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Black Students' Perceptions of School Ethnic-Racial Socialization Practices in a Predominantly Black School

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Abstract

Ethnic-racial socialization describes messages and practices that teach youth about their racial and/or ethnic group membership and the role of race in society. Despite a wealth of research on families, little work has considered school socialization practices. The current article uses a framework of school racial socialization to explore six socialization messages reported in a predominantly Black public charter school in an urban area. In focus group and individual interviews, 21 African American students (71% female) discussed what they learned about race and culture at school. Responses revealed a high frequency of cultural socialization and promotion of cultural competence messages, but the content was limited to certain key figures and events. The findings illustrate the complexity of youths' perceptions of socialization and the need for multicultural education in schools.

Keywords

ethnic-racial socialization, cultural socialization, Black students, adolescents, multicultural education, critical consciousness socialization

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Ecological models of development acknowledge that a variety of sources help to socialize children and adolescents into the values and beliefs of their communities (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Coll et al., 1996). While parents are considered to be primary sources, community members, teachers, and peers also play a role (Aldana & Byrd, 2015; Hughes et al., 2011; Lesane-Brown, 2006). The goal of the current article is to use mixed methods to explore the ethnic-racial socialization messages Black youth received in their predominantly Black high school.

Ethnic-racial socialization describes "behaviors, practices, and social regularities that communicate information and worldviews about race and ethnicity to children" (Hughes et al., 2017, p. 255). Socialization messages at school are an understudied area, as the majority of existing research has remained focused on the family context. For example, a 2013 review (Priest et al., 2013) found that 93% of articles considered socialization messages from parents. The remainder considered messages from other family members and community members, whereas only one article considered messages at school. It is important to consider the school context as a source of socialization because socialization occurs both through direct instruction and subtle norms and values (Banks, 2007; Bar-Tal, 1997; Priest et al., 2014). Research on intergroup contact and prejudice reduction (Paluck & Green, 2009; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), racial discrimination (Seaton et al., 2011), multicultural education (Bennett, 2001; Sleeter & Grant, 2011), and culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2004) have all provided evidence of the ways in which school practices around race and culture can shape youths' ethnic-racial identities, racial biases, cultural competence, and adjustment. The field of multicultural education has also provided theoretical perspectives on how schools can promote different racial ideologies through the curriculum. For example, Sleeter and Grant (2011) describe five approaches to educating about difference, from an approach that regards culturally different students as lacking the skills, values, and knowledge to succeed in mainstream classrooms to an approach that prepares youth to restructure society in order to eliminate inequities based on race, gender, social class, and other social identities.

In sum, existing research has attempted to understand the ways in which norms and values around race are related to student outcomes (see Aldana & Byrd, 2015, for a further review). What research has not done is attempt to understand school ethnic-racial socialization as a psychological process and from students' perspectives (Howard, 2001). A psychological approach to school ethnic-racial socialization considers how students understand their school environment as a result of their beliefs and previous experiences, with less focus on the intentions of the teacher or curriculum. Existing research

cannot accomplish this goal because it is often focused on researchers' or teachers' definitions of constructs such as cultural relevance and because the classrooms are often selected for their particular approach (Bennett, 2001; Howard, 2001). Research using preselected classrooms does not inform how ethnic-racial socialization practices are evident in the curriculum of typical teachers. The current study uses data collected with a phenomenological approach to help understand Black students' perceptions of ethnic-racial socialization messages in their everyday school experiences.

Theoretical Background

The current study explores perceptions within a comprehensive framework of students' perceptions of school racial climate (Byrd, 2015, 2017). The framework has 10 dimensions grouped into two domains: intergroup interactions and school racial-ethnic socialization. One dimension of intergroup interactions and five school racial-ethnic socialization domains guide the current study.

Intergroup Interactions

The domain of intergroup interactions focuses on the nature of interactions across racial and cultural groups within a school. This domain is primarily informed by Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory, which developed as a response to racial and ethnic segregation and discrimination in the first part of the 20th century. In his seminal work, Allport theorized about how prejudice could be overcome and specified four conditions for situations that would promote reduced prejudice: (a) opportunities for cross-race contact, (b) equal status within the situation, (c) the opportunity to work toward common goals, and (d) support from authorities. In education, intergroup contact theory has been used to develop interventions aimed at reducing student prejudice (Dessel, 2010; Wittig & Molina, 2000). Allport's (1954) conditions have also been adapted to the study of school racial climate directly (Chavous, 2005; Green et al., 1988) and incorporated into other frameworks of racial climate (e.g., Hurtado et al., 1998). The current study focuses on the authority support condition of Allport's theory and expands it into the notion of *support for positive interaction*: the peer and teacher norms that govern intergroup interactions, that is, whether such interactions are encouraged or frowned upon.

School Racial-Ethnic Socialization

The remainder of the analysis focuses on the second domain, school racial-ethnic socialization, which describes explicit and implicit ways schools teach

about race and culture. Schools have a predetermined curriculum and can convey complicit messages, but a "hidden curriculum" is also conveyed through norms, structures, and policies, for example, through less critical forms of multicultural education or the absence of multicultural content altogether (Wills et al., 2004). Studies have investigated how school structures and policies enforce norms (e.g., Perry, 2001), but few studies have attempted to quantify students' perceptions of these norms as socialization. A major area of focus is culturally relevant education (CRE), which uses students' cultural backgrounds in learning to promote academic achievement and identity development (Aronson & Laughter, 2015; Howard, 2001; Young, 2010). Despite the wealth of research on CRE, little research has investigated youths' perceptions of these practices (Howard, 2001). A related area is Afrocentric education, which aims to socialize children into an African world view in opposition to the Eurocentric world view taught in mainstream schools (Asante, 1991). Afrocentric schools and programs focus on teaching African and African American history, displaying cultural symbols, and using African patterns of interaction such as call-and-response (e.g., Chow-Hoy, 2001; Clarkson & Johnstone, 2011).

The current framework's conceptualization extends most directly from research on parental racial-ethnic socialization, which examines the ways parents, especially minority parents, support their children's positive development in a world of bias and racial barriers (Hughes et al., 2006). When combined with research on multicultural education and colorblind ideology, Hughes and colleagues' dimensions provide a starting point for applying racial socialization to schools as dimensions of school racial climate (Aldana & Byrd, 2015). Five dimensions are the focus of the current study: promotion of cultural competence, cultural socialization, mainstream socialization, colorblind socialization, and critical consciousness socialization.

The first is *promotion of cultural competence*: learning about the histories and traditions of other groups. It can also be referred to as multiculturalism or support for diversity. The second is *cultural socialization*, that is, what youth learn about their own racial and cultural background. Aspects of culturally relevant teaching and Afrocentric education could be described as cultural socialization. The alternative to cultural socialization is *mainstream socialization*, which refers to learning about mainstream U.S. norms, values, and traditions. This dimension draws on the dimensions of egalitarianism or individualism in the parental literature (Hughes et al., 2006). Other areas of research have also considered how mainstream culture sometimes conflicts with the values of minority families (Arunkumar et al., 1999; Boykin et al., 2006; Rouland et al., 2014; Tyler et al., 2008). Fourth, *colorblind socialization* refers to messages that encourage youth to ignore the importance of race in society and their personal lives. Colorblind

ideologies are associated with higher racial prejudice and have been theorized to be harmful for the academic motivation and success of minority youth (Atwater, 2008; Schofield, 2006). However, little research has investigated students' perceptions of colorblind attitudes in others at school. Finally, as opposed to colorblind socialization, *critical consciousness socialization* teaches youth to recognize and address differences between racial groups in power and privilege. This dimension is referred to as "preparation for bias" in the parental racial socialization literature (Hughes et al., 2006). However, the term critical consciousness is used in this case to underscore the fact that youth can be prepared for privilege and to be the perpetrators of bias as well. Furthermore, all youth can be taught about structural forms of racism that exist beyond individual interactions.

Developmental Considerations

Although research has not specifically examined developmental variation in understanding school racial socialization, based on existing frameworks (i.e., Brown & Bigler, 2005), we know that adolescents have sophisticated abilities to perceive racial discrimination in covert forms and are developing in their ability to detect more subtle and abstract forms as well (e.g., institutional racism). However, there is less work on adolescents' perceptions of and ability to think about race and culture outside of discrimination. Most developmental theories assume that adolescents have an "adult-like" understanding of race by the age of 10 to 12 years (Byrd, 2012, p. 6). However, adolescents are different from adults because they tend to have less experience with individuals from different communities and may have not yet experienced challenges to their worldviews and identities. Therefore, we might expect that adolescents have the full capacity to reason in complex ways about race and culture but may not have had opportunities to do so.

The Current Study

As stated, the goal of the current study is to explore the ethnic-racial socialization practices as received by Black students in their predominantly Black school. There are several reasons why this is an important setting to consider. First, Black youth are the most commonly studied group in the ethnic-racial socialization literature (Aldana & Byrd, 2015; Hughes et al., 2006). Thus, their school experiences can be compared with what is already known about socialization at home. Second, given that the school is predominantly Black, it was expected that socialization messages would be salient to students and that some messages, such as cultural socialization and critical consciousness socialization, would be especially frequent compared with other settings.

There is a need to understand school racial socialization in typical schools, and a predominantly Black but not culturally-focused school provides both the opportunity to study an everyday setting and to potentially maximize the salience of socialization messages.

As such, through qualitative individual and focus group interviews, we investigate how Black high school students describe their experiences of ethnic-racial socialization in a school context where the student body is predominately Black while the teaching staff is predominately White. Based on previous research on parent ethnic-racial socialization (Huguley et al., 2019) and research on school racial climates (Byrd, 2015, 2016), we expected that students would describe socialization experiences that include cultural socialization, critical consciousness socialization, mainstream socialization, colorblind socialization, and promotion of cultural competence. We also anticipated that students may describe socialization practices in ways that are not yet conceptualized in the current literature. To build on the existing literature, we sought to examine the content of these received socialization messages and experiences, from the perspective and words of Black high school students. In addition, we examined the frequency with which students describe the varying socialization messages. Based on findings in the parent literature that suggest parents are most likely to communicate about cultural history and traditions and to encourage their children to interact positively (Hughes et al., 2016), we expected that students would most frequently report cultural socialization and promotion of cultural competence within the school environment. We also expected that students would describe a moderate amount of critical consciousness socialization. Research on multicultural education also finds that teachers feel most comfortable addressing these topics and are less likely to engage in topics around privilege and oppression (e.g., Aldana & Byrd, 2015, de Waal-Lucas, 2006), but teachers in a predominantly Black school may be more likely to give these messages compared with predominantly White schools.

Method

Setting

College Prep High (a pseudonym) is a public charter school located in a large, economically impoverished, predominantly Black city in the Midwest. According to state data, the school is 84% non-Hispanic Black or African American and 14% Hispanic. About 85% of the school's students were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The school serves about 800 students in Grades 7 through 12, but the middle (7–8) and high (9–12) school are located on different levels of the building and have their own vice principals.

Table 1. Interview Participant Demographics.

Pseudonym	Grade	Gender	GPA range	Focus group no.
Amber	10	Girl	3.0–4.0	6
Antonio[a]	10	Boy	2.0–3.0	8
Barry	10	Boy	1.0–2.0	4
Coco	10	Girl	2.0–3.0	7
Jamie	12	Girl	2.0–3.0	8
Jason[a]	11	Boy	Not reported	9
Jerome[a]	10	Boy	3.0–4.0	6
Jerry	10	Boy	1.0–2.0	4
Jessica	11	Girl	1.0–2.0	10
Jesse[a]	11	Girl	3.0–4.0	6
Little Dog	10	Girl	Not reported	5
Madison	11	Girl	3.0–4.0	1
Marie	10	Girl	2.0–3.0	1
Mocha	10	Girl	1.0–2.0	4, 7
Olivia	10	Girl	3.0–4.0	2
Rico	10	Boy	2.0–3.0	1
Sarah	12	Girl	3.0–4.0	3
Shae Rose	11	Girl	3.0–4.0	5
Shontae	11	Girl	3.0–4.0	2
Tee	11	Girl	2.0–3.0	8
Temperance	11	Girl	3.0–4.0	7

Note. GPA = grade point average.
[a]Did not participate in a follow-up interview.

Demographic information for staff indicated that 28% of teachers and 64% of administrators were African American, 59% of teachers and 27% of administrators were White, 4% of teachers and 0% of administrators were Hispanic/Latino.

Participants and Procedure

The sample was 21 students in Grades 10 to 12 (71% female). All except one student identified as Black or African American; the other student identified as multiracial (Black and White). Table 1 summarizes participants' gender, grade, and self-reported grade point average (GPA) range.

The first author visited each of the homerooms in the high school to tell students about the study and to invite them to sign up for more information. Students were told that we were looking for students to talk about "diversity

at their school" and that any student could participate. The research team then contacted interested students by phone. In addition, afternoon announcements were made informing students about the study and inviting them to obtain consent forms in the main office. Those who returned consent forms were scheduled for interviews.

Participants were first invited for a focus group interview. We began with focus group interviews to provide an opportunity for students to engage in a discussion of racial socialization as experienced in their school. The goal of the focus group was not to come to consensus, but to gather a variety of different points of view of common experiences, to more fully understand the topic at hand (Liamputtong, 2011). The focus group format also allowed opportunity for students who feel less comfortable in one-on-one conversation to discuss their experience and become familiar with the research team (Clark, 2009; Hoppe et al., 1995; Russell et al., 2009). This is particularly important for topics that may be difficult to discuss, such as race. Some individuals were the only participants in their scheduled focus group interview; if so, these participants were interviewed using the same focus group questions. After they participated in the focus group, a follow-up individual interview was scheduled for about 2 weeks later. In the individual interview, participants were asked whether there was anything they had thought about more or wanted to add from their focus group interview. Participants were then asked what it was like to be a Black student at their school, from their personal perspective. Participants received US$10 for each interview. Each participant selected their pseudonym for the study. Note that some students chose not to attend their follow-up interview, for unknown reasons. In total, we conducted 10 focus groups and 17 individual interviews.

The interviewers were all African American women: two were graduate students and one was a postdoctoral fellow. The focus group interviews were semi-structured and focused around two primary questions: (a) "What do you learn about race and culture at school?" and (b) "How do people of different races get along at school?" Probes encouraged students to give details about their perceptions and prompted for various classes and areas of interest (e.g., "What do you learn about race and culture in English class?," "Do teachers ever talk about discrimination?," "What do you learn about American culture?"). The focus groups lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. The follow-up interviews began by asking students about important points from their first interviews and if they had thought about anything more since then. The follow-up interviews also included questions about students' experiences as Black students in the school. These interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.[1]

Analysis

The research questions and analyses were guided by the school racial climate framework described above (Byrd, 2017), and we expected that students may describe their experiences in ways that do not align with existing theory, thus we took a deductive and inductive analytic approach. All focus group and individual interview data were combined, and we used thematic analysis to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, we became familiar with the data by reading the transcripts. Then, using Google Sheets, we coded any instances when participants described a lesson or activity that taught them about race, culture, or diversity and instances when participants mentioned explicit messages from other people at school about race into the six dimensions described in the introduction. We also coded whether the instance did not fit into the existing theoretical framework. Discrete instances were considered: one or more complete sentences that ended when participants changed topic or the interviewer asked an unrelated question. Responses could be coded into multiple dimensions. For example, Shontae's statement "Like in world history we talked about the Hispanic, African American, and American Indian" was coded as both promotion of cultural competence and cultural socialization because she learned about her own group and other groups. Next, we discussed our coding and refined the codebook. In our discussion, we recognized that, in addition to the six categories outlined in the school racial climate framework, students talked about the explicit absence of several categories. From this discussion, we included a code to capture notably missing ethnic-racial socialization. After we coded each interview, we reviewed the coding for consensus and discussed the patterns within the data that reflected coherent themes.

Results

A total of 165 responses were coded into one or more dimensions of the school racial climate framework. Figure 1 shows the number of responses in each dimension. All of the dimensions of the school racial climate framework were represented among participant responses: cultural socialization, promotion of cultural competence, critical consciousness, support for positive interaction, mainstream socialization, and colorblindness. In addition to the themes represented by the school climate framework, the students described what we refer to as *silence*, a noticeable lack of content about race from their teachers and school and *ambiguity*, where students acknowledge that they have heard messages about race while at school, but cannot describe what

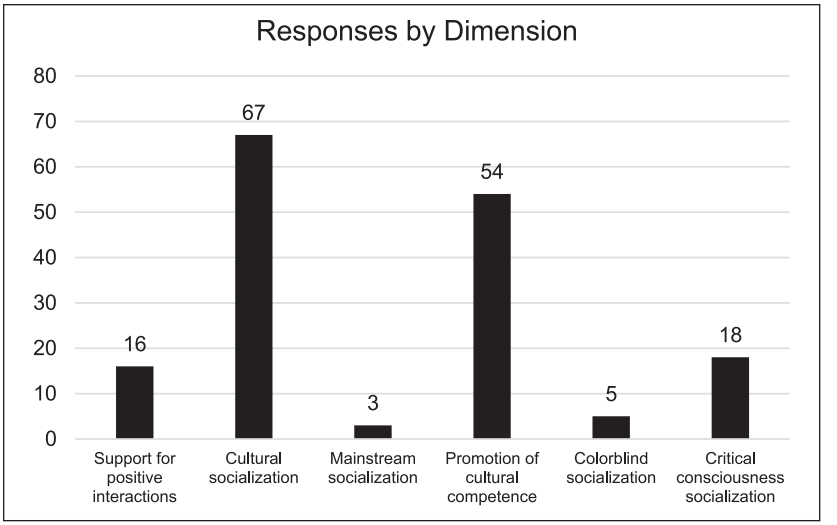

Figure 1. Number of responses in each dimension.

they are or recount a more specific example. Below, we describe what each of these themes meant for the students at College Prep High.

Cultural Socialization

The most common experiences referenced in the focus groups and individual interviews related to cultural socialization ($n = 67$). This code was mentioned in 10 focus groups and 6 individual interviews. Cultural socialization included learning about African American history or Black culture, learning about Africa, and encouragement to be proud of their race. Students primarily described cultural socialization in terms of learning about the history of slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow. In one focus group, Rico described as follows:

> Well, when we was—like our teachers teach us about African American history sometimes, and with the stories they'll tell us about how Blacks were segregated from everybody else when discrimination was going on and they use like examples and stuff.

In another focus group, Shontae told the interviewer, "Everything that I've learned about Blacks is just Black history, what happened in the past." Almost all of the cultural socialization activities related to the past, in particular

slavery or civil rights figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Frederick Douglass, and Rosa Parks. Many of these lessons occurred in history class, and during Black History Month. Shae Rose recounted a dance company that came to the school for Black History Month:

> I remember a dance company doing a dance representing when, for Black History Month, representing our president, Barack Obama. They actually did a dance to his speech.

Participants also described cultural socialization in English and government classes. In their English classes, students read *Gifted Hands*, the autobiography of neurosurgeon Ben Carson, and the autobiography of escaped slave Olaudah Equiano. In government class, a group recounted listening to a speech by President Obama.

In an individual interview, Madison described her experience learning about Olaudah Equiano. Madison described her English teacher as a White woman and expressed that her teacher's willingness to teach Equiano's story was meaningful to her. Madison said,

> Like, it kind of motivated me to read [the story] because I'm like, she's a Black—I mean a white person. She was interested in reading this story and letting us read it and telling us about it, and she knew a lot about it. So, that was good.

Madison was more motivated to engage with cultural socialization at the school, as she saw her White teacher as both knowledgeable and invested in a lesser known story of strength and resilience during chattel slavery in the United States.

The socialization that students described was also specifically about Black people in the United States. Only a few participants reported learning about African history or culture, and few mentioned learning about a particular ethnic group or nation in Africa. When asked about what she learned about Africa, Sarah described, "we just looked at different, um, states in Africa. Like on the map and what each tribe went through." The messages also did not include Black culture or what it meant to be Black. No participants could describe learning about Black culture in school. According to Olivia and Shontae, it was something they just "picked up" from people around them. Notably, only one participant, Sarah, described any teachers telling them to be proud of their culture. In response to the question, ". . . Do you have any teachers who say oh, you should be proud to be African American or something like that?" In contrast to her peers, Sarah (who was interviewed by herself) responded, "Every teacher says that."

Promotion of Cultural Competence

The second most common dimension was promotion of cultural competence ($n = 54$) or opportunities to learn about other cultures (mentioned in 10 focus groups and eight individual interviews). When asked what they talk about in world history class, Sarah replied, "Um, like different countries have different races and cultures." Nearly half of this category was devoted to learning about Latinx people, the second largest demographic in the school. Furthermore, fully half of the responses about Latinx people concerned Cinco de Mayo celebrations. Shae Rose offered one description in a focus group:

> Yeah, in our school we have a tradition where every year we devote either a day or a week, depending on you know, how everything is set up. [. . .] We ask every Mexican who is in our school—we actually get all of them. We get some shirts. We actually celebrate with them. We have them, we actually we learn fully about their culture and where they come from, and what they do and what they eat. Stuff like that.

Thus, many of students' opportunities to learn about another culture focused on just one group (Mexicans) and occurred outside of the normal classroom curriculum. Other mentions in this category included meeting Brazilian and Nigerian exchange students, celebrating St. Patrick's Day, and learning about Native Americans.

Promotion of cultural competence and cultural socialization was also linked for many students. For example, in a focus group, Shontae and Olivia talked about an Intolerance class that "taught about different cultural races," which covered Chinese culture and Black history, in the same course. In another focus group, Mocha described learning "how each race act different, talk different, and, um, they believe in different stuff."

Critical Consciousness

Next, there were 18 responses about critical consciousness socialization, all of which were about racial prejudice and discrimination. These responses spanned seven focus groups and three individual interviews. There were no mentions of learning about privilege, the structural and institutional manifestations of racism, or instruction in how to deal with discrimination. Students primarily reported learning about racial discrimination in the past, often through reading books about slavery or segregation. For example, in a focus group, Amber describes reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* in class:

> We were learning something in English about racism. It was about three black men being in a train, and two white women came on—and they weren't supposed to be on . . . They wanted to work to get money and they got caught and they framed this black guy for raping her, and he really didn't rape her. [. . .] I forget what it's called; I think it's the Tom Robinson case. [. . .] We did a whole book on it called *How to Kill a Mockingbird* [sic].

As the cultural socialization dimension, most of the responses were about the past rather than current-day discrimination or prejudice. When students did mention learning about current-day racism, their understandings were vague. For example, Sarah had some exposure to teaching present day racism but could not recall any details:

> I: So the teachers ever talked about like racism in society . . .
> Sarah: Yeah, they talked about, well one teacher, which is the world history teacher, talked about racism. [. . .] Um, like . . . some . . . like he said like racism is going on now in different countries. I'm not sure what country, what city. Racism is still going on now, some people are racist, [I] still don't even know.

Similarly, when asked whether racism is still a problem today, Tee responded, "Some I—some I hear about Canada, like in school I hear about it." Some students could describe racist events that had occurred to family members in other parts of the country, but in no cases did students describe content at school that attempted to reveal structural racism or even discuss the deep racial divides within their own metro area. However, two of the responses did concern class discussions where teachers attempted to draw attention to negative racial stereotypes that students held.

Shontae was the only participant with extensive coursework related to critical consciousness socialization. She took a course called Intolerance that she described as being "like world history" but more about racism. She described learning about Photoshopping pictures for magazines as well as "about Black people; about how we discriminate against ourselves." She also reported learning about the one-child policy in China and the Aztecs, although it was not clear from her description how these connected to intolerance.

Support for Positive Interaction

The next most common dimension, support for positive interaction, included messages encouraging students to interact positively across race ($n = 16$;

mentioned in seven focus groups and four individual interviews). For most of the responses, participants reported that teachers encouraged students to mix, often by doing icebreakers in class or having them sit with different groups in class. In a focus group, Shae Rose described as follows:

> We do an ice breaker, get to know everybody. We . . . what else, okay we do an ice breaker, we have groups . . . they'll put us in groups where we don't pick our own groups because they know that we're going to go for people that we're most comfortable with so they tend to make us go meet new people. We'll even have . . . of course every year we have this thing called Personal Orientation. Yeah, so they encourage [hanging out with different races] a lot.

Thus, most of the encouragement does not directly refer to race or culture, although participants interpreted it as encompassing cross-racial interaction. The participants also mentioned that peers would be supportive of cross-racial friendships.

Mainstream and Colorblind Socialization

There were very few mentions of mainstream socialization ($n = 3$) or colorblind socialization ($n = 5$). In the literature, mainstream socialization is messages about American culture and values, typically with an underlying assumption of whiteness as the norm (Perry, 2001; Tyler et al., 2008). Mainstream socialization messages were mentioned in two focus groups and one individual interview. Participants, however, generally did not describe messages relating to hard work, individualism, or competition, although two students described conversations about responsibility and life skills. Only one focus group was able to describe what they learned about American culture:

> I: What do you learn about American culture?
> Shontae: Well, like different countries have their own way of going. Like different countries, more like your culture.
> I: Okay.
> Olivia: I learned that, um . . . Americans have uh . . . freer—I guess you can say freer way of living than most people on different continents. Because if—because the USA is the land of opportunity. So . . . we have like . . . our own choices, basically. And uh . . . I learned a lot about the foods that we eat. How the foods are from different places but we make them our own. Like, spaghetti is from Italy.
> Shontae: But we make it our own.
> Olivia: Yeah, and we make it our own.

Shontae: Like chicken, soup . . .
Olivia: So basically we, basically we're free.
Shontae: Everybody shares the same opportunity.
I: Mmm hmm.
Olivia: We're united, like a team.
I: Right.
Olivia: [like a cheerleader] United!

In terms of colorblind socialization messages, only a few participants mentioned teachers telling students that they were colorblind or did not care about race. These mentions occurred in four focus groups and one individual interview. When asked about this topic, most of the participants had little to say. A few students said colorblindness was exhibited in teachers' behavior. In her focus group, Temperance told the interviewer, "They don't say it but it is exhibited through the way they teach"—that is, treating everyone fairly. In no cases did participants report teachers telling them to ignore race or that talking about race was in itself racist. While the teachers did not explicitly devalue the importance of race through direct messages, some students did feel that there was an unspoken cultural norm to avoid race throughout the school. When describing the teachers, Shontae said, "I guess that's just how they feel. Today racism's not a big deal because Black people and white people holding hands." She continued, "It's not really much racism as it was then. There's nothing really like, nothing to talk about."

Silence

Silence was a common theme ($n = 51$) and reflected descriptions of the school avoiding conversations, curriculum, and programming about race. When first asked to describe what they learned about race, culture, and diversity, most students responded as Tee did: "They don't talk about race here at school." Silence was most commonly in response to a lack of cultural socialization or critical consciousness socialization. Particularly, when asked about whether they learn to be proud of being Black, focus group after focus group responded with resounding "nos." In her focus group, Jesse elaborated, "They don't focus on—this is not that, I don't feel that this is that kind of school. They don't focus too much on race at all." Mentions of silence arose in eight focus groups and two individual interviews.

Without prompting, many students used Black History Month as an example of the silence. For example, in one focus group, Jesse responded to the question of what they learn about race with, "Yeah, I can't even remember

what we did for Black History Month," to which Jerome added, "I don't think we did nothing." In another focus group, Jaime described,

> . . . it might be a poster in their classroom that may quote what they say, but we don't necessarily take the time in February to be like this is what our Black ancestors did and this is how white people were back then.

The students noticed this lack of programming and curriculum, particularly during a time that is dedicated to understanding Black history and celebrating Blackness. Since the interviews took place in mid-March to mid-April, Black History Month may have been especially salient. The focus group methodology assisted in bringing silence to light, as students worked together to remember what had been done for Black History Month and reminded each other of how the (lack of) high school celebration was different from middle school.

Discussion

The current study used qualitative methods to explore how Black high school students experience ethnic-racial socialization and which types are most prevalently discussed, in a predominantly Black school with a majority White staff. Cultural socialization and promotion of cultural competence were common, which was expected. Cultural socialization is the most common message that parents report giving their children (Hughes et al., 2006; Priest et al., 2014), and most schools have embraced some form of multiculturalism since the civil rights movements of the 1950s (Banks, 2013). The teachers in this predominantly Black school may have felt a need to encourage their students to learn about their culture, as has been reported in other studies (e.g., Tyson, 2003). In addition, the presence of many Mexican American students in the school likely prompted efforts to recognize them in some way. Few schools are entirely homogeneous, so it may be the case that some degree of racial diversity can lead schools to provide opportunities to learn about cultures in ways that are highly salient to students. These opportunities also appear to be meaningful to students—at least a few students in the interviews very clearly missed the opportunity to celebrate Black History Month.

However, the analysis also revealed silence and an extreme narrowness in the opportunities for ethnic-racial socialization, which were centered around a few historical figures and two holidays. The students were vocal in how disappointed they were in the notable absence of meaningful and thoughtful curriculum and conversation about race, and Blackness in particular. Multicultural education researchers have warned against curriculum that

highlights "heroes and holidays" in the absence of acknowledging structural inequalities (Perry, 2001; Sleeter & Grant, 2011). According to a review, there are mixed findings about how cultural socialization at school is associated with the development of positive beliefs about one's racial group (Aldana & Byrd, 2015). For example, one Afrocentric after-school program for African American girls increased positive affirmation and belonging toward their racial group (Thomas et al., 2008), whereas another program was associated with decreased positive feelings using the same measure (Lewis et al., 2012). In order to be promotive of a positive racial identity, cultural socialization messages may need to include present-day achievements and be paired with critical consciousness socialization that connects current realities with past and current discrimination, that draws attention to current social justice movements, and that gives students a sense of agency and strategies for overcoming discrimination. It is clear, from these students, that their school was missing opportunities to provide these messages.

As noted, there were fewer perceptions of critical consciousness socialization messages, and many of these involved historical literature. These findings are consistent with the literature on culturally relevant teaching and multicultural education, which indicates that few schools take a critical approach to racial inequality (Bennett, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2004). Nevertheless, there could be an important distinction between the intended socialization and the received messages, as the discussion of Shontae's intolerance class shows. Teachers may be providing more messages than students are receiving. Studies of parental socialization indicate low correlations between parent-reported and child-reported socialization (Hughes et al., 2017). Teachers also may not be successfully providing critically conscious messages that delve deeply into the nature of structural racial inequities. Research finds that students as young as middle school can interrogate racial oppression that occurs in their schools and communities (Hope & Bañales, 2019) and that high school students readily understand when their teachers are ill-equipped to discuss (and in fact may perpetuate) racial oppression in schools (Hope et al., 2015). Furthermore, a review of the literature found that most research on critical consciousness socialization in school takes place in after-school and summer programs specifically focused on youth empowerment (Aldana & Byrd, 2015). It may not just be an artifact of the literature—youth may need highly structured, prolonged experiences that are cultivated by adults prepared to discuss hegemony and oppression to understand structural inequality.

Perceptions of colorblind socialization were uncommon. As with critical consciousness socialization, youth may be cognitively limited in their ability to recognize messages about ignoring race. It may also be that colorblind

socialization is generally implicit and so would not be captured as much in the current study and instead the school's colorblind ideology was noticed through the students' mentions of silence. Future research will need to investigate the varying ways in which colorblind messages are expressed. One possibility may be that colorblindness is itself multidimensional. Walton et al. (2014) have identified three types of colorblind socialization messages (which they refer to as egalitarian messages): procedural-justice colorblindness, distributive-justice colorblindness, and colormuteness. A procedural-justice colorblindness focuses on equal opportunity as a means to achieve equality, whereas a distributive-justice colorblindness is more concerned with equal outcomes, which may need to be achieved by policies such as affirmative action. Colormuteness, in contrast, attempts to silence discussion about race in order to emphasize sameness. The last construct is most similar to the conceptualization of colorblindness in the current study. Just as other forms of socialization can range in how much they highlight structural inequalities, there may also be varieties of colorblindness that have different implications for adolescents' beliefs and values.

In addition, the focus of the interviews may have made participants less likely to respond with messages about mainstream values like hard work and individual responsibility. Finally, dominant values are seen as "normal" and thus may be less salient (Perry, 2001). Fewer parental ethnic-racial socialization studies have examined mainstream socialization (Walton et al., 2014), and teaching about dominant values is often considered more in the educational literature under the domain of Whiteness studies and colorblindness than ethnic-racial socialization. Thus, more theorizing about and study of this dimension will be important in the future.

Support for positive interaction was less frequently reported than other messages. The interviewees reported some messages from their teachers and peers about the acceptability of cross-race interaction, but other forms of this message may come in more implicit forms. Such norms are essential for promoting positive racial attitudes (Allport, 1954). However, given that the school was more than 80% Black, it is not clear to what extent participants actually interacted across race. It would be interesting to explore how perceptions of socialization messages are moderated by youths' own tendencies to seek out cross-race friendships.

Overall, the findings indicate complexity in perceptions of messages about race and culture in a predominantly Black school. Although all the students in the sample were Black, there was variability in perceptions of what was taught and the meaning of what was taught. Some students claimed to not have celebrated Black History Month that year, whereas others did recall

events. Some clearly understood the idea of racism as expressed in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, whereas others struggled to describe where racism could occur. Future work should consider the personality characteristics and experiences that are associated with students' noticing and interpretation of messages at school. For example, youth may be more affected by the racial climate if they have a stronger racial identity centrality (Byrd & Chavous, 2012) or have an incongruent home culture (Rouland et al., 2014). Although it is not known whether research has examined this question, students may be more likely to pay attention to ethnic-racial socialization messages that confirm their existing attitudes or the messages they already hear at home. It is also possible that youth value the perspectives of those they trust, such as parents and favored mentors, over those they have a less close relationship with. Research should also consider how messages from school interact with messages from home, and how adolescents integrate potentially conflicting ideas.

Limitations, Strengths, and Implications

A limitation was that the study focused primarily on messages that students could report on in an interview and was not able to directly address the subtle messages that youth may perceive but not be able to articulate in those formats. Students may need more time or other types of prompts to report on more subtle messages. For example, an extended PhotoVoice project might give students the chance to reflect and report back in unexpected ways. Another potential limitation is that the study took place in a charter school rather than a traditional public school. However, the school had similar demographics, curriculum, and test scores to the local public schools in the area.

The major strength of this study was that it addressed limitations in the existing literature. First, the study examined students' everyday classroom experiences instead of their experiences with special programs or particularly culturally relevant teachers (Bennett, 2001; Howard, 2001). Second, the study privileged a phenomenological, subjective perspective in the data collection. A different analysis of school racial socialization could content analyze curriculum materials in English or history classes or to catalog teachers' self-reported practices. However, the current analysis revealed individual differences in the activities and messages students perceived in the same school and highlighted the fact that what teachers intend to convey is not always what students receive.

Another strength of this study is that it integrates work in multiple fields and disparate research programs. For example, research on intergroup relations has

examined promotion of cultural competence and support for positive interaction and yet is silent on cultural socialization. On the other hand, culturally relevant teaching is generally concerned with cultural socialization but has not theorized about support for positive interaction. The current framework acknowledges that all of these dimensions are part of the school racial climate, which will allow for future analyses of the relations of these dimensions to each other and how they uniquely and jointly predict student outcomes.

A third strength was the qualitative method, which allowed interviewers to probe for a wide variety of content beyond what participants provided in response to the opening general question. Interviewers could also prompt participants to elaborate on their statements and to clear up confusions about terms, such as discrimination. In addition, the focus group methodology offers advantages over an individual interview because participants could compare across experiences and prompt each other in ways an interviewer might not (Hughes & DuMont, 1993). For example, in one focus group, one student discussing their class reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* reminded another that they had read the book in the previous year. At the same time, the follow-up individual interview allowed participants to share anything they might have been hesitant to say in a group and to elaborate on their thinking. The passing of time was also an additional strength because several participants were able to share new reflections triggered by their participation in the focus group.

Some practical implications for educators are that high school students are aware of the ways in which race and culture are (and are not) discussed at school. Since adolescents have similar reasoning capabilities as adults in this area, educators should not fear that racial content is too advanced and should instead use the classroom space to engage in guided conversations about the history and traditions of students' cultures and the historical legacy of racism and discrimination in the United States. Even in schools with a majority of students belonging to one race, students appreciate and can benefit from these conversations. Furthermore, teachers should attempt to teach about a wide range of historical events and figures and to include contemporary examples of positive role models.[2]

Conclusion

The study of school ethnic-racial socialization from a psychological perspective is expanding. Nevertheless, existing theory and literature from related fields provides a strong foundation for understanding the processes that might occur. The current study uses a framework based on this foundation to organize an analysis of Black students' experiences with teaching about race and culture in their school. The findings reveal a high degree of both consistency

and complexity with implications for the future study of identity development and school adjustment. Adolescents are distinctly aware of the ways in which teachers and their curricula engage (or fail to engage) with race and culture. In this particular study, we see that Black History Month and Cinco de Mayo lose meaning when silence is predominant in a school. By limiting our study of socialization to the family context, scholars have failed to elucidate a major influence on youth understanding and outcomes.

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Notes

1. De-identified data from this project are available at ICPSR: Byrd, Christy M. A Qualitative Investigation of Black Students' Perceptions of School Racial Climate. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2019-03-10. https://doi.org/10.3886/E108801V1
2. Teaching Tolerance from the Southern Poverty Law Center (http://www.tolerance.org) provides many free resources for educators on issues of diversity, equity, and justice.

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