

## **Adolescent Perceptions of Diversity within Educational and Social Settings: Implications of Race and Social Class**

*Aaron A. Baker and Sheneka M. Williams*

*Peabody College, Vanderbilt University*

Since the Brown decision in 1954, magnet schools have become a preferred reform vehicle for addressing desegregation in urban districts nationally (Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Blank & Archibald, 1992; Rogus, 1996). Once used extensively as part of court ordered desegregation plans throughout America in the 1970s (Clincy, 1995; Yon, Nesbit, & Algozzine, 1998), most magnet school plans are now touted as effective desegregation tools (Black, 1996; Blank & Archibald, 1992; Clincy, 1995). Many researchers believe that they are both popular as a policy option and successful at achieving racial diversity because magnet schools attract diversity rather than mandate it (Gersti-Pepin, 2002). Nevertheless, scholars differ on the overall efficacy of magnet schools in terms of the “quality” of education they provide all children within the school and in terms of whether students within magnet programs interact across racial lines (Dickinson, Holifield, Creer, & Holifield, 2000; McNeil, 2000).

Although the bulk of research on magnet schools has targeted high school students, the majority have focused on effects of racial diversity on students’ outcomes (e.g., Orfield, 2002), few field-based studies have focused on adolescent middle school students. Additionally, relatively little research has been conducted to examine how successfully “magnet schools create physical mixing of students of different races within school walls, let alone constructive relationships among them” (Dickinson, Holifield, Creer, & Holifield, 2000, p. 392). Thus, while magnet programs are popular mechanisms for achieving racial diversity, we know little about how these programs impact student experiences and their views of race (Gersti-Pepin, 2002). Therefore, in an effort to better understand how magnet school students make meaning of their lived and perceived racial experiences, this study asked: How race conscious<sup>1</sup> and class conscious<sup>2</sup> are middle school magnet students? In this study, we attempt to capture and describe the extent of race and/or class-consciousness among magnet school students, and the nature and orientation of their values regarding diversity by engaging the students in rich discussions about their experiences at school. Thus, our intention is to offer new insight into the manner in which magnet school students perceive and experience the physical mixing of students of different races and social classes by giving voice<sup>3</sup> to students’ attitudes, values, behaviors, and beliefs. In-depth interviews

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<sup>1</sup> Race consciousness refers to one’s awareness of his/her racial identity and group membership (Cross, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Class consciousness refers to one’s perception of the meaning of social class as generating factors that influence social position (Durrant & Sparrow, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this manuscript the terms Black and African-American are used. Most often when “Black” is used, this is because we are quoting a student or an author. We feel it is important to use the language and the sentiment provided by our interviewee.

regarding how students perceive and value racial diversity at school, and their thoughts on the social climate and social relations were conducted with students from a single magnet school in middle Tennessee. The primacy accorded the students' voices reflects a deliberate effort to capture their truths and avoid distorting their stories.

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Frameworks**

All social research rests on a set of assumptions concerning the nature of the problem they address, and the characteristics and needs of the target population (Morris, 2004). The following theoretical frameworks and review of relevant literature helps to illuminate some of the assumptions related to this study, and provides a background on some of the concepts needed for evaluating perceptions and experiences of the students. The key concepts and theories grounding this study are derived from research on race and identity development (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990), contact theory (Allport, 1954; Cook, 1969), and social balance theory (Brockner & Swap, 1976; Moody 2002).

#### *Race and Class Consciousness*

Interestingly, despite recent (and imminent) federal court decisions to eliminate court ordered school desegregation—decisions tantamount to exclaiming race no longer matters in our schools— researchers continue to argue that race matters to all people in our country; whether White or not, especially in our schools (Banks, 1998; Milner, 2003; Scheurich & Young, 1997). Many hold that the world consists of racial individuals, including teachers and students, who reap the benefits, privileges, as well as hardships of racism because of their racial heritage. Thus, some research has concluded that such racialized experiences give rise to race consciousness, which emerges for members of both the dominant group and the subordinated racial class (Durant & Sparrow, 1997; Ferguson, 1936; Handy, 1984).

For the purposes of this study, race consciousness is defined as one's awareness of his/her racial identity and group membership, as reflected by attitudinal expressions of identity, devotion, pride, behavior, etc (Cross, 1991). As a function of racial identity development (which is discussed further below), race consciousness may be expressed in different forms, and is not static due to social changes, transformations, and stratification occurring within a racial group (as well as within the larger society). Therefore, the type and degree of race consciousness of members of a particular racial group may vary over time.

Another assumption explored in this study is that attitudes toward race and class are shaped by students' experiences and their status within race and class hierarchy. Since social class also stratifies America, just as race consciousness can emerge from racialized experiences, class-consciousness can emerge among members of both dominant and subordinate groups (Durant & Sparrow, 1997). With this in mind, class-consciousness is defined as one's perception of the meaning of social class as generating factors that influence social position. Interestingly, some social scientists argue (e.g. Handy, 1984; Wilson, 1987), like those proponents of unitary status and the end of court-ordered desegregation, that race and racism no longer matter as much as social class and classism.

While W.E.B. Dubois (1969) proclaimed, over a century ago that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men...in America" (p.17) and as suggested above, some researchers contend that the problem no longer persists in twenty-first century. Wilson (1987), for example,

argues that race is much less a factor in the lives of minorities than it once had been. According to Wilson, the problem of the color line has evolved into economic and social structure problems best described by Wilson as “social isolation” and “concentration effects.”

Social isolation and concentration effects are generated by increases in the size of the service sector, and decreases in the size of the production sector (Wilson, 1987). Consequently, the residents of the inner city who possess the necessary level of education earn better jobs, take those jobs, and ultimately move away from inner cities. It is in this manner that concentration effects and social isolation are produced: educated minorities who possess financial capital, human capital, and social capital leave the inner city, taking all of their capital with them. Thus, in the context of this study, as we try to determine how race and class impact adolescent perceptions of diversity within educational and social settings, it is critical that we consider the extent to which students perceive and experience both social isolation and concentration effects.

Before adolescents can truly perceive diversity, they must understand how they perceive themselves as racialized beings. To that end, one’s racial identity development may affect the way he/she perceives diversity within educational and social settings. We offer Cross’s Model of Nigrescence and Helm’s Model of White Identity Development to better explain adolescent racial identity development.

#### *Cross’s Model of Nigrescence*

Cross’s (1991) model of Black racial identity development provides a method by which we can begin to explore and understand endemic racism and its impact on race consciousness. The model, outlined below, follows five stages in a process called “Nigrescence,” the journey to a healthy Black identity; those stages include Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization/Commitment.

During the *Pre-Encounter* stage, Black people have not confronted racism personally. Many perceive their Blackness as inferior or deficient. People in this stage may harbor anti-Black feelings, rejecting any symbols of Blackness, or they may purport race neutrality with statements like “I am a human-being who happens to be Black.”

In the *Encounter* stage, a racist circumstance or particular event (e.g., recognition of racial profiling) transform a pre-encounter Black person’s understanding of his or her racial self. “A person’s identity filters incoming experiences so that the information ‘fits’ into his or her current understanding of self” (p. 200). Provoked by feelings of anger, guilt, and confusion, Black people in this stage begin to perceive and acknowledge experiences of racism. Ultimately, this stage initiates a deeper search for understanding Blackness (Laughter, Baker, Williams et al., 2005).

The point of *Immersion/Emersion* marks a period of transition; a Black person in this stage wants to shed the pre-encounter identity, but remains uncertain about what Blackness should mean to them and how to become the “right kind” of Black person. In an attempt to tear down their old perspectives on race and construct a new identity, Black people in the Immersion part of this stage surround themselves with symbols of (e.g., dress, hairstyles, and flags) and reject Whiteness. Their worldview is polarized and simplistic: “Black is beautiful; White is evil.” Emersion begins the process of emerging from this simple, dichotomized view of race. For example, a Black teacher may expand his or her understanding of students of color to include more than just Black children (Laughter, Baker, Williams et al., 2005).

A development of security and pride in one’s sense of Black identity characterizes *Internalization*. As Locke (1925) suggests, Black people in the internalization stage profess,

“We wish our race pride to be a healthier, more positive achievement than a feeling based upon the realization of the shortcomings of others” (p. 9). The new and robust identity performs three dynamic functions in a person’s daily experiences: (a) it protects a person from psychological insults resulting from endemic racism; (b) it provides a sense of belonging; and (c) it provides a foundation for carrying out transactions with people across race and culture (Cross, 1991).

The final stage of *Internalization/Commitment*, which is not necessarily reached by those in the internalization stage, is characterized by a “sustained interest in Black affairs” (Cross, 1991, p. 220). Thus, this stage is exemplified by people for whom racial awareness becomes a permanent way of life (e.g., Gandhi, Malcolm X, and Dr. King). Other than such a commitment, this stage is virtually indistinguishable from Internalization.

### *Helms’s Model of White Identity Development*

As the “norm” of American society, the White racial identity by definition seeks to camouflage itself and become the invisible lens through which everything else is seen and judged (Scheurich & Young, 1997). By making this “Normal” strange in some way, it can be brought into focus and recognized as a creation susceptible to deconstruction. In her psychological work, Helms (1990) established a series of six identity statuses<sup>4</sup> (Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudo independence, Immersion/Emersion, and Autonomy) used to conceive White identity development. In the *Contact* status, one sees White as normal, as the status quo. From this position, anything not White is seen as deficient, as not measuring up, and the benefits to being White are thought of as appropriate. A White student in this status thinks in terms of colorblindness, unwilling to admit the systemic and institutional nature of racism.

Movement to the second status of *Disintegration* occurs through increased contact with other races, when overt differences between races become obvious. Often, guilt and anger occur in this status as Whites refuse perceived guilt, claiming no fault in the system still benefiting him or her. Moving past these emotions to the status of *Reintegration* can turn White students against people of color. A White student in reintegration sees America as a meritocratic society where anyone can work hard and succeed (Laughter, Baker, Williams, et al., 2005).

The fourth status, *Pseudo independence*, marks an important shift in thinking. The pseudo-independent White person begins to see that racism is not comprised of individual acts of discrimination but remains a systemic problem, leading the person to deny his or her own Whiteness. *Immersion/Emersion* brings the desire to deny Whiteness full circle as one begins to seek a personal identity based on “accurate information about what it means... to be White in the United States as well as in the world in general” without relying on myths and stereotypes. White people in this stage seek to understand Whiteness and search for other White people who have established a stable sense of their own identities.

As a secure theory of Whiteness develops, White people may approach the final status of *Autonomy* with a stable and positive White identity. At this status, White people develop “a lived commitment to antiracist activity, ongoing self-examination, and increased interpersonal effectiveness in multiracial settings” (Helms, 1990, p.5). In an effort to better understand adolescent perceptions concerning diversity, one must consider the context of the

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<sup>4</sup> The term *status* is an update from Helms’s previous delineation of six stages, emphasizing that this is not necessarily a linear progression and that one can progress and regress over the course of a lifetime.

educational and social setting. This study examines both contact theory and social balance theory as they relate to how adolescents, in general, interact with each other (Laughter, Baker, Williams, et al., 2005).

### *Contact Theory*

Allport's (1954) social psychological contact theory contends that before contact between two differing groups will result in positive attitudes toward each other, both groups must meet three conditions: (a) equal status; (b) cooperative interdependence; and (c) positive support of those in authority. Cook (1969) added two more conditions: (a) the situation should encourage acquaintanceship and (b) the behavior of the group in question should contradict stereotypical beliefs.

In order for conditions of equal status to be met, no group should hold positional hierarchy over another group. If the setting is structured such that positional hierarchy is correlated with race, then interracial friendships are unlikely (Moody, 2002). The second condition, which suggests that groups must depend on each other, fosters cross-racial interaction. For instance, if students of different races play the same team sports or participate in the same extracurricular activities, then cross-racial interaction will take place. This, in turn, could be a catalyst for developing cross-racial friendships. Allport's (1954) third condition suggests that persons in authority should support cross-racial mixing. In the case of a racially mixed school, school administrators, teachers, and coaches should support cross-racial relationships. Stockard and Mayberry (1992) suggest that we are more likely to find cooperative school climates in settings where extracurricular activities are integrated or where the faculty is racially mixed.

Given that administrators, teachers, and coaches have authority to select students into extracurricular activities, their actions could either promote or inhibit cross-racial interactions. If contact theory holds true, then as cross-race exposure through courses and extracurricular activities increases, then cross-racial interactions are more likely to expand. However, Allport (1954) contends that increased intergroup contact would not necessarily mean less hostility or lead to interracial friendships. Instead, contact may reinforce previously held stereotypes and increase intergroup hostility (Khmelkov & Hallinan, 1999). The intent of this study is to examine the degree to which students interact or uphold stereotypical beliefs about certain groups.

### *Social Balance Theory*

Further supporting the premise of contact theory, social balance theory suggests interpersonal attraction through three domains: propinquity, similarity, and status. Moody (2002) defines *propinquity*, or functional proximity, as the necessary condition for peer relationships. In essence, peer relationships form when individuals can interact with each other. The more that people come in contact, the more likely they are to become familiar with one another (Brockner & Swap, 1976; Moody 2002). Although necessary for cross-racial friendships to form, propinquity does not guarantee that such relationships will be positive. It is possible that propinquity can lead to negative interaction among individuals. In that regard, Moody (2002) notes that it is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for interaction.

*Similarity*, one of the strongest predictors of interpersonal characteristics, may explain why race is more or less relevant in a setting. With respect to race, social balance can

amplify peer relationships. If race is an important attribute for initial peer relationship to be formed, then social balance will magnify its importance by building cliques around race-based peer relationships (Moody, 2002). Social balance theory suggests that individuals with like characteristics draw to each other. Therefore, sex, race, and ethnicity are salient factors in interpersonal attraction.

A third factor that affects peer relationships is *status*. The halo effect, which suggests that higher status may act as a source of attraction for members of a lower status, can confer status on the other person (Blau, 1964; Huston & Levinger, 1978). In turn, the halo effect can motivate minority group members to be open to contacts with members of the dominant group. However, dominant group members who are status conscious may avoid peer relations with minority group members (Khelmov & Hallinan, 1999).

#### *Adolescent friendships and extracurricular activities*

Ability grouping and classroom organization have the potential to negate cross-race peer relations, but extracurricular activities provide an opportunity for students of different racial and ethnic groups to engage with each other. Clotfelter (2002) explains that the degree of interracial contact in school organization depends on three factors: (a) the racial composition of the school; (b) the degree to which students participate in extracurricular activities; and (c) the evenness with which students are distributed across organizations.

In regards to context, a school's racial composition is directly reflected in the racial composition of its teams and organizations. Thus, a racially mixed school, which has non-White students, should also have non-White students who participate in extracurricular activities. The second factor, which relates to student participation, suggests that if students of any group join organizations at a lower than average rate, the potential for interracial contact is necessarily lessened (Clotfelter, 2002). The third factor discusses how students are dispersed in organizations. Clotfelter (2002) adds that if a significant number of clubs or teams are comprised of students of one racial group, then the potential for interracial contact will be lessened. Such is the case for nearly all-White soccer teams or all-Black basketball teams and segregated cafeterias (Clotfelter, 2002). Combined, these factors note the importance a racially mixed school plays in not only increasing the likelihood of cross-racial interaction, but also in the formation of cross-racial friendships.

Slavin and Madden's (1979) work found that students who participated in sports teams in racially mixed high schools tended to have more cross-racial friends. They also reported that these students held more positive racial attitudes compared to students who did not participate on athletic teams (Khelmov & Hallinan, 1999). In addition, Hallinan and Teixeira (1987) studied the importance of Black and White students engaging in activities together. Their study found that Black and White students who participated in the same co-curricular activities were more likely to choose each other as best friends than those who were not engaged together in at least one activity (Khelmov & Hallinan, 1999). Patchen's work (1982), which included both qualitative and quantitative data, found that high school students in integrated schools who participated in cooperative extracurricular activities had improved racial attitudes. Research indicates that extracurricular activities, especially sports, increase the likelihood of cross-racial friendships. Thus, it is important for parents, teachers, and administrators to encourage student participation in extracurricular activities. With respect to cross-racial friendships, some minority students may be encouraged to develop friendships with students of the majority race. However, these students must keep in mind that a status-conscious majority member may reject them.

Ultimately, contact theory and social balance theory provide a framework for better understanding how students perceive race in a racially mixed school. Not only are these theories pertinent for understanding how students “mix” inside school, but they also explain how students interact with each other outside of school. As sociological research has shown, all of the processes of interpersonal attraction are influenced by the social characteristics of the setting in which interactions occur (Khelmov & Hallinan, 1999).

### *Magnet Schools, Quality of Community, and Desegregation*

According to Rossell (2003), “Magnet schools are an attempt to introduce market incentives into school desegregation policy” (p. 697), an attempt, which may be unsuccessful, and in fact, detrimental to desegregation efforts because voluntary magnets may cause White flight (Rossell, 2003.) Nevertheless, researchers have long contended, “magnet schools can desegregate across lines of social, class, achievement, and race, and serve all their students well” (Metz, 1988, p. 55). Several researchers, in fact, support the concept of magnet schools because they believe that for the good of society, all children need to be in desegregated schools (e.g., Metz, 1988; Ascher & Burnett, 1993; Estes et al., 1990; Orfield, 2001). Nevertheless, while these studies do avert to the importance of desegregation, as well as the importance of magnet schools in the desegregation process, few accept the assumptions that simply because the students are enrolled in a school together that they will interact in a meaningful manner, across race. That is, little qualitative research has examined the nature of the relationships among students of different races within magnet schools.

Research has shown that magnet schools (based upon student interactions) may be characterized as having one of four orientations, each with important implications for students. According to Schoenfeld (2001), a desegregated magnet school may: (a) try to avoid any particular response to the diverse nature of the student body; (b) encourage assimilation, where schools tend to see success as achieving an endpoint whereby minority group members do not differ from their White counterparts in values, orientations, skills, and the like; (c) promote pluralistic coexistence, where different historical experiences and values are accepted, but no effort is made to foster increased understanding; or, (d) achieve integrated pluralism. Integrated pluralism, which seems the most difficult orientation to achieve, starts with the recognition and acceptance of differences, but adds emphasis on fostering respect and interaction. Considering the goals for magnet school initiation— to enhance racial and social diversity (Gertsi-Pepin, 2002; Goldring & Smrekar, 2002; Orfield, 2001; Schoenfeld, 2001)— it is critical that we examine how students both perceive and act out issues of race and class, if we are to understand which orientation magnet schools reach, how students think about race and class, and/or whether any of these issues matter to them at all.

In the next section of this manuscript, we will discuss methods used to capture adolescent perceptions of diversity within educational and social settings.

## **Method**

The purpose of this study was to describe the manner in which adolescents experience race and understand diversity within a magnet school setting. This study employed qualitative methods to gain students’ perceptions on diversity, race, and social class and how these perceptions impact their race consciousness. The sample selection technique use for this was purposeful (Patton, 2002), yet representative of typical adolescent students.

Perhaps we need to say that our sample size is a limitation; however, we need to defend our stance by saying that our study is transferable.

### *Rationale for Method*

The intent of this study was to describe the perceptions and experiences of adolescents in a magnet middle school. The qualitative design was selected for this study because “it is largely an investigation of a social phenomenon, undertaken by intensively comparing, contrasting, and classifying participants’ experiences, and perceptions” (Yon, Nesbitt, & Algozzine, 1998, p. 78). Most studies in the magnet school context have examined student achievement and have been quantitative in nature. To that end, students’ voices have been minimized. Hence, the research strategy developed for this study involves a series of in-depth interviews with students. The qualitative methodology selected corresponds to the nature of the data sought: student attitudes, self-reported behavior, and exploration of interactions and exchanges (Yin, 2003).

### *Site Selection*

This manuscript is based on a subset of qualitative case studies that are part of a larger, multiple-methods research project funded by the William T. Grant Foundation, beginning in 2001. The larger study involves district data and survey research across 26 schools (two clusters) in Metropolitan Nashville over a period of three years. To study student perceptions and interactions across grade levels, we selected students at a single magnet, middle school.

Thus, the site for this study was a magnet middle school located in an urban community, adjacent to public housing, in middle Tennessee. The school, founded in 1993, was established as part of a district-wide commitment to desegregate the system, which had begun 10 years earlier. Thus, the school-community was selected for its appropriateness, familiarity, and proximity.

At the time of the study, the neighborhood community was primarily composed of low income Black families; however, the school community was much more diverse. With an enrollment of 590 students in grades 5-8; of these, 58% are African American, approximately 34% of the students are White 7% are Asian, 2% are Hispanic, and less than one percent were Pacific Islander or other. Approximately 30% of the students that attend the school are zoned into the school by the geographic location of their residences within the surrounding neighborhood of the school.

Interestingly, all of the students in the school are now part of a single unified school-body – commonly referred to as a “full-site magnet” –where each student participates in the magnet program. Until two years preceding this study, the students had been segregated within the school. “Magnet students” (those students who had been enrolled through an intricate lottery system), had their classes in a different part of the building and with different teachers than the “zoned students” (those who attended the school because it was their neighborhood school). This type of magnet is referred to as a “program within a school.” Consequently, while the district had been committed to desegregation, the students in this magnet school had previously been segregated primarily by social class (and race to an extent) for eight years.

### *Sample Characteristics and Selection Criteria*

This study is comprised of 14 adolescent Black and White students who attend a single magnet middle school. For a qualitative study, this sample size represents a reasonable balance between time and researcher resources (Patton, 2002). In addition, this sample size allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of students' perceptions of cross-racial friendships.

Students were selected from a random stratified sample; several students' parents were interviewed, and the parents gave permission for their children to participate in the study. In addition, participants provided names and telephone numbers of classmates who would be interested in participating in the study. Combined, these strategies created a sample that was random within grade level (grades 6-8), friendship patterns, and race. From a sample of 14 participants, ten participants are Black and four are White.

### *Data Collection*

Data collection took place over a three-month period using semi-structured interviews with Black and White adolescents as the primary source of data. Students were contacted by telephone to participate in the study. If students (with parents' permission) consented to an interview, then an interview was scheduled. On occasions, some of the families that lived in the housing project adjacent to the school had their phones disconnected, or had moved to new homes. Consequently, we were only able to interview one student from the neighborhood zone.

### *Interviews*

Qualitative inquiry—strategically, philosophically, and therefore, methodologically—aims to minimize the imposition of predetermined responses when gathering data (Patton, 2002). The primary source of data was semi-structured interviews. Interviews were audiotaped with the interviewee's permission (and their parents' permission), and they were transcribed verbatim. Students' names and other identifying characteristics remain anonymous; thus, pseudonyms are used to protect students' privacy. The interviews took place at locations convenient to parents and students. Several interviews were conducted in friendship pairs in an effort to maximize comfort during the interview process.

Interview questions are clustered around four major themes and are intentionally non-directive (Yin, 2003) to trigger broad, comprehensive responses. The core clusters include: (a) social climate and social relations, (b) ideas about desegregation and post busing programs, (c) perceived level of familiarity, caring and support at school, and (d) experiences outside of school (e. g., extracurricular activities). Collectively these broad categories will provide insight on the race consciousness of adolescents inside and outside the school setting (see Appendix A for the interview protocol).

### *Field Notes*

Additional field notes include personal notes to self and questions raised during the fieldwork experience. A journal was kept to capture impressions made in interviews and performance while conducting interviews. As Patton (2002) notes, the observer takes in information and forms impressions that go beyond what can be fully recorded in even the most detailed field notes.

### *Data Analysis*

This is a qualitative study; therefore, data analysis was continuous throughout the fieldwork. Data analysis focused on recognizing themes and patterns that emerged based on the study's conceptual framework and interview protocol. We utilized two primary sources to draw from in organizing the analysis: (a) the questions that were generated during the conceptual and design phases of the study; and (b) analytic insights and interpretations that emerged during data collection (Patton, 2002). Using this premise, we identified and coded themes that are relevant to the study's theoretical propositions. An "open coding" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 223) technique was used to combine data from interviews and field note observations. This process strengthened the study's findings by exposing commonalities across individual cases and data sources. In addition, this process strengthened the study's internal validity. We have a relatively small sample size; therefore, the richness of the data adds rigor to the study. As Patton (2002) explains:

The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size. (p. 245)

### *Limitations*

*Sample size.* Because this study was exploratory in nature, its purpose sought to understand how middle school students perceive diversity, and issues regarding race and class. In that regard, this study sought depth opposed to breadth. With a sample size of approximately 14 middle school students, all but one of the students were true "magnet" students, which is to say that only one student interviewed lived in the school's zone (which is largely a low-income, housing project neighborhood) and attended the magnet school as their neighborhood school. Unfortunately, having so few of the "zoned" students may limit our ability to understand how class is perceived by the low-income students attending the school. Adding more neighborhood students to the study may have contributed to the richness of that data, and enabled cross class comparisons.

*Generalizability.* Although qualitative findings may not be generalizable (Patton, 2002) to a population, results may be transferable to other populations. Since "[social] phenomena are neither time- nor context-free" (Guba & Lincoln, 1982, p. 238), providing thick description of phenomena studied within its setting/context offers opportunities to "fit" findings from one study to other similar context. Ultimately, we are more interested in authentically understanding specific cases within a context than in hypothesizing about generalizations, because as Guba and Lincoln state: "one can easily conclude that generalizations that are intended to be context free will have little that is useful to say about human behavior" (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 62).

## **Findings**

### *Students' perception of Race and Diversity*

During the course of each interview, we asked each of the students to describe their school as if they were writing an advertisement for television. Prominent among responses

that referred to newness of their facility and the strong academic focus of the institution was racial diversity. All of the students interviewed reported that their school is diverse. While one White sixth grade girl said that the school is diverse because it is “mostly like a mix of African American and White” students, a typical description of the school, like this one from a White 5th grade girl, pointed out that students perceived far more races around them at school:

*We have a whole lot of different cultures at our school. We have Hispanics, African American people, people from Afghanistan and things. We have, it seems like there is a whole lot, but probably more than I'm saying.*

An African American sixth grade student elaborated further: “I mean you have Hispanics, Blacks, Whites, we have people from Asia, Korea, Japan, Africa.” In addition to perceiving that their environment is diverse, each of the students attested to the importance of attending a diverse school. An African American sixth grade boy, when talking about a Puerto Rican boy in his class, explained that his school environment is important because it enhances his understanding of different cultures:” It helps us learn more about their race... I learned where [he] came from, like what they do, like in their country.”

Most students, however, provided two particular reasons why diversity at school is important to them: some students felt that diverse school environments helped eliminate racism, and others held that their school experience would help them learn how to interact with different people in their future work life. For example, a White sixth grade girl speculated:

*If you don't go to school with people of other races and stuff, then you'll hold prejudice against them or something. Here I am learning how to get along with people different from me.*

Similarly, a White sixth grade boy, who no longer attends the magnet school, averts to the effect that he believes a diverse student body has on the development of racism:

*I kind of miss [the magnet school] actually... Some of [the kids at my new school] are racist... [They] refer to people by their color or their race, and stuff like that, which I don't like. I don't know if you can really be racist at [the magnet school].*

One Black, sixth grade girl, when asked if attending a diverse school had any benefits, explained:

*It would help me to know and work with other races. Like if I had went to a school with all Black children, it would probably make me feel that I need to have a job with all Black people. I am learning how to interact with different kinds of people.*

Another African American sixth grade girl agreed, and explained that diversity was of particular importance for her White counterparts:

*They need to get to know other cultures and know what their customs are, and get along with those people because soon they are going to have to work with people like us sometimes.*

While the students perceive their school to be diverse, students report that the curriculum does little to teach students of difference races how to interact and fully enjoy the benefits of the school's diverse atmosphere. One student wished that the school would provide programs for that purpose: "Teachers and the principal could organize a lesson plan that had to do with the culture of others... to teach about others people's culture (sixth grade Caucasian girl)."

Certainly, each of the students agreed that diversity at school was important to them; however, when asked about whether they had friends of other races the answers varied. Seven of the twelve students interviewed said that they had friends of other races. They responded similarly to a White girl, who stated: "Some of my friends are African American, and some of my friends are White. One of my friends is Asian." However, five other students simply stated, "no." They did not have friends of other races, and they were not sure that other students had friends from other races.

The above perceptions of the students regarding diversity provide some insight into the quality of the racial interactions among students. Moreover, their responses point to a potential mismatch between what they say they value, and how they live out their values at school. Even among those students who said that they had friends across races, the nature of their friendships seems to be influenced, in some ways, by race. For example, we discovered that only one of the White students who had minority friends had ever visited those friends' homes. It was much more common for minorities to visit their White friends homes. Below, we shift focus from friendships to conflicts. There, we try to describe the nature of disputes at the magnet school. In particular, we seek to provide further insight into the racial climate at the magnet school, the quality of community, by considering how the students perceive the conflicts that erupt during the course of a school day.

#### *Perceptions of racial conflict*

All students agreed that there were few if any racial conflicts, across race, at school. While one student pointed out students fight at school: "Sometimes it is boys against girls, and sometimes it is girls against girls. Sometimes it is Black against Hispanic... but we don't have racial conflicts," many students; however, perceived that there were conflicts within races. Specifically, the students recalled fights among the African American students: "Most of the times it is just the African Americans... Most of the time they get into arguments, one just pushing somebody, and it will turn into a big fight." Another African American boy agreed: "Yes, it is mostly the Black kids. White kids don't do it as much."

Some of the students speculate that the conflicts among African American students arise from differences in values across social class: "It is usually the Black people, and if you don't live by any of them, like in the ghetto, I'm just going to say it, and then they probably ain't going to like you... they just won't get along with you."

#### *Students' perceptions of within-school segregation*

It was evident from the interviews that each of the magnet students averted to the importance of diversity at school; however, many students perceived segregation among classes at school—across both race and social class. An African American fifth grader explained—"the AP classes, that is when they take, like all the smart kids in fifth grade, and put them in special classes in the sixth grade"—are perceived to include few minority students:

*The reading class I go to, it has, let me see; a girl that goes to that classroom is an African American girl. Anna, she is from Russia. And then, I think there is one Jewish boy in our classroom. The rest is all White. (Sixth grade Caucasian girl)*

Her friend, an African American sixth grader explained that her experience was almost completely the opposite:

*The one I go to, it has a whole bunch of Black kids, I should say African American. And, they live in the projects next to their school, it is not a very good background because that is the kids that mess up and disrupt the class. There is the other kid; she is kind of weird because I'm not sure about her background because I don't her all that well. But most of the kids in my class are African American, so they come from the projects by the school.*

When asked how she felt about attending classes with students zoned into the school from the nearby housing project, she explained that she was not learning much and that she did not enjoy the classes:

*I think they are a lot of slow kids. They don't catch on to things easily, it kind of makes it less enjoyable to learn because you have to wait...and it gets boring. It makes it kind of [difficult] to learn about certain things when there are slow kids there.*

### **Discussion and Implications**

Both Handy (1984) and Wilson (1987) report that many believe that increased social mobility among African-Americans and the reduction of racial prejudice and discrimination have led to an increase in class-consciousness and a decrease in race consciousness. This study seemingly supports their position. It revealed that middle school magnet students, based on their perceptions and experiences, are not race conscious, but instead, are more class conscious. For example, the middle class magnet students (from primarily middle class families) believed that zoned students (largely poor families) had more racial conflicts, and they believe that zoned students behave badly in classes. However, we did not include all of these findings in this manuscript because our study may be biased toward the perceptions of the wealthier student population (only one zone student, which is to say, only one student who attends the magnet as a neighborhood school, was interviewed).

Nevertheless, while students do appear more class conscious, their level of racial identity development may have had an impact on their perceptions. Both Cross's and Helms's research indicates that students become race conscious at varying degrees and at varying times. Thus, if some students have not begun to date, or apply for jobs, etc., and if the school chooses not to address (as one girl suggests) issues of race/diversity in the curriculum, then the students may not have experienced race or racism often or significantly enough. They may still be in the Pre-Encounter stage or Contact status. In essence, their level of racial identity development may dictate how they perceive the racial climate, or quality of community, in their school. Furthermore, the quality and climate of their school may affect how students proceed through racial identity development. In others words, school environments that ignore race may inhibit racial identity development.

In addition to their perceptions on race, students seem to have a limited perception of diversity. The data reveals that middle magnet school students think their classes are

diverse whenever they are 100% of a particular race. In other words, if there is one African American student in a class of 25 students then the students perceive the class as diverse. Additionally, many attest that there is a level of pluralistic co-existence, where different historical experiences and values are accepted, but no effort is made to foster increased understanding. The class-consciousness revealed in this study closely aligns with how students of different races interact with each other. For instance, students who are placed in more advanced level courses have little, to no, interactions with students who are placed in regular classes. Such class-conscious issues are similar along racial lines. Classroom observations indicate that advanced level classes have a smaller percentage of Black students. This, in turn, leads to fewer Black-White interactions. However, this disparity is not as noticeable in extracurricular activities such as band, football, etc.

### Conclusion

In an effort to understand how middle school magnet students perceive and make meaning of school desegregation efforts, we asked the question: How race and/or class conscious are middle school magnet students? Our study, shaped by this question, and informed by in-depth interviews with students, ultimately revealed a complex picture of students thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. Students professed that they are more class conscious than race conscious (as theory suggest); however, their behavior indicates that race does matter to them. Specifically, while most students attest to the importance of racial and social diversity at school, our single-case study reveals that most students do not interact across racial lines, nor do they recount friendships across social class. More important to them than diversity is access to strong academic institutions. Thus, our analysis shows that while students value diversity, few capitalize on opportunities to engage meaningful relationships across race and social class.

Considering these findings, we suggest that a follow-up study with these students in 10th grade, and again in 12th grade will provide more insight into their race consciousness. Additionally, we believe that in order to better understand the significance of class-consciousness, a replication of this study would need to involve more of the zoned student population.

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*You may contact the authors at:*

*Aaron A. Baker - aaron.a.baker@vanderbilt.edu*

*Sheneka M. Williams - sheneka.m.williams@vanderbilt.edu*

## APPENDIX

### Student Interview Protocol

#### *Social Climate, Social Relations*

- How would you describe this school if you were writing a TV ad? What stands out in terms of climate or the feel of the school? How would you describe the school climate to a friend?
- If I take a tour of this school, where should I go, specifically? What would you want me to see? What will I see?
- Are fights a problem in this school?
- Do you know any students who use alcohol or drugs? Here at school?
- Is vandalism a problem?
- Is this school a safe place for students? Can you share an example? Were you ever scared here? What do you worry about at school?
- How would you describe relationships between teachers and students? (Close or distant? What about students who aren't in your classes?
- How well do you know other kids here? How do you get to know other students? What about students who aren't in your classes?
- How would you describe the students who attend this school in terms of their backgrounds?
- Do students mix outside of class?
- Do students of different races mix?
- Are groups separated by certain characteristics? Can you give me an example?
- Do certain groups of students take certain classes? Describe the different groups of students.
- How would you describe relations between students of different racial or ethnic groups? How much tension is there?
- How do you make friends in school? Are most of your friends the same race as you are? Do you have friends of other races?
- How comfortable are you discussing controversial issues, like race? Do you discuss these issues, in class? Outside of class? At home?

### ***Desegregation and Post-Busing Programs***

- Did you ride a bus to school last year or the year before? For how long? (Were you a part of the cross-town, Nashville school busing program?)
- What do you think about busing kids across town so that Black kids and White kids can be taught together in the same school?
- Is it important for kids of different races to go to school together? If so, how should we accomplish that goal? If not, what's more important?
- How do you think your school experiences will affect your ability to work with people of other races and ethnic groups?
- How do you think your school experiences will affect your ability to understand people of other races and ethnic groups?

### ***Perceived Level of Familiarity, Caring, and Support***

- How would you describe teachers' attitudes toward students?
- How well do teachers know you and other students? What do they know about you? How do they learn this information?
- How well do you know teachers? What do you know? How do you learn this information? Do you talk to teachers outside of class time?
- What do teachers most care about, in terms of their students? In terms of this school?
- What do teachers expect of students, in terms of achievement? Do they expect more from certain students? Or less from certain groups of students? Do teachers demand less of students in certain classes and more in other classes?
- What do students care most about, in terms of their teachers? In terms of their school?
- What are students' expectations, in terms of achievement and their classes, (and grades)?
- How would you describe the students' (your friends') attitudes toward school?

### ***Outside of School Experiences/Family Demographics***

- Do you participate in any extracurricular activities- sports, school government, theater?
- What do you do after school? Where do you like to go? What is your favorite thing to do?
- How do you get to school each morning? How do you get home?

- How would you describe your neighborhood?
- Do you have friends that live in your neighborhood? If so, are these friends the same race as you? Are these friends of another race?
- What do you like to do on the weekends? Where do you like to go?

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