Breaking the Silence:
White Students' Perspectives on Race in Multiracial Schools

Many white students feel uncomfortable talking about "racial" topics, Ms. Lewis-Charp reports. She shares the findings and implications of a study of how students in multiracial schools relate to one another across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines.

BY HEATHER LEWIS-CHARP

SITTING IN A SMALL discussion group after seeing a film on race, Danielle Channing (a pseudonym to protect the identity of the student) is silent. A white, middle-class freshman at a multiracial high school in California, Danielle is unable to find the language to talk about her own experience or to draw connections to the content of the film. Later she reflects, "The movie was really heavy, and when we came out we were all a lot more aware of the others' ethnic backgrounds. And it made us even more scared — it made me feel like I should hide with my four white girls." When asked why she didn't voice her reactions to the film, she simply said, "I was afraid that I would sound racist."

Our research on intergroup relations indicates that, like Danielle, the vast majority of students feel that any type of prejudice, intolerance, or racism is wrong. Broad principles of fairness and egalitarianism espoused

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by schools, the media, and government have contributed to students' perceptions that they are all the same, regardless of skin color. Unfortunately, this generic belief in our fundamental "sameness" does not appear to help a young woman like Danielle relate to or empathize with authentic cultural, language, and class dif-ferences or to understand why and how she is privileged relative to many other students in her school.

This observation stems from a comprehensive study of the class of 2000 at six racially diverse California high schools over a 3½-year pe-

riod. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, our study explored how students relate to one another across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences and what roles their schools, families, and peers play in helping them cope with those differences. Specifically, we were interested in their understanding of racial issues, their perceptions of their own race, and their attitudes about others.

In the first two years of our study, we interviewed 72 students from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds about their schools, families, and peers. There were 16 white youths in our preliminary sample of 72, and we interviewed each of them up to three times within the first year and a half of our study. Further, we conducted four monoracial student focus groups within each school, 24 in all. Approximately 40 white youths participated in our focus groups. Finally, we surveyed the entire class of 2000 at each school about intergroup relations during both their freshman and sophomore years.[1]

Over the course of our research we spoke with many white students who, like Danielle, had faded into the background of their schools' dialogue on race. These students did not perceive intergroup relations or race issues to be about *them*. It could be easy to mistake their silence as apathy or indifference, but this was far from the case. To the contrary, our white-student focus groups were passionate and explosive. In these settings and in individual interviews, white students communicated complex feelings about race and racial issues, including pride, ignorance, anger, shame, ambivalence, and alienation. They raised questions about the role of schools in addressing white stu-

dents' attitudes about race, as well as the consequences of ignoring them.

INCONSISTENCIES IN WHITE STUDENTS' ATTITUDES ON RACE

In her study on white identity in high school, Pamela Perry likened the racial attitudes of white students at

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the multiracial high school she studied to a tumultuous stream marked by contradiction and instability. She argued that white identities are "unstable, mutable, and variable by context."[2] Our findings are consistent with Perry's, as the students we interviewed appeared torn between idealized visions of diversity, race, and ethnicity and the day-to-day stresses of negotiating difference.

Our findings on white students' sense of "racial comfort" provide a direct example of the contradictory nature of white students' attitudes about diversity. In our survey, we asked students to indicate on a scale of comfort levels how comfortable they would feel visiting someone of another race at his or her home or working for someone of another racial group. Across our six schools, white youths reported feeling "somewhat comfortable" to "very comfortable" on every survey measure of ra-

cial comfort. This directly contradicted our observation and interview data, which consistently revealed anxiety among white students about interacting with peers and teachers who were not white.

For instance, our interviews revealed that many white students were uncomfortable talking to students of color about any topic perceived to be "racial." Their perception of what qualified as "racial" was quite broad — extending to topics such as hair, skin, music, history, and politics. In one white student's words, "You have to be careful of what you say and what you do because you never know how people from other races might take it." Students' fears of talking about race and culture were based, in part, on unfamiliarity with racial terms or language but also on a more generalized fear that they might unwittingly say something racist. Another white student said, "If I'm around people of a different race I try to be careful of what I say to make sure that they're not going to get offended by it. I don't want anyone to hate me for what I'm saying when I don't mean it." This fear of talking about race belies the high level of racial comfort white students reported in our student survey.

The discrepancies between our survey results and interview findings are not surprising, as such inconsistencies have been found in similar research on the racial attitudes of white adults. Many researchers have argued that on attitudinal surveys whites exaggerate positive feelings about interacting with other racial groups.[3] Eleanor Brown, who has written extensively about white attitudes, argues, "White Americans are not only less egalitarian than they appear, but are also less egalitarian than they per-

ceive themselves to be."[4] Although not surprising, our findings point to a key characteristic of white students' attitudes about other racial groups: an apparent gap between white students' vision of themselves and their actual comfort with interracial communication.

One source of this gap is the lack of knowledge that white students have about other racial groups. White students reported that they faced ridicule or derision from peers if they displayed ignorance of basic facts about their peers' cultural or racial experience. For instance, one white student said, "I think most black people have made it really evident that you don't say anything slightly racial. When I said once that I didn't know black people get sunburned, I just didn't know. I got totally jumped on."

On the one hand, it is unrealistic to expect white students to know that which they have never been taught. The curriculum in schools often does not do an adequate job of teaching cultural competency, and this leaves many young people ill-equipped to negotiate cultural, racial, or linguistic differences. On the other hand, the animosity communicated by students of color is equally understandable, as they have to explain themselves to their white peers while they themselves are immersed in white culture, expectations, and values through the media and the formal curriculum of the school. Further, one can assume that, while white students encounter information about other groups quite frequently, they may ignore or marginalize it as not being relevant to them or their future.

Such differences in knowledge and experience can make discussions of discrimination, racism, and equal opportunity particularly contentious. Our interviews reflected studies of national trends within the adult population, which reveal that whites and blacks have starkly different visions of the opportunity structure within the United States.[5] In our study, many students of color, particularly those of African American descent, identified specific experiences of discrimination and racism they have faced in their classrooms, school activities, and other public settings, such as retail stores. Others spoke more generally of lowered teacher expectations. One young African American student said succinctly, "Some people that I encounter, it doesn't matter what I do. I could become President, and they would still see me as 'Oh, she ain't going to do nothing.'" We also found that, while students of color may have participated in discussions of race with their families and friends or in their community, white students generally had little, if any, exposure to similar dialogues. Thus we found the basic literacy or adeptness of white students in the skills, attitudes, and behaviors that characterize "cultural competency" to be inferior to that of students of color.

Some of the schools we studied tried to address issues of discrimination and privilege overtly through multicultural classes or workshops, but they were not adequately prepared to deal with the different levels of experience that students of color and whites brought to the table. White students like Danielle, whose story began this article, were often taken aback by the depth of experience and emotion shared by students of color in such forums. Reactions among the white students — and some students of color — to such encounters included withdrawal, anger, resentment, and skepticism. Students exposed to such issues for the first time experience what Kevin Kumashiro describes as a "crisis" distinguished by various forms of resistance and denial.[6] He and other researchers, including Beverly Daniel Tatum, argue that efforts to address discrimination and privilege must create spaces for students to work through such crises. Thus, while overt conversations about race and racism are crucial to raising consciousness around these issues, schools must be very thoughtful about how they engage students, for unresolved feelings of exclusion or alienation can exacerbate racial prejudices rather than heal them.

'SPECIAL RIGHTS' AND THE SEARCH FOR CULTURAL PARITY

White students had mixed opinions about how schools should address racial issues. Across our six schools, white students consistently ranked their schools' efforts to address diversity as less effective and less important than did their peers of color in the same school. This difference was particularly prominent when students were asked about what steps their schools could take to improve intergroup relations. For instance, most white students indicated that hiring more teachers from diverse racial backgrounds or teaching about the backgrounds of various minority groups would be "not at all helpful" to "somewhat helpful" in improving racial and ethnic relations at their school. Meanwhile, students of color indicated that the same efforts would be "somewhat helpful" to "very helpful." At the same time, however, whites felt almost as strongly as students of color about enforcing rules against the use of racial slurs. Thus, while white students believed that their school should prohibit racist language and racist acts, they generally did not support their schools' efforts to embrace cultural diversity and bridge cultural differences.[7]

The ambivalence of white students about their schools' efforts to embrace diversity was generally based on a sense that multicultural events or activities were not inclusive of whites. Similarly, white students' conversations about their schools' attempts to provide safe spaces for students of various ethnic, racial, and cultural groups often focused on their perception that their schools were not explicitly creating such spaces for white students within the school. For instance, when we began our study in 1996, none of the six schools had a "European American" club. The potential for such a club and the schools' rationale for not allowing one were raised independently by white students in focus groups and individual interviews. Students assumed that the school administration would not allow a white club because it would be, by virtue of its "whiteness," intrinsically racist.[8] Although many white students saw existing clubs, such as the Latin, French, and German clubs, as sufficient forums for them to express and explore their identities as European Americans, many others did not. The desire for a "white club" became a rallying cry for white students who believed they were victims of "reverse discrimination." In one student's words, "You see all the different cultures have clubs, but there's not a white club, and there never will be because it's like whites being Nazis and stuff like that, and I think it's hypocritical. It's culturally a double standard."

Coupled with this outrage, however, was an underlying ambivalence among white students about the prospect of a European American club. On the one hand, white students wanted what students of color had, and they felt personally offended by what they perceived as the implicit association of "whiteness" with "racism."

On the other hand, white students seemed to want the club *only* because other racial groups had clubs. When students were asked if they would attend a European American club at their school, they would often grimace and say, "Not me." We were intrigued when, in the third year of our study, one of our high schools did, finally, sponsor the creation of a European American club. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the ambivalence communicated by so many of the white students, the club initially attracted a very small group of students and ultimately failed because of a lack of members.

The sense of exclusion expressed in the rallying cry for a white club was a recurring theme over the course of our study. For example, some white students had a perception that school administrators would allow black students to wear "black power" T-shirts within the school, while "white power" T-shirts would be prohibited.[9] White students raised this issue not because they had several "white power" T-shirts at home that they wanted to wear to school, but because it was an easy way to illustrate the types of racial expression that were off-limits to them. We believe that white students were struggling with the implicit invisibility of whiteness and the social taboo against drawing too much attention to it. In a school environment that, at least superficially, encouraged students of all backgrounds to express themselves culturally, white students were aware that they were not allowed to overtly celebrate or take pride in their identity.

The rise and fall of the European American club and the urban myth of the "white power" T-shirt make perfect sense within the context of research on "whiteness" and white identity. "Whiteness," or a common

European origin, is generally not a highly salient category in the United States. As has been articulated by many researchers, most whites in the United States see themselves as *raceless*, preferring to identify as "Americans" or as "individuals."[10] However, white students within highly diverse and multiracial schools have a heightened and more complex understanding of racial issues.[11] This understanding causes students sometimes to view whiteness as "raceless" and "normal" and at other times to see whiteness as a distinct racial category to which they are assigned membership. The awareness of race becomes particularly salient for these students when topics of perceived exclusion — for example, affirmative action or racial clubs — are raised. It was a sense of exclusion rather than a sense of common destiny or shared interest that galvanized students to form the European American club. This feeling of exclusion, however, was not enough to sustain the club.

GRAPPLING WITH HISTORY

America's racial history emerged as a major focal point of our interviews with white students. These discussions dwelt mostly on students' desire to deny the significance of this history for their own lives and the lives of students of color. White students framed their discussions of history defensively, emphasizing that they had no control over or responsibility for things that happened before they were born. For instance, one white student argued that "if we didn't have history, then we wouldn't have the history problems. You wouldn't have anything to bring back, like a black person couldn't say, 'You put my people into slavery.'"

Several researchers have identified this forward-focused and ahistorical

perspective as characteristic of white Americans.[12] It is an anti-sociological perspective that emphasizes the individual over society and is linked to the idea of individual, rather than collective, responsibility. Among the white students whom we interviewed, such ahistorical perspectives were often accompanied by a tendency to dismiss the experiences of other groups and, in some cases, blame people of color for their own social position.

As researchers of high school intergroup relations, we were intrigued by the role that history and social studies classes and curriculum play in solidifying or challenging students' attitudes about race. The history or social studies classroom is one of the primary settings within schools where students have the opportunity to learn about the cultural and social practices, perspectives, and contributions of students who are different from them. This is why critical educational theorists have often focused on history and social studies classrooms as potential forums within which students can actively critique social inequities, gain awareness of political issues, and engage in civic participation and service.[13] Unfortunately, the white students in our study generally did not have these types of experiences in their classes.

Although history and social studies teachers cannot be held fully accountable for white students' response to the content of their classes, we discovered some aspects of the way that the curriculum was presented that may have contributed to students' attitudes. For instance, we heard from students of all racial backgrounds that they were not receiving a broad-based vision of the contributions of various ethnic, racial, and cultural groups to our nation's history. Similarly, students were generally not exposed to a complex examination of movements for social change from which they could develop a clear picture of how, throughout history, individuals of all

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races, ethnicities, cultures, and genders have come together across their differences to effect change. In contrast, our interviews revealed that students' discussions of race and diversity tended to focus on a very narrow set of topics, including slavery, the oppression of the American Indians, the Holocaust, and the civil rights movement. Within each of these topics, students had limited opportunities to engage in activities that encouraged them to look at historical events from the vantage point of different individuals or groups.

Problems arose when white students relied on the mainstream history curriculum for most of their knowledge about other racial and ethnic groups. In these cases, white students often viewed history as disconnected from present-day realities and people of color as "victims." These perceptions, in turn, led to attitudes that students of color were mired in history and that they couldn't get over the injustices suffered by their ancestors. For instance, one white student argued that students of col-

or "want to still be the victim, they still want to say, 'Oh, you shouldn't do this to me, you're racist toward me.' I think they need to drop it."

Thus it seems that the mainstream history curriculum isn't succeeding at making the link between historical events and present-day social inequities, or at giving students a sense of their own ability to change social conditions. Similarly absent is a sense of empathy with and responsibility for others. One must consider that white students are exposed to these ideas but they resist them because of the uncomfortable implications of skin color and class privilege. Such an awareness challenges students' belief in the traditional American principles of individualism and meritocracy, bringing the inherent contradictions between these ideals and equally valued principles of equality and fairness to the forefront.

The news, however, is not all grim. One of our schools used the Facing History and Ourselves curriculum, which appeared to be successful at encouraging students to probe deeper into history without leading to intergroup tensions or animosity. Key to this curriculum is the effort to connect a deep understanding of history with contemporary political and social questions that challenge us. This link is critical to developing young people's perception of themselves as actors in, rather than consumers of, history. It is on this positive note that we now turn to the implications of our findings for educators.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Our research indicates that attendance at a racially diverse school does not, in and of itself, guarantee that white students will develop positive

relationships with or attitudes about students of color. However, compared to white students in more homogeneous settings, those who attend a diverse school appear to gain an increased level of awareness about race and racial identity.[14] Unfortunately, we found that, across the multiracial and multiethnic schools we studied, white students had few positive forums to explore or redefine their racial identities. Thus their burgeoning racial identity often left them feeling confused and sometimes angry with others for "seeing" them strictly in racial terms. Further, a multicultural curriculum is generally peripheral to the Eurocentric core curriculum. The message communicated to students of all racial backgrounds continues to be that experiences of people of color are "peripheral" and that "whiteness" is central, immutable, and "normal."

The challenge for educators, as our schools become increasingly diverse, is to increase and enrich opportunities for students to see one another and one another's histories and cultures as part of the same collective story. It is also important to engage white students as allies against racism and to encourage them to become authentically invested in the creation of a more equitable society.

Our interviews highlight three overarching implications for educators. First, white students and students of color need safe spaces within the school where they can engage in dialogue on racial issues. Second, principals and teachers should look for strategies to integrate a multicultural curriculum into the core curriculum, so that students do not see it as peripheral or irrelevant. Finally, teachers may need additional support and training to understand and respond to white students' attitudes toward race and the conflicts that arise between students of different racial and ethnic groups.

Provide safe spaces for dialogues on race. Our research shows that poorly facilitated or designed dialogues

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on race can harden students' prejudices rather than break them down. Thus it is imperative that educators be intentional and thoughtful about supporting young people's readiness to engage in such dialogue. One way to do this would be to provide students with opportunities to participate in dialogues on race and racism with students from their own racial group, before bringing them into a larger and more diverse group. The ability to explore biases openly and without threat of condemnation is key to both supporting self-reflection and encouraging students to empathize with their peers' experiences. In the relative safety of this environment, white youths can be exposed to potentially volatile issues such as white privilege and what it means to be prejudiced.

After having the opportunity to develop a shared vocabulary, young people from different racial and ethnic groups should be brought together for structured and well-facilitated interracial dialogues on race, framed by clear guidelines for interaction. For instance, students can be paired, with one student sitting silently and listening to the other student for a structured period of time. Providing an opportunity to speak and listen uninterrupted is one way to ensure that students really hear what others are saying. Diaries and journals can also serve as stepping stones toward engaging in cross-racial dialogue about race. Most important, such group dialogues must include adequate opportunities for preparation and debriefing to make sure that all youths feel comfortable with the process.

Integrate multicultural content into the core curricula. Our findings illustrate that students of color aren't the only ones who suffer when multicultural content is marginalized. In addition to providing a point of connection and identification for students of color, the integration of multicultural content into the core curriculum can help white students to develop the skills necessary to interact with diverse peers and colleagues. In particular, it will expand white students' knowledge and understanding of people of color in the United States and lead to an enriched sense of cultural competency and a reduced fear of interracial contact.

Successful models, such as Facing History and Ourselves, indicate that schools can play an important role in helping white students step outside their own perspective. This process is the foundation from which they can begin to understand, empathize with, and validate the historical and contemporary experiences of discrimination faced by people of color. One way to engage students more actively in issues of race is to have them research the racial history of their own communities. Asking students to review local newspapers and legislation can help them build a more critical understanding of how present-day

racial inequalities are linked to and rooted in historical events and ideology. Having students write biographies of family members, community members, or one another can also help them to develop an understanding of the experience of growing up as a member of a different racial group.

Further, making the views and experiences of antiracist whites part of the curriculum, either through studying historical accounts or by inviting guest speakers, can help end the dichotomous "us versus them" character of much of the dialogue on race. Providing young people with white antiracist role models can also help persuade students of all backgrounds that whites have the potential to be powerful allies to people of color. Finally, engaging students in such hands-on activities as interviewing, writing letters to decision makers, creating murals, keeping journals on the prevalence of racial stereotypes, giving presentations to community groups, and service learning and volunteering can be a particularly powerful way to get youths actively involved in fighting racism. However, it is crucial that after engaging in these activities young people are encouraged to reflect analytically with others so that they don't limit their perspectives to their own experiences.

Provide additional training and support for teachers. Teachers and administrators should have ongoing opportunities to participate in professional development activities that enhance their understanding of racial issues and of the needs of students who engage in dialogues on race. Addressing issues raised by students in the context of classroom discussions, especially when they are contentious, is very difficult. This is true for white teachers, who, like many of their white students, may have limited experience talking explicitly about race. It is also true, however, for teachers of color, who are often disproportionately responsible for teaching a diversity-based curriculum. These teachers could benefit from exposure to techniques for responding to the attitudes and perspectives communicated by white students in a way that will challenge their thinking without alienating them from the dialogue.

Similarly, teachers responsible for core courses would benefit from ongoing training on how to further integrate diversity and antiracist topics into their classroom curricula. White teachers need to model risk-taking by admitting that they don't have the solutions to race problems, but they also need to fulfill their social responsibility to support young people as they learn to thoughtfully consider these difficult issues.

Multiracial schools face enormous challenges in addressing the wide array of needs that their students present. Schools occupy the difficult position of having to educate students and balance the needs of multiple constituencies, despite limited resources. Multicultural and antiracist education is often seen as an add-on to the curriculum, specifically geared toward students of color. Our data argue powerfully for the relevance of such education for *all* students. All students need to be able to relate to people of diverse backgrounds, see social issues from multiple perspectives, and reach common ground with those who hold different viewpoints. All students benefit from an honest view of U.S. history that makes meaningful connections to current issues facing young people. Such skills are fundamental to citizenship in our multicultural democracy, and they deserve a central place in the curriculum of our public schools.

1. We administered these surveys in the fall of 1996 to 2,817 ninth-graders and again in the spring of 1998 to the same cohort as tenth-graders; 2,134 students participated in the second round of surveys. We continued to track 24 of our students through the spring of their senior year and produced in-depth case studies of these students, incorporating observational data and interviews with their parents, teachers, and peers.

2. Pamela Perry, *Shades of White: White Kids and Racial Identity in High School* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), p. 4.

3. See Eleanor Brown, "The Tower of Babel," in Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds., *Critical White Studies: Looking Beyond the Mirror* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), pp. 112-15.

4. Ibid, p. 113.

5. William Frey, Bill Abresch, and Jonathan Yeasting, *America by the Numbers: A Field Guide to the U.S. Population* (New York: New Press, 2001), p. 36.

6. Kevin Kumashiro, "Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education," *Review of Educational Research,* Spring 2000, p. 44.

7. This is consistent with studies of the opinions of the general white population. According to Gerald David Jaynes and Robin M. Williams, Jr., eds., *A Common Destiny: Blacks and American Society* (Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1989), since the 1960s whites have expressed dramatically increased support for the use of law to prohibit racial discrimination. However, they found that whites were much less likely to support policies aimed at implementing principles of racial equality.

8. The principal at one high school did, in fact, refuse to allow a European American club on campus because he perceived that it might lead to increased racial tension. White students at two of our other high schools claimed that administrators at their schools had done the same.

9. As far as we can tell, this was not the case. We interviewed black students who had been told by school administrators to remove T-shirts promoting "black power."

10. See Pamela Perry, "White Means Never Having to Say You're Ethnic: White Youth and the Construction of Cultureless Identities," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography,* vol. 30, 2001, pp. 56-91.

11. Ibid.

12. See Perry, *Shades of White;* and Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

13. See Michael Apple, *Education and Power* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Henry Giroux, "Rewriting the Discourse of Racial Identity: Towards a Pedagogy and Politics of Whiteness," *Harvard Educational Review*, vol. 67, 1997, pp. 285-320; and Kumashiro, op. cit.

14. Perry, *Shades of White.* K