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AUTHOR   Reid, Evelyn; Henry, Gertrude B.
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ABSTRACT
                The categories of race used by school administrators to
report student racial data assume racial purity. The omission of a category
for mixed racial heritage is indicative of a deeper neglect on the part of
society in recognizing this segment of its people. This mindset, which
ignores the existence of biracial Americans, coupled with the implicit biases
inherent in a White/non-White system of categorization, has contributed to a
situation wherein the potential for psychological harm to biracial Americans
is quite high. To support biracial youth, educators must create a climate
that fosters the development of a healthy identity for all students through
acceptance of religious, social, cultural, and other differences. This review
of educational and psychological research identifies educational strategies
that address the needs of biracial children: planning for student
psychological, social, emotional, and cultural needs; creatively and
carefully engaging young children in discussions of racial oppression and its
consequences; infusing biracial issues throughout the curriculum, with
curricula that are sensitive to process as well as content; aiding in the
refinement of biracial children's (and their parents') identity; exposing
children to their heritage; becoming sensitive to various learning styles;
and providing parents and children with tools (words and phrases) to protect
themselves from others who do not affirm human diversity and biraciality.
(Contains 71 references.) (TD)

WAITING TO EXCEL:

BIRACIALITY IN THE CLASSROOM

DR. EVELYN REID

MORGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

&

DR. GERTRUDE B. HENRY

HAMPTON UNIVERSITY

HAMPTON, VIRGINIA

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Waiting to Excel: Biraciality in the Classroom

ABSTRACT

This paper is the result of a research review aimed at understanding the issues and problems faced in our society and schools by biracial individuals with the hope of providing information that will help to shape our classrooms with those individuals' needs in mind. This paper will attempt to briefly set the historical context that gave rise to dualistic thinking about race and culture in American society, then will present a review of the psychological research on biracial individuals, and finally, will close with recommendations for classroom teachers support of biracial students.

Introduction

In 1967, the Supreme Court in *Loving v Virginia*, struck

down antimiscegenation laws that previously had prohibited

interracial marriages. As a result, such families gained legal

recognition. Although these legal mandates provided equality

and due process for interracial couples, the biracial offspring of

these marriages are still currently embroiled within an intense

struggle for recognition, acceptance, and respect for their civil

rights in public schools. The contours of this Biracial civil

rights struggle in schools is framed within federal categories of

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racial groups and our judgements about race. Primarily these judgements about race are based upon visible physical features such as skin color and those "above the neck characteristics" such as hair, eyes, ears and so forth. Biracial students are those individuals whose parental lineages represent two racial backgrounds.

Recent opposition to State of Ohio law and local school board policy, can be seen in the case of eight year old James McCray, who challenged the Cincinnati Public School system for failing to provide a specific designation for biracial students. This opposition to law and policy serves as a reminder to educators about how both the government and school systems—as well as other societal institutions— exclude, and therefore ignore the specific needs of, biracial students (*Cincinnati Enquirer*, September 9, 1991; January 2, 1992). The unwillingness of biracial students to be forced into choosing one race over another highlights the particular dilemma these students are forced into by the "system." However, even more unsettling is the criteria for classification—ambiguous at best—that assumes clear cut distinctions about racial heritage, therefore unwittingly

perpetuating the societal notion that racial purity is the standard and that racial intermixing is somehow deviant, or at least not common enough to be acknowledged. This criteria for classifying the biracial segment of our population, places individuals from racially-mixed backgrounds in an especially compromising position, a position that is then exacerbated when their particular needs and experiences are also left unacknowledged in the classroom.

Historical data will demonstrate that the biracial segment of our population is not new. Woodward (1969) documents that in the sate of Virginia in 1613 Pocahontas and John Rolfe married and had a biracial son. Woodward maintains that the marriage between Pocahontas, an American Indian and John Rolfe, an English widower, brought about peace between many English settlers and American Indians and their Biracial offsprings. But, Wardle (1988) observed that many interracial marriages and their Biracial offspring faced human indignities in American society. For instance, Wardle noted that many non-Whites and language minorities were brought to this country for cheap labor. This cheap labor force intermixed and intermarried. Thus, their offsprings began a

biracial mix (e.g., mixes of various American Indian groups, Scottish/Black American, Amerasian, Mexican/White American).

It appears then that this group has been present in society since the 1600s and they have been both supported and abused. Thus, American society's lack of recognition of the group may be linked to political, social, and economic concerns within the system.

Demographic data on biraciality reveal that the majority of these families reside in urban areas of the North, Midwest, and West Coast, where they experience less overt racial prejudice and greater tolerance for diversity in family structures and lifestyles Gibbs (Gibbs, 1989; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987). Moreover, this data highlights that interracial families and their biracial offspring gravitate to metropolitan areas where a significant number of interracial families live, for instance, New York, Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Denver, Seattle, San Francisco, and Los Angeles (Collins, 1984; Gibbs, 1989). Although these researchers approximate the biracial population at 500,000 to 650,000; there is no accurate accounting of the group for

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various reasons. For instance, federal classifications ignore biraciality, federal data on interracial marriages primarily reflect Black/White unions with limited statistics on their offspring, and many interracial families fail to respond to federal data forms that ignore biraciality.

Biraciality—The Historical Context

The particular dilemma of biracial students stems from long-standing Western belief systems that implicitly accepted White race and culture as the "norm," while establishing other races and cultures as somehow deviant. This type of dualistic thinking is represented, for example, in biblical thought, where races originated from Noah's blessing on Shem and Japhet, fathers of the Semites and Indo-Europeans, and his curse on Ham, father of the African race—and the natural implications of good and evil that such interpretations imply.

Certain assumptions about race were also perpetuated by theories stemming from Darwin's Origin of the Species, whose ideas about "survival of the fittest" and "natural selection" were later used by Social Darwinians to explain away various political, social, and economic barriers to

descendents of Africans and other Brown races as simply being a matter of their inability to adapt to their social environment— thus implicitly setting up the "dominant" or accepted White race as superior and the "subordinate" or minority Brown races as marginal or inferior, placing them on the fringes of society.

In American society, many of the elements embedded in these systems of thought have been perpetuated in the laws and government classification schemes for racial and ethnic groups. Events from American history show that during the period of slavery, society's view of race was radically dualistic, with Whites being the "pure" race advantaged by the system, and any other race or mix of race being the "Negro" race neglected by the system. According to Gordon (1964), legal mandates from this time period designated the following races as Negro: "American Indians, Ethiopians, Chinese, Japanese, Mongolians, Malays, Hindus, Mestizos, Half-breeds, and `the Brown Race.'" These two types of classification (White/Negro), according to Gordon, superimposed group attributes that in society transformed into power and privileges for Whites, while denying the individual rights of other races,

thus implicitly supporting racially biased creationist and evolutionist views.

Although the Constitution had given certain Americans equal rights, and the Bill of Rights established democracy and equal representation under the law, slave statutes were instituted that rescinded or restricted the rights of anyone falling into the category of "Negro." White males were assumed to have natural rights and privileges; however, most persons with non-White ancestry were considered Negro, and as such, was forced into slavery, with resistors being brutally beaten or killed. White male masters were granted the right to use unwilling African females to bear children for the slave labor force (Benson, 1981), with those children, in turn, becoming slaves. Intermarriage was allowed between Black slaves and White female servants, however the law stated that...if a free-born White woman married a Negro slave, she would be required to serve her husband's master through her slave husband's life, and further, that the children born of such marriages would be regarded as slaves." (Logan, 1990, p.222)

In sum, then, the White/Negro dichotomy, implicitly carrying with it the connotations of "norm/deviant,"

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"good/evil," or "superior/inferior" has served in American history to grant privileges and power to the White majority, while denying basic rights to anyone with non-White blood. Caught especially in this false dilemma of race and the implicit privileges granted or denied, were those biracial offspring of interracial heritage, whose fate in society would be governed by whether they could pass as White, or whether they would be identified as Negro, and thus be governed by societal constraints that limited their basic human rights.

In the 1950s and 1960s, non-Whites began to openly fight for their rights in society and schools. These civil rights groups mobilized societal support and placed pressure on federal representatives to fashion legislation in support of minority group rights (e.g., *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), the Civil Rights Act of (1964), ESEA (1965), Bilingual Education Act of 1968, Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975). Yet even while new laws were being formed to protect the rights of minorities, the social stigma of being non-White—especially of being of mixed race—was being expressed in movies and popular writings of the period. For instance, Millard Kaufman's 1958 movie,

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Raintree County commented on the fear of having mixed blood: "...the worst of fates to befall Whites is 'havin' a little Negra blood in ya' - just one little teeny drop and a person's all Negra." (Omi and Winant, 1986, p. 60) Also, Neila Larsen's book, Passing, in the 1960s chronicled the internal dilemmas that a young biracial (Black/White) female grappled with in attempting to resolve whether to pass for Black or White. It appears then that, during this time, White fear of racial mixing expressed itself more in terms of social and cultural sanctions on those whose blood lines were not pure—and that those social and cultural sanctions were damaging enough to persuade those of mixed race or heritage to deny one heritage for another in order to "qualify" for the advantages and privileges granted to Whites.

This pattern, for biracials, of having to "choose" one racial heritage over another no longer carries the legal ramifications it did during the period of traditional slavery in the U.S. However, the ghost-like assumption of racial purity, with its implicit biases against non-White individuals, is still reflected in the categories of race established by the federal government and used by school administrators to report student

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racial data today. The categories automatically assume racial purity, and as such, are not relevant for those of mixed heritage. Moreover, the omission of a category which represents these individuals is indicative of a deeper neglect on the part of society in recognizing this segment of its people. This mindset, which ignores the existence of biracial Americans, coupled with the implicit biases inherent in a White/non-White system of categorization, has contributed to a situation wherein the potential for psychological harm to biracial Americans is quite high. As a result, educational institutions and individual educators must make themselves aware of the specific needs of biracial students with the hope that validating and supporting these individuals' experiences will eventually lead to a time when racial categorizations will no longer be necessary in helping to achieve individual civil rights.

Psychological Literature on Biraciality

Because biraciality is still a relatively new area of study, very little information has been gathered about the curriculum needs of biracial students in schools. In fact, studies

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of interracial families and their biracial offspring in community settings are also still relatively rare. As a result, this review of research relies mostly on clinical studies, with the assumption that information gathered from these sources can be used as a starting point for developing effective educational strategies for biracial students in classroom settings.

Much of the clinical literature points to identity formation as the major issue for biracial individuals. In a 1990 study, Poston argues that identity with a racial group and clarification of group characteristics are basic to the development of a healthy and independent personality. However, the study implies a distinction between racial identity and racial definition. Poston maintains that racial identity is formed internally and focuses on shared characteristics. Racial definition is externally imposed and focuses on differences. This distinction is crucial in understanding the dilemma of biracial individuals because racial identity, unlike racial definition, need not necessarily consist of an either/or choice; instead, it offers the possibility of accepting biraciality or biculturality as a racial identity, thus eliminating the individual's necessity to choose.

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Although most studies cite the biracial child's critical need for family, community, and school support in developing a healthy racial and ethnic identity (Benson, 1981; Chang, 1974; Chen, 1981; Erikson, 1950; 1959; 1963; 1968; Gibbs, 1974; Gibbs, Huang, and others, 1989; Gordon, 1964; Gunthorpe, 1978; Ladner, 1977; Logan, 1981; Payne, 1977; Poston, 1990; McRoy and others, 1984; Piskacek and Golub, 1973; Teicher, 1968), several studies underline the need for recognizing the unique situation of interracial families and biracial children. For instance, several researchers found that in the family setting, biracial children's attitudes and perceptions about race develop differently from children of single race families (Gunthorpe, 1978; Logan, 1981; Payne, 1977). One study noted that darker skinned children of Black/White parentage tended to reject identification with the Black heritage and culture, suggesting, perhaps, that the darker-skinned biracial youth had a more negative self-image than those of lighter complexion. Another study (Piskacek and Golub, 1973), found that there is often conflict between the biracial youth's choice of racial identification and that of their parents. The underlying commonality of both studies, however, is a constant

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pressure on biracial children to choose, a situation that does not apply to children of single race parentage and is often unfamiliar to intermarried parents, since they each have a single race background. As Gordon (1964) emphasizes, "[Often]…well intentioned intermarried parents find it difficult to provide their children with the security that comes from 'knowing who I am and what I am.'" (p. 317)

Teicher's clinical study of Black/White intermarriages and biracial children (1968) supports Gordon's statement. Teicher's study found that although more sophisticated parents (those who were open to, receptive to, and offered immediate and positive feedback to their biracial children's concerns about exclusion) were successful at helping their children feel confident with both parents' racial differences (the children felt good about their sexuality and felt comfortable interacting in White society). On the other hand, less sophisticated parents dealt with their biracial children's concerns by suggesting that "we are all human," which served to dismiss—and therefore deny—their children's frustration and confusion over issues of exclusion, racial bias, etc. Such an approach, in distinct cases, led to intense problems with "identification with the minority

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parent, sexual-identity conflicts, and extreme problems of adjustment to a predominantly White environment." (p. 249-256)

While most of the research on biracial children is clinical in nature, some studies have specific implications for educators. In the area of socialization, several studies (Benson, 1982; Chang, 1974; Gibbs, 1989, Teicher, 1968) have found that biracial students may view their social place within the school as marginal. Even children who have satisfying social relationships in elementary school may confront this sense of marginality upon entering junior high school and college, and young adults may also undergo a crisis of identity as they begin to consider a career choice. In addition, many biracial students may adopt their version of a Black identity when they fear rejection by their Black peers who may perceive them as "too studious or bookish." Such students may overidentify with their version of Black ghetto culture by adopting a negative attitude toward school and their studies, become truant, deliberately fail courses, and express anti-achievement values.

Another growing body of literature (Cole, Glick, Sharp, 1971; Hale, 1978; 1982; Kagan, 1977; Ramirez and Casteneda,

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1974; Shade, 1989) finds that learning styles often vary among different groups. This research implies that the strategies learned at home for acquiring, organizing, and remembering information may reflect a child's racial identity—or, in the case of a biracial child, a combination of identities. Implications of this research suggest that teachers must consciously plan for the unique learning styles of biracial children.

Discussion and Recommendations

The complexity of the issues raised by the historical data and psychological research on biracial children and their interracial families presents a challenge to educators and teachers to work toward increasing their knowledge, awareness, and understanding about biracial children and their needs. There is a critical need for investigations of biracial children in community settings, especially schools and classrooms. Because no education research was located that reported the specific curriculum needs of biracial students, this void in the area represents a critically important field of study.

Although no education research was located that explored the specific curriculum concerns of biracial groups,

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the psychological research does point to a set of specific areas in which educators can help .address the needs of biracial children. The failure of society in general and educators in particular to support biracial youth (and sometimes from the home, as well), results in a critical need for support in classroom settings as these students refine their knowledge of themselves and the world. To achieve this support, educators and classroom teachers must work to create a climate that fosters the development of a healthy identity for all students through acceptance of religious, social, cultural, and other differences, as well as sensitivity to a variety of learning styles and socialization issues. It is not enough to incorporate biracial issues into a mainstream education program in a fragmented or cursory manner that is itself exclusionary; the most powerful element of change in the classroom is to infuse biracial issues throughout the total curriculum.

Certain psychological research suggests that teachers must consciously plan not only for the subject matter that they teach, but also for their students' psychological, social, emotional, and cultural needs (e.g., Benson, 1982, Chang, 1974; Gibbs, 1987; 1990). This research also suggests that

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from an early age (i.e., two and three years) children recognize physical and racial differences (Erickson, 1959; 1963; Logan, 1981; 1990; McRoy et al., 1984; Wardle, 1988). Thus, the implication of the research suggests that one way teachers can become effective at working in classrooms with diverse student populations where biracial students are present, is to carefully select content and present it in such a way that young children are engaged not only in the physical differences of racial groups, but also in discussions of racial oppression (history/ migration of groups and economic, social, and political realities of groups) and its consequences. For example, Cullen (1903-1946) "Incident" is illustrative of poetry for teachers to launch into a discussion of racial oppression and the need for students to reflect on their actions and observations of others in regard to racial slurs and its impact on others.

> Once riding in Old Baltimore,
> Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
> I saw a Baltimorean
> Keep looking straight at me.
>
> Now I was eight and very small,
> And he was no whit bigger,
> And so I smiled, but he poked out

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His tongue, and called me "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.

This poetry allows for specific content (e.g., English Literature) that may help teachers move away from overemphasizing the physical characteristics of racial groups and onto a discussion of the psychological, social, and emotional harm of oppression. A psychologically-based curriculum that shows sensitivity to process as much as content, might also break down the competitive and unequal structures that exclude interracial parents and their biracial children from schools and classrooms. For example, teachers may use parents as resource persons in the classroom to explain how they have dealt with various forms of oppression—race, gender—in particular situations.

Another consideration might be to use poetry similar in content to the Countee Cullen piece above to engage students in open classroom discussions and written expressions of their personal experiences with oppression. Also, this careful

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attention to content and process may aid teachers in supporting parents' rights to be part of a mixed marriage and support their understanding of their responsibility to raise healthy children. In addition, curriculum content and process sensitive to group issues will place teachers in a positive position to offer advice, support, and counseling and referrals based on individual needs of the family or child.

There is a need for teachers to develop an awareness of their views of interracial families and their biracial children. Wardle (1988) contends that a critically important starting point for teachers is to understand that people of different racial backgrounds have a right to marry and have children, and these parents can raise their children with a rich interracial identity void of choosing one parents racial background over another. However, the historical data and psychological literature highlighted the omission of federal classifications for biracial children, negative and conflicting messages from society, and the fact that often well-intentioned interracial couples have not yet decided their children's identity (Gordon 1964; Teicher, 1968). Thus, this research implies that teachers must oftentimes be prepared to help not only biracial children figure out their

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racial identity, but they must be prepared to assist parents in this area as well. This is especially true in schools where forms omit a biracial category and require specific racial designations.

The research suggests that teachers must aid in the refinement of biracial children's identity so that they understand that regardless of the process of combining heritages, they are a single unit as other racial groups (perhaps in the future racial categories will no longer exist or as in the case of Brazil, a biracial category will exist for them nationally). The research on biracial identity (Benson, 1982; Chang, 1974; Chen, 1981; Erikson, 1959; 1963; Gibbs, 1974; Gibbs, Huang, and others, 1989; Gordon, 1964; Gunthorpe, 1978; Ladner, 1977) cautions community representatives, parents, and teachers not to automatically assume that biracial children must identify with the parent of color. Wardle (1988) suggest that teachers provide parents with suggestions for exposing their children to their heritage through festivals, books, art, music and drama, community and religious organizations where other interracial families with biracial children are present, and to encourage parents and children to

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openly discuss all aspects of a mixed racial heritage, including skin, eyes, eye color, hair, ears and so forth. Teachers must include in these suggestions to parents ways in which they might connect these discussions to conflicts stemming from societal prejudices. For example, teachers must provide parents and children with tools (words and phrases) to protect themselves from others who do not affirm human diversity and biraciality.

It is important that teachers recognize their critically important role in the classroom as the central value transmitter in the school lives of youth, thus, they must plan for the individual differences that all students bring to the classroom by responding to children's naturally curious questions. For instance, students may ask "Why is your mother White and your father Black?" "Why do you look different from your parents?" "Can I touch your hair?" "Are you adopted?" Teachers must show sensitivity to these questions by openly and genuinely linking into children's interest and entering a discussion about valuing those physical characteristics inherited from parents. There are a number of specific classroom activities that teachers may use to teach about

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inherited physical features from parents. For instance, teachers might use family members (both sides), and go as far back as possible so that all children in the classroom develop a family tree that expose inherited physical characteristics. Another suggestion is to provide activities for mixing colors: paints, food colors, colored plastic, tissue paper and so forth. Still another suggestion for teachers is to avoid curriculum materials that divide the country and the world into neat distinctive racial and ethnic groups (or use supplemental materials). Yet another suggestion to teachers might be to conduct classroom activities that address the commonality of all people, a collage of hands, a poster of heads, have all children trace (or use prints) their feet onto butcher paper or use a chart of emotions all children experience: note that all children have parents, a language, clothes.

The research on learning styles (Benson, 1982; Chang, 1974; Gibbs, 1989; Shade, 1989;) implies that teachers who work with biracial students must become sensitive to variations in children's learning styles. Perhaps, classroom teachers might develop a cooperative classroom atmosphere where students learn to share their unique experiences and learning styles in a

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student-centered cooperative environment. In this regard, students are able to see their own identity reflected in the curriculum and are better able to accept and understand the content of that curriculum. The interactive nature of a cooperative process-oriented curriculum and classroom empowers the biracial student in ways that can provide a positive force in his or her understanding of self and community.

The process-based curriculum, with its emphasis on the lives and experiences of the students, also addresses the issue of relevant content. It allows the development of a curriculum that reflects multicultural issues and challenges societal assumptions about race and ethnicity—assumptions that are often especially harmful to biracial children. For example, engaging in a critique of United States history from a socio-historical and social reconstructionist perspective can help the biracial student not only in understanding how he or she fits into society, but also in viewing him- or herself as an agent of social change (e.g., see Sleeter and Grant Making Choices for Multicultural Education, 1988). The process-based content-based curriculum will also support biracial students who face

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problems of identity in regard to marginality. For instance, Benson, Chang, and Gibbs pointed out that many biracial children may feel secure during the elementary years, but upon entering junior high, high school, and even college they may adopt negative attitudes toward their studies and school and/or their version of black ghetto culture. Specific information on biracial Americans who have made major contributions to society can help to reinforce the student's sense of empowerment.

Conclusion

Though issues of race and ethnicity are receiving more and more attention in the classroom, the tendency to focus on single group issues—though helping to raise consciousness about those specific groups—actually serves to exclude, and therefore discriminate against, those students who identify with their mixed racial or ethnic backgrounds. However, as interracial marriages and biracial children become more commonplace, increasing numbers of students will share the unique experiences derived from living in an integrated family environment. As educators charged with meeting both

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students' and society's needs, we must answer the challenge of making sure that our society recognizes and accepts these individuals. The simple omission of a category on an application form should serve to remind us that our societal institutions are a reflection of what we believe; when they no longer accurately represent those beliefs, we must move to change both the forms and the institutions.

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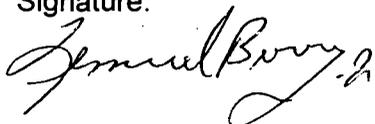
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