

A White Educator's Ongoing Journey; Toward Racial and Cultural Competence  
By Karen Manheim Teel (Chapter 11)

Growing up in a world without diversity is one common to many. I grew up in an all white community, mostly of Irish ancestry, attended Catholic school and both my father and grandfather were volunteer firemen in our community. That was in the 1960's. Around the age of 8, my mother, younger brother and I traveled to Detroit, Michigan, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. My exposure to diversity was limited to the CBS Evening News. While in Detroit, the riots broke out in the city and Amtrak was on strike. As we sat on the Amtrak train, I remember the fear I felt as racial unrest was looming on top of us and I did not understand why. It was not a matter of ignorance, just a matter of fact. My parents did not raise us to be racists. It was just never discussed, so to be in the middle of what proved to be an extremely violent environment was frightening.

Similar to Ms. Teel, my first black classmate was in my junior and senior years of high school. I remember thinking how uncomfortable for this poor young man as he was so alone yet quite accepted by his peers.

When Ms. Teel began to teach she was told that African American students had very low skills and were not motivated. She heeded all of the advice by her supervisor as she was urged to send out students for referral in order to maintain control. She made certain assumptions and agreed with the tracking situation. It was when Ms. Teel began her doctoral studies did she then become more concerned and outraged at what she believed was the way that African American students were set up for failure. My

personal experiences align with those of Ms. Teel. Although I was never told directly that African American students were less motivated or that they had very low skills, it was obvious to me that these students were set up for failure from the beginning. My most recent experience was that as Principal. A family that attends our high school recently sponsored a student, "Brian". He is 16 years of age and African American. He does not have an intact home life, as his father is deceased and his mother ill. He grew up and was "educated" at a school in Queens. I use the term "educated" loosely as I have taken "Brian" under my wing as a personal challenge to help him in Math. You may think that it's crazy for me to take on this challenge as Principal as my day is certainly full enough, but there is something that truly bothers my core being that this young man has not been afforded the same opportunities as the other students in my school because of his background. The schools that he attended previously let him down academically and it is not right that a bright young man who IS motivated be cheated of a future because of the educational system to which he was exposed - "Brian" was set up for failure.

Why is it acceptable for teachers to reprimand and expect anything less than what a student is capable of in a White classroom, but not in an African American classroom? When are we going to learn that our youth, regardless of color or creed, are our future?

In her essay, Ms. Teel references a book, *Why Are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* As Principal, one of my goals this year is to talk with the "black kids who are sitting together in the cafeteria" and find out why? Why is it when I asked 10 African American young ladies on our European trip to stand for a photo with 10 of their White peers, they declined? What are we doing wrong that would allow them

to sit together in the cafeteria or are we doing all right and they are doing all wrong? As a 53 year old woman who grew up in the height of racial tension, I do not understand why we expect less, give less and allow “black kids to sit together in the cafeteria”.