yet there is a warning we must heed. We have to continually balance the information we learn, whether from the research or from the personal narratives, with the temptation to use it to form stereotypes about multiracial students and other students of color. There is no single multiracial experience, for if there were, a stereotype could aptly describe it. But there is not. There is no singular white experience, and if there were, a stereotype could describe it. If you are white, you know you are not like every other white person in this country. The same can be said about students of color, and, in this case, multiracial students of color. In *Challenging Multiracial Identity* (2006), Rainier Spencer states “there is no singular interracial experience any more than there is any singular Afro-American or any singular Euro-American experience” (p. 19). When I draw singular conclusions about the multiracial experience, I create stereotypes and deny the richness and variety of each of the narratives included in this book.

One such narrative comes from Donna Rogers Beard, who shares another grandmother’s story:

Three facts that will liberate the so-called biracial child and the rest of us: One, there is no such thing as race. Two, life is difficult. Three, culture, as we know it, is too narrowly defined. I am the grandmother of a so-called mixed-race or interracial child. I want her to grow up in a world that has put race on the shelf with the belief that the world is flat.

Like me, Donna Rogers Beard has solidified her thinking about race with the birth of her granddaughter. She writes,

It has taken me nearly 60 years to understand and clarify my rejection of race as a legitimate category. The birth, two years ago, of my granddaughter

has caused me to focus on the topic of racial identity. I hope that I will be able to share with my granddaughter the following: There is no such thing as race. She can save herself a whole lot of grief if she does not allow herself to be sucked into this false construct. She must take control of her world by understanding who she is—what does she enjoy doing, who does she enjoy being with, and why—and not allow anyone to tell her that she must identify with any group or person based on what society has defined as race.

Even though there is no singular racial experience for a group, we each have a singular racial history or story that we can tell. Your story differs from mine and from Donna's, and it is just as valid and important. By writing our own stories and using them as the basis for our understanding others' stories, we can learn more about ourselves and the shared experiences of those who do not look like us.

Recall your first encounter with racial discrimination. Write about it below.

Describe your school years. What encounters did you have with others who did not look like you?

Describe your young adult years. What encounters did you have with persons from other racial identity backgrounds?

What life experiences caused you to look more closely at issues of race?

Describe any pivotal experiences you have had with students.

What are your assumptions about multiracial students?

Below are some things I now know. Please add your new understandings to the growing list.

WHAT I LEARNED

- A racial history has to be personal, local, and immediate (Singleton and Linton, 2006).
- As a white person, I have not had to make choices about what box to check on forms. I knew I was white.
- I always felt the white box was the only box to check, and unconsciously or consciously, I believed it to be the best box.
- My racial history as a white person is written in contrast to persons of color.
- There is a system of privilege based on phenotypes or physical appearance.
- Multiracial students complicate our understandings of race.
- "There is no singular interracial experience any more than there is any singular Afro-American or any singular Euro-American experience" (Spencer, 2006, p. 19).
- Learning the stories of others builds my knowledge base to better understand my students.

What have you learned? Write about some things you know now.

Exploring my racial history grounds my thinking for the next steps on our journey.

TAKING IT TO THE CLASSROOM: STRATEGIES TO BUILD COMMUNITY AND IMPROVE ACHIEVEMENT

- Have students write a *bio* poem—a poem that expresses their uniqueness. Post the poems on the walls of your classroom.
- Create a *Visual Buffet* of pictures on the walls of your schools. Ensure the school walls are covered with pictures of students of many different colors and cultures. Even though this is a well-known strategy, I still find bare walls when I walk into schools.
- Build a classroom library with books about students with diverse heritages (see suggestions at the end of the chapter).
- If you are an English teacher or an elementary teacher, use a writers' workshop format so that students write their own cultural histories.

OUR JOURNEY THUS FAR

We are building background knowledge as we continue our journey to learn more about multiracial students. In Chapter 2, we begin “falling off the cliff” to learn more about *what we don't know we don't know* about race and how racism weaves its way through every aspect of our lives, including issues of identity that impact our students in today's classrooms. Since there is no singular racial group experience, our journey takes a detour as we look more closely at issues of race.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES FOR WRITING CULTURAL AND RACIAL HISTORIES

- Davis, B. (2006). *How to teach students who don't look like you: Culturally relevant teaching strategies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Singleton, G., & Linton, C. (2006). *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Terrell, R., & Lindsey, R. (2009). *Culturally proficient leadership: The personal journey begins within*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.