THE INFLUENCE OF K-12 SCHOOLING ON THE IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF MULTIETHNIC STUDENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of K-12 schooling on the racial and ethnic identity development of 23 self-identified multiethnic students attending high schools across the San Francisco Bay Area. All of the students participated in a semi-structured interview, nine participated in one of two focus groups, and five completed a writing activity. I approached this study with a postpositivist realist conception of identity (Mohanty, 2000; Moya, 2000a/b) that takes seriously the fluidity and complexity of identities as well as their epistemic and real-world significance. In defining racial and ethnic identity formation, I borrowed Tatum’s (1997) understanding of it as “the process of defining for oneself the personal significance and social meaning of belonging to a particular racial [and/or ethnic] group” (p. 16).

The findings from this study indicate that the formal aspects of schooling (e.g., curriculum and diversity education initiatives) rarely directly influence the racial and ethnic identity development of multiethnic students. They do, however, shape all students’ racial and ethnic understandings and ideologies, which in turn shape the informal aspects of schooling (e.g., interactions with peers and racial and ethnic divisions within the student body) which exert direct influence over multiethnic students’ experiences and identities. Of course, schooling is not alone in shaping the racial and ethnic understandings and ideologies of the general student body; other influences such as family and neighborhood context cannot be discounted. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that schools are sites of negotiation, that these negotiations influence multiethnic students’ identities, and that these negotiations occur in the context of, and are shaped by, both formal and informal aspects of schooling, including, but not limited to, school demographics, curricula, race and ethnicity-based student organizations, and interactions between all members of the school community. Based on the findings, it is recommended that educators infuse the curriculum and classroom discussions with issues of race, ethnicity, multiethnicity, and difference; actively engage in the process of complicating, contesting, and deconstructing racial and ethnic categories and their classificatory power; and end the silence regarding multiethnicity in schools and ensure its authentic inclusion in the curriculum.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I have been told that I am exotic, interesting, and lucky to have been exposed to two different cultures (“You get the best of both worlds, Erica”). Yet, I have also been told that I have “confused genes” and that I will live a “conflicted life.” I have been asked more times than I can count if I am adopted, others often “remind” me how lucky I am that I can “pass” as White, and my knowledge and experiences of Indian culture have been tested, evaluated, and measured continuously by friends, strangers, and even a few teachers. Questions I am often presented with include: “Do you eat Indian food at home?” “Do you speak Hindi?” “Is your family Hindu?” and “Have you been to India?” Each time I am presented with such questions, I wonder if visibly [insert racial or ethnic group here] individuals get asked similar questions in such a challenging way. I also remember how I felt when an(other) Indian student in my high school said, “You aren’t really Indian, Erica.” Throughout my life, it seems that many of my friends, classmates, teachers, and even some family members and strangers have had trouble deciding where I “belong,” could not reconcile the differences between their perceptions of me and my identity, and have felt the need to impose their racial and ethnic understandings on me. Given the interactive nature of identity development, comments and experiences such as these were not without consequence for my sense of self and belonging.

It wasn’t until I arrived at graduate school and started studying multicultural and antiracist education that I began to seriously interrogate some of these experiences from an educational perspective. From this, numerous questions emerged. Would my experiences have been different if people had known more about multiethnicity or if it had been included in the curriculum? How might my experiences have been different if
schools developed different approaches to studying racial and ethnic diversity? What can schools do to be more inclusive of their multiethnic students and support their identity development? What new understandings of race, ethnicity, multiethnicity, and identity are required to more accurately reflect the experiences of students in today’s schools? Have other multiethnic students had experiences similar to mine? These questions, among others, are what brought me to this study, which seeks to understand the perceived influence of K-12 schooling experiences on the identity construction of self-identified multiethnic students.

**Context**

This study may not have been possible, and quite certainly would have yielded significantly different findings, had it been conducted at any other time in American history. Just over 40 years ago, prior to the United States Supreme Court’s 1967 ruling in *Loving v. Virginia*, anti-miscegenation laws prevented mixed race couples (particularly Black-White couples) from marrying. Prior to that, until the Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, racial segregation in American public schools was legally permissible. Even after *Brown*, Jim Crow laws and official racial segregation remained in place for another decade while the “one drop rule” meant that anyone with Black ancestry was considered Black. Other attacks on racial integration in the history of the United States include, but certainly are not limited to, the internment of approximately 110,000 Japanese individuals during WWII, California’s 1905 prohibition on marriages between Caucasians and “Mongolians,” and the westward relocation of Native Americans to isolated lands.
Although certainly the United States has not yet achieved racial equality, race relations have changed dramatically in the past 50 years and such egregious attacks on fundamental freedoms (at least within our national borders) have greatly diminished. Fifty years ago, multicultural education had not yet emerged as an approach to better serve minoritized students in schools; many of today’s technological advances facilitating and encouraging the movement of information, consumer goods, cultural artifacts, and people around the globe had not yet been achieved; and the biological underpinnings of race remained largely intact. Just over a decade ago, individuals were not yet allowed to select more than one racial category on the US Census and official school forms, Tiger Woods was not yet publically asserting a multiethnic identity, and the US had not yet elected a multiethnic president. Indeed, this study is situated in a specific moment in history marked by much higher levels of recognition, support, and acceptance of multiethnic individuals than in the past. Moreover, this context is changing rapidly, so much so that “research findings from 15 to 20 years ago may not be replicable or as relevant to persons who are of mixed race in their early twenties” (Root, 2003b, p. 121).

Today, celebrities, professional athletes, and politicians like Tiger Woods, Halle Berry, Paula Abdul, Vanessa Hudgens, and Barack Obama have increased the prominence of multiethnicity in both the media and the public consciousness. Tiger Woods, for example, discussed his multiethnic identity on the Oprah Winfrey Show, calling himself Cablinasian (to represent his Caucasian, Black, American Indian, Thai, and Chinese heritage) (see Hollinger, 2004). Scholars and authors such as Arboleda (1998), Basu (2007), Camper (1994), Ifekwunigwe (2004), Krebs (1999), Kwan & Speirs (2004), Renn (2008), Rockquemore and Brunsma (2002), Rockquemore and Laszloffy
(2005), Root (1992b, 1996b), Schwartz (1998), Wallace (2004), Wardle (1996, 1998, 2004), Wilson (1987), Winters and DeBose (2003), and Zack (1993, 1995), to name but a few, have contributed to a substantial increase in the research and literature related to multiethnicity. With the help of organizations like iPride and the Interracial Family Circle, multiethnic families can, in at least some parts of North America, connect in a supportive community. Resources and information related to multiethnicity are now readily available via websites such as those hosted by MAVIN, the Mixed Heritage Center, and the Association of MultiEthnic Americans. And, thanks to programs like iPride’s Multiethnic Education Program, educators can benefit from resources, training, and support as they strive to be responsive to, and supportive of, the educational experiences of their multiethnic students. It is fair to say, then, that in manifold ways and myriad settings, multiethnicity is receiving long overdue attention and acceptance, so much so that we now often hear of the “multiracial/multiethnic movement.”

Largely in response to the campaigning of multiethnic individuals, the 2000 U.S. Census was the first to allow individuals to indicate identification with more than one racial group. U.S. Census Bureau estimates from July 2007 indicate that nearly 2.5% of the California population is, in the Bureau’s terms, multiracial. Similar estimates were reported for Nevada, Oregon, and Washington, and much higher percentages were reported for Oklahoma (4%), Alaska (4.7%), and Hawaii (18.6%) (Stuckey, 2008). Given that the Census counts only those who identify with more than one racial group, these numbers do not include those who identify with multiple ethnicities; the fractions identifying as multiethnic would likely be considerably greater. Although already significant, these statistics should be even more compelling for educators when we
consider the distribution of multiethnic individuals by age. According to a report based on findings from the 2000 Census, “People who reported more than one race were more likely to be under age 18 than those reporting only one race. … Of the 6.8 million people in the Two [sic] or more races population [category], 42 percent were under 18” (Jones & Smith, 2001, p. 9). Based on these numbers, we can assert confidently that a large percentage of the students in our schools are multiethnic, and logic dictates that their numbers will increase with time.

Clearly, then, this research emerges from a changing context marked by increasing recognition of and interest in multiethnicity and the experiences of multiethnic individuals. Moreover, we cannot deny that multiethnic individuals and couples do not face the same legal and social impediments they once did, that attacks on racial and ethnic integration are not as overt or pervasive as they once were, and that some progress has been made towards racial and ethnic equality in the United States. Given these changes, it may perhaps be tempting to sit back and celebrate the achievements and progress realized to date, yet they should not be allowed to obscure the fact that much remains to be done. In fact, these achievements are, I would argue, best viewed as evidence that additional progress is possible. We must also bear in mind that increased recognition of and interest in multiethnic individuals and their experiences is not a substitute for deep understanding. Indeed, our understanding of the experiences and identity construction of multiethnic individuals remains limited (Shih & Sanchez, 2005; 2009).

If we are to achieve the sort of deep understanding of the experiences of multiethnic individuals that may more appropriately inform future policy, practice, and
relationships, we cannot be satisfied with mere recognition and interest. Rather, we must undertake genuine inquiry into the experiences of multiethnic individuals and the effects of current policies, practice, and social relations on those experiences. More broadly, if we are sincere about our desire for equity, social justice, and a society in which racial and ethnic identities are not determinants of opportunity or life chances, we must continue to interrogate the constructs of race and ethnicity and the ways in which racial and ethnic ideologies and categories operate in the lives of individuals. This research, in examining the identity construction of multiethnic students as influenced by their K-12 schooling experiences, seeks such deep understanding, and, it is hoped, may serve as the basis for more informed educational policy and practice.

**Problem Statement and Purpose**

It is widely believed that schools play a significant role in students’ racial and ethnic identity development (see, for example, Castenell & Pinar, 1993; Dolby, 2000; Gay, 1994; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Nieto, 2000; Yon, 2000) and prior research links students’ racial and ethnic identities to academic self-esteem and educational aspirations and outcomes (see, for example, Zirkel, 2008). Thus, many educators and researchers have turned their attention to educational methods for supporting the identity development of students, and in particular, the racial and ethnic identity development of minoritized students. Such efforts most often take the form of multicultural and antiracist education programs—initiatives frequently critiqued for their tendency to perpetuate rigid, essentialist, and static understandings of race and ethnicity and to reinforce the boundaries constructed between racial and ethnic categories (see, for example, Cruz-Janzen, 1997; Dolby, 2000; Gosine, 2002). Based on these critiques, it is often assumed
that contemporary approaches to diversity education marginalize multiethnic students and fail to support their racial and ethnic identity development (see, for example, Calore, 2008; Cruz-Janzen, 1997; Wardle, 1996, 2000a, 2004). Although such assumptions abound in educational literature, and despite the growing body of research and literature attending to the experiences and identity construction of multiethnic individuals, there is very little empirical research that examines the influence of schooling experiences on multiethnic students’ identity construction processes—processes understood as differing from those of monoethnic individuals in significant ways. There is, in other words, a significant gap in the research on multiethnic students and their identity development—a gap that this research begins to fill.

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to gain a deep understanding of the K-12 schooling experiences of multiethnic students and the perceived influence of these experiences on their racial and ethnic identity development. More specifically, I sought to examine the influence of school curriculum, policies, practices, social structures, and patterns of behavior on the perceptions of 23 multiethnic high school students in relation to questions of self, identity, and belonging. At the same time, I have endeavored to identify ways in which schools might be more inclusive and supportive of their multiethnic students. Multiethnic students’ voices should be heard as we attempt to overcome the limited, rigid, and impoverished understandings of race, ethnicity, and diversity that pervade contemporary schooling. Without efforts to fill the significant gaps in educational research about such students, attempts to develop more inclusive and less essentializing policies and practices regarding race and ethnicity cannot hope to succeed.
Research Questions and Methods

The central research question for this study is: in what ways does K-12 schooling influence the racial and ethnic identity construction of multiethnic students? Related questions include: in what ways do school initiatives such as multicultural and antiracism education influence their identity development processes? What other aspects of K-12 schooling (i.e. the curriculum, peer networks and friendships, the racial and ethnic makeup of the school, extra-curricular activities, and student organizations) influence the racial and ethnic identity construction of multiethnic students? How might K-12 schools become more inclusive of, and better support the identity development of, multiethnic students?

In seeking answers to these questions, I interviewed 23 self-identified multiethnic high school students drawn from eight schools across the San Francisco Bay Area. During semi-structured interviews, participants and I explored their racial and ethnic identity construction processes and the various factors influencing these processes, with a focus on their K-12 schooling experiences. All participants were invited to join optional focus groups and to complete an optional writing activity.

Definitions

In this section, I make clear my understanding and use of such terms as schooling, race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity—terms upon whose meanings there is seldom agreement.
Schooling vs. Education

In much educational literature, the term “education” is preferred to “schooling,” as the former is seen to connote a process that takes place over one’s lifetime, in many different venues, both formally and informally, and is related to a broad range of topics and subjects. I quite intentionally, however, favor the terms “schooling” and “schooling experiences” throughout this study. I have done so because I believe that education is not confined to what one learns either formally or informally in schools and because my focus is specifically on, for example, the lessons and activities that occur in schools; the social interactions that take place between students in a classroom, in the hallways, in the cafeterias, on the lawns; the relationships between staff members and students; the explicit and implicit knowledge that students learn from their teachers, administrators, and classmates; and the school-based organizations and activities that students are invited to join or from which they are excluded. In short, my focus is on the broad range of lessons, activities, and interactions that take place in schools and the perceived influence of these on the identity construction of multiethnic students.

Race, Ethnicity, and Multiethnicity

Before discussing my definition and use of the term multiethnic, it is worth exploring the definitions of race and ethnicity I use, and my understanding of the relationship between these two constructs. As I understand it, “race” is a concept that European expansionists devised, based on observations of physical variations, to create a system of color-coded hierarchy, which became “a strategy for dividing, ranking, and
controlling colonized people” (American Anthropological Association, 1998, ¶ 7). More recently, the notion that humans can be organized into biologically discrete groups has lost credence. The more common perspective held by social scientists today is that race has “no empirical validity or scientific merit. It exists instead as a social construction that is manipulated to define and reinforce the unequal relations between dominant and subordinate groups” (Fleras & Elliott, 2003, p. 386). In describing the instability of race’s meaning and racial categories themselves, Omi and Winant explain that “the meaning of race is defined and contested throughout society, in both collective action and personal practice. In the process, racial categories themselves are formed, transformed, destroyed and re-formed” (1986, p. 61).

Despite the instability of race’s meaning, efforts to subvert this dubious concept, and the transformation and re-formation of racial categories, race and racial ideologies continue to hold real-life consequences—both positive and negative depending on where one is situated in the racial hierarchy—for individuals both in the United States and abroad. Thus, to adopt a color-blind approach that fails to acknowledge the very real material, social, and political inequities that result from racist ideologies (based on fictitious notions of race) precludes the sort of meaningful engagement that might actually pose a challenge to racism, racial ideologies, and the very notion of race. Arbitrary and unsound as racial categories are, to ignore them is not to deconstruct them.

Although the terms race and ethnicity are often used interchangeably, and although I believe that the two concepts are closely related and that the distinction between them is blurred, the two are not synonymous. Giddens, Duneier, and Applebaum describe ethnicity in the following way:
Cultural values and norms that distinguish the members of a given group from others. An ethnic group is one whose members share a distinct awareness of a common cultural identity, separating them from other groups. In virtually all societies, ethnic differences are associated with variations in power and material wealth. Where ethnic differences are also racial, such divisions are sometimes especially pronounced. (2005, p. A6)

Using this as a definition of ethnicity, we begin to see some of the similarities between the constructs of race and ethnicity: they are often experienced in similar ways (especially as such experiences relate to power and privilege) and they are both, at their core, essentially concerned with distinctions between and the grouping of individuals. These and other similarities between these two constructs significantly influenced my definition of the term multiethnic and my decision to examine the experiences of multiethnic (as opposed to multiracial) students.

Throughout this research, I use the term multiethnic instead of multiracial, mixed race, biracial, mixed origin, mixed ethnicity, children of mixed parentage, of blended background, ethnoracially mixed, and a variety of other possible terms—terms that are often employed by study participants to describe their heritage and that are frequently found within the related literature. All of these terms are problematic and reinforce the misconception that there exist biologically defined “pure” races and discrete ethnicities. They are not, though, used and defined in the same way by all researchers. In most of the related research, the terms multiracial and biracial are favored and typically refer to children of parents representing two or more racial categories (as delineated by the Census Bureau). In this study, I expand this focus to include children of parents who may be racially similar, but who represent different ethnicities. Under this conception, the child of a Chinese mother and a Japanese father is considered multiethnic, as is the child of an Afro-Caribbean mother and an African father.
The decision to define multiethnicity in this way is not based on an inaccurate conflation of race and ethnicity or the impact they have on the lives of individuals, but a desire to blur the distinction between them. In fact, as Hall argues, this distinction is already blurred.

Biological racism privileges markers like skin colour, but those signifiers have always been used, by discursive extension, to connote social and cultural differences…The biological referent is therefore never wholly absent from discourses of ethnicity, though it is more indirect. The more “ethnicity” matters, the more its characteristics are represented as relatively fixed, inherent within a group, transmitted from generation to generation, not just by culture and education, but by biological inheritance, stabilized above all by kinship and endogamous marriage rules that ensure that the ethnic group remains genetically, and therefore culturally “pure”. (Hall, 2000, cited in Gunaratnam, 2003, p. 4)

The strength of Hall’s argument can best be demonstrated through an examination of my own experiences. When I make claims to my Indian heritage such claims are challenged, primarily, because of my physical appearance (i.e. my perceived race). However, these challenges are aimed at my cultural practices and preferences (ethnicity), such as “Do you eat Indian food?” or “Are you Hindu?” or “Do you enjoy Bollywood movies?”

To excessively differentiate between race and ethnicity would be to miss the significant “interrelations between the two ‘registers’ of biology and culture in processes of giving ‘race’ and ethnicity meaning and bringing them to life in the social world” (Gunaratnam, 2003, p. 5). Therefore, as it is used here, multiethnicity encompasses “biological ancestry as well as cultural and contextual influences that shape values, attitudes, and behaviors” (Greene, 2004, p. 115).

While sharing my research at the most recent meeting of the American Educational Research Association, an audience member took exception to my use of the term multiethnic as it, she felt, downplays race and racism. She argued that researchers
should centralize race in their work as a more insidious construct than ethnicity if they hope to effectively challenge racism. As should be clear, I believe that this individual underestimates the interrelations between these two constructs. Moreover, I believe that any successful challenge to racism in contemporary American society will require additional focus on the ways in which cultural differences are mobilized to leave intact racial hierarchies and persistent inequities.

This perspective was shaped in large part by Bonilla-Silva (2003) who argued that those with a vested interest in maintaining the racial status quo have developed new strategies for doing so, the manifestation of which he terms “color-blind racism.” This ‘new’ variety of racism, unlike the overt forms of the Jim Crow era which drew explicitly on notions of biological and moral inferiority, rationalizes racial inequality through nonracial dynamics such as market outcomes and cultural limitations. Despite representing a shift away from the unconcealed, unabashed racism of yesteryears, Bonilla-Silva argues that, “this new ideology has become a formidable political tool for the maintenance of the racial order” (p. 3). The ideology of color-blind racism relies on four central frames, namely abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. Of particular interest here is the frame of cultural racism, described by Bonilla-Silva as “a frame that relies on culturally based arguments such as ‘Mexicans do not put much emphasis on education’ or ‘Blacks have too many babies’ to explain the standing of minorities in society” (p. 28). As cultural differences (as opposed to biological differences) are increasingly relied upon to defend persistent racial inequities, to consistently privilege race in one’s research neglects the relationship
between race and ethnicity and potentially undermines one’s efforts to challenge the racial status quo.

As should be apparent, I recognize that different individuals and groups experience racial and ethnic categories differently and that these categories too often determine who gets what in American society. Why, then, group all multiethnic individuals together in this study? Indeed, elsewhere I have questioned the extent to which a single multiethnic population, with members who identify as such, actually exists and can be studied (Mohan & Venzant Chambers, 2009). Nevertheless, for several reasons described in greater detail in Chapters Three and Four, for the purposes of this study, individuals with diverse racial and ethnic heritage combinations were invited to participate. Briefly, this decision was based, in part, on the fact that as multiethnicity garners increased attention, there is often (but certainly not always) a tendency to depict the multiethnic “population” in broad strokes regardless of the racial and ethnic heritages they represent. This is true of media accounts, much of the related educational literature, organizations serving the multiethnic community, and other writings about multiethnicity. Moreover, I believe it is worth discerning if multiethnic students share common experiences related to straddling or crossing racial and ethnic borders, regardless of which races or ethnicities the borders segregate, and if these experiences hold implications for educators.

Limitations and Delimitations

Most of the limitations and delimitations of this study are addressed in Chapter Four. Those not addressed elsewhere are included here. This study only drew participants from schools in the San Francisco Bay Area, and thus neglects possible significant
regional differences within the state and across the country. However, because this study drew participants from public, private, inner-city, suburban, large, small, racially and ethnically diverse, and more homogeneous schools, where commonalities exist between participants’ experiences and perceptions, we may feel confident generalizing from them. Any conclusions drawn from this study are also made with an awareness that all participants self-identified as multiethnic and volunteered to participate in this study. Accordingly, this study does not include participants whom I or others might consider multiethnic but who do not identify as such.

**Overview of the Dissertation**

Still requiring explanation is my understanding of identity and identity construction. This is the purpose of Chapter Two. I enter this study with a postpositivist realist conception of identities, as developed by Mohanty (1997, 2000) and expanded in Moya and Hames-García (2000). This conception is positioned between essentialism and post-modernism, neither of which I find capable of dealing with the fluidity and complexity of identities as well as their epistemic and real-world significance. Central to this conception of identity are the causal relationship between one’s social identities and experiences and the cognitive component of experience that can help us to better understand our social positions and identities. This postpositivist realist approach serves as my starting point for a study of multiethnic identities. That is, I enter such a study with an acknowledgement of objective social structures and their consequences for groups and individuals, yet I do not accept a monolithic approach to identities that fails to recognize their variability, instability, and inconsistencies. Furthermore, I believe that interrogating identity categories and people’s experiences of them will not necessarily produce wholly
accurate or indisputable “facts,” but that we can come to better understand the social conditions that shape our experiences and the influence of these experiences on our identities through such a study.

The purpose of Chapter Three is to situate my study in relation to the existing literature regarding multiethnic identities and the K-12 schooling experiences of multiethnic students—literature to which, in many ways, this study is a response. The literature review is divided into five sections, which, together, contribute to the rationale for this research, inform the research design, and provide the educational context for the study. In Section I, I examine empirical investigations of multiethnic identities and their formation and link the findings of prior research to the design of this study. Section II also examines research regarding multiethnic identity construction, but with a focus on the outcomes of the identity construction processes for individuals. Section III focuses on literature addressing the influence of K-12 schooling on students’ identity construction, as well as literature related to multicultural and antiracism education. Section IV examines the body of literature more narrowly focused on the K-12 schooling experiences of multiethnic students. Finally, Section V integrates the literature and research reviewed in Sections I-IV and highlights gaps in our understanding regarding the identity construction and K-12 schooling of multiethnic students.

Chapter Four provides a description of this study’s methodology. There, I review the steps taken to access and interpret the experiences and perceptions of research participants. I explore the methodological complexities of conducting research with and for multiethnic individuals and share my responses to these complexities. I also interrogate my role as the primary research “instrument” for this study, including the
perceived influence of my identity on the research situation, as well as the biases, assumptions, and perspectives with which I entered this study and how I attempted to mitigate their impact.

Chapters Five, Six, Seven, and Eight comprise presentations and discussions of the data. In Chapter Five, I present profiles of each participant—profiles which are needed to properly situate the influence of participants’ K-12 schooling experiences within the broader context of other influences on their identities. Chapters Six and Seven examine participants’ experiences and perceptions of the formal and informal aspects of K-12 schooling respectively. In Chapter Eight, I present and discuss the data related to participants’ general reflections on K-12 schooling and their recommendations for educators.

In Chapter Nine, the final chapter, I summarize the study, address the research questions in light of the literature and my findings, reflect on the study’s methodology and the insights offered by a postpositivist realist conception of identity, and identify implications and recommendations for educators based on the research findings. Chapter Nine also includes a discussion of future research directions emerging from this study.

**Significance of the Study**

As discussed, this study emerges from a context marked by an increasing recognition of multiethnic individuals and a rising interest in their social, educational, and personal experiences. This context is also characterized by a growing number of multiethnic students in today’s schools, about whose experiences there is very little empirical research. This study, therefore, is both timely and contributes to a growing, but still incomplete, body of literature related to the racial and ethnic identity development
and experiences of multiethnic individuals. This study also contributes in important ways to contemporary educational research and our understanding of multiethnic identity formation. Through the exploration of multiethnic students’ racial and ethnic identity development as influenced by K-12 schooling, it provides a starting point for educators concerned about the personal, academic, and social experiences of their multiethnic students. It may also help educators better understand the impact of K-12 schooling on the racial and ethnic identity development processes of multiethnic students. Additionally, it identifies ways in which schools might become more inclusive of their multiethnic students and better support their personal, academic, and social experiences. The study’s significance is that it offers deep understanding of participants’ experiences and identifies implications that have the potential to inform educational policy and practice.
CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMING OF IDENTITY

Identity lies at the heart of this study, which seeks to determine the influence of K-12 schooling on participants’ racial and ethnic identity development. Before this question can be researched, however, many others must be answered: What do I mean by identity? What theories inform my understanding of identity? What processes are implied by identity construction? And even, why do identities matter? In what follows, I answer these questions, mapping out a theoretical framing for my understanding of identities, how they are constructed, and the factors influencing them.

Identity has been described as “one of the most discussed and contentious issues in both the social sciences and society at large” (Gosine, 2002, p. 81), “one of the most urgent—as well as hotly disputed—topics in literary and cultural studies” (Moya, 2000a, p. 1), and as “the fundamental question of philosophy from Socrates’s ‘Know thyself!’ through countless other masters down to Freud” (Maalouf, 1996/2000, p. 9). Given the significance of identity, as described by Moya below, it is not surprising that identity, and attempts to understand its meaning and development, persist in capturing the attention of so many from such disparate disciplines.

The significance of identity depends partly on the fact that goods and resources are still distributed according to identity categories. Who we are—that is, who we perceive ourselves or are perceived by others to be—will significantly affect our life chances: where we can live, whom we will marry (or whether we can marry), and what kinds of educational and employment opportunities will be available to us....Moreover, identities have consequences for the kinds of associations human beings form (such as white supremacist churches along the lines of Christian Identity) and the sorts of activities they engage in (such as blowing up federal buildings or shooting random nonwhite or Jewish people). (Moya, 2000a, pp. 8-9)
Indeed, there is little disagreement over the significance of identities, either for individuals and societies. And yet, while the importance of identity is agreed upon, there is no clear, widely accepted definition of identity, no single conception embraced by all disciplines. Likewise, the term identity is invoked in numerous and distinct ways. We often hear, for example, references to identity politics, especially as they relate to certain aspects of identity such as race, class, gender, sexuality, or nationality. Used in this way, identity refers to a sense of group membership or solidarity with individuals with whom one shares a common socio-politically salient identity. Thus, we often find discussions of particular types of identities, such as racial identity, national identity, or sexual identity. Identity may also refer broadly to an individual’s sense of self, or as Maalouf (1996/2003) says, “what prevents me from being identical to anybody else” (p. 10). Here, identity is often linked to related notions of self-concept, self-esteem, and cultural knowledge or pride. We frequently hear warnings against identity theft and the need to protect one’s identity. In these instances, identity is used in reference to the market place and is linked to personal financial data. We also find instances in which “identity” is used as a noun or as a verb. Yon, for example, distinguished between identity conceptualized as a category announcing who we are or as “a process of making identifications, a process that is continuous and incomplete” (2000, p. 13). How, then, is identity used here? In what follows, I outline the postpositivist realist approach to identity with which I entered this study. However, I first make clear some of the basic tenets of my understanding of identity and identity construction processes.

Drawing on the work of Barth (1969), Jenkins (2003) describes identity development as consisting primarily of two processes. The first process is one of internal
definition in which individuals, either individually or collectively with others, develop a self-definition of their identity. In the second process—external definition—individuals are assigned an identity by others, which may or may not coincide with the self-definition of the individual. According to Jenkins, “It is in the meeting of internal and external definition that identity, whether social or personal, is created” (2003, p. 61). Reflecting a similar understanding of the interactive nature of identity formation, Erikson (1968) explains,

In psychological terms, identity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him. (cited in Tatum, 1997, p. 19)

Likewise, Tatum (1997) discusses the “looking glass self” (Cooley, 1902) or the notion that how we see ourselves is inextricably linked to how others see us and, therefore, treat us. As she says, “Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am” (1997, p. 18). That identities are constructed by individuals, not in isolation but though inherently social processes involving interaction with and responding to the influences of others is widely accepted by both those approaching identity from a psychological development perspective and those who approach identity from the social sciences.

Although above I have cited Erikson, a well known psychoanalytic theorist, my thinking about identity is more influenced by understandings emerging from the social sciences than by those theories stemming from developmental psychology and psychoanalysis. I am mindful of the fact that how we think about and experience our
identities is, in part, tied to our cognitive and emotional development, but here my thinking is more fully informed by non-linear theories of identity that emphasize their fluidity and the influence of ecological factors.

At the center of my conceptualization of identity lie notions of relationship and interaction. I am particularly persuaded by the idea that identities emerge through processes of negotiation and reconciliation between how one conceives of herself and the identities assigned to or imposed on her by others—assigned identities which in turn shape her relationships with others and her experiences stemming from these relationships, especially as they relate to notions of inclusion and exclusion. Appiah (2005) calls these imposed identities “labels.” As he explains, “Once labels are applied to people, ideas about people who fit the label come to have social and psychological effects. In particular, these ideas shape the ways people conceive of themselves and their projects” (p. 66). For labels to function in this way, Appiah notes, we must have a social conception of the group to which a label refers “so that some people are recognized as members of the group,” some people must identify as members of the group, and some people must be treated as members of the group (p. 67). Thus, the label “woman,” functions to influence our individual identities only in so far as we have a basic shared understanding of what it means to be a woman, others self-identify as women, and those identified as women are sometimes treated as women.

As Appiah (2005) notes, these labels or imposed identities often correlate to prominent social categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. To return to the notion of a “looking glass self,” the way we are treated, our relationships and experiences, what the world says we are, and thus, our identities, often reflect and are
shaped by the most visible and socio-politically salient dimensions of identity, including, but not limited to, race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, religion, location, nationality, appearance, age, and education. These social categories, none of which is always experienced in isolation, “blend, constantly and differently, expanding one another and mutually constituting one another’s meanings” (Hames-García, 2000, p. 106). And, of course, the meaning attached to these labels and thus the nature of their influence on our identities are shaped by social and political contexts and are rooted in history. Thus, in saying that our identities emerge through constant negotiation between our internal self-perceptions and external identities assigned to us, we must keep in mind that our self-perceptions and others’ perceptions of us are shaped by numerous dimensions, dimensions that are not static but are rooted in history and given meaning in our particular social and political contexts. In other words, our identities are shaped by our own and others’ understanding of what it means to be, for example, a woman or a man, heterosexual or homosexual, and Christian or Buddhist, and the meaning attached to these labels—understandings and meanings that vary in different contexts.

As previously discussed, identity is invoked in numerous ways, including in reference to a sense of group membership or solidarity with individuals with whom one shares a common socio-politically salient identity. Although nationality, for example, may be a significant element of one’s identity, it is unlikely, however, to capture its entirety. In other words, few people are likely to describe themselves in terms of just one aspect of their identity while neglecting all other dimensions. Nevertheless, there are certain dimensions of identity, dimensions that often play a determining role in our experiences and relationships, worthy of additional attention. For example, race is often
singled out as a central aspect of an individual’s identity, as race mediates so many other experiences we may have—as a student, or a mother, or an immigrant. While not ignoring the impact of other socio-politically salient dimensions of identity, as the focus of this study is multiethnic identities, I briefly explain here my understanding of racial and ethnic identities.

In defining racial and ethnic identity formation, I borrow Tatum’s understanding of it as “the process of defining for oneself the personal significance and social meaning of belonging to a particular racial [and/or ethnic] group” (1997, p. 16).1 Tatum’s conception of racial and ethnic identity emphasizes the personal meaning and importance attached to identifying with a racial or ethnic group and acknowledges that “the salience of particular aspects of our identity varies at different moments in our lives” (p. 20). Thus, the importance one attaches to her racial or ethnic identity is likely to vary with time and context.

It should be clear at this point that identities conceptualized in this way are neither fixed nor stable. Quite obviously, there are some dimensions of our identities, for example those related to location, age, familial roles, or occupation, that are likely to change over time and thus shape our identities in different ways. Likewise, the meaning and significance attached to those dimensions of identity often thought of as being more constant (but certainly not always so), such as race, gender, class, or sexuality, are likely to change according to context. Furthermore, as our own thinking about the multiple dimensions of our identities shifts, as the experiences and relationships stemming from

1 Although Tatum specifically addresses racial identity development and acknowledges the differences between racial identity and ethnic identity, I nevertheless expand her understanding of racial identity development to include ethnic identity development. This does not reflect a conflation of race and ethnicity but a recognition that significance and meaning are often attached to membership in both racial and ethnic groups.
both imposed and self-assigned identities change, and as we interpret and reinterpret experiences and relationships influenced by our identities, our identities are likely to shift and transform.

Given the preceding, we may wonder how one could ever set out to study identities and the factors influencing them. The answer to this question lies, in large part, in the epistemological stance with which one approaches the study of identities. In what follows, I briefly outline and critique two theoretical understandings of identity—those often labeled as essentialist and associated with identity politics and those most often characterized as stemming from postmodernist/poststructuralist perspectives. I then outline the postpositivist realist conception of identity with which I entered this study. This conception is both consistent with and reflects the foregoing understandings of identity. Here, I draw heavily on the work of Mohanty (2000) and Moya (2000a/b) who developed this framework as a means of transcending the opposition constructed between essentialist and postmodernist approaches to identity. Finally, I take a closer look at Hames-García’s (2000) postpositivist realist approach to the multiplicity of identities.

An Essentialist Approach to Identity

An essentialist approach to understanding identities posits that “individuals or groups have an immutable and discoverable ‘essence’ – a basic, unvariable, and presocial nature,” which determines their cultural identity (Moya, 2000a, p. 7). Such an approach is frequently applied to various categories of identity including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class, and, when employed in the research process to advance the interests of a particular group of individuals, is often termed “identity politics.” As a method for understanding identities, essentialism has been criticized for its “tendency to posit one
aspect of identity (say, gender) as the sole cause or determinant constituting the social meanings of an individual’s experience” and its disregard for the “instability and internal heterogeneity of identity categories” (Moya, 2000a, p. 3). Likewise, essentialism is critiqued for neglecting the ways in which identities are constituted by “variegated social categories that are in a constant state of production and negotiation with other forms of difference, and within specific social, historical and interactional arenas, whilst also serving to constitute the arenas” (Gunaratnam, 2003, p. 32). In other words, because identities are neither predictable nor stable but rather are in a constant state of construction and negotiation, essentialism is said to be a deficient approach for it fails to capture (or neglects to acknowledge) the complexity, variability, and fluidity of identities.

**Postmodern and Poststructural Approaches to Identity**

Embracing such critiques of essentialism, and in an effort to posit an alternative approach to understanding identities, postmodernist and poststructuralist theorists tend towards an absolute deconstruction of identity and the idea of a knowable self. As Moya (2000a) explains,

> Instead of asking how we know who we are, post-structuralist-inspired critics are inclined to suggest that we cannot know; rather than investigate the nature of the self, they are likely to suggest that it has no nature….Because subjects exist only in relation to ever-evolving webs of signification and because they constantly differ from themselves as time passes and meanings change, the self—as a unified, stable, and knowable entity existing prior to or outside language—is merely a fiction of language, an effect of discourse. (p. 6)

Or, as Kumar explains in his analysis of the post-modern condition, “identity is not unitary or essential, it is fluid and shifting, fed by multiple sources and taking multiple forms (there is no such thing as ‘woman’ or ‘black’)” (1997, p. 98). We can quickly see
the dilemma posed by a postmodern perspective for anyone seeking to understand any aspect or consequence of identities: How can one examine and evaluate the political, social, economic, and personal implications of identity categories which have been so comprehensively deconstructed as to elude scrutiny? Moreover, how can we examine the factors influencing, for example, the racial identities of Black urban youth when the very notions of “Black,” “urban” and “youth” have been so thoroughly challenged?

The researcher of racial and ethnic identities, therefore, may find herself in a precarious position between two approaches to the study of identities that have been positioned in opposition to each other, and neither of which “has proved adequate to the task of explaining the social, political, and epistemic significance of identities” (Moya, 2000a, p. 10). According to Mohanty (2000), “Both the essentialism of identity politics and the skepticism of the postmodernist position seriously underread the real epistemic and political complexities of our social and cultural identities” (p. 43). For that reason, I am drawn to an alternative approach, that of postpositivist realism.

A Postpositivist Realist Approach to Identity

Here, drawing primarily on the work of Moya (2000a/b) and Mohanty (2000), I provide a detailed overview of their way through this dispute, which is intended to “reclaim identity” through the development of a postpositivist realist theory of identity. While I draw almost exclusively on the works of Moya (2000a/b) and Mohanty (2000), it should be noted that Roman (1993) presents a comparable approach which she terms socially contested realism.

Mohanty, who first put forward the postpositivist realist theory of identity in 1993, provides the following proposal for theorizing identities:
[W]e need to explore the possibility of a theoretical understanding of social and cultural identity in terms of objective social location. To do so, we need a cognitivist conception of experience…a conception that will allow for both legitimate and illegitimate experience, enabling us to see experience as a source of both real knowledge and social mystification. Both the knowledge and the mystification are, however, open to analysis on the basis of empirical information about our social situation and a theoretical account of our current social and political arrangements. (2000, p. 43)

We cannot fully understand Mohanty’s proposal for theorizing identities presented here without examining the epistemic status he attributes to experiences stemming from one’s social location and their role in the construction of one’s identity. By way of explanation, Mohanty (2000) states that

Experience, properly interpreted, can yield reliable and genuine knowledge, just as it can point up instances and sources of real mystification….It is on the basis of this revised understanding of experience that we can construct a realist theory of social or cultural identity, in which experiences would not serve as foundations because of their self-evident authenticity but would provide some of the raw material with which we construct identities. (p. 32)

Mohanty acknowledges that experience is not self evident nor always a reliable source of knowledge, however, “we do and can learn or discover something about the reality that shapes our experience” (Hau, 2000, p. 157). The argument is that there is a cognitive component to experience, in that experience involves “a range of processes of organizing information, processes that, like all cognitive activities, involve constant reinterpretation, reevaluation, and adjudication” (Hau, 2000, p. 156). Thus, through an interpretation and reinterpretation of experiences, we can come to better understand both our social positions and our identities.

The foregoing ideas are best captured in the six claims of a postpositivist realist theory of identity provided by Moya (2000b). As the focus of this study is multiethnic
identities, I attempt to describe and clarify these claims through examples related to multiethnic identities.

1. “The different social categories (such as gender, race, class, and sexuality) that together constitute an individual’s social location are causally related to the experiences she will have” (p. 81).

   Here it is important to highlight two aspects of this claim. First, Moya draws our attention to the fact that social categories together influence an individual’s experience. Hence, the experiences of a wealthy White woman are very likely to differ from those of an economically disadvantaged White woman. Second, Moya notes, the significance and influence of social categories vary according to context:

   To appreciate the structural causality of the experiences of any given individual, we must take into account the mutual interaction of all the relevant social categories that constitute her social location and situate them within the particular social, cultural, and historical matrix in which she exists. (p. 82)

Thus, it is problematic, and likely to lead to inaccurate assumptions, to think of one’s multiethnic identity without consideration of the other aspects of her identity (such as class or sexuality) and how the experience, and thus influence, of each of these aspects is determined by her particular social, political, and historical context. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that as one’s context changes, so too will her experiences.

2. “An individual’s experiences will influence, but not entirely determine, the formation of her cultural identity” (p. 82).

   Of particular importance here is that fact that different individuals of the same social group may interpret their experiences stemming from membership in that social group differently. In other words, it is not one’s experiences alone, but her interpretation of those experiences (which differ for each individual), that will most influence her identity. As Moya explains, “the kinds of identities [individuals] construct for themselves
will both condition and be conditioned by the kinds of interpretations they give to the experiences they have” (p. 82). Here, I will use as an example a common experience shared by me and my sister. When we assert a White/East Indian multiethnic identity, we are often confronted with questions about our connection to and experiences with Indian culture such as “Do you eat Indian food” or “Have you been to India?” or “Do you speak Hindi?” Whereas I may interpret these questions as someone taking a kind interest in my heritage (“Wow, she thinks I am interesting!”), my sister may interpret them as challenges to her identity (“This person is testing how Indian I am”). Based on such interpretations, I may see myself as special, interesting, and a true member of the Indian community, whereas my sister may see herself as the victim of rigid racial and ethnic categories and her sense of identity as a member of the Indian community may be challenged and thus altered.

3. “There is a cognitive component to identity that allows for the possibility of error and of accuracy in interpreting the things that happen to us” (p. 83).

Here, Moya draws our attention to the fact that our personal experiences may be interpreted and reinterpreted in light of new experiences and knowledge and that these interpretations (see Claim 2) will largely determine their influence on our identities. Thus, an individual may reinterpret her previous experiences of being coded as Black, perhaps with more accuracy, in light of new knowledge about the history of racism against Blacks. As Moya explains, “it is a feature of theoretically mediated experience that one person’s understanding of the same situation may undergo revision over the course of time, thus rendering her subsequent interpretations of that situation more or less accurate” (p. 83). Returning to the previous example of questions regarding my experiences with and knowledge of Indian culture, after learning about the ways in which
racial and ethnic categories have been mobilized for purposes of sorting and domination and the mechanisms used to reinforce the boundaries between racial and ethnic groups, I may reinterpret these questions and my experience, reinterpretations which may in turn influence my sense of identity.

4. “Some identities, because they can more adequately account for the social categories constituting an individual’s social location, have greater epistemic value than some others that the same individual might claim” (pp. 83-84).

Using her own identity as an example, Moya explains that her identity as a Chicana may grant her “knowledge about the world that is ‘truer,’ and more ‘objective,’ than an alternative identity [she] might claim as either a ‘Mexican,’ a ‘Hispanic,’ or an ‘American’” in that a Chicana identity may more accurately reflect other salient aspects of her social identity such as, for example, her “Indian Blood,” her “Mexican cultural heritage,” her “political awareness,” and her “disadvantaged position in a hierarchically organized society arranged according to categories of class, race, gender, and sexuality” (pp. 84-5). Here, I am reminded of debates regarding how multiethnic individuals should identify. Take, for example, US President Barack Obama. Although he certainly does not disavow his multiethnic heritage, many have argued that because he is phenotypically Black, an identity as Black or African American may more accurately reflect structures of racism and discrimination of which he is likely to have been a victim. Indeed, Obama himself recently said “I identify as African-American — that's how I'm treated and that's how I'm viewed. I'm proud of it” (“Obama’s True Colors,” 2008). Thus, an African American identity may more adequately reflect the social categories that have determined Obama’s social location than a multiracial identity.
5. “Our ability to understand fundamental aspects of our world will depend on our ability to acknowledge and understand the social, political, economic, and epistemic consequences of our social location” (p. 85).

Here, Moya is emphasizing the need to acknowledge and interrogate how the very real social categories such as race, class, gender, and sexuality determine our social locations, and the influence of these social locations on our identities. In other words, we can more accurately understand and construct our identities when we take into account the social, political, economic, and epistemic consequences of our social locations. To return to the example of Barack Obama, it is problematic to consider his rise to the White House as “the first Black president” (“Obama’s True Colors,” 2008) without taking into account those factors that also constitute his social location. Certainly Obama benefits from being heterosexual in a heteronormative society. Surely being male is advantageous in a political landscape dominated by men. And, it is fair to assume that Obama’s White cultural capital imparted by his White mother proves valuable in a society still marked by persistent racism—racism increasingly based on cultural differences (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). Thus, by focusing on Obama’s race and ignoring the other factors that determine his social location, we misread fundamental aspects of American society.

6. “Oppositional struggle is fundamental to our ability to understand the world more accurately” (p. 86).

The sixth claim is premised on the argument that, in dismantling dominant ideologies, oppositional struggles may lead to greater objectivity. As Moya explains, “the ‘alternative constructions and accounts’ generated through oppositional struggle provide new ways of looking at our world that always complicate and often challenge dominant conceptions of what is ‘right,’ ‘true,’ and ‘beautiful’” (p. 86). Examples of oppositional struggle, as they relate to multiethnic individuals, that helped to expose racist dynamics
in the United States include efforts to challenge the “one-drop rule” and anti-miscegenation laws. Tatum describes the “one-drop rule” as follows: “in both legal and social practice, anyone with any known African ancestry (no matter how far back in the family lineage) was considered Black, while only those without any trace of known African ancestry were called Whites” (1997, p. 169). This rule served as a means to protect the “purity” of the White race and reinforce the boundaries between racial categories. In part, through the struggles of multiethnic individuals to challenge the “one-drop rule” and to have the option to more accurately identify themselves, the racist underpinning of this rule and the ways in which it was used to dominate and exploit were exposed.

Reading these “claims” of a postpositivist realist theory of identity, and in particular the final claim, one gets the sense that its proponents are treading close to a more objective/positivist approach to identity. To reconcile this near contradiction, the notion of fallibility is introduced. In Moya’s words,

Realists… do not shy away from making truth claims, but… they understand those claims to be “fallibilistic”—that is, like even the best discoveries of the natural sciences, open to revision on the basis of new or relevant information. In fact, it is realists’ willingness to admit the (in principle, endless) possibility of error in the quest for knowledge that enables them to avoid positivist assumptions about certainty and unrevisability that inform the (postmodernist) skeptic’s doubts about the possibility of arriving at a more accurate account of the world. (2000a, p. 13)

Although written into most of the six claims discussed above, this notion of fallibility is most evident in claim three that “there is a cognitive component to identity that allows for the possibility of error and of accuracy in interpreting the things that happen to us” (2000b, p. 83). Thus, as Moya explains, “identities are subject to multiple determinations
and to a continual process of verification” and that “it is in this process of verification that identities can (and often are) contested and that they can (and often do) change” (2000b, p. 84).

As it relates to this research and my own understanding of identities, the strength of a postpositivist realist theory of identity is that it provides a way, not around, but through, the precarious binary opposition constructed between essentialist and postmodern conceptions of identity. By acknowledging the consequences of identity categories without essentializing them and paving the way for an analysis of such categories without making claims to absolute certainty or accuracy, postpositivist realism attempts to reclaim identity from the epistemological quagmire in which it was stuck.

This postpositivist realist understanding of identity has shaped this study in several ways. For example, while I focus on the racial and ethnic heritages of participants and the ways in which these heritages have shaped their experiences and identities, I am mindful of and attentive to the influence of other aspects of their identities such as gender, class, religion, and location. Moreover, I do not claim to capture the Truth about the experiences and identities of multiethnic students. Rather, I seek to better understand their perceptions (i.e. interpretations) of their experiences and the ways they believe, at a given moment in time, those experiences have shaped their identities. I am also mindful of the ways in which racial and ethnic categories have been constructed and mobilized in the United States, and I believe that an examination of the influence of these categories on individuals’ experiences and identities can help us to understand the ways in which they function. Thus, in interviewing students, I sought to learn about their identities and
experiences, but I also sought to gain knowledge about the societies in which they live, and in particular, their schooling contexts.

**A Theory of Multiplicity**

Since I am concerned primarily with multiethnic identities, identities which are often assumed to be more “complicated” and that challenge fixed notions of racial and ethnic categories, an examination of how postpositivist realism approaches the multiplicity of identities is needed. In what follows, I provide an overview of Hames-García’s (2000) conception of multiplicity as well as the challenges (understood as “restrictions”) that impede its realization. In other words, his theorization of multiplicity is more of an ideal model than a reflection of the lived experiences of individuals. I spend considerable time reviewing this approach, as his notion of restrictions and how they operate on the experiences and identities of individuals has proven particularly useful for understanding the responses of some research participants.

Hames-García (2000) provides the following starting point for understanding the ways in which postpositivist realism conceptualizes the relationships between multiple social group memberships:

> Politically salient aspects of the self, such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and class, link and imbricate themselves in fundamental ways. These various categories of social identity do not, therefore, comprise essentially separate “axes” that occasionally “intersect.” They do not simply intersect but blend, constantly and differently, like the colors of a photograph. (p. 103)

Using the example of Henry Rios, a gay Chicano lawyer who is the main character in Michael Nava’s 1992 novel *The Hidden Law*, Hames-García argues that in order to understand Henry’s experiences, we should not focus separately on his gay identity and
his Chicano identity, but rather the ways in which they mutually constitute each other’s meaning. To interrogate each identity separately would “presuppose a preracialized (nonracial) sexual identity or essence that then intersects a presexualized (nonsexual) racial identity or essence” (p. 106). As Hames-García explains, “the crucial error…comes from asking how separate identities come to ‘intersect,’ instead of starting from the presumption of mutual constitution” (p. 106).

Certainly this approach captures the complexity of how identity categories can be understood as constructed and negotiated, and takes into account “the mutual imbrication of politically salient categories, such as race, ethnicity, sexuality, gender, and class” (p. 106). However, as Hames-García argues, identities are not always experienced according to this conception of multiplicity because “this multiplicity of the self becomes obscured through the logic of domination to which the self becomes subjected” (p. 104). That is, Hames-García acknowledges that “social actors do not arbitrarily or freely select the signifiers of race and ethnicity or create them themselves” (De Andrade, 2000, p. 272). Developing a notion of restriction through which individuals are subjected to misrepresentation and misunderstanding, he argues that a “person’s ‘identity’ is reduced to and understood exclusively in terms of that aspect of her or his self with the most political salience” (p. 104). Thus, Hames-García, in reference to Black women, gay Chicanos, and Asian American lesbians states that “their political interests…often appear opaque insofar as they differ from those of the hegemonic members of the politically salient groups to which they belong” (p. 104). Hames-García explains the difference between “transparent” and “opaque” interests and how they are influenced by restrictions in the following way:
Those whose interests conform largely to...dominant constructions of their identity might be said to have “transparent” interests. By contrast, there are those who, possibly by virtue of membership in multiple politically salient groups, often find themselves and their interests distorted by restricted definitions and understandings; their interests, rather than transparent, are “opaque.” I call this process by which individuals come to be misrepresented and misunderstood “restriction.” Thus, a heterosexual, middle-class, white woman’s interests as a woman would be transparent insofar as her interests as a woman are typically taken to represent those of women as a group. (2000, p. 104)

Returning to my research focus of multiethnicity, we can imagine how this process of misrepresentation and misunderstanding might operate on individuals with multiple racial or ethnic identities. For example, let us assume that we want to understand the interests of a woman who is the daughter of a Black father and a White mother. Presumably, her interests will depend, in part, on how she is racially identified by others, that is, her experiences stemming from an assigned racial identity based on forces of restriction—an identity that would result, at least in part, from her phenotype and reflect conventional understandings of race. Likewise, her interests will depend on how she racially identifies herself, which will likely be influenced by the identities assigned to her by others. And, of course, this raises questions about which other politically salient groups she belongs to and their hegemonic members. The poststructuralist’s response to such questions is summarized by Hames-García in the following way:

The miscomprehension of the reality of multiple group membership by discrete, essentialist categories is what poststructuralism seeks to remedy and to avoid. Rather than provide a solution to the distress of “walking from one of one’s groups to another,” however, poststructuralism increases the sense of homelessness for members with opaque interests. It removes the epistemological ground on which one can claim that one “belongs” in a group (or that someone else does not) and of making normative demands for inclusion, acknowledgement, and legitimacy. (p. 120)
How, then, do we avoid this “sense of homelessness” brought on by a poststructuralist conception of identity and avoid monolithic conceptions of identity which lead to restrictions? Drawing on María Lugones’ essay “Purity, Impurity, and Separation” (1994), Hames-García offers an alternative approach to understanding multiplicity. In his words,

[Lugones] portrays the act of separating something into pure parts as an act of domination (460). By contrast, she views ‘impurity’ as a way of resisting the social forces of reification. Lugones’s paradigmatic example of impurity (‘curdling’) is mestizaje, or racial mixing, which asserts its impure (undivided) multiplicity and rejects separation into pure, discrete parts (460). Separate and fragmented become ways of seeing others and oneself that facilitate domination and exploitation. The logic of purity views group members with opaque interests (whom she calls “thick” members) as split and fragmented rather than as whole and multiple. The reality of their experiences, interests, and needs becomes obscured because “the interlocking of memberships in oppressed groups is not seen as changing one’s needs, interests, and ways qualitatively in any group but, rather, one’s needs, interests and ways are understood as the addition of those of the transparent members” (474). (2000, p. 120)

Returning to my example of a Black-White biracial woman, according to Hames-García, her interests should not be seen in terms of how they differ from Black women or White women, but in terms of how her biracial identity as whole and multiple shapes her interests. In other words, we cannot assume that a Black identity free from the influences of a White identity, or vice versa, will shape her needs, interests, and ways. Rather, we need to acknowledge the influence of the socially constructed categories of Black and White as mutually constituting a biracial or undivided identity, which is further constituted by the influence of other socially constructed identity groupings.

This way of conceptualizing multiplicity has several advantages. It escapes the traps of essentialist views of identities which result in fragmentation and rescues identity from the deconstruction of poststructuralism. It also paves the way for a response to
Hames-Garcia’s question “How can a critical epistemological realism account for such complexities and contradictions [i.e. multiplicity] and also explain (and facilitate) the expansion of solidarity and group interests in a way that can help to overcome restriction and separation?” (2000, p. 105). Based on this notion of multiplicity, he responds to his own question in the following way:

This kind of resistance [to restrictions] is one through which the self grows, transforms, and expands. It counters restriction with expansion, fragmentation with multiplicity, separation with solidarity, and exploitation with transformation. Thus a realist understanding of group membership that takes into account the social structures underlying domination must conceptualize group membership beyond the limits imposed by restriction. In this sense, it must reject ‘the master’s tools,’ the tools of purity and separation, and make connections between, among, and across groups. (p. 126)

On theoretical grounds, I cannot fault this conception of multiplicity. However, I question the ability of individuals to construct an identity grounded in such a conception. In what ways do individuals respond to the forces of domination and exploitation that lead to restriction and likewise cause fragmentation and pathologize “impurity”? In other words, this ideal conception of multiplicity relies on the notion that individuals can and do respond to “restriction with expansion, fragmentation with multiplicity, separation with solidarity, and exploitation with transformation” (Hames-Garcia, 2000, p. 126). The crucial question that remains, however, is to what extent does this theory of multiplicity explain, reflect, or help us to understand the lived experiences of individuals with multiple memberships in politically salient social groups? And, more specifically for my current purposes, the lived experiences of multiethnic individuals? Although it is not my intention with this study to evaluate Hames-Garcias theory of how individuals should
respond to forces of restriction, my findings offer some insights into the ways in which they do respond to them.

**Conclusion**

I have made explicit my understanding of identity and outlined a postpositivist realist approach to identities. This postpositivist realist approach to identities seeks to reclaim identities from the epistemological, ontological, and political quagmire that delegitimated the concept and positioned it as “theoretically incoherent and politically pernicious” (Moya, 2000a, p. 2). Thus, I entered this study with an acknowledgement of existing social structures and their consequences for groups and individuals, yet I do not accept a monolithic approach to identities that fails to recognize their variability, instability, and inconsistencies. Furthermore, I believe that interrogating identity categories and people’s experiences of them will not necessarily produce wholly accurate or indisputable “facts,” but that we can come to better understand the social conditions that shape our experiences through such a study. In addition, I have presented Hames-García’s theory of multiplicity (or the “mutual imbrication of politically salient categories”) which offers a model of how individuals might respond to the restrictions that come with multiple memberships in politically salient groups (2000, p. 106). However, as stated, constructing a “whole” or “unfragmented” identity would require one to overcome the influences of restrictions imposed by others. And, as discussed in the next chapter, few agree on how and whether or not multiethnic individuals do so.

Finally, I should make perfectly clear the relationship between the theoretical framing of identity presented here and this research study, particularly as it relates to data collection and analysis processes. My intent with this study is not to test the explanatory
power of postpositivist realism, nor is it to test the applicability of Hames-García’s theory of multiplicity. Rather, I have presented an overview of a postpositivist realist understanding of identity to make clear my epistemological and theoretical position in relation to the study of multiethnic identities, and I have discussed Hames-García’s theory of multiplicity to elucidate my understanding of the ways in which conventional notions of race and ethnicity may produce restrictions which are then imposed on multiethnic identities. As Lather (1986), cited in Anderson (1989), argues, critical ethnographers—and I would say all researchers—need to develop a reciprocal relationship between data and theory:

Data must be allowed to generate propositions in a dialectical manner that permits use of a priori theoretical frameworks, but which keeps a particular framework from becoming the container into which the data must be poured. (p. 276). (Anderson, 1989, p. 254)

Following her advice, the preceding theories did not serve as a vessel for the data; however, they do shape my understanding of multiethnic identities, and thus influenced the research questions and how I set about attempting to answer them (see Chapter Four). Likewise, the research questions and my efforts to answer them were not dictated, but shaped, by the literature reviewed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER THREE: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to situate my study in relation to the existing literature regarding multiethnic identities and the K-12 schooling experiences of multiethnic students—literature to which, in many ways, this study is a response. This synthesis of existing literature is divided into five sections, which, together, contribute to the rationale for this research, inform the research design, and provide the educational context for the study. In Section I, I examine empirical investigations of multiethnic identity formation and link their findings to the design of this study. Section II explores perceived consequences of a multiethnic heritage and prevalent views on the impact of multiethnic identity development processes. Section III focuses on literature addressing the influence of K-12 schooling on students’ identity construction, as well as literature related to multicultural and antiracism education. Section IV examines the body of literature more narrowly focused on the K-12 schooling experiences of multiethnic students. Finally, Section V integrates the literature and research reviewed in the previous sections and highlights gaps in our understanding of the identity construction and K-12 schooling of multiethnic students.

The past two decades have seen the proliferation of empirical studies and literature related to the identity construction and experiences of multiethnic individuals. Some of these studies were conducted with adults (e.g. Khanna, 2004; Miville, et al., 2005), some with children (e.g. Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, & Harris, 1993), some with adolescents (e.g. Bracey, Bámaca, & Umaña-Taylor, 2004; Doyle, 2006; Herman, 2004; Phinney & Alipuria, 1996; Sheets, 2004), and others with college-age participants (e.g. Basu, 2007; Kelch-Oliver & Leslie, 2006; Phinney & Alipuria, 1996; Renn, 2004a).
Several studies focused exclusively on multiethnic women (e.g. Basu, 2007; Comas-Díaz, 1996). Others were limited to an examination of the identities and experiences of individuals of a specific racial or ethnic heritage combination: Baird-Olson (2003) focused on American Indian “mixed-blood” identity, Comas-Díaz (1996) addressed the experiences of LatiNegras with a Caribbean background, Kich (1992) examined the identities of Japanese/White individuals, and Standen (1996) explored the biracial Korean/White experience. Given the history of race relations in the United States, it is not surprising that the majority of these heritage-specific studies have focused on Black-White multiethnic individuals (e.g. Brunsma & Rockquemore, 2001; Fryer, Kahn, Levitt, & Spenkuch, 2008; Gibbs and Hines, 1992; Kelch-Oliver & Leslie, 2006; Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, & Harris, 1993; Rockquemore, 2002). Nevertheless, we also find studies with participants representing a broad range of heritage combinations (Basu, 2007; Lopez, 2001; Renn, 2004a; Sheets, 2004). Some researchers have employed qualitative methodologies to examine the identities and experiences of multiethnic individuals (e.g. Kelch-Oliver & Leslie, 2006; Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, & Harris, 1993; Miville, et al., 2005), other studies were quantitative (e.g. Brunsma, 2005; Doyle, 2006; Herman, 2004; Udry, Li, & Hendrickson-Smith, 2003). Various studies reflect developmental understandings of identity construction (Jacobs, 1992; Kich, 1992; Poston, 1990), others approach multiethnic identity construction from a more sociological perspective focusing on social contexts and ecological factors influencing multiethnic identities (Basu, 2007; Renn, 2004a; Root, 1998, 2003b). Among these different types of studies, we find those that focus on specific factors and their influence on multiethnic identities: Brunsma and Rockquemore (2001) examined the influence of physical
appearance, Rockquemore (2002) studied the influence of gender, and Sheets (2004) explored the influence of friendships. In addition to these differences, the abovementioned authors employ a broad range of terms to refer to multiethnic individuals, such as mixed-race, biracial, bicultural, biethnic, multiracial, ethno-racially mixed, and a host of other terms.2 Despite differences in terminology, participant selection, and focus among these studies, and between these studies and my own, the research and literature discussed in this chapter was selected because it contributes to our understanding of the identity development processes of multiethnic individuals and provides the backdrop against which the data from this study are best viewed and interpreted.

**Section I: Multiethnic Identity Development**

In response to a general neglect of biracial individuals in literature pertaining to identity development and the limitations of previous models of racial identity development when applied to biracial individuals, Poston (1990) proposed one of the earliest and most referenced models of biracial identity development, which consists of the following five developmental stages: personal identity, choice of group categorization, enmeshment/denial, appreciation, and integration. Poston’s (1990) model of biracial identity development is, as he himself admits, “tentative and based on the scant amount of research on biracial individuals and information from support groups that serve this population” (p. 153). Moreover, it implies a predictable progression through discrete developmental stages, yet he identified “the existence of the stages, individuals’

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2 Throughout the dissertation, when discussing others’ research, I often adopt their terminology.
movement through the stages, and the feelings and attitudes that biracial persons express in each of these stages” as “important areas of investigation” (p. 154).

Poston’s model is not based on empirical research, and therefore remains, by his own admission, speculative and tentative. Jacobs (1992), in contrast, proposed a model of biracial identity development based on research and clinical experience with preadolescent biracial (Black-White) children. His research methods included interviews with biracial children and their parents and a variation of the doll-play experiment first developed by Clark and Clark in 1947. According to Jacobs, preadolescent biracial children go through three stages of identity development: pre-color constancy, post-color constancy, and biracial identity. Quite similar to that of Jacobs is Kich’s (1982, 1992) three stage model of multiethnic identity development. Kich developed his model based on semi-structured interviews with 15 biracial adults (aged 17 to 60) of White and Japanese heritage. According to Kich, all research participants “progressed through three major stages in the development and continuing resolution of their biracial identity…from a questionable, sometimes devalued sense of self to one where an interracial self-conception is highly valued and secure.” (p. 305).

Both Jacobs’ (1992) and Kich’s (1992) models were based on research with individuals of a specific heritage combination and, therefore, may be of limited applicability for individuals of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, each model identifies a specific identity that multiethnic individuals will ideally develop and

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3 Jacobs used 36 wooden dolls of various skin and hair colors, facial features, heights, and sexes. Biracial children were asked to play with the dolls, match dolls to a stimulus doll, self identify with a doll, identify dolls that resemble their family members, select which dolls they would prefer as a sibling, select which dolls they would prefer to play with, select which dolls they liked the least and most, select which dolls would be the sibling of a light-brown baby doll, and select which doll they would look most like when they grew up (Jacobs, 1992).
leaves little room for the possibility of multiple, shifting, and contextual identities.

Emerging mostly in the 1990s or earlier, these linear/stage models of multiethnic identity development have more recently given way to non-linear/ecological models that focus less on one’s linear progression through developmental stages and more on the various factors that may influence multiethnic individuals’ identities and the patterns of identity such individuals may adopt at different times and in different contexts.

In 1996, for example, Root outlined a model of multiracial identity consisting of four patterns of “border crossing” that may result from an individual’s navigation between the racial and ethnic categories imposed on them by society. The four patterns include:

(1) having both feet in both groups…[and] the ability to hold, merge, and respect multiple perspectives simultaneously, (2) the shifting of foreground and background as one crosses between and among social contexts defined by race and ethnicity…Thus one practices situational ethnicity and situational race…in differing contexts, (3) [Sitting] on the border…experiencing it as the central reference point…viewing themselves with a multiracial label, and (4) [Creating] a home in one “camp” [racial or ethnic identity] for an extended period of time and [making] forays into other camps from time to time. (1996a, pp. xxi-xxii)

Whereas this earlier work was concerned primarily with the outcomes of the multiethnic identity construction process, in 1998 and 2003, Root outlined an ecological model of multiracial identity development with a theoretical grounding in symbolic interactionism. Here, Root highlighted the influence of macro lenses (e.g., gender, regional history of race relations, class, and generation) and middle lenses/micro lenses (e.g., inherited influences, traits, social environments, and phenotype) in shaping the experiences, and thus identities, of multiracial individuals (1998, 2003b).
Based on her research with multiracial college students of various heritage combinations, Renn (1999; 2004a) provided a model of multiracial identity development that builds on Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) ecology model of human development, which, like Root’s (1998, 2003b), emphasizes the influence of environmental factors on one’s identity development.4 Through her research, Renn (2004a) identified five “identity patterns” which include: (1) a monoracial identity, (2) multiple monoracial identities, (3) a multiracial identity, (4) an extraracial identity, and (5) a situational identity. Echoing Root (1996a), Renn emphasized the situational and shifting nature of multiracial identities: “these patterns are not exclusive, nor are they rigid or unchangeable” (2004a, p. 68). Where Renn’s patterns of multiracial identity differs from Root’s (1996a) is in her identification of pattern four (no racial identity by means of deconstructing the category of race) which she attributed, in part, to the college students’ “exposure to theories of deconstruction and the knowledge that race is a construction rather than a biological fact” (2000, pp. 411-412).

While Renn (2004a) conducted research with male and female multiracial college students, Basu (2004, 2007) focused on the identities of biracial college women representing multiple heritage combinations. Like Renn (1999, 2004a) and Root (1998, 2003b), Basu highlighted contextual influences on the identity construction of participants. Those influences considered in Basu’s study include, among others, family, friendships, schooling, social barriers, and the media. She concluded, “rather than

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4 Bronfenbrenner’s model focuses on the influence of person-environment interactions, which take place in microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems. The “systems” Renn identified as being most influential on the identity development of multiracial study participants include academic work, friendship groups, social and dating life, and involvement in campus activities (microsystems); peer culture (mesosystem); and family, hometown, and high school (exosystems). Renn found that these systems, together, shaped participants’ ideas about race, culture, and identity (macrosystem).
focusing solely on the individual, the results of the study show the importance of considering social context when examining biracial identity” (2004, p. 172). Although not in an attempt to develop a model of multiethnic identity development, through her dissertation research, Lopez (2001) also found strong evidence to support the notion that multiethnic identities are fluid, contextually driven, and influenced by a broad range of factors; as did Wijeyesinghe (2001).

A significant difference between the earlier stage models of multiethnic identity development and the more recent ecological models is the “end point” of the multiethnic identity development processes identified. For Poston (1990), arrival at stage five is marked by an integrated sense of identity, and for both Jacobs (1992) and Kich (1992) stage three entails the development of a biracial or bicultural identity. More recent ecological approaches (e.g. Basu, 2007; Lopez, 2001, 2004; Renn, 2004a; Root 1996a, 1998, 2003b), however, do not specify a particular identity that individuals are likely to or ideally will develop, but a variety of patterns of identity or patterns of “border crossing” that individuals may adopt at different times, in different contexts, and according to their unique experiences. It is important to note, however, that the ecological models’ descriptions of the ways in which individuals create spaces for themselves between, within, and outside of conventional racial and ethnic categories may be of limited use for explaining the identity development processes experienced by young individuals. School aged children may not have the confidence and the necessary knowledge pertaining to the socially constructed nature of racial and ethnic categories to adeptly navigate these borders, challenge conventional understandings of race and ethnicity, and assertively claim spaces for themselves. Unequipped with such tools,
students’ self-definition of their identity may not hold up to the scrutiny of others. In fact, the ecological models discussed here have emerged from studies conducted with adolescents and adults, with little focus on early and late childhood identity construction experiences. Thus, Wardle’s (1992) model that takes into account ecological influences and how they might be experienced by children with different levels of cognitive and emotional maturity potentially overcomes some of the shortcomings of previously posited linear and non-linear models of multiethnic identity construction (see also Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004). Quite likely, the most accurate conclusion to draw is that of Miville, Constantine, Baysden, and So-Lloyd (2005), who state that both developmental and ecological models of multiracial identity development “capture some, though not all, components that make up racial identity for multiracial people” (p. 514).

Despite the considerable differences between the studies discussed here and the models of multiethnic identity development emerging from them, several conclusions can nevertheless be drawn. First, the identity construction of multiethnic individuals is widely understood to differ qualitatively from the identity construction of individuals with more homogenous racial and ethnic backgrounds. In other words, there are differences in multiethnic individuals’ identity construction processes that do make a difference. Second, and consistent with the understanding of identity development discussed in the

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5 Wardle put forth a model of multiethnic/multiracial identity construction that takes into account developmental stages and ecological influences. The two stages Wardle identified are early childhood and adolescence, his description of which focuses on differences in cognitive development at each stage. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1989) ecological model of development, Wardle identified family, group antagonism, minority/lower status context, majority/higher status context, and community as significant factors influencing a child’s progression through the two developmental stages. Although Wardle described his model as both developmental and ecological, it appears to me to be an ecological model that, rather than positing specific developmental stages unique to multiethnic individuals, simply takes into consideration the fact that young children and adolescents are at different stages in their cognitive and emotional development. Accordingly, I believe Wardle’s model is better understood as a variant of the ecological models that, unlike the others, focuses on the identity development of younger multiethnic individuals.
previous chapter, implicit in each of the models of multiethnic identity construction is the interactive nature of the identity development process. That is to say, one’s identity development, whether a process of “border crossing” or a progression through developmental stages, is not merely a private endeavor but is one of negotiation between one’s self concept and the perceptions of others—described by Jenkins (2003) as internal and external definitions of one’s identity. Thus, the most recent studies of multiethnic identities tend to have a psychosocial focus and recognize that, although some patterns may be discerned, the multiethnic identity construction process varies considerably between individuals. Third, there is strong evidence to support the notion of multiethnic identities as fluid, contextual, and situational (Basu, 2007; Lopez, 2001, 2004; Renn, 1999, 2004a; Root, 1996a, 1998, 2003b; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). Indeed, as noted previously, most current studies, as well as findings from a pilot study conducted for this research (Mohan, 2007), indicate that the multiethnic identity development process is non-linear and may result in multiple and shifting identities. Finally, it is widely accepted that certain factors have a significant influence on the identity construction of multiethnic individuals. Renn (2008), for example, points out that physical appearance, cultural knowledge, and peer culture are factors permeating the literature related to multiethnic identities, and Root (2003b) states that “virtually all researchers of biracial identity find it important to discuss the influences of phenotype, environment, family environment, and racial awareness” (p. 117).

The literature discussed in this section, my analysis of it, and the preceding conclusions, as well as the postpositivist realist framework for understanding identities outlined in the previous chapter, shaped the central research questions for this study and
how I set about answering these questions. While acknowledging that individuals, and particularly young individuals, are likely to pass through cognitive and emotional developmental stages, my goal was not to identify specific stages encountered on the path to an “end point” multiethnic identity. Rather, the data collection strategies were designed to better understand the broad range of factors and relationships influencing the development of participants’ racial and ethnic identities and changes to these identities over time and across different contexts.

Section II: Problem, Equivalent, and Variant Approaches to Multiethnic Identity

A related body of research, rather than attempting to develop models of identity construction, has sought to characterize the consequences of a multiethnic heritage and the impact of multiethnic identity development processes. These processes and lived identities are most often characterized as either more problematic, equivalent to, or different from, and perhaps even “better” than, those of monoethnic individuals (Thornton & Wason, 1995).

Problem Approaches to Multiethnic Identity

The identity construction of multiethnic individuals is often described as a process fraught with difficulty and confusion. According to Wardle (1998), as a result of the emphasis North American society places on “racial and ethnic identity and affiliation, children of mixed parentage often feel disloyal and confused; they have a sense of not knowing where they belong.” (p. 8). Following a similar line of thought, Wilson (1987) pointed out that the pervasive notion that multiethnic individuals must choose a single race with which to identify stems from the “rigid racial boundaries imposed by our
society...[making it] impossible to maintain a dual allegiance to both racial groups.” (p. 7). Moreover, it is often assumed that questions about one’s identity, appearance, cultural legitimacy, family, and so forth will lead to a conflicted sense of identity and emotional and behavioral problems. Thornton described such thinking as the “problem approach” to multiracial identity based on the notion that “the internal struggle for mixed people lies in trying to maintain bonds to incompatible groups” (1996, p. 109).

A study conducted by Udry, Li, and Hendrickson-Smith (2003) based on the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) data from 1994-1995, supports this “problem approach” to multiracial identity. According to their findings, “mixed-race adolescents showed higher risk when compared with single-race adolescents on general health questions, school experiences, smoking and drinking, and other risk variables” (2003, p. 1865). The authors pointed out, however, that, despite being higher risk than their single race peers, mixed-race adolescents are nevertheless low risk. Although they could not with certainty attribute these findings to a specific cause, they concluded that “most of the risk items we assessed may be interpreted as related to stress, so we may therefore choose to interpret mixed race as a source of stress” (p. 1869).

Further evidence to support this “problem approach” was presented by Fryer, Kahn, Levitt, and Spenkuch (2008). Using the same data set as Udry, Li, and Hendrickson-Smith (2003) (National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) data from 1994-1995) but focusing on the responses of only black-white identified students and comparing them to single-race black and white students, these authors found that “mixed race children engage in substantially more risky/anti-social behavior than either blacks or whites, especially outside of school” (2008, p. 5).
Variables identified as depicting risky/anti-social behavior include those taking place in and out of school with the former including “trouble with teachers, trouble paying attention, trouble with homework, trouble with students, effort on schoolwork, skipping school, and never [sic] suspended or expelled” and the latter including “watch TV, drink, smoke, dare, lie to parents, fight, property damage, steal, violent acts, sell drugs, encounter violence, ever sex, ever STD, and ever illegal drug use” (p. 11). The authors argued that their findings were “largely consistent with the ‘marginal man’ hypothesis (Park, 1928, 1931; Stonequist 1935, 1937)” (p. 5) and that “mixed race adolescents – not having a natural peer group – need to engage in more risky behaviors to be accepted” (p. 2). Similarly, in a qualitative study conducted with nine Black-White biracial college-age women, Kelch-Oliver and Leslie (2006) found that among participants “the most prevalent experience was a feeling of being marginal between two cultures” (p. 53) and that “most of the participants felt a sense of not fitting in, belonging, or feeling accepted by either race” (p. 70).

Equivalent and Variant Approaches to Multiethnic Identity

According to Thornton, the “equivalent approach” to multiracial identity “characterizes mixed racial and monoracial identity formation as an assimilation process with similar outcomes” (1996, p. 109) and posits that “no matter where multiracials start, they end up in the same place, with identities comparable to their monoracial peers” (p. 113). In contrast, the “variant approach,” like the “problem approach” focuses on the uniqueness of multiracial identities, but rather than viewing them as a source of problems, multiethnic identities are understood simply as different if not “better” than monoracial identities. Thornton explained, “the variant and problem approaches describe
differences between mixed and homogeneous populations,” but according to the variant view, multiracial individuals “are likely to benefit from being able to draw from and exist in two contrasting worlds” (p. 113).

Several studies have attempted, even if not explicitly, to examine the applicability of each of these approaches to understanding multiethnic identities. Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, and Harris (1993), for example, in a qualitative study conducted with nine black/white biracial children and their parents, found that, contrary to “the problems that historically have been conjectured for this population…for all of the respondent children and adolescents, there was no great sense of perceiving themselves as marginal in two cultures” (p. 228). In their quantitative study, Phinney and Alipuria (1996) compared the survey responses of 241 multiethnic/multiracial high school and college students to those of 1,041 of their monoethnic peers. As they explained,

> We found that multiethnic young people were not at a psychological disadvantage because of their mixed background. A self-esteem measure did not indicate any difference in terms of psychological well-being between multiethnic individuals and their monoethnic peers… Multiethnic individuals are not troubled, marginal people. (p. 152)

Reflecting a “variant approach” to multiethnic identities, Phinney and Alipuria went on to point out that,

> [T]he multiethnic participants were not identical to their monoethnic peers. At least in some cases, multiethnic youths may have an advantage in their inter-group relations; multiethnic male and female high school students with one Black parent and multiethnic males with one Latino parent had more positive attitudes towards other groups than their monoethnic peers did. (p. 153)

Finally, Bracey, Bámaca, and Umaña-Taylor (2004) examined the self-esteem, ethnic identity, and the relationship between these two constructs of 3282 biracial and monoracial adolescents. They found that biracial study participants “had significantly
lower self-esteem than Black adolescents, but significantly higher self-esteem than Asian adolescents...[and] that biracial adolescents had reported significantly higher levels of ethnic identity than White adolescents” (p. 129).

Because the evidence to support each of these approaches to understanding multiethnic identity is persuasive, it is difficult to determine if one approach is more accurate than the others. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, though, Shih and Sanchez (2005) only found support for the “problem approach” when reviewing qualitative studies sampling clinical populations. In fact, they found that “studies on non clinical samples find that multiracial individuals tend to be just as well-adjusted as their monoracial peers on most psychological outcomes” (p. 569). Nevertheless, they identified numerous challenges that multiethnic individuals face in their identity development process, including conflict between their private sense of identity and the identities imposed on them by others, feeling that they must justify their identity choices to themselves and others, feeling forced to identify with one heritage over another, a lack of role models, conflicting messages about race from family members and the community, and a sense of double rejection from both of their heritage groups. Ultimately, and, I would argue, very accurately, Shih and Sanchez concluded that much more research is needed to fully understand multiracial identity and its effects on psychological adjustment.

As the studies examined here indicate, conventional understandings of racial and ethnic categories, and, perhaps more importantly, the boundaries constructed between them, are understood as significantly influencing the identity construction of multiethnic individuals. Recalling the language of Hames-Garcia (Chapter Two) these categories and the boundaries constructed between them are often understood as restrictions imposed on
multiethnic identities. The influence of these categories and boundaries, however, as seen in the review of conceptions of multiethnic identities as problematic, equivalent, and variant, is not agreed upon. What does seem to be agreed upon, as before, is that multiethnic identity development differs in important ways from monoethnic identity development. Consequently, when interviewing and conducting focus groups with participants and when analyzing the data, I paid close attention to participants’ discussions of racial and ethnic categories, their experiences stemming from these categories, and their perceptions regarding the influence of these experiences on their identity development. At the same time, given the findings of some researchers (e.g. Udry, Li, & Hendrickson-Smith, 2003; Kelch-Oliver & Leslie, 2006), I knew that I needed to be sensitive to the fact that some participants may well have had negative experiences stemming from the imposition of racial and ethnic restrictions.

Despite the numerous studies that refute the problem approach to multiethnic identity, this perspective permeates much of the educational literature related to multiethnic students. As discussed in Section IV, many of the arguments for altering educational policy and practice are premised on the idea that multiethnic students are at risk of feeling marginalized, excluded, conflicted, and/or confused as a result of their multiethnic identity and that they require unique support mechanisms. Before discussing such arguments, however, I first review the understood influence of schooling on students’ identity construction and the more prevalent methods used by educators to support the racial and ethnic identity development of students.
Section III: Schooling and Student Identity Construction

There appears to be an implicit line of logic running through much educational literature related to students’ racial and ethnic identities, which develops as follows: (1) because many identity construction processes take place during childhood and adolescence, and (2) because children and adolescents spend much of their time in schools, and (3) because identity construction processes are both cognitive and social, and (4) because many of children and adolescents’ cognitive learning and social interactions take place at school, (5) schooling, therefore, does play a significant role in students’ racial and ethnic identity construction processes. Indeed, the central role played by schools in individuals’ identity development is assumed, and constantly affirmed; however, the specific nature and outcomes of schooling’s influence persists as a prevalent topic in educational research.

In the literature related to curriculum and students’ racial and ethnic identities, the focus is often on the ways in which minoritized people are excluded from the “canon” and marginalized through negative or inaccurate representations of racial and ethnic minorities. For instance, Castenell and Pinar (1993) argued that African American students “have been denied access to their history and culture in school” (p. 6). The result of this exclusion, they said, is a fractured identity: “If what we know about ourselves—our history, our culture, our national identity—is deformed by absences, denials, and incompleteness, then our identity—both as individuals and as Americans—is fractured” (p. 4). Nieto (2000), drawing on a case study with a Chicano student named “Paul,” explained the importance of incorporating Chicano culture and experiences in the curriculum to support the identity development of Chicano students. She stated,
It is not simply a question of feeling good about themselves; rather, a strong sense of identity is essential for giving young people a sense of their own dignity and worth. Including their experiences in the school’s curriculum is one way that Paul and his classmates are given the opportunity to develop this sense of dignity and worth. (p. 260)

Across the literature related to K-12 curriculum and students’ racial and ethnic identities, the consensus is clear: maintaining the typically Eurocentric curriculum either fails to support or actively hinders the identity development of minoritized students, while a curriculum that acknowledges, incorporates, and builds on students’ cultures, histories, and experiences supports their identity construction processes (see, for example, Castenell and Pinar, 1993; Cruz-Janzen, 1997; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Nieto, 2000; Shields, 2003).

The educational literature related to student identity formation is, of course, not limited to analyses of the curriculum, nor is it limited to racial and ethnic identity development. McLeod and Yates (2006) examined the influence of high school contexts (i.e. socio-economic demographics, dominant values) on students’ identity formation related to, for example, gender and career aspirations. Research conducted by Reichert and Kuriloff (2004) revealed some of the ways in which “the looking glass of the variously gendered academic and social curricula of schools” influences the self-concept of boys (p. 544). Tatum (2007) discussed the importance of inclusive learning environments as they relate to the curriculum, the diversity of staff and students, and building a sense of community, for the healthy racial identity formation of students. Others have discussed how the racial and ethnic composition of a school influences students’ racial and ethnic identities (e.g. Phinney & Alipuria, 1996; Lopez, 2004). And, in his study of high school students’ identities, particularly as they relate to race and
culture, Yon (2000) found that the school is “a discursive field wherein identities are
done, unmade, and contested” and that the school “is not simply a container of identities
or static locale, but is implicated in the production of the identities of teachers and
students” (pp. 31-32). Indeed, the literature is replete with examples of the ways in which
K-12 schooling experiences, including those that take place formally in classrooms and
during school sponsored activities, as well as those that take place less formally in sites
such as hallways and cafeterias, potentially influence students’ identity development in
both positive and negative ways.

The findings of these and similar studies, especially as they relate to racial and
ethnic identities, should be of particular importance to educators since, as Hall (2000b)
explained, “in conventional pedagogic analysis, cultural diversity and identity
fragmentation are usually directly linked to behavioral problems, low self-esteem, and
poor academic attainment in school” (p. ix). In contrast, based on an analysis of findings
from more than a dozen studies, Zirkel pointed out that “a strong, positive racial or ethnic
identity is associated with higher levels of academic performance…higher educational
aspirations…[and] greater academic self confidence…” (2008, pp. 1151-1152). As
previously discussed, Bracey, Bámaca, and Umaña-Taylor (2002) conducted a
quantitative study examining the “self-esteem, ethnic identity, and the relationship
between these constructs among biracial and monoracial adolescents” (p. 123). Their
findings indicated “a significant, positive relationship between ethnic identity and self-
esteeem for all groups” (p. 130). In their concluding comments, they stated that “these
findings have important implications for intervention programs, youth programs, and
multicultural education in that they suggest the importance of promoting both healthy
self-esteem as well as positive ethnic identity development as critical to adolescent adjustment” (p. 130). As a result of such findings, the argument is repeatedly made that schools should seek to support the identity development of all students, and in particular, the racial and ethnic identities of minoritized students.

Overview of Multicultural and Antiracism Education

Much of the literature related to schooling and students’ identity development concentrates on racial and ethnic identities, and within this literature, the focus is most often on multicultural education, and, to a lesser extent, antiracism education. Certainly, other approaches have been suggested as a means to, in part, support the identity construction of all students, and, in particular, minoritized students. These include, among others, culturally relevant pedagogy (see Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive teaching (see Gay, 2000). I focus here on multicultural and antiracism education, however, because of the explicit link made between such approaches and the identity development of minoritized students (in the case of multiculturalism see, for example, Gay, 1994; Nieto, 2000; in the case of antiracism see, for example, Dei, 2000), their potential impact on all students’ understandings of race, ethnicity, and identity (Cruz-Janzen, 1997; Gosine, 2002), and their prevalence in educational literature, and especially literature related to multiethnic students. Here, I draw attention to the conceptions of race and ethnicity upon which these initiatives are constructed, which, presumably, reflect predominant thinking about race and ethnicity among educators, and, as a result of curricula, policies, activities, and classroom practices based on these conceptions, their students. Again, one purpose of my research is to interrogate the perceived influence of such diversity education initiatives on multiethnic students’ racial
and ethnic identity construction—a subject which remains noticeably neglected in educational research.

Since its emergence in the late 1960s, multicultural education has suffered critiques from both liberals and conservatives, has prompted numerous debates about the sources of and remedies for racial inequality, and has experienced multiple metamorphoses into more narrowly defined approaches. While conservatives argue that multicultural education is too political, grants excessive attention and preferential treatment to minority students, and distracts teachers and students from more “essential” curriculum (May, 1994), more radical opponents claim that, due to its narrow and simplistic understanding of racism and its focus on attitudes and behaviours, multicultural education leaves unchallenged the structural sources of racial inequality and does little to improve the educational position and life chances of minority students (May, 1994; Grinter, 2000). These critiques engendered debates as to whether racism—and the unequal educational opportunities available to minorities—results from prejudice or oppression and, likewise, if the solution to these problems lies in altering individuals’ beliefs and attitudes or in changing oppressive institutional structures. Amidst these debates, those advocating multicultural education created divisions between more nuanced approaches. Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997), for example, described five types of multiculturalism: conservative multiculturalism/monoculturalism, liberal multiculturalism, pluralist multiculturalism, left-essentialist multiculturalism, and critical multiculturalism. During this period of metamorphosis for multicultural education, those advocating antiracism education mounted their challenges and increasingly placed themselves in opposition to multiculturalists.
Even when authors take pains to specify precise definitions of their favored approach, incongruous terminology and the blurring of lines between the approaches make comparative analysis difficult. For example, while authors such as Grinter (2000) draw a clear distinction between multicultural and antiracism education and position them as fundamentally incompatible, Nieto (2000), in her definition of multicultural education, removes the division entirely, and states that “Multicultural education is antiracism education.” (p. 305). Likewise, Nieto’s conceptualization of multicultural education is nearly indistinguishable from the definitions of critical multiculturalism provided by Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) and May (1999), yet she does not adopt their terminology. Furthermore, Kincheloe and Steinberg’s (1997) critical multiculturalism is, both in theory and practice, strikingly similar to characterizations of antiracism such as those provided by Dei and Calliste (2000) and Grinter (2000). Add to the mix other approaches, such as those laid out by Sleeter and Grant (1999) which include the “human relations” approach to multicultural education and “education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist,” and one is left with a spectrum of inconsistently-named educational strategies ranging from the most conservative to the most radical, with those in between differing, at times, almost imperceptibly. However, because traditionally defined multicultural and antiracism education are often viewed as incompatible strategies lying at opposite ends of a spectrum and pitted against each other in scholarly debates, this discussion focuses on them. It should also be noted that, in more recent years, both multicultural and antiracism education have expanded the scope of their focus from race and ethnicity to include class, gender, sexuality, ability, and other axes of difference. While I recognize that these axes are not experienced in isolation from
each other, the analysis here focuses primarily on each approach’s treatment of race and ethnicity.

As stated, numerous scholars engage in the debate between multicultural and antiracism education (see e.g. Grinter, 2000; Short, 1991, 2000; Fyfe, 1993). Among those who do so, Dei and Calliste (2000) provide a succinct overview of the ways in which these two approaches differ. According to them, multiculturalism advocates tolerance, focuses on shared commonalities, and views the obstacles to equity as stemming from intolerance and a lack of goodwill, while antiracism focuses on relations of domination and subordination, challenges racist behaviors and values, and sees the obstacles to equity as discrimination, hatred, exclusion, and violence. For the purposes of my analysis, more salient than the differences depicted by Dei and Calliste are the conceptions of race and ethnicity which underlie each respective approach. Indeed, the relevant difference here lies in how each approach views, and thus presents, the boundaries between racial and ethnic groups. That is, in teaching about diversity—the values, norms, and customs of different racial and ethnic groups—does multicultural education necessarily reinforce racial and ethnic categories and the boundaries between them? And, does antiracism education do the same when emphasizing differences in power between racial groups? In other words, do both approaches rely to some extent on essentialist conceptions of traditional racial and ethnic categories to achieve their aims?

*Critiques of Multicultural and Antiracism Education*

According to critics, predominant models of multicultural education, which begin with an adherence to five traditional racial groups, oversimplify the diversity found in today’s schools (Wardle, 1996). Moreover, multicultural education constructs minority
groups in “static, essentialist, and exoticized terms” and reinforces shallow understandings of the complexity of race and ethnicity (Gosine, 2002, p. 89). This thin treatment of segregated racial and ethnic groups, often manifested in lessons about the “Three D’s” (dress, dance, and diet) or the “Three F’s” (food, fun, and fashion), necessarily emphasizes the differences, and thus boundaries, between them. Drawing on such critiques of multicultural education and findings from a study conducted with biethnic and biracial individuals, Cruz-Janzen (1997) explained that

> The need is to move beyond the traditional models of multicultural education that continue to promote the separation and isolation of Americans—and all humans—through exclusive ethnic and racial categories and the sorting of people into groups. Education that is truly humanistic, inclusive, and multicultural must instead strive to prepare all students to be able to cross cultural boundaries without having to relinquish their self-identity and integrity. (p. 328)

Challenging essentialist conceptions of racial and ethnic groups and making space for those who do not neatly fit within them is arguably quite feasible within the multicultural framework, “yet multicultural education, while advocating for inclusiveness, makes no allocations for persons with multiple ethnic and racial heritages” (Cruz-Janzen, 1997, p. 325). In fact, until they do so, some scholars argue, conventional approaches to multicultural education will not be authentically multicultural (Wardle, 1996).

Extending these critiques, Dolby (2000) challenged the conception of identity that underlies multicultural education. She stated:

> Identity politics tend to dominate in mainstream multicultural discourses. Theoretically dependent on the idea of the Enlightenment subject (Hall, 1992), this configuration of identity assumes that humans have essential, stable cores that are fully formed and unified. Within this paradigm, groups are designated by characteristics that are understood as inherent (though not necessarily biological) and finding one’s “authentic” self, or the core of one’s identity, is a central preoccupation. (p. 899).
Echoing others (see Gosine, 2002; Yon, 2000), Dolby argued that such an approach to identity neglects the ways in which identities are produced and reproduced and the “slick and elusive” nature of race and racial identities (p. 908). Moreover, as she explained, “Racial identities cannot be bounded and framed, for they exceed, engulf, and mock the borders in which we attempt to encase them” (p. 908)—borders imposed and reinforced by multicultural approaches to education.

Antiracism education has been critiqued for the similar use and reinforcement of essentialized understandings of racial and ethnic groups. However, there is a qualitative difference between how antiracism and multiculturalism engage with essentialized notions of race. Whereas multiculturalism’s essentialism arguably results from oversight and lack of awareness and can be rectified within its current framework, essentialism is fundamental to antiracism education. Returning to Dei and Calliste’s (2000) conceptualization of antiracism education, we must ask if it is possible to challenge systemic racial inequalities without essentializing—in fact reinforcing the boundaries between—those racial groups competing for power, access to resources, and representation. According to Gosine, the answer is no, because antiracism “suppresses the inter-group divisions, ruptures, and contradiction [within racial groups]… [and] further reifies the normative-deviant binary it is designed to critique” (2002, p. 90).

At their core, both multicultural and antiracism education, although for different purposes, rely on essentialized understandings of racial and ethnic groups. In the case of multicultural education, this results from what appears to be an understanding of the complexities of race and ethnicity and how they are experienced and negotiated by individuals that is overly-simplistic, although perhaps inadvertently so. In the case of
antiracism education, this oversimplification apparently stems from the need to strategically essentialize racial groups in order to achieve its aims. The net result of each approach is described by Gosine in the following way:

Although well-intentioned, multicultural and anti-racist models encourage people to think in terms of discrete, bounded collectivities that possess recognizable sets of attributes that distinguish one group from another. Such an approach perpetuates a we-them view of difference—a simplistic, binary perspective that reinforces the backbone of racist discourses (2002, p. 96).

Such “we-them” dichotomies neglect those living on the hyphen, and the reinforcement of such dichotomies contributes to the rigidity of racial and ethnic categories which are understood to confine multiethnic identities.

Clearly, K-12 schooling experiences are widely believed to influence the identity construction of all students, and ample evidence suggests that this influence potentially supports or hinders students’ identity development. It is also widely believed that students’ sense of identity, and in particular their racial and ethnic identity, is linked to their self-esteem and educational aspirations and outcomes. As a result of such conclusions, educators have devised various strategies to support the racial and ethnic identity construction of minoritized students, among which multicultural education (in its many forms) and antiracism education are the most prevalent, if not in practice, in the literature. Thus, I reviewed here the central tenets of each and discussed critiques of their reinforcement of rigid and essentialist conceptions of racial and ethnic categories.6 This relatively descriptive review provides the backdrop for the following section, as it reveals

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6 My focus here is on the critiques of multicultural and antiracism education often found in the literature related to the schooling experiences of multiethnic students. There is, however, a large body of literature that implicitly or explicitly responds to or refutes such critiques. Zirkel (2008), for example, clearly demonstrates the efficacy of multicultural education for many minoritized students. My intention is not to advocate abandoning multicultural and antiracist approaches, but to suggest that they ought to reflect more nuanced and accurate understandings of the complexities of race and ethnicity.
many of the assumptions reflected in the literature and research related to the K-12 schooling experiences of multiethnic students. In other words, this literature, along with the literature related to the identity construction of multiethnic individuals (Sections I and II), provides the foundations upon which the literature reviewed below rests. Additionally, the literature reviewed in this section describes the schooling context within which participants study and socialize.

**Section IV: The K-12 Schooling Experiences of Multiethnic Students**

In recent years, we have seen a considerable expansion of the literature related to the K-12 schooling experiences of multiethnic students, of which Wardle has produced a significant portion (see, for example, Wardle 1996, 2000a/b, 2004). Drawing on many of the studies discussed in the previous sections and his own empirical research, Wardle has written dozens of articles related to the education of multiethnic students and has published a book with Cruz-Janzen (2004) entitled *Meeting the Needs of Multiethnic and Multiracial Children in Schools*. In the same year, Wallace (2004) edited a collection entitled *Working with Multiracial Students: Critical Perspectives on Research and Practice*. The collection, comprising both reviews of original empirical research and more theoretically oriented chapters, consists of two sections, one focusing on theoretical and methodological considerations for conducting research regarding multiracial and multiethnic identity, the other focusing on implications for teachers and teacher educators. The authors in this collection, as in the other literature reviewed here, employ a broad range of methodologies, theoretical framings of identity, and terminology. However, of particular importance here is the fact that both books (and much of the related literature) discuss the educational experiences of multiethnic/multiracial students,
identified as a distinct population with similar needs and experiences, and attempt to identify implications for practitioners.

Assertions that K-12 schooling experiences influence multiethnic students’ identity development abound in the literature. Sheets (2004), for example, conducted a study that “examine[d] the friendship networks of multiracial students in school settings and explore[d] how their social experiences influence multiracial identification and identity formation” (p. 135). While Sheets pointed out that “parents and teachers were not a focus of this study” she concluded that “it is imperative that teachers (and parents) understand that the multiracial identity developmental process is not separate from learning and cognition” and that “teachers who make a conscious effort to promote multiracial identity development through curricular planning and instructional strategies help students develop a psychological dimension of self, both individual and group, which is a consequence of a [sic] their distinctive socialization process and dual heritage and membership in a [sic] particular racial and ethnic groups” (pp. 150-151).

Additionally, the findings and educational implications from Root’s (1998) study with biracial siblings appear in the second edition of Banks and McGee Banks’ *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* (2003). Here, Root stated that the analysis of the experiences of multiethnic individuals raises “significant issues for educators as the classroom, school, and university are home away from home for many students and a source of significant information, process, and interaction—and ultimately a significant influence in perception of self” (p. 117). In their book *Raising Biracial Children*, Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2005) explained that

Schools are one of the most important socializing agents in the lives of children. Outside of families, they may be the most important. While the
primary and overt function of schools is to teach academic skills and content, their secondary function is to teach children about themselves, and how to interact effectively with other people (pp. 88-89).

Rockquemore and Laszloffy went on to discuss three aspects of schooling—the racial composition of the school, the racial awareness and sensitivity of schools’ leadership, and teachers’ attitudes and behaviors—which they identified as having a significant impact on mixed-race students’ racial socialization and identity development. They also discussed the significant impact of friendships and peer interactions on the racial socialization and identity development of mixed-race children. In this and the related literature, the primary assertion is always similar: schools can and should, but often fail to, support the racial/ethnic identity development and self-esteem of multiethnic students.

Also permeating much of the literature related to multiethnic students’ K-12 schooling experiences is the assertion that such students have unique needs emerging from their identity construction processes—processes understood as differing from those of monoethnic students. For example, in 1995, Nishimura published an article entitled “Addressing the Needs of Biracial Children: An Issue for Counselors in a Multicultural School Environment” and in 1998, Wardle published an article entitled “Meeting the Needs of Multiracial and Multiethnic Children in Early Childhood Settings.” In these articles, the central “need” of multiethnic students is that for support in the development of healthy ethnic and racial identities (Wardle) or a positive racial self-image (Nishimura). Later, in 2004, Wardle described this need as desperate: “these students desperately need educators to support and nurture them in their efforts to survive and succeed in a world that often does not understand them and their families” (p. 176). At the same time, the general consensus emerging from the literature is that multiethnic
students’ need for support is not being met by schools, which Wardle (2000b) attributes, in part, to the “invisibility” of multiethnic students in most schools. According to Wardle, the existence and contributions of multiethnic individuals are largely absent from the curriculum; multiethnic students are rendered invisible by many school practices (e.g. single-race student groups, holiday celebrations, racial/ethnic data collection forms); most teachers have not received training to support multiethnic children; not everyone believes that multiethnic people represent a unique population and others feel that an acknowledgement of multiethnicity undermines the solidarity and power of single-race/ethnicity groups; and “there are almost no textbooks that provide advice and information to assist educators to meet the needs of these children better” (p. 12).

Extending beyond the notion that schools are simply not meeting the needs of multiethnic students is the idea that school practices actually marginalize or have adverse effects on the identity development and experiences of multiethnic students. As Wardle (2004) posited,

One of the greatest dilemmas for multiracial and multiethnic students is to see themselves as normal and accepted, and not abnormal, strange and freaks. Students’ and adults’ frequent questions of, “what are you, anyway,” simply aggravate this dilemma. One reason multiracial and multiethnic students struggle is because they are not taught in schools about their extensive history (Cortes, 1999); another is that they are not visible in their school: in books, curricular materials, posters, pamphlets, examples of literature and the arts, and so forth. (pp. 69-70)

Moreover, as discussed above, it is often assumed that traditional approaches to multicultural education marginalize or exclude multiethnic students (see Glass & Wallace, 1996; Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004).

Building on the foregoing assertions, much of the literature that seeks to do so, despite some differences in focus and wording, identifies implications and
recommendations for educators that are strikingly similar. These recommendations are often focused on ways to modify and supplement multicultural education so as to make it more inclusive of and responsive to the experiences of multiethnic students. As is often pointed out, the identified recommendations benefit not just multiethnic students but all students, as they potentially lead to more accurate and nuanced understandings of race, ethnicity, and other forms of diversity. For example, Wardle (1996) suggests that educators:

1. Correct inaccurate history;
2. Explore racism against biracial people;
3. Explore the problems of single-race groups;
4. Support the biracial child’s self-esteem;
5. Explore all forms of diversity;
6. Provide antibias activities;
7. Provide an inclusive multicultural curriculum; and
8. Closely examine language used to study and discuss biracial children (pp. 387-390).

Later, in 2004, Wardle and Cruz-Janzen added to this list “support different learning styles…support healthy racial identity development…provide adult role models and use the community…treat all children as unique individuals…don’t allow biased behavior or language…provide small groups and cooperative learning…provide lots of opportunities to explore race and racism in this country…don’t stereotype any of your students…[and] create appropriate instructional materials” (pp. 194-200). Wardle and Cruz-Janzen also emphasized the need to transform teacher education programs. They explained, “teachers must receive a different and improved kind of teacher preparation
that should include self-reflection, understanding the history of racism, understanding the
negative power of racial categories, and being informed about the history of multiethnic
and multiracial people and the normalcy and potential of multiracial and multiethnic
children” (2004, p. 220). Indeed, in her quantitative doctoral study conducted with 268
elementary school teachers from a Northern California school district, Calore (2008)
found evidence to suggest that participants were ill-prepared to serve the unique needs of
multiracial students due to schools’ current racial data collection practices, lack of
teacher knowledge and training, and a shortage of meaningful classroom materials related
to the multiracial experience.

Presumably, Wardle and Cruz-Janzen’s (2004) recommendations were influenced
by Cruz-Janzen’s dissertation research which explored “the perceived role and
significance of the home, school, and peers as socialization agents that impact the formal
curricula of the schools and thus the ethnic self-identity and self-concept of biethnic and
biracial persons who are not of combined African-American and European-American
heritage” (1997, p. 11). Drawing primarily on interviews conducted with 10 biethnic and
biracial participants who ranged in age from 20 to 30 years old, Cruz-Janzen found that
“schools seem to operate in isolation from and with disregard for the families and
communities of color they claim to represent and serve” (p. 310). Her participants, in
their assessments of the formal curriculum in their K-12 schools, offered several critiques
including the Eurocentric focus of the curriculum, the inaccuracies of American history,
the lack of relevance of the curriculum to students of color, the lack of role models of
color, and the curriculum’s denial of biethnic and biracial Americans. Based on these
critiques, the participants’ suggestions for schools included calls for more lessons about
ethnicity and race, inclusion of other perspectives, the sharing of positive aspects of other
groups’ histories and heritages, and acknowledgement of all Americans including
biethnic and biracial people. Included in Cruz-Janzen’s dissertation is a detailed critique
of multicultural education for its neglect of biethnic and biracial students and its tendency
to reinforce exclusive racial and ethnic categories, as discussed above.

In many ways, the literature presented in this and the previous sections and the
assumptions underlying it prompted my desire to conduct this research. With the
exception of a few dissertations (e.g. Cruz-Janzen, 1997; Lopez, 2001) and a handful of
other empirical studies either directly or more loosely related to the K-12 schooling
experiences of multiethnic individuals, there has been very little empirical research into
these issues. As discussed in the next section, what we often lack are the voices of
multiethnic students and their perceptions and experiences stemming directly from their
K-12 schooling experiences, and especially those stemming from diversity education
initiatives such as multicultural and antiracist education. Based on the previously
discussed assertions regarding the schooling experiences of multiethnic students, the
literature reviewed in this section identifies noticeably consistent implications for
educators. What we do not know, however, is whether these recommendations are
actually heeded by educators and, if so, with what effect on the experiences and identity
development of multiethnic students.

Section V: Integrating the Literature

In this chapter, I have sought to address several questions, the answers to which
provide the foundation for this study. These include (1) What insights do we have into the
racial and ethnic identity construction of multiethnic individuals? (2) Are K-12 schooling
experiences understood to influence the identity construction of students? (3) What are the prevalent approaches used by educators to support the racial and ethnic identity construction of students? (4) What influence might these approaches have on the racial and ethnic identity construction of multiethnic students? (5) What are the perceived influences of K-12 schooling experiences on the identity construction of multiethnic students, as discussed in the literature? Here, I attempt to integrate the literature reviewed above and directly answer these questions.

Whether a progression through developmental stages or a non-linear process, multiethnic identity construction is widely understood as differing from that of monoethnic individuals in significant ways and as being influenced by a broad range of factors including, but not limited to, social context, family, peer culture, phenotype, cultural knowledge, racial awareness, the imposition of racial and ethnic categories, and schooling experiences. While their experiences of these influences might be similar, how individuals respond to them will likely vary considerably. There is also strong evidence indicating that multiethnic identities are fluid and situational. What remains most disputed is whether or not multiethnic identity development presents unique personal and social challenges, whether it is simply different from but no more challenging than monoethnic identity development, or whether multiethnic individuals benefit from exposure to and experiences of multiple racial and/or ethnic heritages. As Shih and Sanchez (2005) argued, considerably more empirical research is needed to make such determinations.

It is also widely accepted that K-12 schooling experiences, including those related to the curriculum, school activities, peer groups and friendships, and knowledge
development influence all students’ identities. As we may recall from Section I of this chapter, one’s cultural knowledge, peer culture, racial awareness, and social experiences are factors widely understood as influencing the racial and ethnic identity development of multiethnic individuals. Given that these factors are significantly influenced by K-12 schools or often take place within them, it is not surprising that such schools are recognized as playing an important role in multiethnic students’ racial and ethnic identity construction processes.

Because one’s sense of identity, and particularly racial and ethnic identity, is often linked to self-esteem and educational outcomes and aspirations, especially for minoritized students, educators have developed various approaches to support students’ identity development. Of these approaches, multicultural education (in its many forms) and antiracism education are the most prevalent, if not in practice, certainly in the literature. Both of these approaches, however, have been critiqued for their reinforcement of rigid and essentialist conceptions of racial and ethnic categories, and multicultural education, in particular, is critiqued for its shallow treatment of race and ethnicity—tendencies that are understood as doing a disservice to all students and as being particularly neglectful of and marginalizing for multiethnic students. These approaches are thought to directly confine the identity choices of multiethnic students through the reification and imposition of racial and ethnic borders. Thus, educational approaches said to serve monoethnic students may not be appropriate for multiethnic students, just as models of monoethnic/monoracial identity development may not apply to multiethnic individuals (Poston, 1990). What we lack, however, is a sufficient understanding,
grounded in empirical research, of the impact of such approaches on the perceptions, experiences, and identity construction processes of multiethnic students.

As a population, multiethnic individuals undoubtedly differ from each other in innumerable ways. However, in much of the educational literature related to multiethnic students, they are treated as a population with more or less similar needs and experiences. Pages upon pages of recommendations have been identified for educators of multiethnic students, yet we have little idea if any educators actually heed this advice or, if they do, with what results. Nor do we have sufficient empirical research to support these recommendations or assess their appropriateness. Calore (2008) found that educators are ill-prepared to serve the unique needs of multiracial students, but we do not know how this lack of preparation manifests itself in the classroom or what its effect is on multiethnic students. In many ways, this study is a response to this literature.

Prior studies have demonstrated the various ways in which K-12 schooling experiences—both those that take place formally in the classroom and during school-sponsored activities, and those that take place less formally in such places as hallways and cafeterias—influence students’ identity development. However, in terms of empirical studies that explicitly address the K-12 schooling experiences (understood holistically and taken together) of multiethnic students and the influence of these experiences on such students’ racial and ethnic identity construction processes, I know of none. What we are missing are the voices of students and their perspectives on and perceptions of schooling as it relates to their identity development. How do multiethnic students feel about race and ethnicity-based student organizations and activities? Do they join them? Do they feel excluded from them? Do these experiences of membership or exclusion influence their
sense of identity? What lessons have had an impact on their thinking about race, ethnicity, and their own identities? Do they feel that multiethnic students have particularly unique needs and, if so, what are they? Has the racial makeup of their school influenced their experiences and identity choices? Do they, as it is often assumed they will, feel marginalized and excluded in school? Do they feel that schools impose racial and ethnic categories on them? Have particular relationships with teachers or other students had a positive impact on their sense of identity? In short, what is the perceived influence of their K-12 schooling experiences on multiethnic students’ racial and ethnic identity construction processes?

In sharing multiethnic students’ perspectives related to such questions, this research makes an important contribution to our understanding of the racial and ethnic identity construction and K-12 schooling experiences of multiethnic students. Before examining these perspectives, however, in the following chapter I discuss how I set about accessing and interpreting them. I also explore the methodological complexities of conducting research with and for multiethnic individuals and share my responses to these complexities.
CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

The postpositivist realist conception of identity outlined in Chapter Two draws attention to the epistemic value of experience, and the notion that “we do and can learn or discover something about the reality that shapes our experience” (Hau, 2000, p. 157). This conception acknowledges the influence of individuals’ experiences—and their interpretations of these experiences—on their identities, as well as the relationship between one’s experiences and other social categories such as race, gender, class, and sexuality that constitute one’s social location. In light of these understandings with which I entered this study, I needed a methodology that would provide the opportunity to gain a deep understanding of participant’s experiences and how these experiences have shaped their identities. I also needed a methodology that would allow for the exploration of a broad range of influences on participants’ identities and invite the type of open dialogue conducive to the emergence of participants’ stories, experiences, reflections, and interpretations.

Given the purposes of this study and its inductive nature, I deemed a qualitative approach most appropriate. Of the various qualitative research methods, interviews were selected as the primary tool for data collection precisely because interviews allow for an in-depth exploration, through dialogue, of participants’ lived experiences and the meaning they make of those experiences (Seidman, 2006). To enhance the depth of the interview findings and to further explore emergent themes, I also invited participants to take part in focus groups and complete a writing activity. In doing so, I sought to explore the racial and ethnic identity construction of multiethnic participants as influenced by their K-12 schooling experiences, the ways in which diversity education initiatives such
as multicultural and antiracist education influence participants’ identity construction, and
the ways in which schools might become more inclusive and supportive of their
multiethnic students.

In the following pages, I review the steps taken to access and interpret the voices
of research participants. I explore the methodological complexities of conducting
research with and for multiethnic individuals and share my responses to these
complexities. Finally, I interrogate my role as the primary research “instrument” for this
study, including the perceived influence of my identity on the research situation, as well
as the biases, assumptions, and perspectives with which I entered this study and how I
attempted to mitigate their impact.

**Participant and Site Selection**

The criteria for participation in this study were self-identification as multiethnic
and enrollment in a San Francisco Bay Area high school. All participants self-identified
as multiethnic in response to a study advertisement. Prior to commencing this research, I
was often asked if I would include a research participant that is, for example, half
Scottish and half German (note that I am never asked about multiethnic individuals who
identify with two ethnicities from a common “minority” racial group). To such questions,
my answer was “yes,” because, prior to an interview, I could not predict the ways in
which racial and ethnic restrictions might operate in the life of such an individual. Thus,
several participants represented ethnic groups that are subsumed under a single racial
category. Furthermore, since my research seeks to examine the experiences and identity
construction of self-identified multiethnic individuals, to exclude this individual would
require the imposition of a restriction based on what I consider to be a “legitimate” multiethnic identity.

I chose the San Francisco Bay Area as the location for the study for several reasons. Lopez (2003) provides various explanations for why California is a particularly suitable location for the study of multiethnicity based on, for example, the fact that “it is the only large state with a significant percentage of all the ‘major’ race groups present in its population” and the data indicating that “the state accounts for a large portion of the mixed heritage population in the country” (p. 31). As U.S. Census Bureau estimates from July 2007 indicate, 2.5% of the California population (approximately 36 million) is, in the Bureau’s terms, multiracial (Stuckey, 2008). Additionally, according to a report based on findings from the 2000 Census, “People who reported more than one race were more likely to be under age 18 than those reporting only one race.…Of the 6.8 million people in the Two [sic] or more races population [category], 42 percent were under 18” (Jones & Smith, 2001, p. 9). Thus, we know that California has a sizable population of multiethnic youth (see also Lopez, 2003; Ness, 2001). Moreover, iPride, the oldest multiracial justice organization in the US (Brown & Douglass, 1996; iPride.org), is located in Berkeley, California, and, as detailed in the following section, iPride assisted in the recruitment of study participants. Finally, I grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and have local knowledge of the schools and communities from which participants were drawn—knowledge that, as discussed below, I expected would assist in the gathering and interpretation of data.

I originally intended to draw all participants from a single public high school in the Bay Area and to supplement interview, focus group, and writing activity data with
data collected at the school site related to curriculum, student and faculty demographics, and diversity education policies and practices. This research model, though, proved unfeasible for several reasons. One principal welcomed me to conduct this study at her school, but prior to commencing the research, she retired, and the in-coming principal did not want the school to be the research site. One school district rejected my application to conduct research with its students due to concerns about loss of instructional time that might result from participation in the study. Schools in other districts might have been willing to host this research, yet I feared that their policies related to research conducted with students might preclude open dialogue with participants. For example, several districts have policies that require school personnel to be present during interviews and focus groups with students. Consequently, the research model changed substantially and participants were drawn from schools across the Bay Area.

**Research Procedures**

An advertisement for this study was sent to members of iPride, an organization of multiracial families in the San Francisco Bay Area, to which several students responded directly. Additionally, several teachers who received the study advertisement from iPride informed their students of the study, and one teacher sent the advertisement to all students in her school. I also discussed the study with several teachers with whom I was in contact, and they shared the study advertisement with their students. Finally, following their interviews, several participants encouraged their friends and classmates to participate in the study. Thus, study advertisements, word-of-mouth, and snowballing

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7 Not all of iPride’s members reside in the Bay Area, and as a result, numerous students from across the country contacted me about participation in the study. Because these students were not enrolled in Bay Area high schools, I was unable to interview them for this study.
techniques were used to contact potential participants. All students interested in participating in the study were invited to contact me directly by phone or email. Once students contacted me and confirmed their enrollment in a Bay Area high school and self-identification as multiethnic, I sent them a detailed description of the study and informed consent and informed assent forms.

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

All participants were required to participate in a semi-structured interview during which we explored their identity construction processes and K-12 schooling experiences. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary method for data collection for precisely the reasons provided by Barriball and While (1994): “they are well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues and enable probing for more information and clarification of answers” (p. 330) (see also Seidman (2006) and Marshall and Rossman (1989) for similar discussions of the merits of interview based methodologies).

Twenty-three students from eight high schools (two private, six public) and with a wide array of racial and ethnic heritages were interviewed (see Table 1). The interviews took place at a time and location deemed convenient and comfortable by the participants—most often after school at local coffee shops and eateries. In some instances, students were interviewed on their campuses after the school day had ended, either on a lawn or in a classroom that was provided for our use by the school. All of the students were interviewed individually, with the exception of two students who requested to be interviewed together. Given participants’ busy schedules and other commitments,

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8 One participant had graduated from high school within the past seven months.
scheduling the interviews proved fairly difficult. The 23 participants and I exchanged 
more than 500 emails, in addition to countless text messages and phone calls.

After ensuring that the necessary consent and assent forms had been signed, I 
explained the study in greater detail to students and invited them to ask me questions 
about myself and the study. I also gave participants a copy of Root’s (2003a) “50 
Experiences of Racially Mixed People” (Appendix III) to read, if they wanted to, while I 
was getting organized to begin the interview. My assumption was that participants would 
find the list interesting and that it would prompt reflection on their own experiences. All 
of the questions included in the interview protocol (Appendix I) were asked of students. 
However, the questions were not necessarily asked in the order in which they appear, and 
we frequently discussed topics introduced by the students or that emerged from the 
conversation. The interviews ranged in length considerably, with the shortest lasting 
approximately 30 minutes and the longest reaching nearly two hours. The variations in 
length were due not to the number of questions asked but the length of students’ 
responses and the number of topics they introduced. I took notes during the interviews 
and recorded each using two digital voice recorders. Following the interview, all 
participants received a thank you note with a $5.00 gift card to a local coffee shop and 
were invited to select their own pseudonym (five students selected their pseudonyms).
Table 1: Participants’ Pseudonyms, Self-Described Heritages, and Schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Heritage</th>
<th>Public/Private School</th>
<th>School Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Chinese and White</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Parkside H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mialany</td>
<td>Black and White</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Parkside H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dana</td>
<td>White and Black</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Canyon H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>White and Iranian</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Oak View H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony</td>
<td>Filipino and Indian</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Oak View H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>French and Mexican</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Bridges H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Mexican and Arab (Tunisian)</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Bridges H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Italian and Portuguese</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Bridges H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cara</td>
<td>Chinese and White</td>
<td>Private</td>
<td>Cedar Grove H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amaya</td>
<td>African American and Indian</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Pine Mountains H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raya</td>
<td>Black and White (British and Ethiopian)</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Pine Mountains H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barry</td>
<td>Spanish, German, and Irish</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Pine Mountains H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina</td>
<td>Black and White</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Pine Mountains H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendra</td>
<td>Puerto Rican, Mexican, Black, and French</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Pine Mountains H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee</td>
<td>Mexican and Persian</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Pine Mountains H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jen</td>
<td>Puerto Rican, Yugoslavian, and Italian</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Pine Mountains H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hip Hapa</td>
<td>African American, Native American, Canadian, Vietnamese</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Oceanside H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelley</td>
<td>Chinese and White</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Deer Valley H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>French, Persian, Jewish and Russian</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Deer Valley H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>Chinese and White</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Deer Valley H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>Caucasian and Japanese</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Deer Valley H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hannah</td>
<td>Japanese and White</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Deer Valley H. S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>White and Black</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Deer Valley H. S.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Focus Groups

Drawing on the work of Krueger (1994) and Morgan (1993), Asbury (1995) explains that focus groups “rely on the dynamic of the group interactions to stimulate the thinking and thus the verbal contributions of the participants, and to provide the researcher with rich, detailed perspectives that could not be obtained through other methodological strategies” (p. 415). Moreover, as Kitzinger (1995) points out, researchers who conduct focus groups often do so based on the idea that “group processes
can help people to explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one to one interview” (p. 299). Finally, both Morgan (1996) and Wilson (1997) discuss the complementary relationship between individual interviews and focus groups. Wilson (1997), for example, describes the use of focus groups as a means to follow up on issues and topics that have emerged from individual interviews. With these potential benefits of focus groups in mind and in an effort to enhance the breadth and depth of the data, following their interviews, I invited students to participate in an optional focus group. Nine students participated in one of two focus groups.

I designed the focus groups to provide a forum in which participants could discuss salient themes emerging from the interviews with other multiethnic students and in which participants and I could further explore such themes. Thus, prior to the focus groups, I read the transcripts or listened to the interviews of focus group participants (depending on whether or not the interviews had already been transcribed), to identify common themes and questions to be discussed or issues which I believed warranted further exploration (Wilson, 1997). For example, I used the Pine Mountains focus group as an opportunity to further explore the topic of phenotype—a topic that was not included in the interview protocol but that many of the focus group participants brought up during their individual interviews. As Kitzinger (1995) explains,

Group discussion is particularly appropriate when the interviewer has a series of open ended questions and wishes to encourage research participants to explore the issues of importance to them, in their own vocabulary, generating their own questions and pursuing their own priorities. (p. 299)

Consequently, although I brought a series of questions to each focus group, participants were encouraged to introduce questions and topics for discussion with the group.
Although the majority of students expressed interest in participating in a focus group, scheduling the focus groups proved very difficult given the distances between participants’ communities and schools and their busy schedules. I proposed four focus groups, only two of which took place, both at local pizza restaurants. Five participants from Pine Mountains High School attended the first focus group, the second comprised four students, three from Deer Valley High School and one from Oak View High School. I took notes during both focus groups and recorded each using two digital voice recorders.

**Writing Activity**

According to Creswell (2003), participant-generated documents may be a source of particularly thoughtful data because of the attention required to create them. With this in mind, I designed an optional writing activity that provided participants with the opportunity to share further insights and thoughts related to the research topics. The writing activity was also intended to provide participants with the opportunity to articulate their thoughts and experiences in writing and in the absence of the researcher and audio recording devices. In this sense, the writing activity was designed to be a less obtrusive method of collecting data than the interviews and focus groups (Creswell, 2003).

In the writing activity prompt (Appendix II), I asked participants to reflect on their schooling experiences and encouraged them to identify ways in which schools are and are not meeting the needs of their multiethnic students. However, I emphasized with participants that the prompt was only a suggestion and that they should feel free to share whatever reflections they had related to the research topics. Generally, students expressed
very little interest in completing the writing activity. Three students wrote reflections about being multiethnic and their schooling experiences and one student wrote reflections about being interviewed by me about her identity and experiences. Further, one student sent me a paper she had written about multiethnicity prior to the interview and another student sent me two papers he wrote about multiethnicity following the interview.

Data Analysis and Presentation

In their article, “Qualitative Analysis on Stage: Making the Research Process More Public,” Anfara, Brown, and Mangione state that “in all the discussions of validity in qualitative research there is one major element that is not sufficiently addressed—the public disclosure of process” (2002, p. 29). This conclusion is based on several observations:

First, what exactly does it mean when a researcher writes, “themes emerged”? The reader is expected to take the word of the researcher that he or she did a credible job in data analysis—that the themes that emerged actually have some congruence or verisimilitude with the reality of the phenomenon studied. Second, although triangulation, member checks, and other qualitative strategies are mentioned frequently in design or methods sections of research articles, rarely is there evidence of exactly how these were achieved…Third, rarely are we privy to an interview protocol that may be used to collect data. (p. 29)

Anfara, Brown, and Mangione conclude that “However qualitative researchers address validity in their research…the processes employed in the research must be made more public” (p. 35). Expressing similar ideas, Palys (1997), in his discussion of qualitative data analysis states, “It would be nice if one could point to examples of qualitative research in which that author(s) self-consciously discussed the decision points they faced, and how and why they made the decisions they did, but there have been few such accounts” (p. 297). Taking these observations and critiques seriously, in the following
pages I detail and “make public” the processes and decisions involved in organizing, reducing, analyzing, and presenting the data. Much as I would like to depict these processes as straightforward and coherent, I cannot; as predicted by Marshall and Rossman (1989), they were “messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating…[They did] not proceed in a linear fashion, [they were] not neat” (p. 112). I do, however, take comfort in Creswell’s assertion that “Unquestionably, there is not one single way to analyze qualitative data—it is an eclectic process in which you try to make sense of the information” (Creswell, 2002, in Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002, p. 31).

**Starting Points**

The interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and features of speech such as long pauses, sighs, and laughter were noted in the transcripts. Each student received a copy of his/her interview transcript and was invited to correct any errors and provide clarification. Only one of the participants pointed out an error in a transcript that needed to be corrected. Having deemed the data ready for analysis, I read each transcript or writing activity at least twice, but often three or more times. As Creswell (2003) suggests, my purpose at this point was to start reflecting on such questions as “What general ideas are participants saying? What is the tone of the ideas? What is the general impression of the overall depth, credibility, and use of the information?” (p. 191).

Based on my initial readings of and reflections on the data, and given the central research questions of this study, I decided that it would be important for readers to gain a broader understanding of participants’ racial and ethnic identity construction processes and the various factors beyond K-12 schooling that have influenced these processes. Thus, in Chapter Five I present profiles of participants with a focus on their racial and
ethnic identity development as influenced by such factors as family, friends, relationships and interactions, phenotype, racial and ethnic categories and stereotypes, and local environment. The data directly addressing participants’ K-12 schooling experiences are presented according to salient topics in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight. As discussed below, distinct data processing and analytic procedures were used for generating the profiles and the subsequent discussion of participants’ K-12 schooling experiences.

**Generating Participant Profiles**

The participants’ profiles, which are composed almost entirely of participants’ own words, are, as per Seidman’s (2006) suggestions, presented in the first person. To generate the profiles, I first read each interview transcript to gain a general sense of the participants’ identity development, their experiences, and the topics they discussed. Using printed copies of the transcripts and a highlighter, I then identified passages which related to participants’ identity development. Returning to the computer, I deleted my words and the un-highlighted sections of the transcript. The remaining text formed the basis of the profile and I began a process of selecting the most descriptive passages and editing them.

For the sake of coherence, the text was “cleaned up” and I removed some of the often repeated words, such as “like,” “um,” and “you know.” I also removed or changed all proper names and excluded text that could be used to identify the participant. In some cases, I rearranged the text thematically. Thus, for example, in instances where a participant talked about her siblings at several different times during the interview, I grouped this text together. I also added a minimal amount of text to ensure clarity. For example, in response to the question “How would you describe your process of identity
construction as a multiethnic individual? Do you feel that this process is complete, or is it ongoing?” Jill responded with “It is ongoing, it will never be complete.” Because Jill’s response cannot stand alone, to enhance clarity, the sentence from her profile reads as: “Developing my identity is ongoing, it will never be complete.” Such changes were very minor and did not alter the meaning of the participants’ words, and therefore they are not indicated in the text of the profiles.

Once a first draft of each profile was completed, I reviewed the focus group transcripts and writing activities and identified passages to include in the profiles. During a final reading of each profile, I made any other changes needed to enhance clarity. The profiles, as with the interviews, vary in length and reflect differences in speech styles and loquaciousness. Ultimately, each profile presents a shared story, one that is crafted by me using a participant’s words (Seidman, 2006). To ensure the accuracy of my interpretations and that through crafting the profiles I did not inadvertently misrepresent the participants’ stories, I invited participants to review their profiles and offer suggestions to improve accuracy and coherence.9 None of them requested that I make changes to his/her profile.

Analysis of the Data Relating to K-12 Schooling Experiences

Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight include a presentation of the data directly related to participants’ K-12 schooling experiences. Again using printed copies of the data and a highlighter, I reread the data and identified passages in which participants discussed their K-12 schooling. As before, my purpose at this point was to reflect on such questions as “What general ideas are participants saying? What is the tone of the ideas? What is the

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9 Upon their completion, I attempted to email each participant her/his profile. Unfortunately, a few participants had changed schools or email addresses and I was unable to contact all of them.
general impression of the overall depth, credibility, and use of the information?” (Creswell, 2003, p. 191). After reflecting on the data and these questions, I identified three broad categories into which the data naturally fit: participants’ discussions of the formal/deliberate aspects of schooling, their discussions of the informal/social aspects of schooling, and their broader reflections on K-12 schooling including recommendations for educators. The formal/deliberate aspects of schooling are those that teachers and administrators can and do influence, and the informal/social aspects are those over which teachers and administrators generally have little direct influence.

Once the data had been divided into these three broad categories, I manually coded them according to the topics discussed by participants. Not surprisingly, these topics most often corresponded to the questions that I asked students during the interviews and focus groups. For example, topics from the data related to the formal aspects of schooling include interactions and relationships with teachers and diversity education initiatives—two topics about which I explicitly asked participants. I then, in separate documents, combined all of the data related to each topic.

At this point, I reviewed and reread the data related to each topic and sought to identify “salient themes, recurring ideas or language, and patterns of belief that link people and settings together” (Marshall and Rossman, 1989, p. 116). In successive iterations of data analysis, my tasks included, for example, searching for relationships among the concepts and themes discussed by participants, drawing comparisons between participants’ experiences of specific aspects of K-12 schooling, identifying divergences between participants’ perceptions of similar phenomena, and comparing my findings to prior research and extant literature. I then began a concomitant process of analysis akin to
what Strauss and Corbin (1990) call axial coding: I began putting the data back together and looking for patterns and relationships that could help us to understand the K-12 schooling experiences of participants and the influence of these experiences on their racial and ethnic identity development. Through this process, numerous themes emerged including, for example, the silence regarding multiethnicity in schools, the reification of racial and ethnic categories, and the significant influence of reflected appraisals (Cooley, 1902; Khanna, 2004; Tatum, 1997).

In Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight, I present the data related to participants’ K-12 schooling experiences in a way that reflects these analytic processes. Through the internal organization of these chapters, I attempt to lay bare my processes of breaking down, analyzing, and piecing back together the data. In doing so, I attempted to expose these processes to scrutiny, in large part as a response to the critiques of accounts of qualitative research processes put forward by Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002) and Palys (1997).

Chapters Six and Seven focus on participants’ experiences of the formal and informal aspects of schooling respectively. The data in these chapters are organized into sections according to topic and the salient themes emerging from the data related to each topic are discussed at the end of each section and again at the end of each chapter. While Chapters Six and Seven focus on participants’ past schooling experiences, Chapter Eight includes the data related to participants’ broad reflections on schooling and their recommendations for educators—data best viewed against the backdrop of the data presented in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven. Many of the ideas and themes that permeate Chapters Five, Six, and Seven come together, so to speak, in the data presented in
Chapter Eight. Moreover, participants’ reflections on schooling and their recommendations for educators are, not surprisingly, very much rooted in their own identities and experiences. As such, in Chapter Eight, I frequently refer back to the data in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven and, therefore, organizing the data according to participants and not topics reduced repetitiveness.

**The Complexities of Researching Multiethnic Identities**

Research with multiethnic individuals, like much research related to race and ethnicity, gives rise to several complexities and conundrums. Root (1992a, 2003b) discusses several of these complexities, including: the fact that mixed race people are not distributed randomly throughout the United States; the limitations of using self-selection to identify research participants, especially given all of the ways in which mixed race people may identify and define race and ethnicity; the changing meaning of mixed race over time; the implications of conducting research with mixed race individuals of a certain heritage combination versus those representing multiple heritage combinations; the limits in generalizability resulting from restricted sampling (i.e. according to age); and the difficulties, when appropriate, of identifying control groups. Other work addressing these and similar complexities can be found in Part 1 of Wallace’s (Ed.) (2004b) *Working with Multiracial Students: Critical Perspectives on Research and Practice*, entitled “Unmasking the Interface: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations in Multiracial and Multiethnic Identity Research.” Here, Renn (2004b) explored how to conduct research on multiraciality without reinforcing static notions of racial categories; Lopez (2004) explored how information about race and ethnicity is collected with mixed heritage students and ways to ensure more accurate analysis and
conclusions based on such data; and Wallace (2004a) advocated for greater attention to cultural processes in the study of multiethnic identities. In this section, I explore several of these complexities as they relate to this research and detail how I have addressed them. Additionally, I identify and discuss those limitations and delimitations of the study that are not addressed in Chapter One.

In Chapter One, I made clear my definition of multiethnic and my rationale for including participants whose parents might be racially similar but who represent different ethnic groups. Simply making clear my own definition of multiethnic, however, does not avoid many of the complexities related to sampling and participant selection. According to Root, “recruiting multiracial individuals will almost always yield selective samples” because:

[S]ome persons will not respond to advertising because the social environment has rendered multiracial identity as a negative status. Other multiracial persons, such as some African Americans, Filipinos, Latinos, Native Americans, and Hawaiians, may not identify as multiracial; to them, ethnic or cultural identity may be more salient than racial heritage. Advertising specifically for people of color will selectively sample those multiracials who identify as such…and who may be critically different from those who would not identify as people of color. (1992a, p. 183)

These difficulties in sampling are compounded by the fact that potential participants may interpret the definitions of race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity differently. Moreover, some multiethnic individuals may acknowledge their mixed heritage but identify monoracially or identify as a member of a specific heritage group (e.g., Japanese/White) but not with a larger multiethnic population.

Although significant, I do not see these difficulties as deterrents to conducting this research. As indicated, all participants self-identified as multiethnic in response to advertisements about this research. Certainly other methods might have been used to
identify study participants. For example, results from a questionnaire asking students to indicate their parents’ racial and ethnic heritage could have been used to identify potential participants; however, as Root (2003b) points out, this method tells us little about how the student identifies. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a study with multiethnic individuals that satisfactorily avoids or responds to all of these complexities. Moreover, I join Renn (2004b) in the belief that “we need to allow the strengths of different research paradigms and methods, as well as individual researchers, to contribute to the discussion of multiraciality” (p. 17).

In a review of dissertations and theses addressing multiracial identity, Root identified several methodological flaws, one consequence of which is that “proportionally few offer new information” (2003b, p. 121). Here, I address two of these flaws which are relevant to this research. First, as Root argues, “Restricted sampling limits generalizability of results. Many studies use college-age students, who…are in a specific developmental stage of their lives. Community samples are harder to obtain but yield a broader scope of influences on people’s identities” (p. 121). Because I seek to understand the influence of K-12 schooling on participants’ identity construction, it seems logical that all participants would have at least enrolled in high school. Certainly older individuals could have participated in this study, but, as Root points out, community samples are hard to obtain, and older study participants would have perhaps been more difficult to recruit given the requirement of enrollment in a California high school. The argument that students are at a particular developmental stage and therefore limit the implications of my findings is perhaps reasonable. However, Root also points out that “generational changes in the meaning of mixed race and the support for mixed race
identities imply that research findings from 15 to 20 years ago may not be replicable or as relevant” today (p.121). As one goal of this research is to identify implications for educators in today’s schools based on the perceptions and experiences of current students, we can quickly see the limitations of including older participants in this study.

Second, as discussed in the previous chapter, many authors and researchers employ different terms to refer to multiethnic individuals, and many researchers limit the focus of their studies to multiethnic individuals of a certain heritage combination. According to Root (2003b),

Researchers also have to be specific about their sample of mixed race people on the basis of the research questions. It may not be appropriate to mix persons of Black/White and Asian/White and Native American/White and Latino/White in the same samples, particularly if the sample numbers are small. Historical issues specific to the ethnic groups may predictably confound results. (p.121)

Based on my research questions, I am confident in my decision to group multiethnic individuals together regardless of their racial or ethnic heritage—a decision I might not have made had the aims of the research been different. Indeed, elsewhere I have questioned the extent to which a single multiethnic population, with members who identify as such and therefore whose experiences can be studied, actually exists (Mohan & Venzant Chambers, 2009). While I am critical of studies that uncritically group all multiethnic individuals together and assume that they share a common identity and similar experiences, feelings, and histories (and interpretations of these), for several reasons, I nevertheless used multiethnic as a broad category for identifying the participants in this study. I did this, in part, in response to the increasing number of organizations, publications, studies, and media accounts treating multiethnic individuals as a single group and the rise of the so-called “multiracial movement.” Certainly, many
studies identify specific heritage combinations, yet as multiethnicity garners increased attention, there is a tendency to depict the “population” in broad strokes, and too little empirical research examining the experiences of multiethnic individuals broadly identified. Likewise, as discussed in the previous chapter, there is an expanding body of literature related to the K-12 schooling of multiethnic students, much of which considers multiethnic students representing a range of heritage combinations, without distinction (see, for example, Wallace, 2004b; Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004). Consequently, it is worth discerning if there are unique yet shared experiences related to straddling or crossing racial and ethnic borders, regardless of which races or ethnicities the borders lie between, and if these experiences hold implications for educators. Moreover, it would likely be impossible to investigate the experiences of individuals representing every possible heritage combination so as to identify implications for educators (or anyone else). What we can do, though, is examine whether there are common educational experiences shared by individuals who identify as multiethnic. Thus, what ties all study participants together (however loosely) is their experiences of crossing borders (Root, 1996a), be they racial and/or ethnic borders.

I am cognizant of the limitations of identifying research participants in this way, and, in particular, I acknowledge Root’s (2003b) assertion that heterogeneous samples of multiethnic individuals overlook historical issues specific to particular ethnic groups. This lack of emphasis on historical issues specific to certain groups, however, is a necessary feature of this study given the research questions and my aims. Moreover, in my analysis of the data, I do not neglect those instances in which participants discuss such issues, especially as they relate to their identity and self-concept. Rather, historical
issues such as the development and deployment of racial and ethnic stereotypes and the persistent legacy of racism and discrimination are, when discussed by participants, examined for the influence they have in shaping participants’ identities and experiences. Additionally, for the same reasons that I did not specify specific racial or ethnic heritage combinations as criteria for participation in this study, I did not restrict participation to individuals of a specific gender, social class, or other social grouping. As is evident from my approach to identity outlined in Chapter Two, I understand individual identities as influenced by a broad range of factors and socially constructed categories which mutually constitute each other. It is beyond the scope of this study to engage in a thorough analysis of such factors as gender, class, religion, or sexuality, yet I am mindful of the ways in which these social markers, together, constitute participants’ social locations and, thus, influence their experiences and identities. As with historical issues, when discussed by participants, the functioning and impact of these social categories are examined as they relate to participants’ identities and experiences.

A final complexity, which relates not just to this study but to all studies aimed at better understanding racial and ethnic identities, arises from simultaneously working with and against racial and ethnic categories. This complexity is best captured by the question: How can one conduct research that is situated in race and ethnicity without reifying fixed notions of racial and ethnic categories? As Gunaratnam explains,

This danger relates to how categorical approaches can serve to reify ‘race’ and ethnicities as entities that individuals are born into and inhabit, and that are then brought to life in the social world, rather than ‘recognizing’ race and ethnicity as dynamic and emergent processes of being and becoming. The conceptual ‘fixing’ of ‘race’ and ethnicity is dangerous in terms of the limitations that it can place upon analysis, and because it can serve to produce and reproduce wider forms of essentialism, stereotyping and racism. (2003, p. 19).
For this research, this danger of reifying rigid notions of race and ethnicity is intensified by the fact that terms such as multiracial and multiethnic imply that there are “pure” races and ethnicities.

The most common response to this danger is a somewhat frustrated statement such as “Although we can deconstruct notions of race and ethnicity, we have to keep using these terms in the fight against prejudice and racism.” However awkward this position may feel, when set against the alternative option of color-blindness (see Gallagher, 2003), it provides a preferable way forward. In other words, while research on race and ethnicity runs the risk of bolstering their strength as divisive social categories, this consequence is far less threatening than the option of denying the often insidious, real-life effects of racial and ethnic categories on individuals and groups. Perhaps more optimistically, research with multiethnic individuals can, as I hope this research does, serve as a starting point for the exploration of the limitations and complexities of racial and ethnic categories. Accordingly, when research on race and ethnicity is intended to advance a liberatory agenda, we can see this snare as an unfortunate but necessary evil encountered on the path to a more just and equitable society.

**Self as Research “Instrument”**

As researcher-conducted interviews were the primary source of data, I served as the principal research “instrument” for this study. I developed the interview and focus group protocols and the writing activity prompt; I conducted all stages of the data collection, analysis, interpretation, and writing; and I took part in participants’ meaning-making processes. As such, several issues related to my relationship with the research,

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10 Portions of this section first appeared in Mohan and Venzant Chambers (2009).
my proximity to the participants, my biases and perspectives, and the need for reflexive practices are worth exploring here.

**Insider/Outsider Research**

Before examining my own proximity to the research participants and the implications of this proximity for my findings and analysis, it is worth reviewing some of the various perspectives related to insider and outsider research. According to the literature related to insider/outsider research, a researcher’s proximity to participants potentially influences participants’ engagement with and responses to the research questions, the researcher’s ability to gain access to and build a rapport with participants, and the quality of the data and interpretations (e.g., De Andrade, 2000; Irvine, Roberts & Bradbury-Jones, 2008; Johnson-Bailey, 1999; Merriam et al., 2001; Narayan, 1993; Rhodes, 1994; Twine, 2000; Villenes, 1996). The implications of this finding, however, are widely debated. Four common perspectives on the debate surrounding insider/outsider research as it relates to social identities are: (1) insider research is preferable, (2) outsider research is preferable, (3) research conducted by both insiders and outsiders is preferable, and (4) one is never always an insider or outsider in any research situation given the multiple axes of differentiation along which individuals identify. Related to the fourth perspective is the notion that one’s identity as either an insider or outsider is negotiated and re-negotiated with research participants throughout the research process. The debate between these perspectives persists in methodological literature precisely because each has some merit; therefore, I briefly explore their basic tenets here with a focus on their applicability to my own research.
Insider research typically refers to research conducted by and with individuals who share a common salient sociopolitical identity. Providing an explanation for arguments in favor of insider research, Merriam et al. stated, “It has commonly been assumed that being an insider means easy access, the ability to ask more meaningful questions and read non-verbal cues, and most importantly, be able [sic] to project a more truthful, authentic understanding of the culture under study” (2001, p. 411). In addition, those advocating insider research often argue that such techniques as “racial matching” lead to more accurate findings in that research participants will be more honest and forthcoming with researchers with whom they share a common identity (see, for example, Schuman, 2005; Twine, 2000). Often, those who seem to favor insider research do so tentatively, acknowledging the complexities of identities that challenge absolute insider status. Taking this perspective, Hodkinson advocated for “the continued use of the notion of insider research in a non-absolute sense…as a means to designate ethnographic situations characterised by significant levels of initial proximity between researcher and researched” (2005, pp. 131-132).

Despite evidence to support its efficacy, insider research has come under attack by those who feel that a researcher’s proximity to participants will introduce bias into the data collection and interpretation processes and preclude the interrogation of taken-for-granted knowledge among members of a common culture or community. As Merriam et al. pointed out “insiders have been accused of being inherently biased, and too close to the culture to be curious enough to raise provocative questions” (2001, p. 411). Scholars advocating outsider research often begin with these critiques of insider research and argue that “unprejudiced knowledge about groups is accessible only to nonmembers of
those groups” (Zinn, 1979, p. 210); that “the outsiders’ advantage lies in curiosity with
the unfamiliar, the ability to ask taboo questions, and being seen as non-aligned with
subgroups thus often getting more information” (Merriam et al., 2001, p. 411); and that
“insiders are expected to conform to cultural norms that can restrict them as researchers”
(Twine, 2000, p. 12).

Hoping to overcome the dichotomy between insider and outsider research are
those who argue that both insider and outsider research have strengths and weaknesses
and together both may “enlarge the chances for a sound and relevant understanding of
social life” by accessing different types of knowledge (Merton, 1972, p. 40). Other
attempts to move beyond the debate between insider and outsider research trouble
monolithic approaches to identity that inform notions of “absolute insiderness” and
“absolute outsiderness” and invoke poststructural and postmodern understandings of
identity that emphasize fluidity and complexity. This perspective argues against the idea
“that individuals from certain ethnic, gender, sexual preference, or economic class groups
hold identical or even similar views, ideas, or behaviors” (Brayboy, 2000, p. 423) and
posits that “identity is not unitary or essential, it is fluid and shifting, fed by multiple
sources and taking multiple forms (there is no such thing as ‘woman’ or ‘black’)”
(Kumar, 1997, p. 98). Extending this line of thinking, Merriam et al. point out the
elusiveness of insider and outsider status:

More recent discussions of insider/outsider status have unveiled the
complexity inherent in either status and have acknowledged that the
boundaries between the two positions are not all that clearly delineated. In
the real world of data collection, there is a good bit of slippage and fluidity
between these two states. (2001, p. 405)
Echoing Merriam et al., Hodkinson (2005) warns us against failing to recognize that “one’s precise level of proximity is liable to fluctuate somewhat from one respondent to the next” (p. 139), and he reminds us that “the prominence of particular elements of identity fluctuates back and forth according to context and audience” (p. 133). Thus, De Andrade (2000), Hodkinson (2005), and Palmer (2006), all researchers who, to some extent, assumed insider status when they entered the research situation found that their status as insiders to the cultures under study was in flux and needed to be negotiated and re-negotiated with participants.

Despite the persuasiveness of those arguments that challenge notions of absolute insider and absolute outsider status, the fact remains that some individuals share a greater level of social proximity than others, and evidence suggests that this proximity (or lack thereof) influences data collection and analysis. Given the methodological concerns associated with insider and outsider research, particularly as they relate to questions of bias and interpretation, it is worth exploring my own experiences of “insiderness” and “outsiderness” during the stages of this research.

**Self as Insider/Outsider**

Prior to commencing this project, although I was unsure exactly how my identity would influence the research, I did assume that being multiethnic would be an asset in building a rapport with students and in understanding their experiences. These feelings were in part influenced by Wallace’s (2001) reflections on her experiences as a mixed heritage woman conducting research with mixed heritage students. As she relates,

I have no doubt that my own background as a first generation, mixed heritage woman clearly influences this research. I suspect that through the process of meeting and interviewing these individuals, I was able to
establish a greater sense of rapport with students than would be possible for a researcher from a monoethnic/racial background. Inevitably, participants asked question about my identity and experiences. There were also times when I found myself on common ground with a student and I ventured to share aspects of my life in response to their comments. These moments deepened the value of the interviews in a way that could not have been achieved through a simple reading of the prepared interview probes. I believe the reciprocal nature of the interviews made this a richly rewarding, transformative experience for all involved. (pp. ix-x)

Her personal reflections make a strong case for the merits of insider research with multiethnic students, and, based on her reflections, I entered the research situation feeling well suited to conduct this study. However, I also entered the research situation acutely aware of my own biases—biases which are discussed in greater detail below. I feared that I was too close to the research topic, that I was too eager to assume the role of advocate for participants, and that, like much research, the project stemmed from a desire to better understand my own experiences. That is to say, I feared that many of the critiques leveled against insider research applied to my project and that my personal identity and interests could pose a challenge to the integrity of the research.

Despite my assumption that I would be conducting research as an insider, I was also aware of the improbability of interviewing a White/East Indian participant. In fact, not one participant and I shared a common heritage combination. Furthermore, although the participants and I have all at one point in time or another identified as multiethnic and have all grown up in Northern California, we differed from each other in innumerable significant ways including age, class, gender, academic and extra-curricular interests, phenotype, religion, sexuality, and type of schools attended. In other words, I could hear the “rational” voice in the back of my mind saying “you can’t be an insider researcher for this project—no one really can,” “the literature on insider research doesn’t apply here,”
“the participants are unlikely to share your heritage and identity,” and “there are too many ways that you differ from participants.” Certainly, some of these concerns were not unfounded, and I did not feel the same level of connection and rapport with all participants. While some appeared quite comfortable talking with me, others were more reticent. Some participants and I were quite surprised by how much we had in common, while others and I had few common interests and experiences. Several students have continued to be in contact with me following their participation in the study; others have not. Likewise, my research and the topic of multiethnicity seemed to capture the interest of participants to varying extents.

The greatest challenges I perceived to my insider status occurred in those instances in which the participant, while not disavowing their multiethnic heritage, more strongly identified as monoethnic. Similarly, I feel that participants were less likely to see me as an insider if being multiethnic was less central to their sense of identity than other factors. Despite these challenges to my insider status, and to the notion that I could even be an insider researcher for this project, in important ways I did share a sense of connection with many of the students—a connection that seemed to transcend whatever differences we may have had and whatever distance there was between us. This sense of connection, and indeed insiderness, was not instantly achieved; rather, it emerged from and was constructed through the dialogue between me and the participants. For example, as discussed, at the start of each interview I provided students with Root’s (2003a) “50 Experiences of Racially Mixed People” (Appendix III) in which she identified “50 questions or comments and experiences [that] evolved from a questionnaire [she] developed for a study on biracial siblings” (p. 1). The list contains items such as “Your
parents or relatives compete to ‘claim’ you for their own racial or ethnic group” and “You have been told, ‘You don’t look Native, Black, Latino…’” and “You have been told, ‘You have the best of both worlds’” (p. 2). In Root’s words, “This list provides a launching point for sharing, discussing, laughing, debriefing, and educating” (p. 1). Not surprisingly, different items on the list resonated with different students, but when the list was discussed, participants and I could identify at least one shared experience. Of particular importance is the fact that, despite all of the other ways in which participants and I differed from each other, we could often identify a shared experience that related directly to the topic of the interview—I doubt this would have been true of many monoethnic individuals. For example, many of the participants and I have been told that we do not look [insert racial or ethnic category] or we have had our “cultural authenticity” tested by others.

Many of the questions that I asked participants were fairly straightforward: what grade are you in?, what classes do you like most?, do you have any siblings?, and so forth. At the same time, several of the questions were much more complicated, requiring considerable reflection and self awareness to answer. For example, I asked students if they thought their multiethnic identity construction process was complete or ongoing, and if complete, whether they thought of their identity as fixed, fluid, or situational. Perhaps not surprisingly, many of the students asked me to explain such questions or to give them an example to help them answer. Of course, I could have shared examples from other studies conducted with multiethnic individuals, and in some cases I did; however, much of the time I chose to share a personal story of how, for example, my own sense of identity shifts according to context. Certainly it was easier for me to recall my own
experiences as opposed to someone else’s, but I believe that speaking from personal experience was also beneficial in several ways: it prevented a feeling of hearsay (“I read something once about a multiethnic woman who…”); it conveyed that I may be able to relate directly to their experiences; and, by sharing a relevant personal example about myself, it perhaps increased the likelihood that they would feel comfortable doing the same.

Returning to the literature regarding insider research, we recall that Merriam et al. (2001) stated that “the outsider’s advantage lies in…the ability to ask taboo questions…” (p. 411). Yet, I believe that being multiethnic actually allowed me to ask uncomfortable, “taboo” questions of multiethnic students as the dialogue developed (e.g., “do you feel accepted by both of your heritage groups?”). In fact, some of the students reported feeling “tested” by questions about their ethnicity or heritage posed by monoethnic individuals. At least for those students, I suspect that “taboo” questions posed by monoethnic researchers might have caused them to become defensive or to close up. Moreover, I expect that participants felt less threatened talking explicitly about race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity with someone who was more likely to have shared their thoughts, experiences, and concerns.

Of course, I never explicitly asked participants if they saw me as an insider researcher. In the following excerpt from an email sent to me by a participant after her interview, however, she seems to identify me as an insider researcher and indicates her appreciation of my understanding of some of her experiences.

I just wanted to thank you for the awesome interview. I've never really been able to talk about that sort of thing in depth before and it really feels good to finally do it, especially since it was with someone who knew the ins and outs of where I was coming from.
Ultimately, I believe that my multiethnic identity was an asset for this research and allowed me to better access, relate to, and interpret the participants’ stories and experiences. Certainly there were instances in which differences in personal identification, experiences, or emphasis placed on multiethnic identity left me feeling more like an outsider researcher. While this outsider status did not seem to significantly hinder the purposes of the research, the interviews in which participants seemed to view me as an insider were generally longer, more conversational, more personal, and allowed for more in-depth explorations of the interview topics.

Thus far, I have focused on my multiethnic identity and the influence I believe it had on the research situation. My Bay Area roots, however, which I explained to participants, also appeared to have an impact on the ways they viewed me and the information they shared during the interview. The interviews often included references to, for example, the diversity of a certain community, the reputations of particular schools, or differences between neighborhoods in the Bay Area. These references were often made quickly and participants clearly assumed that I would understand comments like “you know what it’s like in this city” or “of course, that neighborhood is different from mine” or “we all know what that school is like”—comments that someone without local knowledge perhaps would not understand. Because I did not need to interrupt students and their chain of thought when such references were made, we were able to maintain a more conversational tone with fewer interruptions for clarification. I also believe that participants were more likely to share certain stories and experiences knowing that they did not need to provide substantial background information.
Of course, this assumed knowledge and understanding also gives rise to certain challenges. Penny Rhodes, a white researcher who conducted interviews with black foster care providers, made the argument that outsider research is beneficial for accessing taken-for-granted knowledge. As she explains,

But, even when discussing such sensitive subjects as racism, being white was not always the handicap expected. Many people were prepared to talk openly at length about their experiences and opinions and several confided that they would not have a similar discussion with another black person. People treated me to information which they would have assumed was taken-for-granted knowledge of an insider. As one woman in her twenties explained: “I wouldn’t have had a talk like this with another black person. I can discuss these sorts of things more easily with you. With a black person, you would just take it for granted.” (Rhodes, 1994, cited in Twine, 2000, pp. 12-13).

Because my local knowledge of the Bay Area seemed to lead some participants to omit taken-for-granted knowledge and not elaborate on certain experiences, I often asked them follow up questions to help make explicit their understandings and to encourage them to provide more detail. Nevertheless, I believe that my Bay Area roots facilitated a conversational tone during the interviews and encouraged open dialogue between me and the participants.

**Additional Methodological Considerations**

As Griffiths (1998) points out, “All researchers have opinions about what they are researching. Their research has been chosen precisely because it is something of significance to them…” (p. 129). Certainly this describes my own relationship to this research. I am fully aware that my experiences of growing up as a multietnic child in California and attending schools in the Bay Area, in large part, prompted my desire to conduct this study and shaped the biases and expectations with which I began this
research. Additionally, through my studies, I have become increasingly critical of diversity education initiatives such as multicultural and antiracism education due to their tendency to reinforce and perpetuate limited, rigid, and essentialist understandings of race and ethnicity—a perspective that further stimulated my interest in this study and shaped the research design. Given my own subjectivity and desire to serve as an advocate for multiethnic students, it is worth interrogating my biases and perspectives, how they have influenced my approach to this research, and steps taken to mitigate their impact.

In the name of full disclosure, based on my own experiences, academic studies, and findings from a pilot study for this project, I assumed that participants would share stories of, for example, feeling excluded from school activities based on essentialist understandings of race and ethnicity, others questioning their racial or ethnic group membership, and never learning about multiethnicity in school. I expected that they would tell compelling stories about the ways in which educators did not support their identity construction or consider them in the planning of curriculum and school activities. Indeed, these biases are written into the central research questions, one of which asks how schools might be more inclusive of and better support the identity development of multiethnic students (note the assumption that schools need to improve in both categories and that multiethnic students’ identity development should be supported in schools). Regardless of my biases and expectations, I wanted participants to be fascinated by the research topic and to enjoy the opportunity to talk about their identities and experiences as multiethnic students (an opportunity seldom, if ever, afforded to me at their age). I was also aware of the power imbalance between me and participants in the research context;
ultimately, I had control over the direction of the interviews and focus groups and the task of interpreting and presenting the participants’ voices rested with me.

Unquestionably, the opportunity to conduct this research was a considerable privilege that brought with it many responsibilities, and I had to be vigilant in my efforts to prevent my own interests and perspectives from precluding genuine inquiry. Although I could have conducted an autoethnography or advocated for multiethnic students based on my own experiences, I sought to hear the experiences of current students as expressed in their own words and to better understand their identity development as they described it. The responsibilities bestowed upon me by research participants to, for example, represent their stories as accurately as possible and to not construe their words for my own purposes, are ones that I take seriously. Consequently, I used several strategies to minimize the impact of my assumptions, biases, perspectives, expectations, and desires on this research.

I invited participants to ask me questions about the research, and I often discussed with them my interest in the topic and my motivation for conducting the research. Throughout the study, I took notes about my thoughts, feelings, frustrations, and hopes related to the research and the data. Reviewing my notes helped me to identify the perspectives that I brought to the research situation, and, once identified, I attempted to ensure that such perspectives did not dictate the course of the interviews and focus groups. I also needed to be careful in my analysis of the data, not hearing only what I wanted to hear and not interpreting the data simply through the lens of my own experiences. Of course, I realize that I can never escape myself or adopt entirely new perspectives, and I do not pretend that completely objective and emotionally disengaged
research is possible. This being the case, I believe that it was important to have participants review both their interview transcripts and their profiles to ensure that I had not misunderstood their words or misrepresented them. The focus groups also served as a means to follow up on the interviews and ask participants if I had understood them correctly. Although I wrote the writing activity prompt (which was more of a suggestion than a required topic), this activity provided participants with the opportunity to share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences in a more “neutral” and less obtrusive environment free from the influence of my presence. Finally, I also relied on the “extra eyes and ears” of my supervisory committee and colleagues to review the research protocols and data analysis strategies.

**Conclusion**

Woven throughout this chapter, both implicitly and explicitly, are issues of trustworthiness, interpretation, and accuracy. Returning again to the postpositivist realist conception of identity presented in Chapter Two, clearly the aim of this study is not to unearth an indisputable Truth about participants’ identities and their experiences. As discussed,

> [I]t is realists’ willingness to admit the (in principle, endless) possibility of error in the quest for knowledge that enables them to avoid positivist assumptions about certainty and unrevisability that inform the (postmodernist) skeptic’s doubts about the possibility of arriving at a more accurate account of the world. (Moya, 2000a, p. 13)

Indeed, uncertainty and revisability are integral components of a postpositivist realist approach to identity, one claim of which is that “there is a cognitive component to identity that allows for the possibility of error and of accuracy in interpreting the things that happen to us” (Moya, 2000b, p. 83). Our personal experiences may be interpreted
and reinterpreted in light of new experiences and knowledge, and these interpretations, in turn, will determine their influence on our identities. Thus, I do not claim to capture the Truth about the schooling experiences and identities of participants (or any other multiethnic individual); rather, I seek to better understand their perceptions (i.e. interpretations) of their experiences and the ways that they believe, at a given moment in time, those experiences have shaped their identities. Moreover, given my understanding of identity as fluid and shifting and the identity construction process as continuous over one’s lifetime, we must recognize the data presented in the following chapters as representing a “snap shot” fixed in time and space. Nevertheless, through combining data collection methods, genuinely and earnestly interrogating my role as the researcher, attempting to mitigate my influence on the research situation, taking seriously the methodological conundrums associated with this and similar studies, using multiple and iterative data analysis strategies, and inviting participants to review their transcripts and profiles, I have attempted to conduct this research in a way that allows the voices of participants to be heard as they make meaning of their experiences—voices that provide opportunities for deep understanding.

The following chapter consists of the aforementioned participant profiles and a brief, preliminary analysis of them. In Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight, I present and analyze the data related to participants’ K-12 schooling experiences and their reflections on these experiences.
CHAPTER FIVE: PARTICIPANT PROFILES

In order to properly situate the influence of participants’ K-12 schooling experiences within the broader context of other influences on their identities, this chapter presents a profile of each student with a focus on his or her racial and ethnic identity(ies) and identity development as influenced by such factors as family, friends, phenotype, racial and ethnic categories and stereotypes, and local environment. The specific influence of participants’ K-12 schooling experiences is the topic of the following chapters.

My purpose here is not simply to present the data, but to demonstrate the range of factors and experiences beyond those related to K-12 schooling that influence participants’ identities, and, perhaps most importantly, to allow participants to speak for themselves and share their stories, experiences, thoughts, and identities in their own words. Following the profiles, I offer a brief preliminary analysis of them; however, as the data presented here and their implications are revisited throughout the following chapters, I do not thoroughly interrogate the profiles here.

The profiles below, which draw almost exclusively on students’ own words, are derived primarily from participants’ interviews, although focus group and writing activity data are also included. The profiles, written in the first person, are grouped according to participants’ schools.

Jill

My name is Jill, I am 16 years old, and I am going into my senior year at Parkside High School. I spend a lot of my time dancing and I am part of a youth performance
company. My first year of high school was at Green Meadows, then I transferred to Parkside.

My dad’s Chinese and my mom is White. I hate that term “White,” because it’s like saying “Black.” I guess my grandma on my mom’s side is—her ancestors are from England, and then my grandpa, I guess they’re from Slavic countries but I don’t know where. I’m trying to figure that out right now. My grandfather was Jewish, my grandmother is not. So I’m not Jewish, but I hate, I don’t like saying that I’m Jewish because I’m not religiously, but ethnically. If someone asked me what I am, I would probably say Asian/American, just because it’s easy. Everyone understands it. I also don’t like the word Asian, because when you look at Asia, how big is it?

There wasn’t a distinctive moment when I realized I was multiethnic, I think it was just really gradual, just realizing that like I didn’t look like everyone else, and my hair was different, and my last name was different, and all of that. I think it was also because I was a part of the youth performance company, which is really a diverse community. So I had my elementary school, which was really monoracial, and then I had the performance company, which balanced things out. If I didn’t have the performance company, I probably would be much more confused and insecure and really emotionally unstable, but I’d go to dance classes where everyone looked different. It was nice to have that to balance out, and my mentor at the performance company is mixed, Black and White.

Developing my identity is ongoing, it will never be complete. I mean, how can it be complete? I think other people think theirs is complete. I guess if you can trace your family tree back, then you feel like your identity is complete. You know what race you are; you always check the same box. But for me, I don’t know, I feel like I can’t be complete until I figure out who my ancestors are, and that’s gonna take ages. And like, I keep figuring out new things. I didn’t know my grandfather was from a Slavic country until recently. I think, for me it’s like a yearning. I keep wanting to learn more about who I
am, so that nothing gets lost. I think also I’ve always just been interested in my people. And just trying to figure out where I fit in.

I’ve always felt I’m not strongly connected to like my Chinese side of the family, and I don’t speak Cantonese. I was Americanized because I went to a school that was predominantly White, so that was all there. And then my dad, a lot of his family lives around here. He has seven siblings, like a huge family and I have cousins. Some of them are mixed, some of them aren’t. We all just kind of come together a couple times a year and celebrate Chinese New Year or the 4th of July or something. But it’s just a place where we all see Chinese culture. I can’t speak to half of them. But now I’m starting to become more interested and I want to document the stories of how like my aunt came over here when she was 11 on a plane by herself from China. That’s ridiculous. My grandfather who passed away was a paper son and was like sold for a bag of rice to someone. It’s just really, really bizarre history that was completely normal 50 years ago. But, my parents have always been like, “figure it out on your own, do what you want.” So it’s always been like, “you want to go abroad, figure it out yourself. You want to do this activity, we’ll help you do it, but it’s really coming from you.” So in some ways I kind of wished they’d pushed me to learn more about myself. I mean my dad speaks really basic Cantonese, but it’s like why didn’t you speak to me? Even if it was just basic conversation, “hi how are you?” or “can I buy this?” It would still be there. Why didn’t you send me to Chinese school? I could be fluent in Mandarin right now. And it’s like I’m finally having to do that by myself. I signed up for Mandarin because, like the class is horrible, but I really want to learn the language. Like I really want to go to China. So I’m gonna have to go there by myself and figure it out.

I’ve been involved with iPride and making a movie about being multiracial. Making a movie was really interesting, just because I’d never sat down and thought about it. They asked me questions and I had to write answers. And I had never done that
about myself and who I was, so that was kind of—it was an interesting experience to have to actually articulate it in words and have that be documented and then have it be put on a movie.

But I think as I’ve gotten older I’ve started to have conversations—I just had a conversation with my mom about how being a White woman, you can’t understand what I’m going through. Because she was talking about how in the Bay Area she feels that there’s a lot more acceptance. And yes, there is compared to some place in like Ohio, but at the same time, these mixed kids here in the Bay Area are going through it just as much as the remote rural areas of the country, and she hadn’t thought about that. And I was like, “it’s not like I’ve never had an experience where someone’s been like, ‘you look weird. You look like you’re adopted. What’s wrong? Why do you look different?’ even though I live in such a diverse area.”

Mialany

My name is Mialany, I am 17, and I am about to start my senior year of high school. I’ve changed schools every year in high school. Freshman year I went to All Saints High School, and then I went to Parkside High School sophomore year, last year I went to Delgado High School, and my senior year I’m going to Bay View High School, but I’ve lived in the same city all my life. Someday I want to go into fashion design or pediatrics. I plan to go to a community college and then transfer to a university.

My mom is White Spanish, so my grandparents are—my grandfather on my mom’s side is from Guatemala, and then my grandmother is from Spain, but they’re both White skinned, from European descent. And then my father is Creole. My grandpa’s Creole, he’s French and African American, and my grandmother is African American, and they live in New Orleans. I always knew I was half White, half Black, but I didn’t necessarily—it wasn’t an issue up until my 8th grade, probably. My parents just brought
me up knowing—they never had like a sit down conversation with me about it, but it just always was there. I always feel like I’m using somebody’s color to identify them. And like, that’s hard, because I don’t want people to identify me by the color of my skin, but then at the same time, I’m doing it just as bad as they are. So I never really know what to say. I can be like “oh, I’m mixed,” but people are like, “no you’re not, what are you talking about, you’re White” or “no you’re not, you’re Black, Mialany.”

I guess I probably realized I was different when my dad used to pick me up from school, because people would always be like, “who is that?” When my dad did come around, he blasts his music and scrapes off in his big old truck. Like you can notice him, so when he used to pick me up, he’d be playing rap music, and they were like, “hold on, who is he?” And I was like, “that’s my dad, what do you mean ‘who is he?’” And they’re like, “he doesn’t look like you.” And I was like, “actually he does.” And then that’s when I realized skin color mattered. Like I look like my dad a lot, just the skin color is different. I have the features of a quote “Black person.” I don’t know, and it’s different for different people. I feel like a lot of African Americans can tell that I’m half Black, they can see it when they look at me. But then there’s people that are like, “you can’t be Black. What are you talking about? You don’t even look Black.” I’m like, “okay, I don’t know what to tell you.” Like there’s nothing I can say. I still don’t know what to say some of the time. I mean, I don’t know how to approach this subject. And people will question me a lot—I’ll give you an example. There was this girl and she was like, “what are you? You’re not full White with that hair.” Like, are you serious? I’ve never even met you in my life, and you’re gonna be that blunt about something? And I’ve been called Mulatto and I’ve been called Albino. Because, people are like, “you act Black, but you’re White.” And I’m like, “what is acting Black?”

People question how I dress and talk all the time, and it’s just like to the point where they decide who I am. I feel like I don’t have one certain type of look. I can look
punk rock or I can look urban or I can look real preppy. I don’t stay in one category just because that’s not who I am. And people are like, “You need to stop changing your outfit. You need to sit in one space.” I can’t do that. I just don’t—I don’t identify myself by the things that I wear, and I feel like a lot of society does. So that’s how they decide who I am without knowing my race. They’re like “oh, she’s a rocker,” “oh, she’s a punk rocker,” or “she’s preppy.” If they can’t find out what race I am, they’re real frazzled.

People don’t talk about being mixed because people try to forget about it. Because now it’s not something you celebrate, it’s something that you try to get away from. I don’t know. I personally like being mixed. I just feel like it’s so stressful to the point where you just want to be like, “why, why did you have to get pregnant with a different color?” I mean, I also think it’s totally cool. I want my kids to be mixed. They’re obviously gonna be mixed, but I’m just saying I wouldn’t have it any other way. Because then you get—I mean there’s upsides to it, too. Personally, I think mixed kids are way prettier than not mixed kids. And you get to know about two different cultures instead of only learning about one culture. You get to understand two different ways of life. And like maybe one of your parent’s family is more upper class, but then the other is more lower class. So you get to experience both types of family situations. And I feel like we’re more aware of actually the racial problems that are happening in life, because we have to deal with it on both sides. I mean, I think that we’re all more aware of just what’s going on in life. And maybe not just because we’re mixed, but maybe because—actually maybe it is because we’re mixed. Maybe we’re more in tune with reality.

Dana

My name is Dana, I’m 17, and I am a senior at Canyon High School. I play softball, I am on the school newspaper, and I’m a DJ for the school’s radio station. I am still waiting to hear from colleges that I applied to go to next year.
My mom is White and my dad is Black. Well, I don’t even remember living with
my dad. My parents got divorced when I was like three, I think, and my dad died last
year. I guess I pretty much always knew I was mixed, because my mom was White and I
wasn’t the same color as her and because I get tan really fast. So I just kind of—I mean,
it was never really a big deal, because every place I’ve lived, no one who knew me really
cared. Yeah, I always knew that I wasn’t White, but I never really thought about it. And
no one else seemed to really think about it until I went out to—I was 10, I think, and I
went to a drive-in movie with my neighbor and her son. And then her husband came
along. And he really didn’t like me. And I didn’t know why. And then he was all like, “well,
why did you bring the nigger kid along?” And that was really awkward. But I didn’t
really—it never really hurt my feelings, because I had always been going to like iPride
and things like that, so I always felt like, well that’s kind of his problem.

In terms of figuring out who I am, like pertaining to my race—I think I’m pretty
good, other than—well, I guess not really though. Because I’ve always grown up around
White people, and you know, I’ve never actually even been around Black people. I don’t
really have many Black friends who are full Black themselves and live in a Black
neighborhood. So my identity, I think it’s probably definitely situational. I mean, I know
just from going to Mills College over the weekend, in a large group of just Black people,
especially Black girls or women, I’ve been around them less than I’ve been around Black
guys because there’s more Black guys at my school. And it’s just—I don’t know, I felt a
little awkward, because, you know, they were just—they just seemed really different than
I am. Not in a bad way, just different. I just didn’t feel like—cause when I’m with my
friends who are mostly White and Indian, I feel like they make me feel like I’m extremely
Black. So when I was with them, I was like “wow, I’m extremely White.” And that’s how I
feel, ‘cause it’s like I live in a White neighborhood where there’s one family in our entire
neighborhood who is Black, and everyone stares at them.
I think the good thing about just living with my mom for as long as I did, is she—being that she had been a social worker and a therapist and done all this stuff, she really didn’t try to make me into something. She was just kind of going with the flow, letting me do what I wanted to, to the point where I sometimes didn’t do anything. Like sports, I would always quit. But then she always, I guess she always tried to make sure I went to iPride and make sure that I knew that I wasn’t just White. She’d never make out like being White was a bad thing or being Black was a bad thing, or making you choose who you have to be—just being a mixture, that’s cool.

But living with my grandma, and my aunt just lives down the street, was totally different, because, you know, the first thing my grandma did was she got my hair cut. She had my hair straightened so that it would be straight. She just really wanted me to fit in, I guess. And I never did. My grandma disowned my mom when she married my dad. Because she really just didn’t like—since she’s so old now she doesn’t really care anymore, but you know, every once and a while she’ll say to me, “you know, when I look at you, I don’t see you as being half Black. You’re just White.” She really doesn’t, in her mind, she’s not saying anything mean. And I really don’t think that she’s racist, but she does have feelings that are not politically correct, I guess. Like she wouldn’t hate anyone just because they were Black or whatever, but she definitely wouldn’t accept them as much as she would accept someone who is White. And my aunt is even worse.

I don’t really know how to explain myself. That’s the hardest problem I had when I was writing my essays for college applications. Because, I mean, yeah, I’m half Black and I’m half White, but I mean, I feel like that’s such a small thing of what makes you who you are, really. It’s not like the biggest part of what makes me who I am. I think living with my mom, and being an only child, and living with a single parent, and being raised in, you know, different communities really influenced me. Like I went from living in a place where like everyone was, you know, not really poor but pretty middle class to
living in a pretty rural area. And then now I live in a really affluent part of the Bay Area. So I think that’s really influenced who I am, because I really—I don’t judge people by how much money they make or how they look or how they talk or anything like that. Because it doesn’t matter.

Being involved with iPride, I think it almost made me feel kind of sometimes angry that I was part Black because some of the people just made me really mad, and I didn’t—because I think I had lived around White people for so long, I didn’t understand just, you know, the cultural differences. Because most people had like a Black mom or a Black dad who lived with them. And they were influenced by that. I wasn’t. And I didn’t understand, you know, why do you talk that way? Or why do you say this word instead of this word? And why do you do this instead of that? And why does your mom call me this? And I don’t understand why you’re calling me “little momma.” I don’t get that. No one else calls me that, and I thought it was an insult, so I was offended, and it’s like a term of endearment, they’re saying something nice to me. And it almost kind of turned me off for a while, and then I like started to really like them. And everyone was really cool. And you know, you go to people’s houses and you learn about people, and you get to know them and then everything’s cool. I think iPride almost offers more to their parents, though. I think it’s a bigger deal for our parents than for us, like our parents make it into a bigger deal. Then it makes it worse for us. Because it doesn’t bother me that I’m multicultural, or ethnic, or multiracial. Like that never mattered to me, but it’s like even though it was great that my mom had me in iPride and it was great that she was doing all this stuff and never made it a big deal, it was almost like she was doing so much of that, that it made me feel like, well, is this something that I need to feel strange about? Or why can’t I just be at home hanging out with the friends I have who are White? Or why do I have to go here and hang out with these people?
Andrea

My name is Andrea, I’m 16, and I am a junior at Oak View High School. I am the assistant editor of the school’s literary magazine and I do martial arts. I plan to go to college on the East Coast.

My mom is American and my dad is Iranian. When I say American, I mean like we have a covered wagon in Oklahoma. The farthest back I can remember being different from my other classmates is in second grade when I had the idea, I think I had just watched Aladdin and I realized, “hey, my dad’s kind of like that.” And so I pretended, so I went around and said “I am a Persian princess” and people were like “no way” and “that’s cool, you’re a princess.” A lot of kids didn’t know what Iran is, and I kind of didn’t either, I was really too little to know.

I really think that I am still in the process of developing my identity. I mean, I always think that, when I think of myself, I don’t think of myself as White or I don’t think of myself as Iranian. I think of myself as the two, but I really feel like, when it comes down to it, my Whiteness is what sort of rules, because I don’t look at all Iranian, except for my eyebrows. I think everyone else sees me as White. I mean, a lot of the time, just the other week actually, we were talking about the word kahn in class. In my Spanish class, there’s a girl whose last name is K-a-h-n, and I said, in Iran, Kahn means ruler and leader and my grandfather’s name was Rahim Kahn. And one of the guys who I’ve known for like two years looked at me and was like “wait, is your grandfather Iranian, are you Iranian? Wait, what?” And we usually have to go through like a process, whenever I meet a new teacher, or a new person and they see my last name, its like, you look at the last name and you look at me and say “Something doesn’t fit.” I really think there’s no way I can get out of the questions, because, it’s just how it is. It’s kind of futile, because I feel like I can never be Iranian enough, that I can prove it. It’s like whenever I say I am
half Iranian it's like "oh, do you speak the language" "are you Muslim?" "do you speak Farsi?" "have you met your grandparents?" I mean, it's always, it's pretty much the same thing all the time, just the "oh, you are?" and going through the whole, the motions. I feel like I've done it so many times.

My parents are like "Andrea, you've gotten the best of both worlds." And my parents have tried to help me learn about my heritage through stories and stuff, and ever since I can remember, my dad has always said "Shab bekheir" to me every night, which is "good night." There's always that little piece that stays alive. Like we celebrate new years and we do the dancing and it's good, but I feel like I could do more. I always feel like I could do more. Mostly my dad teaches me about my Iranian heritage, because I never met my dad's parents, they both died in Iran. And, it's usually stories or food. And his sisters and brothers-in-law, they tell me things. And then there's also the sort of culture shock thing. We went out to dinner with my uncle once, and he was like "Andrea, what are you looking for in a prospective husband?" And I said "I am fifteen!" And he said, "so, your great grandmother was married at age nine."

When I walk into my Oklahoma family or my mom's family, I feel Iranian. I look White, but I don't feel the way you guys do, so I am sorry, I don't fit here quite as well. And I have something like that with my Iranian family. But I just look different and I don't speak the language. I remember the worst part—last summer my Iranian family was over and we went out to lunch and the only reason the family—everybody was speaking English was because I was there. And I felt like, "wow, I really don't feel a connection here. I feel like I am out of place."

I feel like I used my heritage as an individualization thing. So I could make my—it is a part of my identity, but when I was growing up there weren't many other half Iranian half White kids and so I sort of clung to that. And kids didn't really know, elementary kids didn't really know how to deal with that. I wasn't one, I was both. And I am trying to be
both, but I still feel like I am not Iranian enough. I always feel like I am trying to be both, day by day. My feet are in White world, but my hands are holding on to a little piece of that Iranian. A lot of the time I feel like it’s bad that I prove myself, that it’s annoying for people after a while. That I should just, just let it go, just lose the fight or something. I never feel Persian enough. And mostly it’s because I don’t speak the language, or I don’t do the religion, so I always try, I am trying to enroll in classes and trying to get my parents, get my dad to speak to me more in Farsi. I just, I always feel like no matter what I do, its not going to be—I am just going to be White. It is what people are going to let you be.

Anthony

My name is Anthony, I’m 15, and I’m a sophomore at Oak View High School. I’m in choir and I was in the school musical Sweeney Todd. In college, I’m probably going to be a music major.

I’m half Filipino and half Indian. My mom is Filipino, and my dad is Indian, from Madras. My mom is actually part of a tribe in the Philippines called the Igorot or something. And they weren’t taken over by the Spanish when they came and colonized it, because they were in the mountains and they could fight them off there. So I’ve researched that stuff. I haven’t really met any of my grandparents. I’ve met my dad’s mom, but the only time I met her when I went to India when I was 4. And then I never—I knew my mom’s mom when I was a baby. I always knew I was half Filipino and half Indian. I went to school in San Lorenzo, and a lot of the people there are Filipino. So, I guess I always knew I was half Indian and half Filipino.

My family, I think we’re pretty acclimated into America. I have this thing about when we go to my parents’ friends’ house, their house always smells like the food of the country, and I can’t stand Indian houses sometimes, because they smell so strong with
the spices. And so, my house is not like that. Because we’re really—I think we’re really Americanized now. My mom does cook some Filipino food sometimes, like once a week. Or my dad makes some Indian food or we get frozen Indian food. I don’t—we’re pretty integrated into the culture of America.

Being mixed isn’t the core of my identity. Yeah, I don’t think it has to be, because everyone that’s born in America is like an immigrant, unless you’re a Native American, so then I don’t think it really has to be such a large part of your identity, especially since my parents didn’t really incorporate that into the way I was raised. They sort of abandoned all of that pretty much. Um, they didn’t—I don’t know, I think my dad sort of lost touch with his India heritage when he moved here. And my mom moved here when she was 14, so I mean, she—they both know their languages and whatever, but they weren’t really a part of it when they came here. I know with a lot of my other friends, their house smells like the food they eat. But mine, we’re eating like frozen dinners.

Both of my parents are actually Catholic. And they have these Tamil churches, the Tamil Catholic Church of the Bay Area and my dad used to be a board member in it. So sometimes I still go to that, even though I can’t understand a word that they’re saying, because it’s in Tamil. But, you know, that’s the only Indian thing really that I’m part of. And my mom’s dad worked for the American military in the Philippines, and he was moved here when my mom was 14. So with my grandpa, all of my 6 aunts and uncles came, they came to California, so they’re all here. But my dad came here by himself. So I’m not really into that culture so much, because none of my Indian relatives are even here. And there’s not that many Indians around here, I don’t even have that many Indian friends at all. I actually pretty much have none. So, I mean, I don’t feel connected to that side at all. So like the only recent connection I’ve had to that was the Tamil Catholic community that my dad was part of. And that’s once a month, if I go. Sometimes we don’t go, because I get so bored, because I can’t understand them.
When I go to foreign countries, I think of myself as an American. But I went to Brazil two summers ago with a choir. And people thought, because there are so many mixed race people in Brazil, the whole country is mixed race, and people thought I was Brazilian, but I guess I felt—I don't know. In Brazil I thought of myself as mixed race a lot more, as opposed to when I went to Italy or France I felt a lot more American, because I like stuck out there a lot more.

Frank

My name is Frank and I’m a junior at Bridges High School. I play three sports—football, baseball, and I run track. My favorite class is probably history but I want to study architecture. I plan to apply to several different universities, mostly on the West Coast.

My father is Mexican/American and my mother is French and some Irish. I never really had any experiences that made me feel different because I am multiethnic. If somebody asks me what I am, usually I’ll say French, because I live with my mom. I guess I say French and not Irish because of my last name. But usually when I tell people French, they look at my skin tone and they’ll say like, “And what else?” And then I’ll tell them.

I don’t really feel that grounded or attached to any heritage. I could identify in lots of different ways, because I don’t think that it changes my personality at all. Like I don’t think it really affects how I am as a person. I mean, it is just your background. It plays a major role, but not to how my life is. If I had to describe my identity in a word or two, I would probably say “diverse.” I sort of have different identities. Yeah, that would probably make the most sense—when I’m with my father’s side, yeah, I would identify myself as probably strictly Mexican. Or when I’m with my mom’s I would just say French or White.
My family has influenced me in a way. Like when my parents split up. I wasn’t allowed to learn Spanish from my dad’s family, because my mom didn’t want me learning Spanish to affect how I grew up and how I communicated with my dad. So yeah, my family does play a major role in my life. I see my dad once every three months maybe. His whole family speaks Spanish and I’m studying Spanish in school. I chose to study Spanish just because I wanted to be able to communicate with my dad’s family, and also I’d probably use that more so on a job nowadays. When I’m with my dad and his side of the family, I feel more connected to the Mexican culture. Like when I’m down there for some holiday or something, their way of celebrating is a lot different than my mother’s family. And it’s a lot of fun the way they do it sometimes. So yeah, I’ll identify more with them.

Jasmine

My name is Jasmine and I am a senior at Bridges High School. I play soccer and I’m into rock climbing. I plan to study political science with a minor in French. I want to be a diplomat, in foreign affairs.

My dad’s Arab, from Tunisia, and my mom’s Mexican, Mexican/American, and my grandparents are full blooded Mexican. My mom was raised in the United States and she looks White. She doesn’t look Mexican at all, even though she’s like 100%. I speak French because in Tunisia they start learning French in the third grade because that’s their commerce language, and I spend my summers in Tunisia. So I go there every year for three months. And on the way there I stop in France where I have friends and family.

We have family in Mexico, but we don’t visit them. I don’t know why. We just don’t. My grandpa has a brother down there. But for the most part, everyone is pretty much dead, everyone that my grandparents are related to. So we don’t go down there. I’ve been to Mexico, I think, maybe three times. Once when I was young, and then twice
just for a vacation when I was probably in middle school, but I don’t think I’ve gone recently. So I don’t feel so much Mexican as I do Tunisian, because I don’t really—I haven’t experienced the culture. You know, I can’t say that I’ve experienced it.

If somebody were to ask me what I am, I would probably say—I don’t know. I would say something sarcastic like, “I’m an Arab.” You know, I don’t know, ‘cause they wouldn’t believe me. If I were to really give a serious answer, I would probably say Mexican/Tunisian or Mexican/Arabic. I would have to say my identity development is definitely ongoing. Not in terms of evolving, and I’m just kind of, you know, accepting it. I’ve accepted it a long time ago. But I would definitely say that I’m learning more and more as I grow older and as I mature.

I don’t hang out with Mexicans. I haven’t hung out with a group of Mexicans or a group of Arabic people here in America. The only time that I intermingle with a group of people in which the majority is Mexican would have to be when I’m with my family when we get together for baby showers, because they live here. And around them, I feel White, because I don’t take an interest in speaking Spanish. I don’t take an interest in Catholicism. I am Muslim. Well, I am not practicing yet. I still have to—you have to memorize the first stanza of the Koran in order to practice. And I only know the first two lines. My dad does not practice, which is—I mean, he acts like he’s so holy, but no, he does not practice, when there’s like a mosque in Hayward. I mean, I know I could be practicing as well, but I mean, I haven’t really—I read the Koran, but I haven’t began that step yet. So, yeah, you know, when I’m with my family and they’re all speaking Spanish and they all look Mexican I don’t really feel like I’m a part of them. But at the same time, it’s not like it bothers me or anything. I feel I’m a part of the family, but I don’t feel like I’m within that culture whatsoever.

My parents never talked to me about being multiethnic, I just pretty much took it upon myself, you know, it’s pretty self-explanatory. You’re going to Tunisia for three
months every year. You’re dad is from there. He’s got childhood friends there. My dad has definitely forced religion upon me, though. He definitely has tried to influence me, which, of course, everybody knows that if you try to force something on an adolescent, it’s going to backfire. It will always backfire unless you’re a submissive person, which I am not. And I denied my ethnicity. I denied my—I mean, they say that if you’re father is Muslim, then you’re Muslim by blood. But I don’t see how religion can be tethered to blood. But I mean, I just denied the fact that I was Muslim “by blood” and I kind of rebelled in that way. And my dad was very unhappy with it. But he didn’t really talk about it, because I don’t really talk to him. I avoid talking to him. So I guess he avoids talking to me. I don’t know. We just don’t talk period. The only time we talk is when we disagree, and when he’s like yelling and stuff. Then I read The Kite Runner. My ex-boyfriend gave me the book in my sophomore or freshman year. Then I went to Tunisia and I was reading The Kite Runner while I was in Tunisia. And while I was reading The Kite Runner, I mean, it was just so beautiful, you know, the religion. There’s a part in the book, and it’s a really beautiful experience, and it has to do with practicing the religion, getting down on our knees and praying, right? And that book gave me a different perspective on what I was supposed to be in terms of what my dad wants. And I just cut my dad out of it, and I accepted it for what it was, and I opened my eyes a little bit wider, and I just—this is gonna sound really Hallmark, but I just saw beauty all around me. Because before that point, up until I was old enough to realize that, you know, there’s beauty in the Arabic culture. Because my dad just made me hate who I was. He made me hate the Arabic people. He’s the meanest person I have ever met in my entire life. And I hated—I hated who I was for that—not the person I was, but that part of me. You know, the culture. I just didn’t like it. I was resentful that I was a part of that, and therefore, I didn’t even give my religion a chance. I didn’t give anything a chance. It’s not like I went over to my Mexican side and was like “okay, I’m gonna be this.” I didn’t really
claim anything. *The Kite Runner* just gave me a different perspective on my own religion, my own cultural background. Although it is set in Afghanistan, Afghanistan is a lot like Tunisia. And I was like, this is who I am. And I just felt so a part of it. And while I was reading the book I could hear my family arguing in Arabic outside the door. And I was just smiling, and I was like, oh my god, this is great. I have this dual perspective that no one else can really have. Well, of course, there are other people that have this dual perspective. But, I mean, I felt kind of like a one in a million type of person the more I just opened my heart to it.

Like I said, I don’t really identify with that Mexican side of me. I think the reason why is because there’s a lot of girls in high school that are like, “nuh-uh, she ain’t Mexican, she ain’t Latina,” and so I fail to mention that part of me. I just know how the girls at my school are, because I’ve heard them talk about other girls. They say, “uh, she says she’s Mexican, but she ain’t Mexican, she ain’t Latina” and stuff like that. But they haven’t said that to me, because I’ve never been open about it. I’m not open about it to their face. I mean, my friends know who I am. My friends know that I’m both. But it’s annoying and I don’t want to hear it. Not because like I’m ashamed or I’m intimidated. I mean, I don’t know.

**David**

My name is David, I go to Bridges High School, and I’m 17 years old. I am a junior and I play on the varsity baseball team. I want to play baseball in college. I play the stock market with my friend a lot now, so I think I’m going to go into business economics. I hang out with my friends a lot and I do a lot of community work. I’m about to take over the youth group at my church. I’m very busy.

I am Italian and Portuguese, which are pretty close together, both European. My dad is Italian, and he’s—he actually is Native American, but very little. Like our great
grandmother was like Cherokee or something like that. So that and he’s a little bit of Portuguese and mostly Italian. My mom is full Portuguese. My mom used to speak Portuguese all the time, but ever since my grandmother died, she stopped. I used to speak fluent Portuguese when I was like four or five. And then my grandmother died, so I stopped. I was trying to get my aunt to teach me Portuguese, but I’m kind of too busy for that. My mom has nine brothers and sisters; I have a huge family. When I am with my Portuguese family I identify more with them, but I also feel different from them. I guess my identity shifts.

My dad speaks Spanish. He went to the Dominican Republic and stayed there for a few years. He kind of wasn’t around me as much, but my grandparents, his parents are. I think I feel more Portuguese than Italian, because the Italian side, my grandparents have kind of shifted away from it. Like they’ve become so Americanized that you can’t even tell any more. And then it’s just kind of now you’re American. You’re not even Italian anymore. I sometimes feel like I am more White/American and Portuguese. My grandparents have been around me more than my dad has, and if you could think of the perfect American family, that’s probably what they are.

It’s kind of hard to like—I don’t know, like when they say what race you are or whatever. I didn’t know. Like Portuguese is European White and so is Italian, but it’s kind of like you don’t want to be like classified into like, “oh you’re White.” Like no, I’m Portuguese or Italian. People ask me all the time what I am. They try to tell me I’m Mexican. I’m like, “I’m Portuguese.” Or they say “you’re Spanish.” Like, no, I’m Portuguese. Spain is right next to Portugal, but they’re different. My identity, it’s kind of like a—it’s like a journey. You learn more—as I’ve gotten older I’ve kind of gotten more in touch with like my—I don’t know, I kind of want to travel the world, too. I kind of want to figure out where I came from, my roots and my mom’s kind of not that way. And
neither is my dad, which kind of sucks, because I’m the one that wants to go—I want to
go to Portugal and I want to go to Italy.

My mom’s side of the family is very Portuguese. Portuguese people are their
own—I don’t know if you’ve known any Portuguese people. They’re just there. And they
get very loud and they’re very obnoxious and they’re very stubborn, and they like to eat
a lot, and they like to shove food down your throat. And, I mean, they’re really close knit.
I mean all of those things in a good way. Like the Americanized, White society is really
lazy. Like, “oh, Bobby, I’m gonna give you $50 today to go each lunch.” Oh, I’m sick. I’m
getting $3 to go get lunch, and you’re getting $50. And I go out and work every other day
for money. And you go home and play video games for five hours. And then all my other
friends—my other Portuguese friends on the other hand are very hard working also and
have to go to work and go do our chores and we actually work for our money.

Cara

My name is Cara, I’m 18 years old, and I’m a senior at Cedar Grove High School.
Next year I’m going to college in New York. I row six days a week and I’m one of three
co-leaders of the Hapa Club, which is the multiracial student affinity club at our high
school.

I think for me, my identity is definitely a process. And I feel like I’m getting to that
place where I can sort of start to be like this is who I am, this is who I’m not. But I think
that it’s still a process and I’m not really—I mean, there are times where I feel like, where
I almost feel guilty like, “oh my God, I’m so like Whitewashed” or whatever. Like we’re
not cooking a dinner for Chinese New Year. And then it’s sort of like, well, why do I—
should I be obligated to do that just because I’m—you know? And so I do have those
kinds of moments. And you’re like, I should be doing the traditional whatever and you
think about all this stuff that you’re—almost like requirements that you’re not meeting.
But I mean, there’s really no White equivalent. Like my mom’s not culturally Irish, she’s just White. I never really get questioned about my White side, but it’s interesting, because I do—this is usually the question that comes after the “what are you” question: “oh really, you’re Chinese?” “oh, you totally look...this is what I thought you were” “really you’re Chinese? I don’t really believe that, like really?” They’re like trying to see it in your face. And then, “so do you read Chinese?”

My parents have influenced my identity. I mean, I think that of course they have, they’re responsible for a lot of things that I think and feel and identify with. But they’ve never really been like, “we are a multi-racial family, these are our values, we are different,” you know? They’re not very self-entitled people. My dad has a really big family. My grandfather, his father, is one of five brothers, and they all have at least three kids, so I have a very large second aunt, second uncle network. And they all came from China within the past, I don’t know, like right after the Cultural Revolution. So some of them, my dad is one of the youngest in that whole generation, and so some of them speak a lot of Mandarin—my dad hardly speaks any at all. And so we just, it was my grandfather’s 90th birthday, so we just had a big reunion in New York. And it was interesting to see, you know, because that’s sort of the family joke like, “oh, we’re so White.” Like all of us are, you know, look at us eating with forks. And the kids don’t even know how to use chopsticks. So that’s sort of where the differences get pointed out with my family. But sort of in jest, because they all know why they came to the United States. And so the fact that we’re all so White now and that none of the kids have any idea is sort of like a family joke. But I think that they’re also a little bit sad that we’ve sort of lost that tradition.

I have a sister who is a year and 20 days older than me and my brother is seven and half years younger than me. I think it’s interesting how people do comparisons, especially between me and my sister. Because the general consensus is my sister is a
lot Whiter looking than I am. She has lighter brown hair than I do and sort of a less
rounded face, which are traditional ethnic stamps, I guess. And so whenever we meet
people for the first time, they will say like, “oh you’re kids are so beautiful” and like
“mixed kids always look better.” Or, you know, it’s the exotic thing. I mean, there’s sort of
that joke that mixed kids are—like, “have you ever seen an ugly mixed kid?” Or that it’s
different and cool. I mean especially in that age range, like especially 5th through 8th
grade, it’s such a huge developmental period. And so it’s a lot of striving to be different,
you know, and being an individual. And so I think you felt cooler, because you had
something different. That was sort of the time that was like, I want glasses just to be
different, like kids who wanted braces. It was like, “oh, I’m a different race from you.” I’d
bring in the books for Chinese New Year in kindergarten, the ones about like Chinese
folk tales. I have those books about the dragons and you don’t. Me and my mom helped
make the food for the Chinese New Year lunch at our school.

Amaya

My name is Amaya and I am a senior at Pine Mountains High School. Next year I
am going to a community college and then I plan to transfer to a university in the South. I
want to major in sports medicine and be an athletic trainer. I have a job and I'm involved
in my church.

My mom is African American and my dad is Indian, he’s Sikh. My mom and dad
are divorced; my dad is remarried to an Indian woman and has two kids. If somebody
asks me what I am, I’ll tell them I’m Black and Indian. It wasn’t ever hard, you know, how
if your mother was Black and your father was White, you know, having that kind of racial
thing, “oh you’re an Oreo,” you know? I’ve never had any kind of troubles being—
knowing my mother was Black and my father was Indian. I never got treated differently in
any kind of way. I think I’ve always been aware of it. I don’t consider myself different. I
know I do have a unique mix, very rare to find, but just because I have this mix, I don’t see myself as different from anybody else. And my friends don’t see me differently. People can always tell that I’m mixed, and they always definitely know I’m mixed with Black. But they, they’ll think Puerto Rican before they think Indian. They’ll think I’m some kind of like, you know, Latin or something versus being Indian. So, I mean, I’ll correct them and say, “my father’s Indian, but my mother is Black.”

My Black side is a little bit more dominant, because I live with my mother. My father is in my life, but I do more things with my mother’s side of the family. I feel like, for me, I feel like I’m 100% Black because I live with my mother, I’m around my mother more than I am my father, I’m around her side of the family more than I’m around my father’s side of the family. I feel like I’m 100% Black and 50% Indian because even though when I go around my father’s family, even though they accept me as “we know you are a part of our blood” it just, it still just feels different knowing that, you know, I’m mixed, my hair isn’t like yours, our skin color might be the same, but it’s still different. But versus when I go with my mom’s side of the family it’s like you just couldn’t tell. I could just be like “oh, I’m Black.” If I had chose to, I could completely deny the Indian side of the family, but I choose not to. Because that’s who I am. You know, he’s my blood. I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for my father and my mother getting together.

I was trying to go to India maybe after I graduated from high school, but I kind of wanted to get settled for doing college. So I decided after I graduated from college that will be my trip to there. I speak Punjabi partially, but I don’t really like to speak it. I speak it to dad, because he forces me to speak it so I can keep it up, but otherwise I don’t like speaking it. He’s the only person I speak to, and my brother and sister, and that’s all.

One thing my mother and my father instilled into me was to know who I am, so I’m never torn to act more Indian with my dad’s side of the family, or to act more Black when I’m with my mom’s side. I know who I am. My identity was all instilled by my
parents. I think you knowing your identity is kind of all about how you were brought up. And how my parents brought me up, they made sure I knew who I was and where I came from. I know who my identity is. I mean, people of course change in the stuff they go through, but it's like how my mother raised me is to know who you are. Because I don’t think that me growing up, like I'll get confused like “oh, well, I think I'm a little bit more Indian or I’m a little bit more Black.” I know what I am, and I don’t think that will change.

If my mother and father would have never gotten a divorce, half the things that I do now, I would not be able to do. Like having a boyfriend, that would be out the door. All the piercings that I have, it would be out the door. Being able to go out partying and do all the things that I’m able to do, it would be completely out the door. I would probably—I wouldn’t even be going to a community college after high school. I would be going straight off to a four year college. I wouldn’t be doing sport medicine. I would be either a lawyer or a doctor. My life would be completely different if my mother and father were still together, or if I went to go live with my father. I would be a totally different person if my father was—if my mother and father were still together.

I adapt more to my mother’s side with the racial things, and even though I don’t get discriminated for being mixed, but sometimes I do get discriminated for being—my mother being Black, you know, having the Black thing. I have a very, very strong sense of Black pride. There being racist people in the world towards Black people. It doesn’t—you know, they don’t discriminate me for being mixed, but just the fact that, you know, “you’re a nigger,” or stuff like that. I haven’t personally experienced it ever. But, I mean, like I said, it’s out there. You do have racist people out there that will look at you differently because the fact that you are Black or you don’t look like they do. But it’s never been because I'm mixed. It’s never been because of that. You know, so my mother’s side affects me more than my father’s side does, completely.
My name is Raya and I am 18 years old. My mom is British and my dad is Ethiopian. Right now I am planning on getting into nutrition, and I have been getting back into modeling because I have the exotic look. I recently graduated from Pine Mountains High School.

With me, being multiethnic was pretty easy. I didn’t go through a huge amount of things. I had moments where people would ask me if I was adopted because they saw my mom and stuff like that. I guess I first realized I was different when my neighbor told me my parents can’t be married because they’re different colors. And I think we were seven and I got really mad about it. She was like “your parents can’t be married” and I said “why?” and then she was like “because they are two different colors.”

When I was a kid, I spent most of my time with my mom, and so at school, I was able to relate more to White people than I was to Black people. Even with my two half brothers who are Black, I feel different from them. Just look at us. But I’ve never looked at it in a bad way, though. Like they’re Black, well, I’m Black and I’m White. I look at it like that, I never looked at it like “uh, I wish I could just be one thing.” I never wanted to be just one thing. Well, the only time I ever wanted to be one thing was with my hair. Because it was always hella hard to do my hair when I was little and I was like “God, if I was just White this would be so much easier.” I think that was the only time I ever had feelings like that. But other than that, no. With me, it’s just, it’s never really bothered me, I’ve always loved being mixed.

With me, I consider myself pretty lucky. I went through little things where people would say things and it made me mad, but I was glad that they said it because it made me more aware. I mean, eventually you have to realize that “hey, you know, you are a little bit darker than that person right there.” I mean, at first when I was little, I was like
“oh, we’re all the same thing” but no, we’re not. You know, and it helped me realize it.
The big question kids asked me was “are you adopted?” But other than that, nobody’s ever said “eew, you’re mixed.” But I had lots of times when I was little and I would get people saying “oh, I wish I was mixed too.” I would get a lot of that. Like, “I’m so boring compared to you.”

Like if people would ask me, “well, what are you?” I’d say I’m Black and White and then they’ll be like “but what do you mark on the paper?” I’m like, well, if I think about it, back in the day of Martin Luther King, if they were to look at me, and if there were to be a White drinking fountain and a Black drinking fountain, I’d still have to go to the Black one. So I was like I’ll just mark the Black, you know, I look Black. But if I could mark both, I would never mark just Black or just White. On tests, sometimes I would be like I’m White, I’m Black, I’m White, I’m Black, like I will just mark whatever one I want to be today.

My dad really tried to push that I was Black, like that I had Black in me. As I started getting older and he was able to talk to me more, he started trying to talk to me about serious things. And so he would talk about the history of Black people, so whenever I have a conversation with him I basically know how it’s going to go down. And I’m like “alright, yeah dad, I realize I’m Black, I’m going to go sit with mom now.” You know, it would be like that. And so that, I think that’s just made me hate Black people for a while. Just because the way my dad, like he would constantly push being Black on me, that I was just like “I hate Black people.” I never dated any Black guys, I just dated White guys. Just because it was a personal thing, like just to get back at my dad. ‘Cause I know he would, if I go out with a Black guy, he’d be like “oh yeah.” And he’d just make little smart comments. But if I dated a White guy, he wouldn’t be disappointed, I mean, he married a White woman. He wouldn’t be too disappointed, but I mean, he’d just be like “oh yeah, you can’t handle a Black man.” He’d probably try to say something smart
like that. And so I was like “alright dad, whatever.” And so he would just go on and say his thing and I would be like “do you feel better now?” and “Black pride, dad, Black pride.”

One thing that I like so much more about my mom, was that my mom was really into Black culture and she would try to teach it to me, but she wouldn’t force it on me. She’d embrace it and she’s like “oh, in Africa they do this.” My mom listens to hip hop, she has Mary J. Blige, but then she also has Rolling Stones, you know, she just goes back and forth with stuff. She was the one who helped me embrace being mixed from—as soon as I could learn and started talking, she was showing things like that to me.

Barry

I am Barry, I’m 15 years old, and I’m a sophomore at Pine Mountains. I am the sophomore vice president and I play second base on the baseball team.

I am mostly Spanish. My great, great grandma came here from Spain when everyone was immigrating to America. And then on my dad’s side I am German and Irish. My mom’s whole side is Spanish. I’ve been to Spain and I’ve also been to Germany. I first became aware of my multiethnic identity in elementary school when we had a heritage fair. I believe it was fourth grade. We brought in everything from our heritages. And my class went down to the Mormon Church in Oakland to look at the genealogy records. It was kind of hard to find stuff on my family because we were so spread out because my great grandma had a lot of kids. And then my grandma had a lot of kids, baby boomers. And so it’s just kind of hard to find and piece everything together. So I kind of found out a lot about my dad’s side, like his great, great, great grandparents came here from Ireland, and then they were part Dutch from Germany. One was Irish and then he married my great, great, great grandma that was Dutch and they came here
together. And a lot of people are like “I’m from this predominantly one country” and then I’m 50/25/25, you know.

Just to keep it simple for people I usually just identify myself as Spanish just because of my skin color, it kind of makes more sense to people that I am. And I think I’m more Spanish, just like ‘cause most of my family is Spanish. I feel really Spanish from my mom’s family. And I still feel Spanish with my dad’s family. Mostly because my dad’s side of the family was kind of ignorant. They say racist comments like—they don’t mean to, but it’s still not politically correct. You know, my parents are an inter-racial couple. And my grandma on my dad’s side did not think they were gonna last. ‘Cause my mom’s side, they’re very accepting of cultures because they’re culturally enriched themselves. And my dad’s side is kind of red neck. You know, because when they moved here, they went to the South. Yeah, they’re very ignorant.

My Spanish side has been more influential on me mostly because of foods that we have, all that stuff, paella. You know, we have a lot of Mexican dishes there, too. All the different Hispanic or Latino dishes, we’re always having that constantly. It’s pretty much that way because my grandma—my parents had to work a lot, so she took care of me. So she was the main influence in my life. So I kind of grew off of that. So I’m proud of my culture. That’s kind of gotten me to my Spanish heritage and how I feel grounded there more so than German and Irish. And I still spend a lot of time with my grandma. I still go to A’s games constantly with my grandma and she’s always over at our house. So it’s been really a family affair.

I’ve a brown skin complexion and living in California people automatically think I’m Mexican but in reality I’m Spanish. I don’t get offended if someone asks what am I, but when people assume, that’s when people get offended. I have a brother who’s working right now. A lot of people when he was—in his school experience, a lot of people called him Mexican, like identified him as Mexican. And I remember a couple of
times I asked him, “am I Mexican or am I Spanish?” because I didn’t know the difference because I was younger. And he was like, “no, you’re not Mexican, you’re Spanish, you just remember that.” So I’ve always kind of—that’s kind of stuck with me. Lots of people will ask me “what are you?” They’re kind of, you know, the head cock and “what are you?” I usually break it down into the Spanish, Irish and German, and I go, “but I’m predominately Spanish.” They go, “really?” And they get all fascinated by it. You know, and they ask, “have you ever been to Spain” and stuff. I’ve run into some people that aren’t considered friends that are like “well, isn’t it the same as Mexican?” And it’s like, no. I just say, “it’s across the pond.”

Christina

My name is Christina, I’m 17, and I’m a senior at Pine Mountains High School. I am going to go to a community college next year and then I’ll transfer to a state school. Someday I want to be a dental hygienist. I am on the school’s cheerleading team and dance team, which takes up a lot of my time.

My mom is White and my dad is Black. When someone asks me, I say that I’m mixed and they’ll be like “oh, with what?” Because most people think, when they look at me, they think I’m mixed with Puerto Rican or something, they never think Black and White. If they go “oh, you’re mixed?” and then if they say “with what?” I’d be like “Black and White.” They never just assume Black and White, but I never just tell somebody “oh, I’m White” or “I’m Black.”

Our family is really close and so all of my family, my uncles and everyone like that is White, and I never met my real dad, so I am always around my White family. And I don’t feel different, I don’t feel like “oh, I’m different from them” or whatever. I don’t act different, but then at school, I hang out with mostly with Black people, or I hang out with Tongan people a lot. So I don’t really hang out with White people at school. It feels
different, like the lifestyles are definitely different between home and at school. At home, my sister’s kind of punk rockish and all that stuff and I have brothers who are like, you know, they’re kind of preppy I guess you’d say, and then at school, I hang out with, we say the “ghetto people” at school. So, the lifestyles and how they act is very different. But I don’t change up how I act or anything like that.

If I was to walk into a room and nobody knew me and if it was a group of Black people and a group of White people, I feel like the Black people would be the people that I would hang out with because I look kinda more like them. I think I look more Black, like my skin color and stuff, but my features, I think my features are more White because I don’t have that type of nose and stuff or I have little tiny lips and I don’t have their real short hair, like I have long hair. But if I went over with the White people, I’d feel like I’m sticking out or whatever. And I’d feel like they’re all looking at me, you know? Whereas the Black people, like I don’t really look—I could look like them, but I think I look different from them too. But I feel like I would blend in more with them, just because the skin color and the way I dress and stuff is more like them. So I feel more comfortable.

Kendra

My name is Kendra and I am senior at Pine Mountains High School. I plan to go to community college for two years and then transfer to a local state university. I might study psychology—I am taking it right now and I really like it. Right now I work part time at an after school program for kids.

I’m Puerto Rican, Mexican, I have Black in me, and French. My dad’s Mexican, and then my mom’s Puerto Rican and she has the Black and the French in her from my grandma and my great grandma and grandpa. Everyone’s like “you’re a mutt, you’re a mutt.” I just found out that we have French in us. My mom just told me a couple of months ago and I was like “wow, that’s pretty cool.” At first we thought it was Irish, but
then she had it confirmed that it was French that we had in our family, well on my mom’s, on her mom’s side, so that’s pretty cool. I don’t know anybody else that has French in them at all. Yeah, I thought it was pretty cool being two different Latino races, and then, just having Black in me from my family, I thought that was really cool, and then the French just topped it off.

With both my Hispanic families, like sometimes I’ll be with my Mexican family and I’ll say a word that they don’t really understand, that Puerto Rican says, their type of vocabulary, and then my grandma or my dad will be like “oh, that’s how you know you’re Puerto Rican” or I’ll be with my Puerto Rican grandmother and then I’ll do stuff that Mexicans do, like with food, and she’ll be like “oh, you’re so Mexican.” ‘Cause I’m closer to my Puerto Rican side of the family, but then I know more about my Mexican side, like with food and stuff like that. It’s probably because there are so many more Mexicans in this area. Like with the Mexican food, it’s like I know what this is and I know what that is and then when I go to my Puerto Rican family and they’re teaching us—sometimes my mom likes to teach us how to cook so when we get older, we’ll know how to cook some Puerto Rican dishes, and my family will be like “you’re Puerto Rican too.” My mom and my sisters and I talk about being mixed all the time. And then, when I’m with my Black family, they’re sometimes really outspoken I guess you could say, and I’m sitting there and sometimes my accent comes out, my Hispanic accent comes out, and they’ll sit there and say “oh, you’re so Mexican” or “you’re so Puerto Rican” and I’m just sitting there, like, I start laughing.

I’m way closer to my mom’s side. So I feel like I’m more, like even though I know I’m half Puerto Rican and half Mexican and I have Black in me and I have French in me, I feel like I’m more Puerto Rican just because I’m closer to my mom’s side of the family. I live with my mom, so I’m closer to her. I don’t have that same relationship with my dad or his family. I guess when I get around them, they’re like mostly Spanish speaking and I
don’t know that much Spanish, so to me it’s kind of weird. I love my dad’s family and everything but sometimes it’s kind of weird when they try to talk to me, because I don’t really understand but when I’m with my mom’s family it’s like “oh, okay, whatever,” you know? Because we’re really strong being Puerto Rican so it always comes up, and then with my dad’s side it’s like I just feel like I’m more Puerto Rican just because of the simple fact that I’m closer to my mom. My identity, I think it’s—part of it, I could say it’s complete, but I still think it’s ongoing. Well, with my race, yeah I think it’s complete, but just like other things going on with my life, I think it’s still ongoing. I’m still going through all those changes and stuff.

Renee

My name I Renee, I am 16, and I am junior class president at Pine Mountains High School. I danced for about 10 years, it was a big part of my life, but I stopped dancing this summer because it was just taking over my life, because of the commitment, and I wouldn’t have time for both dance and being class president.

I’m Mexican and Persian. My mom was born in Iran and my dad’s Mexican. We have two sides of the family and they don’t really do stuff together so when I am with the Mexican side of the family I just kind of, just acknowledge the Mexican side, and they are very different from the Persian side of the family. And when I am at my grandparents house and they are having a party, then I really acknowledge the Persian side, like I don’t really think “oh, I am Mexican also” it’s just like “oh, Persian, okay.” But when I am with the Mexican side of the family, I feel very Mexican—burritos everywhere, like enchiladas. Yeah, and everybody speaks different languages. For me it’s the people I’m around. Like if I’m at a family party on one side of my family, I feel like I don’t acknowledge the other side, and that’s how I feel, and vice versa.
The best is when people are like “are you sure?” And nobody would ever guess—they always think that I’m White with a tan or something. Every time I tell them I’m mixed they’re like “uh, no you’re not.” Because I think when you tell people what you are, they expect you to look the typical like of that thing, you know what I mean? And so people will be like “what are you?” and I’ll tell them and they’ll be like “why don’t you look like it then?”

A lot of people, when you tell them that you’re mixed nowadays, for me, it’s always like “oh really? That’s hecka cool.” A lot of people, they like it, they think that it’s cool. And I know a lot about both cultures and stuff, like food-wise and stuff like that, like we eat both at home all the time, like family parties and stuff. Then people are always like “oh, Persian, what’s that?” That’s what I have to explain to people a lot of times, they don’t know what that is and stuff. And they’ll come over and I’ll be like “oh, here’s Persian food, try a little bowl.” And they’ll all love it and be like “oh this is so cool that you get this.” And everybody loves Mexican food. Yeah, I like it, I am glad that I am mixed. I remember people asking “that’s such a cool mix, how did that happen?”

Jen

My name is Jen, I am 16, and I am a junior at Pine Mountains High School. I am Student Body Vice President and I play soccer, volleyball, and softball. Sports take up a lot of my time. My favorite classes are yearbook and leadership, and academically I like history.

I am half Puerto Rican and a quarter Italian and a quarter Yugoslavian. My mom is Puerto Rican and my dad’s the other one. We used to live on Staten Island, but we moved here when I was three. I feel Californian.

My identity, it depends, like I guess it all depends on who I’m with or who I’m around. If I was around all White people, I would identify myself as being brown. I don’t
know. Actually, I would say I identify more with being more Puerto Rican than, I don’t
know, just because I am brown, like others wouldn’t see me as being White at all. So it’s
just kind of what I identified with throughout the years. When I’m with Puerto Ricans, I
feel probably different in some way, just because I am different in some way, but not, like
not a significant amount, it doesn’t change the way I feel around them or anything. So if
people ask me what I am, I say “I’m Puerto Rican.” Or normally I’d say I’m Puerto Rican
and Italian. But not Yugoslavian because everyone’s like “what the hell is Yugoslavia?”
And it’s right next to Italy, so…Yeah, I would say I’m mixed basically, or if I’m talking to
an Italian, I’d be like “I’m Italian and Puerto Rican.”

I’m not close to my extended family; we’re not close at all really. Because they all
live in Puerto Rico and I’ve only been there a few times. I love it there. And my dad’s
family, they’re just White, like they don’t identify with the culture or anything. My family
hasn’t really influenced my identity, because I’m not close with my family. I can relate
more to my family that’s Italian and Yugoslavian because they’re White and they speak
English and my mom’s side is Puerto Rican and they all speak Spanish, so I don’t know
what they’re talking about. And, I don’t know, I just feel like I could relate more with my
White side of my family. Because I can like talk to them and interact with them.

Hip Hapa

My name is Hip Hapa and I’m a senior at Oceanside High School. I used to run
cross country and I am really into music. This summer I am working as a counselor at a
camp for transracially adopted and mixed heritage youth. Next year I am going to a
community college and then I plan to transfer to a state school to study psychology.

What my mother brings to the table is African American and Native American,
and people don’t really like to count it, but I’m proud of it, Canadian. My grandmother
went up to Canada to escape the whole slavery thing, and then they came back down.
And my dad, he’s African American and Vietnamese. When people ask me what I am, well, before I used to really struggle with that question, because it was like I want to explain that I’m all of these different things, but then at the same time you don’t have time for that just in passing. But me, really, I just say I’m mixed.

It was weird. At first I didn’t realize I was mixed. It was more like there was something wrong with me, because, I don’t know, let me take off my hat. My hair is very not curly, so when my hair’s this short and it’s almost like straight, people ask me what’s wrong with my hair. And I didn’t have an answer. Because they assume that I’m Black. But obviously there’s something else in there, because—and then they start to look at the eyes. Most people have no idea that there’s Asian in here. But it was mainly like my hair and who I hung out with and how I talked. And then I’d ask my mom. And I can’t remember when, but all of a sudden I found out that my dad was Vietnamese, and it was like “whoa, I’m like more than one thing.” So, yeah, I don’t know when that happened, but it was more through people asking me why I looked and acted the way I did.

Developing my identity, well, it doesn’t stop really. Well, let me start with growing up and being born, there were so many different people that were raising me, as I say jokingly, I’ve got 50 moms and 100 aunts. And my godmother’s parents—they’re my guardians now, but they’re very people oriented. They’re always surrounded with people, and everybody’s different. So I see it as an ongoing thing, because we were surrounded by culture, especially I guess here in I guess California, there’s a lot of it. You’re always kind of changing who you are and who you’re hanging out with and who you’re talking to, I guess who your family is, so for me it’s all good.

My biological family, it was more—some of them are cool. But for the most part, they’re pretty much all of the irritating people in the outside world who are like “why do you dress this way?” It’s like, “why are you wearing Converse instead of Nike? Why are you listening to Pearl Jam instead of—just why are you different?” And they couldn’t get
that. We’ll see if they do now. But it’s just like the people I call my family are family
friends, close friends and they’re all different—my godparents, guardians, all the people I
know through them. Just people that I’ve created as my family. Obviously, since they’re
all okay with each other, and they’re all different, they’re more comfortable with the fact
that I’m this medley of whatever. My biological family on the other hand, especially not
being around for the process that goes on with the other people mentioned, they’re
just—I think for the large part they were uncomfortable with it, but they just didn’t get it.
So I pretty much always thought that there was something wrong with me. I tried to fix
the way I talked when I was in high school. I’m mixed because of my dad, and as far as
they’re concerned, I guess they would have preferred my mother would hook up with
some African American male and that I would be all Black. The influence of my biological
family, I’d say that it’s both negative and positive. Positive because of the fact that it was
negative. It made me stand up and say, “look, I’m not going to change myself for you.
I’m not going to do all this for you.” So it did for a long time make me question who I was.
But because I was questioned, it defined who I was. So I see it more positive than I do
negative.

If my dad could talk about his heritage, he would. His circumstance is that his
dad was a GI, and hooked up with one of the women there, and she wanted to keep my
dad, but her village basically ostracized her and cut her off from everything. And said if
you’re gonna keep this mixed kid, then we’re not gonna keep you. So she left him at an
orphanage. She went through the baby drop thing. So he has no idea who his family is,
and he’s not really inclined to find out who they are. But over the past few years, I’ve
kind of grown into, like my life’s goal is basically, if it comes down to going to Viet Nam,
like learning the language and kind of immersing myself there, then that’s what it will be.
Like one day it just dawned on me, “wait, there’s a whole group of people over there that
I’m related to and they have no idea I exist.” I was like, “let’s fix that.” And then a few
years later it dawned on me again, that like wait, yeah, there’s family over there, but then I realized, well, my dad has a dad. His family’s over here. So it was kind of—I just kind of want to find them and go from there.

I can tell you it’s more like 50 million different experiences that comprise one situation, like feeling like I’m letting down my family by being so many things. Or them feeling that because I’m something else that detracts from me. I don’t like to look at—I mean, if people like to look at themselves as parts, that’s cool, because that’s how they see themselves. I mean, as far as me, I’m one person who’s this and this and this. I’m not part this and part that and part that. So as far as my family is concerned, it’s like “no, look, I’m not less African American because I’m Vietnamese, just I’m more of me.” Then to get corny on top of all that, I’m 100% me.

I don’t want to paint the wrong picture. Being mixed is an experience that I would trade for nothing in the world, nothing! It’s like being as many different people you want, or blending them all into one thing: you. It’s like being a walking yin yang; without one part of you, the whole thing just doesn’t work. I believe it helps me be more open to other people and their experiences, because I know how much I value my own.

Kelley

My name is Kelley, I’m 16, and I’m a sophomore at Deer Valley High School. I like to play video games, really girly ones. I have a Playstation 3.

My mom is Chinese. My dad is White—he’s more French and British, in terms of his ancestry he comes more from Celtic tribes, I guess, a lot of Scottish too. I think I’ve always known that I am mixed. I just kind of grew up with it. Yeah, except I always felt more, I guess, White, because I kind of look more White than I do Asian. When I am around White relatives, I usually feel more Chinese, but when I am around Chinese people, I feel more White. We spend more time with my Asian family, just because they
live nearby. I think developing my identity is ongoing. I just kind of adjust to it. I really don’t know how to explain it any better. I kind of shuffle back and forth. Like sometimes, I’ve gone through phases where I’ve felt more in touch with my Chinese side and then vice versa. I’ve always felt that when people first meet me they always assume that I’m just White, so I’ve always not really liked that so much. Like if I were, if I looked exactly half Asian and White, I probably would have felt more comfortable with that.

With my Chinese family, I think there’s kind of this invisible rift between us. Because as a child I used to be closer with my Asian side, except it’s kind of grown more distant over the years. And I think mainly it’s because I don’t speak the language. I know some Chinese, except now it seems more imperative that I become fluent in the language, because my grandma on my Chinese side speaks completely in Chinese. She doesn’t know any English at all. Then all my uncles know mainly Chinese. And it’s just, you know, we can’t actually really talk or sit down and have a huge conversation, because we have that language barrier. So speaking Chinese, it would be so much more helpful. Well, I’ve always kind of felt a little bit isolated in that way. Because my mom tried to teach me and my brother Chinese when we were growing up. And we went to like Saturday schools for Chinese. And I even took a class at Diablo Valley College for Chinese. Because I was pretty much really trying to learn the language. But it’s been really difficult. I’ve been in fights with my mom about that, like “why didn’t you teach me Chinese sooner?” I think the fact that I’ve been exposed to really American culture has actually backfired on me and has made me feel like I really, you know, I’m more curious about my Chinese side than I am my White side.

People ask me a lot of questions about my Chinese heritage. I’ve always been able to tell people I’ve gone to China, because I went when I was 7. But I’ve always felt like that language was the hugest thing trying to overcome. And I can speak conversational Chinese, but I’m not fluent in it. And it’s always been that kind of barrier.
So I always find it hard to convince people that I am Chinese—not always, but sometimes, because I take on more of my dad’s side, my White side.

*The following is taken from Kelley’s writing activity, which she wrote following a trip to China during her summer break.*

The primary aspect related to my multiethnicity that concerned me most while I was in China was of course my physical appearance. Despite being half Chinese and half Caucasian, in terms of physical appearance I look, to most, predominantly White. And this feature, which we are consistently taught in school today should be irrelevant to the manner in which we treat people, I found to be the defining characteristic people treated me by. Although at times I found this fact useful, there were countless other times where I felt that it drew a line between the Chinese and myself. As much as I wanted to learn and become part of that part of my heritage there were many inevitable features which hindered or prevented this entirely. My appearance, the language barrier, and cultural difference, I felt were the main aspects. Many of the Chinese I met during my stay in Shanghai were very curious of me but also very shy. My Chinese relatives I was staying with in Shanghai always reminded me how happy and grateful they were for me to stay with them telling me that to the Chinese it was an honor and a show of higher social status to know a foreigner, especially a European or American. I'm positive that if I appeared physically more Chinese or a more balanced mix between Chinese and Caucasian my experiences with people in China would have been incredibly different.

Nowadays, with [American presidential] elections only a month away, the political debates are a constant topic in my public speaking class and one little detail has been bothering me now that I've been thinking a lot about multiethnicity. That is, Barack Obama is consistently being assumed by my peers and politicians alike as being, simply, Black. Whether for simplicity sake or out of obliviousness, people have been calling Obama “the Black democratic candidate.” Most people don't recognize him as being
multiethnic, and I believe that is in large part due to the fact that he physically appears more Black than White. I guess the point I’m trying to make is that appearance is, whether we like it or not, a huge determining factor in the way we are treated. And after my experience in China I feel that physical appearance has a much bigger effect on how we are treated than I had previously thought and in the future multiethnicity will most certainly have an interesting role when it boils down to physical appearance.

Josh

My name is Josh, I am 18, and I’m a senior at Deer Valley High School. I play water polo and I swim. Next year I am going to a community college, but I am also interested in going to art school.

I’m part French, I’m part Russian, part Jewish, and part Persian. My dad’s side is the Jewish part. And my mom’s side is more of the Russian, French and Persian. My parents are both Jewish, but like my dad’s been in the Middle East like his whole life. My parents both grew up in Israel, but their family, or my mom’s family didn’t grow up there. My grandfather on my mom’s side is Persian. My grandmother, she’s French and Russian. My mom speaks French and Farsi and English and Hebrew. My grandma speaks Russian, but she didn’t really pass that on to my mom. And also my grandfather speaks Farsi.

If people ask me, I just basically say that I’m French, Persian, Jewish and Russian. But on forms, I just mark Other, but if I can’t, I just put White or something, I don’t know. My dad he’s really dark, and my mom is extremely white. It’s crazy. I don’t think I’m as much into the White culture as into Middle Eastern and Russian and stuff like that. I think it would take a lot more generations in order for me to be in—but I don’t even think it’s going to be me. I think it’s probably going to be my kids’ kids who are going to be more White. Because I’m the first generation here. It’s like my parents try to
restrict us from being more White. An example of it is that we don’t go as much out to
restaurants. It’s not because we can’t afford it or something, just we don’t do it. So I feel
that my values would be much different if they let me become more White, I guess.

I’ve always known that I was mixed. It’s kind of been like my parents just
basically told me I am. So we would like, for example, like my mom she makes Persian
food. My dad makes, I don’t even know what it is, it’s like Middle Eastern food, I guess,
and my grandma would make Russian food. And it’s just basically like we’re told that
we’re multiethnic. It’s just kind of engrained into me. Yeah, it’s just basically who I am.

My dad, his family is really Orthodox, and they’re really into conserving the
traditions, heritage. My mom, I wouldn’t say that she’s traditional. Because, I guess like
her part of the family isn’t exposed to that as much. I go to Israel every year. Over there
it’s like I feel more comfortable, just because everyone kind of looks the same, I guess,
like skin color and what people eat and stuff like that. I think it just makes you feel more
comfortable around people that are like you. My parents first sent me to Israel when I
was 5, I went there alone. I don’t know how I did it, but they sent me alone just because
they thought, why don’t we just let me find, like just have the influence from over there.
Whenever I’m there, I stay with my family. I’m the first generation here. So everyone, I
literally mean everyone, does not live in the United States. Basically, my family here is
like close friends, family friends, that’s my family.

My first language was Hebrew. So that’s a key right there. Actually, in
kindergarten I remember having a really hard time in English, because this was also in
preschool, because I actually didn’t know English. I went to school and I was clueless of
what—I didn’t even know the alphabet, nothing. My parents thought, “yep, he’ll learn it in
school.” But I think the fact I’m in resource is because I learned Hebrew first. Because
my grammar is really bad. Well, I have learning disabilities, but I feel that the fact I
learned Hebrew, I feel that that’s a factor of it also. I mean, if I learned English earlier, my grammar would be better.

My dad’s very dark. But if I’m only with my mom, it’s kind of—I don’t really look as much like my mom. So it’s kind of weird when I’m alone with her. But I remember people, just like whenever my dad would pick me up from school, people would just look at him, like he’s so dark. Out of all my siblings, I’m the only one with like tan kind of skin. They’re white, they’re all white.

Most of my friends aren’t Jewish. Because I can’t really make that many friends in Israel or there’s not that many Jews here. All of my friends, everyone knows I’m Jewish, they know I’m Persian, but they don’t know I’m like part Russian and French and stuff. But I don’t think they really influenced me that much. I mean, in a way they did, because like I’m with them all the time. But I don’t really like having that many people come over to my house, just because like my parents they speak Hebrew to me. And it’s just kind of weird to have people over and them hearing Hebrew. And it’s just like — it’s just extremely weird, yeah. I have a lot of Persian friends, also. And they’ll be like, “so Josh, do you speak Farsi?” And I tell them, “no, I don’t know how to speak Farsi.” And they’ll be like “oh, well, that’s a shame.” I don’t feel like they think that I’m Persian at all just because I don’t know their language. It’s kind of annoying.

Jordan

My name is Jordan, I’m 16, and I’m a junior at Deer Valley High School. I like listening to music and playing music—the piano, guitar, ukulele, accordion.

I’m half Chinese and half White. My mom is Chinese. My dad is White—just a mix of different types of White. I’ve always thought I was a bit more Chinese, though. But that’s just because all my Chinese relatives live in this area, and all my White relatives live on the other side of the country, in the Midwest. So I’m exposed to Chinese culture a
lot more. My parents never really sat me down and announced that I’m mixed to me. I kind of just always knew it. I think my family, the influence of my family has made me feel more Chinese, just because they’re always around, the Chinese side. I have some cousins who are full Chinese. I feel like—at least with some of them, I feel the same level of Chinese. But with others, I don’t. Because they’re like really, really Chinese, traditional. I know they’re definitely aware that I’m half White, but I don’t know if they identify me as being half White. I don’t really know.

I think my identity shifts. I think when I go to my White relatives in the Midwest, I usually feel more Chinese. And then when I go to like big Chinese gatherings here, I always feel more White than everyone there. I had this one experience in Chinatown when I went to buy like some crab. Chinese have crab for the New Year. And nobody really—I didn’t identify with anyone there. Mostly because, even though I speak a little bit of Chinese, enough to get around, they all kind of looked at me funny. And it’s the same thing whenever I go to White places. I don’t feel as in touch with the exact ethnic groups of my White side. When people ask me what I am, I say I’m half Chinese and half White. Because I don’t honestly know all the different types of White that I am. And we don’t just study White in World History. So I always kind of—even though I can relate to the culture, it’s like I feel like an outsider still on either side.

When I meet Chinese people for the first time, they always ask if I’m Chinese, and I say half. And then they’re like, “oh, so do you speak Chinese and have you been to China and stuff?” And I’m like “no, not really.” I think a lot of times it’s curiosity, but I’ve noticed a few times where it seemed almost like they wanted to like assert their dominance, their cultural dominance. But I don’t know. I think it’s just being around all the Chinese people. You kind of have to adapt to be Chinese, so you don’t get ostracized for not knowing anything. It’s just like you never see a bunch of White people mingling with crowds in Chinatown.
I know a lot of people say “you get the best of both worlds.” Yeah, I think it’s really true, though. Because like I can more comfortably go into like a Chinese restaurant, like a real Chinese restaurant or in Chinatown, more comfortably than like a White person. But I can also—I can’t really think of like a White thing to do. But I think maybe an advantage is just, I think it’s fun to be half and half.

Anne

My name is Anne and I’m a junior at Deer Valley High School. I’m on the varsity basketball team and I want to play basketball in college. Someday I want to be a high school teacher.

I’m half Caucasian, my dad’s Caucasian and my mom’s Japanese, 100% full blood Japanese. I’m not really sure when I realized that I was multiethnic, but I know recently, as I got older, I noticed that I was multiethnic because when I would go to my mom’s side of the family, they live in Southern California, it’s very different. Both her parents speak Japanese. They speak English, too, but the majority of the time they’re speaking in Japanese to my mom and then she’s translating to us. And we always eat Japanese traditional food when I go to see my grandparents, so it’s more of a cultural experience when I go see them. And then my dad’s parents live locally, so we usually go see them every weekend. They’re just a typical, you know, Caucasian family. We watch the football game and get all rowdy. So I just notice the difference, you know, between going to my dad’s parents and my mom’s parents, just the cultural thing was totally different. And I didn’t really notice until I got older and you pay attention to that kind of stuff. And I just think I’ve become more conscious of how my grandparents on my mom’s side react, like when they get bummed out if me and my brother don’t visit them as much as we visit my dad’s side because they feel like “oh, it’s that cultural gap” or “we’re not Americanized” or “maybe they don’t think we’re fun.” And that really bothers me,
because I do love my grandparents, they are good people. So once I realized that, it really bothered me. I don’t want my grandparents thinking I don’t love them or I don’t like them or I like my dad’s parents better.

When my mom used to come pick me up, people would always think I was adopted, they could tell I was either adopted or multiethnic, not that it made me feel uncomfortable or anything, but people definitely did always ask. But when we went on vacation, especially like when I go to Hawaii, people always ask me if I’m a Native and stuff. You know, so I get that a lot, and if I’m with my dad, people go, “oh, well you’re really dark.” And my dad’s Dutch and German, his family’s very fair skinned, so there is certainly a difference. I’m definitely a mix of both of their features, and you can’t really say “you look like your dad” or “you look like your mom.” People definitely make comments like, “oh, you don’t look Japanese” or “I would never tell you’re Asian” or “you don’t speak Japanese, do you?” or “do your parents speak Japanese?” and “you don’t bring Japanese food to school, you don’t eat it at home.” It’s like they’re questioning you, like they’re trying to figure it out, you know, are you for real? And it’s it doesn’t really matter to me, you know, like I am.

If I had to describe myself, I would say I’m a mixed race child, but it’s not like the main defining moment or defining aspect of who I am. I would say I’m a girl, I’m a student, or I’m a teenager, something like that. And I think part of that is just because of the way my parents have, you know, brought me up. They’ve brought up both races, you know, so it hasn’t really been an issue of, you know, “am I White, am I Japanese?”

I’m dating a Black and Hispanic boy right now. He’s very confident and knows everything about who he is; he loves to pull the fact that he’s Black, but then he also loves to pull, you know, “my mom’s Hispanic, and I have that side in me.” And it’s kind of like it’s inspiring, because the multiethnic kids that I knew before, they’re just kind of like trying to be American, you know, they’re trying to fit in. That’s kind of how I felt a little bit.
But as I’ve gotten older, I’ve noticed that it’s not always about just fitting in and feeling comfortable. And he’s kind of showed me that it’s okay to be who you are. You know, it’s okay to have two sides and not be the norm and not be the kind of girl that is half Asian and half White but desperately trying to be White.

Hannah

I’m Hannah and I’m a junior at Deer Valley High School. My mom’s Japanese, so I’m half, and then my dad is purely White. He’s like Austrian and Italian and English and all of that stuff—I don’t even know all of them. I play soccer for Deer Valley and for a traveling team. I pretty much play year round. I’m pretty soccer based; it’s all I have time for. I plan to apply to universities in California, or at least on the West Coast.

I guess when I was really little I had no idea really that I was multiethnic, because you don’t think about those kinds of things when you’re little, you just kind of go run around everywhere. I don’t think there was a defining moment when I realized I was multiethnic, I just kind of knew after a while, I guess. It doesn’t really make a difference to me, though. I mean, I can look at my grandma, my mom’s mom, and she’s this small little plump Japanese woman and, I mean, I guess looking at her compared to my dad’s side grandma there’s a huge difference, so I can see how I’m at least half. But there wasn’t like a defining moment for me. When I have family reunions with the Asian side of my family, I don’t feel that out of place because a lot of my cousins are half White too, or actually, they’re half Indian, or Native American, I guess. So I don’t feel that out of place. I mean, there’s my really older like aunts and uncles, and yeah, I can see how I am whiter than they are, but that’s it.

My family just kind of raised me to be whoever I want to be and who I am. So I mean, we have some Asian foods that we sometimes eat, but we’re not really like “you have to do awesome in school because you’re Asian.” That’s a typical stereotype of
being really smart. They want me to do the best I can and so I don’t think they put too much pressure on me from like my Asian heritage. And then, I don’t know, they just kinda support me in whatever I do. I am really secure with who I am.

People ask me what I am, people think I’m from the Philippines. I’ve gotten Hawaiian, I’ve gotten Mexican, Spanish, Italian, I’ve gotten lots of things. I’m just like “no, I’m just half Japanese and half White.” My friends know that I’m pretty, like mentally I’m pretty White. They don’t think I’m going to have sushi every night or something like that. I mean, sometimes people make jokes like “well, you’re Asian so you’ll do really well” but it doesn’t bother me. I think, usually if people say “White” they usually mean wholly White, and so I differentiate myself that way, just because I feel like if someone were to ask me what I am, I’d probably say half Asian/half White.

There are a lot of Asian kids that go to Deer Valley. So, and I’m not as Asian as they are, so I’m like right in the middle, just because, I mean, I guess I don’t look completely Asian. Like you can tell when people are full. And I’m Japanese, and a lot of people I know are Chinese. So, that’s a little different for me. I mean, this is my opinion and like what I see, but a lot of Asian people tend to be friends for whatever reason, I have no idea. But, I don’t know, not all of them do. But you do tend to see them in groups, but I don’t know a lot of them that well.

I have a few half Asian friends actually, but I don’t know, everyone’s kind of treated the same in our group of friends. I mean I have friends that ask me things about Japanese stuff, but I don’t even know the answers. It’s just kinda like “oh, I guess I should know that, but...” Like they usually don’t ask a whole bunch of questions, but they usually ask if I’ve been to Japan or if I speak Japanese. I’ve had some people ask me questions like “well, what do you think, ‘cause you’re Japanese?” And I’m like “well, I don’t really know.” “Cause I don’t know my heritage that well. My brother’s going back to Japan to study ‘cause he’s doing bio-technology for college. So I think that’s kind of cool
that he’s going to go over there and he’s learning how to speak Japanese. But I don’t have really an interest to learn the language just because I feel like I’d have a really, really hard time with that. But, I don’t know, some day I want to go back there just to see what it’s like and see how much different everything is than what I know it to be.

I don’t think of myself as being multiethnic, I think of myself as just, as a person. I don’t separate myself from everyone else just for that reason, I just think of myself as me. All of my friends that I’ve made accept me for who I am, and they don’t make me feel any different.

Marie

My name is Marie, I’m 17, and I am a senior at Deer Valley High School. I play basketball for Deer Valley and for a traveling team, which takes up most of my time. Next year I am going to college to study architecture.

My mom is from the Cape Verde, well, she’s from Rhode Island, but her family’s from the Cape Verde Islands, just off the coast of Africa. And my dad is from Wales and was raised in the US. My mom grew up in Rhode Island. It’s better now than it was then. I think she has a scar on her back shoulder blade of a brick that a KKK member threw at her. And when she was riding her bike home from school, and they had—they were like marching the streets or something. So she had very horrible experiences, and she’s had crosses burned in her front lawn and bricks thrown through windows. And then my dad grew up, I don’t know, the stereotypical White boy family, almost like White trash, actually. To be honest with you, the dad walked out and he raised the kids and like, not very good. So my mom tells me all this about Black people, and then my dad tells me all this about White people. So I guess they don’t really like ever mix the two. I only get like one side from each and then I’m left for interpreting what I want.
I can’t remember when I first become aware of my mixed race identity. I don’t even know to be honest with you, but I had a dream last week, like less of a dream and more of remembering a memory of when I went to a psychologist when I was really young. And I just remember the last day I got pizza, and then I asked my dad, I was like, “um, did I actually go to therapy?” And he was like, “yeah, because you were confused about if you were White or Black.” And that was in elementary school. But I can’t really remember any of that. So I’m guessing it started somewhere around then. But then I remember, you know, just going to junior high you always have to fill out those bubble—I don’t even know what the questions are anymore, but there’s always the bubble, like what’s your background.

I think I understand that I’m equally Black as I am White, and I don’t see it as half and half. I see it as I’m a Black person, but I’m also a White person. But other people see me as half and half. And I think a lot of people in [city name], when they see half and half, they just say that you’re White, because for some reason they think White overshadows any other race that you have. And especially because I’m fair skinned in the winter, in the summer I turn dark. I think people would identify me as White, because they go off of the color of your skin, and I look White. A lot of people know that I’m half Black, because my mom’s like really known. It really doesn’t come up as much as it did in junior high. I think people just think it’s cool that—I mean, people play it up, too, which is kind of just as bad as playing it down, in my opinion. They’re always like, “oh, well, I have a Black friend,” like it matters, I don’t know. But then if I say something, they’ll be like “stop pulling out the Black card.” I get that a lot, and I get really frustrated.

I think I’m a very independent person, and I do have a very good idea of who I am. And it seems like things have kind of stalled when it comes to me trying to identify myself, just because at this point in my life I don’t feel as though I need to identify myself. I mean, I needed to with SATs and I needed to with college applications, but as
of right now, I don’t really need to. So it’s not really having a huge weight on my life like it did in junior high, where for some reason it really mattered to people what I was. They always brought it up somehow, subtly.

Colleges are really trying to boost their like diversity rates. And so like that kind of does play an advantage to me, I feel. But I just wish there weren’t any advantages or disadvantages. I don’t want either. I just want everyone to kind of see that like, like no difference. But I can understand people wanting people to recognize that they’re Chinese, you know, like half Chinese or half Japanese, because they want people to understand that that’s also a part of them. So I can understand people who want that. I’m just personally not that type of person. I don’t want to be recognized as any sort of race, and you can just know my personality. Because you can—you can never really—people say like, “oh, you’re half Black and half White, that’s really cool. I don’t see you as that.” But the second they find out that I have Black in me, there’s automatically something changed, even for the better. And they’re like, “oh wow, I never would have noticed that.” Or like, “oh, she’s Black.” Like there’s always a change. And I wish that there weren’t that change, like good or bad. And if it just was like a name, because you don’t—you know, everyone has different names, but you don’t get excited.

Discussion

The foregoing profiles allow for the proper contextualization of participants’ K-12 schooling experiences within the broad spectrum of influences on their racial and ethnic identity development. Here, I provide a brief preliminary analysis of the profiles that will assist in the interpretation of participants’ schooling experiences, as presented in the following chapters.
As discussed in Chapter Three, Lopez (2001, 2004), Renn (2004a, 2008), and Root (1998, 2003) identified various factors influencing the identity construction of multiethnic individuals. Renn (2008), for example, pointed out that physical appearance, cultural knowledge, and peer culture are factors permeating the literature related to multiethnic identities, and Root (2003) stated that “virtually all researchers of biracial identity find it important to discuss the influences of phenotype, environment, family environment, and racial awareness” (p. 117). In the foregoing profiles, we clearly see the influence of, among other factors, physical appearance, cultural knowledge, peer culture, family environment, cultural and familial ties, and the perceptions of others on participants’ racial and ethnic identity development. Although all participants discussed several of these factors as having an influence on their racial and ethnic identities, their experiences related to these factors and the precise influence of them on their identities vary considerably. Take, for example, Amaya and Andrea’s discussion of their physical appearance. As Amaya explained, her appearance as a Black woman means that she could “completely deny the Indian side of the family,” yet she chooses not to. Amaya acknowledges without hesitation her African American and Indian heritages, but she strongly identifies as a Black woman. Conversely, Andrea feels like her Whiteness “rules” because she doesn’t look Iranian, and she often feels that she has to “prove” that she is Iranian and is left never feeling “Iranian enough.” Although both Amaya and Andrea have had experiences stemming from a physical appearance more often associated with one of their heritages, how they experience the perceptions of others and the influence of these experiences on their identities differ significantly.
We also perceive the significant influence that family environment has on participants’ identities and experiences (Basu, 2007; Kich, 1992; Lopez, 2004; Renn, 2004a; Root, 2003). David, for example, identifies strongly with his Portuguese heritage in large part because he is surrounded by his Portuguese family members. Anthony, on the other hand, does not feel a strong sense of connection to either the Filipino or Indian culture, stating that his family is “pretty acclimated into America.” As we have seen, many participants described their family members as purveyors of cultural knowledge (often in the form of language and food), and thus, being raised by one parent or spending more time with one side of one’s family seemed to significantly shape participants’ identities and experiences (see, for example, Amaya, Christina, Dana, Frank, and Raya’s profiles). This finding is hardly surprising given the emphasis placed on cultural exposure, knowledge, and participation by, among others, Lopez (2004), Renn (2004a, 2008), and Wallace (2004a).

Given the disparate experiences of participants related to the various factors influencing their identities, it is also not surprising that their expressed identities are notably dissimilar. Consistent with the findings of, for example, Basu (2007), Lopez (2004), and Renn (2004a), and immediately evident from the profiles, is the fact that there is neither a single “multiethnic experience” nor a similar identity embraced by all research participants. Jasmine, for example, identifies much more with her Arabic heritage than her Mexican heritage or as multiethnic, Hip Hapa identifies strongly as mixed, and for Anne, being multiethnic is not a central aspect of her identity and she does not readily identify herself according to race.
In accordance with the findings of, for example, Basu (2004), Lopez (2004), and Root (1998), a large percentage of the participants also discussed a shifting and contextual sense of identity. Renee, for example, discussed how her identity shifts depending on which side of her family she is around. Whereas Renee identifies more strongly with her Mexican heritage when she is with her Mexican side of the family and her Persian heritage when she is with her Persian side of the family, the opposite is true for Jordan. That is, Jordan also discussed how his sense of identity shifts according to context, but he feels “more Chinese” around his White relatives and “more White” when he is with his Chinese relatives. Indeed, participants expressed various “patterns” of racial and ethnic identity, differing not only from each other but for themselves according to different influences and contexts. Marie, for instance, despite saying “I think I understand that I’m equally Black as I am White, and I don’t see it as half and half. I see it as I’m a Black person, but I’m also a White person,” also described situations in which she has identified more strongly with either her Black or her White heritage. The preceding lends support to Basu’s findings that “identity is not a constant state that, once achieved, will not fluctuate” and that “biracial individuals may show a great deal of variation in the identification choices that they make” (2004, p. 172).

Nearly every participant discussed his or her racial and ethnic identity development as an ongoing and incomplete process and, as Basu (2004, 2007), Lopez (2004), Renn (1999, 2004a), Root (1996a, 1998), and Wijeyesinghe (2001) also found, not one characterized by distinct developmental stages. Admittedly, several participants discussed a stage in which they were young and not aware of racial and ethnic differences. Hannah, for example, acknowledges that she did not think much about her
racial and ethnic identity as a young child, stating “I guess when I was really little I had no idea really that I was multiethnic, because you don’t think about those kinds of things when you’re little, you just kind of go run around everywhere.” However, once participants develop a level of racial and ethnic awareness, their processes of identity development appear to be continuous and continuing. Certain participants did, though, describe specific periods in which they felt their identities developed more quickly. Cara, for example, explained that middle school was “a huge developmental period” for her. She said, “I mean especially in that age range, like especially 5th through 8th grade, it’s such a huge developmental period. And so it’s a lot of striving to be different, you know, and being an individual.” However, Cara also acknowledged that her identity development is an ongoing process. Moreover, most of the “stages” or “developmental periods” in their racial and ethnic identity development that participants discussed related not to phases in their cognitive or emotional development, but to changes in environment or context. In fact, as discussed in Chapter Seven, and consistent with the findings of Basu (2007) and Lopez (2004), among others, the contexts in which participants live and attend school, and specifically the racial and ethnic diversity (or lack thereof) of these contexts, emerged as a central factor influencing the development of their racial and ethnic identities and was discussed at length by almost all of the participants.

Again, my purpose here is not to thoroughly interrogate each individual profile but to provide the backdrop against which the data in the following three chapters is best understood. Regardless of the notable differences between participants’ identities and experiences, as we will see, many of their reflections on and perceptions of their K-12 schooling are strikingly similar. Nevertheless, as with the other factors influencing their
identities, participants’ K-12 schooling experiences, despite often times being very similar in nature, influence their identities in quite distinct ways.
CHAPTER SIX: PARTICIPANTS’ EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE FORMAL ASPECTS OF K-12 SCHOOLING

This and the following chapter provide a summary and analysis of the data directly related to participants’ past K-12 schooling experiences. As discussed in Chapter Four, I divided the data related to participants’ past K-12 schooling experiences into two broad categories: the formal/deliberate aspects of schooling and the informal/social aspects of schooling. The formal/deliberate aspects of schooling are those that teachers and administrators can and do influence and the informal/social aspects are those over which teachers and administrators generally have little influence.

In this chapter, I focus specifically on the data related to the formal aspects of participants’ K-12 schooling. These data are organized according to the following topics: the documentation of racial and ethnic identities; race and ethnicity-based student organizations; relationships and interactions with teachers and administrators; specific lessons, projects and classroom activities; (not) learning about multiethnicity; (not) learning about race and ethnicity; and diversity education initiatives.¹¹

As we will see, only two of the twenty-three participants explicitly linked their experiences of the formal aspects of K-12 schooling to their multiethnic identity development, and, in fact, many of the participants were quite adamant that these aspects

¹¹ Nearly every participant has been involved in school sports teams or school-sponsored extra-curricular activities including baseball, band, cheerleading, school musicals, basketball, school newspapers and magazines, track and field, swimming, school radio, soccer, and school leadership. Beyond merely stating their involvement in such activities, they were mostly discussed in the context of interactions with teammates or others involved in the same activity. Thus, data related to such activities are included in the following chapter which focuses on the informal/social aspects of schooling. Several participants also mentioned textbooks and specific readings. The mention of these texts, however, was typically embedded in discussions of other topics such as classroom discussion, relationships and interactions with teachers, and lessons about race and ethnicity. Data related to textbooks and specific readings, therefore, are included in other sections of this chapter and are not examined separately.
of schooling had not influenced the development of their racial and ethnic identities. Moreover, participants frequently appeared disinclined to discuss the formal aspects of schooling and often only did so in response to direct questions. Indeed, regardless of what questions I asked, how I asked them, or how many times I asked them, discussions of the formal aspects of schooling did not seem to capture the attention of most participants. Nevertheless, despite participants’ reticence, they depicted their schools as sites in which racial and ethnic categories and the boundaries between them are reinforced; in which race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity are seldom, if ever, discussed in detail; in which participants are often confronted with instances in which they must chose to identify with or represent one of their racial and ethnic heritage groups; and in which multiethnic students may feel little connection to the curriculum. In the data discussed in this chapter, we also find numerous examples of participants being singled out and being made to feel different from their classmates. Given these findings, as discussed in later chapters, even if the influence is indirect and not recognized by participants, that the formal aspects of K-12 schooling have influenced participants’ racial and ethnic identity development cannot be denied.

**Documentation of Racial and Ethnic Identities**

In 2000, the US Census first allowed individuals to mark more than one racial category, and this change was expected to appear on school forms that collect racial and ethnic data about students by 2004 (Zehr, 2000). Study participants, however, have encountered numerous forms, applications, and exams in school that had not implemented this modification. Those requests for racial or ethnic identification most discussed by participants appear on standardized tests such as the California Standardized
Testing and Reporting (STAR) exam, Advanced Placement exams, the ACT test, the PSAT, and the SAT. Largely consistent with the findings of Lopez (2004), participants discussed such data collection in terms of the responses they supply, the perceived use of the collected data, their strategic responses which may help them get scholarships or gain admissions to college, the responses others feel they should provide, and their feelings about the lack of options which would allow them to identify accurately or having to mark Other. The data do not, however, support Wardle’s assertion that “One of the most difficult school-related activities for multiracial and multiethnic children is filling out official school forms” (2000b, p. 14).

A recurring theme in the interviews was participants’ concern about how to represent themselves accurately on such forms. Jordan, for example, realized that he had misidentified himself as “Other Asian” in response to questions about his racial heritage: “No one ever told me how to do it, so I just put Other Asian, because I saw Other in it, so I thought it applied to me.” Kelley, on the other hand, always marked White, because that’s what she thought she was supposed to do. She said, “I would always put White. I always wanted to put Asian. And I did it a couple of times. But then I was always told that it’s whatever your father is that counts.” Other participants, such as Renee, Frank, Jasmine, and Jen discussed their decision to answer such questions strategically based on their assumptions about how such data are used, and, in particular, how they are used in the college admissions process. Rene, for example, said “[I mark] Mexican. Yeah, just because that will work more towards my advantage more than Iranian.”

Hip Hapa takes a slightly more defiant approach to filling out such forms and explained that he typically declines to respond to these questions before adding “but their
descriptions are so—they’re so limited.” Dana, on the other hand, defied the instructions to “check one” box for her Advanced Placement English exam but then chose to respond strategically on the PSAT because she thought it might help her get into college. Amaya stands apart from the other participants in her perceptions of such forms in that she interprets not identifying accurately as an act of discrimination against one of her heritages. As she explained, “I always check Other. I never, ever discriminate one side. I’ll put Other and I’ll put that I’m African American and I’m Indian.”

Several of the participants discussed other people’s opinions of what responses they should give on such forms. Both Andrea and Anthony, for example, provided responses to data requests that their parents did not agree with or were surprised by. When Anthony marked Other his dad questioned why he did not mark Asian, and when Andrea marked Other her mom “looked at [her] and said ‘Andrea, next time just fill in White.’” Much more surprisingly, Marie had teachers who encouraged her to mark White despite the fact that she identified more as Black at the time. She said, “A lot of my teachers would also say ‘just pick White,’ which seemed odd. Because I think when I was younger, I identified myself more as Black.” These examples point to clear differences between how Anthony, Andrea, and Marie identify and how they are identified by others (and even by their parents). In other words, explicit questions about their racial heritage led to realizations of the differences between their internal sense of identity and the identities applied to them by others (Jenkins, 2003).

For the most part, it appears that participants’ racial and ethnic identities and ideas about how racial and ethnic data are used (or, in Kelley’s case, notions about “what counts” as your official race or ethnicity) shape their responses and not that the response
options or experiences of filling out such forms shape their racial and ethnic identities. Nevertheless, for Jen, such forms first brought to her attention the fact that she is multiethnic: “I first realized I was multiethnic like in second grade, when we were doing the STAR testing, you had to do the bubble and the answer.” While this statement indicates a revelation about her multiethnic identity in terms of not fitting neatly into a single racial or ethnic category, it does not appear that this revelation in second grade had a significant influence on her sense of identity as a multiethnic individual, and what that identity means to her, either then or now. In fact, Jen discussed not placing much importance on such forms and described how she now responds to racial and ethnic data collection questions strategically based on her perceptions of how the data are used.

Again, participants’ approaches to and feelings about racial and ethnic data collection forms differ significantly. We can, though, see that such forms are often viewed by participants as limited and limiting and few feel that they allow for accurate self representation. It is not surprising, then, that participants generally placed little importance on these forms and often chose to respond in ways that they deemed strategic. As discussed later in this chapter, however, the forms used to collect racial and ethnic data from students comprise one of many examples of the ways in which schools reinforce racial and ethnic categories and the boundaries constructed between them.

**Race and Ethnicity-Based Student Organizations**

Many of the schools that participants have attended have race and ethnicity-based student organizations such as Black student unions, Persian student clubs, Hispanic student groups, and so forth. With the exception of Cara, whose school has a multiethnic affinity club of which she is a co-president, participants’ involvement in these
organizations was quite minimal. Particularly during discussions about race and ethnicity-based student organizations, issues of phenotype, questioning, testing, cultural knowledge and legitimacy, and the perceptions of others—in other words, issues related to participants’ reflected appraisals (Cooley, 1902; Khanna, 2004; Tatum, 1997)—emerged.

In their discussions of such organizations, Marie, Mialany, Renee, and Josh, for example, expressed concerns about not being viewed as “authentic” members of their various heritage groups by other members (Root, 1998). Marie and Mialany have concerns about the possibility of not being perceived as “Black enough” by their peers, and as a result of this possibility, would not (Marie) or did not (Mialany) join a Black student group. At no point in their interviews, though, did either Marie or Mialany refer to themselves as not “Black enough.” Rather, Marie sees herself as Black and White, saying “I think I understand that I’m equally Black as I am White, and I don’t see it as half and half. I see it as I’m a Black person, but I’m also a White person,” and Mialany repeatedly referred to herself as mixed. We may wonder, however, what the effect, over time, of having one’s racial or ethnic “legitimacy” called into question has on one’s sense of identity and racial or ethnic group membership. Indeed, when we look from a broader perspective at the data from their interviews, there can be no doubt that Marie and Mialany’s experiences of having their identities called into question by others has influenced their racial and ethnic identities and how they think about these identities.

Neither Josh nor Renee, on the other hand, seemed particularly bothered about the possibility of not being accepted members of Persian and Mexican organizations, respectively. In fact, when Renee and Josh discussed these issues and their reasons for
not participating in such organizations, they did so rather unemotionally. Renee, for example, responded to comments like “oh, then you’re not full Mexican” or “you’re not real Mexican” with “okay, whatever.” Likewise, Josh simply thinks it is “interesting” that the other Persians see him as “nothing.” Nevertheless, all four participants (Josh, Renee, Marie, and Mialany) appeared disinclined to put themselves in situations in which their own sense of racial or ethnic identity might be called into question or challenged by others or in which they might be made to feel as if they do not belong.

Interest in a multiethnic student group was expressed by several students including Christina and Kendra. For both of them, a lack of time has prevented them from joining race and ethnicity-based student organizations, yet both reflected Christina’s preference: “even if all my friends joined the Black student union group, I would join the mixed one, because that’s what I am.” Josh and Kelley, both of whom attend Deer Valley, expressed their interest in joining a multiethnic student union and indicated that they had already thought about starting such an organization. The idea of starting a multiethnic student organization was also discussed at the Pine Mountains focus group. Although the focus group participants expressed general interest in this idea, Renee wondered what the members of a multiethnic student organization would do together. She asked, “What do you talk about, though? What would you talk about? Like that’s what—I don’t think anybody does [start a multiethnic student organization] because they’re like ‘What do you talk about?’”

In discussions of multiethnic student organizations, Jill expressed feelings quite different from the other participants: she would rather have a truly diverse and integrated student body than one divided into separate groups of students according to their race or
ethnicity. In fact, Jill transferred from Green Meadows High School to Parkside High School because she wanted to attend a more diverse school. She said, “I think the student union itself should be diverse….That’s why I went to Parkside High from Green Meadows. I was like, ‘oh yeah, such a diverse school.’” Jill went on to say, though, that when she arrived at Parkside she thought “this is the most segregated place I’ve ever been.” It is important to note, however, that Jill is a member of iPride and works for iPride’s FUSION Program (a summer program for mixed race and transracially adopted youth). We can conclude, then, that Jill does not oppose the idea of multiethnic organizations, but rather the segregation that occurs in her school—segregation that she believes might be exacerbated by additional race and ethnicity-based student organizations.

Mialany attributes the general lack of multiethnic student organizations to the fact that “a lot of people don’t want to fess up that they are mixed” because they “don’t want to have to deal with the problems.” She said:

A lot of people don’t want to fess up that they are mixed—they don’t want to be a part of it, because they don’t want to have to deal with the problems. Like other people, they’ll be like, “oh, those are the confused people. They don’t know what they’re talking about. They don’t know who they are.”

Mialany feels that joining a multiethnic student group at her school would cause social problems and she believes that many prefer to keep their multiethnic identity private. However, she, like Jill, is a member of iPride and works for iPride’s FUSION Program. This suggests that she would be interested in joining a multiethnic student group at her school if she did not perceive problems associated with membership in one. In other words, Jill and Mialany not only perceive the need for organizations for multiethnic
individuals (and especially youth), but are members of one; yet neither thinks that their school, at present, is an appropriate context for such an organization.

Of the 23 students interviewed, only Cara attended a school with a multiracial student affinity club (named Hapa Club), membership to which was open to all students. Cara was a co-president of Hapa Club and she discussed the club’s purposes and activities at length throughout her interview. Moreover, when I asked Cara about her multiethnic identity construction, much of her response included a discussion of Hapa Club, and, as evidenced in the following excerpt, Cara explicitly linked her experiences with Hapa Club to her multiethnic identity formation.

[Joining Hapa Club] was the first time I really thought about—or the first time I sort of found out that there was an outlet, or that it was sort of a main part of someone’s identity that they would revolve around, you know?...I think for me [my identity development] is definitely a process, but I feel like I actually am getting sort of—because at first, especially like my freshman year, [I was] just sort of learning about the whole [multiethnic] community. Because it’s a very silent sort of underground community for sure. And you have to go looking for the information and looking for the resources. I definitely found that the hard way, like as a leader [of Hapa Club] looking for issues to talk about and things like that. But I think that once you do establish how you relate to these other people, what you have in common and what you don’t have in common, it becomes a lot easier to sort of begin to form your identity. And I feel like I’m getting to that place where I can sort of start to be like “this is who I am, this is who I’m not.”

Although Cara views her multiethnic identity development as an ongoing process, she feels that the club, by exposing her to new ideas, information, and conversations, has influenced this process. She also feels that the club is important for other students in a society in which “race is an emphasized component of identity.” Nevertheless, Cara has difficulty finding relevant and relatable information and activities to bring to the meetings. As she said, these difficulties stem from the fact that some of the obstacles
originally faced by multiethnic individuals have been overcome (such as the inability to identify with more than one race on the US census); that the “common factor” among multiethnic individuals is that they are different from both monoethnic individuals and each other; and that you can only have so many “self-loathing” and “woe is me” conversations. As she explained, “You can only have those conversations up to a certain point, because then you’re just going around the room saying ‘oh, I went to China and I felt too White, and then I went to McDonald’s and I felt too Chinese.’”

With the exception of Cara’s Hapa Club, the race and ethnicity-based student organizations discussed by participants were all limited to a focus on a single race or ethnicity. Nevertheless, more than a third of participants either expressed interest in joining, or implicitly recognized the value of, multiethnic student organizations. As with the forms used to collect racial and ethnic data from students, single-race student organizations reinforce racial and ethnic categories and the boundaries between them—a tendency that we see again and again in the data related to the formal aspects of schooling. The data presented here also highlight participants’ perceptions of, feeling about, and experiences stemming from their reflected appraisals (Cooley, 1902; Khanna, 2004; Tatum, 1997). Clearly, many of the participants are aware of the fact that they are viewed as “different” from those with whom they identify or as “not [insert racial or ethnic category] enough,” and their discussions of these organizations evince the pervasiveness of limited and essentialist understandings of racial and ethnic groups in their schools.
Relationships and Interactions with Teachers and Administrators

Although teachers and/or administrators were discussed in general terms by most of the study participants (i.e. “some teachers have asked about my last name”), several of them also shared stories about relationships and interactions with specific teachers and administrators. As we see in this section, some participants discussed very positive relationships and interactions with teachers or administrators, others have had quite negative experiences, and some have had both.

Many of the participants reported that teachers and administrators ask them questions about their racial and ethnic heritage based on, for example, their last name or their phenotype. Amaya said, “the teachers don’t treat me differently. They’ll just be like ‘oh, your last name is [name].’ It’s just like a regular kind of thing, like ‘oh, you’re Black and Indian.’ That’s just all. It doesn’t affect me.” Likewise, Cara said “it’s more like [teachers] are surprised, you know, like ‘oh, wow, I didn’t expect that like from you, you seem so White.’ A lot of it is about the name. They do it subtly through the last name, like, ‘oh, really?’” While the other participants did not appear to mind such questions from teachers, Hip Hapa reported that he would “fly off the handle” if a teacher ever asked him “what are you?” He also reported, however, that he has had a lot of “really cool” teachers who have never asked him about his identity.

Somewhat surprisingly, three of the participants’ hair piqued the interest of their teachers. During the Pine Mountains focus group, Kendra and Amaya discussed being asked questions by teachers about their hair and whether or not it is real. Dana, who recalled two different teachers asking to touch her hair, reported feeling “really bothered”
and “really mad” about comments from teachers about her hair during a check for head lice.

I went to an all White school, and they had no idea how to check my head for lice. I mean, I didn’t have lice, but it just made me really mad because of all the things they were saying. Like, “oh, you need to comb your hair, you need to do this. Oh, this is horrible, you shouldn’t do this. Your hair’s too oily. Your hair’s too this.” And it just made me really uncomfortable.

If they had no other effect on their identities, questions and comments from teachers about their hair must have reinforced for Amaya, Kendra, and Dana the notion that they are in some way “different” from their classmates. Certainly for Dana, having her hair scrutinized and rudely discussed by her teachers was a negative experience that made her feel uncomfortable, and at other times during her interview she discussed not wanting to be treated differently at school or singled out because of her heritage—feelings that were, presumably, influenced by this lice checking incident.

Only three participants shared what I would consider especially positive interactions with and perceptions of specific teachers. Andrea, for example, reported very positive experiences with a specific teacher who recognizes her “Iranian-ness.” As she said, “I’ve only had one teacher that sort of recognizes my Iranian-ness…it’s very rare for me to find a teacher who recognized both sides.” Similarly, Anne and Marie, both of whom attend Deer Valley, spoke very positively about the same two teachers. One is their former History teacher who frequently brought up the topics of race and ethnicity in class, and the other is their English teacher who is the only Black teacher at their school and who also frequently discussed race and ethnicity in class. Indeed, Marie said “there’s only two good, really good things at Deer Valley, that’s [English teacher’s name] and [History teacher’s name].” Perhaps because of the nearly all White faculty and staff and
largely White student population at Deer Valley (see Chapter Seven), Anne and Marie appeared especially appreciative of these two teachers’ efforts to infuse issues of race and ethnicity into what appears to be a Eurocentric curriculum delivered in a nearly all-White context. Marie, in particular, is grateful that she can talk to her English teacher and that they can discuss their experiences of being Black. Interestingly, both teachers have been asked to leave the school, which Marie attributed to efforts to maintain the city’s “bubble.”

Raya and Marie, both of whom identify as Black and White and both of whom have attended predominantly White schools, shared negative experiences with teachers (Marie) and administrators (Raya) in which they felt singled out because of their Black heritage. Raya reported being treated differently by administrators at all of her schools. She said, “I just remember them making little comments and things that would just be like, ‘what the hell?’…Because it wasn’t just one principal, like principals at every single one of my schools [treated me differently].” Additionally, Raya described an incident in which she and the two other Black students at her school were falsely accused of breaking branches off of a tree. Marie, who, like Raya, has attended nearly all white schools, also reported negative experiences with teachers stemming from what appears to be very blatant racism. As Marie explained, during P.E. class in 6th grade, her teacher pulled her out of line and made a very racist comment.

[T]here was this tree, and there were White seagulls in the tree, and like those huge Black raven birds around this area on the ground. And she pulled me out of P.E. line, and was like, “hey Marie, look at that tree. What do you notice?” And I was like, “it’s a lot of birds.” And she was like, “the White ones are above the Black ones, and that’s how it belongs.”
Later in her interview, Marie discussed leaving class everyday for two weeks when her middle school art teacher “brought in a book about lynching Black people” and asked students to “draw pictures of it.” Marie was also quite critical of Deer Valley’s administration, and in particular the principal, who she feels lacks cultural awareness and sensitivity despite her perception that “he prides himself on being Mexican.” Stemming from racial assumptions or blatant racism, these experiences certainly highlighted for both Marie and Raya, the fact that they were often viewed as different (if not inferior to) most of their classmates.

Like many of the other formal aspects of K-12 schooling, participants’ interactions and relationships with teachers and administrators often resulted in the participants feeling singled out or being made to feel that they are different from their classmates. This is not to say that participants want to be treated the same as everyone else (Andrea and Marie, after all, both appreciate that their teachers recognize the uniqueness of their experiences), but they certainly do not want negative attention from teachers and administrators or attention that only highlights the ways in which they differ (especially physically) from their classmates. Nevertheless, my general finding is that questions and comments from and interactions with teachers, while occasionally very offensive and blatantly racist, have had very little direct influence on participants’ overall sense of identity. This finding is perhaps not surprising given that we have so few examples of teachers and administrators actively and purposefully affirming, or, indeed, engaging with, participants’ identities in the ways called for by, for example, Nieto (2000), Shields (2003), Tatum (2007).
Specific Lessons, Projects, and Classroom Activities

This section includes a discussion of the data that emerged primarily in response to the question “were there specific lessons that you feel have been influential in your identity construction process?” For the most part, participants responded to this question with a very confident “no,” but the few lessons that were recalled are discussed here.

Hannah, who was quite adamant that the formal aspects of schooling had not influenced her racial and ethnic identity development, talked about studying the Japanese internment and learning about her grandmother’s experiences in the camps. Although Hannah reported that she merely enjoyed learning about the Japanese internment and her family’s history and that she found the topic interesting, Tatum (2007) and Nieto (2000), among others, would argue that seeing her heritage reflected in the curriculum helped to affirm Hannah’s sense of identity.

Cara recalled reading a book about Japanese people who live in Hawaii, noting that she could draw parallels between their experiences and her own, but ultimately concluding that her identity development is a very individual process and that the parallels between her and the people in the book related to things she had already worked out on her own. As she explained, “you draw the parallels, but like it’s parallel to things I’ve already worked out on my own. It’s a very – it’s a very individual process I think.”

Unlike the other participants, Anne explicitly linked specific lessons to her multiethnic identity development. As she explained, reading Native Son and watching a video about race made her realize that although she has enjoyed being “American” and “living in the White world,” she can’t “just abandon” her Japanese heritage and that she needs “to know both sides.” She also went on to explain how such realizations, stemming
from these lessons in school, have prompted her to start exploring her Japanese heritage with her mom.

Um, I don’t know. It’s kind of like—like I said, I just wish I knew a little bit more [about my Japanese heritage]. And I never really wanted to know more until I read *Native Son*, because I realized—we watched this movie, and it’s called like the *Color of Race* or something like that, something along those lines. And they talk about, this guy says, “well why can’t we all just be American?” And he’s a White guy talking to a Black, Asian and Latino person. And they’re saying “well, you can’t just consider yourself American, because America’s built, you know, on all these different cultures” kind of thing. And that’s kind of how I used to think about it. But when I heard that, you know, and I heard their response, it made a lot of sense. You know, I can’t just say I’m American, because technically I’m not, you know, I’m not like Native American, so I don’t have that. But I’ve learned that, at least I’ve never wanted to know more about it. I’ve just kind of liked being American, you know, and Caucasian, living in the White world, you know…But as I’m getting older, I’m seeing that I can’t just abandon [my Japanese culture]. You know, I need to know both sides, and to, you know, help educate other people about Japanese and you know, the Asian descent. I need to kind of learn more about that. And I’m actually starting to do that a little bit more with my mom, you know, talk about where she grew up, her culture, what she did as a kid and her experiences, the different holidays they celebrated and all that kind of stuff. So I’m kind of trying to learn.

During her interview, Andrea discussed several lessons and activities that she did not explicitly link to her identity development in the way that Anne did, but which nevertheless seemed (albeit in a less direct way) to have influenced her sense of multiethnic identity. Whereas for Anne, reading *Native Son* and watching the video changed the way she thinks about her own identity and connections to her Japanese heritage, for Andrea it was not specific lessons or activities, but the interactions with classmates and teachers stemming from these lessons and activities, that seemed to most influence her sense of identity. For example, Andrea described (with a notable level of frustration) a group project that she wanted to do about Iran but that left her feeling as though she must “prove” that she is Iranian. She also recalled a classroom discussion
during which Iran was brought up but in which she was not called on to share her perspective. Ultimately, Andrea decided not to participate in the conversation, fearing that she would not be perceived as “authentically” Persian. We may recall from Andrea’s profile that, in discussing her identity, she made the following comment: “I am trying to be both, but I really, I feel, I still feel like I am not Iranian enough. I always feel like I am trying to be both, day by day. My feet are in the White world, but my hands are holding on to a little piece of that Iranian.” It seems very safe to assume that the classroom experiences that Andrea discussed have influenced her sense of not being “Iranian enough” and challenged her perceived ability to be both White and Iranian simultaneously, even if she did not describe them as having this influence. As before, we see the significant influence that reflected appraisals (Cooley, 1902; Khanna, 2004; Tatum, 1997), and particularly those that differ from self appraisals, can have on one’s experiences and sense of identity.

(Not) Learning about Multiethnicity

In every interview, I asked participants if multiethnicity had been discussed in class or included in the curriculum during their K-12 schooling. The most common responses to this question were a certain “no” or something along the lines of “not that I can remember.” Among those lessons or conversations related (however loosely) to multiethnicity recalled by participants, most had to do with the so called “mulatto” population and were embedded in lessons about slavery or the general diversity of American society. In general, the data discussed in this section point to a notable silence in schools regarding the topic of multiethnicity—a silence that persists despite participants’ expressed interest in learning about the topic.
Seven participants were adamant that multiethnicity was never discussed in class and provided responses like “I can’t think of anytime that’s ever happened where people have like talked about mixed races or anything like that” (Christina) and “No, that would never come up. The idea of being mixed, I didn’t have that, because that was never talked about” (Hip Hapa). Looking back to when I was in high school, the only time multiethnicity was discussed was during US History or Black History Month when we learned about the so-called “mulatto” population and the “one drop” rule. Thus, when participants said that they had never learned about or discussed multiethnicity in school, I often asked them if they had similar lessons to the ones I had in US History class or during Black History Month. For several of the participants, this question seemed to “jog” their memories. Hannah, for example, said “Yeah, that’s the only thing that you hear, that eventually like Whites and Blacks, like African Americans and Whites can eventually marry or like they have a thing together.” Similarly, Marie, who clearly has an interest in the topic (she wrote a paper for class about being mixed race), recalled, “The only time mixed race is brought up is when slave owners raped their slaves, and then people look at me. And I’m like, ‘no, my dad didn’t rape my mom.’”

Unlike the others, seven participants (Anthony, Andrea, Jill, Cara, Barry, Anne, and Frank) could recall a time in which multiethnicity or related topics not focused on Black-White relations were mentioned (but not necessarily discussed) in class. For example, during his interview, Frank discussed a standoff between Latino and cowboy students that took place in the school courtyard on Cesar Chavez Day. His History teacher used this event as an opportunity to discuss issues related to race, ethnicity, mixed race, and identity in class. In other words, the discussion, apparently, was in response to
the standoff and not a pre-planned lesson. When I asked Frank if the discussion had had any influence on him or his thinking, he said, “It was like I thought about it. Well, I rarely think about my ethnicity, but when I do, it’s kind of like I do go in depth a little bit about it. So I thought about it, yeah.” Barry also recalled an instance in which issues related to multiethnicity were discussed in class. Although the conversation was “brief,” and, so it seems, more about the mingling of racial and ethnic groups in the US and not specifically multiethnic individuals, as Barry said, “It was pretty brief, but it was still there, you know. So you have to embrace that it was there.”

Although she could recall a lesson about Creoles and Mestizos in Brazil, Andrea, who feels “left out” when her experiences are not talked about in class, shared her perception that multiethnicity is rarely discussed in class because “nobody really knows how to address it.” In general, Andrea feels that multiethnicity is the “grey area” and that in the rare instances in which the topic is discussed, it is treated like a side note. Kelley, Jasmine, Jordan, and members of the Pine Mountains focus group, like Andrea, also provided explanations for why they think multiethnicity is not discussed in their schools. These explanations include the fact that the multiethnic population is so diverse (Jasmine, for example, said “there’s just so many possibilities out there that you can’t encompass all of them” and Jordan said “you can be multiethnic, but there’s so many different possibilities”) and the observation that “you don’t really hear about mixed people being oppressed or murdered for being of mixed heritage” (Kelley). The explanations provided by members of the Pine Mountains focus group for why such lessons and conversations do not take place more often in schools also include the suggestions that being multiethnic is “frowned upon in the history books,” that “nobody really cares” enough to
bring it up, and that “[multiethnicity] is not on the top of a teacher’s priority list.” Whether or not these explanations are correct, the foregoing data point to a conspicuous silence regarding multiethnicity in participants’ classrooms.

With the exception of Andrea, participants’ discussions about the presence or absence of the topic of multiethnicity in their classes were conducted in a rather unemotional and straightforward way, and the numerous explanations for why such lessons and discussions do not take place more often indicate that participants simply do not expect to be represented in the curriculum. What participants did not expressly address, however, is what influence the lack of such lessons and discussions might have had on their racial and ethnic identity development. Based on the literature reviewed in Chapter Three, we might conclude that the lack of curriculum related to multiethnicity and the lack of representation of multiethnic individuals in the curriculum has put participants in danger of developing fractured identities (Castenell & Pinar, 1993) or of not developing a sense of their own dignity and worth (Nieto, 2000). Nothing participants said, though, led me to believe that this would be an accurate conclusion. This is not to say that the silence regarding multiethnicity in participants’ schools has not had an influence on the development of their racial and ethnic identities. However, as discussed in the following three chapters, I found the influence of this silence to be much more indirect (but perhaps no less significant) than that predicted by, among others, Castenell and Pinar (1993), Nieto (2000), and Tatum (2007).

(Not) Learning about Race and Ethnicity

Questions about what participants learned more generally about race and ethnicity in the classroom were not originally included in the interview protocol. Based on their
discussions of such topics as teachers, administrators, specific lessons, and learning about multiethnicity, however, I asked them if and how the topics of race and ethnicity were discussed in their classes and included in the curriculum. In this section, I present and discuss data that emerged from these questions. As we will see, many of the participants’ responses are strikingly similar and several themes permeate these data. These themes include the idea that lessons about race and ethnicity are “risky” or “taboo” (Tatum, 2007), a focus on Black-White relations, a focus on “standard” races and the exclusion of many racial and ethnic groups (Wardle, 1996), a focus on oppositional relations (Gosine, 2002), and an adherence to curriculum guidelines and textbooks. The data point to a lack of substantive engagement with the topics of race and ethnicity in participants’ classrooms, in the formal curriculum, and especially in courses other than English and History.

David, Raya, Amaya, and Jasmine, among others, all noted their school’s focus on Black-White relations and the exclusion of other racial and ethnic groups. David and Jasmine, for example, said:

David: I think America it’s become too, 2-D. Like when they talk about mixed races or multiethnicity, it’s Black and White. And I think they’ve been focusing too much on Black or White. If you’re a minority, you’re considered—I mean, if someone says “minority” to you, what do you think? You’re like “oh, Black.” …I think that’s the way it’s been taught in the schools. Because when you read books in high school, it’s To Kill a Mockingbird or Frederick Douglass, another one. And there’s so many that there’s just no other diversity at all. It’s really one or the other. You can’t even call it diversity.

* * *

12 Interestingly, although David evidently did not learn this in school, Frederick Douglass often identified as multiethnic (see, e.g., “Icons: Making Mixed-Race History” http://www.intermix.org.uk/icons/index.asp).
Jasmine: Everyone is pretty much just fed up with hearing about slavery. Although it was a tragic thing, we just mull it over in every English class I’ve ever had. And I’m like great, we know there’s issues between Black people and White people. But what about the Mexicans? What about the Chinese people? What about the Arabic people? You know, I mean, second in line I would say is Mexican, third in line I would say I guess Chinese, and then I would definitely say like Indian, Native American and Arabic are just all last in line, you know, in terms of intermingling and, you know, the history of the two cultures, you know, combined or clashing or whatever. It’s always been pretty much Black and White.

As noted, participants reported a lack of substantive engagement with the topics of race and ethnicity in their classrooms. For example, in ways strikingly similar to each other, Barry and Renee talked about classroom discussions related to race and ethnicity and the reasons why they feel such discussions do not occur more often in their classes. Both believe that teachers should “step outside of the box” during discussions about race and ethnicity, but that to do so may risk offending someone. When I asked Barry what was “inside the box” he said, “Inside the box is kind of like, you know, lines that you follow, where you say this, but you can’t say this, because it will offend people.”

Expressing similar ideas, Renee said:

I think unless it’s in your textbook, you don’t learn about it, because teachers are still afraid to step outside of the box in that category because they’re too afraid, like I said, to step on anyone’s toes, get in trouble, offend anyone, that they just teach you exactly what’s in the history books and what’s in the history books, we all know, is just the generic what they want you to know about history.

Marie echoed Renee and Barry’s observation that teachers mostly “stick to the textbook” when teaching about race and ethnicity. Marie also attributed the lack of discussion about these topics to the fact that most of the students in her school are White and may not see similarities between the subjects of lessons about race and ethnicity and themselves.

Like if a question is brought up, if someone in class were to be like, “well, where were the Hispanics during this war?” The teacher would be like
“just stick to the textbook” or “just stick to this.”...I think that it’s—Deer Valley High School just wants to teach you about who they think most of the kids are, because they want them to understand. And the way a lot of people understand is when they see similarities between what they’re learning and themselves.

Jill, like many other participants, expressed interest in learning more about race and ethnicity and identified several reasons why such discussions and lessons do not occur more frequently in her school including discomfort with the topics, the lack of a safe environment for such lessons, and her perception that “there’s so much a hush on [race and ethnicity] in our culture.”

Nobody wants to talk about race in a place where they’re forced to do it, because it makes some people really uncomfortable. And they just shut down. And others want to talk about it, but they’re not provided the safe environment that they need to do that, because you have half the class just being like, “this is so stupid, why are we here? I don’t want to write a paper on who I am.”...I mean, I think it’s just uncomfortable anyways, because people just don’t like to talk about [race and ethnicity], because there’s so—there’s so much a hush on it in our culture. It’s like, “don’t talk about that.” You know, when you’re little you just—when you’re in elementary school you don’t talk about it. And so it’s just kind of like hushed as a society. So that when you’re in an environment where people are “let’s talk about race,” people shut down or the people who want to open up shut down because there’s not a safe space for them to talk about it....I feel like when people talk about race, they get really defensive. And that makes it really hard.

Adding to the list of reasons why lessons and conversations about race and ethnicity do not occur more often in participants’ classrooms, Dana speculated that perhaps because teachers lack knowledge and information about these topics they are reluctant to address them in class. Dana also speculated that students have little interest in talking with their teachers about such topics for this same reason.

Anne, as discussed in previous sections, reported much more engagement with issues of race and ethnicity in her classes than did most of the other participants. Based
on her previous comments, I asked Anne how the topics have been presented in her classes. She noted that the lessons in her History class tend to focus on oppositional relations and that those in her English class are carried out carefully and sensitively. As she explained, her English teacher “chooses his words carefully, chooses what he shows us carefully.” For Jordan, as for Anne, some of his classroom discussions of race relations focused on oppositional struggles between racial and ethnic groups. Although many participants discussed oppositional Black-White relations, Jordan responded to the oppositional Chinese-White relations discussed in his school and his resulting feelings.

Like a lot of times I feel like I should be angry. Or certain times I feel like I should be angry at White people and like sympathize with the Chinese when we’re learning about things like the immigration and stuff. But then like, I’m not really sure I should mor—not morally, but I don’t feel like I should, because I’m not full Chinese. So, I don’t know.

While the discussions of oppositional race relations described by Anne, Jordan, and others, may or may not reflect a broader multicultural or antiracist approach to education, Jordan’s comments affirm Gosine’s contention that such discussions can perpetuate “a we-them view of difference—a simplistic, binary perspective that reinforces the backbone of racist discourses (2002, p. 96).”

In her exposure to lessons about race and ethnicity, and thus in her knowledge related to these topics, Cara stands apart from all of the other participants. She is the only participant who appears to have been exposed to ideas that debunk the scientific and biological myths associated with race and reveal the ways in which racial differences were arbitrarily constructed—ideas that she explicitly linked to her identity formation. As with the other students, however, she was quick to acknowledge the “risks” associated with teaching students about race and ethnicity.
Yeah, no, actually you can flip back a couple of pages, this is one of those identity formation things in class. This was last year I took [a] genocide history seminar. And so we did sort of like an introduction about, you know, race, categorizing, all that good stuff. And we watched—yeah, basically that was the first time it was introduced to me that race was not a biological category. There was no like Chinese gene. There was no Black gene. I mean, that was—at first you’re sort of like, “I don’t really get that. Like what do you mean [race] doesn’t exist?”…And so I think that most people were like, “huh, that’s weird. Oh, well, I guess that makes sense.” And for me it was not really like, “oh, okay, that’s cool.” Like it really—because for me, like race is such a big deal, because I—like when I do encounter it, it’s not just like “oh yeah, like let me just reaffirm that I’m like this race.”

It is interesting to note how many participants conflated lessons about race and ethnicity with lessons about countries other than the United States. Regardless of how race and ethnicity are conceptualized by participants, however, the data included here point to a noticeable silence in their classrooms regarding these constructs. The data also point to the pervasiveness of the idea that lessons about race and ethnicity are “risky” or “taboo” (Tatum, 2007), to teachers’ adherence to curriculum guidelines and textbooks, and to a focus in the classroom on oppositional relations which reinforce racial and ethnic divisions (Gosine, 2002), particularly between Blacks and Whites. Given the ways in which participants discussed learning (or not learning) about race and ethnicity in their classrooms, it is not terribly surprising that they did not directly link lessons about race and ethnicity to their racial and ethnic identity development. It is also not terribly surprising that they encountered so few lessons about multiethnicity beyond an acknowledgement of the so-called “mulatto” population. The exception, as noted, was Cara who described learning about the social construction of race and racial categories and explicitly linked these lessons to her identity formation. Of particular importance is the fact that, as discussed in greater detail in Chapter Eight, so many participants
expressed a sincere desire for more substantive and meaningful engagement with race and ethnicity in their classrooms (understood as concepts or understood as people representing various racial and ethnic groups). Indeed, the data reviewed in this section help to contextualize participants’ recommendations for educators presented in Chapter Eight.

**Diversity Education Initiatives**

In the previous section, I focused specifically on participants’ experiences and perceptions of learning about race and ethnicity in their classrooms. There, my focus was on lessons and discussions that took place in classrooms either as a part of the formal curriculum or in response to specific events on campus or students’ inquiries. Here, I examine the data related to what I understand to be the diversity education initiatives of the participants’ schools, including such activities as Diversity Weeks, Caravan Days, Challenge Day, Heritage Fairs, multicultural assemblies, and holiday celebrations. These differ from classroom lessons and discussions in that they are often considered “special events” that include participants from various classes and grade levels, they are designed to provide students with the opportunity to explore and share with classmates their culture(s), or they are not part of the formal curriculum. Most of these initiatives reflect a multicultural approach to education that aims to acknowledge and celebrate racial and ethnic diversity in schools and society (Dei and Calliste, 2000). As we will see, these initiatives also typically focus on the dress, dance, and diet of different cultural groups.

Although most participants were unable to recall a lesson, project, or classroom discussion that they felt *influenced* their multiethnic identities, several of them discussed lessons and projects through which they *explored* their racial and ethnic heritages. Josh,
for example, recalled bringing in items that represent his culture for his school’s Culture Day.

We had that kind of thing, the Culture Day, and I brought my dad’s tzitzit. And everyone was just wondering what it—they thought it was a blanket. So it’s just like this whole—and actually I made a lot of friends off it, because they thought it was really cool…I think I presented [as] one of the last people. Just because it’s so uncomfortable just to show people like, “oh, I’m from that place.” And on the top of it, I feel like there’s always that war over there [in Israel]. And people are always like, all those stereotypes and all that. It’s just really uncomfortable.

In response to the question “when did you first become aware of your multiethnic identity?,” Renee discussed a similar activity in which she made a doll that “resembled” her and presented it to her class. In describing this activity, Renee explained that she made a doll representing her Persian heritage (as opposed to her Mexican heritage) because she often went to her Persian grandmother’s house after school and her grandmother helped her make the doll. I did not get the sense that Renee learned much about the Persian culture from this activity, but it did provide the opportunity for her to share her Persian heritage with her classmates. Likewise, Josh did not say that he learned about his heritage through bringing in his selected items and he said that doing the presentation made him feel uncomfortable because of the stereotypes people have about Israelis; however, he also said that his classmates thought that the tzitzit he brought in was “cool.” In this sense, these classroom activities did not necessarily lead to Josh and Renee learning more about their cultures; rather other students learned about Josh and Renee’s heritages. Just as Renee linked making a doll to her realization that she is multiethnic, Barry discussed his school’s heritage fair in relation to first becoming aware of his multiethnic identity. As I find it hard to believe that Barry and Renee were not previously aware of their racial and ethnic heritages prior to these classroom activities.
(indeed, Renee responded to her classmates’ questions about her doll with “I’m part Persian”), perhaps it is more accurate to say that the activities led to the realization that they are different from many of their classmates in that they identify with multiple cultures which they could represent during such activities—cultures which differ from many of their classmates’ cultures. As discussed in the following chapters, were all students to learn about different heritages, and particularly those of their classmates, this could positively support the identity development and experiences of multiethnic students, if this learning were to lead to acceptance and greater understanding of multiethnic heritages and identities and the ways they are experienced by individuals. If, however, the aforementioned activities led to acceptance and greater understanding on the part of other students, Josh, Renee, and Barry did not so indicate.

As previously discussed, traditional approaches to multicultural education are often critiqued for their thin treatment of segregated racial and ethnic groups, often manifested in lessons about the “Three D’s” (dress, dance, and diet) or the “Three F’s” (food, fun, and fashion), which necessarily emphasize the differences, and thus boundaries, between these groups. We have also seen the critique that traditional approaches to multicultural education often require multiethnic students to select one heritage with which to identify to participate in lessons and activities (see, for example, Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004). Additionally, it is often assumed that multiethnic students feel marginalized and excluded during such diversity education activities and are troubled by the experience of having to “pick one” heritage to represent in order to participate in them (see, for example, Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004). The following examples from the data provide unequivocal support for these critiques.
Frank described his elementary school’s Ethnic Week during which “you would bring some food from your culture.” Anthony attended several different schools before high school, one of which had Multicultural Day and another of which had Multicultural Night. In comparing these two different activities, Anthony favored Multicultural Night because, unlike Multicultural Day, the students did more than just “put out food on the table or something” and the event was more interactive. Similar to Culture Days, Multicultural Night, Diversity Weeks, and Heritage Fairs, Anne’s elementary school had Nationality Days. Anne remembered being asked to bring in food from and to focus on countries representing her non-White, Asian heritage because her school had “enough White kids” and not enough of “everyone else.”

I know in elementary school, because it’s kind of like they’re trying to make your world diverse, you know, you always do a bunch of like Nationality Days where you learn about the world and all the countries. And I do remember if I ever want[ed] to do something like a European country, it was kind of like, “well, why don’t you try and do like an Asian country or a Russian, like Russia or something like that. Because there’s enough White kids that can cover that kind of thing. We don’t have enough of everyone else.”

Kelley, who used to be a more active member of Deer Valley’s Diversity Club, discussed the Diversity Week that the club organizes each year and their efforts to provide food and dancing from different cultures. Kelley noted that during the event “they really try and push different races,” but that they “ignore the fact, obviously, of mixed races, and they really don’t, you know, cover the whole broad spectrum of race.” Following these observations, Kelley noted the focus on dance and food (“They try and pull people from like different Middle Eastern countries, and they’ll either do Middle Eastern dances or food. They always have food”).
As is evident, Frank, Anthony, Anne, and Kelley (like several of the other participants), despite their underlying critiques, discussed their schools’ diversity education initiatives and their focus on food, fashion, and fun in a fairly detached manner. Conversely, Jill, Marie, Cara, and Dana explicitly, and with some passion, critiqued their schools’ diversity education initiatives and highlighted their superficiality.

Cara and Dana, for example, said:

Cara: We would have, the holiday festival was the best (sarcastic), because we used to have one music teacher—one was Christian, one was Jewish, and they would always have secret sort of passive battles about how many—we had to have an equal number Chanukah songs and Christmas songs, because there are too many Christmas songs. So they would make up their own Chanukah songs. And then we got two Jewish teachers, so then it was two Christmas songs and a whole bunch of Chanukah songs. And then they started putting in the, you know, Ramadan songs, and then, of course, Kwanzaa. Not a single person at our school celebrated Kwanzaa, like for a fact. But of course they had to have the little Black girl light the Kwanzaa candle. It’s pretty empty, though, because I mean, you’re like “we’re so diverse, we celebrate four winter holidays instead of one.” Like I’m not impressed by that if it’s a lie. Yeah, I mean, and so that’s the sort of thing where people are sort of fed up with it, you know, like this is obviously a joke, because we go to the school. We know that nobody talks about like, “oh man, I’m so excited for Kwanzaa.” So it’s like that was sort of when it would become a joke, you know?

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Dana: Like, instead of having people come and show you the food of India or wherever, have them come and, you know, talk about where they themselves just came from. And then study other places, you know, in Africa or in India or, you know, China or other—because places like that are huge, and you can’t just say that one person from South Africa had the same experiences as someone from like Morocco or Ethiopia. Like, it doesn’t work. There has to be more than—there has to be more. Like if you’re gonna do it, go all the way and really teach. Like food should be the least important thing. Like talk about different cultural things that people do. I know food can be a big part of that, but that shouldn’t—like I know that we did the country reports in 6th grade and the biggest thing was what dish are you gonna make. Like instead of how long have these people lived in Ethiopia or what part of India did you study? You know—
there’s like 50 different like dialects of Cantonese and stuff, like let’s learn about that. Let’s learn about their presidents and things like that. I don’t need to know that everyone eats chow mein, okay. I mean it’s important and it’s yummy, but it’s not—I’m not going to learn anything. I’m not going to learn how to cook their food, I’m just learning that it tastes good.

Again, it is often assumed that multiethnic students feel marginalized and left out during such diversity education activities and are troubled by the experience of having to “pick one” heritage to represent in order to participate in them (see Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004). Several examples of participants feeling as though they need to “pick one” heritage with which to identify can be found in the data. Jordan, for example, described an activity that took place on his campus during Challenge Day13 which divided students according to their racial heritage.

We did this activity where they drew a big circle on the ground and they were like “step into the circle if you are Asian.” I didn’t know what to do. I just started going over the line. But like, I just kind of looked around, because there were some other half Asian people there. And one of them didn’t go over and one of them did go over. So I didn’t really know what to do. So I went over for a little bit, but then came back.

Like many of the other participants, Jordan did not “connect with” the “ethnic stuff” his schools have done; however, unlike many of the others, he attributed this lack of connection to a sense of not knowing which ethnicity to “be proud of.”

I think schools are definitely, or at least I’ve noticed, that schools are definitely trying more to like focus on diversity, maybe. And they do a lot of ethnic stuff, but I never really connect with it, I guess, because I never really know which like ethnicity I should be proud of, really.

13 Challenge Day is an event that takes place on school campuses and is run by the Challenge Day Organization. “Challenge Day’s vision is that every child lives in a world where they feel safe, loved and celebrated.” As stated on the Challenge Day website, “We provide youth and their communities with experiential workshops and programs that demonstrate the possibility of love and connection through the celebration of diversity, truth and full expression” (http://www.challengeday.org/mission-vision.php).
Jordan’s statement does not indicate to me that he feels particularly marginalized or left out or that the “ethnic stuff” his schools did had a significant impact on his racial and ethnic identity. Rather, he seems simply not to connect to it because he firmly identifies as both Chinese and White and does not want to choose between his two heritages to participate in activities. Indeed, as discussed, when asked to step into a circle “if you are Asian,” Jordan “went over for a little bit, but then came back.” Andrea recalled an activity similar to the one described by Jordan that took place during her high school’s Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration, as well as a video that they watched following the activity.

For MLK day, when I was a freshman, they had us step into a circle if you are not White. And I was like “what?” I didn’t know what to do. So I kind of straddled the circle. And then we watched a video about kids who were Hispanic and Black and Middle Eastern, and I tried to relate, but I really couldn’t because I was like so in the middle. And then they, for about two minutes, they showed a little tiny interview of people who are half Hispanic and they didn’t look it, and I, for those two minutes—it was a very, incredibly short period of time—I felt like kinship, “I know you!” Because they were talking about how like, “no, I look blonde but I am Hispanic” and “I am sorry if I don’t look Hispanic enough to you.”

Clearly, both Jordan and Andrea identify strongly as multiethnic, and they both responded to being asked to pick one heritage with which to identify in much the same way (i.e. they refused to do it). Unlike Jordan, however, Andrea could recall a time (albeit a few short minutes) in which she “connected with” one of her school’s diversity education activities—the only activity she could recall that acknowledged multiethnic heritage and differences between how people identify and how they are identified by others.
Like Andrea and Jordan, Raya’s identity as mixed has significantly influenced her perceptions of and involvement with her schools’ diversity education initiatives. Indeed, Raya expressed significant concerns about and negative perceptions of her school’s Black History Month activities and lessons, which she feels focus too much on oppositional Black-White relations and the divisions constructed between Blacks and Whites. Raya appeared particularly troubled by the fact that other Black students got mad at her because she does not identify as Black or get involved in the activities during Black History Month.

Raya: I hate Black History Month…Usually the Black people would end up getting really mad at me because during Black History Month we’d have certain days where we would like do a certain thing and I just wouldn’t do it. Because the thing is, with me, I mean, I know it’s good to remember your history, and slavery was part of my history, like half of me, but with me it’s not as important to me as it is for full, I guess, African American people, or you know. Because with me, like I’m mixed, I don’t relate to that at all. I don’t, you know what I mean, I have so much in both sides…

Erica: So do you think we should focus more on our similarities?

Raya: Yeah, I think it should just be like all mixed race year.

Clearly, Raya firmly identifies as mixed (“I have so much in both sides”), and, because of this identity, she had negative experiences during her school’s Black History Month activities and lessons. Although Raya did not discuss feeling conflicted or confused about how to identify during such activities, so negative are her experiences that Raya would prefer not to celebrate Black History Month at school and to focus more on our similarities and multiraciality.

Several of the themes emerging in the previous paragraphs (i.e. the superficiality of many multiculturalism-inspired activities, participants being asked to pick one heritage
with which to identify, the reinforcement of racial and ethnic boundaries, participants’ negative perceptions of diversity education initiatives, and participants feeling excluded from full participation in diversity education activities) can be found in participants’ discussion of Pine Mountains’ multicultural assembly. Seven of the participants in this study attend Pine Mountains High School, which annually hosts a Multicultural Assembly during which students perform various cultural dances. Of these seven participants, Raya was the only one not to mention the assembly during her interview and Renee, Jen, and Barry discussed the Multicultural Assembly rather matter-of-factly. Jen and Renee noted that there is not a group of multiethnic students who perform at the assembly, but they also recognize that there are not “multiethnic dances” that students could perform. When I asked Barry if he participated in the assembly, he said that he did not because “there’s not enough Spanish people here.” Renee, Jen, and Barry did not, though, appear particularly concerned about or to feel excluded from the Multicultural Assembly.

Amaya and Kendra, on the other hand, both of whom identify with the Black community, spoke about the assembly at length and with emotion during their interviews and focus group. The concern for them stems primarily from the fact that Black students were not allowed to perform hip hop dances at the assembly. Amaya explained:

I have a very strong sense of Black pride. I have a very, very strong sense of Black pride. Like actually one of our teachers here, we’re having Multicultural this year. You know, we have Multicultural every year, and this is her second year doing it. And last year, you know, usually Black girls, we always—I’ve never performed, but we’ve had Black girls perform and do hip hop dances my freshman and sophomore year. But here comes junior year, this new teacher’s coming in saying that hip hop isn’t Black culture. And she has a Black boyfriend. And you’re saying that hip hop is not Black culture. So I take that very offensively. Because if you watch BET and VH1 during Black History Month, they’re talking
about hip hop being Black culture, and for you to fix your mouth to say something like that and you have an African American boyfriend, I think that’s wrong.

Among the other issues that upset Kendra and Amaya is the fact that the Black students were being told that hip hop is not their culture and the fact that the teacher in charge of the assembly and who makes decisions about who can and cannot perform is not Black but has a Black boyfriend. If the assembly and the issues surrounding the assembly have had any influence on their racial and ethnic identity, it seems to have strengthened their sense of solidarity with the Black students at school. In other words, it appears that it is because Amaya and Kendra identify with the Black community that they feel so outraged. In fact, the sentences leading into Amaya’s discussion of the Multicultural Assembly are “I have a very strong sense of Black pride. I have a very, very strong sense of Black pride,” she repeatedly mentioned taking offense to the exclusion of Black students, and she often used the pronoun “we” when discussing the feelings of Black students.

Christina, another student at Pine Mountains with Black heritage, also expressed concerns about the Multicultural Assembly but for quite different reasons. Christina identifies strongly as mixed and feels that she does not have “anything to do” for the assembly because there is no group for mixed students. Moreover, she feels that if she joined a group of Black students performing at the assembly (speaking hypothetically, of course), people would make comments and question her racial identity.

They’re not doing it or whatever, but if the Black girls, if they did it, I kinda would be, (pause) I would kinda think twice about doing it. Even though I know they wouldn’t have a problem with it or whatever, but just (pause) some people, just like the comments that people who—like I don’t have problems with them, but just people who I know or whatever, and they’re the ones who have made the comments “well, you act White” or
whatever. So I’m kinda like, “why’d you say that ‘you act White’?” I feel like self conscious about doing that ‘cause they’ll probably be like “oh, why is Christina—she thinks she’s like 100% Black.” Like the stupid people will say comments like that. And I’m very self conscious, I wouldn’t wanna like have to deal with that.

Christina, as discussed here and at other times during her interview, is very self conscious, especially when it comes to comments and judgments about her racial identity and “legitimacy” as a member of the Black community. In fact, she struggles to maintain her mixed identity in contexts divided along racial lines such as that created by the Multicultural Assembly. Yet, she firmly states that she identifies as mixed and explains her lack of participation in the Multicultural Assembly as, first and foremost, stemming from her mixed identity. In this sense, and keeping in mind the fact that there are no White or Black student groups performing, the Multicultural Assembly, as an isolated event, does not seem to have influenced her sense of racial identity as both Black and White. Rather, the assembly serves as an example of the situations in which Christina has had to, or perceives she might have to, choose between her White heritage and her Black heritage—a decision which she fears could result in her sense of identity and group membership being challenged, questioned, and commented on by “some people.” We may wonder, then, if other participants, despite not explicitly saying so, have similar fears when it comes to participating in their schools’ diversity education initiatives.

Based on the preceding, there are several conclusions that we can reasonably draw: (1) participants were generally not, when given a choice, involved in their schools’ diversity education initiatives; (2) participation in their schools’ diversity education initiatives often requires students to select one heritage to represent or identify with; and (3) many participants were critical of their schools’ diversity education initiatives.
because of their focus on dress, dance, and diet and their superficiality. Questions that emerge, however, include: Given participants’ expressed interest in learning about race and ethnicity, what modifications to such diversity education initiatives might have increased the interest and participation of study participants? Are multiethnic students more likely to be critical of their schools’ multicultural initiatives than other students? If so, is this based on experiences stemming from their racial and ethnic identities and the navigation of racial and ethnic categories? Although discussed in greater detail in Chapter Eight, it is important to note here that, despite a notable level of disinterest in such diversity education initiatives, several participants felt that there should be more opportunities for multiethnic students to participate in them without having to choose one heritage to represent. Likewise, it is worth pointing out again that the experiences of Jordan, Raya, and Christina lend support to the literature which posits that multiethnic individuals feel marginalized, excluded, and/or conflicted during such diversity education initiatives (see Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004).

**Integrating the Data**

Based on what participants said during their interviews, the formal aspects of participants’ K-12 schooling—those over which teachers and administrators have influence or control such as lessons and the curriculum, the collection of racial and ethnic data, classroom discussions, the existence of race and ethnicity-based student organizations, diversity education initiatives, and their interactions with students—have had very little direct influence on participants’ racial and ethnic identity formation. Of the participants, only two explicitly linked formal aspects of schooling to their identity development: Anne recalled watching a movie that changed the way she thinks about her
identity and that made her want to learn more about her Japanese heritage and Cara explained how her involvement with Hapa Club and learning about the social construction of race influenced her multiethnic identity and how she thinks about that identity. Although Frank said that the stand off between Latino and cowboy students and the conversation during his History class following the standoff made him think “in depth” about his identity, he was also quite clear that he does not feel that the formal aspects of his schooling have influenced his multiethnic identity development. This is not to say that participants have not had the opportunity to explore and learn about their racial and ethnic heritages through various projects and assignments—opportunities advocated by Cruz-Janzen (1997), Schwartz (1998), Tatum (2007), Wardle (1996, 2000b, 2004), and Wardle and Cruz-Janzen (2004)—or that they have not enjoyed or felt a sense of connection to particular curricula or lessons. There is, however, a difference between learning about and exploring one’s heritage or enjoying a specific text or video and having one’s sense of racial and ethnic identity and group membership strengthened, challenged, or altered. Taking what they said at face value, such lessons and assignments did not alter most participants’ thinking about, attachment to, and feelings regarding their racial and ethnic identities; rather, their identities influenced their experiences and perceptions of such lessons and assignments.

We may wonder, though, what the participants did not share with me during the interviews. While we can certainly assemble from their interviews a list of activities, discussions, and lessons that participants did not connect to, that they felt excluded from, or that required them to focus on one of their racial or ethnic heritages over others, they generally did not link these activities, discussions, or lessons to their racial and ethnic
identity development. Perhaps there is a connection, however, yet to be discerned by participants, between the formal aspects of their K-12 schooling and their multiethnic identity development. Perhaps they will later reflect on and reinterpret their schooling experiences differently (as I did with my own). Perhaps they did not want to critique or evaluate the formal aspects of schooling with a researcher from the field of education. Perhaps, if they did perceive that certain activities, discussions, and lessons had a negative impact on their racial and ethnic identity development, they did not want to share this perception with a researcher.

As we may recall from Chapter Three, Cruz-Janzen (1997) argued that

The need is to move beyond the traditional models of multicultural education that continue to promote the separation and isolation of Americans—and all humans—through exclusive ethnic and racial categories and the sorting of people into groups. (p. 328)

Based on the data presented in this chapter, I feel confident in concluding that the vast majority of the schools that participants have attended participate in the reification of racial and ethnic categories and the reinforcement of limited conceptions of race and ethnicity and what it means to be a member of a particular racial or ethnic group. With the exception of Cara, no student had, at school, been exposed to ideas that challenge biological conceptions of race, and we have numerous examples of silence in schools regarding race and ethnicity and few examples of engagement with these topics beyond “the basics” and Black-White relations. Moreover, the engagement with the topics of race and ethnicity in the classroom that participants did report was often brief, superficial, or focused on oppositional relations between specific racial and ethnic groups. These lessons and discussions, along with race and ethnicity-based student organizations, racial and ethnic data collection forms, and the diversity education initiatives that participants
discussed, all contribute to rigid conceptions of racial and ethnic categories and limited understandings of what it means to be a member of a specific racial and ethnic group. It is no wonder, then, that participants discussed not being seen as “[insert racial or ethnic category] enough” or were told that they do or do not “act [insert racial or ethnic category].” Recalling the literature reviewed in Chapter Three, these findings are perhaps to be expected given the analysis of, for example, Cruz-Janzen (1997), Dolby (2000), and Gosine (2002) who point out the tendency of multicultural education to “encourage people to think in terms of discrete, bounded collectivities that possess recognizable sets of attributes that distinguish one group from another” (Gosine, 2002, p. 96).

At the same time, and as discussed in more detail in Chapter Eight, students expressed a sincere desire for more engagement with race and ethnicity in their classes, and the teachers who were talked about most favorably were those who introduced these topics in the classroom. Given the silence surrounding race and ethnicity in most participants’ schools, it is also no wonder that these topic are perceived by participants to be “taboo” and “uncomfortable” (Tatum, 2007). Additionally, the silence regarding multiethnicity beyond references to the so-called “mulatto” population is striking. As the topic of multiethnicity is so seldom discussed in participants’ schools, it is not terribly surprising that so many participants feel that their multiethnic identity is often not recognized by others and that they are not accepted members of multiple racial and/or ethnic groups.

A review of Andrea’s experiences illustrates the above points well. Andrea generally feels that she is not recognized as multiethnic (in large part because of her physical appearance), that others do not see her as an “authentic” Iranian, and that there is
no “middle ground” for her to live on. Indeed, she feels that her multiethnic identity is often challenged by others “even though [she] really strive[s] to be more than just brown hair and blue eyes.” Thus, she felt a strong sense of “kinship” to the people in the video she recalled who “are half Hispanic and they didn’t look it.” She appreciates having a teacher who recognizes “both sides” and feels left out when she is never called on to share her stories and her family’s history in class because, as she said, there are “more authentic” Persians in her classes. Because she identifies as both Persian and White, she did not know whether she should step into the circle when “non-White” students were asked to do so and ended up straddling it. Because of these and similar experiences, Andrea generally feels that multiethnic individuals are “left out” of the curriculum or only mentioned as a “side note.” In each instance, she discussed her identity as determining her response to these lessons, activities, and interactions and did not say that watching the video, being asked to step into a circle, or multiethnic individuals not being included in the curriculum particularly influenced her sense of self as an Iranian/White multiethnic individual. At the same time, though, she is troubled by these experiences and her perceived need to constantly “prove” she is Iranian. It seems clear from the data that the reification of racial and ethnic categories and the general silence regarding multiethnicity in her schools have, despite her not saying so explicitly, played a significant role in shaping others’ perceptions of her, her experiences, and, thus, her identity.

What we lack is a list of activities, discussions, interactions, and lessons that (intentionally or otherwise) supported or assisted participants’ racial and ethnic identity formation processes such as those put forward by, for example, Cruz-Janzen (1997),
Returning to Cara’s schooling experiences, we see that hers were significantly different from those of the other participants. Her school was the only one with a multiethnic student organization and she was the only student to have learned about the social construction of race. Cara’s involvement in Hapa Club and her class on genocide did not merely influence but actually supported her multiethnic identity construction. It is important to note, however, that Cara was one of three participants to attend a private school and that, based on my understanding of Cedar Grove, the school has financial resources and a level of independent control over the curriculum not often found in public schools. Nevertheless, we can conclude that the formal aspects of K-12 schooling can positively influence and support the racial and ethnic identity development of multiethnic students. In fact, based on their recommendations for educators presented in Chapter Eight, participants clearly recognize that schools could better support their academic, social, and personal experiences and their multiethnic identity development.

Several other themes and findings emerging from these data merit further attention. First, we can clearly see the impact that the perceptions of others have on the racial and ethnic identities of participants, and particularly their sense of membership in one or more of their racial or ethnic heritage groups (Root, 1998). The impact of these perceptions was especially evident in their discussions of race and ethnicity-based student organizations and Christina’s discussion of the Pine Mountains Multicultural Assembly. Second, woven through these data are comments related to the racial and ethnic diversity of participants’ schools (see, for example, comments made by Anne, Marie, Raya, and Jill). Both of these themes are addressed in much greater detail in the following chapter.
where we clearly see the influence of school demographics and reflected appraisals (Cooley, 1902; Khanna, 2004; Tatum, 1997) on participants’ identities. Third, I draw attention to a statement made by Marie. As we may recall, Marie said “the way a lot of people understand is when they see similarities between what they’re learning and themselves.” As previously discussed, across the literature related to K-12 curriculum and students’ racial and ethnic identities, the consensus is clear: maintaining the typically Eurocentric curriculum either fails to support or actively hinders the identity development of minoritized students, while a curriculum that acknowledges, incorporates, and builds on students’ cultures, histories, and experiences supports their identity construction processes (see, for example, Castenell and Pinar, 1993; Cruz-Janzen, 1997; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; Nieto, 2000; Shields, 2003). For those who identify strongly as multiethnic, we can confidently conclude that, based on these data, they have seen few similarities between “what they’re learning and themselves.” These participants’ feelings about this disconnect between their own identities and experiences and the curriculum, while largely absent from the data presented here, are much more evident in Chapter Eight.

Again, only two of the participants explicitly linked their experiences of the formal aspects of schooling discussed here to their racial and ethnic identity development. The data presented here, however, taken together, paint a picture of schools as sites in which racial and ethnic categories and the boundaries between them are reinforced; in which race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity are seldom, if ever, discussed in detail; in which participants are often confronted with instances in which they must chose to identify with or represent one of their racial and ethnic heritage groups; and in which
multiethnic students may feel little connection to the curriculum. These data constitute the backdrop against which the data related to the informal/social aspects of participants’ K-12 schooling, as presented in the following chapter, are best understood. Moreover, the data presented here are necessary for contextualizing participants’ general reflections on schooling and their recommendations for educators which are presented in Chapter Eight.
CHAPTER SEVEN: PARTICIPANTS’ EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE INFORMAL ASPECTS OF K-12 SCHOOLING

In this chapter, I present and analyze the data related to the informal and social aspects of participants’ K-12 schooling and the perceived influence of these features of their schooling experiences on their racial and ethnic identity development. The data are organized according to the following topics: school diversity, friendships, stereotypes, challenged identities, and racial tension at school. Within the topic of friendships, two predominant themes emerged that are discussed separately: (1) diverse friendship networks and boundary crossing and (2) friends with similar identities and heritages. Although participants’ perceptions and experiences related to these aspects of schooling vary considerably, we can see, as a general matter, the significant impact that the informal aspects of schooling have had on their racial and ethnic identity development.

School Diversity

Nearly all of the participants (the notable exceptions are Hannah and Andrea) had a fair amount to say about the diversity of their schools, and the topic was often introduced to the interviews by the participants. Although only two participants (Anne and Cara) explicitly linked formal aspects of their K-12 schooling to their racial and ethnic identity development, more than half of them drew clear connections between the racial and ethnic diversity of their schools, the development of their racial and ethnic identities, and how they experience these identities. This is consistent with Lopez’s (2004) finding that “The diversity of the social environments in which adolescents operate can influence how they situate themselves racially/ethnically” (p. 29).
The data related to school diversity reveal a significant difference in the language used by participants from different schools to describe the social and personal implications of their racial and ethnic identities. Those participants who recognized and discussed their schools as racially and ethnically diverse—most notably those from Pine Mountains and Bridges—used phrases like “I really don’t feel as if I stand out” (Frank), “I can feel okay” (Kendra), “it doesn’t matter…I can just be whatever I want” (Jen), and “it’s out in the open that I am what I am…it is something to be proud about” (Renee). This is not to say that students who have attended less diverse schools necessarily encounter significant social obstacles or struggles in their multiethnic identity construction processes, but they certainly do not use the same language to describe how they feel about their racial and ethnic identities. Josh, for example, said “I kind of stand out” and “people look at me differently” at Deer Valley, Dana reported feeling singled out when asked to provide the “non-White” perspective in her classes or during the check for head lice (see Chapter Six), and Barry (before transferring to Pine Mountains) discussed his experiences at a mostly White middle school as a “down point” for him culturally and recalled thinking “I think it would be easier if I was White.”

As discussed below, based on the data, we can conclude that the racial and ethnic diversity (or lack thereof) of participants’ schools has had a significant impact on their racial and ethnic identity development. In addition, we can conclude that (1) participants’ transitions between schools with differing levels and types of racial and ethnic diversity and integration and (2) the presence or absence of fellow students representing specific racial and ethnic heritages, are important factors shaping participants’ racial and ethnic identity development.
Several students (e.g. Barry, Christina, Jill, Mialany, Hip Hapa, Raya, Jen, and Anthony) discussed their transitions between schools with different degrees and types of racial and ethnic diversity. Hip Hapa, for example, has always attended what he considers to be very diverse schools, but his experiences have differed significantly from school to school. In the interview excerpts that follow, Hip Hapa discusses moving from a very diverse and integrated elementary school to a middle school that included students who had attended diverse but segregated elementary schools. This transition marked the beginning of a “negative” period in Hip Hapa’s life during which he got “a lot of crap for who [he] hung out with” and began to wonder if there was something “wrong” with him. By the end of 8th grade, however, Hip Hapa realized that what he thinks of himself matters more than what others think of him. Nevertheless, we can clearly see the impact of his transition between elementary school and middle school on his multiethnic identity development.

My elementary [school] was incredibly cool, because you had people of every single race at my school. I don’t think there was a race that wasn’t represented. And there wasn’t—it was incredibly multiracial. And we just didn’t, for us it wasn’t multiracial, it was just like we’re all kids. It was what it was. So all of these lines in defining ourselves, it didn’t really happen until 6th grade. And then we had to go to middle school with all the other kids who were going to the really super segregated elementary schools.

[Later in the interview]

Like kindergarten through 5th grade it was basically like I said. Everybody was different, everybody was okay with it, because it’s not like you were thinking of anything different. So that was really nice. Sixth grade is when you, or at least I began to get attacked for what I chose to do and who I chose to hang with. So, what middle school ended up doing was, it was largely negative. Because I wasn’t thinking like I am now, so it was really like “is there something wrong with me? I’m alone, this sucks. Why?” And I guess more towards the end of the 8th grade I started to kind of develop this idea of “well, why am I even thinking that? Like, I’m
comfortable with me, and that’s all that really matters.” And more through high school, especially since my group of friends were all incredibly diverse both in how we look and what we do, so I guess more in high school it was just like we’re comfortable with ourselves, so let’s just suffer through four years of this.

Barry also discussed his experiences of transitioning between schools with different levels of racial diversity and integration. As he explained, transitioning from a predominantly White middle school to Pine Mountains was “a big step culturally-wise” that “kind of helped me rebuild my confidence in the world, you know, culturally speaking or becoming more comfortable with my culture.” In his writing activity, Barry described Pine Mountains as “one of the most diverse and culturally rich schools in the area.”

Barry: I had a really bad middle school experience. It was one of the, you know, kind of the down points in my life now that I look back on it. Like when I was going to 8th grade, I was like “Oh yeah, it’s good.” Then I was like, you know, “That wasn’t so good.” This certain group of people discriminated, kind of like the popular kids, and then they kind of discriminated against me.

Erica: So how is it different at Pine Mountains than at your middle school?

Barry: I went to [school name], and they were really, really, really cliquey. And there was only about, you know, one race. Everyone else was a minority. It was pretty much White. Yeah, pretty much that’s how it was…I remember one time in middle school I was thinking that it would be so much easier, you know, life would be so much easier if I didn’t have to answer all these questions first…When I came to Pine Mountains, it was a big step culturally-wise, just because I was so accepted. And I was used to always being on the defense on a lot of subjects. And here it was just, “Hey, me too.”

Erica: So then how is it different at Pine Mountains?

Barry: I think because there’s so many different races here and we’re so multicultural that we’re more accepting of different cultures. Like we’ve seen this, it’s not that big of a deal.
Erica: So the diversity at Pine Meadows—

Barry: Kind of helped me rebuild my confidence in the world, you know, culturally speaking or becoming more comfortable with my culture.

During the focus group with students from Pine Mountains, Barry repeated many of these ideas. In the following excerpt, Barry explains that at one point in elementary school he thought “it would be easier if I was White” because the vast majority of his classmates were White and he looked different from everyone else. When we juxtapose this comment with his description of his “comfort with [his] culture” at Pine Mountains, we can clearly see the impact his schools’ racial and ethnic diversity has had on his sense of identity.

I went to [elementary school] which was another primarily White school, it wasn’t discriminatory, but I knew that I looked different than everyone else. And so, I was just more aware of that as a whole. And I remember saying when I was little kid, “You know, I think it would be easier if I was White.”

For Hip Hapa and Barry, as for several other participants, their transitions between schools brought a change in their racial or ethnic identities, how they were experienced, and/or how they thought and felt about their identities. Given that so many participants discussed a situational sense of identity (Basu, 2004; Renn, 2004a; Root, 1996a; Tatum, 1997), changing according to the people they are around, it is not surprising that these physical transitions, from one context to another, coincided with significant shifts in their racial and ethnic identity development.

Given that so many participants discussed a situational sense of identity, it is also not surprising that the presence (or absence) of students representing specific racial and ethnic groups had such a significant influence on participants’ racial and ethnic identities. Anthony, for example, described feeling closer to his Filipino heritage while attending
schools with lots of other Filipino students, and Marie reported identifying, at times, “more [as] White” because she goes to a nearly all White school. Likewise, David, who is Italian and Portuguese but identifies more with his Portuguese heritage, attributes this sense of identity to the fact that he is exposed more to his Portuguese family members and the Portuguese culture than he is to the Italian side of the family, which he described as “so Americanized that you can’t even tell [they’re Italian] any more.” David also attributes his strong sense of identity as Portuguese to the fact that he has always gone to school with many other Portuguese students. He said:

I went to [school name] in [city name]. And in that part of [city name], it’s predominantly either Black, Hispanic or Portuguese. It kind of worked well, because there was a lot of Portuguese people in my class [and] in the whole area. So I mixed well with the Portuguese kids and Hispanic kids or Latino kids, because they kind of feel a whole bond in that whole category...I have a lot of Portuguese friends. I don’t know how it worked that way, but there’s a lot of Portuguese people out here, and you kind of feel like if you’re Portuguese you’re closer than someone who’s not Portuguese.

Both the influence of transitions between schools with different degrees and types of racial and ethnic diversity and integration and the influence of the presence (or absence) of students representing specific racial and ethnic groups are well illustrated in the following excerpt from Christina’s interview. Christina explained that she went to a mostly White elementary school and that in 5th grade she realized that she was different from the other students. Up until that point, Christina did not know that she had a Black father, but, upon considering that “White and White don’t make Brown,” asked her mom who her dad is. It is safe to assume that Christina would have figured out that her dad is not White at some point, but it was because she went to an almost all White school that she realized “wow, these kids are all White and I’m not.” We can also assume that, prior
to 5th grade, Christina did not identify as multiethnic. Christina also talked about moving from a mostly White middle school to one that was “basically straight Black or Mexican,” at which point Christina connected with the Black culture and developed strong ties to the Black community at school. Despite having grown up in a household of White family members and having attended nearly all White schools until 7th grade, Christina now “feel[s] more comfortable hanging out with Black people.”

[I first realized I was mixed] in the like 5th grade, and I was at an elementary school where it was mostly White kids there, ‘cause my mom is White and I don’t know my dad, so I grew up, like my brothers and sisters are White. So I’m the only mixed one…Yeah, and I’m the oldest too, but I just, I never noticed until I was in about 5th grade and then, it was weird, I just noticed one day, I was like “wow, these kids are all White and I’m not.” And then I asked my mom, “mom, who’s like, who’s my dad?” Because, I see the dad I call dad is White and I just asked them, because I know white and white don’t make brown….If you’d seen pictures of me in elementary school, obviously I was younger, so I was different, but just like, even my mom says I just act hecka, I act a lot different. Even from when I was in 7th grade, ‘cause once I got into 8th grade I had switched schools, ‘cause I went to [school name] in middle school for 6th and 7th grade and that [school] had some Black people, but it was mostly White too. And then in 8th grade I switched and then went to [school name] and that was like basically straight Black or Mexican there. So that’s when my mom said that she’d seen a big difference in me from the way I dress, the way I talk, the way I acted. She said [it was] just a big change. And it’s not because – I just felt comfortable. Once I started hanging out with [Black students], that’s what it was, like when I started hanging out with them, I had fun and I just felt more comfortable around Black people. And I love my mom and I love everybody in my family, I love White people, I don’t have any problem with that, but I just feel more comfortable hanging out with Black people.

Clearly, that the diversity of her schools (or lack thereof) has significantly shaped Christina’s racial identity is irrefutable.

Two other themes emerging from the data related to school diversity are discussed further in the following sections. First, several of the participants (e.g. Amaya, Christina, Anthony, Raya, Kendra, Hip Hapa, Jill, and Mialany) discussed the racial and ethnic
segregation of students at their schools—segregation that is experienced by individual participants in quite different ways. Second, we begin to see the significant influences of school friendships and peer networks on the racial and ethnic identity development of participants—influences which are explored in detail in the next section.

**Friendships**

This section includes a presentation and analysis of the data related to participants’ friendship networks and interactions with friends. From these data two predominant themes emerged: (1) diverse friendship networks and boundary crossing and (2) friends with similar identities and heritages. Due to a dearth of literature exploring multiethnic students’ perspectives on the influence of friendship networks on their identity development (Sheets, 2004), it is difficult to determine if the findings discussed here reflect or support those of prior research. The findings do, however, challenge notions of multiethnic students as socially “marginal” (see Fryer, Kahn, Levitt, & Spenkuch, 2008).

**Diverse Friendship Networks and Boundary Crossing**

As stated, racial and ethnic segregation at schools emerged as a theme in many of the interviews (e.g. Anthony, Kendra, Raya, Barry, Christina, Mialany, Hip Hapa, Jill). Several of the participants, however, and most notably those at diverse schools, discussed having diverse groups of friends representing many different racial and ethnic groups. Among those participants who attended schools that they described as segregated, several discussed feeling that they can more easily cross the racial and ethnic boundaries between students because they are multiethnic. Kendra, for example, talked about hanging out
with friends representing various racial groups and went on to say that she thinks the different groups of students at Pine Mountains are more accepting of her because she is multiethnic.

Kendra: [My Black friends], they’re like “Oh, you know Kendra’s half Black, da da da da da.” And just start laughing and playing around with me. And then I have, ‘cause at [Pine Mountains], there’s so many different races, so you can tell there’s different groups everywhere, but me, like you could find me around everywhere, like one minute I’ll be with the Black people and the Latin people, and one minute I’ll be on the other side with my little White friends and then you know I have all different friends and they’re all mixed races too, so it makes it easier.

Erica: So do you think [being multiethnic] is an advantage socially?

Kendra: I would say it is, yeah.

Several of the other participants from Pine Mountains also noted the significant racial segregation that takes place at their school. Like Kendra, Raya, both at Pine Mountains and at her other schools, felt that she could more easily “get away with” going between the various groups of students because she is multiethnic. In the excerpts below, Raya discusses code switching (Doss & Gross, 1994) or, as she puts it, her ability to “change it up a little bit” depending on whether she is with White people or Black people.

Raya: If I’m with White people, my personality just changes. I tend to like, “ah-huh, what are you talking about?” (in a high-pitched voice) you know, like that. And then when I’m with Black people I’m like (sucks teeth) “shoot” (low voice). You know, it just changes with things, and it’s really easy for me to change that because I’m around both sides at my house and outside of my house…I’ve never had times when I’m like “oh, I don’t fit in, I’m Black.” Alright, I’ll just change it up a little bit, you know. I’ve never felt like “maybe I should just sit over here.” And I can get away with it. ‘Cause there’s White people who’ll try to do it and they’ll be like “uh” (not convinced sounding) and Black people stare at them like they’re crazy.

[Later in the interview]

Erica: Would you say that there were specific challenges socially?
Raya: Socially? Well no, that’s what I’m saying, just because I could go to whichever group I wanted to, like “oh the Black people aren’t here today, let me go to the White people or the White people aren’t here today, let me go to the Black people.”

Erica: You could have multiple cliques.

Raya: Yeah, “look, there’s some Mexicans let me just go over there.” Everybody asks me if I am Latina anyways.

This notion of being able to more easily move between groups of students organized according to race and/or ethnicity was also discussed by Kelley, Jen, and Jill. Kelley, a student at Deer Valley, feels like a “middleman” and that she can associate with both Asian and White students; Jen discussed the segregation that occurs between the Brown and non-Brown students at Pine Mountains and her ability to identify and associate with both groups of students; and Jill noted the segregation that occurs at Parkside and her ability to “break the boundaries” between students. Jill said:

All the African American kids sit at the bricks (at school). All the Cambodians sit somewhere else. All the Mexicans sit somewhere else…And it’s just weird, because I mostly have—like I have my group, but like there’s three of them. So I like float around to everywhere…And it’s weird because I’ll go to this group and I’ll hug someone. And I’ll go to the other group and I’ll hug someone. And I’m like, “what’s up, how are you doing?” to the random person who doesn’t look like me at all. Then I’ll go over to the other group. And it’s just, it’s weird how you can like break the boundaries.

Hip Hapa, Frank, Anthony, and Dana, also discussed having very diverse groups of friends. Hip Hapa described his friends as “incredibly diverse both in how we look and what we do” and Frank said, “I have a very diverse group of friends, so nobody really gets singled out or labeled.” Anthony also said that he has “different groups of friends” despite the fact that “a lot of people [at Oak View] just stick with one group of people.” Moreover, when asked if there are any advantages of being multiethnic said, Anthony
said, “Advantages? Well, I guess I can identify with a lot more people.” Similarly, Dana discussed feeling as though she can blend in more easily with different groups of people because of her personality, her “experiences of being mixed,” and her ability to “fit in” wherever she goes because of her appearance. She said, “So, I mean, I definitely can pretty much fit in wherever I go, because I’m kind of like skin color wise, kind of in the middle, yeah.”

We may recall from Chapter Three, Fryer, Kahn, Levitt, and Spenkuch’s (2008) study conducted with Black-White identified students, the data from which they found to be “largely consistent with the ‘marginal man’ hypothesis (Park, 1928, 1931; Stonequist 1935, 1937)” (p. 5). Based on their findings, these researchers concluded that “mixed race adolescents – not having a natural peer group – need to engage in more risky behaviors to be accepted” (p. 2). It is important to keep in mind that the data presented in this section primarily relate to participants’ (not all of whom are of Black-White heritage) experiences with their friends (as opposed to peers or classmates), and that, as evidenced in the later sections, some participants have also had quite negative social experiences as a result of their multiethnic heritages. Nevertheless, the data related to participants’ friendships certainly refute the image of multiethnic students as socially marginal: having diverse friendship networks and the ability to cross racial and ethnic boundaries emerged as common themes during many of the interviews. Indeed, particularly at racially and ethnically segregated schools, being multiethnic seemingly provides a social advantage that allows participants to more easily move between different groups of students. As noted by Raya, Christina, and Jen, such movement between groups of students can be more difficult for monoethnic students.
No fewer than ten participants reported having a diverse group of friends, and we know from the data related to school demographics that the participants who attend racially and ethnically diverse schools, and, thus, are surrounded by students representing various racial and ethnic heritages, were more likely to describe their identities and the social impact of these identities in positive terms. Even if these participants did not explicitly say so, it seems reasonable to conclude that having a diverse group of friends has supported their racial and ethnic identity development—a conclusion supported by Rockquemore and Laszloffy (2005) who assert that “A diverse peer group allows greater opportunity to develop a multifaceted view of race and expand children’s options in terms of their own racial identity” (2005, p. 101).

Friends with Similar Identities and Heritages

Nine of the participants (Jasmine, Hannah, Raya, Jill, Kelley, David, Amaya, Christina, and Renee) reported having multiethnic friends or friends with whom they have a shared heritage or sense of identity. Jasmine, Raya, Jill, Renee, and Hannah, for example, all said that several of their best friends are multiethnic. As Hannah explained,

I have friends, there’s three or four of my close friends that are actually half Asian and half White. So when I’m with them I don’t feel any, I mean like, I don’t feel any different…It’s just like I don’t even think of myself as being any different because they don’t make me feel any different.

Kelley, David, Amaya, and Christina all discussed having friends with whom they share a racial or ethnic heritage. Although Kelley initially had a difficult time making Asian friends, she now feels that she and her close friends “can understand each other more” because they all have Asian heritage. Likewise, David who has a strong sense of identity as Portuguese feels that he can “bond even more” with other Portuguese students and
Amaya feels that it is easier for her to mix with African American students because she is mostly exposed to African American culture at home.

Christina very explicitly linked the racial heritage of her friends to her own identity development. During her interview, Christina explained “all of my family, my uncles and everyone like that, is White, and I never met my real dad, so I am always around my White family.” As she said, having Black friends provides her with the opportunity to connect with and learn about her “Black side” which she felt was missing from her life.

Christina: They’re Black and they have their Black families and stuff and they live, I guess, a different way than what I grew up as. And then, because I’m mixed, I didn’t really have the Black part of me. I don’t know any part of my Black side so because of that I’m interested in like knowing about…

Erica: Finding out about that side…

Christina: Yeah, so that’s why I wanted to, that’s why I just always—even when I got into middle school, I’ve always just been hanging out with Black kids or whatever, ‘cause I was interested in that ‘cause I never had that. So, maybe if I was White, maybe I wouldn’t be like that, ‘cause I wouldn’t—not that I wouldn’t be interested, but I wouldn’t be feeling like I was missing something. You know?

Based on these data it seems that students benefit from having friends who share a common heritage or sense of identity, because shared experiences may form the basis of understanding (a la Kelly’s experiences), because such friendships can provide them with the opportunity to learn about one or more of their heritages (a la Christina), and because such friendships can mean that students are less likely to feel “different.” I note that this is entirely consistent with the previously discussed finding that students benefit from having a diverse group of friends.
Stereotypes

What the data in this section principally demonstrate is the persistence of stereotypes in participants’ schools. Indeed, quite a few of the participants discussed the stereotypes that are imposed on them at school, and nearly all of the participants with Asian heritage discussed the “model minority” stereotypes that get applied to them (Lee, 1996). Hannah and Anne, for example, both of whom identify as Japanese and White, reported that some of their classmates assume they will do well academically because they are Asian. Hannah said, “Sometimes people make jokes like ‘well, you’re Asian so you’ll do really well’ but it doesn’t bother me.” Likewise, Anne said, “I think people, when they find out I’m of Asian descent, they kind of go, ‘oh, why don’t you sit next to me so I can look on your paper on the test’ kind of thing. And it’s like you’re just expecting that I’m smart, when you’re probably going to get a better grade than I would.” Jordan, Jill, Cara, and Kelley, all of whom identify as Chinese and White, also discussed the stereotypes related to academic performance that get applied to them. As Jordan explained, “I think there’s a stereotype of Asian people or Chinese people working really hard in school. So I think a lot of people associate me with that, because I’m half Chinese.” Jill said, “for the people that didn’t know me, it was because I was Asian [that] I did well. Like ‘she looks like she could be Asian, she must be doing well, she must just have it in her genes.’” Similarly, Cara reported:

I actually do think that people think that you’re smarter if you’re Chinese, but like book smart…It’s not so much like the actual intelligence, it’s the work ethic, because people have this idea that Chinese people are really hard workers, and like they’re slightly unethical – like they’ll do whatever it takes to like get the job done.
Although Hannah, Anne, Jordan, Jill, Cara, Kelley, and Hip Hapa all mentioned the stereotypes of Asians that get applied to them, none described these imposed stereotypes as accurate or fitting. Hip Hapa, for example, said, “whenever somebody brought up the stereotype that Asians were smart, I was like ‘well then why am I not super good at math?’”

While the previous excerpts depict the stereotypes that often get applied to study participants, in those that follow, we see the stereotypes and perceptions Anne and Jill have of the Asian students at their schools and why they do not feel as though they fit in with them. Interestingly, Anne feels that she does not fit in with the Asian students because she does play sports, whereas Jill feels she does not fit in with them, in part, because she does not play sports. As we know from the section on race and ethnicity based student organizations, several participants worry about being perceived as not “[insert racial or ethnic group] enough” to join such organizations. As we see in Jill’s excerpt, she perceives herself as “not Chinese enough” based on her stereotypes of Chinese students.

Anne: There’s Asian kids at our school, you know, they eat Asian food all the time and they hang out with, you know, Asian kids, and it’s—I guess this is a stereotype, but a lot of Asians are more quiet, you know, submissive, studious, and that kind of thing. And that’s not really me. You know, school’s a struggle for me. I do sports and I’m tall, you know, so I don’t always fit into to the Asian stereotype.

Jill: At Green Meadows I don’t think I thought about race until the end of the year when it had subconsciously gotten to me so much that I was the only person in those classes who—either I wasn’t Asian enough—I had an Asian say, “oh, Jill, you don’t count because you’re only half Asian. That’s why you get 98% and not 100%. Like you get an A- because you’re half.” I mean, I’ve always felt I’m not strongly connected to my Chinese side of the family, and I don’t speak Cantonese. Like I’d go to school, and
when I was at Green Meadows, all the Chinese people, the nerdy Chinese people, whose parents moved out to [city] so that they could go play sports. I don’t play sports. I’m so athletically challenged…And I was like, “I don’t fit in with you. That’s not who I am. I don’t want to be part of your group, because I’m not Chinese enough.”

The fact that Jill and Anne both invoked stereotypes of Asians to explain why they do not feel as though they fit in with the other Asian students at their schools indicates to me that they have internalized many of the stereotypes of Asian people and that these stereotypes have influenced how they think about their own identities and “Asian-ness.” Indeed, Jill said that she does not feel “Chinese enough” to hang out with the other Chinese students at school.

Participants with Asian heritage were not the only ones to discuss the stereotypes that get imposed on them by others. Jasmine, for example, discussed the stereotypes of Arabs that her classmates invoke during her Government class and explained that Arabs are often portrayed during classroom debates as hijackers and people who go on “crazy ass jihads.” Although Jasmine said that these stereotypes have not influenced her in a “negative way,” and although she initially said that her schooling experiences have not influenced her sense of multiethnic identity, she spoke passionately and at length about these debates in the context of a broader conversation about the specific influences of K-12 schooling on her identity construction.

Josh, in discussing his perception that other students at Deer Valley High School “look at [him] differently,” mentioned the stereotypes about Jewish people that are applied to him. As he explained, when classmates find out that his dad is a diamond dealer, they make comments like “oh, Jewish people are into jewelry” and “Josh, so are you gonna become a jeweler?” Josh was quite clear in stating that these comments from
his classmates are not mean-spirited but stem from a lack of awareness and sensitivity. In discussing this lack of cultural sensitivity and awareness, Josh also talked about trying to keep kosher on Bar-B-Q Day at school. He said, “everyone would ask me why I wouldn’t eat the hamburger with the cheese.” Josh explained that, following his response, some of his classmates would make comments like, “oh, Josh, just eat it”—comments that, understandably so, seemed to annoy Josh.

Dana has a friend who challenges her Black identity, to which her response is “I’m just not stereotypically Black.” More often, however, Dana feels that stereotypes about Black people are applied to her, especially by White and Hispanic students who, she feels, treat her like a “token Black person.” Indeed, Dana expressed annoyance about the questions White and Hispanic kids ask her and the assumptions that they make about her upon finding out that she is Black (“it’s White kids and Hispanic kids who are so annoying”).

People who look at my skin color and my hair, and then think, like people who are racists, “oh, you’re gonna steal something. Oh, you’re this, you’re that.” Like coming up to me and asking me about hip hop music or rap or whatever, in school. Like that’s the most annoying thing. It’s kids my age who don’t know me thinking I’m a certain way, and I’m not. And Black kids never do that. Black kids are always fine. They don’t—they figure that I’m half something and they don’t treat me like I need to be like this. But it’s White kids and Hispanic kids who are so annoying. It’s like they want me to be friends with them, or someone who’s like part Black, just to bring in the Blackness a little, because they’re not Black at all, but they’re pretending they are.

Marie, who, like Dana, identifies as Black and White, also often encounters questions reflecting stereotypes of Black people. Marie reported feeling annoyed by the “stupid questions” that people ask her when they find out she is half Black (i.e. “How high can
you jump?” “Can you dunk?”), so much so that she often does not “really mention that [she’s] half Black” to people who do not already know.

During Cara’s interview, we engaged in a more general conversation about stereotypes. Cara, despite mentioning the “Chinese prototype” that people project onto her (see above), shared her perception that stereotypes are not taken as seriously as they once were and do not function like they used to in terms of shaping the way younger generations think. Cara also shared her belief that stereotypes have mostly become the basis for jokes which point out how “ridiculous” the stereotypes are. Cara’s discussion of stereotypes here is similar to Hannah’s (above) who said that “people make jokes” about her doing well in schools—jokes that do not bother her.

Like, we called Chinese food a couple months ago, and it was taking a real long time. So [some friends] said, “Cara get your grandmother on the phone, tell her to hurry up.” Like I was – I laughed. It was a joke, you know, because I think that to us it seems so ridiculous that someone would actually think that all Chinese people are related or that all Chinese people are good at math. Like at this point, it’s almost become, because it’s so highly publicized, “don’t do this, don’t be racist, don’t be racist, don’t make stereotypes.” Then it becomes a joke, basically.

At the Pine Mountains focus group, as during Cara’s interview, the topic of stereotypes came up several times and we engaged in a more general conversation about the topic. Following a conversation about the stereotypes that get applied to the focus group participants, we began discussing the difficulties associated with challenging stereotypes, and especially the challenge of doing so in schools. Pine Mountains focus group members seemed to feel that stereotypes continue to shape people’s perceptions and they discussed the formidable challenges associated with breaking down stereotypes “that have been around forever.” Whereas Barry and Renee expressed doubts about schools’ ability to break down stereotypes and “teach somebody to be tolerant if they’re
ignorant,” Jen said that a conversation such as the one taking place during the focus
group was one way to do just that. She noted, however, that if such conversations took
place in school “all hell could break loose in the classroom” and Renee feels that
conversations about stereotypes can get “so messy.” Despite these concerns, Barry would
like to see our arrival at the “middle ground” “where we acknowledge different races
without being stereotypical.” What is interesting is that none of the study participants
explicitly pointed to the role of schools in the perpetuation and reinforcement of
stereotypes. Nevertheless, emerging from the data, and especially the data presented in
the previous chapter, we have numerous examples of school practices that we can
reasonably interpret as reinforcing stereotypes, such as many of the diversity education
initiatives previously discussed. At the same time, we lack examples from the data of
school practices that directly challenge stereotypes.

Again, what the data in this section principally demonstrate is the persistence of
stereotypes in participants’ schools. Perhaps not surprisingly, participants did not feel that
the stereotypes that get applied to them are accurate reflections of who they are. Yet, as
we have seen here and at times in the previous two chapters, participants also invoke
stereotypes about their racial and ethnic heritage groups and those of others. Taking Jill’s
experiences as an example, at different times during her interview, she discussed being
seen by others as both Asian and not Asian based on the stereotypes they hold of Asian
people. While she feels that the stereotypes of Asians that often get applied to her are not
accurate or appropriate (and, in fact, she poked fun at the idea that her doing well in
school is because “she must have it in her genes”), she also invoked stereotypes to
explain why she does not feel “Asian enough.” All of this lends support to the idea that
Jill engages in an ongoing process of navigating other people’s perceptions of her, her own perceptions of herself, and the divisions constructed between racial and ethnic groups—all of which are influenced by stereotypes.

As Stephan (1999) explains, “The basis of stereotyping is categorization…. [W]hen we categorize people by using a group label, we are highlighting the similarity of people within the category and the ways in which these people differ from other groups” (p. 2). Racial and ethnic stereotypes, quite obviously, reinforce the divisions (both physical and conceptual) between racial and ethnic groups—the very divisions that study participants discussed having to navigate in their social interactions and as they develop a sense of identity and belonging. In other words, stereotypes influence how study participants are seen by others, and how they see themselves and others, and they serve to reinforce racial and ethnic categories and the divisions constructed between them—all of which shape participants’ experiences and identities. In this sense, by reinforcing stereotypes or leaving them unchallenged (see also Chapter Six), participants’ schools have a significant, albeit indirect, influence on their identity construction.

**Challenged Identities**

This section includes a discussion of the data related to participants’ perceptions and experiences of having their identities and “legitimacy” as members of a given racial or ethnic group challenged by classmates and peers, challenges that were also discussed in the context of race and ethnicity-based students organizations (see Chapter Six). As we will see, some participants fear having their cultural legitimacy or claims to group membership challenged—fear that we might reasonably conclude stems from past experiences of overt challenging from others. We also find numerous examples in the
Data of explicit (and sometimes aggressive) challenges to participants’ identities, cultural legitimacy, and membership in a given racial or ethnic group (Root, 1998).

Nearly every participant reported being asked questions about their racial and ethnic identities and, often times, their cultural knowledge. For many, these questions were understood as stemming from benign curiosity. For at least one third of the participants, however, these questions were, or led to, direct challenges to their identities or claims to membership in one of their heritage groups. Jen, for example, discussed being told that she is not Puerto Rican because she does not speak Spanish: “[When I say I am Puerto Rican] people are like ‘do you speak Spanish? No? Well then you’re not Puerto Rican’ and it’s like ‘what? [I’ll] slap you.’” Likewise, Kendra discussed being overtly challenged about her Black identity (she did not, however, report being challenged in the same way about her Puerto Rican, French, or Mexican identity).

[People say] “oh you’re not really Black. Just ‘cause your great grandma was Black doesn’t mean you’re Black.” And that kind of makes me mad, because it’s like, and it’s been people that I don’t even know that have said that and it’s like “how can you sit there and judge me if you don’t know me?” I was like, “you don’t know my family, you don’t know my background and how can you sit there and say that I’m not really Black?” And like they just stick by it. “oh, well you’re not Black just because your boyfriend’s Black or you’re not Black just because your cousin’s Black.” …They just make up little things and it’s like “well I’m not sitting here telling you what you are and what you’re not, ‘cause I don’t know you. But you’re just sitting there saying that I’m not this, I’m not that just because my boyfriend’s Black.” And like, stuff like that just aggravates me and makes me mad.

Likewise, Jasmine has encountered numerous challenges to her Arabic identity from other Arabic people—challenges based in large part on her phenotype and to which Jasmine responds quite strongly.

When I meet another Arabic person that is my age, they ask me specifically about my religion. “well, have you done Hajj, do you do
Ramadan? Do you pray five times a day? Go ahead, say something in Arabic.” And I have no problem, you know, I’ll go ahead and match your questions. But then when it just gets a little out of hand, when they start telling me to speak Arabic, I’ll just say F-you in Arabic, you know, like I’m better than this. Like I’ll say something like that, and they’ll just be done.

As another example, Hip Hapa reported encountering so many challenges to his identity that “none of them really stand out.” As Hip Hapa explained, based on his phenotype, people “tell” him he is Black. Thus, the challenges he receives are often directed towards his assertions of Vietnamese and Native American heritage. The second excerpt below is taken from Hip Hapa’s writing activity in which he again discusses the challenges multiethnic individuals often encounter and concludes “not being acknowledged by outside races and your own is nothing less than shitty.”

For me it was always not that they’re trying to figure out how Vietnamese I am or how much Vietnamese makes up Hip Hapa. It’s more like you’re using that—it’s more saying like “well, this is why you’re not Vietnamese.” Because whenever I say I’m Vietnamese, “do you speak Viet?” Let me see, “no, and I could explain to you why that fits in perfectly with my life, but I’m really not gonna waste that time.”…I mean, it sounds bad, but as far as the negative experiences, none of them really stand out because it happened so often, that it was just kind of normal. It was like, okay, I’m mixed, so people are telling me that I’m not. People are gonna tell me that I’m Black because I’m Brown. So, I don’t know, I got pissed off everyday. Somebody said something everyday about how I wasn’t Vietnamese or how I wasn’t Native American.

“You don’t count if you don’t speak the language.” “You can’t be both!” Sadly, this is just a taste of statements mixed people will undoubtedly hear their whole life…Being Mexican is difficult. Being an African-Mexican American is just as difficult if not a little bit more so. I don’t mean to disrespect anyone’s experiences, but not being acknowledged by outside races and your own is nothing less than shitty.

Whereas the other participants discussed the challenges to their identities either matter-of-factly or, at most, as annoying and troubling experiences, for Mialany,
challenges to her Black identity resulted in physical confrontations and, ultimately, her expulsion from school.

Mialany: I know I’m multietnic. I don’t have a strong sense of where I’m supposed to be, though. Like in a sense, I know that I’m half White, half Black, but I don’t know where I should be categorized as. ‘Cause it’s just basically you’re either Black or you’re White or you’re Mexican or you’re Indian or you’re Latino, you know?

Erica: How has that played out in your life? Can you give me an example of that.

Mialany: Not very well. Not very well. Like I went to Parkside High, and my cousins [who go to Parkside] are all Black, full Black, full African American. And I was hanging out with them and everybody was like, “well, you’re not Black enough to be hanging out with them.” My cousins didn’t say that, obviously, because they know who I am. But people are like, “you’re trying to act Black.” And I don’t—I feel like I can fit in more with the type of people that I was hanging out with. And it became this big issue to where I got jumped twice. And I got kicked out of school because I retaliated….Because you would think people at Parkside High would know, because Parkside’s so diverse and so different, and you think of [city name] as just like this hippie place, and you go to Parkside High and it’s like these kids are so evil and so mean just to be evil and mean. And I think that they just find the one thing that everybody can just—“you’re not Black. You’re skin is White.” You know, that was the one thing that they could actually find in me that was wrong or a fault that they could quickly pickup and just be like, “hey, you guys, she thinks she’s Black. She’s not Black. I’ve never seen her dad. I’ve only seen her mom,” you know?

As evidenced in the preceding excerpts and elsewhere in the data, study participants who discussed having their racial and ethnic identities and/or cultural knowledge challenged and questioned by other students did so with a certain level of emotion. Phrases like “so annoying,” “pissed off,” “it’s hard,” “get shit,” “don’t tell me what I am,” “aggravates me,” “makes me mad,” “[I’ll] slap you,” and “feel self conscious” permeate these excerpts and the related data. Although no participant openly connected the challenges and questioning they encounter to their own sense of racial and ethnic identity, certainly such questioning and challenging cumulatively undermine these
participants’ feelings of racial or ethnic group membership. Kendra, for example, maintains and asserts her Black identity, but surely she is aware that some people do not accept her as a Black woman. One wonders how often a person can have her sense of identity and group membership challenged without beginning to question it herself. Indeed, as Root (2003b) explains, “peer acceptance and rejection are critical identity influences” (p. 119). Given the constant challenges to her identity that Mialany encounters, it is not surprising that she said, “I know I’m multietnic. I don’t have a strong sense of where I’m supposed to be, though. Like in a sense, I know that I’m half White, half Black, but I don’t know where I should be categorized as.”

Root (2003b) labels such challenging as “hazing” and explains that “The experience associated with hazing may bring physical appearance, behavior, accent, bilingual capabilities, dialectical proficiencies, choice of friends, choice of romantic partner, class, parent’s occupation, clothing preference, body type, and neighborhood into the equation” (p. 119). Challenges to participants’ identities often emerge in response to a host of factors including phenotype (e.g. Andrea, Jasmine, Hip Hapa, Mialany), knowledge of languages (e.g. Jen, Jasmine, Hip Hapa), speech pattern (e.g. Christina), heredity (e.g. Kendra), religious practices (e.g. Jasmine), and the imposition of stereotypes (e.g. Dana), and draw on such features as romantic partners (e.g. Kendra), friendship choices (e.g. Mialany), and style preferences (e.g. Dana). The data related to participants’ challenged identities also clearly point to the pervasiveness of limited understandings of what it means to be [insert racial or ethnic category] and the influence of stereotypes in shaping these understandings.
Racial Tension at School

As noted in previous sections, quite a few of the participants discussed the voluntary racial and ethnic segregation of students at their schools (e.g. Amaya, Christina, Anthony, Raya, Kendra, Hip Hapa, Jill, and Mialany). For the most part, this segregation was discussed matter-of-factly and not as a source or consequence of racial and ethnic tension between students. Three of the participants, though, discussed instances of overt racial friction on their campuses. Mialany, for example, experienced feelings of discomfort and fear during a riot that took place at Parkside High School following the anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination. Mialany, who identifies as Black and White, said that she did not know what to do during the riot between Black and White students and decided to leave the campus. As we know, Mialany had previously been jumped by other students who questioned her Black identity, hence her fear of getting “busted up” for saying the wrong thing.

There was a riot at my school the day of Martin Luther King’s assassination. Two White students came to school with a Nazi flag—a confederate flag, waiving it around and dragging a brown teddy bear with a noose around it’s neck. They didn’t end up getting in trouble because it’s a freedom of speech, and [the school] didn’t have proof that there was a brown teddy bear. But that next Friday they had a riot. And I didn’t know which—like I was so against the fact that [the two students] ever did that. But then I didn’t know what to do. Like I was wearing, you know, a “Black power” shirt, but then at the same time I was like, “do I look stupid because I’m White?” But then at the same time, I agree with what [the Black students] were saying, you know what I mean? Like, this is not okay. But then on the other side there was like the White kids, and they all had a confederate flag and were like waving it in their faces. And I’m so against that. It’s crazy. And so I was just like “I’ve got to go home. I have to leave.” I couldn’t—I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know where to go. I didn’t know what to say or who to talk to. Because if I say one thing wrong, that could be my face, like I could get busted up.
During his interview, Frank discussed two activities that took place during elementary school in which students were divided by race. In the first instance, another student at school decided the teams for a game of kickball based on the “color of kids.” Frank, who identifies as Mexican and French, said the experience “caught [his] attention.” In the second instance, a few students said “you could only play this game if you were White” and they did not allow Frank to play. These occurrences, however, were not as significant to Frank as the tense event that took place at his school on Cesar Chavez Day. On that occasion, the Mexican and cowboy (i.e. White) students had a standoff in the school’s courtyard. Frank, who, again, identifies as French and Mexican, “wanted nothing to do with” the standoff and did not participate in it.

A few years ago here, we have Cesar Chavez Day at school, like where a lot of Latino kids were bringing like Mexican flags to school. And then they got into it with like the cowboys or whatever. Yeah, [the cowboys] would all bring like American flags and confederate flags and all that. It was really crazy. [They were] on either side of the courtyard. So that was maybe probably the only time that I felt that race had anything to do with my friends and I. [But] I didn’t participate in that…It wasn’t just like I look Mexican, so I’m gonna go stand with them, or on the other side. I just don’t—I don’t know why people have to profile like that.

Kendra, during both her interview and focus group, discussed the confrontations that have taken place between the Mexican and Black students at her intermediate and high schools. Kendra, who has both Black and Mexican heritage, reported not knowing what to do when such confrontations occur.

I know a lot of the Mexicans don’t really like the Blacks at our school. I don’t know if it’s anywhere else, but I know, ‘cause I’ve seen a lot of like confrontation between the Mexicans and the Blacks. But then I know a lot of the Mexicans, they know I have Black in me, but then they also know that I’m Latino, so they’re like “okay, you’re Mexican” and stuff like that. But then they also have confrontations with some of my Black friends, so I’m like in the middle, and it’s like what do I do, you know?
While it is often assumed that multiethnic students are “forced to choose” one heritage with which to identify (see Wardle, 1998, 2000b), quite interestingly, all three of these participants avoided making such a choice when instances of racial tension occurred at their schools. Mialany left school during the riot for fear of how her involvement (particularly on the side of the Black students) would affect her personal safety, Frank chose not to participate in the standoff between the Latino and cowboy students, and Kendra avoids participating in confrontations between Mexican and Black students. On-campus confrontations such as these produced feelings of confusion (Kendra), disillusionment (Frank), and fear (Mialany), and presumably reinforced for these three participants the notion that they do not fit within standard racial groupings, the divisions between which are emphasized and strengthened by such events. Indeed, the three incidents of racial tension described here point to entrenched racial divisions between which participants must navigate at school. Given that the confrontations discussed by these three participants all took place between groups of students with whom participants identify (e.g. Mialany identifies as Black and White and the confrontation was between Black and White students), we might speculate that similar confrontations have taken place between others groups of students with whom participants do not identify, with similar consequences for other multiethnic students.

**Integrating the Data**

As we can see from the data presented in this chapter, participants’ racial and ethnic identities, how they think and feel about their identities, their experiences stemming from their identities (both those that they assert and those that they are assigned), and the meaning they attach to their identities often shift during their years at
school. Whereas very few participants drew explicit connections between the formal aspects of K-12 schooling and their racial and ethnic identity development, this chapter includes numerous examples of the perceived influence of the informal and social aspects of schooling on participants’ identities. Indeed, the following exchange between me and Renee reveals an understanding of the relative importance of formal and informal aspects of schooling common to many of the participants:

Erica: Let’s just reiterate, you do not feel that school has been influential in your identity construction?

Renee: (long pause) peers-wise, yes, teacher-wise, no.

Having given my question (which was a reiteration of what she had previously said) some thought, Renee pointed to the informal and social aspects, but not the formal aspects, of her K-12 schooling as having influenced her identity development.

As we have seen, the racial and ethnic diversity of participants’ schools (or lack thereof) has a significant impact on their racial and ethnic identity development. Again, given that so many participants discussed having a situational sense of identity that shifts according to the people they are around, it is not surprising that the presence (or absence) of students representing specific racial and ethnic groups was reported to have such a significant influence on their racial and ethnic identities. This is consistent with Lopez’s (2004) finding that “when mixed-heritage students move from racially/ethnically homogeneous to more diverse school settings, it can prompt an initial or renewed assessment of their race/ethnicity identification(s), both in terms of how they conceptualize their heritage and their understandings of how others perceive them” (p. 43).
We have also seen that participants who have attended racially and ethnically diverse schools were more likely to discuss their multiethnic identity in positive terms, as a social asset, or as “not that big of a deal.” Conversely, participants who have attended more homogeneous schools were more likely to describe feeling “different” or particularly visible at school. At the same time, however, participants who attend diverse schools often pointed out the racial and ethnic segregation of students on campus, and the three participants who recalled instances of overt racial tension on campus (Mialany, Frank, and Kendra) all attend schools best characterized as racially and ethnically diverse. Such segregation and racial tension result from and reinforce the boundaries constructed between racial and ethnic groups—boundaries that participants often discussed navigating in their social interactions and that are frequently invoked during the “hazing” (Root, 2003b) that participants encounter. Based on the data, we might conclude that the optimal school setting for multiethnic students, in terms of both their social experiences and identity development, is a racially and ethnically diverse and integrated campus.

Having diverse friendship networks and the ability to cross racial and ethnic boundaries at schools also emerged as common themes during many of the interviews. Particularly at racially and ethnically segregated schools, being multiethnic seems to provide a social advantage that allows participants to more easily move between different groups of students. Nine of the participants (Jasmine, Hannah, Raya, Jill, Kelley, David, Amaya, Christina, and Renee) reported having multiethnic friends or friends with whom they have a shared sense of identity, and both Renee and Christina linked friendships to opportunities to connect with and learn about one of their heritage groups. From these findings, I infer that study participants are particularly drawn to friends who are more
likely to understand or relate to their experiences stemming from their racial and ethnic identities, from whom they do not feel particularly different, and/or around whom they do not feel as though they stand out. This inference is consistent with Sheets’ (2004) related finding that “factors of race and ethnicity were more closely tied to multiracial students’ choice of friends than were personality characteristics, common interests, and activities” (p. 140).

As we may recall from Chapter Two, at the center of my conceptualization of identity lie notions of relationship and interaction. I am particularly convinced by the idea that identities emerge through processes of negotiation and reconciliation between how individuals conceive of themselves and the identities assigned to or imposed on them by others—assigned identities which in turn shape relationships and experiences stemming from these relationships. As we may also recall from Chapter Two, Tatum draws our attention to the “looking glass self” (Cooley, 1902) or the notion that how we see ourselves is inextricably linked to how others see us and, therefore, treat us. As she says, “Who am I? The answer depends in large part on who the world around me says I am” (1997, p. 18). Given this understanding of identity development, I read the challenges to participants’ racial and ethnic identities, to their cultural legitimacy, and to their group membership as necessarily shaping their identity development processes and their outcomes. As is to be expected, study participants who discussed having their racial and ethnic identities challenged by other students did so with a notable tone of irritation and displeasure. Whether or not such challenging is actually understood by participants as influencing their racial and ethnic identities, it must certainly highlight for them the differences between how they self identify and how they are identified by others.
(described by Jenkins (2003) as internal and external definitions of one’s identity)—differences that they surely negotiate in the construction of their racial and ethnic identities. The challenges participants encounter to their asserted identities and claims to group membership also highlight the prevalence, persistence, and robustness of stereotypes about racial and ethnic groups in participants’ schools—stereotypes which reinforce the divisions between these groups. As previously noted, of the participants who discussed the stereotypes that get applied to them, none felt that these stereotypes were accurate or appropriate. Once again, we perceive the differences between how participants view themselves and how they are viewed by others.

Taken together, and consistent with the literature discussed in Chapters Two and Three, the data presented in this chapter indicate that study participants often negotiate the boundaries constructed between racial and ethnic groups—those that are physically present on their campuses and those that are imposed during interactions with peers. The data also indicate that participants often confront differences between how they self identify and the identities assigned to or imposed on them by others. What is clear from the data presented here is that others’ perceptions of study participants (often grounded in stereotypes and limited notions of what it means to be [insert racial and ethnic group]) play a significant role in shaping participants’ social experiences and their racial and ethnic identities (see Khanna, 2004). It is particularly important to keep these findings in mind as we turn our attention to participants’ reflections on schooling and recommendations for educators, as presented in the next chapter.
CHAPTER EIGHT: PARTICIPANTS’ BROADER REFLECTIONS ON SCHOOLING AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

One purpose of this study was to determine how K-12 schools might become more inclusive of, and better support the racial and ethnic identity development of, multiethnic students. As noted in Chapter Three, Cruz-Janzen (1997), Greene (2004), Schwartz (1998), Wardle (1996, 2000b, 2004), and Wardle and Cruz-Janzen (2004), among others, have provided numerous suggestions for ways in which K-12 schools might do just that. Also noted in Chapter Three is the fact that missing from much of this literature are the voices of multiethnic students and their perceptions stemming directly from their K-12 schooling experiences. Likewise, we lack suggestions for educators generated by or based directly on input from multiethnic students.

During the interviews and focus groups, several participants discussed changes that they feel educators and administrators could institute to create environments that are more inclusive of multiethnic students, that might better support their identity development, and that might improve their academic, social, and personal experiences. When participants did not volunteer such recommendations, and although they were not included in the original interview protocol, I asked participants some combination of the following questions: Would you have liked to learn (or learn more) about multiethnicity?, Do you feel that multiethnic students have particular needs, and if so, do you feel that your school (or schools in general) are meeting those needs?, and What suggestions do you have for educators who are looking for ways to support the schooling experiences and identity development of multiethnic students? Although the wording of these questions often varied slightly between interviews, the essential inquiry was always the
same. So as not to direct participants’ responses, I intentionally kept these questions rather vague. Here, I provide a summary and analysis of the data emerging in response to these questions as well as related data from the focus groups and writing activities.

Ultimately, then, the data discussed here relate to how study participants feel that educators could support their identity development and enhance their academic, social, and personal experiences in schools. As such, the following data played a significant role in shaping my own recommendations, as presented in the next chapter. Because participants’ responses to the above questions are very much rooted in their own identities and experiences, throughout this chapter I refer back to data already presented. It is, in part, for this reason that I present the data from each participant together (see Chapter Four). As we will see, despite the significant differences between individual participants’ identities and experiences, several dominant themes, discussed in detail later in the chapter, permeate the data. These themes include: a “blindness” towards multiethnic students in school; a desire to learn about race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity; the similar needs of all students; and a desire for awareness and understanding.

**Participant Perspectives**

**Hannah**

When asked if she thinks multiethnicity should be discussed more in schools, Hannah said, “yeah, I think it’s interesting and I’m sure other people would think it’s interesting too….I think it’s important because I don’t think people realize how many multiethnic people there are, ‘cause I didn’t realize.” As we know, throughout her interview, Hannah made comments like “I don’t think of myself as like completely

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14 For example, I often substituted the word “multiethnic” for the term most often used by the participants during their interviews (i.e. multiracial or mixed race).
Clearly, being multiethnic is not central to Hannah’s sense of identity, which is again made evident in her response to my question about multiethnic students’ needs. Whereas she speculated that students who think of themselves as “that” (multiethnic) may not have the opportunity to learn about “who they are” in school, she also thinks that is something “you kind of find out on your own throughout all of your experiences.” Because she does not identify strongly as multiethnic, Hannah struggled to think of recommendations for educators beyond that which she had earlier offered of including multiethnicity in the curriculum. In response to my request, she said “this is hard just because I don’t think of myself as like completely multiethnic, I just think of myself as me.”

**Frank**

As with Hannah, being multiethnic is not central to Frank’s sense of identity. In fact, as we know from his profile, Frank said “I don’t really feel that grounded or attached to any heritage. I could identify in lots of different ways, because I don’t think that it changes my personality at all…I mean, it is just your background.” This being the case, it is perhaps not surprising that Frank’s enthusiasm for lessons about multiethnicity was somewhat muted (“it can’t hurt,” “it’d be kind of cool”). Likewise, Frank’s recommendation for educators seems to stem more from a desire to answer my question than from a perceived need for educators to alter their practices.

Frank:  I don’t know, you could probably like make it aware that there are multiethnic groups.

Erica:  So raise awareness that there are multiethnic people?

Frank:  Yeah.
Hip Hapa

Hip Hapa feels that, by not focusing more on race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity beyond “bringing in a food that represents you,” educators are failing to meet the needs of all students.

[Y]ou’ve got single race kids that are ignorant of mixed race kids. And you’ve got mixed race kids that are either ignorant to themselves, and that there’s a group of them, and that they’re not alone. Just by not talking about it, it’s a problem for everybody.

As he said, classroom discussions should focus more on race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity, as well as “the fact that there’s a ‘we’ not just a ‘you.’”

Hip Hapa: I don’t know where it would fit in, but they’d have to find somewhere. Just like, “look, people are mixed, and they can be different things and that’s okay. Let’s talk about this.” I mean, if I ever become a teacher, we’re gonna talk about that in my class.

Erica: So it’s important for everybody to learn about?

Hip Hapa: I think it, yeah, it should be a standard in a grade or something, whenever they deem it okay to talk about it...I think if anything, I think there should just be more talk about the fact that there’s a “we” not just a “you” or just the concept of being mixed.

Jen

At several times during her interview, Jen mentioned the diversity of Pine Mountains and linked the school’s diversity to her sense of identity (“because this school is so diverse, I can just be whatever I want”). At the same time, when it comes to the formal aspects of schooling, Jen feels that there is little attention paid to multiethnic students. As she said, there is nothing in school that makes it “better” or “worse” for them, in part because “the school’s like blind to mixed races.” Jen is interested in having multiethnicity included in the curriculum “just to bring attention towards it,” and she indicated that discussions about multiethnicity would be good to have in the classroom.
because “a lot of students would have something to say,” which I take to mean that a lot of students would be interested in and would relate to the topic. Jen pointed out, however, that teachers might feel uncomfortable talking about multiethnicity or fear saying “something wrong.” Although Jen does not feel that multiethnic students have particularly unique needs, in an effort to identify a recommendation for educators, she said that a Mixed Race Awareness Day would be “perfect” at Pine Mountains because it has so many multiethnic students.

**Anthony**

Anthony spoke tentatively about the importance of discussions about multiethnicity in the classroom and speculated that such discussions might mean that other multiethnic students would not have to “figure it out” by themselves. Based on his comments, I interpret “it” as one’s multiethnic identity. He also said that such discussions need to take place when students are younger, but pointed out that it is not necessarily a school’s role to “tell” students “what [they] are.”

> I don’t know. Maybe [multiethnicity] should have [been discussed] so people would have been more aware of it. And maybe when you were younger, like in kindergarten or 1st grade so that you could actually realize that you would have been multiethnic. So maybe I think it should be. Kind of like you don’t have to figure it out by yourself. I’m not saying the school should be telling you what you are, but you should become aware of it more at a younger age, I think…[But] like what are you supposed to say, like “oh here are the mixed race kids, guys.”

**Jill**

Although Jill’s comments are not nearly as tentative as Anthony’s, they both linked discussions about multiethnicity to “figur[ing] out who you are.” Jill was quite clear that schools cannot force students to explore their identities, but said that subtly integrating multiethnicity into the curriculum might provide students with the opportunity
to “start looking at who they are and where they come from.” Jill also pointed out that learning about multiethnicity would be “helpful for everyone.” As she said, “it’s like during Black History Month you learn about African American people and how much influence they’ve had, but then everyone learns about that and everyone benefits.”

We already know that Jill thinks that there should be more engagement with the topics of race and ethnicity in classrooms, but she also feels that “nobody wants to talk about race in a place where they’re forced to do it.” Indeed, as discussed in Chapter Six, Jill feels that lessons about race and ethnicity do not take place more often in schools due, in part, to the lack of safe environments in which to talk about these topics and fears people have about saying the wrong thing or being silenced. Jill is also critical of diversity education initiatives that are superficial and attempt to “focus on diversity…all in one leap.” All of these themes reemerged in response to my request for a suggestion for educators. Additionally, Jill discussed the fact that, while it is “important to talk and help the multiethnic students,” her school has to “deal with the achievement gap” between students and “make sure that everyone is getting through.” Ultimately, Jill feels it is important for educators to build awareness about difference and to establish with younger students that “difference is okay” and that accomplishing these tasks will require “planning and…trials and just figuring things out…slowly.” She said:

I think it’s just building awareness…I don’t even know if it’s about race, I think it’s just—if you’re starting with younger kids just establishing that difference is okay…It can’t be just like “oh, okay,” like there has to be planning and there has to be lots of like trials and just figuring things out. So that, instead of just instituting this one thing all throughout the country, like you can do it slowly.
Cara

As discussed in Chapter Six, learning about the social construction of race had a significant impact on Cara’s thinking and her sense of racial and ethnic identity. Thus, when asked for a recommendation for educators that might benefit multiethnic students, Cara discussed at length the importance of learning about (and emphasizing the difference between) race, culture, and ethnicity. As Cara said, if more schools offered lessons such as these, no one would see race “any other way again” and there might be less confusion about multiethnic people (i.e. fewer people would wonder “what are they really?”)—confusion and misconceptions about race to which Cara reacts strongly.

I think that it should be something that—I mean the most powerful lessons are the things that really get embedded with us, are the ones that are repeated over and over again. We see them in every discipline, you know, in school, outside of school. It really is like a part of your life. And so I think that what I would really say is that to emphasize the difference between race and culture and ethnicity, because they are three distinct things, and it’s so easy to say multiethnic, multiculture, multiracial, you know what I mean. But I think that if people think critically about what each of those mean, it will become apparent…[B]ecause when you think about race, though, you’re like “this is absolutely ridiculous that this is such—like why is this a standard? Why is it like you should be this race? Why do you need to correlate characteristics or traditions and physical appearance?” And I think that is something that when you hear about it and you think about it, it’s so obvious that you can’t – like you’ll never see it any other way again. But until then, it just sort of totally slips under the radar. And that’s why there’s so much sort of confusion, you know, like “what are they really?” “oh yeah, I totally sympathize. I’m so sorry that you’re a victim of whatever.” But they don’t really get until you’re like “it’s because it’s ridiculous, that’s why I’m upset, because it’s ridiculous.”

Jasmine

When asked if she feels that schools are meeting the needs of multiethnic students, Jasmine said that multiethnic students are “Not really thought about, I guess. They’re not really considered as having special needs, because they’re not really
considered, period.” Several themes from Jasmine’s interview come together in her response to my request for a suggestion or recommendation for educators. As seen in the previous chapter’s section on stereotypes, Jasmine discussed at length the stereotypes of Arabs that emerge during debates in her Government class. In response to my request, Jasmine suggests that teachers should have students share their ethnicity with their classmates during Government and similar classes because “it’s very important for kids to be in touch with their background and where they come from. And kids need to be aware that there are other people out there that are like them and that are not like them.” In the previous chapter, we also found out that Jasmine’s Arabic identity and membership in the Arabic community are often challenged by other Arabs (in large part because of her phenotype) and that she responds strongly to this challenging. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, Jasmine thinks that teachers should promote discussions about students’ backgrounds and heritages in the classroom “because sometimes kids aren’t brave enough to do it on their own, because they think that they’re going to be discouraged by other students that are looking the part of what they claim to be.” Finally, as discussed, Jasmine feels that multiethnic students are “not really considered, period,” and she would like to see teachers create more awareness about multiethnicity.

David

We know that David feels that the curriculum, educators, and American society are too focused on Black-White relations (“I think America, it’s become too 2-D”) and he believes that students should learn about other racial and ethnic groups (including multiethnic individuals) in schools. As he said, “I think it should be more multidimensional. There should be definitely more talks about different ethnicities…” In
response to my question “do you think multiethnicity should be discussed in school?”

David said, “yeah, definitely, because I think a lot more people can identify with it, you know?” David also feels that students need opportunities to engage more with racial and ethnic diversity during the early years of school because “once you’ve gotten to junior high, you’re very set in what basically what you are or what you are not.” Additionally, David thinks that schools should focus more on multiethnicity rather than having students “pick one or the other” during diversity education initiatives such as Diversity Day. As evidenced in the excerpt below, David clearly believes that the formal aspects of K-12 schooling should play a role in multiethnic students’ racial and ethnic identity development.

But if they’re teaching you that you can be this and this, you can be all of them, instead of being “oh, pick one,” I think you identify better and it’ll help you all the way through until you get to high school, and then you’ll be more educated about it, and it will be better.

Raya

We already know that Raya would prefer it if her schools did not celebrate or place so much emphasis on Black History Month because it “reminds you that people were separated.” As she suggested, instead of celebrating Black History Month, we should focus on our similarities and racial mixing. When asked if she thinks schools are meeting the needs of their multiethnic students, Raya said that they are not because multiethnic students are not given the opportunity to learn about multiethnicity. Raya also reiterated her observations that the only time multiethnicity was discussed in her schools was in the context of the slavery—discussions to which her response was “eew.” Based on the foregoing, it is not surprising that Raya’s recommendation for educators is that they provide opportunities for students to learn about multiethnicity. In the excerpt
below, Raya states that such lessons would be important not only for mixed race people but for people in mixed race relationships (which, quite obviously, she, personally, always will be).

Raya: Just throw it in there. You know, like, don’t keep it out. It doesn’t have to be anything like specific, but just give us a section where we learn about [multiethnicity]. We always, we have sections where we learn about everything else, and nobody’s ever interested anyways, so it’s just like throw in a section of that, mix it up, like let us know.

Erica: And what do you think the benefit of that would be?

Raya: I think, I think it would make mixed race [people] know that we are, you know, a part of the world too. Not only that, but I think it would help people that are in mixed race relationships feel like “oh, okay, this is, I’m not—we’re not the only ones doing it and we’re not that weird,” you know… I definitely want them to throw in the history of mixed race. I think that would be really interesting to learn about. Especially since there’s so much of it lately, you know.

Renee

As she said during her focus group, Renee thought that the interview for this study was “cool” because no one had ever “bothered to ask” her about multiethnicity. Thus, it is not surprising that Renee expressed interest in discussing multiethnicity in the classroom. Renee said that such discussions would be particularly relevant given the expanding multiethnic population and that talking about multiethnicity might help multiethnic students feel “comfortable.” Like several other participants, Renee interpreted “needs” as learning about one’s culture, yet she also said that students have “been taught just not to expect that from their education.” It seems that Renee feels it is important to learn about one’s culture, but that not learning about it in school is “not really a big deal” because students do not expect such lessons and, therefore, do not feel disappointed by their absence.
Like Jen, Renee pointed out that discussions about multiethnicity (and race and culture) have the potential to be uncomfortable. Throughout her interview, Renee talked about race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity as being “taboo” topics that teachers are “too afraid” to talk about or “touch” in the classroom. Yet, she also feels that these are important topics to discuss and learn about and she was especially appreciative of her History teacher’s efforts to broach these topics in the classroom despite it being “uncomfortable.” She also noted, however, that the more they discuss these topics in her class, the less uncomfortable the conversations become. It is not surprising then, that her central recommendation for educators was that they discuss race and ethnicity more in the classroom.

Erica: If you could recommend one thing to teachers, in terms of their multiethnic students, what would it be?

Renee: Something for them to teach in the classroom? To not be afraid to step outside of the box and…

Erica: The box of…?

Renee: The book, like to not be afraid to touch on topics that nobody else touches on. Like, to be the first to actually talk about stuff that’s not just in your history book and not be afraid.

Erica: In terms of…?

Renee: Race and culture.

Andrea

Throughout her interview, Andrea talked about not being recognized as multiethnic and/or Iranian and her perception that many people see her only as “brown hair and blue eyes” (i.e. as White). Likewise, she feels “left out” of the curriculum and she links her feelings of having “nowhere to go” to the fact that multiethnicity is never
brought up in her classes. It appears that what Andrea desires most is more recognition as being multiethnic and Iranian and more understanding on the part of others as to how it feels to be multiethnic and not recognized as such—recognition and understanding that she feels would be more likely to occur if multiethnicity were discussed comprehensively in school. Thus, Andrea’s central recommendation is that multiethnicity be discussed more in schools—not just the fact that multiethnic people exist and that “everybody is different,” but “what it feels like” and “the issues.” She said:

I just wish somebody would’ve talked to me about it, would’ve addressed it and the, I don’t know, I feel like the people who are full White or full whatever you are, would know what it feels like, or would talk about it. Because it’s hard, it really is…[We should] address it and talk about the issues, you know, it’s not just [about] everybody is different.

Amaya

When we compare Amaya’s comments to those of the other participants, we notice striking differences between her and their perspectives. In fact, Amaya was the only participant to say that she actually does not care whether or not multiethnicity is discussed in schools.

Really, my opinion, like it doesn’t bother me. You can talk about it. You don’t talk about it. That’s your choice. It doesn’t affect—it doesn’t make me mad or bother me that, you know, teachers don’t really talk about it or choose not to talk about it.

Amaya reiterated several times throughout her interview that her sense of racial and ethnic identity resulted from how she was raised (“My identity was all instilled by my parents. I think you knowing your identity is kind of all about how you were brought up.”), and she made virtually no connection between her sense of identity and her schooling experiences. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Amaya’s central
recommendation for educators is that they treat multiethnic students “like we’re just like you.”

You treat us like we’re just like you. Just because we’re mixed doesn’t make us different from everybody else. We’re blood and flesh and everything, you know, we’re here to learn. We’re not here to be discriminated against just because we’re mixed or we’re just one complete race. You know, we come to school to get an education, so it shouldn’t matter what race we are. You know, if you’re a student who needs special needs, if maybe you can’t—your English isn’t as good as other students’, then yes, you know, you need to give that student a little bit more special attention or help just a little bit more. But if we are capable students of doing things like everybody else, then teach us as a regular class, and don’t discriminate against us for being mixed or one complete race.

Dana

When asked if she thinks multiethnicity should be discussed in schools, Dana’s response focused on the increased understanding that others may gain from such discussions—understanding that may prevent them from making so many assumptions about her and other multiethnic students.

I think there should be a class where you get to just – there should be something where—so people understand that, you know, there are people who are more than one race. They might look like they’re one, but they’re not. They could be like five different things. And it really shouldn’t matter…I think people assume too much that—well, even with me, just assuming that I’m Black. Like we read the *Bluest Eye*. People just started assuming that I was Black and light skinned with good hair because there was a girl in the *Bluest Eye* like that. I was like, “no, I’m half White.” And like, I think people need to know that it’s strange to ask someone “well, what are you?” and things like that.

As we know, Dana has attended predominantly White schools and has often been made to feel as though she is different from her classmates. Based on her interview, it seems that Dana does not want to be treated differently because of her multiethnic heritage (“You just need to understand that, you know, it’s okay that I’m more than one thing. It’s not a big deal.”). When I asked her for a recommendation for educators, Dana said that
students should have the opportunity to learn about multiethnicity at a younger age. At the same time, she said that it is a “double edged sword” because drawing too much attention to multiracial kids could make them feel “uncomfortable” or lead to other people treating them differently.

I don’t think that it would be such a big deal. Because I don’t think that it should matter really…that I’m more than one race. It’s important to understand that I’m not just Black, I’m not just White, but it’s also important that you don’t assume that you need to do—act special towards me or like be extra careful of things you say because I’m half Black and half White, and you’re gonna hurt my feelings if you just call me Black or if you just call me White. You just need to understand that, you know, it’s okay that I’m more than one thing. It’s not a big deal. And you really shouldn’t say, “oh, you’re not Black” or “oh, you’re not White” or “I think of you as this way.” That’s kind of rude, but you don’t need to feel like you’re gonna say the wrong thing. I guess just – I don’t know how to explain it.

Based on her comments in the preceding excerpt, I asked Dana what recommendations she would offer to elementary and intermediate school teachers, to which she responded with “do more” followed by her critique of diversity education initiatives that focus on food (see Chapter Six).

Anne

As discussed in Chapter Six, Anne was one of few participants to have had substantive conversations about race and multiethnicity in the classroom. Thus, I asked Anne if she feels that having such conversations were, for her, a positive experience. Interestingly, her response to this question focused on the benefits to be gained by other students from such conversations. In other words, like Jill and Hip Hapa, Anne feels that learning about race and multiethnicity is beneficial for everyone. Like several of the other participants (e.g. Marie, Jill, Jen, Renee, and Barry), Anne recognizes that conversations about these topics may be uncomfortable or cause controversies, yet she thinks that they
are of utmost importance for all students and that they might help “make racism less of an issue.” As Anne explains below, “an open discussion” about race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity is “something that needs to be done” and that learning about these topics is “part of growing as a person.”

Erica: So your one recommendation…

Anne: I would tell my teachers that you should talk about it more in class. You should make it—

Erica: Race? Ethnicity? Multiethnicity? All of it?

Anne: I think all of it. I think you need to look at racism. I think you need to look at, you know, the perspectives of a mixed race person in America, because their perspective is gonna be different than anyone that’s full blooded, whether you’re a minority or you know, in power, of the majority. So I think you need to talk about all that. I think you need to talk about ethnicity, because it is—for a lot of people you ask them, you know, “describe yourself,” a lot of people will say, “I’m Indian,” “I’m Japanese,” “I’m White.” You know, so obviously, if it’s strong enough for them to say it in their identity, it’s something that should be talked about and brought up. You know, it should be an open discussion. Everyone should participate whether you want to or not kind of thing, because it’s just something that needs to be done, you know, it’s part of growing as a person.

Mialany

When I asked Mialany if she would have liked to learn about multiethnicity in school, she said that such lessons would be important for “other people’s sake.” At the same time, Mialany said that learning about multiethnicity would give people an “awareness” that might prevent them from “judg[ing] you so quickly.” Given Mialany’s experiences of feeling judged by others and being attacked by schoolmates, it is safe to assume that she includes herself in those who would benefit from multiethnicity being discussed in schools.
As is clear from the exchange below, Mialany generally feels that schools are not meeting the needs of multiethnic students because there are no opportunities at school to “learn about being mixed as a whole.” Mialany also said that her schools have never done anything specific to support her identity development in terms of the “academics” but that the social aspects of schooling often made her identity construction process “more confusing and more stressful.”

Erica: Would you say your schools have supported your identity development, schools did not support your identity development, or is there no connection between the two?

Mialany: I feel like if there is a connection, it wasn’t a good connection.

Erica: So schools did not support your identity construction?

Mialany: No, not at all. Not necessarily the schooling in terms of academics.

Erica: Like the formal aspects of schooling?

Mialany: Yeah, it didn’t help at all. It made it actually more confusing and more stressful.

Erica: What did?

Mialany: School. Going to school and being around the people that are in school and them judging me for who I am. Like at home that doesn’t happen, but like going to school, people are always constantly looking at you, judging you by the little things that you do.

Erica: So if schools did anything, negative or positive, it was unintentional?

Mialany: Exactly.

Erica: So schools never discriminated against you, but they never did anything to support you. If anything happened, it was just by chance.

Mialany: Yeah, it just happened.
When asked for a recommendation for educators, Mialany discussed her belief that there needs to be more awareness about multiethnicity and about difference. As we may recall, Mialany has encountered numerous challenges to her identity based on limited understandings of what it means to be Black and White. Thus, she wants people to know that “it’s okay to be different.” Keeping in mind the riot that took place at Parkside High School following the anniversary of Martin Luther King’s assassination and the fear that caused her to leave school during the riot, it is not surprising that Mialany added “I don’t want to put too much pressure on race, because it could backfire.”

There should be more awareness of the fact that not everybody’s the same. Not necessarily mixed, but just in general. Not everybody’s going to look the same. Not everybody’s gonna act the same. People are different and it’s okay to be different. And it’s okay to be mixed…[But] I don’t want to put too much pressure on race, because it could backfire. You talk about race too much, and then it becomes a riot between Latinos and African Americans and European descent. Like “Oh, we didn’t like you back in the day, so we’re not gonna like you now.” Like it could become a whole other situation.

**Kendra**

Like Renee, Kendra linked the importance of discussions about multiethnicity to the expanding multiethnic population (“I do think it should be talked about, ‘cause nowadays it’s like everybody’s mixed”). Moreover, Kendra feels that such lessons would be an interesting and important addition to the “basics” focused on Blacks and Whites that she typically learns in school (see Chapter Six). Given the content of Kendra’s interview, it is not surprising that she reiterated her recommendation that schools teach students about multiethnicity and that Pine Mountains provide the opportunity for multiethnic students, as a group, to participate in the Multicultural Assembly. Kendra,
however, was the only participant to recommend that educators talk to other multiethnic students to get ideas for lessons and activities.

Talk about it more in class, try to do activities, you know, with like the different mixed races, try to get ideas from other mixed races too, other kids that are mixed. And then like in multi [multicultural assembly], have a mixed group do something.

**Christina**

When recommending that her school establish an organization for multiethnic students, Christina said, “I’m comfortable with my race and everything like that, but maybe there’s people out there who aren’t or whatever. And, maybe it would help them if we could all get together and like talk about it, you know?” As we may recall from the previously discussed excerpts from Christina’s interview, however, she repeatedly expressed concerns about being viewed as though she is “acting” Black or White and she sometimes feels self-conscious around Black people and fears that she will not know something that she thinks most Black people know (or are expected to know). Moreover, a tone of defensiveness permeated many of her comments (“I am comfortable with my race” and “I know that I am both”). Accordingly, I do not feel that it is too much of a leap to conclude that Christina feels that she, too, would benefit from the existence of a multiethnic student organization whose members could get together and talk about their experiences. In addition to the establishment of a multiethnic student organization, Christina would like multiethnicity to be included in the curriculum, and she feels that multiethnic students should be provided with the opportunity to participate in the Multicultural Assembly.
Barry linked the concept of students’ needs to academic standards and said that schools are meeting multiethnic students’ needs because they are held to the same standards as everyone else. When I asked Barry about the social and personal needs of multiethnic students, he mentioned what he feels is a “don’t ask, don’t tell” or color-blind policy in schools that prevents discussions about students’ racial and ethnic heritages.

Erica: So academically they’re meeting their needs, because schools hold everybody to the same standard?

Barry: Uhm hm.

Erica: What about socially and personally?

Barry: Personally or socially it’s pretty hush hush, you know what I mean? Or the don’t ask, don’t tell type of policy.

Erica: Sort of a color-blind approach in schools.

Barry: Uhm hm.

Based on these and other comments made throughout his interview, Barry’s recommendations for schools are not unexpected. We know, for example, that Barry thinks that there is too much “hush” on race and ethnicity in schools and society. We also know that Barry went to schools where here felt the White students discriminated against him and that during elementary school he thought “I think it would be easier if I was White.” Finally, we know that Barry felt that moving to the racially and ethnically diverse setting of Pine Mountains was “a big step culturally-wise” and noted that “because there’s so many different races here and we’re so multicultural that we’re more accepting of different cultures.” It is not surprising, then, that Barry would like educators and students to engage more with the topics of race and ethnicity and to spend more time
discussing our identities and the fact that “everyone is different.” As he said, we need to explore everyone’s ethnicities because “the more we learn about ourselves, the more comfortable with ourselves we will be.”

In his writing activity, Barry repeated several of the ideas that he discussed during his interview including his perception of the fear that people have about discussing multiethnicity and related topics. Barry believes, nevertheless, that talking about these topics will make them less uncomfortable and will make other people “more accepting.” He wrote:

That fact of the matter is that speaking out and for multiethnic people and celebrating diversity is still taboo for schools. I believe that people are still a little afraid that they might offend someone so they try not to talk about it. Even then, not talking about it is making the situation worst. The more we talk about something the less uncomfortable it gets and [the] more accepting people become.

Josh

Like many of the other participants, Josh feels that schools should offer more lessons about multiethnicity and that students should have the opportunity to learn about the multiethnic population in America. As we know from the previous chapter, Josh noted with annoyance the stereotypes of Jewish people that get applied to him by his classmates, and, as he explains here, he feels that learning about “our cultures” will prevent such stereotypes from happening.

I would say that we should have, like for English, I say we have more multiethinic books, because right now we’re just reading about Black people and Asian people and stuff like that. And like in history we shouldn’t talk about just one country. We shouldn’t talk about just—let’s say like our country, we should talk about like the actual people, the multiethinic people in there…I’d say learn more about our cultures and like, if it comes to an assembly, like having it in the assembly, because I mean, I think if people don’t know about it, things like stereotypes happen.
Kelley

Although Kelley never directly said that she thinks schools are not meeting the needs of multiethnic students, she did say that she is bothered by how little awareness there is about multiethnicity. She said, “the only thing that really bothers me is probably just the fact that not that many people are aware of [multiethnicity].” As discussed in Chapter Six, Kelley feels that multiethnicity is not addressed in schools because it is a topic that many educators (and other people) are not interested in or concerned about because “you don’t really hear about mixed people being oppressed or murdered for being of mixed heritage…it’s sort of a novelty still.” At the same time, Kelley feels that the topic of multiethnicity will eventually appear more in schools as people realize that multiethnic people are “becoming very prevalent.”

In stating that multiethnicity should be discussed more in schools, Kelley said “I think it would benefit everyone because people even who are not multiethnic would learn more about multiethnic people or maybe themselves in general, so it would broaden everyone’s perspective.” Furthermore, at the end of her writing activity, Kelley wrote “I really appreciate what you're doing and I think that multiethnicity is a very important topic which we're only beginning to scratch the surface of.” All of this indicates to me that Kelley feels multiethnicity is an important topic that should be (and eventually will be) discussed more in schools.

Jordan

When asked if schools are meeting the needs of multiethnic students, Jordan said, “I’m not aware of any issues or needs that mixed race people have. It’s not really an issue at school or an issue in my life or anything.” Jordan did not draw connections between
the formal aspects of schooling and his identity development, but he recognized that there could be a connection between the two if race and ethnicity were discussed more in school. As he said, “well I think that if we did talk about race and ethnicity at school it would help shape our identities in like a good way.”

In response to my request for recommendations for educators, Jordan expressed interest in having the racial and ethnic data questions changed on the STAR exam and SAT. As we may recall, Jordan discovered that he had been misidentifying himself as “Other Asian” on such forms for several years. He said, “yeah, I’d want a bubble on the STAR test or the SAT for multiethnic. Just so it’s like we actually exist.” During his interview and focus group, Jordan also reiterated his interest in having the topic of multiethnicity discussed in schools.

Marie

Marie feels that because multiethnicity is never included in the curriculum, schools are not meeting the needs of their multiethnic students. She also feels that multiethnic people are invisible in the curriculum, except when it comes to hearing about the sexual exploitation of slaves—lessons in which she is not interested. As we know, Marie goes to a predominantly White high school, and thus, despite feeling invisible in the curriculum, she feels very visible in “the social part of school.” Like Renee, Marie thinks that teachers need to offer more lessons and provide the opportunity for more discussions related to race and ethnicity. Also like Renee, Marie thinks that teachers should “go outside of the book, outside of textbooks.” Marie feels that there is currently too much focus on Blacks and Whites when race is discussed and too much focus on Black/White multiethnic individuals and not people with other heritage combinations.
As we know from the data presented in the previous chapters, going to nearly all White schools has had a significant impact on Marie’s experiences and multiethnic identity. Given that the staff and students at Marie’s high school are nearly all White, Marie feels that uncomfortable conversations about race and ethnicity are particularly important to have in the classroom. Finally, as discussed throughout her interview, Marie, it seems, feels angry about her experiences of being multiethnic and, perhaps more significantly, one of very few people with Black heritage in a nearly all White community. While she recognizes the challenges faced by those who want to discuss race and ethnicity in the context of her school, she wishes that people would “try to understand” and she feels that by teaching students about race and ethnicity (and getting teachers who know about these topics), her experiences at school would be much different, and, indeed, better. She said,

> I think I get so angry because people don’t understand. And I get so angry because I can’t understand why any of this ever happened, and like why I’m not just like everyone else, and like why people have to like see – like “why?” is the biggest question…[But] I think it’s also really difficult for Deer Valley to talk about race, because either kids just will kind of tune it out and play it down, or they won’t understand. The teacher, first of all, doesn’t understand, and so they can’t really express themselves, can’t really answer any questions that people ask…And I’m not saying that only people who grew up, you know, with a tangible idea of it can really talk about it, and I think that that’s what a lot of kids in [city name] think. They’re like “Oh, well, I can’t compare myself to them, I don’t even know how to.” It’s just, I wish people would just try to understand. Like maybe you don’t understand, but at least as long as you try, and you like genuinely try to understand.

**Integrating the Data**

It is quite apparent that most students’ recommendations are, at least in part, grounded in their respective experiences. That said, woven throughout the foregoing data
are several dominant, and often interrelated, themes. In what follows, I discuss and analyze these themes in greater detail and consider them in light of the relevant literature.

**Correcting a “Blindness” Towards Multiethnic Students**

Seven of the 23 participants pointed out the lack of attention given to, and indeed near blindness towards, multiethnic students, and even the concept of multiethnicity, in their schools. Jen, for example, said, “I think just the school’s like blind to mixed races;” Jasmine said, “Mixed race students, well, they’re not really thought about, I guess. They’re not really considered as having special needs, because they’re not really considered, period;” Mialany said that if the formal aspects of schooling had any influence on her identity it was unintentional and “just happened;” Barry said that in terms of multiethnic students’ social and personal experiences his school has a “don’t ask, don’t tell type of policy;” and Marie said “in the curriculum we’re invisible.” While the other participants did not make such explicit statements, we can clearly see from their comments that multiethnic students and the topic of multiethnicity are not, as Renee said, “on the top of a teacher’s priority list.” As we know, Wardle (2000b), in discussing the invisibility of multiethnic students in most schools, points out that the existence and contributions of multiethnic individuals are largely absent from the curriculum; that multiethnic students are rendered invisible by many school practices (e.g. single-race student groups, holiday celebrations, racial/ethnic data collection forms); that most teachers have not received training to support multiethnic children; that not everyone believes that multiethnic people represent a unique population and others feel that an acknowledgement of multiethnicity undermines the solidarity and power of single-race/ethnicity groups; and that “there are almost no textbooks that provide advice and
information to assist educators to meet the needs of these children better” (p. 12).

Regardless of the merits of Wardle’s and the participants’ explanations for schools’ “blindness” towards multiethnic students, the existence of that “blindness” itself is hard to refute.

**Talking About Race (and Ethnicity and Multiethnicity)**

In 2007, Beverly Tatum published a book entitled *Can We Talk about Race? And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation*. Here, Tatum asks, “Can we get beyond our fear, our sweaty palms, our anxiety about saying the wrong thing, or using the wrong words, and have an honest conversation about racial issues?” (p. xiii). Tatum is calling on educators to find the courage to have honest and open conversations about race, no matter how uncomfortable these conversations might be. As we can see from the data presented here and in Chapter Six, many participants are asking the same question as Tatum. Indeed, the majority of them expressed a sincere desire that their teachers would have more honest, open, authentic, and detailed conversations with them about race, ethnicity, and especially multiethnicity. Many of the participants (for example, Cara, David, Raya, Renee, Kendra, and Marie) envisioned such conversations going beyond the “basics,” Black-White relations, and the limited (if any) treatment of these topics often found in textbooks. Renee’s primary recommendation for educators, for example, is to “not be afraid to touch on topics that nobody else touches on. Like, to be the first to actually talk about stuff that’s not just in your history book and not be afraid [to talk about] race and culture.” Even when students (for example, Jen, Jill, Renee, Dana, Anne, Barry, and Marie) acknowledged that such conversations in the classroom can be difficult, uncomfortable, and even the source of confrontation and controversy, they
nevertheless expressed a desire for them. It is, however, important to note that both Dana and Mialany feel that such conversations need to be conducted carefully. Dana, for example, fears that focusing too much on multiethnicity might “make people feel uncomfortable” and Mialany said, “I don’t want to put too much pressure on race, because it could backfire…Like ‘oh, we didn’t like you back in the day, so we’re not gonna like you now.’ Like it could become a whole other situation.” Mialany does not fear lessons about race, ethnicity, multiethnicity, and difference, but rather, lessons that focus on oppositional relations between racial and ethnic groups. Despite these concerns, Dana and Mialany’s, as well as the other participants’, desire for more substantive engagement with issues related to race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity is evident.

**Specifically Addressing Multiethnicity**

As we saw in Chapter Six, most participants could not recall a lesson or discussion about multiethnicity that had taken place in their classes. Of the participants who could remember having lessons or discussions about multiethnicity in class, most described brief or impromptu discussions or simply hearing about the “mulatto” population. Although the participants cited here provided various reasons for why they think multiethnicity should be discussed more in schools ranging from “it’d be kind of cool” (Frank) to “I think it’s interesting and important for everybody, like me and other people, to learn about it” (Kendra), with the exception of Amaya, they all emerged in favor of learning about and discussing multiethnicity in school. Not surprisingly, the extent of participants’ desire to learn about multiethnicity often reflected their own experiences and identities. Frank and Hannah, for example, who do not identify strongly as multiethnic expressed mild interest in learning about multiethnicity, whereas Jill, who
does identify strongly as multiethnic and who has been involved with iPride and FUSION, spoke more passionately about the importance of learning about multiethnicity in school and providing students with the opportunity to “start looking at who they are and where they come from.” Although participants generally expressed a desire to learn more about multiethnicity, several also pointed out that conversations about multiethnicity (as well as race and ethnicity) can be quite uncomfortable. As Jen said, “I think that [multiethnicity] is something that teachers wouldn’t want to discuss. Probably they’d feel, they might be uncomfortable, or they might not want to say something wrong, I don’t know.” Likewise, we know that Barry thinks that multiethnicity and diversity are viewed as a “taboo” topic in schools. Nevertheless, despite the differences between how individual participants identify and between their respective experiences, despite the differences between their reasons for wanting to learn about multiethnicity and who they feel would most benefit from such lessons, and despite their recognition that conversations about race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity can be uncomfortable, the general consensus was that the topic of multiethnicity should be included in the curriculum and discussed in classes. Given these findings, it is not surprising that virtually all of the literature identifying recommendations for educators on behalf of multiethnic students suggests the introduction of topics related to multiethnicity into the curriculum and classroom discussions (see, for example, Cruz-Janzen, 1997; Schwartz, 1998; Wardle, 1996, 2000b; and Wardle and Cruz-Janzen, 2004).

**Getting an Early Start**

Drawing on Phinney (1991) and Poston (1990), Wardle (1998) points out that “It is well documented that racial and ethnic identity, and developing concepts about racial
and ethnic diversity, are developmental tasks that begin in early childhood” (p. 8).

Perhaps stemming from the recognition that the development of one’s identity and racial and ethnic understandings begins at a young age, four of the participants (Anthony, Jill, David, and Dana) noted that students need the opportunity to learn about race, ethnicity, and/or multiethnicity and to discuss their identities and heritages when they are younger. Anthony said, “Maybe [multiethnicity] should have [been discussed] so people would have been more aware of it. And maybe when you were younger, like in kindergarten or 1st grade so that you could actually realize that you would have been multiethnic.” Jill said,

You have to start with this when a child is young so that they become accustomed to doing that, because by the time you’re 16, you’re gonna be like, I’m not gonna talk to you about my race. What is that? You’ve already established who you are, so you think, and you already have your friends and you already have a place where you belong.

Although David did not discuss his own identity development in terms of developmental stages, he said,

I think for the most part, after you get past junior high, that you’ve already passed the stage where you’re not, you’re not really deciding anymore what you are…So like, in the younger years, I think they should be focusing more on multiethnicity than anything, instead of choosing, [having] them either pick one or the other.

Likewise, Dana noted that multiethnicity should be discussed in schools “when kids are younger” before such conversations get “awkward” and so other students would realize that being multiethnic is not “such a big deal.”

**We All Have Similar “Needs”**

In 1995, Nishimura published an article entitled “Addressing the Needs of Biracial Children: An Issue for Counselors in a Multicultural School environment” and in
1998, Wardle published an article entitled “Meeting the Needs of Multiracial and Multiethnic Children in Early Childhood Settings.” In these articles, the central “need” of multiethnic students is that for support in the development of healthy ethnic and racial identities (Wardle) or a positive racial self-image (Nishimura). Indeed, permeating the literature related to multiethnic individuals is the notion that they need assistance and/or support as they develop their racial and ethnic identities. As we have seen, however, the foregoing data indicate that participants generally do not feel as though multiethnic students have particularly pressing or urgent needs that are not being met by schools. In fact, Jordan said “I’m not aware of any issues or needs that mixed race people have. It’s not really an issue at school or an issue in my life or anything” and Hannah said, “I don’t, well I don’t personally have special needs just because I don’t think of myself as [multiethnic].” Nevertheless, Raya, Marie, Hip Hapa, Jasmine, and Mialany—participants for whom being multiethnic is more central to their overall sense of identity—all indicated that multiethnic students’ needs are not met because there are no, or so few, opportunities to learn about race, ethnicity, multiethnicity, and one’s heritages at school. Indeed, many of the participants linked the notion of needs to opportunities to learn about, discuss, and explore one’s heritages and identity(ies) (e.g. Hannah, Hip Hapa, Anthony, Jill, Jasmine, David, Raya, Renee, Andrea, Anne, Mialany, Christina, Barry, and Marie). Participants, though, do not think of themselves, or multiethnic students in general, as having particularly unique needs; rather, they feel that everyone needs to be supported as they construct their identities and needs to have opportunities to learn about their heritages. Hannah, for example, said, “you can kind of separate that to anyone thinking that they’re not meeting their needs ‘cause they’re not learning enough
about who they are or something.” Likewise, Jasmine said, “I think it’s very important for kids to be in touch with their background and where they come from. And kids need to be aware that there are other people out there that are like them and that are not like them” and Anne said, “[F]or a lot of people you ask them, you know, ‘describe yourself,’ a lot of people will say, ‘I’m Indian,’ ‘I’m Japanese,’ ‘I’m White.’ You know, so obviously, if it’s strong enough for them to say it in their identity, it’s something that should be talked about and brought up.”

A Desire for Awareness and Understanding

The central theme running through the data related to participants’ recommendations for educators, and, indeed, most of the data presented in this chapter is a desire for awareness and understanding— awareness and understanding about race and ethnicity, about multiethnicity and the experiences of multiethnic individuals, and about difference. Where participants diverged is in how much importance they place on increasing awareness and understanding, and who they believe will benefit from such an increase. Hannah, Jen, and Frank, for whom being multiethnic is not a central aspect of their identities, spoke in vague terms about the importance of awareness about multiethnicity: Hannah would like more people to “realize how many multiethnic people there are, ‘cause [she] didn’t realize;” Frank suggested that schools raise awareness about “multiethnic groups;” and Jen feels that Pine Mountains should have a Mixed Race Awareness Day. The other participants who spoke about their desire for awareness and understanding, however, did so with more enthusiasm and in more concrete terms.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the perceptions of others and interactions stemming from these perceptions significantly influence participants’ racial and ethnic
identities. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that so many participants, either explicitly or implicitly, drew a connection between the awareness and understanding of others and their own experiences. For example, Hip Hapa, whose identity is constantly questioned and challenged by others, would like people to understand that “people are mixed, and they can be different things and that’s okay.” Moreover, Hip Hapa feels that there should be “more talk about the fact that there’s a ‘we’ not just a ‘you’ or just the concept of being mixed.” Using strikingly similar language, Jill said “I think it’s just building awareness…I don’t even know if it’s about race, I think it’s just – if you’re starting with younger kids just establishing that difference is okay.” As we know, Mialany, using language similar to that of Hip Hapa and Jill, explicitly drew a connection between other peoples’ lack of awareness and her own experiences.

I feel like a lot of people don’t have awareness, and that’s why they judge you so quickly…There should be more awareness of the fact that not everybody’s the same. Not necessarily mixed, but just in general. Not everybody’s going to look the same. Not everybody’s gonna act the same. People are different and it’s okay to be different. And it’s okay to be mixed.

Whereas Mialany uses the words “awareness” and “judge,” Dana uses the words “understanding” and “assume” to convey very similar ideas. As Dana said, “people assume too much” and they need to understand that “there are people who are more than one race. They might look like they’re one, but they’re not.” Both Dana and Mialany seem to feel that, ultimately, multiethnic students benefit from learning about multiethnicity, not necessarily because they learn anything, but because the increased “awareness” and “understanding” of others might put an end to the judgments and assumptions they encounter.

Several other participants expressed very similar ideas:
- Jasmine would like educators to raise awareness about race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity and said, “kids need to be aware that there are other people out there that are like them and that are not like them.”

- Cara feels that there is a lot of confusion about multiethnic people (“what are they really?”) and she links this confusion, in part, to others’ lack of understanding about ethnicity, culture, and the social construction of race.

- Raya, who will always be in a mixed race relationship, feels that an increased awareness about multiethnicity “would help people that are in mixed race relationships feel like ‘oh, okay, this is, I’m not – we’re not the only ones doing it and we’re not that weird.’”

- Andrea was quite clear in her desire for other people to know “what it feels like” to be multiethnic and, presumably, what it feels like not to be recognized as such.

- Barry would like other people to be “more aware that there’s…other people from different countries. There’s other colors out there. There’s people with different – everyone’s different.” Barry went on to say, “So [people] need to explore that. And the more we learn about ourselves, the more comfortable with ourselves we will be.”

- Kelley, in stating that multiethnicity should be discussed more in schools, said “I think it would benefit everyone because people even who are not multiethnic would learn more about multiethnic people or maybe themselves in general, so it would broaden everyone’s perspective.”

- Josh discussed the stereotypes about Jewish people that get applied to him at school and would like other students to learn about multiethnicity and “our cultures” because “if people don’t know about it, things like stereotypes happen.”

- Marie would like for students at Deer Valley to learn more about race and ethnicity so they might have a better understanding of her experiences, racism, the anger she feels, and the experiences of other minoritized individuals. She said, “It’s just, I wish people would just try to understand. Like maybe you don’t understand, but at least as long as you try, and you like genuinely try to understand.”

- In his writing activity, Anthony linked other peoples’ lack of awareness about multiethnicity to the harassment that other multiethnic students experience. He wrote, “Although I did not go through extensive harassment as a multiethnic individual going through my schooling thus far, there are many people that still do. I believe there should be many steps taken to improve awareness around the issue of multiethnicity to move closer to fixing this issue.”
Again, given the influence of other peoples’ perceptions (and interactions and experiences stemming from these perceptions) on participants’ racial and ethnic identity development, it stands to reason that so many participants would like others to have more accurate understandings of race, ethnicity, multiethnicity, and the experiences of multiethnic people. What is remarkable is how many comments made by participants had at their core the belief that other people need to know that “we are all different and difference is okay.”

In the following chapter, I integrate the findings and analysis of this and the preceding chapters and identify implications for educators. Additionally, I identify directions for future research and reflect on my postpositivist realist framing of identity and the research processes.
CHAPTER NINE: CONCLUSION

This study examined the influence of K-12 schooling on the racial and ethnic identity construction of 23 multiethnic students attending various high schools across the San Francisco Bay Area. All of the students participated in a semi-structured interview, nine participated in one of two optional focus groups, and five completed a writing activity. I approached this study with a postpositivist realist conception of identity (Mohanty, 1997, 2000; Moya, 2000a/b) that takes seriously the fluidity and complexity of identities as well as their epistemic and real-world significance. In defining racial and ethnic identity formation, I borrowed Tatum’s understanding of it as “the process of defining for oneself the personal significance and social meaning of belonging to a particular racial [and/or ethnic] group” (1997, p. 16). This conception of racial and ethnic identity emphasizes the personal meaning and importance attached to identifying with a racial or ethnic group and acknowledges that “the salience of particular aspects of our identity varies at different moments in our lives” (p. 20).

Research Questions and Findings

The central research question for this study was: in what ways does K-12 schooling influence the racial and ethnic identity construction of multiethnic students? Related questions included: in what ways do school initiatives such as multicultural and antiracist education influence their identity development processes? What other aspects of K-12 schooling (i.e. the curriculum, peer networks and friendships, the racial and ethnic makeup of the school, extra-curricular activities, and student organizations) influence the racial and ethnic identity construction of multiethnic students? How might
K-12 schools become more inclusive of, and better support the identity development of, multiethnic students?

As we saw in Chapter Six, only two of the twenty-three participants drew an explicit connection between their racial and ethnic identity development and the formal aspects of schooling; the others either failed to draw such a connection or were adamant that one did not exist. Conversely, as seen in Chapter Seven, participants quite readily linked their experiences of the informal and social aspects of schooling to their identity construction. When we read participants’ recommendations in Chapter Eight, however, the connections between the formal and informal aspects of K-12 schooling and the nature of their combined influence on the experiences and identities of participants become much more apparent. Indeed, when we consider the data from all three chapters, as well as their profiles, it is clear that formal aspects of schooling do, in fact, play a significant, if indirect, role in shaping the experiences and identity construction processes of participants.

As discussed, the data presented in Chapter Six paint a picture of K-12 schools as sites in which racial and ethnic categories and the boundaries constructed between them are reinforced; in which race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity are seldom, if ever, discussed in detail; and in which limited and superficial notions of what it means to be [insert racial/ethnic group] are promulgated, perpetuated, and buttressed by, for example, diversity education initiatives that often require multiethnic students to identify with or represent one of their racial and ethnic heritage groups. The data presented in Chapter Seven indicate that study participants often negotiate the boundaries constructed between racial and ethnic groups—those that are physically present on their campuses and those
that are imposed during interactions with peers. These data also indicate that participants often confront differences between how they self identify and the identities assigned to or imposed on them by others. What is clear from the data presented in Chapter Seven is that others’ perceptions of study participants (often grounded in stereotypes and limited notions of what it means to be [insert racial and ethnic group]) play a significant role in shaping participants’ social experiences and their racial and ethnic identities (see Cooley, 1902; Khanna, 2004; Tatum, 1997).

Given the influence of other peoples’ perceptions (and interactions and experiences stemming from these perceptions) on participants’ racial and ethnic identity development, it stands to reason that so many participants would like others to have more nuanced and more accurate understandings of race, ethnicity, multiethnicity, and the experiences of multiethnic people. Moreover, given that nearly all of the participants discussed at least one instance (if not several) in which they had been made to feel different because they are multiethnic, it also stands to reason that so many comments made by participants had, at their core, the belief that other people need to know that “[people] can be different things and that’s okay” (Hip Hapa). In other words, a central finding is participants’ recognition of the importance of being able to authentically represent their heritages and experiences in ways that do not pathologize difference. Viewed in light of the data, participants’ desire for greater engagement in schools with issues related to race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity is not surprising, and, in fact, is quite logical. I detect the following lines of reasoning:
If…

- teachers and students alike engaged in authentic, meaningful, and earnest explorations of and discussions about the constructs of race and ethnicity and how they are experienced;
- more people were aware of the existence and experiences of multiethnic individuals;
- lessons and discussions about race and ethnicity did not focus on people from other countries and what they wear, eat, and celebrate;
- lessons and discussions about race and ethnicity did not focus on “the basics” and oppositional relations;
- educators more actively worked towards challenging the boundaries constructed between racial and ethnic categories;
- members of the school community (and beyond) had a less limited understanding of what it means to be [insert racial and/or ethnic group];
- racial and ethnic stereotypes were not so prevalent and robust; and
- others understood that “people are different and it’s okay to be different” (Mialany);

Then perhaps…

- Hip Hapa would not encounter so many questions about and challenges to his racial and ethnic identities and claims to group membership.
- Josh would not be asked if he plans to be a jeweler because he is Jewish.
- Mialany would not have been jumped at school.
- Jasmine would not be asked to prove she is Arabic by speaking Arabic.
- Jordan and his classmates would not have been asked to step into a circle if they are Asian.
- Dana would not be told that she is “not Black,” nor (ironically) would she be expected to provide the “Black perspective” in class.
- Andrea would be recognized by her classmates and teachers as both Iranian and White.

Taken together, the findings from this study strongly support the conclusion that K-12 schooling experiences do influence the identity development of multiethnic students, but not in the ways it is often assumed in the literature that they will. As noted in the previous chapters, many of my findings that relate to the schooling experiences and identities of participants reflect those of other researchers. Indeed, the similarities
between my findings and those of Lopez (2001, 2004) are quite striking.\(^\text{15}\) There are also notable similarities between my findings and those of, for example, Cruz-Janzen (1997) and Renn (2004). Where the differences emerge however, are between the findings and conclusions of my study and those of others as they relate to the “needs” of multiethnic students and the actual influence of K-12 schooling experiences on their racial and ethnic identity construction processes.

Reading the literature expressly concerned with the K-12 schooling experiences of multiethnic students and the influence of these experiences on their identity construction processes (the vast majority of which, as previously noted, has been written by Wardle), one gets the feeling that this influence is direct and immediate. Take, for example, Wardle’s (2004) assertion that

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One of the greatest dilemmas for multiracial and multiethnic students is to see themselves as normal and accepted, and not abnormal, strange and freaks. Students’ and adults’ frequent questions of, “what are you, anyway,” simply aggravate this dilemma. One reason multiracial and multiethnic students struggle is because they are not taught in schools about their extensive history (Cortes, 1999); another is that they are not visible in their school: in books, curricular materials, posters, pamphlets, examples of literature and the arts, and so forth. (pp. 69-70)
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Similarly, Sheets (2004) explains her belief that “it is imperative that teachers (and parents) understand that the multiracial identity developmental process is not separate from learning and cognition” and that “teachers who make a conscious effort to promote multiracial identity development through curricular planning and instructional strategies help students develop a psychological dimension of self, both individual and group, which is a consequence of a [sic] their distinctive socialization process and dual heritage.

\(^{15}\) These similarities are likely due in part to the fact that, although our research questions differed, aspects of our methodologies were very similar (i.e. we both interviewed roughly 25 multiethnic students from Northern California).
and membership in a [sic] particular racial and ethnic groups” (pp. 150-151). From these and similar statements, we get the impression that multiethnic students are likely to face an identity crisis, that they struggle with their identity construction because they do not see themselves reflected in the curriculum, and that teachers must employ unique strategies to support the healthy identity formation of multiethnic students. The findings from this study, however, tell quite a different story.

To understand the effect of K-12 schooling on the racial and ethnic identity construction of multiethnic students it is critical to understand the connection between multiethnic students’ experiences of the formal and the informal aspects of schooling. To be clear, both the formal and informal aspects of schooling shape the identity construction of multiethnic students. While the formal aspects exert a less direct influence on the identity construction of multiethnic students, they are critical in shaping all students’ understandings, beliefs, ideologies, and perceptions related to race, ethnicity, diversity, and difference. In turn, these understandings, beliefs, ideologies, and perceptions directly affect the informal aspects of schooling, such as interactions between students and the prevalence and power of racial and ethnic stereotypes and divisions. It is precisely students’ experiences relating to the informal aspects of schooling that most directly influence their identities—their development, how they are experienced, how they feel about them, and students’ feelings of inclusion or exclusion. In short, the formal aspects of schooling (e.g. curriculum and diversity education initiatives) shape all students’ racial and ethnic understandings and ideologies, which in turn shape the informal aspects of schooling (e.g. interactions with peers and racial and ethnic divisions within the student body) which exert the most direct influence over multiethnic students’
experiences and identities. Of course, we must acknowledge that the formal aspects of schooling are not alone in shaping the racial and ethnic understandings and ideologies of the general student body; other influences such as family and neighborhood context cannot be discounted. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that schools are sometimes hostile sites of negotiation, that these negotiations influence multiethnic students’ identities, and that these negotiations occur in the context of, and are shaped by, both formal and informal aspects of schooling, including, but not limited to, school demographics, curricula, race and ethnicity-based student organizations, and interactions between all members of the school community.

**Implications and Recommendations for Educators**

Although the participants in this study generally do not feel that multiethnic students have particularly unique or special needs, several noted that if multiethnic students did have unique needs, schools would not be meeting them because multiethnic students are “invisible” to or not considered by educators. In fact, one third of the participants pointed out their schools’ “blindness” to multiethnic students. At the same time, several of the participants discussed the idea that all students need to be supported as they construct their identities and need to have opportunities to learn about their heritages (e.g. Hannah, Jasmine, and Anne). As we may recall, Wardle (1998) and Nishimura (1995) posit that multiethnic students need support in the development of healthy ethnic and racial identities (Wardle) or a positive racial self-image (Nishimura)—needs that, I (and at least some participants) would argue, all students share. Given this, it is not surprising that several of the participants, in requesting more engagement with the

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16 Portions of this section appear in Mohan (2009).
topics of race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity in the classroom, noted that all students stand to benefit from such conversations (see, for example, comments made by Hip Hapa). Indeed, a principal finding from the data in Chapter Eight, and indeed, a principal finding from this study, is participants’ desire for more engagement with the topics of race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity in K-12 schools (and, as noted by four participants, the earlier students begin this engagement, the better). Despite acknowledging that conversations about these topics can be uncomfortable and risky (Tatum, 2007), these are the conversations participants desire.

Based on the preceding, my recommendations for educators, which are discussed in greater detail below, are not terribly surprising. They are: (1) infuse, early and often, the curriculum and classroom discussions with issues of race, ethnicity, multiethnicity, and difference, (2) ensure that classrooms are spaces in which these topics can be explored openly and safely, (3) actively engage in the process of complicating, contesting, and deconstructing racial and ethnic categories and their classificatory power, and (4) end the silence regarding multiethnicity in schools and ensure its authentic inclusion in the curriculum.

As discussed in Chapter Three, there is ample literature that puts forward recommendations for educators concerned about making their schools more inclusive of and responsive to the experiences of multiethnic students (see, for example, Cruz-Janzen, 1997; Greene, 2004; Root, 2003b; Schwartz, 1998; Wardle, 1996, 2000b, 2004; and Wardle and Cruz-Janzen, 2004)—recommendations with which I generally find little fault. Here, however, I particularly emphasize one central recommendation for educators that I believe should guide all other changes to policy, practice, and relationships made
with multiethnic students in mind: engage in more meaningful and authentic explorations and discussions of race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity with all students.

Racism is an undeniable and inexcusable feature of North America history, the legacy of which continues to be felt today. At their worst, schools can be accused of perpetuating racist ideologies and the social inequality that results from them. At their best, schools can play a role in dismantling such ideologies and creating an equitable learning environment for all students. Indeed, it is of utmost importance that schools make a strong commitment to combating inequalities within and beyond their walls, that they create a school culture that is welcoming to and affirming of all students, and that they do not allow pressure to attend to “more essential” curriculum to trump the important task of preparing students to thrive in our ever more diverse society (Shields & Mohan, 2008; Tatum, 2007). As we have seen, traditional approaches to accomplishing these important tasks, such as multicultural and antiracism education, do not account for those students who do not easily fit within the rigid racial and ethnic categories reinforced by them (Cruz-Janzen, 1997; Dolby, 2000; Gosine, 2002; Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004). In critiquing these approaches for their tendency to reinforce limited understandings of race and ethnicity, my goal certainly is not to argue for the disposal of them. Racial and ethnic categories, as robust social constructs, shape the lives of all individuals and to decline to acknowledge this because the process promises to be complicated and messy would be to shirk one’s responsibility as an educator of students growing up in a society as diverse as North America’s. Arbitrary and unsound as racial and ethnic categories might be, to ignore them is not to deconstruct them. Thus, regardless of the method selected—multiculturalism, antiracism, or any other anti-
oppressive pedagogy—schools can, and indeed should, actively engage in the process of complicating, contesting, and deconstructing racial and ethnic categories and their classificatory power.

Consistent with the findings of, for example, Basu (2007), Lopez (2004), Renn (2004a), and Root (1996a, 1998), and immediately evident from the data, is the fact that there is neither a single “multiethnic experience” nor a similar identity embraced by all research participants. What this indicates is the inappropriateness of uncritically inserting a multiethnic category into an otherwise unchanged approach to teaching students about race and ethnicity. Such an uncritical insertion is another way of masking differences that do indeed make a difference. The idea here is to deconstruct and challenge divisive identity categories, not construct new ones; to move away from the essentializing tendencies of many school activities and curricula, not essentialize yet another group.

Indeed, many participants were quick to recognize the impossibility of having a multiethnic booth with representative food and artifacts on Diversity Day, or a multiethnic dance at the Multicultural Assembly. Thus, we can see the inappropriateness of asking one multiethnic student to “speak for” all multiethnic individuals, as if there were some sort of discrete and fixed multiethnic identity or experience. In other words, we cannot reify multiethnicity. Accordingly, I urge educators not to be satisfied with simply hanging a poster of Halle Berry or any other multiethnic celebrity in the classroom, or with merely adding to the reading list a novel or two depicting multiethnic families. Nor should educators gratuitously include a brief unit on multiethnicity. Rather, multiethnicity should be incorporated into every discussion of race and ethnicity, and such discussions need to take place more frequently. Indeed, multiethnicity is not simply
a topic to add into multicultural education, but an angle of vision from which to see and re-work it. It is here that a postpositivist realist lens for reconceptualizing race and ethnicity may prove most useful in that it captures the complexities, contradictions, and fluidity of these constructs while allowing for an interrogation of the ways in which they shape the lived experiences of students. Finally, a cursory examination of multiethnicity runs the risk of reifying racial and ethnic categories and strengthening their classificatory power, and therefore, not discussing multiethnicity may be preferable to its superficial treatment. In other words, there is no acceptable easy alternative to substantive, sincere, and meaningful engagement with multiethnicity and, of course, race and ethnicity. Given that the inclusion of multiethnicity in the curriculum has the potential to help us create more authentically inclusive schools; to mitigate the testing and questioning that multiethnic individuals are too often subjected to and, therefore, to support their racial and ethnic identity development; to challenge divisive racial and ethnic categories and limited understandings of them; to provide a more historically accurate and inclusive education; and to respond to students’ demand for such lessons, we cannot in good conscience allow the silence regarding multiethnicity in schools to continue (Mohan, 2009).

The foregoing obviously holds implications not just for K-12 classroom teachers but also for school leaders and teacher preparation programs. For example, school leaders need to create an environment in which tough conversations about racism and other forms of discrimination are not retreated from but are embraced as significant learning opportunities, in which difference is not pathologized but normalized, and in which students and teachers can openly, honestly, and thoughtfully engage with the
complexities of race, ethnicity, multiethnicity, and identity. We also need preparation programs through which future educators gain the skills, knowledge, and confidence required to engage in meaningful, authentic, and frequent discussions of race and ethnicity. In other words, preparation programs and educational leaders must strive to help educators affirmatively respond to Tatum’s question: “Can we get beyond our fear, our sweaty palms, our anxiety about saying the wrong thing, or using the wrong words, and have an honest conversation about racial issues?” (2007, p. xiii).

**Future Research Directions**

Based on the findings from this study, I see the need for additional research directed at the understandings and classroom practices of, and the training and support received by, K-12 educators as they relate to engaging with the topics of race and ethnicity in the classroom. As discussed, most participants in this study noted the general silence in their schools regarding race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity, yet most expressed an earnest desire to engage with these topics in the classroom. At the same time, several of the participants offered explanations for why such engagement does not take place in their schools including: race and ethnicity are uncomfortable or taboo topics, teachers are afraid of offending someone or of “getting in trouble,” teachers have curricular guidelines that they must follow and that preclude meaningful engagement with race and ethnicity in the classroom, and the lack of a safe environment in which to talk about these topics. These findings, I believe, point to clear directions for future research. Topics that warrant further attention from researchers include: teachers and school leaders’ conceptions of race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity, where these conceptions come from, and how they influence relationships and practice; teachers and school leaders’ perceptions of
multiethnic students and their experiences; the training and preparation received by teachers and school leaders related to addressing race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity with students; and teachers’ feelings about and (dis)comfort with discussing these topics in the classroom and the support (or lack thereof) that they receive from school leaders if they wish to do so. Through further research investigating these issues, we can hope to gain a deeper understanding of why so many participants in this study reported a silence in their schools regarding race, ethnicity, and multiethnicity and how, as a practical matter, we might end this silence.

Likewise, as discussed in Chapter Four, I join Renn (2004b) in the belief that “we need to allow the strengths of different research paradigms and methods, as well as individual researchers, to contribute to the discussion of multiraciality” (p. 17). I see rich possibilities for additional studies taking a variety of approaches and with a range of foci such as, for example, gendered analyses, regional comparisons, studies focusing on individuals with specific heritage combinations, and studies grounded in different theoretical perspectives and utilizing different framings of identity.

Finally, as noted in Chapter One, if we are sincere about our desire for equity, social justice, and a society in which racial and ethnic identities are not determinants of opportunity or life chances, we must continue to interrogate the constructs of race and ethnicity and the ways in which racial and ethnic ideologies and categories operate in the lives of all individuals. Such investigations must be ongoing precisely because these ideologies and categories are, despite the best efforts of those invested in maintaining racial hierarchies (Bonilla-Silva, 2003), neither static nor stable (Omi & Winant, 1986).
Reflections on the Research Methodology

As a means of accessing the unique stories and experiences of participants, I believe that semi-structured interviews worked well. While the interview protocol provided the framework for the interviews so that I could compare the responses of participants related to a number of key issues, I designed and conducted the interviews in such a way as to allow for spontaneity and flexibility, and, perhaps most importantly, the introduction of topics by individual participants. The focus groups served as a means to follow up on issues and topics that had emerged during the individual interviews, they provided a forum for discussions between study participants about topics related to multiethnicity, and they allowed me to check the accuracy of my preliminary interpretations of the interview data. They were not, however, a significant source of new ideas and, perhaps not surprisingly, participants spoke somewhat less candidly during the focus groups than they did during the interviews. Nevertheless, as was hoped for, there was a complementary relationship between interviews and focus groups (Wilson, 1997) and following the focus groups I had greater confidence in my interpretations of the data.

As discussed in Chapter Four, the writing activity was designed to be a less obtrusive method of collecting data than the interviews and focus groups (Creswell, 2003). Participant interest in completing the writing activity, though, was minimal, and only three participants (Barry, Kelley, and Hip Hapa) completed it as originally designed. The reflections provided by Barry, Kelley, and Hip Hapa, however, were quite detailed and very thoughtful and excerpts from each of their activities are included in the data chapters. I am, therefore, convinced that writing activities can be a source of rich data and
I wonder what incentives I could have used to make the activity more appealing or to increase completion rates.

As not all students participated in a focus group and only five completed the writing activity, I have considerably more data, as well as data from multiple sources, from some participants and not others. As the focus groups and writing activities were optional, I expected that this would be the case. Nevertheless, the individual profiles in Chapter Five and the individual reflections on schooling in Chapter Eight ensure that the unique experiences and perspectives of each participant are represented in the dissertation.

Deciding how to present the data proved quite challenging. Although the focus of this study was the influence of K-12 schooling on participants’ racial and ethnic identity development, it was important to contextualize the data on K-12 schooling within the broad range of influences on participants’ identity construction processes. Participants’ families, for example, play a significant role in shaping their experiences and their identities. Moreover, I felt it was important to demonstrate the fluid and shifting nature of many participants’ racial and ethnic identities, the fact that there is no single multiethnic identity embraced by all participants, and the varied meaning they attach to their respective racial and ethnic identities. For example, for some participants, being multiethnic was not a central aspect of their identity while for others it was a defining feature of their sense of self. Accordingly, Chapter Five includes individual profiles in which participants discuss influences that are, for the most part, external to K-12 schooling.
Given my focus on K-12 schooling, it seemed important to present the remaining data in such a way as to allow for a micro-level look at each of the salient features of participants’ K-12 schooling (i.e. interactions with teachers, friendships, diversity education initiatives) and a macro-level analysis of the influence of these features, taken together, on participants’ racial and ethnic identity development. In other words, the presentation of the data directly related to participants’ K-12 schooling experiences was designed to provide a detailed understanding of both the individual perceptions and experiences of participants and the broader contexts in which they have studied and socialized—both of which were necessary for answering the research questions.

As discussed in Chapter Four, reflection on the data related to participants’ K-12 schooling experiences resulted in the identification of three broad categories into which the data naturally fit: participants’ discussions of the formal/deliberate aspects of schooling, their discussions of the informal/social aspects of schooling, and their broader reflections on K-12 schooling including recommendations for educators. Once the data related to each of these formal and informal aspects of schooling had been identified, I presented the data according to topics within these categories. For example, the data within the category of the formal aspects of K-12 schooling are organized according to the following topics: the documentation of racial and ethnic identities; race and ethnicity-based student organizations; relationships and interactions with teachers and administrators; specific lessons, projects and classroom activities; (not) learning about multiethnicity; (not) learning about race and ethnicity; and diversity education initiatives. The data related to participants’ broader reflections on K-12 schooling and their recommendations for educators are, like the profiles, organized according to individual
participants. Throughout the presentation of the data in Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight, emergent themes were identified and discussed—themes which were revisited, discussed in greater detail, and linked to each other in the final section of each chapter entitled “Integrating the Data.”

Although presenting one’s data according to topics is perhaps unconventional in a dissertation, I believe that presenting the data in this way was particularly apposite given my desire to provide a detailed understanding of both the individual perceptions and experiences of participants and the broader contexts in which they have studied and socialized. Moreover, we can see the strength of organizing and presenting the data in this way when we compare it to the more common approach of presenting the data according to emergent themes. Through the presentation of the data in this way, which mirrored the processes by which I broke down, analyzed, and pieced together the data, I was able to make public and lay bare the processes for scrutiny. In other words, no reader will need to take my word for it that the themes that I claim to have emerged actually emerged and “that the themes that emerged actually have some congruence or verisimilitude with the reality of the phenomenon studied” (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002, p. 29). Additionally, the presentation of the data in this way highlights the substantial differences between, for example, participants’ heritages, identities, school contexts, and social experiences. Set against the backdrop of these differences, the commonalities among participants’ general reflections on K-12 schooling and their recommendations for educators are all the more striking. Likewise, when, despite these differences, common ideas, experiences, and perceptions related to the formal and informal aspects of schooling are expressed by different participants, we can feel
confident in the broader relevance of our subsequent conclusions. Finally, given that educators will presumably be most interested in the relationships between the actual features of schooling and how they are experienced by multiethnic students, arranging the data as I have done (i.e. according to these features and participants’ broader reflections on schooling), while still allowing for a thematic analysis, lays bare these relationships.

**Reflections on a Postpositivist Realist Framing of Identity**

Before concluding, as a final note of reflection for future researchers, I think future studies of multiethnic individuals, their identities, and experiences, should take seriously the strengths of the postpositivist realist framing of identity. This framing, to my mind, is particularly apt because of its focus on context, interpretation, experience, and cognition—all of which played a significant role in the identity construction of participants in this study.

I know of no other study of multiethnic identities and experiences that employs a postpositivist realist approach to identity; in examining the data from this study, however, we perceive the important insights offered by this approach. In particular, we see the cognitive aspects of identity discussed by Mohanty (1997, 2000) and Moya (2000a/b) and the influence of the interpretations participants have of their experiences. Moya asserts that “an individual’s experiences will influence, but not entirely determine, the formation of her cultural identity” and highlights the fact that it is not one’s experiences alone, but her interpretation of those experiences (which differ for each individual), that will most influence her identity (2000b, p. 82). Participants experience and interpret, for example, questions regarding their racial and ethnic heritage in quite different ways, and these experiences and interpretations appear to have varying effects on their sense of racial and
ethnic group membership. Nearly every student discussed being confronted with questions pertaining to their knowledge and experiences of their racial and/or ethnic heritages. For some, such as Andrea, these questions are viewed as a challenge to their asserted identity and are discussed in terms of testing and evaluation, while others, such as Renee, view these questions as benign curiosity or even flattering interest. The difference between these experiences and their influence on participants’ identities may not be in the exact questions asked, how they were asked, or who was asking them, but in each individual’s interpretation of her experiences of such questions. As we know, those participants who did not report feeling challenged when they express a multiethnic identity or claim membership in multiple racial and ethnic groups, generally discussed their identities and experiences stemming from their identities in more neutral or positive ways. Conversely, those who felt that their sense of identity and group membership was challenged by others were more likely to share negative experiences and perceptions.

In asserting that “there is a cognitive component to identity that allows for the possibility of error and of accuracy in interpreting the things that happen to us,” Moya draws our attention to the fact that our personal experiences may be interpreted and reinterpreted in light of new experiences and knowledge and that these interpretations will largely determine their influence on our identities (2000b, p. 83). This process of interpretation and reinterpretation is discussed by Barry when reflecting on his middle school experiences:

I had a really bad middle school experience. It was one of the, you know, kind of the down points in my life now that I look back on it. Like when I was going to 8th grade, I was like “oh yeah, it’s good.” Then I was like, you know, “that wasn’t so good.” This certain group of people discriminated, kind of like the popular kids, and then they kind of discriminated against me….When I came to Pine Mountains, it was a big
step culturally-wise, just because I was so accepted. And I was used to always being on the defense on a lot of subjects. And here it was just, “hey, me too.” (emphasis added)

Additionally, several participants explained the shifts in their identities stemming from increased exposure to and knowledge about their heritages. One striking example of such a shift is the change in Jasmine’s sense of identity following her reading of *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini. Prior to seeing her culture and religion portrayed through Hosseini’s writing, she felt little connection to, and, in fact, rejected, them. After reading the book, however, she said “*The Kite Runner* just gave me a different perspective on my own religion, my own cultural background….And I was like, this is who I am. And I just felt so a part of it.”

Moya also points out that “some identities, because they can more adequately account for the social categories constituting an individual’s social location, have greater epistemic value than some others that the same individual might claim” (2000b, pp. 83-84). In discussing this assertion, I previously used Barack Obama as an example. Although Obama certainly does not disavow his multiethnic heritage, many have argued that because he is phenotypically Black, an identity as Black or African American may more accurately reflect structures of racism and discrimination of which he is likely to have been a victim. Indeed, Obama himself recently said “I identify as African-American — that's how I'm treated and that's how I'm viewed. I'm proud of it” (“Obama’s True Colors,” 2008). Raya, who shares the same racial heritage as President Obama, expressed a very similar sentiment.

Like if people would ask me, “well, what are you?” I’d say I’m Black and White and then they’ll be like “but what do you mark on the paper?” I’m like, well, if I think about it, back in the day of Martin Luther King, if they were to look at me, and if there were to be a White drinking fountain and a
Black drinking fountain, I’d still have to go to the Black one. So I was like I’ll just mark the Black, you know, I look Black.

Raya clearly recognizes that no matter how she sees herself, she will often be viewed as a Black woman, and that an identity as a Black woman may more accurately reflect her experiences. Despite these realizations, however, Raya does not identify as a Black woman.

In examining Raya’s experiences and those of many other participants, we are reminded of Hames-García’s notions of restrictions and multiplicity. According to Hames-García’s theory of multiplicity, Raya’s Black and White identities are best viewed not as intersecting but as mutually constituting each other. In other words, the socially constructed categories of Black and White (ideally) mutually constitute a biracial or undivided identity. Consistent with this perspective, Raya’s interests should not be seen in terms of how they differ from Black women or White women, but in terms of how her biracial identity as whole and multiple shapes them. As we have seen from the data, however, perceived restrictions (manifested as the imposition of fixed and rigid understandings of racial and ethnic categories), do not always allow for the possibility of a multiple, whole, and unfragmented identity for study participants to develop and express. We may recall Kendra’s experiences of being asked to side with either her Mexican friends or her Black friends when tensions arose between the two groups of students. Or Mialany’s experiences during the riot at school after Martin Luther King Day. Or, of course, all of the instances in which study participants have perceived that their legitimacy as members of a certain racial or ethnic group was being tested or challenged. Each of these experiences can be linked to the imposition of rigid racial and
ethnic categories (restrictions) which challenge the notion of an unfragmented multiethnic identity.

While the intention of this research was not to test the applicability or accuracy of a particular approach to understanding identities, and, in particular, multiethnic identities, my study has confirmed me in the belief that studies informed by a postpositivist realist conception of identity, as well as Hames-Garcías’ theory of multiplicity, may be better able to capture (i.e. avoid over- or under-reading) the nuances, evolutions, contradictions, real life consequences, and general complexity of multiethnic identities.

**Concluding Thoughts**

When she first heard about my research topic, a member of the iPride community said, “the last thing we need is another ‘tragic mulatto’ study.” I could not agree more. As “producers” and “consumers” of research, we often inadvertently focus on the most striking evidence, even if it is not representative. Certainly, in this dissertation we have seen instances of overt racism, of threats to personal safety, and of other emotionally distressing social and educational circumstances and events. It is important to me, however, to emphasize that generally speaking the participants in this study are happy and well-adjusted individuals who are popular with their peers and involved in their school communities. They undoubtedly defy the image of the “tragic mulatto” and the troubled, fragmented, crisis-prone individual so prevalent in popular and academic accounts of multiethnic youth. They were also incredibly generous with their time, knowledge, and insights; to them I am extremely grateful.

This dissertation is focused on the experiences and racial and ethnic identity development of multiethnic students. However, this dissertation holds implications for a
great many students in North American schools and their educators. Countless students can be accurately described as “border crossers”—those who defy categorization be it on the grounds of, for example, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or religion. These are the individuals who, either by birth or by choice, cannot be boxed in or constrained by those categories and labels according to which society has traditionally been organized and divided. They have more than one box to check. They have often been made to feel that they do not fit in. They have been asked to explain, and indeed justify, their identities. They are the students who must no longer remain neglected by educational policies and practices based on impoverished understandings of identity and the limited categories around which identities are often constructed. These sentiments were well captured by Mialany, to whom I give the final word of this dissertation:

There should be more awareness of the fact that not everybody’s the same. Not necessarily mixed, but just in general. Not everybody’s going to look the same. Not everybody’s gonna act the same. People are different and it’s okay to be different. And it’s okay to be mixed.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Appendix I – Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me about yourself (prompts: heritage, grade, age, interests, favorite classes, activities).

2. When and how did you first become aware of your multiethnic identity?

3. How would you describe your process of identity construction as a multiethnic individual?
   a. Do you feel that this process is complete, or is it ongoing? Please explain.

4. In what ways do you feel that your identity construction has been influenced by your family members?

5. In what ways do you feel that your identity construction has been influenced by your peers?

6. In what ways do you feel that your identity construction has been influenced by your grade K-12 schooling experiences?
   a. Are/were there specific lessons that you feel have been influential in your identity construction process?
   b. Are/were there any school activities or events that you feel have been influential in your identity construction process?
   c. Are/were there other school practices that you feel have been influential in your identity construction process?
   d. Have there been any comments made by teachers or other school employees that you feel have been influential in your identity construction process?
   e. Have there been any comments made by classmates and peers that you feel have been influential in your identity construction process?

7. What else has influenced your identity construction?

8. Was multiethnicity discussed in class or included in the curriculum during your K-12 schooling experiences?
   a. If so, please explain how the topic was presented.
b. If so, did such lessons or discussion influence your identity or sense of self?

c. If so, do you believe that such lessons or discussions had an influence on others’ perceptions of you?

9. What social challenges and/or advantages did you experience as a result of your multiethnic identity in grades K-12?

10. What personal challenges and/or advantages did you experience as a result of your multiethnic identity in grades K-12?

11. What academic challenges and/or advantages did you experience as a result of your multiethnic identity in grades K-12?

12. In general, do you feel a sense of belonging (connectedness) to the larger school community or to a specific community within the school? Do you link your sense of belonging (or lack thereof) to your multiethnic identity?

13. Is there anything I have not asked you that you feel would be helpful for understanding the influence of your K-12 schooling experiences on your identity construction process?
Appendix II – Writing Activity Prompt

Instructions:

Think of a specific time when your school supported your multiethnic identity development or a time when you wished the school had done something different to support you as a multiethnic person.

With this in mind, please write about specific ways in which schools are and are not meeting the needs of their multiethnic students. Please be as detailed as possible. Also, if you feel that there are specific ways in which schools might better meet the academic, personal, and social needs of multiethnic individuals, please write about them here and provide a rationale for your suggestions.

Feel free to be creative! You can write this in the form of a letter to educators, in paragraph form, as a story, a poem, etc.

Completed writing activities can be emailed to me at mohanerica@yahoo.com in the text of an email or as an attached document. Please complete this writing activity within four weeks of receiving this invitation.

Should you have any questions about this activity, please do not hesitate to contact me. Thanks again!

Erica Mohan
mohanerica@yahoo.com
Appendix III - Maria Root's 50 Experiences of Racially Mixed People

The 50 questions or comments and experiences evolved from a questionnaire I developed for a study on biracial siblings I conducted from 1996 to 1997. These questions and comments provide an introduction to the way in which race consciousness is brought up directly, sideways, and from all sides for people of mixed heritage. These comments and questions, though not an exhaustive list, provide a window into how this country internalizes assumption about race, belonging, and identity. They socialize the mixed race person to understand as well as question race American style. It is a monoracial system; one race per person. Not everyone experiences these questions or comments the similarly. One person might enjoy being asked, “What are you?” whereas their sibling might dread and resent the question. This list provides a launching point for sharing, discussing, laughing, debriefing, and educating.

1. You have been told, “You have to choose; you can’t be both.”
2. Your ethnicity was mistakenly identified.
3. People assumed your race to be different by phone than in person.
4. You are accused of not acting or wanting to be Latino, Asian, Black…
5. You have been told, “Mixed race people are so beautiful or handsome.”
6. Strangers looked between you and your parent(s) to figure out if you were related.

7. You have been told, “You don’t look Native, Black, Latino…”

8. You have been asked, “What are you?”

9. People say things they might not otherwise say if they knew how you identified racially.

10. You have been asked, “Where are you from?”

11. You have repeatedly been the recipient of stares or longer than passing glances from strangers.

12. You have been told, “You look exotic.”

13. Your choice of friends has been interpreted as your “selling out” or not being authentic.

14. You have been accused of “acting or wanting to be white.”

15. Judgments of your racial authenticity have been based upon your boyfriend/s or girlfriend’s (partner’s) race.

16. Comments are made about your hair or hairstyle, skin color, eye shape etc.

17. You have been subjected to jokes about mixed race people.

18. You have been told, “You think you’re too good for your own kind.”

19. Grandparent(s) or relatives don’t accept you because of your parents’ interracial relationship.

20. Your parents or relatives compete to “claim” you for their own racial or ethnic group.

21. You have been told, “You have the best of both worlds.”
22. You have been asked about your racial or ethnic heritage as an object of curiosity.

23. Upon meeting you, people seem confused by your last name. They do not think it “matches” you.

24. People assume you are confused about your racial identity or have had a hard time figuring it out.

25. People speak to you in foreign languages because of how they interpret your physical appearance.

26. You have been told, “Society doesn’t recognize mixed race.”

27. You have been told, “You aren’t really Black, Latino, Asian…”

28. You have been mistaken for another person of mixed heritage who does not resemble you.

29. You have been told you must be full of self-loathing or hatred because of how you racially identify yourself.

30. You have been told, “You are a mistake.”

31. Different people perceive your race differently based upon the company you keep.

32. The race people assign you varies in different parts of the U.S.A.

33. You have difficulty filling out forms asking for a single race.

34. You identify your race differently than others identify you.

35. You are told, “You aren’t like other Indians, Asians, Latinos…”

36. Your siblings identify their race differently than you do yours.

37. You have been called racial slurs of groups with which you do not share heritage.
38. Friends suggest that you date someone based upon the race or ethnicity with which they think you should identify.
39. Your parents identify your race differently than you identify.
40. You are told, “You aren’t Black, Latino, Asian…enough”
41. Your mother was assumed to be your nanny or babysitter.
42. A stranger assumes that your father is your “older boyfriend” or your mother is the “older woman.”
43. You were treated differently by relatives or your parents than a sibling on the basis of racial features.
44. You were well liked by peers but were not asked for dates.
45. You wish you were darker and try to get as much sun as possible.
46. People assume your father was in the military.
47. You have enrolled in Spanish language classes in order to develop the ability to say “Yes” to the question, “Do you speak the language?” and remove one of the blocks to authenticity.
48. Your otherwise friends become more distant when they think associating with you will make their racial authenticity or popularity questionable.
49. You have been knowingly approached and asked, “Your mother’s white (black, Asian), huh?”
50. You have tried to hide one or both parents from view of people who know you but are not your closest friends because you anticipate they will treat you differently.
Appendix IV – Behavioral Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval

The University of British Columbia
Office of Research Services
Behavioural Research Ethics Board
Suite 102, 6190 Agronomy Road, Vancouver, B.C. V6T 1Z3

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL - FULL BOARD

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Other locations where the research will be conducted:
This research will be conducted on the Berkeley and Los Angeles campuses of the University of California. It will also be conducted at the iPride office in Berkeley, California. The interviews and focus groups will take place in a quiet, private room or office identified for use by the iPride staff, the participant, or the University of California.

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<td>Erica Mohan</td>
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The application for ethical review and the document(s) listed above have been reviewed and the procedures were found to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

Approval is issued on behalf of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board and signed electronically by one of the following:

Dr. M. Judith Lynam, Chair
Dr. Jim Rupert, Associate Chair
Dr. Laurie Ford, Associate Chair