

# Worldviews of One Mixed Heritage Family in an Urban Middle School: An Ethnographic Study

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## Abstract

Although the mixed heritage population of the U.S. continues to grow, few (if any) attempts have been made to examine educational needs specific to this group of children, especially from the family's perspective. This article uses ethnographic data to examine the experiences of one mixed heritage family—with an African American father and a Chinese American mother—in an urban middle school. The data revealed that the family experienced several sources of tension from the school, from the child, and from interracial differences concerning the educational needs of their child. Specifically, the data revealed that interracial differences within the family were influenced by situational complexities. The article suggests the importance of understanding and addressing these tensions and complexities in reaching out to mixed heritage students and their families.

Key Words: mixed heritage family, worldviews, middle school, ethnicity and education

## Introduction

An increasing amount of scholarship has begun to focus on diversity issues, including race, gender, class, family type, disability, second-language learning, and immigration status (Artiles, 2003; Banks, 2001; Comer, 1993; Delpit,

1995; Garcia, 1991; Gay, 2000; Kohl, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Orenstein, 1994; Rose, 1989; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). However, far less attention has been paid to one particular group in terms of diversity, namely, mixed heritage families and their children (Benedetto & Olisky, 2001; Herring, 1995; Morrison & Rodgers, 1996; Nishimura, 1995). On the few occasions when efforts were made to study this group, the literature is limited to racial identity development (Benedetto & Olisky; Hall, 2001; Kato, 2000; Morrison & Bordere, 2001; Nishimura; Schwartz, 1998). Few if any attempts have been made to examine educational needs specific to this group of children (Lopez, 2003a; Reid & Henry, 2000; Renn, 2000), especially from the family's perspective.

To address this important gap in literature, this ethnographic study examines the experiences of one mixed heritage family with a student attending an urban middle school. This examination is important as the mixed heritage population of the U.S. continues to grow (Banks, 2001; Constantine, 1999; Kalish, 1995; Kato, 2000; Lopez, 2003a; Morrison & Rodgers, 1996; Nishimura, 1995; Steel, 1995; Wardle, 1992) and as this population continues to face unique challenges rooted in deep-seated American biases of racism, separatism, and ethnocentrism (Gibbs, 1987; Wardle, 1992). Thus, never before in the history of American education has there been so great a need for educators to hear voices from mixed heritage families, to recognize their unique situation, and to examine ways to better serve their children in school settings.

## Related Literature

The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, in general, and the 1967 decision outlawing antimiscegenation laws (*Loving v. Virginia*), in particular, have resulted in a greater public acceptance of interracial marriages. Yet, racial categorization and racism are still too frequently part of everyday life in the United States (Kato, 2000; Morrison & Bordere, 2001; Schwartz, 1998). Long-standing Western belief systems persist and continue to accept, however implicitly, the mainstream, dominant white race and culture as the "norm," while treating other races and cultures as somewhat deviant (Reid & Henry, 2000). Mixed heritage families and their children continue to face societal myths, prejudices, and barriers (Kato, 2000; Reid & Henry, 2000; Wardle, 1992).

As issues of race have received more and more attention in education, there is a tendency to focus on the history and struggles of single racial-ethnic groups. Despite the intention to celebrate the diverse heritages of this country and to help to raise consciousness about various specific racial-ethnic groups, such a tendency ignores the rich history of mixed heritage people (Wardle, 1996).

Rather, it serves to perpetuate the notion of the abnormality of mixed heritage people (Wardle, 1996) and exclude and discriminate against those individuals who identify with their mixed heritage backgrounds (Reid & Henry, 2000).

Mixed heritage children, in particular, deserve our attention, as this makes up one of the groups that most notably contribute to increasing racial-ethnic diversity in the school-age population (Tafoya, 2000). Interracial birth more than doubled between 1978 and 1992 (Kalish, 1995). Based on a Census 2000 "race" question, on which Hispanic/Latino was not an option, 4.0% of people under age 18 were of mixed heritage. For California, the corresponding number was as high as 7.3% (Lopez, 2003b). Therefore,

as we think about the increasing racial and ethnic diversity in our student population and its influence on how we educate and conduct research in the context of schools, the discussion would be incomplete without acknowledging the growing population of mixed heritage children. (Lopez, 2003a, p. 25)

This call to understand mixed heritage children and their families is important, as most of the previous efforts have treated the family as a place where couples share and transmit similar values and traditions (Rogler & Procidano, 1989; Tzeng, 1992). Even some recent acknowledgement of potential sources of conflict, such as cultural beliefs of professionals conflicting with those families who do not come from similar cultural backgrounds (Garcia, Mendez Perez, & Ortiz, 2000; Rutherford, Anderson, & Billig, 1997), often assumes that a family has a single voice or a clear consensus about how to educate their children. A mixed heritage family, on the other hand, may have multiple voices, with different or conflicting perspectives within the family when it comes to identifying their mixed heritage children (Xie & Goyette, 1997), transmitting values and traditions, and raising and educating them in school (Okun, 1996). This implies that educators need to be more aware of the multiple perspectives and concerns of mixed heritage families when working with their children.

Such awareness is important because these differences within a mixed heritage family may work in both ways. They may benefit their children, including a broader cultural education and a larger knowledge base (Schwartz, 1998), an enhanced sense of self and identity, a greater intergroup tolerance and language facility (Thornton, 1996), and an enhanced capability to identify multiple aspects of a situation and to see both sides of a conflict (Kerwin, Ponterotto, Jackson, & Harris, 1993). On the other hand, these differences may result in conflicting views about their children's racial identity (Folaron & Hess, 1993), exert strong and contradictory influences on their children who are already struggling with internal conflicts (Schwartz, 1998), and lead to difficulty in

reconciling the needs of their children with the prejudiced views of the children's grandparents (Folaron & Hess).

Adding further to the challenge of working with interracial families is the fact that educators themselves are likely to harbor various prejudices, given the prevalence of these prejudices in society at large (Schwartz, 1998; York, 1991). Therefore, it is critical for educators to examine their personal views (Morrison & Bordere, 2001; Schwartz), to recognize the unique situation of interracial families and their children (Reid & Henry, 2000), and to learn about and respect the beliefs, attitudes, and concerns of mixed heritage families (Schwartz). Of particular interest is what education means to families with mixed heritage school-age children, and what it means to reach out to these children and their families in school settings.

Unfortunately, there are hardly any empirical studies that explicitly examine these questions. One of the very few studies available that illustrated the importance of framing these questions is that of Kerwin, et al. (1993), which inquired into the experiences of a group of biracial children and their families. In their study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 9 black/white biracial children between the ages of 5 and 16 and with their parents (a total of 6 families), who resided within 75 miles of New York City.

The data revealed that many participant parents expressed concerns about racial discrimination directed against their children, particularly black parents. Black parents tended to anticipate that their children would describe themselves as Black if asked about their racial identity, whereas white parents tended to anticipate that their children would see themselves as "Black and White" or "mixed," or they reported not knowing how the child might respond. Black parents also tended to be more conscious of discrimination than their white spouses because of their personal experiences with racism. For example, a black father noted that his children had to be the best to survive in the face of racism. In addition, black parents were more likely to identify a need to actively prepare their children to deal with racial prejudice (e.g., "I certainly don't want [my sons] to grow up with rose-colored glasses.").

Although the study of Kerwin, et al. (1993) focused on issues salient in the development of racial identity for school children of black/white racial heritage and not specifically on the educational needs of these children, the available data from this study suggest the importance of being sensitive to the views and values of interracial families, particularly multiple perspectives within these families. Thus, the present case study may be viewed as bridging a gap in research on mixed heritage, school-age children and their families. It seeks to better understand the perceptions and experiences of one mixed heritage family in an urban middle school, with one African American parent and the other

parent being an Asian American. By examining how this family interacted with the school, as well as how the family's involvement and perceptions were influenced by its values and life circumstance, educators can better understand what is involved in reaching out to mixed heritage children and their families.

Along with the scant research on mixed heritage children in general, current discussions that are available focus on offspring from African American and European American unions (Chiong, 1998; Folaron & Hess, 1993; Kato, 2000; Kerwin, et al., 1993; Morrison & Rodgers, 1996; Nishimura, 1995; Winn & Priest, 1993), whereas children from other mixed heritage families are often regarded as if they were "marginally interracial" (Chiong, 1998, p. 4). Yet, "people with different kinds of mixed racial-ethnic ancestry can be so different from each other that for many purposes it makes little sense to view them as a single category" (Jaret & Reitzes, 1999, p. 731).

As Asian Americans are the fastest-growing minority in the country and they experience the highest outmarriage rates of all racial groups (Xie & Goyette, 1997), an ethnographic study on a mixed heritage family with one Chinese American parent and one African American parent may shed some needed light in this long-ignored area. In addition, this line of research may have a broad theoretical interest, particularly relating to Ogbu's views of voluntary minorities (e.g., Asian Americans) and involuntary minorities (e.g., African Americans; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Of particular interest, for example, is how their respective experiences with racism might play out within such mixed heritage families, particularly regarding their children's educational needs.

## Data and Method

The findings reported here are part of a larger dataset gathered from an ethnographic study of cultural interchange among teachers, students, and families from diverse backgrounds; during the study I spent around 10-12 days each month at Parkway Middle School in New York City, from September 1996 to June 1997. (Note: The names of the middle school and the participants have been changed to maintain their confidentiality.) The school maintained a small enrollment of about 140 students in grades 6-8. During the 1996-97 school year, 81% of the student body received free or reduced-price lunch. Over half (58%) of the students lived in a household with both parents present.

According to the New York City Public Schools Official Class Ethnic Census Report, the student body during 1996-97 was 47% Latino, 34% African American, 10% Caucasian, 5% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian or Alaskan, with the remaining 3% under "code not entered." However, student self-identification in a homework survey presented quite a different

picture, in which a striking 21% of the students identified themselves as “mixed” (Xu & Corno, 2003). On the other hand, the staff was less diverse than the student body; only one of the nine full-time teachers was non-Caucasian (African American).

My entry to the school community was facilitated by a number of factors, including the assistance of a colleague who had known the school director and several teachers for many years, and my previous experience working with families from diverse cultural backgrounds in the same geographic area (Xu & Corno, 1998).

This article focuses on one mixed heritage family whom I refer to here as the Lynch family. I came to know the Lynch family through what ethnographers doing fieldwork refer to as “serendipity” (Wolcott, 1994). My first contact with the Lynch family occurred at a parent/child/teacher conference in late November 1996. During the meeting, Mrs. Lynch brought up the topic of the citywide standardized tests. She wanted to know how she could get involved in the process. “Should we go to a Barnes & Noble bookstore to buy books? What books would you recommend?” In addition, she wanted teachers to give her son, Greg, extra work because “he can accomplish more.”

These questions intrigued me, since Greg was in the sixth grade and had been in Parkway less than three months. I was interested in finding out what made Mrs. Lynch take up this line of questioning at her first parent/child/teacher conference, and with such a sense of urgency.

## **Data Collection**

Data for this article were collected from the following sources: (a) open-ended interviews with the school staff, the student (Greg), and the Lynch family; (b) observations of classroom interactions, staff meetings, and home visits; and (c) collections of relevant documents.

### ***Interviews***

I conducted three long interviews with the Lynch family during the school year, including one interview with Mrs. Lynch at her workplace in February 1997, one joint interview with both Mr. and Mrs. Lynch at home in May 1997, and one interview with Mrs. Lynch at home in August 1997. Each of these three interviews lasted between 2-3 hours. In addition, I conducted two interviews with Greg, each an hour long, in February and in June of 1997. In these interviews the family was asked to articulate their perspectives on the educational needs of the child and to comment on their reactions to the school's various approaches; the research goal was to understand how the family's

perspectives and reactions were influenced by its values and priorities.

All of the nine full-time teachers were interviewed at school between September 1996 and November 1997. Most of them were interviewed 2-3 times, with each interview lasting, on average, 60-70 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed.

### *Observations*

I conducted observations of classroom interactions, parent/child/teacher conferences, staff meetings, parent association meetings, and special events (e.g., school orientation and school celebration of various holiday traditions). In addition, I visited Greg's home two times during the school year, with each visit lasting about 4-5 hours. I also traveled with Greg, other students, and teachers on the field and museum trips and to basketball games.

### *Documents*

Two types of documents were collected and used for this article. One type of document related to Parkway's policies and practices, including the school director's weekly memos, instructional materials (e.g., curriculum units), and the school yearbook. The second type was more specifically related to Greg and his family, including school-to-home letters, school report cards, and examples of Greg's work (e.g., homework and notebooks).

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection, in which analytical files (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) were built after a home visit or during the reading of the audiotape transcription. These analytic files helped inform and facilitate the next stage of data analysis, namely, the use of SQR NUD\*IST, a software program for analyzing qualitative data. For example, seeing that academics as a topic had been raised and perceived important by the Lynch family in my analytical files, I used the software program (a) to carefully check my data if it was indeed the case and not just my impression or bias, and (b) to systematically code and sort interview transcripts (e.g., interviews with Mrs. Lynch), field notes (e.g. parent/child/teacher conferences), and documents (e.g., school report cards) relating to this topic.

Sorting and organizing different codes also made it more manageable to see possible relationships among these codes. For example, initially I assigned separate codes to the family's reactions to their interracial marriage and to their views on parental involvement. After carefully examining related texts grouped around these codes, I noticed that there seemed to be a common thread across



these categories, namely, racial consciousness. Accordingly, these initial codes were reorganized under this more generic code of racial consciousness. During data analysis these codes, along the relationships among them, were used to help “provide some coherence and structure” to the extensive dataset while retaining the original accounts, observations, and documents from which it was derived (Ritchie & Spencer, 2002, p. 309) and understanding the boundaries of relevant events through the eyes of the participants (Wells, Hirshberg, Lipton, & Oakes, 1995).

### **Methodological Concerns and Trustworthiness**

My first concern was whether my access to the school (i.e., through a colleague who knew several school staff members) would lead the family to perceive that I was accountable to the school system, thereby preventing me from gaining their honest opinions of the system. Later on, however, like other researchers involved in a similar situation (Harry, Allen, & McLaughlin, 1995), I wondered whether I would “develop a bias in favor of the primary respondents, the parents, because of the increasing intimacy of home visits, acquaintance with family members, and close-up views of parents’ life situations” (pp. 367-368).

Another concern related to my lack of formal K-12 educational experience in this country. On the one hand, this lack of experience gave me an opportunity to approach American schooling with fresh eyes, perhaps capturing certain phenomena that might be overly familiar and taken for granted by American-born researchers. On the other hand, I wondered whether I would “get it” or “get it right” on other phenomena.

To address these methodological concerns, I used three “lenses” in combination to enhance the trustworthiness of this study: the lens of the researcher, the lens of the study participants, and the lens of people external to the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

#### ***Lens of the Researcher***

Triangulation of different data sources and perspectives was used as a means of enhancing credibility and safeguarding against researcher bias (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 2002; Yin, 1994). For example, observations (e.g., parent/child/teacher conferences) and relevant documents (e.g., Greg’s report cards) were used to validate the corresponding self-reported data from different participants (e.g., school director and Mrs. Lynch). The purpose was to develop a converging line of inquiry based on “multiple forms of evidence rather than a single incident or data point in the study” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127).



*Lens of the Study Participants*

I stayed at the Parkway school community for an extended period of time (ten months) to better capture and understand the participants' worldviews. In addition, I took my work back to the participants for them to judge the credibility of the narrative accounts and interpretations.

*Lens of People External to the Study*

Peer debriefing was used to minimize potential bias (Erickson, 1986; Vaughan, 1992). This work was shared with and critiqued by several colleagues from diverse cultural backgrounds (including Caucasians and African Americans). Relevant feedback was used to revise the text in instances where elaboration was recommended (e.g., what extra school work meant to Mrs. Lynch, Greg, and the school) or rival explanations were suggested (e.g., possible explanations for Greg not receiving extra school work).

**Findings**

Mr. Lynch is of African American and Native American descent. He is a practicing lawyer and a law professor at a local community college. Mrs. Lynch is of Chinese descent. She came to the U.S. from Hong Kong when she was a child. After finishing high school, she attended one and a half years of college, but stopped when her first child was born. Recently, she returned to college and took courses in graphic design while working at a college library. The family lived in a three-bedroom apartment, where Greg shared a bedroom with his younger brother, while his two sisters (one older and one younger) shared another bedroom.

Greg was twelve years old at the time. He looked more Chinese than African American, with straight hair and light skin complexion. Mrs. Lynch acknowledged that Greg was "closer to Asian looking." She added:

Sometimes people do stare at him because of his skin complexion, and they can't tell whether he's Filipino or Polynesian. So sometimes it gets a bit awkward, just a little bit. But like I said, he's a people person and he's overcome that....He has a good relationship with everybody.

As for his sense of racial identity, Greg said, "I'm both [African American and Chinese American]. I look like an Asian, but sometimes I speak like an African American." Overall, he leaned toward considering himself more as African American, which was evident in his class assignment on February 25, 1997, when he responded to the question, "Why do you think it's important to study black history?"

As an African American, it is important to study black history because it is my history. The events that happened in the past affect me. Black history is also American history. If one is an American then it is important to know their history. It is always important to know history so that the mistakes that were made in the past can be prevented from happening again.

After the first parent/child/teacher conference, I interviewed Mrs. Lynch at the library where she worked in February 1997. The location was her choice as she had to go to her college classes directly after work. After I sat down, Mrs. Lynch quickly turned to the conference I had observed. As the interview proceeded, a number of topics surfaced, relating to citywide tests, extra work, academics, and the family's values and expectations. These topics provided many leads for follow-up interviews and observations. Three major themes gradually emerged from ongoing data analysis (see the data and method section), including (a) tension resulting from her seeking extra school work for Greg, (b) tension between the school's emphasis on "school community" and the family's concern with Greg's academic performance, and (c) tension arising from racial consciousness.

### **Tension Resulting from Requesting Extra School Work**

It appeared that Mrs. Lynch began to pay attention to the citywide tests long before this conference. When Greg was in the third grade, she had transferred him to an elementary school, "one of the top schools, when it comes to their reading and math." At graduation, the principal of that elementary school recommended Parkway. Finally, she made the decision to send Greg to Parkway after the school director gave her various school statistics orally and described how some of its graduates had gone on to some selective high schools in the city (e.g., Stuyvesant High School).

As for the importance of the citywide tests, Mrs. Lynch noted that the result of these tests was crucial in getting into good New York City high schools:

That's what they look at. I mean, let's be realistic now. If you are at Stuyvesant or Bronx Science or any of the other specialized high schools, they'll look at these scores to see how well you did, and whether you're an A student or a B student or a C student.

Regarding the request she had made for extra work at her first parent/child/teacher conference, Mrs. Lynch felt Greg got "too little work" from the school. "I've always believed that you can *never* get too much homework." This belief, she explained, had to do with her childhood experience in Hong Kong, where she recognized the value of extra work to reinforce and expand what she

learned in class. “If there are opportunities out there and you can push your grades up further, why not?”

As it turned out, by the end of the school year, Mrs. Lynch did not receive any recommendations from Parkway on how she could help Greg better prepare for the citywide tests nor did Greg receive any extra assignments from his teachers. Multiple data sources revealed that this lack of follow-through was due to the following three factors.

First, Greg resisted. In the middle of the first parent/child/teacher conference, Greg expressed displeasure with the idea of asking for more work, saying “Extra homework? It’s my first year!” Four months later was the second parent/child/teacher conference; when the conference was interrupted by a staff member, Greg quietly prodded his mother, as if knowing what she was thinking:

*Greg:* Don’t ask him for extra work.

*Mrs. Lynch:* Why not?

*Greg:* He said you had gone to every teacher!

At home, Greg and his mother got into arguments about extra homework. He would say, “Mom, stop it! Don’t ask for extra homework for me. I’m doing okay.” When I asked him in early February whether his advisor or any teachers had given him extra homework, Greg said, “No...I didn’t ask...I didn’t want no more homework.”

Second, from the school’s perspective, citywide testing was not viewed as a high priority compared to Mrs. Lynch’s perspective. The advisor’s opening statement in the first conference was quite telling:

Portfolio is something kids start in the sixth grade. It has an entry sheet, a chance for kids to reflect on what they’re learning. By the time they leave the school, it can show growth and demonstrate capabilities more effectively than any test scores.

As for Mrs. Lynch’s request for extra work, the advisor responded that Greg could ask him to suggest some books to read as extra work for the humanities class (which the advisor taught). Greg could also contact other teachers for things that would count as extra credit. In general, the advisor viewed this as a situation where “Kids need to ask and show interest first.” He felt that it was more important and powerful for Greg to show interest, initiative, and ownership first, to earn respect from teachers. Thus, his implicit message to Mrs. Lynch was that Greg was the one who needed to take the initiative, not her as a parent.

Finally, Mrs. Lynch’s busy schedule prevented her from following up with Greg’s advisor and other teachers. With a full-time job and attending college

classes four nights a week, she often was not at home during the early evening hours; when she did arrive home, she sometimes had to work on her own assignments until 3:00 a.m. After the first conference with Greg's advisor, she said she intended to contact him on a monthly basis. She also planned to contact other teachers on a monthly basis so that she would have a better picture of how Greg was doing, instead of relying only on the advisor's "interpretation." However, her hectic schedule prevented her from implementing any of these plans. During my interview with her in May 1997, she said, "I was supposed to get back to him [the advisor] at the beginning of this month, but I couldn't because I had finals."

Although Greg was reluctant to take any initiative to ask for extra work, he seemed quite responsible in doing his assigned work. In late October, a science class started with a list of questions for students to answer on the excretory system, including "What happens when the kidneys do not work?" and "Describe similarities and differences between the excretory and the digestive systems." As he wrote down answers to these questions, Greg said to himself that he was "so glad" that he had just reviewed the excretory system the night before.

Greg also seemed to be quite responsible in working with other students. In a math class four months later, the teacher asked the students to work in groups. While one member of a group worked on the 3 times table (multiplying  $3 \times 1$  through  $3 \times 12$ ), another member recorded the time spent on completing the table. Each group was then asked to draw a bar graph showing the results. Eric started first, but he stopped abruptly and threw his pencil on the table, complaining that Rebecca's counting was too loud and it distracted him from his work (i.e., "Man, I cannot concentrate!"). In response, Greg helped record time for Eric, using a lower voice. He did the same for Rebecca, and then let them record the time he spent completing the table. Greg's initiatives were acknowledged by his advisor in his year-end report that "Greg has been a great help in class and is a very cooperative student."

In addition, Greg seemed to be very concerned with his test scores. One afternoon in early March, the teacher instructed students on how to take an upcoming citywide test (e.g., "Make a list of ideas and look for details") and asked them if they had any questions. Greg immediately raised several questions:

*Greg:* Are you grading it?

*Teacher:* Yes, teachers grade it.

*Greg:* On what grounds?

*Teacher:* On a scale from one to six.

When the teacher shifted to another topic, Greg asked, further, what the scale numbers stood for and if he could find out his test score. Greg finished the test early, but then he came back into the classroom after the others had left to tell the teachers, “I think I did pretty good.” He then left as quickly as he had entered, as the teacher nodded his head.

### **Tension Between School Community and Academics**

Greg gave the impression that he was constantly exploring his surroundings, listening, looking, or on the move. The school director described him in an interview as “bright, kind, a leader, reliable, and interested in learning. He soaks up everything that goes on and is well-respected by the other kids.” This image, to some extent, was reflected in a poem he wrote, which was printed in the school literary magazine in January 1997. It was titled, “Who Am I?”

So cool,  
 So nice,  
 So handsome,  
 So sweet,  
 Sweeter than a piece of candy.  
 He glides across the room.  
 He's the best at everything.  
 He's very strong.  
 All the girls like him.  
 He's . . .  
 He's . . .  
 He's mysterious.  
 He's me.

Greg's self-image was also in line with observations made by other students. For example, one girl noted that “as a friend, he's *really* nice,” and she liked him.

Greg said he enjoyed “a lot of freedom” in the school, explaining that the teachers “are not always on your case” and “they're not always pressuring you doing things...I get to roam around and go out to eat” during lunchtime. During the twice-a-week advisory class, he felt free to “talk about things that happened in class and in school” as well as “problems in the world.”

Greg liked his classes, especially math and gym, and various school trips and extracurricular activities. In particular, he liked playing basketball, evidenced by the only poster he had hung in his bedroom, advertising Michael Jordan's movie *Space Jam*. In fact, he considered it one of his proudest achievements

that he was selected to be on the school's basketball team in his first year at Parkway.

Mrs. Lynch agreed that "Greg loves the social life at the school." She observed, "We have a certain group of kids over there who are not getting what they should be getting at ...So the school is trying to make up for it...by trying to be a mom and dad to these kids, when they may not have an emotional mom and dad at home." She was pleased by the way Parkway tried to foster "a tight-knit community" (e.g., "be together and be there for each other.").

On the other hand, Mrs. Lynch noted that "it's fine to try to be a mom and dad [in such cases], but there's a fine line, where you should not allow it to compromise your academics." She was concerned that, with the amount of emphasis placed on creating a cohesive school community, academics might be "sidetracked" and "compromised":

Out of all the conversations [I had with the school], I've yet to hear about academics, about how to strengthen academics. That wasn't discussed....Yet, isn't that a priority too? All they keep talking about is cohesiveness....But I think academics should be stressed, also. That's why you send your kids there. Besides being chummy, chummy, and being in a feel-good environment, you've got to have strong academics.

Mrs. Lynch became even more concerned when Greg's citywide standardized reading scores were received at the end of the school year, ranking him at the 53rd percentile, compared with the 63rd percentile ranking the previous year. Admittedly, Greg's math ranking rose from the 87th percentile to the 91st percentile over the same period. Still, she felt that the school didn't push him enough academically. She asked: "What happened to his reading score? Were they lax on that? Did they just push math and let everything else slide back?"

Mrs. Lynch felt that she was in a "Catch 22" situation on the question of whether to let Greg stay at the school: "I can understand it if both scores went down dramatically. Then he's totally out. But since he has elevated his math score, I guess he stays there another year."

The decision to let Greg stay was also based on the fact that "he seems to be pleased with the school." It was influenced by her husband's attitude, and he seemed to view Parkway in a more positive light, noting, "I think Greg is having a good experience. He's excited about the school. He does his homework. We're kind of happy with that." Nevertheless, like his wife, academics was Mr. Lynch's top priority as well. For example, he made it clear to Greg that if he wanted to play basketball after school, he had to take care of his school work first. Otherwise, "you don't do the sports. That's something we have to deal with, and we've dealt with that."

As it turned out, during my final interview with Mrs. Lynch in August 1997, she not only allowed Greg to stay at the school, but also arranged for Greg's younger sister to apply there, as well, and sent her there the following year. Mrs. Lynch explained that it's like "a give and take balance." Yet, in addition to Greg's positive attitude toward the school, its closeness to their home, and her desire to have his sister go to the same school, Mrs. Lynch liked Parkway's "liberal" environment. There was not too much pressure, yet at the same time they did not let the child fall back to a point where he or she could not catch up. She remembered, as a child, that the emphasis had always been on "you got to do this, you got to do that—and if you didn't, then you're a bad child."

Even so, academics remained Mrs. Lynch's major concern:

I told everyone I would give the school one year to see the results. I want to have an open mind, to see how well she [her daughter] does in the school. If she's not doing well I'll have no hesitation in pulling her out.

Mrs. Lynch's concern was further evidenced in the following question she posed to me at the end of the final home visit: "I have a question: 'Do the other parents express what I express when it comes to academics, or are they fine with that?'" She then offered me some unsolicited advice about how the issue of academics should be addressed in my study:

Academics should be in the forefront, not in the background, because when you go on to the ninth grade, that's what the high schools want. They want academics to be stressed. They don't want a chummy, chummy environment. Stuyvesant is not going to ask, "Are you going to get along well with the other students?" No, they're going to ask you, "What's your reading score? What's your math score?" That's all they're concerned about. So I hope you emphasize *academics* in your report. I hope you stress it a lot.

### **Role of Racial Consciousness**

The Lynch family was keenly aware of their heritages. This was evident in several large framed pictures hung in the living room, including Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. giving his "I Have a Dream" speech. During one visit, Mrs. Lynch noticed my interest in these pictures and explained that, while these photographs were of African Americans, she contributed to the household with Chinese music (e.g., opera) and Chinese food (e.g., pastries). She also took her children to see special events like the Chinese New Year celebration in Chinatown. At one time, she thought of sending



them to the Sunday school in Chinatown to learn Chinese, regretting, “there were so many things going on, I wasn’t able to do that.”

At other times, Mr. and Mrs. Lynch were even reminded of their racial identities by their families. Mrs. Lynch’s parents did not recognize her relationship with Mr. Lynch, and they were not part of their family life for more than a decade, largely because she—the only daughter in the family, with six sons—had married a non-Chinese. As a result, Mrs. Lynch observed that

The first three children did not have a well-balanced relationship with my parents. They had just recently been introduced back into our lives when the baby [their fourth child, now five years old] was born. So, they are more bonded with the baby [than the other kids].

For both Mr. and Mrs. Lynch, it was a long and difficult period, and the uneasiness continued. This can be seen from the following brief exchange, where the word “difficult” was repeated four times when this topic was raised:

*Mrs. Lynch:* I was upset. If my husband was Chinese, they wouldn’t do that... Yeah, I was really upset. I mean now they come into my life again, but back then...

*Mr. Lynch:* It was *difficult* for both of us.

*Mrs. Lynch:* It was very *difficult*.

*Interviewer:* Just because of the interracial marriage?

*Mrs. Lynch:* Yes. It was very *difficult*.

*Mr. Lynch:* It was *difficult* for both of us. I wanted to meet and know her family, and she wanted me to meet and know her family....

Racial consciousness influenced what Mr. and Mrs. Lynch expected of their children. In some areas they shared quite similar values; in other areas they did not, but they understood where the other view came from. In still other areas, they just agreed to disagree.

### *Shared Priority*

Racial consciousness influenced what Mr. and Mrs. Lynch expected of their children. Mrs. Lynch noted that for the child “to recognize one heritage, one must also recognize both parents’ heritages. And if you deny one heritage, then you’re denying your own heritage.” Similarly, Mr. Lynch wanted his children to understand “who they are and why they exist,” and that “they exist because we came together.” He explained:

I demand the same kind of values that their mother and father were brought up on: Honesty, that's important. I demand that they think for themselves—that's more important. I demand that they believe in our family, even if it's a difficult situation for us. We are an interracial family, and both their mother and I are proud of where we come from. We're not subordinating ourselves to anyone. So we insist that they be aware of both sides of their family, and be proud of it. That's why we have this library.... We have over 1,500 books, from all different cultures. They have these books in their rooms because we insist on that; that's important for us.

The history of segregation and the experience of emigrating from another country shaped the way Mr. and Mrs. Lynch viewed education. Mr. Lynch observed:

Interestingly enough, when we talk, when we sit down and compare, we find that there's a lot of common ground.... My parents came out of segregation, not thinking that their children could ever go to school. A lot of time immigrants think that way, so there's some common bond [between us], and I think it shows in the way we look at and approach education. We really are.

He elaborated:

To us, there's no substitute for eventually going to college. We won't tolerate anything less than that. We're clear on that. Doing well in school, there's no substitute for that. It makes no sense to say that "doing a little bit better" is good enough. We're very consistent about that. It's never good enough, it really isn't. We always expect better and we know they can do better because we see it. There's no substitute for education; the only way minorities are going to make it in this country is to be educated. So, we're both passionate about this. We were both brought up that way.

Likewise, Mrs. Lynch wanted her children to "supersede their parents. Not that my husband and I are bad or anything, but I just have great expectations of them."

### *Different Emphasis*

At other times, Mr. and Mrs. Lynch's racial difference influenced their views divergently. Although Mrs. Lynch shared her husband's view that "there's a lot that you can learn from so many different cultures," the word "diversity" had a special meaning for her. She considered Parkway "a homogeneous environment" because the majority of the students were Latino and African American.

She would like to see a more diverse student body, including more Asians and Caucasians, as “I want Greg to get a full range of ideas from many different groups.” She also would have liked the school to find ways to reach out more to minority parents, as she observed that the majority of parents who came to PTA meetings were Caucasians (though only about 10% of the student body were Caucasians). Personally, she said she would feel more comfortable if she saw even one other Asian parent in these meetings.

Another revealing example related to Mr. and Mrs. Lynch’s different reactions to Greg’s participation in a program called “Cops and Kids,” sponsored by a local community agency. It was designed to promote mutual understanding between the children and the police through dialogue and conflict resolution. Mr. Lynch strongly opposed Greg’s participation in this program.

I don’t believe the propaganda of the police department. I have a different approach to the police than possibly my wife. But to me those programs are [only] propaganda. They don’t deal with the fact that the police treat African Americans differently. It’s a legal fact, it’s a historical fact, that we have huge incidents of brutality and unexplained murders against minorities....I don’t want Greg to be a victim of that kind of propaganda. Black children cannot go up to the police and say, “Mr. Officer?” They just can’t. That’s a fact of life in this country. The police don’t treat them the same as Whites. It’s foolish for his own safety to be part of that propaganda. He needs to be much more sharper about the police than this. The police don’t treat everybody the same. We see it everyday, the newspapers are full of it. I didn’t want him to go, I’m very adamant about that, and that’s justified.

When asked her response to this issue during my last interview with her, Mrs. Lynch viewed it differently. She said, “I have no problem with that [program].” As for her husband’s response, she explained, “You have to understand that when he was growing up, there was segregation and the law enforcement wasn’t too kind toward him. I think it’s ingrained in him to a point where you can’t trust a police officer....He wants to make sure Greg’s protected.”

Mr. Lynch’s racial consciousness further influenced the way he approached Greg, something he called “the African heritage between father and son...African men believe that their sons belong to them, while daughters belong to mothers.” This view (i.e., son belongs to the father) seemed to be one of the reasons that he pulled Greg out of a dance class, arranged by his wife, to attend a karate class instead. He claimed that Greg “kept telling me that he didn’t want to do it,” but admitted “He’s my son, and he takes after me.” As for putting Greg into a karate class, he explained:

Well, I took karate for many years. I still like it. It teaches you discipline. It teaches you to work together with other people and pay attention to details....It teaches you that if you know you can take care of yourself that you don't need to prove it, you can walk away [from confrontation].

At other times, Mr. Lynch did not want to put too much emphasis on his background. When asked if he had other cultural heritages that he would like to pass on to Greg, he noted:

My father is an African American and also Native American. We don't really emphasize the heritage thing, beyond just knowing it; instead, we emphasize that all are human beings. You can't cross racial barriers or racial lines unless you believe that people are people. I mean, my wife and I got together because she's just a good looking woman; and I hope she thought I was a good looking man....I don't think anything in our married life has ever made us think that we're more or less than just people. I mean we argue over the same things most people argue over, we worry about the same things most people worry about, and we think about our children in the same way most people think about their children. There's no difference. We worry about money, we worry about what our kids are doing and where they're going, and we worry about what we're doing and where we're going. I think the years we've been together, we've just reaffirmed that people are people. People may choose to call themselves different things. But I think the key is, people are just people, after all's said and done.

### *Disagreement*

Whereas Mr. Lynch did not explicitly state that he wanted Greg to become a lawyer, he did stress that "they [his children] should all be logical, and they should make logical decisions." As a result, he said he was not into censoring TV viewing. On the other hand, Mrs. Lynch disagreed, not about the importance of making logical decisions in general, but with regards to TV watching.

We do have arguments here. If you look at certain HBO movies or Showtime movies there's a lot of nudity or a lot of cursing, especially for the young ones here. Some things you see in TV movies today, I don't think they should be looking. Fine...at her age [pointing to her oldest daughter, sitting nearby]. But the others? They're still impressionable. My husband feels that all this stuff is out there, they're going to learn about it anyway, but I say, why not postpone it? Wait for later on.

Mr. Lynch defended his approach:

I believe intellectual growth comes through information. That information exists in life, the key to life is to be able to distinguish between what's necessary and what's unnecessary, between what's important and what's not important. There are all kinds of contradictions in this society—contradictions between the rich and the poor, between those who speak one language and those who speak another, and between races. The best way [to learn how to make sense out of all this] is to be exposed to it.

After a little pause, he added:

I have faith, an abiding faith, that my kids will learn to make the correct choices, because, for example, I don't hear them cursing. One time my oldest daughter [from a previous marriage] said, "Yeah? You think I'm a saint, Daddy." I said, "Yeah." And she said, "Yeah, I smoked and I hung out." I said, "Well, I never saw it." She said, "But I don't do it because I made choices." So now she's getting her Ph.D. I believe that they'll make good choices, they all do and it shows.... On the other hand, I think if we had been repressive and said, "You can't do this," then they'd have been out there looking for something. They're not looking because they already know about them. They're out trying to make choices and they can make choices. I have intimate faith in that.

Still, the issue of whether letting children watch certain TV programs seemed unresolved. In Mrs. Lynch's words, "that's where he and I differs and constantly battles." In fact, she considered it as "the biggest issue in this household."

## Discussion

For this article I have used an ethnographic dataset on one mixed heritage family in one urban middle school, to examine the family's values and needs concerning their child's schooling. My purpose has been to listen to direct accounts from the family in its own narrative and to explore issues relating to educating mixed heritage children.

The data from this article revealed that there was a tension resulting from requesting extra school work. Mrs. Lynch emphasized the importance of city-wide tests and consequently wanted the school to give extra work to Greg to better prepare him for these tests. However, after her request, she was unable to follow through, as (a) Greg did not want to any extra work (although he seemed to be quite responsible in doing his regularly assigned work), (b) the school placed less emphasis on citywide tests and wanted the request for extra

homework to come from Greg (and not from his parents), and (c) Mrs. Lynch's own busy schedule prevented her from following up with Greg's advisor and other teachers.

Multiple sources of data suggest that Greg did not experience any uneasiness at school: He liked various classes and the extracurricular activities, and he was well-accepted by teachers and students alike. The family was pleased with the school's effort to build "a tight-knit community." In fact, that was one of the main reasons that the family enrolled Greg's younger sister there the following school year. Yet, this did not prevent the family's concern over academics from arising, particularly in light of Greg's citywide test scores at the end of the school year. There appeared to be a perceived tension between school community and academics, as Mrs. Lynch explained, "Academics should be in the forefront" and not be "sidetracked" by other activities at school, such as building "a feel-good environment" (Mrs. Lynch) or playing basketball after school (Mr. Lynch).

Whereas it can be argued that some of the family's concerns may be attributed to parental styles in general, other available data suggest the influence of mixed heritage parenting in the family's press for extra school work (e.g., the history of segregation and the experience of emigrating from another country shaped the way "we look at and approach education," and "The only way minorities are going to make it in this country is to be educated.") and in the family's emphasis on collective cultural heritages (e.g., "If you deny one heritage, then you're denying your own heritage."). Consistent with theoretical claims (e.g., Xie & Goyette, 1997) and relevant empirical studies (e.g., Kerwin, et al., 1993), the data further revealed the influence of mixed heritage parenting in other important areas, as well. For example, Mr. Lynch's reaction to the "Cops and Kids" program vividly illustrated how his view was shaped by his experience with racism, something that was understandable to, yet not shared by, his wife. He strongly opposed Greg's participation in the program on the ground that police historically discriminated against African American teenagers. His sheer sense of urgency about protecting his teenage son from potential racism was quite telling, since in this situation (e.g., encountering a police officer in the street), what might matter more was Greg's physical appearance—and he looked more Chinese than African American.

The view that Greg, as an African American teenage boy, needed to know how to protect himself was also manifested in other ways, physically and mentally. Mr. Lynch wanted Greg to take karate so that he could defend himself when needed. He wanted Greg exposed to different views (e.g., different TV programs), so that he could make informed and logical choices in the face of "all kinds of contradictions in this society."

On the other hand, perhaps due to Mrs. Lynch's status as a voluntary minority (Ogbu & Simons, 1998), her sense of racial consciousness differed somewhat from that of husband. She was more concerned about how to fit in here in this country and how to get a better education for Greg. In particular, she was aware of the importance of the citywide tests in getting Greg into a top high school. Although Greg had attended Parkway for only three months in sixth grade, she exhibited a sense of urgency and wanted to find out what she could do, as a parent, to help him prepare for the tests. Nevertheless, this urgency did not prevent her own racial consciousness from emerging, expressed in her desire to see a more diverse student body at Parkway (i.e., more Asians and Caucasians) and more Asian parents involved in its PTA meetings.

Whereas the study of Kerwin, et al. (1993) observed that black parents tended to be more conscious of discrimination and more likely to see a need to actively prepare their children to deal with racial prejudice than their white spouses based on their personal experiences with racism, the present study takes this observation one step further, suggesting that black parents as an involuntary minority exhibit this tendency more than spouses who belong to a voluntary minority (e.g., Chinese).

Based on their literature review on children of black and white parentage, Morrison and Rodgers (1996) noted that these parents may view their children's identity in one of the following ways: (a) they identify their children as Black as they believe that their children will be viewed as Black by society; (b) they adopt the human approach, viewing their children not as Black or White but as members of the human race in society; (c) they are undecided about their children's identification; or (d) they want their children to accept both cultural backgrounds.

The data from this study raise questions about such a fixed categorization. Instead, they imply that a mixed heritage family may adopt multiple views at the same time. This is particularly evident in the case of Mr. Lynch, who held ardently to three of the above approaches: He clearly projected Greg as a black teenage boy in his reaction to the "Cops and Kids" program; he insisted that his children "be aware of both sides of their family and be proud of it;" he emphasized their "being human beings" because "you can't cross racial barriers or racial lines unless you believe that people are people."

## Conclusion

What can be made of these findings? First, both the child and the family seemed to be functioning quite well in a setting that emphasized building an inclusive school community, with a relatively large group of students from



mixed heritage families. Still, the family found it a challenge to raise mixed heritage children: They experienced several sources of tensions from the school (e.g., from the Lynches' desire for extra school work and concern for more emphasis on academics), from the extended family (e.g., Mrs. Lynch's parents did not acknowledge her husband for more than a decade), and from within the family (e.g., from Greg's resistance to requesting extra work and the parents' disagreement over what the children should or should not view on TV). These findings suggest the importance of paying close attention to the specific concerns of mixed heritage families.

Specifically, the finding that parents may hold multiple views about their son's identity suggests that their views may be more fluid and influenced by situational complexities. For example, it appeared that Mr. Lynch's views were shaped by several perspectives: how Mr. Lynch felt that society (e.g., police) would perceive Greg (i.e., a black teenager); what he thought it important for Greg to have (i.e., a sense of collective heritages); and how ultimately he would like to see Greg to view himself (i.e., a human being).

Thus, the qualitative data from this study lends empirical support to the argument that ethnic and racial identification may be situation dependent (Nagel, 1994) and particularly fluid among multiracial persons (Johnson, et al., 1997). In fact, this helps to explain one converging, yet seemingly puzzling, finding from two recent surveys: one survey of 638 students at a diverse high school (Lopez, 2003b) and another survey of 69 multiracial women (Johnson, et al., 1997) both showed that respondents' racial identification varies considerably, depending on question formats and response options provided.

This fluid notion about mixed heritage children—along with several sources of tensions from the school, the child, the extended family, and coupled with interracial differences within the family due to each partner's previous experiences with racism—suggests the importance of learning the perceptions and concerns of interracial families (Schwartz, 1998) and of understanding the complexities of reaching out to these families. These findings imply that when working with mixed heritage children and their families, a school needs to pay close attention to *multiple worldviews*, not just *one alternative worldview* that is different from its own. It no longer seems adequate for schools to assume that there is a single and fixed voice within these families, or even from the same parent, about the perceived educational needs of their children. Instead, there is a need to find ways to involve both parents of mixed heritage children, to invite them to voice their shared concerns and priorities, as well as their different viewpoints derived from their respective backgrounds. Specifically, it would be important for the school to provide an atmosphere where it is normal to have different views about what is expected from their children or on

how to better educate them. The school needs to be sensitive and responsive to parental differences, particularly in terms of how to address the educational needs of their children (e.g., with appropriate programs, when to assign individualized homework assignments, etc.). In addition, it would be beneficial to keep close contact with these parents in particular, on an ongoing basis, as their views about their mixed heritage children may be fluid, dynamic, and situation dependent.

As to implications for further research, it would be beneficial to continue the line of research started here, in order to better understand what is entailed in reaching out to mixed heritage children and their families. How might factors such as class, gender, developmental stage, exceptionality (e.g., gifted students and students with learning disabilities), and different kinds of mixed racial-ethnic ancestry work to mediate or moderate families' worldviews regarding the educational needs of their mixed heritage children? Qualitative studies based on observations of school-family interactions combined with multiple perspectives from students, families, and teachers over time would be especially useful in deepening our understanding in this area. Future studies of the nature and kinds of school outreach effort that address various concerns and specific needs of mixed heritage families would undoubtedly be of benefit to this growing population, in particular, and to the multicultural well-being of our society, in general.

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