



Intro to white people

Lessons learned in school are not always about academics. And that's why integrated schools matter to me.

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Whenever I hear a new tussle over voluntary resegregation of public schools, I think of Tony.

That's not his real name. But the guy I'm calling Tony for the purposes of this essay was a black youth, straight from one of the worst neighborhoods in Indianapolis, who wound up living on my dormitory floor during my freshman year at Indiana University 24 years ago.

Back then, nearly all of us floormates hung together as a group, eating dinner together, hitting campus parties during weekends and cutting classes to watch our soap operas during the day (yes, I'm man enough to admit a long-ago fondness for Luke and Laura).

But not Tony. He and I got along fine, and we both spent time easily with the only other brother who lived on that floor - three chocolate chips in a doughy cookie of more than 20 guys.

But Tony, energetic and muscular, chiseled like a sculpture chipped from an iron bar, had trouble fitting in with the other white guys on the floor. Often, when social subtleties failed him, he'd resort to anger and intimidation to get the respect to which he felt entitled, which only made him a deeper outcast.

I didn't fully understand it then, but I instinctively suspected his biggest problem: He had never lived among white people before.

This was something I'd seen growing up in Gary, Ind., where the population was probably 90 percent black. It's hard to grasp the intricacies of white culture when your only contact with white people is what you see on TV and when they wait on you at a department store or restaurant.

Because I was sent to mostly white private schools starting in the fifth grade, I learned early how to cope. How to deal with being a minority of one or two. How to parry prejudices of others without drowning in frustration.

It took me months to realize white folks would agree to do things they absolutely detested just to be polite.

But when I reached college I saw black youths struggling to make the same transition at a much older age. Already facing the same challenges any freshman must confront, they had the added strain of learning the nuances of their new status as strangers in a social scene about which they knew very little.

I felt the transition forced you to make deep decisions about your own identity. Everything from what music you blast in your room, to what clothes you wear, who your friends are and where you hang out comes into question. Where you land is often a fitful compromise between who you want to be and who you want the world to see.

Like any transition, making it later in life is only more painful. And I watched as some black friends got isolated in dormitories, struggled in classes, dropped off the school newspaper and sometimes left school altogether. I'm sure there were many reasons for these problems, but the culture clash didn't help.

So when I hear people shrug off the implications of resegregated schools, I want to sound the alarm. This isn't to say that an all-black environment is always a bad thing. But I'm convinced that attending schools with large numbers of white kids teaches many young black children how to cope with white-dominated settings in later life - from college dormitories to corporate boardrooms and beyond.

If white students are raised in all-white environments, they miss an important cultural learning experience. But black kids in segregated schools can also miss out on learning how to live in a mostly white world, which can be the key to their later success.

As some Pinellas County public schools begin to re-segregate and the School Board is pondering a new way to assign students to schools, I know that the really sticky question is how to achieve diversity; forced busing is a blunt instrument that didn't serve our school system well. And the achievement gap between black and white students remains a persistent argument against the impact of schools where white and black kids share classrooms, but may not share their lives.

But in an increasingly multicultural world, allowing our schools to devolve into segregated camps which echo the diversity missteps of our neighborhoods feels too much like giving up - setting our kids up for failure in the process.

And, as happens so many times, it's the children of color who will pay the dearest price.