



The Way It Is With Me

an interview with
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How significant has it been in your life to be biracial?

I consider myself a black man. I honestly never identified myself as or thought of myself as a biracial person. I have always been well aware that my mom is white, never been ashamed of either side or been reluctant to disclose either side; but I have always identified as a black man. I think this is largely because my mom kind of suggested that I do so as a kid.

When I started to think about what race is about, I had questions about what am I. I was curious around those questions. I discussed with my mom where I stood and I think she realized that our society is what our society is, a society that is color conscious and that if you met me or you saw me on the street, you would automatically assume that I was a black man. She took a realistic perspective that that's the way it was, and certainly to try and say that I was white and live the life of trying to be white would be insane because it's clear that I'm not just that. Trying to live as a biracial or multiracial person would pose its own problems in terms of an identity between two identities. Remember, this was well before any push for any real understanding about biracial issues.

That's just the way it is with me. If other people want to identify as biracial or multiracial, that's fine with me. But I also recognize historically that any time they had a chance, a lot of people would run from the black community and that disturbed me. I feel very uncomfortable telling people how they should identify because a lot of people tell me I shouldn't identify as I do.

I always find it necessary to ground myself in history. That's the way I do my analysis. There is a real historical sense in the black community that a lot of times when people have the opportunity to flee they do, and only the most noble among them do not. So I think the black community is understandably sensitive and see

this as a rejection. As time passes, perhaps it will be seen less so. As the children of the '60s and '70s are growing older, there are more and more voting age people who are of mixed marriages and so perhaps the trend will change.

I can't emphasize enough the extent to which the black community is welcoming to people who identify with them, whether they are three quarters black, half black, or whatever. As a little kid, I grew up in an area where the minority was definitely the majority. There were white kids who were there because they didn't have much money, and they were accepted as long as they accepted the black community, as long as they allowed themselves to be accepted. I have always thought that was something wonderful about the black community.

What experiences when you were young made you conscious of your identity?

Starting in the first grade, I was in a neighborhood school with primarily people of color and without much money. I guess I passed the tests and found myself in this other school my second grade year. Although there were still plenty of people of color there, these classes that I tested into were exclusively white — this was a gifted child program. I started wondering why I was in these classes with people who didn't look like me when the year before I was in all these classes with people who did. I couldn't quite figure it out; so I think that was when I started to really think about issues of race.

What should teachers be thinking about and doing to support multiracial children?

In the ideal childhood, race wouldn't be an issue. and I guess for a while it really wasn't for me. But once it becomes an issue, it clearly should be dealt with at home and in the classrooms. Kids should have an opportunity to explore race; teachers should give them this opportunity. Some teachers are afraid to deal with these issues, because like all people, some teachers aren't really equipped to deal with it in an intelligible way. Teachers need to be trained in order to have a grasp on these complex issues **before** they begin dealing with children.

One thing that I dealt with when I was growing up in two races, something that most people don't focus on, is that about 80% of the black people in this country, I'm not quite sure about the numbers, have, in fact, non-black blood in them as a consequence of this country's history. A good number of people who classify themselves as whites in this country have non-white blood in them.

When I started learning that, I realized that it really is more of a continuum than anything else. If you have

black people who are assailing you as a kid because you have one parent who is white, chances are that person has an ancestor or two who are white as well. It is a difference of degree rather than difference of kind. Once you have come to terms with that, everything just seems a lot more fluid. Most of us are along that continuum somewhere, and you have to guess about someone else based on the color of skin, which is of course inexact. I think if people saw it in that respect, they would have a better abstract idea of what race really is in this country and how judging people based on it is so absurd.

Providing a Healthy Environment for Interracial Children

by Joyce Ladner, *Interracial Books for Children Bulletin* 15 (1984): 6, pp. 7-8
(quoted in *The Issues of Parents of Biracial Children* by M. Frances Davidson
unpublished manuscript, copyright © February 1994)

The following suggestions should be useful in establishing parent-teacher partnerships:

Multiracial children need:

- Love, support, acceptance.
- A clear sense of both, or all, parts of their identity. Knowledge of and involvement in the cultural heritages of both parents is important.
- An atmosphere of openness where racial issues can be discussed; children can freely discuss questions about such issues as skin color, hair texture, and the complexities of cultural identification; and children can talk candidly about their feelings and share their reactions to difficult and upsetting experiences with adults.
- Support from adults on handling difficult situations and guidance in learning how to stand up for themselves, protect themselves, and maintain pride in who they are.
- Accurate information — discussed in age-appropriate ways — about racism in our society and the ways in which it may affect them. Topics to be discussed include name-calling, prejudice, stereotypes, discrimination, hierarchies based on skin color, and exclusionary group behavior.

Young children must be helped to understand that they are good and beautiful just the way they are, and that anyone who is hostile or disapproving has a problem.

- Assistance in sorting out their own unique identity. The complexities of dealing positively with both

the definition imposed by society, with its current racism, and with one's own self-identity are quite difficult.

Children need help with this, and each family will find its own ways of tackling the issue.

Teachers should meet with parents of interracial children and discuss, in addition to the issues affecting all children, the parents' feelings about the children's cultural and racial heritage, how the parents support the child's heritage at home, and how they would like to see this heritage supported at school. How, for example, do parents handle their children's questions about racial identity? How do they respond to any derogatory comments made by other children or adults?

- On-going experiences in multiracial, multicultural environments where many cultural/racial heritages are celebrated. Teachers should include in the curricula people of varying cultural and racial heritages, while at the same time examining the interplay of heritages.
- Role models, older children and adults, who are proud to be from interracial families and other interracial families with various, different combinations of people.
- Books which portray interracial families and materials which enable children to role play their own families or see themselves reflected.
- Exposure to individuals and groups combating racism and working to create a society with racial justice and freedom for all people to be who they are.