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Very simply put, then, the core ideas that emerge from the realist theory of identity are these: Social identities can be mired in distorted ideologies, but they can also be the lenses through which we learn to view our world accurately. Our identities are not just imposed on us by society. Often we create positive and meaningful identities that enable us to better understand and negotiate the social world. They enable us to engage with the social world and in the process discover how it really works. They also make it possible for us to change the world and ourselves in valuable ways. (Alcoff & Mohanty, 2006, p. 6)

Introduction

A few weeks ago, I received an email from my child's school saying that the school would be conducting a "listening campaign" with parents and families and that parents could sign up to attend a virtual focus group with administrators. It sounded like a good idea and being the engaged parent and public school educator that I am, I followed the link to sign up and began reading the directions.

I was directed to sign up for a focus group based on how my family identifies, with the prompts: "Family identifies as…" Asian, Black or African American, Latinx, White, or unspecified. I paused. I identify as mixed-race usually, except when I identify as Black depending on context. My husband identifies as Taiwanese (politically) and Asian (socially). Our son, who is 5, identifies as "Calvin" (his name), a gēgē (Mandarin for elder brother), and a robot (his most recent Halloween costume).

I signed up for the "Unspecified" focus group and thought about emailing the principal to ask why there hadn't been a "Multiracial[1]" focus group category. Then I paused further to consider why the absence of such a category mattered to me at all. Perhaps it was because, since the school had asked about other racial and ethnic groups, I stopped to consider how my and my family's mixed-race identity was perceived by the school, whether our experiences were valued by school personnel, and how the social and political factors that shape identity might in some way affect my child's educational experiences. My positionality as a mixed-race individual, parent of mixed-race children, and work as a teacher-leader in the district where my children attend school, all make me attune to questions of

[1] Multiracial is used throughout this paper to refer to individuals of two or more races, those with parents from two different racial groups, and families made up of individuals from two or more racial groups. I also use the term mixed-race interchangeably with Multiracial. While I am sensitive to the risk of reifying and essentializing racial categories, I have decided to capitalize 'Multiracial' as consistent with the capitalizations of other racial groups such as Black, Asian, etc.

race and identity and how these factors impact the way students experience school.

I don't bring up the absence of a 'Multiracial' category to highlight a real or perceived injustice perpetrated by the school[2]. Rather, I'm more concerned with how schools conceptualize and operationalize 'racial identity', particularly as it relates to Multiracial students and families. As suburban school districts become more racially and ethnically diverse (Diamond & Posey-Maddox, 2020), it's important for K-12 school leaders to think critically about race and how theoretical abstractions like 'racial identity' are being parsed and adopted in school policies. This is of particular importance for the growing number of students and families choosing to identify as "two or more races." In fact, 2020 US Census data revealed a 276% increase in the number of individuals identifying as belonging to two or more races (Jones et al., 2021) and Multiracial children are the fastest growing population under age 18 in the U.S. (Atkin & Yoo, 2019). Suffice to say multiracial families like mine -- which have always existed -- are increasingly common and the education field must engage critically with the concept of 'Multiracial identity' (Chang, 2016; Osei-Kofi, 2012). Beyond an increase in numbers, understanding Multiracial identity can help move educators towards a deeper appreciation of how students' identities and experiences are shaped by race -- a phenomenon which is socially constructed and material; individual and shared; cognitive and historical. I argue that understanding how Multiracial identity is conceptualized and deployed makes it possible for K-12 practitioners to better appreciate how race and racial identity operate more broadly in schools. This has implications for students who occupy other identity categories, though Multiracial students will be the focus of this work.

In my experience working in and with schools, I've long felt there is a disconnect between research and practice in K-12, especially when it comes to research about race and racial identity and the implications for school practice. When it comes to Multiracial students in K-12, there is a significant lack of attention given to this topic and multiraciality is a silenced topic in teacher work (Howard, 2018). To address this gap, I systematically reviewed literature on racial identity and Multiracial identity development, including the small but growing body of literature on Multiracial identity in educational settings. Given that the literature spans various disciplines, I've delineated specific approaches referenced most commonly in education and social psychology journals. What I offer here is a straightforward review of the literature for K-12 practitioners that aims to do four things. First, provide background on the salience of identity in school environments. Second, I briefly highlight theories and assumptions about identity that have gained acceptance in K-12 education: cognitive identity development models; social identity theory; and the uncritical adoption and use of racial categories. Next, I explain the limitations and challenges these theories pose for schools to understanding Multiracial identity and

[2] Given the change to the US Census in the year 2000 and the growing number of individuals who are identifying as two or more races, schools will need to decide whether to move toward making 'Multiracial' a formal category of analysis. Embedded in that choice is the question of what meaning this category will hold and how it will be used by practitioners of curriculum, instruction, and school leadership.

multiraciality as a construct. Lastly, I suggest that a postpositivist realist theory of Multiracial identity[3] be used in education and the implications of such for K-12 practitioners working with Multiracial students and families.

Grounded in the work of Satya P. Mohanty (1993), a realist theory of identity contains a framework for studying Multiracial identity beyond the "either/or" constraints of essentialism (reducing someone's identity to the commonly shared experiences of a social group to which they belong) or postmodernism (which posits that identities are fictitious social constructions that only live in our imaginations). A realist theory of identity offers a way for educators to view Multiracial students through a lens that acknowledges how social categories of race intersect and operate in students' lives without being overly deterministic or reductionist (Moya, 2000).

Racial Identity in Schools

The Importance of Identity

Though scholars have conceptualized identity differently there is widespread agreement among social psychologists that the formation of a positive ethnic-racial identity (self-concept) is associated with positive social and academic outcomes (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014), can bolster youths' sense of belonging and self-esteem (Verkuyten et al., 2019a), and can serve as a protective factor for students navigating racial bias and discrimination in schools (Neblett et al., 2012). Relatedly, the way youth are identified by others – peers and school personnel – can often yield markedly different experiences, treatment, and access to resources needed for educational advancement (Moya, 2000). For mixed-race students, questions of identity and identification often converge and diverge in unique ways as students must navigate how they self-identify with the way they are perceived (or misperceived) by others (Campbell, 2020; Rockquemore et al., 2009). Thus, the identities Multiracial youth embody have the power to shape their school experiences as well as their perceptions and responses. However, before we move to praxis, it's important to first orient ourselves by critically examining theories and assumptions about racial identity (broadly) and Multiracial identity (more precisely) that have gained widespread acceptance in K-12 education.

Racial Identity Development Models

Cognitive identity development models of race are one way of theorizing identity which have gained traction in K-12 education spaces. Popularized by the work of scholars like Beverly Daniel Tatum, who first published her groundbreaking work *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* in 1997, identity development models of race are used to explain the experiences of Black students in integrated majority-white schools[4]. Identity development models have been developed within the fields of psychology and counseling and have gained widespread acceptance in educational discourse (Chang, 2016; Howard, 2018; Osei-Kofi, 2012). Tatum's twentieth anniversary edition includes research on biracial Black-White

[3] Postpositivist realist theory is also referred to as a realist theory of identity. I've chosen to use "realist theory" throughout and encourage readers to understand this as a direct connection to Mohanty's (1993) "postpositivist reality theory."

[4] Scholars have also developed racial identity development models for Whites (Helms, 1990) as well as other racial groups.

individuals' identity development from scholars Kerry Ann Rockquemore and David Brunsma (2008) who found participants adopted varying racial identities from a singular Black identity, shifting between groups, or rejecting racial ascriptions altogether. Today, the majority of scholarship on Multiracial students has focused on identity development models that place the individual at the center of analysis (Howard, 2018; Osei-Kofi, 2012; Rockquemore et al., 2009) and continues to focus mostly on postsecondary students (Campbell, 2020). While there are certainly times when it's appropriate to focus on the individual student, attempting to explain the experiences of mixed-race students in this manner obscures Multiracial students' experiences with racial bias and discrimination (Campbell, 2020; Harris, 2016).

Multiracial identity models have changed over time to include four main approaches. First, the **Problem Approach**, encapsulated in Stonequist's (1935) 'marginal man' theory, emerged during the Jim Crow era, and viewed mixed identity as an obstacle that Multiracial individuals had to contend with in a segregated society. The resulting internal psychological struggles and identity crises (which gave rise to enduring tragic mulatto stereotypes[5]) were seen as cause enough to continue legal and social opposition to mixed-race unions. Second, the **Equivalent Approach** and privileging of blackness came about during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1960s and 70s. Steeped in Erikson's (1968) cognitive framework of ego identity formation, Equivalent Approaches traced racial identity formation through a process of stages whereby individuals sought out a stable sense of self. In this case, biracial Black-White individuals were able to proudly claim a Black political and cultural identity. A third approach, the **Variant Approach,** emerged in the post-Civil Rights Era (arguably the neoliberal colorblind era) and was characterized by scholarly texts like Maria Root's (1996) "Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People" which asserted "I have the right to identify myself differently than strangers expect me to." Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model is a popular theory within the Variant Approach. In Poston's model mixed-race individuals move through five stages: personal identity in childhood; choice of one racial group leading to crisis; confusion/guilt from denying one of their racial group identities; appreciation of multiple identities; integrated multiracial identity. Most recently, the **Ecological Approach**, of which Renn's (2003) work has been the most widely adopted, posits that various external factors shape the process of identity construction for Multiracials and the choices they make regarding their chosen identity (Osei-Kofi, 2012; Rockquemore et al., 2009). For example, the racial composition of the student body at a particular school may serve as an environmental factor influencing how Multiracial students self-identify (Renn, 2003).

Central to assumptions made in identity development models is the notion that identity, whether presented as a linear process of stages or a typology, amounts to individual choice (Osei-Kofi, 2012). Thus,

[5] The tragic mulatto tropes were popularized in American media as early as the 19th Century and are still present in storylines today, for example, the hugely popular Netflix melodrama series *Ginny and Georgia* which follows the life of a biracial Black-White teen and her white mother.

for example, when my child's school asked me to self-select my family's racial identity, they were ostensibly operating under the belief that identity is a matter of personal choice and individual discretion. This notion, however, largely obscures structural realities of race that operate in schools (tracking and disproportionality in discipline practices being primary examples). Viewing Multiracial identity as an individual choice someone makes while moving through a series of cognitive stages doesn't account for socio-historical constructions of race or encourage K-12 practitioners to consider how race is enacted through language, student-student and teacher-student interactions, and school structures. Cognitive identity development theories also ignore that, to a degree, one's racial identity is not simply how you identify but how you are *identified* by others. This is especially relevant for Multiracial students who are often misidentified by teachers in school settings (Howard, 2018; Howard, 2020; Wardle, 2000).

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory, a related concept from the field of psychology, has also gained a foothold in education discourse, particularly as it relates to how students' social identity needs are related to a sense of belonging and self-esteem (Verkuyten, et al., 2019a). In social identity theory, an individual considers themselves as belonging to a certain social group or "in group" through a process of self-categorization (Stets & Burke, 2000). Social identity perspective emerged as an alternative to understanding identity as the integrated self and rather as a social or collective group identity (Verkuyten et al., 2019b). As Verkuyten et al. (2019b) explain, "social identities tell us something about how people as group members position themselves in their social environment (and are positioned by others), as well as how they derive meaning and value from these positions" p. 393. Thus, rather than conceptualizing Multiracial identity through a focus on individual Multiracial students, practitioners operating under social identity theory consider Multiracial students as a social group within the student body.

Social identity theory has become popular in education discourse as practitioners seek to understand how minoritized groups are negatively impacted by discrimination at school and create opportunities for stakeholders to come together to share common experiences (Tauriac, et al., 2013). For example, Black students reporting higher rates of disciplinary action from White teachers may perceive this treatment as a threat to their needs for belonging, esteem, and control, which are correlated with academic engagement and performance (Verkuyten, et al., 2019a). Racial affinity groups, like the one organized by my child's elementary school, are an example of how social identity theory is operationalized in K-12 settings. The shared experiences of those in the self-categorized "in group'' create an environment where participants share more freely and authenticate one another's experiences without the presence of "out group" members (Tauriac, et al., 2013).

It's easy to imagine the limitations of social identity theory in practice when it comes to the construct of multiraciality. Indeed, applying social identity theory to Multiracial identity presents a clear set of challenges. Osei-Kofi (2012) writes:

> In trying to think about multiracialized individuals as a group, one arrives at a collection of people with a wide range of histories, backgrounds, and lived

> experiences, suggesting great difficulty in identifying or describing multiracial students as belonging to a distinct racial identity group (p. 251).

Put plainly, if my child's school created a focus group for Multiracials would I necessarily have meaningful commonalities with the other members of the group? While a growing body of research suggests that Multiracial students do have a common set of experiences (Chang, 2016; Harris, 2016; Museus et al., 2014), we must still be able to account for within-group differences, especially among experiences of Multiracial individuals from different racial pairings. For example, it's not hard to imagine that a student with one Black parent and one Latinx parent is likely to have markedly different experiences than a student with a White parent and an Asian parent. These distinct experiences will undoubtedly affect the way these two students come to understand their own identity and sense of belongingness to certain groups. Thus, while social identity theory offers a way to examine common experiences of a group, there is a danger in essentializing Multiracial individuals or attempting to understand individual identity solely vis-a-vis Multiracial group membership.

Racial Categories and Administrative Data Sets

A third example of theoretical assumptions about identity that have gained acceptance in education is the widespread adoption of uncritical racial categories as proxies for identity (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Viano & Baker, 2020). I use the term *uncritical* to mean the presumption that race is neat, fixed, and easily captured through the use of stable categories like Black, White, Asian, etc. In the example of my son's school, I was being asked to *self-identify* but the options available for me had already been determined. The production and adoption of racial categories is key to understanding how schools operationalize 'racial identity' and how 'identities' become data that is collected, analyzed, and transformed to policy (Viano & Baker, 2020).

The practice of collecting and reporting racial identity using categories is common in schools and is tied to state and federal reporting requirements (Viano & Baker, 2020). The use of predetermined categories such as those that align with US Census categories is an attempt to simplify complex social constructions and remedy educational disparities among racial groups. It makes sense that practitioners would want to have stable categories of analysis. However, racial identities and racial categories are constantly changing[6], context-specific, and thus present logistical and theoretical challenges when trying to transfer them to fixed data points in administrative data sets (Viano & Baker, 2020).

Brubaker and Cooper (2000) warn against "unintentionally reproducing or reinforcing [...] reification by uncritically adopting categories of practice as categories of analysis" (p. 5). Put another way, just because we collect data using racial categories doesn't make the

[6] The category "mulatto" was added to the 1850 Census and remained until 1890. In the 1890 Census a mulatto was defined as someone with "three-eighths to five-eighths black blood," reflective of the since-debunked belief that race was biological and quantifiable. In 2000 Census respondents were given the option to indicate two or more racial groups (Parker, et al., 20125).

categories themselves infallible. Caballero et al. (2007), in their UK-based study of educators' perceptions and practices towards mixed-race students, explain that "there is a real tension between wishing to avoid reproduction of essentialist categories and wanting to reflect and analyze the lived experiences of those who identify -- or are identified -- as inhabiting those categories" (p. 357). The question of how to study the experiences of Multiracial students while not essentializing or reinforcing positivist notions of racial legitimacy is a real issue for scholars and practitioners alike and one that should not be brushed aside.

Though racial identity categories may be contrived they still hold considerable power and the use of these categories in schools has implications for Multiracial students. In her ethnographic study of the role race played in elementary classroom placements, Joy Howard (2020) found that multiraciality frustrated and complicated teachers' efforts to sort students using predetermined racial categories. In the study, teachers "considered race" to assign children to homerooms. Howard observed: "During the third-grade process, one teacher asked if they were ready to consider mixed students. Another teacher replied that they were just sorting Black students, the "legit, not the mixed yet" (p. 37). When deciding how to place a light skinned Multiracial student one teacher stated: "She's mixed, but she's light skinned [...] So, what pile does she go in? Is she African American, or white, or other?" (p. 38). In my own experience in K-12 schools, I've found school leaders disregard the Multiracial category altogether when examining student data because it confounds educators' monoracial framing of race.

Toward a Realist Theory of Multiracial Identity

So far, I've laid out common theoretical approaches to conceptualizing and operationalizing racial identity in K-12 schools and highlighted the shortcomings of each when it comes to understanding Multiracial identity. You might be wondering at this point if the notion of racial identity is even still worth trying to parse or whether schools should abandon the task altogether. Specifically, when considering Multiracial students (a growing but comparatively small group of students at many schools) is it even worth the trouble? The short answer is yes. The fact remains that racial identity is relevant in today's schools. In *Reclaiming Identity* Paula M.L. Moya (2000) argues the salience of identity, stating:

> Goods and resources are still distributed according to identity categories. Who we are-that is, who we perceive ourselves or are perceived by others to be-will significantly affect our life chances: where we can live, whom we will marry (or whether we can marry), and what kinds of educational and employment opportunities will be available to us. [...] We contend that an ability to take effective steps toward progressive social change is predicated on an acknowledgment of, and a familiarity with, past and present structures of inequality-structures that are often highly correlated with categories of identity. (p. 8)

Racial identity is not a topic we can disregard and as more students in our classrooms claim a racial identity comprised of two or more racial groups, multiraciality is a matter educators must take up. To do

so K-12 practitioners need a theory of identity that is versatile enough to account for the identities that today's students embody and pragmatic enough to put into everyday practice. A realist theory of identity offers a path forward.

There are three tenets of a realist theory of identity that inform this work and provide a foundation for understanding Multiracial identity: (1) racial identities are constructed/imagined *and* real, meaning they hold political and social relevance and should be respected; (2) identity categories are context-specific and not internally homogenous; (3) identities are made up of individual *and* collective experience, meaning they are both personal and shared among members of a social group (Alcoff & Mohanty, 2006; Gilpin, 2006; Mohanty, 1993; Moya, 2000).

Constructed Yet Real

Multiracial identity is socially constructed and real, meaning that it is the product of social interaction and is constantly being negotiated and enacted, and yet has concrete ramifications for individuals, and thus, explanatory power in schools (Alcoff, 2010). Most race scholars agree that race is a social construct rather than a biological reality (Lopez, 1994; Omi & Winant, 2014; Osei-Kofi, 2012). It follows, then, that mixed-race is a social construction and that Multiracial individuals are assigned and embody varied meaning depending on their phenotype, speech, and other racial signifiers (Osei-Kofi, 2012; Chang, 2016). Nevertheless, racial identity has tangible effects on Multiracial students' experiences and educational opportunities (Howard, 2018; Howard, 20202; Wardle, 2000) and should be respected and taken seriously (Moya, 2000). An example from a former student of mine, a mixed-race Hispanic and Black young woman, illustrates the imagined and tangible nature of race for Multiracial students:

> I went to a predominantly White Catholic school and was the only Hispanic and one of four Black students. Because I saw how quickly being White allowed my friends into spaces that I did not see many people like me in, I made sure to try and conform to the white identity as much as possible. Everything from my talk, my speech, and my food (R. Sprouse, personal communication, September 6, 2020).

As a Multiracial student in a majority-White school, Rachel minimized parts of herself viewed less proximate to whiteness and tried to 'play up' an imagined white identity by using racial signifiers in order to make herself more acceptable to White peers. She constructed and negotiated her racial identity because it had real consequences for her educational and social experiences.

The way that Rachel spoke about negotiating and performing her identity speaks to the fluid and complex nature of Multiracial identity. A realist approach to identity allows us to recognize Multiracial identity as a socially constructed abstraction while at the same time taking it seriously as a way to make sense of individual experience (Alcoff, 2010; Moya, 2000). Alcoff (2010) uses the category "Latino" to illustrate how a socially constructed category with "dubious political genealogy" can still be "critically important as a way to understand not only political debates [...] but also the current lived experience of millions whose daily experience is in environments that are majority-Anglo" (p. 159). I would argue the same could be said of Multiracial identity, a

social construct which has only recently gained political legitimacy, but which clearly holds explanatory power for the lived experiences of millions of people.

Schools should take a realist theory of identity into account when considering how Multiracial students inhabit and negotiate their racial identities without endorsing false notions of race as a biological reality. This may include allowing students to self-identify and to shift the way they choose to identify racially; training teachers to see race as a fluid, dynamic concept; and developing an awareness of racialization (the way that different racial groups are given meaning and the significance of this for Multiracial students of different pairings and combinations) (Chang, 2016; Gallagher, 2006; Osei-Kofi, 2012). In short, racial identity shouldn't be given so much credence that it becomes an overly deterministic explanation for students' experiences, nor should it be dismissed as something that only lives in students' imaginations.

Context-specific and internally diverse

A realist theory of identity provides the rationale for viewing racial identity as context-specific and not internally homogenous (Moya, 2000). Simply put, context matters for the salience of Multiracial identities. Consider the following hypothetical scenario, based on a student we will call Jalen. A school is trying to address the persistent issue of underrepresentation of Black and Latinx students in advanced courses. To remedy this, the school develops an intervention for targeted outreach and recruitment of Black and Latinx students. Jalen, a biracial Black and White student is not identified for this outreach program because at the time of enrollment his parents indicated his racial identity as "Multiracial" or "Two or more races." Despite not being included in the outreach program, Jalen still manages to enroll in an advanced math course. When he arrives at his classroom on the first day, his White teacher asks Jalen if he's in the right place and requests to see his schedule. Jalen is one of a few minoritized students in the class. Jalen does well in the class and is invited to an awards ceremony for high-achieving African American students. As a Multiracial student, he wonders if this awards ceremony is for him. When he attends the awards ceremony with his White mother his family attracts glances from other monoracial Black families, and he feels out of place.

In this hypothetical scenario Jalen's metaphysical self was unchanged, however, the context of each situation reveals how Multiracial identity is constituted differently in different situations. All three situations – the lack of inclusion in school outreach, being given a chilling reception by a teacher on the first day of class, and feeling out of place at an awards ceremony for African American students – are based on actual experiences of Multiracial students from public high schools where I worked. Troy, a former student of mine, relayed the details of his experience as a mixed Black-White student, attending African American Excellence Awards Ceremonies with his White mother:

> I was being celebrated as being Black. Everyone there was Black. My mother who is my mother and a big source of my identity was White. It was a situation where I couldn't hide from the fact that I was a little different and it was uncomfortable to the point where I would rather not go or rather go with my [Black] dad (T. Carson,

personal communication, September 5, 2020).

In addition to being context-specific, Multiracial identity is internally diverse. Another way to think of this is that Multiracial students are not a monolith and are likely to have school experiences that diverge. We can bring this into focus quickly by imagining that Jalen, the student from our earlier scenario, is a Multiracial student with a White parent and Asian parent – let's call him Kai. How different might Kai and Jalen's school experiences have been? Would Kai have been greeted the same way by his teacher upon arriving at his advanced level math class? I would argue the answer is likely no. Does this mean any one set of experiences – Jalen's or Kai's – are more or less representative of a 'Multiracial identity'? The fact that individual Multiracial students may have had markedly different experiences is illustrative of the fact that identities are not internally homogenous. A realist theory of identity grants practitioners the power to explain internal heterogeneity of Multiracials and the occasionally contradictory nature of multiraciality at the socio-political and individual level (Moya, 2000).

In practice, schools should think critically about context when collecting data or designing interventions for students and families. There may be times when Multiracial students should be examined as a group, as individuals within a group, or as a subgroup of monoracial learners (for example, a mixed Black-Asian student being understood as both a Black *and* an Asian student who may have unique needs based on membership in both groups). This means that schools must learn to be nimble and strategic with how they collect, analyze, and deploy racial category data and must begin to interrogate taken-for-granted racial identity categories. After all, what good are administrative data sets if they don't help us serve the students who are actually in our classrooms?

Individual and shared

The internal heterogeneity of social identities helps underscore a third tenant of postpositivist realist theory which is that identity is individual and shared. The need for a collective power of Multiracial identity is summarized by Gilpin (2006) who explains, "If I present my situation in its uniqueness and singularity, then my claims are easily dismissed as isolated and unimportant" (p. 12). The collective power of Multiracial identity cannot be denied. One need look no further than the Multiracial Movement of the 1980s and 90s which resulted in successful lobbying of the Office of Management and Budget by groups like the Multiracial Americans of Southern California (MASC), and changes to the 2000 US Census (MASC website).

Researchers studying mixed-race students (Chang, 2016) have found Multiracial students expressed pride and entitlement in claiming Multiracial identity and felt it had important explanatory power of their shared experiences. 'The Multiracial experience' has been described in research and includes such hallmarks as being asked "What are you?", feeling excluded by monoracial peers, experiencing exoticization, and being subject to the belief that mixed-race individuals are psychologically imbalanced (Museus et al., 2016). Even Jalen and Kai, to go back to our earlier example, may have had the shared experience of being asked "What are you?" by a peer or having school personnel mistakenly assume that they were not the biological children of their parents.

Embracing a collective Multiracial identity may make it possible for mixed-race students to coalesce around a common set of issues and advocate for social change.

Though there are elements of Multiracial identity that are shared and hold the potential for collective action, a realist theory of identity acknowledges individual agency when deciding the relevance of those identities in his or her life (Alcoff & Mohanty, 2006). Therefore, as Gilpin (2006) reminds us, "We must seek to understand individuals, the groups to which the individuals belong, and the location of those groups within larger sociopolitical contexts'' (p. 15). In K-12 schools this might be transferred to practice by establishing Multiracial student groups where students can share their experiences, support one another, or educate teachers and peers about multiraciality. Schools could also be explicit about issuing statements of inclusivity that take Multiracial students and their families into consideration. For example, the Asian American Pacific Islander Club should be explicit about encouraging participation for mixed-race Asian students. Lastly, Multiracial students who don't wish to participate in such groups shouldn't be ostracized. There may be individual, historical, or context-specific reasons why, for example, a biracial Black-White student may wish to identify as Black and not Multiracial. School leaders should receive professional learning to be educated about these factors.

Implications

While Multiracial identity in schools has largely been approached as a theoretical abstraction (Chang, 2014), adopting a realist theory of Multiracial identity offers avenues for moving from theory to praxis in K-12 schools. By embracing a realist theory of Multiracial identity, school leaders will have greater clarity when invoking terminology like 'racial identity' and 'Multiracial' in education discourse. Developing an understanding of Multiracial identity as constructed and real, context-specific and internally diverse, and individual and collective, has direct implications for school policies and practices.

First, educators should move away from seeing race as an immutable biological reality. Multiracial identity is fluid and constantly being negotiated by students. One way school practices might account for this is by allowing students to self-identify and to change the way they choose to identify racially in different contexts and points in time. Schools should consider how Multiracial students assert and enact their racial identities in response to school practices and structures. For example, how might school enrollment forms that require students to select a single racial group constrain students' racial identity? How might tracking, shown to result in disproportionate numbers of Black students assigned to less rigorous courses (Oakes, 2005), shape the experience of a mixed-race Black student placed in advanced courses? Second, a realist approach to identity invites school leaders to think critically about and to reimagine the use of administrative data sets. While federal or state mandated reporting requirements might dictate the use of prescribed monoracial categories, when possible, schools should choose approaches that allow for a more granular understanding of their student body. This will undoubtedly require a degree of flexibility on the part of practitioners but might better reflect the lived social realities of Multiracial students. There may be times when Multiracial

students should be examined as a group, as individuals within intersecting racial groups, or as a subgroup of monoracial learners. How, for example, might schools consider the impact of school discipline policies on Black boys in ways that account for the experiences of biracial Black-White and Black-Latino boys? Third, a realist theory of Multiracial identity recognizes identity as individual and shared and could lead schools to establish Multiracial student groups where students can share their experiences and support one another. When designing programs and interventions, educators should consider how students outside of a commonly assumed monoracial norm will be impacted. For example, if planning outreach or enrichment for Asian youth, leaders should consider who is excluded when only those identified as monoracial Asian are included. If the school offers single-race student groups or clubs, they should be inclusive of mixed-race students who should be encouraged to join if they so choose.

Lastly, research has found that educators often feel unprepared to support Multiracial students and most teacher education programs do not address multiraciality or mixed-race students (Howard, 2018; Wardle, 2000). Leaders should engage school personnel in professional learning about race and multiraciality that centers the daily lived experiences of mixed-race students. Content of professional learning should also be attuned to historical realities including the legacy of anti-miscegenation laws, the Supreme Court's ruling in *Loving v. Virginia*, and changes to the 2000 Census. Educators should be encouraged to examine their biases and assumptions about race and Multiracial people, debunk pseudo-scientific notions of race, and reflect on the ways in which race is socially constructed and enacted in school settings. Lastly, research has shown that 'tragic mulatto' stereotypes are held by school personnel (Harris, 2002; Howard, 2018) while others subscribe to a competing (though still flawed) narrative that Multiracial individuals are a signal of racial harmony and progress (Chang, 2014; Harris, 2016). Thus, professional learning for educators must counter deficit framing of Multiracial students as "confused" or "unnatural" while also resisting notions of multiracial exceptionalism.

Conclusion

On a Tuesday evening I logged on to my computer and followed the link to the virtual focus group with my child's school leaders and the other 'unspecified' parent participants. Did I find a community of other Multiracial families and feel a sense of connection in our shared experience? Had school leaders come away with a deep appreciation for my family's identity and hopes and dreams for my Multiracial child? Suffice to say the results were in many ways as unclear as the 'unspecified' category itself. As far as I could gather, two parents – one West African and another South Asian – had not felt an affinity for the "Black or African American" or "Asian" groups specified by the school. Beyond that it wasn't clear who was (or was not) Multiracial. Perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised. After all, 'unspecified' isn't synonymous with mixed-race. And so, while I had spent a considerable amount of energy pondering the meaning and significance of my family's Multiracial racial identity, it's not clear that the school had. This must change. Multiraciality, while complex and sometimes contradictory, is an identity category that is important to

understand if we hope to create more equitable learning environments that serve today's students. This requires an interrogation of widely accepted identity theories and theoretical traditions that are incomplete and out of sync with shifting constructions of race. Moving toward a realist theory of identity offers K-12 practitioners the opportunity to contend with multiraciality and appreciate how racial identity operates in schools and in the lives of our students.

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