



Closing the Achievement Gap: Giving a Voice to Vulnerable Teens

a research paper

by Lois Bridges, Ph.D



ID

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ID—My Mission

by Dr. Alfred W. Tatum

“If you fix a boy,
you don’t have to repair a man.”



Seventeen years ago, I invited four young males to join me for a conversation at the back of my classroom.

Eager to share my thoughts and have students critique my thinking as it related to our reading and writing together, I engaged them in a discussion about text.

That conversation helped shape my subsequent teaching, research, and advocacy. It soon became clear to me that there was power in the voices of these young men; however, they were remaining silent because they believed that others simply did not care about what they had to offer. One young male shared, “They won’t listen to us anyway.” This remark and others like it led to my commitment to tap into the voices of adolescents who are struggling to shape or make sense of their identities. I then began to write, in hopes of having these young voices shape the national conversation about what it means to educate students who are negotiating the margins in schools and in their communities.

In taking a historical approach to strengthen my advocacy and support for young readers and writers, it became clear that though today’s students are faced with similar growing pains as those who came before them, they are not being provided with literacy resources in school to counter some of the larger out-of-school forces. These are forces that, framed within changing social and economic circumstances, are souring childhoods and resulting in negative outcome trajectories. Therefore, it seemed to me urgent that we thrust reading and writing upon these young people in very intentional and unapologetic ways, and that we squeeze every ounce of possibility out of every piece of text and every teaching moment.

The ID program has the potential to enable thousands of students to find their voices and engage with texts that can connect them to goals larger than themselves. Being part of such an effort is rewarding, to say the least. More important, this program is a testament to all the students who allowed me to experience the full measure of their humanity as we read and wrote together; shared our intimate, personal thoughts; learned to coexist for the benefit of others and ourselves; and developed a kinship that will keep us forever connected through the ideas and ideals we encountered and shared.

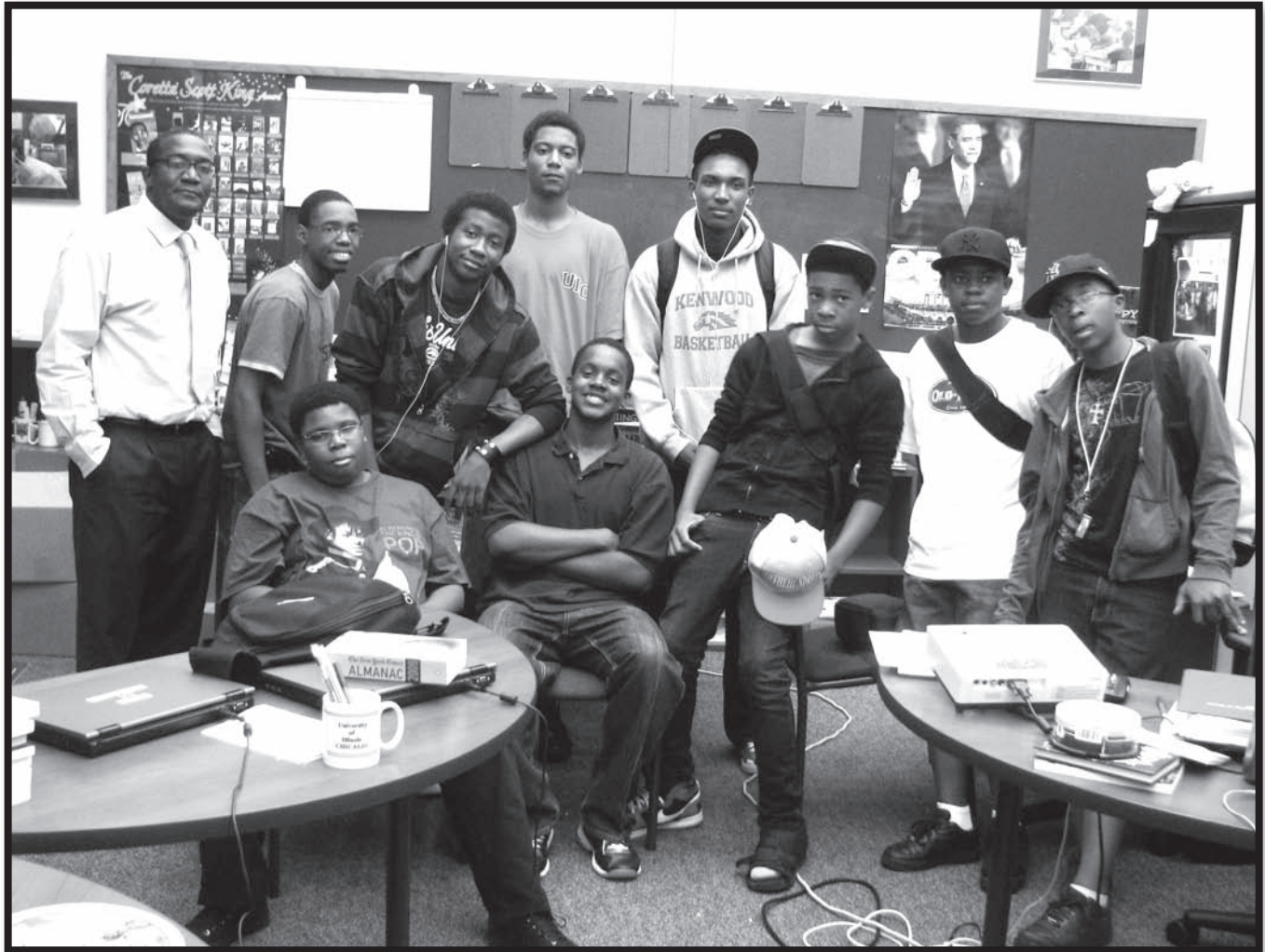
Those four boys talking in the back of my classroom became pillars that supported so many others. The students and teachers who come in contact with ID will also be the beneficiaries of those exchanges. ID students will be invited to exercise their right **to be** advocates and **to have** advocates *on the pages* and *outside the pages* of what they read and write. Those advocates will help these young people secure the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. This is my hope.

CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP: THE SAVING GRACE OF “ENABLING TEXTS” AND “RAW WRITING”

A “silent epidemic,” largely unknown to the American public, is swiftly, effectively destroying the promise of a fulfilling life for a huge number of our most vulnerable teens—those who are “low-income, minority, urban, single-parent, attending large, public high schools in the inner city” (p. 1). The epidemic, a toxic mix of school disengagement, failure, and dropout, disproportionately affects poor students of color. Nearly half of all black, Latino, and Native American students fail to graduate from high school (Bridgeland, et al., 2006). The statistics for African-American males are particularly alarming. According to every standardized measurement of academic success, African-American males consistently appear at the bottom. And many go straight from school failure to imprisonment. Between 1980 and 2000, the number of prison inmates in the United States grew from 500,000 to more than two million; while African Americans are only about 13 percent of the U.S. population, they comprise 50 percent of the prison population (Eckholm, 2006).

In 2007, the Task Force on the Education of Maryland’s African-American Males, convened to study the failure of African-American boys to thrive in its schools, issued devastating findings: “We acknowledge that at every level, there’s been a fundamental failure on behalf of our African-American male students” (p. 8).

The end result of such failure is nothing short of catastrophic. University of Maryland Regent Orlan Johnson, who co-chaired the Task Force, was blunt: “Data has shown us that by the year 2020, if we keep on the same trend we are on now, there will be more African-American males incarcerated than there were enslaved in the United States; that in and of itself tells you where we are” (Fowler, 2007).



The Brother Authors and Dr. Alfred Tatum on the last day of the 2009 African American Adolescent Male Summer Literacy Institute (AAAMSLI).

engage others build capacity

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Act to Overcome

“All students benefit from reading meaningful and significant texts and having the opportunity to create such texts.”

—Alfred Tatum

These statistics, born in large part of poverty—more than one-third of African-American children live below the federal poverty line (Toldson, 2010)—are shocking but, nevertheless, not insurmountable. Indeed, Dr. Alfred Tatum, who grew up in Chicago public housing, has dedicated himself to helping vulnerable teens overcome the strife and hopelessness that too often define their lives and lead to underachievement and school dropout. Inspired by the history of those who embraced literacy as liberation, including Frederick Douglass, James Baldwin, W. E. B. DuBois, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and, more recently, Walter Dean Myers, and drawing from his own life experiences as a teen who found solace and inspiration in books, he has designed a summer literacy institute that invites at-risk adolescents to become “socially conscious readers and writers.” Over the course of five weeks, these young people gather to read provocative, “enabling” texts and respond through discussion and their own writing. Tatum encourages them to write poetry, short stories, children’s stories, and the seeds of novels, and in this way “put their voices on record” as they work to discover and define themselves.

USE ENABLING TEXTS AND EXPLORE TEXTUAL LINEAGE

What are *enabling texts*? Tatum defines them as books or stories that are deeply significant and meaningful to young people because, authored by writers who represent a long line of people who themselves have overcome adversity, they form a *textual lineage* that speaks to the rich possibilities of a life both thoughtful and well lived. Enabling texts offer a road map to life for readers as each of them strives to develop an individual “plan of action” and a “healthy psyche” (p. 65). Through the power of enabling texts, and the talk and writing they inspire, Tatum aims to change the equation for teens—away from learned hopelessness, powerlessness, and grim acceptance of all the worst life has to offer and toward hope, resilience, productivity, and success. Note that Tatum’s work with these texts centers on *human* development, not simply reading development. When working with teens who struggle with reading, too often we give them *disabling texts*—books that, by Tatum’s definition, focus only on skills and strategies and are often developmentally inappropriate. Tatum writes, “To my dismay, I observed one of my graduate students, during her first week in a reading clinic, select *The Berenstain Bears* (a book for primary students) to use with a sixteen-year-old African-American male” (p. 67). Such practices not only embarrass our teens but, in ways that prove destructive, undermine their self-confidence.

Tatum maintains that we've been led astray by narrow standards and standardized tests, choosing texts to help kids navigate those two unwelcome realities rather than titles that can potentially make spirits soar and transform lives. Richard Allington concurs. In his foreword to Kelly Gallagher's *Readicide* (2009), Allington maintains: "The data available indicate that we are producing more and more aliterates every year. . . . State and national initiatives linked to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 have created schools in which lessons are focused primarily on improving reading test scores. As a result, instruction has been narrowed and made even more mind-numbing than in earlier eras" (p. vii). "Mind-numbing" instruction is particularly damaging for our most disengaged students. More than ever, they need transformational texts that engage the heart and inspire a sense of hope and possibility. And while the concept of a textual lineage of enabling books applies to all students, Tatum believes it's especially important for those diverse students coping with the turmoil of poverty and all the challenges wrought by a lack of the opportunities a decent income makes possible.

A recent and inspiring example of "literary transformation" is evident in *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama* (2010). Author-biographer David Remnick describes how Obama, as an adolescent struggling to find himself, searched for his identity among the essays, novels, and poems authored by African-American authors. As a teen growing up in Honolulu, one of the few African Americans among his peers, he turned to a textual lineage of his own creation and "on his own . . . read Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the poems of Langston Hughes, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *The Souls of Black Folk*, the essays of James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*" (p. 79).

CHOOSE TEXTS TO CHANGE LIVES

Carol Dweck, a Stanford University psychologist, writing in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (2006), introduces her readers to two mental constructs: fixed mindset and growth mindset. As the labels suggest, people with a fixed mindset believe they come into the world with a fixed amount of intellectual firepower. They accept failure as an inevitable reflection of their cognitive limitations. People with a growth mindset, on the other hand, refuse to be limited by real or imagined deficiencies of any sort. They believe that with enough hard work, perseverance, and practice, success is inevitable.

In Tatum's world, placing the right text in the hands of a vulnerable teen is the key to overcoming a fixed mindset and building a mindset of growth and possibility. For Tatum, growing up in Chicago's Ida B. Wells Homes, that book was Dick Gregory's autobiography, *Nigger*, a book that Tatum explains "released me from the stigma of poverty, causing me to think differently about my life and moved me to read other texts that strengthened my resolve to remain steadfast as I negotiated a community of turmoil—the Chicago housing projects in the 1970s and 1980s. Gregory's text changed my life" (p. xiv).

Tatum believes that vulnerable teens have lost their regard for *literacy as liberation* that earlier generations simply took for granted. Frederick Douglass's persistent fight for literacy is legendary—when the wife of his slave master, reprimanded by her husband for teaching Douglass to read, abruptly stopped her lessons, Douglass convinced the white children on the plantation to teach him. As Douglass learned and began to read newspapers, political materials, and a wide range of books, he was exposed to a new realm of thought that led him to question and then condemn the institution of slavery. In later years, Douglass credited *The Columbian Orator*, which he discovered as a 12-year-old, with clarifying and defining his views on freedom and human rights. As he famously remarked: "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free."

Sadly, too many teens have not discovered the power of liberation inherent in reading. They are locked into a fixed mindset; their goals center on simple survival. And in this way their fate is sealed, because, as psychologists Aronson, Fried, and Good have demonstrated, "There is very compelling evidence that what a student thinks about intelligence can have a powerful effect on his or her achievement" (p. 115). Indeed, in Richard Nisbett's landmark book, *Intelligence and How to Get It* (2010), the message is clear: intelligence is not primarily genetic but is principally determined by sociocultural influences. Consider Yale Professor Emeritus Seymour Sarason, the founder of community psychology, and his experience as a child of poverty. In their poor Brooklyn neighborhood, Seymour and his family struggled to make ends meet; nevertheless, his father spent what little he had on an expensive encyclopedic dictionary for his family. As Sarason recounts, this made a huge impression on him. It taught him that education is essential and that, with enough hard work and studying, he could overcome his humble circumstances. Hence, the power of enabling texts, which introduce young people to their textual lineage and build for them an intellectual culture in which they learn to believe in themselves as smart, creative, capable human beings.



Dr. Tatum and a young writer review and discuss an original text generated at an AAAMSLI seminar.

Invest in Success

“All kids are indeed capable of generating powerful ideas...all should be inventors of their own theories, critics of other people’s ideas, analyzers of evidence, and makers of their own personal marks on this most complex world.”

—Deborah Meier

Tatum believes that teachers must work on themselves as well as on their students; in particular, they must rid themselves of three persistent and debilitating misconceptions about low-achieving teens. Too many educators, with all good intentions, believe that these teens

- do not want to be educated.
- should accept any form of instruction offered to them.
- need saviors before they need quality education.

Not so, says Tatum, who challenges educators and all adults in a position to nurture teens to ask themselves, “What is U.S. ‘schooling’ doing to or for our vulnerable students?”

Again, Tatum believes that the majestic enabling texts that have helped earlier generations find their way out of poverty and despair (together with a keen focus on student strengths) are essential resources that have sadly been overlooked or underutilized. He rejects outright the notion that low-achieving, disengaged students don’t want to learn. Indeed, he notes that as he considers the welfare and literacy development of this group, he is challenged by the following questions:

- How are we conceptualizing literacy instruction for these teens?
- How are we teaching them to read and write, and what texts are we using?
- How do policies, mandates, curriculums, and personal beliefs affect teachers who are genuinely concerned with addressing the literacy needs of these young people?
- How are we nurturing the identities of these students?
- How are we supporting their beliefs in themselves as academic, cultural, economic, human, social, and spiritual beings?
- How are we helping these young people enjoy school?



Noah Borrero and Shawn Bird (2009) make a similar point in a chapter titled “Focus on What Your Students *Can Do*.” The authors write, “Focusing on students’ deficits is not simply a case of seeing the proverbial half-empty glass. The consequences of such an approach are far-reaching and cumulative. Students and teachers alike suffer as a result of such a focus (and its ensuing labels)” (p. 19). Eric Jensen (2009) notes that students from low-income households often feel “alienated from school” and don’t think their teachers “care about them.” Indeed, as he interviewed these kids, Jensen discovered that they believe their teachers often “talk down to them” (p. 11). Tatum (2009) minces no words: “... many African-American boys feel loathed before they are loved, feel rejected before they are respected, and feel alienated before they are educated. These feelings often morph into expressions of anger” (p. xvi). All the more reason, then, to embrace the directive of Yvette Jackson, chief executive officer of the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education, who maintains that in order to close the achievement gap, educators shouldn’t wring their hands over a perceived lack of potential, but rather should have a fearless belief that all students have potential and teach according to that mindset (Jackson, 2008). In this way, educators can do as Pedro Noguera (2010) urges: expect the best of all their students and “invest in their success” (p. 47).

As a framework for engaging disengaged students with topics and ideas that connect with students’ lives, Tatum introduces four social justice learning platforms:

define self

finding the text and language that help you put your voice on record without waiting for others to define you and your generation

become resilient

remaining steadfast in the face of destabilizing conditions inside and outside school

engage others

bringing others into the fold to strive for a better humanity for all

build capacity

creating a foundation for future generations; agenda-building

Tatum identifies these platforms as a “call to action” to examine the “academic and social ills” (p. 86) that undermine hope and possibility.

Drawing on the African-American tradition of communal literacy (Heath, 1983; Tatum, 2009), Tatum’s African American Adolescent Male Summer Literacy Institute (AAAMSLI) is highly collaborative and anchored to the four learning platforms. As Tatum explains, the teens in AAAMSLI “experience a new kind of power through writing as they move toward a stronger sense of self.”



Empower With Raw Writing

“This is the first requirement for good writing: truth—a connection between the things written about, the words used in the writing, and your real experience in the world you know well.”

—Ken Macrorie

One of the best ways to engage teens in literacy is to invite them to create their own texts. Writing offers students a new kind of power as they craft—through their own writing—a stronger sense of self. And then, as they figure out their own visions and voices through their personal writing, they may well find a way into texts written by other authors. Indeed, the Carnegie Report *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading* (Graham & Herbert, 2010) offers abundant proof that reading and writing are mutually supportive language processes. Students get maximum support when they are able to access and use both:

Comprehending a text involves actively creating meaning by building relationships among ideas in text, and between the text and one’s knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. Having students write about a text should enhance reading comprehension because it affords greater opportunities to think about ideas in a text, requires them to organize and integrate those ideas into a coherent whole, fosters explicitness, facilitates reflection, encourages personal involvement with texts, and involves students transforming ideas into their own words. In short, writing about a text enhances comprehension because it provides students with a tool for visibly and permanently recording, connecting, analyzing, personalizing, and manipulating key ideas in text (p. 13).

Raw Writing, the honest and unapologetic “voices on record” that characterize Tatum’s approach, is the indispensable tool for Tatum’s work with his students at AAAMSLI. But the power of Raw Writing extends beyond the Institute as these teens emerge newly empowered to ask society at large “challenging questions, give different perspectives, and get others involved in acting on issues affecting families, communities, countries, and the world” (Tatum, 2010, p. 90).

Again, like enabling texts, Raw Writing is not about practicing strategies or skills; it’s about helping teens use writing unapologetically to explore their place in the world. The critical importance of this experience is perhaps best summed up by these poignant words, penned by one of the young participants:

You can take my life and my mind too. You don’t have to take my heart; I’m giving it to you. But the *one thing you will never get is my pen because without it I’m nothing. Writing is the only thing I have left* (Tatum, 2010, p. 90).

Define Identity: Vision and Voice

“...help students ‘get their voice on record.’”

—Alfred Tatum

In the development of **ID: voice: vision: identity** (Scholastic, 2010), a literacy program that targets all students, Alfred Tatum draws on both his research and his own experience as an African-American male who grew up in a household and community of turmoil. Tatum has an insider’s understanding of the situations and challenges faced by many of today’s young people. Based on the success of Tatum’s summer literacy institute, ID uses the same tools and resources that he has found so useful in his work with African-American adolescent males: the four learning platforms, collaboration, enabling texts, and Raw Writing. The goal is to help *all* vulnerable teens discover their identities and mark their place in the world with their own voices and visions.

A simple resource with a profound promise, ID is built around deep understandings and passionate yet inherently practical goals for students; ID actively engages students as readers and writers through the expectations and processes outlined below.

Students will:

respond as writers

Students Raw Write in response to slide shows and readings.

read as writers

Students critically analyze what they read—mentor texts, the writings of peers, and their own writing.

write as readers

Students refine their own writing to craft final portfolio pieces.

build their textual lineages

Students read diverse texts included in the ID Anthology and in the ID trade book extension collection.

Act on Hope

“Because young [people] are unique and face their own challenges, they must identify texts that mark their times and their lives. If we create opportunities for this to happen in schools...they will not only begin to trust the texts, they will begin to trust us, too. Then maybe we’ll hear one of them say, ‘Education is on my side.’ This is my hope.”

—Alfred Tatum

We need to “get it right” for our students of color. In his *New York Times* column of March 28, 2010, Frank Rich reminds us that the demographics of the country are the “avatars of a change.” Births to Asian, black, and Hispanic women accounted for 48 percent of all births in America in the 12 months ending in July 2008. By 2012, the next presidential election year, non-Hispanic white births will be in the minority.

Let us hope that we also see a corresponding change in our schools—a shift from instructional policies that inadvertently undermine the literacy growth of many students to a widespread understanding of effective resources and instruction. Let this shift begin by exposing students to enabling texts that transcend generations and resonate deeply with young readers. Only then may we hope to meet the promise of the ID Preamble, the pledge Alfred Tatum asks his own students to recite:

**We, the authors, will seek
to use language to define who we are,
build and nurture resilient beings,
write for the benefit
of others and ourselves,
and use language
prudently and unapologetically
to mark our time
and mark our lives.**

**This we agree to,
with a steadfast commitment
to the ideals of justice, compassion,
and a better humanity for all.**

To this end, we write!

To this end, I write!

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