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# Can We Talk About Race? And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation [Book review]

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***Can We Talk About Race? And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation* by Beverly Daniel Tatum**

Reviewed by Jacob K. Tingle, Trinity University<sup>1</sup>

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Beverly Daniel Tatum (2007). *Can We Talk About Race? And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation*. Beacon Press, 2007. xvi + 147 pp.

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Ten years after Beverly Daniel Tatum wrote, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* she again closely examines the world of American education. Dr. Tatum's book consists of four chapters, each adapted from a talk given at Simmons College during the inaugural lecture series on Race, Education, and Democracy. What developed is a book that is simultaneously captivating, thought provoking, and replete with practical advice.

The informal writing style results in words that leap off the page and indicate that Dr. Tatum's skills as a storyteller go well beyond the written word. In fact, the reader can almost hear her delivering the text in what were certainly engaging lectures. She discusses topics such as culturally relevant pedagogy, hegemony, constructed consciousness, and stereotype threat, yet the book is not filled with technical jargon or esoteric ideas that would be off-putting to the layperson. The most important aspect of the book is that while Dr. Tatum is providing excellent theoretical frameworks, she follows with practical, "What can I do?" knowledge.

In the introduction, Dr. Tatum constructs an excellent foundation. In order to frame her thesis, i.e., that society has a major problem discussing race and racial issues, she briefly covers the history of school desegregation (the heart of chapter one) while encompassing ground up to *No Child Left Behind*. She writes, "The fact of school resegregation and its implications for important aspects of our democratic society lie at the core of each of the essays included in this book" (p. xi). Though not stated explicitly in the introduction, Dr. Tatum is challenging educational leaders (indeed everyone reading the book) to become critical thinkers and to apply a critical theory perspective to all they do; concepts that are especially important for the student affairs professional. As Frigo (1997) indicates, it is the job of a college to facilitate the "intellectual, spiritual, physical, social, and emotional" (p. 29) growth of its students. How can the student affairs practitioner help fulfill that mission if s/he is not fully cognizant of the dangers associated with blind acceptance of the status quo?

Chapter one presents the reader with two significant concepts. The first is that today's American secondary school is more resegregated than at any other point post-

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*Brown*. This level of resegregation suggests that college students are coming to campus having had less interaction with heterogeneous populations. She intimates this lack of exposure to be devastating because both students of color and White students are coming to our campuses vastly unprepared to deal with people different from themselves. This “lack of direct experience means that what one learns about the ‘other’ is too often secondhand information, conveyed in the form of media stereotypes” (p. 108). The implication of which leads to her second important idea, in order to combat this resegregation, schools leaders must be intentional in efforts to affirm identity for all students.

Building upon the historical context of the *Brown* era, Dr. Tatum describes the last 50 years of schooling in the United States. The reader cannot help but be taken aback when reading President Nixon’s criteria for Supreme Court appointments: “I don’t care if he’s a Democrat or Republican . . . he must be against busing, and against forced housing integration” (p. 9). As a reader that grew up during the “Rehnquist court,” I was troubled to learn he was appointed under such stipulations. Furthermore, the first chapter brings the ethical considerations of individual “rights” versus utilitarianism to the forefront. Regardless, however, of whether the reader makes decisions based on a deontological or a utilitarian framework, Dr. Tatum makes a compelling argument that resegregation is a problem which needs to be addressed. Although not explicitly stated in these terms, the chapter concludes with practical advice for the student affairs professional.

The importance of affirming identity, building community, and cultivating leadership (Dr. Tatum’s ABC’s of creating learning environments) cannot be overstated. She writes that the first cog, identity development, is paramount in our cycle of socialization. How one interacts with others and his/her worldview are both functions of social environment. Without strong identity affirmation at school, the student of color may come to think his/her “funds of knowledge” (Stanton-Salazar, 2004) are lacking and that s/he is therefore second-class. Furthermore, without strong identity development, the White student can effortlessly be encoded with hegemonic ideals. In essence, failure to force White students to “unpack their own privilege” (McIntosh, 1989) will ensure that systemic racism continues.

It is on these issues which student affairs professionals can have a profound impact. Despite the recent events at the University of Delaware, programs in residence halls or student union buildings or with on-campus cultural groups can be effective means to educate students. As Gnad (1997) indicates, truly valuable training programs provide energizing educational opportunities outside the classroom that can directly relate to a student’s intellectual, emotional, and social growth. Dr. Tatum cautions, however, that one-time “solutions” may only serve to build immunity—for true change to occur educators must be intentional and be sustained in their efforts.

Chapter two, in the spirit of critical pedagogy, encourages the reader to ask questions rather than to accept current practices “just because.” She connects the dots by explaining the importance of racial diversity and cross-cultural learning. Dr. Tatum argues that academic and social achievement improves in racially diverse learning environments, but she contends that creating effective strategies are difficult when the effects of racial stereotyping are not openly discussed. In this chapter, she implores each of us to explore our own false consciousness as a means to analyze our environment. In

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an effort to encourage self-exploration, Dr. Tatum details specific programs designed to examine concepts of prejudice, White privilege, and internalized oppression. She writes that this exploration-of-self is paramount if we are to become effective anti-racist role models.

The reader unfamiliar with the historical development of the common school and the IQ test will be disturbed to learn about the close ties early educational leaders had with the eugenics movement. While refuting the concept of hereditarianism, Dr. Tatum elucidates one of the most important messages in the book, how malleable knowledge can be. She further champions educational leaders, teachers, and parents to expect more from students. However, she encourages us to do so in ways that do not increase anxiety to inappropriate levels. She details the research of Claude Steele and reveals the relationship between academic performance and stereotype threat. Building upon the identity affirmation information in chapter one, the next chapter presents the reader with very real examples of what can occur without strong identity development.

In chapter three, Dr. Tatum asserts that without strong personal identity development, inter-racial friendships are almost impossible. She contends that in order for people of different races to be friends they cannot pretend to be colorblind. Rather, the two parties must discuss race early, while bonds are forming. If not, Dr. Tatum writes, a relationship is doomed to fail because of the “unspoken” questions each person will have in the back of their mind. True friendships require frank conversations and the ability to confront sensitive issues when they occur. She details both successful and unsuccessful cross-racial friendships, which serve as a “how to” for the reader. The most important (and most difficult) component of the successful relationship is to know oneself. The concept of authenticity is important and runs throughout the book, but is made most salient in this chapter. Dr. Tatum once again offers practical advice that can serve as a guide for all readers, not just educational leaders. She concludes the chapter by providing information on the Study Circles Resource Center. The last pages of chapter three provide those active in student life with a great resource to begin those difficult dialogues on their own campuses.

For those who on a daily basis work closely with developing the college student, chapter four is perhaps the most important and most practical. Dr. Tatum concludes the book by discussing the impact higher education can have on democracy. This chapter serves as an excellent capstone to the text as she solidifies the concepts of identity affirmation, leadership cultivation, and movement from theory to practice. She writes the college students of today are the leaders of tomorrow and asks the question: How will we work to prepare them?

I assert that Dr. Tatum has achieved the goal in making this a practical, relevant, and accessible book. All readers, be they classroom practitioners, student affairs professionals, or campus administrators can benefit from the historical underpinnings of each chapter, the call for critical thinking, and the practical hands-on information in the book. She cautions however that, “You have to give enough [education] to make some real progress, to get past the initial discomfort, and persist to the point where you can really begin to see the benefits” (p. 125). Throughout the text, she intimates that doing the right thing can be daunting. The book reinforces much of the scholarship in the realm of

educational research, but especially concepts of critical theory, White privilege, and creating diverse learning environments. I recommend this book without reservation to anyone who truly cares about making college campuses in the United States places of equal opportunity.

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