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Educational Experiences of Multiracial Students: A Literature Review

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Recently I completed a job application in which I identified my race and ethnicity as “Black” and “White” by checking both boxes. This is something I typically do not do and as I reflect on it, I find that my journey to checking both boxes has been largely influenced by my schooling experiences. I entered kindergarten at a predominantly White elementary school in 1987. While I resided with my Black father and White mother, and understood that I was both Black and White, this was not reflected in any school documents. This was largely because it was not until the 2000 census that multiracial (also referred to as biracial and mixed-race) individuals were able to self-identify by either checking more than one “box” for race, or by indicating “multiracial” on forms (Museus, Sariñana, Lambe, Yee, & Robinson, 2016; Renn, 2009; Tutwiler, 2016).

The directions clearly stated that my parents were to check one box for race, so my parents identified myself and my younger brother as Black. This was done partly because they needed to select one race, but also because they were under the belief that society would “see me as Black anyways.” This belief coincides largely with some of the research regarding multiracial identity in which those mixed-race individuals with at least one White parent are typically identified by society—despite how they self-identify—as the race of the non-White parent (Baxley, 2008; Remedios & Chasteen, 2013). This notion also

reaffirms the antiquated, racist “One Drop Rule” in which White slave masters justified enslaving their biracial offspring because they had at least “one drop of Black blood in them” (Baxley, 2008).

Tutwiler (2016) notes the legal bases for race separation and how it affected multiracial slave-children in her book *Mixed-Race Youth and Schooling: The Fifth Minority*. Mixed-race people have been subjected to state and local laws to control their social status, some of which were principally directed toward their mixed-race, multicultural status, and others that were directed toward people of color in general—which during certain historical periods included mixed-race people. For example, a 1662 Virginia law declared a child born to an enslaved woman a slave, regardless of whether the father was a White slave owner or an enslaved Black man (p. 29).

Even though slavery no longer exists, and the courts overturned miscegenation laws—laws designed to punish those in an interracial relationship or marriage—in 1967 with *Loving v. Virginia* (Warren, 1966), I did not have a racial identity outside of my home. This was something my parents, my teachers, and my classmates could not understand, and because of my own experiences in school, I seek to understand the experiences of other multiracial students. Using studies predominantly from the last twenty years was intentional and significant in that this time frame aligns

with the first time when individuals could identify as multiracial in the United States census. This literature review seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are the models of multiracial identity development?
- What effect, if any, does schooling have on multiracial identity development?
- What are the best practices for public school staff to use to support healthy identity development in mixed-race students?
- What gaps in research are there on this topic to date?

While my identity at school and in society at large was determined for me, I felt a different identity in my home even at a young age. My school and the neighborhood in which I lived were predominantly White. One entire half of my family is White and resides in mostly small, rural communities. Obtaining a college degree was not and is not the norm on that side of my family, so my mother was the exception. The other half of my family is Black and resides in largely urban and suburban, upper middle-class areas. Obtaining a college degree was and continues to be the expectation for that side of my family. I have first cousins who are also biracial like myself. I even have a biracial aunt through marriage. I also have a biracial stepdaughter whose schooling experiences fuel much of my research. My family was and continues to be diverse regarding race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion, sexuality, and gender identity. Despite this, at school I was the only multiracial student, I was one of the only Black students at my school, and one of a handful of students of color.

In middle school, my experiences changed as I started attending a diverse school. The schools consisted of an equal number of White and Black students, and there were far more students of color in general and those who practiced a religion other than Christianity. For the first time, I attended school with other multiracial students. I exposed myself to people of other cultures, faiths, and racial and ethnic backgrounds to learn more about myself. I immersed myself in cultures that were not dominant or considered the majority in society hoping to learn more about myself. Despite this I felt even more disconnected from my race and culture. I align this period of identity development with the extraracial identity pattern—deconstructing race, opting out of race—in Renn’s ecological theory of mixed-race identity development (Harris, B., Ravert, & Sullivan, 2017; Renn, 2003). While society imposed an identity on me early on, during adolescence I began to exert my own power in self-identifying—a complex process I soon learned.

Multiracial Identity Development Models

Identity development among multiracial adolescents and young adults is a complex topic. Children become aware of race and ethnicity early on and become more acutely aware of it during adolescence. In fact, many multiracial youths start out identifying with their parents’ race, particularly the one(s) with whom they reside (Herman, 2004). Adolescent racial identity development often coincides with ego identity formation (Harris, B. et al., 2017). Erikson’s ego identity development theory has also been used as a model for adolescent racial identity development. In fact, Helms (1990) model of Black racial identity follows along

with Erikson's theory: pre-encounter, encounter, immersion-emersion, and internalization (Buckley & Carter, 2005). Similarly, other models of racial identity development have been proposed that focus on adolescents moving away from stereotypes towards an appreciation of one's heritage and racial consciousness (Thomas, et al., 2011).

In fact, racial identity development is difficult to pin to just one time in the overall life span of one's life. Racial identity development is ongoing; however, a large portion of it occurs during adolescence and young adulthood. Often this begins with exploration which includes learning about one's heritage and culture. This stage is particularly prevalent in monoracial youth of color. This exploration stage may last longer in some youth than others but should facilitate the next stage which is affirmation. During affirmation, youth solidify or affirm being a member of their racial group (Fisher, Reynolds, Hsu, Barnes, & Tyler, 2014).

While exploration and affirmation are important components of positive racial identity development, multiracial youth seem to spend more time in the exploration stage, and many do not even reach the affirmation stage. This lack of affirmation has negative implications for the overall mental health of mixed-race individuals. Multiracial youth report experiencing anxiety and depressive symptoms at higher rates than their monoracial peers. (Fisher et al., 2014). Additionally, multiracial youth are more likely to consider suicide than their White peers, and multiracial youth with a minority mother fare worse regarding their emotional well-being than their monoracial minority and White peers (Schlabach, 2013). Lastly, those who identify as more than one race show higher

risk compared to monoracial students regarding smoking and drinking and other risk factors (Udry, 2003). This information is vital to understanding the unique challenges multiracial youth face and what they bring with them to the classroom.

Racial identity development models often do not apply to multiracial youth, so it is important to consider multiracial identity development models. Understanding these models allows school staff to better understand and support the identity development of mixed-race students. Developed by Poston, the biracial identity development model (1990) consists of five stages: personal identity, choice of group characterization, enmeshment/denial, appreciation, and integration (Renn, 2008; Viager, 2011). Root's resolutions for resolving otherness (1990) consists of four fluid stages, as opposed to Poston's linear model: acceptance of the identity society assigns, identification with both racial groups, identification with a single racial group, and identification as a new racial group (Renn, 2008; Viager 2011). Lastly, Renn's ecological theory of mixed-race identity development (2004) identifies patterns of multiracial identity development. Renn's model consists of five identity patterns: monoracial identity, multiple monoracial identities, multiracial identity, extraracial identity, and situational identity (Benedetto & Olisky, 2001; Renn, 2003).

Each theory promotes positive identity development and the affirmation of one as being a contributing member of society. However, these models are almost exclusively used at the college level. In fact, most of the empirical research concerning multiracial individuals focuses on them in postsecondary settings (Museus, et al., 2016; Harris, J., 2017). It may be that these

models fit more with college student development or that these models are not shared with elementary and secondary counselors and other support staff.

When considering the effect schooling has on the racial identity development of multiracial individuals, one cannot ignore the impact of the role of school counselors. School counselors are often the first line of defense in crises on campus. They provide opportunities for social emotional learning and guidance, and they provide resources for mental health wellness. However, one needs to look at how equipped school counselors are in providing appropriate and effective guidance and counseling to support healthy racial identity development.

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model specifically calls for school counselors to enhance the learning process for all students in academic, career and personal/social development (Harris, H., 2006a). Despite this expectation, a survey conducted in 2006 by Harris showed that school counselors of all ethnicities and from all parts of the United States are somewhat unsure about the academic and social needs of mixed-race students. They were unsure of whether their academic and social problems were related to their identity development. For example, middle school counselors were more likely to believe that Black-White biracial students experience more scrutiny than other multiracial youth (Harris, H., 2006b). Furthermore, in a separate study conducted by Harris (2006a) in which he looked solely at African-American school counselors' perceptions of multiracial students, he reported that those counselors generally view multiracial students as being accepted by minorities more so than their White

peers. Additionally, these counselors felt that much of racial identity concerns were the major cause of presenting problems for mixed-race individuals (Harris, H., 2006a; Museus et al., 2016).

Monoracism and Multiracial Microaggressions

The racial identity concerns of mixed-race youth are broad and complex, and often stem from racism. When President Barack Obama was elected president in 2008, his multiracial heritage stood as a symbol for some that the United States had arrived as a post-racial nation. Despite this, multiracial individuals have long been characterized as confused, conflicted or psychologically imbalanced. In fact, the pathologizing of mixed-race people is a common form of prejudice and discrimination (Museus et al., 2016). Personally, I have suffered greatly from well-meaning compliments that are actually insults to one or more aspects of my multiracial heritage. Exoticization is one way in which people attempt to compliment me and other mixed-race people by expressing their fascination with our "unique" look.

Other ways in which monoracial individuals discriminate against mixed-race people include the invalidation of multiracial identities, external imposition of racial identities, racial exclusion and marginalization, and challenges to racial authenticity (Brackett, Marcus, McKenzie, Mullins, Tang, & Allen, 2006; Museus et al., 2016). These themes coincide with J. Harris's (2017) recent study which focused on multiracial microaggressions. The themes from Harris's study include, denial of multiracial reality, assumption of monoracial identity, and not multiracial enough to "fit in." The invalidation of

multiracial identities is the rejection of one's self-selected racial identity. In fact, in Museus's et al. (2016) study, participants noted monoracial individuals rejected their identity in order to justify telling racist jokes. Some even took it a step further by imposing racial identities onto the person, despite how that person chose to self-identify—the process of imposing a racial identity onto another. Lastly, many mixed-race participants in the study identified being subtly and not-so-subtly pushed out of groups of monoracial individuals, while similarly, being asked to authenticate their belonging to one or more of their racial heritages.

Both studies bring to the forefront the issue of monoracism (Harris, J., 2016; Harris, J., 2017; Museus et al., 2016). Similar to racism, monoracism imposes a monoracial-only paradigm. This can be detrimental to mixed-race students because it is exclusionary, inequitable, and oppressive. At the secondary and postsecondary level, mixed-race students feel excluded from organizations which highlight one part of their multiracial heritage (ex. Black Student Union or Asian American Society) because they are not authentic enough to fit in (Harris, J., 2017; Museus et al., 2016; Williams, 2011).

While the study by Museus et al. (2016) only examines the discrimination of mixed-race students in college, one might wonder if the implications may be applied to K-12 education. These students likely did not only experience the different types of discrimination solely on college campuses, but in fact may have experienced it in their primary and secondary schools. Furthermore, they may have experienced it within their own families. As mentioned previously educators like counselors and teachers may not be familiar with the issues

multiracial students face (Harris, H., 2006b; Williams, 2011). Unfortunately, there is a gap in the research regarding the issues elementary and secondary multiracial students experience.

The home is primarily thought of as the “first school,” and this is true for multiracial students as well. The influence of the family is paramount to student success in school and healthy racial identity development. The educational choices parents of multiracial children make strongly impact their racial identity. For example, the diversity of one's school can impact both monoracial and multiracial individuals. In Williams's (2011) study on multiracial student and parent perceptions of schooling, the parents of multiracial students noted selecting schools that were diverse, so that their children would not be singled out at school. The students noted that when they attended diverse schools, they were likely to be identified as their multiracial heritage rather than as a monoracial minority. They all noted these aspects of attending racially diverse schools as positive and beneficial to their multiracial identity development.

Despite the best of intentions by their parents, mixed-race people still face discrimination and prejudice even within their families. Within their immediate and extended families, mixed-race youth reported isolation within the family, favoritism towards monoracial family members, questioning authenticity, denial of multiracial identity, and feelings about not learning enough about their culture and heritage (Nadal, Sriken, Davidoff, Wong & McLean, 2013). Again, these coincide with previously mentioned research in which similar themes emerged relating back to monoracism.

These are the issues students bring with them to the classroom each day. As previously noted, some school counselors recognize these issues, but few know how to support these students. Similarly, multiracial students note that their teachers acted indifferently to their multiracial identity, did not engage in discussion regarding it, nor did they adjust their teaching or alter curriculum to include learning about multiracial individuals (Williams, 2011).

Supporting Multiracial Youth in School

To create change, scholars need to bring the concerns of multiracial students to the forefront. In his dissertation on improving anti-racist education for mixed-race people, Hamako (2014) shared learning goals educators felt would support mixed-race students. Participants expressed goals of learning about privilege and oppression, social constructionism, historical and contemporary contexts of racism, and impacts of racism and monoracism on multiracial people. They also stated that education which develops interpersonal relationships, self-reflection, and activism best serve multiracial students. In contrast, Joseph-Salisbury and Andrews (2017) found that supplemental educational experiences which focus on monoracial minority experiences, such as an educational support group for black adolescent males, do not impede on or negate their identity development as multiracial individuals.

Critical Race Theory and Critical Multiracial Theory in Education

The differences between the Hamako (2014) and Joseph-Salisbury and Andrews (2017) studies may be attributed to the lens through which the researchers examine the subjects. Most studies regarding multiracial

individuals are done using critical race theory in education (CRT) as a framework. CRT emerged in the 1970's first in the judicial system as a critique to white supremacy. It provides a way for persons of color, specifically black people to challenge inequality and prejudice (Harris, J., 2016). Despite the focus on persons of color, CRT does not attempt to break down monoracial barriers. In fact, some educational scholars note their hesitation to consider moving toward a critical multiracial theory in education (MultiCrit) because they feel it will detract from the visibility and resources of monoracial people color. Harris contends that MultiCrit can build upon CRT in order to create a framework for multiracial experiences while still rejecting oppression and white supremacy. This framework can enhance curriculum development and professional development at the elementary, secondary and post-secondary level.

The professional development practices that focus on diversity, equity and inclusion can be altered to focus on the issues of mixed-race students. For example, diversity circles, in which school staff engage in ongoing conversations and self-reflection can focus on attitudes, beliefs and biases regarding multiracial students (Baxley, 2008; Moss; 2008). Educators can reflect with questions like: how do I feel about interracial marriages? What perceived notions do I have about biracial people? What experiences have I had with biracial people and how have these experiences impacted me? (Baxley, 2008).

Bibliotherapy

Multiracial students often feel "invisible" in regard to the school curriculum. Our voices are not always highlighted in the curriculum. The English, Language Arts, or Reading classroom,

as well as the counselor's office are perfect places to introduce those voices (Baxley, 2008; Benedetto & Olisky, 2001). While not intended as a general focus of this literature review nor future research, bibliotherapy, a therapeutic approach that uses literature to address mental health wellness, may be one of the ways in which school staff meet the needs of students. Bibliotherapy can be used in a therapeutic context, but also in a school setting as part of prevention and intervention practices and to address the social-emotional learning needs of students (Heath, Smith, & Young, 2017). Bibliotherapy may be facilitated within the classroom, the larger school setting, or in supplemental and extracurricular environments.

Even if bibliotherapy is not included in the curriculum, simply exposing students to multiracial characters can help to disrupt the status quo of Whiteness. Dutro, Kazemi, & Balf (2005) explored how students make sense of multiraciality in literacy. They found that the experiences of mixed-race students engaged in a heritage literacy project experienced multiracial microaggressions through miscategorization. The title of their study, "You're Only Half" were words those students had heard from peers. However, by allowing multiracial students a voice, they were able to complicate,

fixed notions of racial categories. These three biracial children provided examples of times, both within the culture project and at other points in their lives, when others had (mis)placed them into racial categories. These experiences illustrate the conception of race that informs our perspective—a view of race as a socially constructed category, rather

than representing inherent traits or fixed meanings. (p.98)

Gaps in Research/Limitations

This literature review sought to identify the models of multiracial identity development, the effects of schooling on multiracial identity development, best practices for school staff in supporting multiracial identity development, and gaps in research regarding schooling and multiracial identity development. After identifying not only the models of multiracial identity development, but also the mental health concerns of mixed-race students, a few common denominators began to emerge as part of needs of these students. Monoracism and its effects such as multiracial microaggression, exclusion, and oppression are major factors in identity development and schooling success in mixed-race students. The lack of knowledge school staff possess on multiracial student issues continues to be a concern for those students. Mixed-race students do not see themselves reflected in the curriculum, and educators do not address these issues with them. Furthermore, educators have conflicting views regarding mixed-race students. These factors made it difficult to identify best practices for school staff, educators, and counselors. Initially, courageous conversations regarding racism and monoracism need to occur before attempting to build an anti-racist educational environment that would be beneficial to mixed-race students.

Two unintended consequences of this literature review came about: (a) a simultaneous reliving of my own educational experiences as a mixed-race person and (b) a possible dissertation focus on bibliotherapy in educational settings with mixed-race students. I did not set out

to write this literature review in a narrative format, but it proved to be an effective format for comparing and contrasting my experiences with the research. As a former Language Arts teacher, my excitement rose when the research directed me towards bibliotherapy as a possible best practice for supporting multiracial students. I look forward to continuing this research and seeing if it becomes the focus of my dissertation.

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