

## THE BELL: Hearts & Minds

### Episode 3 – White Kids

[Bell rings]

**Ashé Nevil:** We had an assignment where we had to ask ourselves: Have we really come far from the *Brown vs. Board of Education*? Actually, New York City schools are more segregated than southern schools. And when I found that fact I was just like – what? Because this is New York City, one of the most progressive cities not only in America but in the world! How is it more segregated than the South, which is supposed to be known as pro-Confederate?

**Taylor McGraw:** Hey listeners, I'm Taylor McGraw, editor of The Bell, a media platform that elevates the voices of young people in the conversation about education and empowers them to lead the fight for their futures. This season, called Hearts & Minds, explores school segregation through the eyes of those most affected by it: students.

A few weeks ago, I went on a Googling spree – you know when one thing just keeps leading to another and, before you know it, there are like 32 tabs open, and your laptop's getting too hot to touch, sounding like an airplane preparing for takeoff? That happened. And it all started with a footnote.

I was re-reading Chief Justice Earl Warren's opinion in the 1954 *Brown v. Board* ruling – which is a totally normal thing to do. And I came across a footnote with a long list of psychology studies that the Court cited in making its argument that segregated schools generate a feeling of inferiority among black students.

The first researcher listed in the footnote is Dr. Kenneth B. Clark, a famous African-American psychologist and educator from Harlem. He and his wife Mamie, a fellow psychologist, are perhaps best known for creating the now infamous “doll test,” back in 1940. You've probably seen a version of the doll test over the years. The design is simple. A child is presented four dolls, identical except for the skin color – and then the researcher asks the child questions:

**Researcher:** Which doll is the pretty doll? And why is that doll pretty?

**Black child:** Because she's white and has two eyes.

**Researcher:** Which doll is the ugly doll? Why is that doll ugly?

**Black child:** Because he's black.

**Taylor:** The doll test demonstrated that black children, especially those who attended racially segregated schools, were likely to associate the black doll with negative characteristics and the white doll with positive ones. This, and similar social science research, formed the foundation of the *Brown* decision.

But, in the decades after the case:

**Richard Heffner:** Clark was somewhat disappointed that the Court, in citing his research had ignored two other points he had made – that racism was as profoundly American as the Declaration of Independence and that school segregation twisted the personality development of whites as well as Negro children.

**Taylor:** This is Richard Heffner host of a TV show called “Open Mind,” interviewing Clark in 1982.

Just a heads up, the audio quality isn't great.

**Kenneth Clark:** When I saw the television program that showed these poor white children in South Boston...

**Taylor:** Clark is referencing riots from the mid-70s when Boston implemented a school desegregation busing program.

**Kenneth Clark:** ...with their faces contorted with hate, totally irrational, I don't think those youngsters were born that way. I know they weren't. They were let down, and I wish that the Supreme Court had said in its *Brown* decision: Look, we can't do this to white children. You can't dehumanize white children by having them go around contorted with hate and dehumanized by hate.

**Taylor:** Clark wasn't alone in his assessment that white children also suffered from segregated schools. In fact, back in 1948, there was a survey of more than 500 social scientists from around the country on the probable psychological effects of enforced segregation, a.k.a. Jim Crow. Not surprisingly, 90% of the social scientists said the segregated group, blacks, experienced harmful psychological effects. But, what's often overlooked is that 83% felt that the group enforcing the segregation – whites – also experienced harmful effects. Remember, this was in 1948. The NAACP submitted this evidence to the Supreme Court as part of an 18-page social science statement signed by the Clarks and 30 other pre-eminent researchers.

**Kenneth Clark:** In our social science brief, which we presented to the Court, the Court very eloquently stated the detrimental effects of segregation on minority children but did not point out the detrimental effects of segregation or racism on white children, which probably means that we sort of accept as norm moral schizophrenia for whites as part of a realistic, competitive society.

**Taylor:** Moral schizophrenia. Clark coined this term to describe the hypocrisy of claiming egalitarian values but contradicting them in one's actions. What might this look like today? Maybe it's a white mother on the Upper East Side who is outraged when she reads headlines about school segregation in New York City – but who sends her kids to private school. Or maybe it's a mayor who claims he wants “Equity and Excellence” in the school system but maintains policies that inevitably lead to the opposite. The point is, I think we've gotta get more honest with ourselves about the consequences of the privileges we aren't willing to give up.

On that note, the reason I love doing this podcast is because the kids I talk to are always honest, even when it comes to topics that make adults uncomfortable – topics like race.

In this episode you'll meet three high school students in Harlem, who go to a school that's 100% non-white, and you'll hear about their interactions with white kids. Their stories won't even begin to explain the complex ways segregation affects white children in New York City. Someone could write a book on that topic. But their stories will provide some clues about the value of diverse interactions for everyone involved.

[Musical break]

**Ashé:** I was in AP U.S. History class...

**Taylor:** This is Ashé. She just graduated from Democracy Prep Charter High School in West Harlem.

**Ashé:** ...and my history teacher Mr. Morgan, he said that today schools are more segregated than they were during the Civil Rights Movement. In a way, I see that, because Democracy Prep was originally created to help minority students gets on the level of Caucasian students, and when I look at my other friends' schools there's always fights, they say the teachers just don't care about their education. But when I speak to my Caucasian friends, they're like, “Oh yes, we have Macs in our school.” And it's not even a private school, it's a public school. They have sushi in the cafeteria.

**Taylor:** I asked Ashé where she met her white friends.

**Ashé:** My mom said that, which is in a way true, that this is a white world so I need to learn how to work with white people. And she knows I'm very, a Black Panther, pro-black person, so she's like, when you go to college you're gonna meet white people who are going to say ignorant things and you can't, like, snap at them. So in order to help me weave through that process without blowing up in college, my mom, she looked for different types of communities for me to get, like, exposure to white people – because African-Americans, we usually stick to our neighborhoods – so I go Redeemer Youth Group every Friday and I go to the church. I found a really good community. They're really nice people, really nice kids, but they do say some ignorant stuff. Like one white he said the N-word and I was just like, Ohhhh.

**Taylor:** How did he say it? Like in what context?

**Ashé:** It was a rap song. And I was like, it's still not okay. So it's through these, what-you-might-call-it, situations that I've really learned how to speak to white people and try to let them know what's right and what's wrong and why. Another situation I had, we went on a mission trip to Philadelphia and one of the girls had a bandana and she said, "Hey Ashé, look at me!" She started like throwing random hands. I was like, "Don't do that!" And then she got mad and she was like, "Ashé you're not even that thug life, you're not really about that thug life." Because I guess a lot of people call me an Oreo, which in a way is basically saying, Oh you're black and you're smart, therefore you're not really black, you're trying to be white – which is very stupid by the way – and, like, I may not be a part of the activities of that neighborhood, but I'm still a part of that neighborhood. I still see a black man being thrown against a wall. I still see certain things that as a preppy white kid who lives in Staten Island or 80th Street or Tribeca you don't know nothing about.

**Taylor:** Ashé was so stirred by the encounter, she decided to write a poem about it.

**Ashé:** Here it is. It's called "Sensitive Thug."

Hahaha Ashé. Look I'm a thug. That's... not funny.

Ashe it's just a joke. It's not like you're a thug anyways.

Stop being so sensitive.

Stop being so sensitive.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry that I'm so... sensitive.

I'm sorry that my people are seen as thugs and criminals before living human beings.

I'm sorry that Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, and more died for seemingly looking like a thug.

Do you know what it feels like to never be accepted no matter how hard you try?  
To never reach the age of 18 since society deems you thug before a child?  
You don't, so don't you dare call me sensitive.

**Taylor:** Ashé actually read this to the white girl...

**Ashé:** She started crying... and she said, "I'm sorry, I didn't realize how my words affected you." And I think a lot of white people they say things, they don't mean to hurt. But it does hurt.

**Taylor:** This past school year, Ashé had an internship that also gave her exposure to white peers...

**Ashé:** My NY Historical Society Internship is really fun because I get to meet new kids from all over specifically this one guy from Westchester. He's really cool and he's a fellow queer person. We still can come to each other and talk about queer issues and how hard it is to come out to parents and stuff like that. And just you know stuff like music. Like apparently there's something called PC music? I had never heard of it before and I'm going to look it up when I get home. We just talk about a variety of things.

**Taylor:** I asked Ashé how her interactions with the white guy compared to her interactions with the girl in her youth group...

**Ashé:** Well one he's gay, so, he understands how it is to be oppressed in certain ways. And he's just more understanding. He talks about, Yeah I have a couple – I'm trying to word this in the right way – he does have black friends, but he doesn't just have black friends, he understands them. Because a lot of white people say, "Oh, I have black friends." But it's like, that doesn't really mean anything technically, because just because you have them doesn't mean you understand what they go through, ya know?

He just said to me, "I can't understand your struggle as a black woman; however, I can understand your struggle as a queer person, and from that struggle, I know how hard it is to just go through life itself." And to be looked down upon because of our identities. And that's the difference between her and him. He understands, and she is still struggling to understand. We talk now and she sometimes says things and she actually asks me, is that okay? So, I'm glad that, like, me confronting her from last time really showed that we can change. And some people are like Ashé, "Why do you always protest and all this stuff? People don't change their minds and it's a waste of time." This is why I do it because the very small percentage of people that actually do change their minds and learn the perspective that Hey, you're not a person of color and therefore you will not understand all the problems

that we have; however, you can change your actions in a way that can benefit us instead of hurting us. So, I'm just glad that I really get to see that activism really works, in front of me.

**Taylor:** In the fall, Ashé is taking her activism...

**Ashé:** To Brandeis University. I'm very happy with my choice. I try to be like everyone else that has it on film. But like when my mom filmed it, one of our curtains was crooked so she was like I'm not putting it on there. So [laughter] that happened. I was on the train, like, it's 6:59... it's 7:00. It was very anticipating. The computer was being stupid and would not turn on. So, I'm like, "Are you serious?" So like, once it rebooted, I logged into my email and forgot my password. I was like, "Oh my god!" I was so nervous so I just tried in multiple passwords and when I finally opened it I was like, "Oh my god!" And I just kind of blew up and fell to the floor. It got really emotional.

**Taylor:** Thanks in part to her mother's insistence, Ashé was able to meet diverse peers outside of school. But for many black and Hispanic kids, particularly those from low-income neighborhoods, interacting with white kids is rare. This is the case for Whitney and Nelson, two more Democracy Prep students, who just finished their junior year. Before we get to their stories, here is a quick message:

**Alex:** Hi this is Alex

**Andrea:** And this is Andrea

**Alex:** We are huge fans of the bell and are really proud of all the hard work Taylor has put into making this show very powerful.

**Andrea:** We encourage all you listeners to go on iTunes and leave a review which will help grow the Bell Podcast audience. In addition we encourage you to tell your friends, family, and coworkers to check out the show.

**Alex:** Even tell a stranger, if you feel it's safe enough to do so. Or if you have an ex you'd like to reconnect with, this would be the perfect place to start. I've tried it and it works.

**Andrea:** Also, to see more content about the impact of school segregation, check out BellPodcast.com, and if you haven't already, follow the show on Twitter and on Facebook @BellPodcast.

**Taylor:** Whitney and Nelson are really good friends [Whitney and Nelson laugh]. They tend to giggle a lot whenever they're together. We first met about a year ago when I went to visit their school. In our first conversation, they shared a story from 8th grade.

**Whitney:** Because we had to go downtown to take the specialized test and when we went there all you saw were Asians or Whites. Or like that one African American. Or us, taking the test. And that would be it.

**Taylor:** They're talking about the specialized high school admissions test, which is a gatekeeper to the city's nine specialized high schools. Three of those schools, Stuyvesant, Staten Island Tech, and Bronx Science, rank 1, 2, and 3 for the lowest percentage of black and Hispanic students among all public high schools.

**Nelson:** Nobody in the middle school passed the specialized test with high enough scores to get in. So I could kind of see kind of split and then compared with Democracy Prep - you see mostly people of color. But i feel like it's kind of ok for us because there's obviously a graduation gap between people of color and white and asian people. I was looking at that for my algebra project. Like I saw that statistic and I was like this is what this school is focusing on to make that equal.

**Taylor:** Democracy Prep and other charter school networks are known for being strict and academically rigorous. And charters in the city are overall more racially segregated than traditional public schools. Most are in low-income neighborhoods and many serve exclusively students of color. I was curious to hear Whitney and Nelson's thoughts on the lack of racial diversity at their school.

**Nelson:** I don't know, I know college is going to be diverse, so I could just wait. I used to kind of wish that Democracy Prep was more diverse so you could interact with more people.

**Whitney:** I don't know, like, I've never seen a school to be honest that has everything. Like it's culturally diverse. It's always like one school is Asian-Whites, or in the other school, this specifically, is African Americans and Hispanics. You get it, it's like those pairs? It's never like everything. I wish I had a white friend.

**Nelson:** It's like different cultures, too.

**Whitney:** Okay, so I know this girl Kayla. She used to go to Democracy Prep – really smart. She left in 8th grade to go to Spellman.

**Nelson:** Spence. [Laughter]

**Whitney:** But yeah, she went to [Spence] and it's not really a lot of African Americans. She was that one.

**Taylor:** Spence is an all-girls private school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

**Nelson:** The way she described her school sounded like a movie. Like, they obviously have enough money to make it really extravagant. On the weekends and stuff they go like horseback riding and their parents are going to the Hamptons. She went to her friend's house who's in the Hamptons, and her dad owns like 80 businesses, and he's crazy wealthy and rich.

**Taylor:** I asked Whitney if she would trade places with Kayla if she could.

**Whitney:** It's funny because it was like this one instant, I think she was like... she took a picture, and she was with her friends. And I was like, Hmmm, what if I went to Spence? It was like an interesting thought. But I wouldn't go because it would have been hard on me. I would have felt like I'm different. I mean it seemed good at the time because it's like they're going to the Hamptons, they've got the money, da da da. [Laughter.] But that's like the only thing. Other than that, I'm good with where I'm at.

**Taylor:** Whitney made it clear that she didn't have any white friends.

**Whitney:** No, I'm really trying to think, no, uh, no.

**Taylor:** But Nelson had a different answer.

**Nelson:** I have this one white friend, but she's not... She's in New York state, but she lives upstate.

**Taylor:** How'd you meet her?

**Nelson:** Just some game I used to play when I was younger, online. And I've texted her for a couple of years so I feel like I know her.

**Whitney:** You guys have never met?

**Nelson:** No, she lives in Buffalo.

**Whitney:** You guys should meet up.

**Nelson:** Well, she's like in college now.



**Taylor:** In a follow-up interview, I asked Nelson to talk more about his video game friendship, starting with how it came about.

**Nelson:** I was young so now I'm not embarrassed anymore but it was an online game. It was called Wizard 101. I don't know if you've ever heard of it. I was really young and I would play that for hours. I had no life. Like literally just playing that for hours.

**Taylor:** I looked up some YouTube videos of Wizard 101 – and it actually looked pretty cool. Just listen to the theme song:

[Wizard 101 theme song plays]

**Nelson:** It sounds really nerdy. It was nerdy. Oh well. It was a really fun game and I kind of used that as my escape, in a way, because I was going through stuff at home but you know on the computer nobody knows that or you don't have to think about that. Or you're actually in your house where the chaos is happening, but you're in the game. And I met her and she was – she was really different than most people in the game. In general, she's just a really sweet... she's like the nicest person that I ever met. And our friendship just ended up building because we had some of the same interests. And she's in like college now in her junior year – she was really older than me. I was like 11, she was like 16. She kept me under her wing. If I had problems and stuff I would talk to her because she honestly cared and she was really interested because her life seemed pretty good. She had both her parents in her house, and she was financially stable. But I don't know, she just had a real love that not a lot of people actually have.

She gave me some of my first experiences with someone in high school and someone in college. And, like, I never had that because like my older sister is only a year and a half older than me so we're in the same age range. My cousins, they – I think they graduated high school, but they didn't go to college and stuff like that. So, eventually, we added each other on Facebook. Then I got to see more of her life, like how her high school was. Her high school was like, not a dream high school, but like how we see high school, like they have lockers. Every Halloween they decorate their lockers and they do this whole thing and it's really cool. She was really into stuff like that, like Halloween and Christmas. Her family completely renovates the house. You see like a giant christmas tree, and it's a real Christmas tree, not a plastic one.

And it's just really interesting to see – we're not even that far – we're in the same state but live completely different lives. And when I told her some of the stuff I went through like in

my childhood she was really interested because she hasn't met somebody who's gone through that. So much, chaos, I guess. When you're going through stuff, sometimes it just helps to explain or get that off your chest. So, like, I don't know, stuff that I had experienced that I had never really told people I went through in my childhood, like financial struggles, stuff like that. Just being able to tell her that and have her actually know me on a more intimate level helps. It was like I actually have a close friend. Like when we were on the game a lot like she was probably my closest friend because, like, I didn't even open up to my friends at school the way I did to her.

**Taylor:** A few months before I met Nelson, I was talking to another high school student who goes to school in the Bronx. And when I asked him about white kids, he told me almost exactly the same story. He said he had one white friend, who lived in Canada. They'd met playing Xbox and had sustained a really close friendship.

I bet if I could talk to all of the students in New York City, there would be thousands of stories like this. On the one hand, it's exciting that technology is bringing kids of different backgrounds together, but on the other hand, it's sad that for many kids, that's the only way they'll encounter kids from different backgrounds.

[Musical break]

**Taylor:** Before we wrap up, I want to talk a little more about Dr. Kenneth Clark. In the early 1930s, he attended George Washington High School in Washington Heights. Back then, and for a while after that, the school was integrated. Notable alums include Henry Kissinger, Harry Belafonte, and Alan Greenspan. But as Clark fought to help integrate schools in the South in the 1940s and 50s, schools in New York City, including Washington High, were becoming more and more segregated. Eventually, in 1999, Washington High was dissolved because its results were so bad – and like so many of the city's iconic high schools, it was divvied up into four small ones. Today, those schools are combined 99% non-white and have an average college readiness rate of 9%.

Some people like to make a distinction between de jure school segregation in the South and de facto segregation in the North. Clark, who was the first African American to serve on the New York Board of Regents, had something to say about this in his 1982 profile in the *New Yorker*. Here's what Clark said:

“The school boards and the public officials in the North are *much* more subtle and persistent in defending the racial status quo than those Southerners ever were. But the damage being done to the children is precisely the same as it was in those Southern segregated schools.”

He also said:

“I’ve been to so many conferences, so many symposiums, so many seminars, and all they contribute is more alibis for why the schools aren’t working and why society doesn’t want to deal with this problem.”

Thirty-five years later, our current city leaders have shown that they don’t want to deal with it either. The good news? We’ve got really some smart kids who do.

A few months ago, Ashé, Nelson and Whitney helped kickstart a student-led group you may have heard me talk about, called Teens Take Charge. The Bell helped support a launch event at the Bronx Library Center back in April. A dozen students wrote and performed letters, poems and raps about educational inequity, each addressed “To Whom it Should Concern.” It was a huge hit. *The New York Times* and *Chalkbeat* both ran excerpts of some of the letters.

Here’s an excerpt of one of them by a girl from Harlem, named Yacine:

**Yacine:** To whom it should concern: I live in the center of Harlem where I attended middle school. But now I go to an elite public high school in midtown. Two different worlds, only five miles apart.

At my high school, 93% of students graduate college ready. At my zoned school in Harlem? 7%. I didn’t realize that an A in Harlem was not the same as an A in a majority white high school on the Upper West Side. I had to go through this process on my own as a low-income child of immigrants who did not understand the American education system.

In my high school I have the privilege of walking through unlocked doors. Security guards sit in corners smiling, wishing us good morning. Vast hallways, white walls, high ceilings, bright lights, my own textbooks I can bring home if I need to. I go to a school where the majority of students are white, and I wonder how I made it there despite living in a neighborhood where opportunity is slight. Where teachers only stay in schools for two years before deciding they’ve had enough. Where poverty is high and expectations are low, and I cannot help but think what made it this way. What happened in 5 miles that determined who got to graduate? Who went to college? Who got to explore their talents? Who learned to question? To whom it should concern: There are two different worlds only five miles apart. Please tell me what happened.

**Taylor:** Right now, Teens Take Charge is trying to raise money for a second event at a bigger venue to continue raising awareness of educational inequity. If you want to help out, you can visit

teenstakecharge.com and buy a t-shirt or make a one-time contribution. 100% of the money goes directly to supporting events.

Big thanks to Rob Szytko for helping with the reporting of this episode. Thanks to my friend Fatima, who for let us crash her apartment in Harlem to do some of the recording. Thanks to the folks at Democracy Prep for welcoming me into your school with open arms. And, as always, thank you for listening.