

**Classrooms as Racialized Spaces
Dynamics of Collaboration, Tension, and Student Attitudes in Three High
Schools***

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Abstract

Scholarship on the lower academic achievement of Latino and African American students tends to focus exclusively on structural factors, or exclusively on peers' oppositional attitudes toward school, and this leaves us with a distorted perspective on the tensions that many students experience between race/ethnicity and school success. Students who accept school, rather than oppose it, are also confronted with ethnoracial dynamics in their everyday school lives. This paper investigates students' own perceptions of the role that race and ethnicity play in school success, and locates students' attitudes and experiences in the context of their particular classrooms and school. In a comparison of three high schools, I find that the structure of the classroom shapes inter-ethnoracial interaction, which in turn shapes students' perceptions of each ethnoracial group's capability to do well academically. While I find that cross-ethnoracial collaboration happens successfully in classrooms in each of the three schools in the study, at only one of the schools, Alternative High, is the classroom experience structured in a way that not only relieves tensions between race/ethnicity and academic performance, but also fosters the development of meaningful relationships among classmates across ethnoracial boundaries.

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Existing literature demonstrates that Latino and African-American students have lower academic achievement compared to their white counterparts. Scholarship examines multiple mechanisms that contribute to these outcomes (Herman 2009). To start with, ethnoracial minorities are often concentrated in lower performing schools (Anyon 1997; Devine 1996; Kozol 2005; Wells and Crain 1997). Research also shows that ethnoracial minority students often receive insufficient family support for the demands of the educational system (Chin and Phillips 2004; Glasgow, Dornbusch, Troyer, Steinberg, and Ritter 1997; Lareau 1989; Lareau 2003; Teachman 1987). Complicating the issue of family support, schools exhibit cultural bias in their expectations for students' skills and cultural competencies, implicitly requiring white and middle class cultural sensibilities and cultural competencies (Bloom 2007; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Mehan, Hubbard, Villanueva, and Lintz 1996; Mercer 1974; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999). Further, scholarship demonstrates that ethnoracial minorities are susceptible to pressure from peers to adopt attitudes of resistance to school success¹ (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Brody 1992; Fordham and Ogbu 1987; MacLeod 1987; Tyson 2002; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005).

However, these myriad mechanisms are often invisible to students themselves, who instead rely on achievement ideology to explain school success and non-success (Barnes 2002; Downey, Ainsworth, and Qian 2009; Hochschild 1995; MacLeod 1987; Mehan, Hubbard, and Villanueva 1994; Valadez 2000). Achievement

¹ Scholarship in this debate also demonstrates that students of color do not uniformly experience peer pressure to resist or oppose school (Downey, Ainsworth, and Qian 2009; Matute-Bianchi 1986; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005).

ideology posits that anyone who works hard enough can earn success, and, by this logic, failure to garner success is due to the individual neglecting to put in the necessary hard work. Although scholarship on education undermines achievement ideology by identifying structural factors that contribute to the systematic lower academic performance of minority groups, students themselves often see academic achievement only at the level of the individual. In order to comprehensively understand the issue, we must study students' own perceptions of it.

Existing scholarship tends to focus exclusively on structural factors, or exclusively on peers' oppositional attitudes toward school, and this leaves us with a distorted perspective on the tensions that many students experience between race/ethnicity and school success. Students who *accept* school, rather than oppose it, are also confronted with ethnoracial dynamics in their everyday school lives. I offer a subject-centered view of school success from students who are, by and large, pursuing success—not avoiding it, or even considering avoiding it due to ethnoracial pressures. The students at the three high schools in my study hold distinct understandings of the role that race plays (or does not play) in school success. I locate students' ideas about school success inside their classrooms and schools, paying particular attention to cross-ethnoracial collaboration efforts and instances of ethnoracial conflict that arise in each classroom context. I find each of the six classrooms in my study to be racialized spaces. Yet, the structure of each classroom shapes the inter-ethnoracial interaction in distinctive ways. Some classrooms encourage dynamics that lead students to overcome ethnoracial stereotypes of school success, while other classrooms foster dynamics that

exacerbate ethnoracial divisions and stereotypes regarding school success. Some classrooms are further able to cultivate cross-ethnoracial friendships among students, while other classrooms reinforce ethnoracial social divisions among schoolmates.

Data and Methods

I present data from classroom observations (three consecutive weeks in each class) and 57 in-depth interviews with high school students (ninth, tenth, and eleventh graders) from three dissimilar schools all within the same metropolitan area in California. The data were collected in 2005 and 2006. The interview sample includes approximately 19 respondents per school, split evenly between general curriculum and honors/Advanced Placement (AP) tracks in the two schools that practice curriculum tracking. The three school sites are summarized briefly below.

1. *Comprehensive High*. A typical California high school, as measured against state-wide performance averages on achievement measures such as the California Standards Test and the SAT. Comprehensive High's student population also reflects state averages overall in terms of racial/ethnic composition at approximately 50% Latino, and more than 35% white. The percentage of students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged is over 40%. Socioeconomically disadvantaged is defined by California as annual earned income less than \$35,798 based on a family of four for 2005-2006. The percentage of students who are "English Learners," which means that their native language is not English, is over 20%. The student population is just under 1500.

2. *Alternative High*. Although Alternative High is not a charter school, it operates on a non-traditional educational model through its status as an alternative school in its district. Alternative High has been open just two years, thus its student body is comprised of a freshman and a sophomore class only. Even so, the student body is small, fewer than 110 total students, who are drawn largely from urban neighborhoods. The student body is more than 35% Latino, more than 35% African-American, fewer than 10% Asian, and nearly 20% white. Nearly 55% of the student population is socioeconomically disadvantaged, as defined by the state; and 1% is English Learners. These students choose Alternative High for its non-traditional approach to secondary education, e.g. attending school only three days a week and spending the other two days at job internships. On performance measures such as the California Standards Test, Alternative High scores are just below state averages in English and History, and are drastically below state averages in Math and Science.

3. *Elite Charter High*. A high-performing high school located in an upper-middle class, largely white neighborhood. Elite Charter High emphasizes academic rigor and excludes many traditional high school elements such as sports teams and cheerleading squads. The school offers 22 AP courses (as compared to 8 at Comprehensive High). The school's California Standards Test scores and SAT scores are well above state averages. The student body is nearly 85% white; 5% socioeconomically disadvantaged, as defined by the state; and 2% are English Learners.

In this paper I discuss the relationship between classroom experiences and students' attitudes regarding race/ethnicity and school success. I present data from

field notes in classrooms at each of the three schools in the study, the same classrooms from which I drew the interview respondents. I focus on structured cross-racial collaboration in classroom activities, including spontaneous collaboration among classmates; pair and small group work that is organized by teachers; and group discussions led by teachers. Additionally, I look for evidence of cross-ethnoracial friendships or tensions among classmates. I also describe consequences of meta-institutional structures, such as curriculum tracking, which create or restrict opportunities for students to have ethnoracially diverse classrooms to begin with. I leverage these observational data to help contextualize students' attitudes that I find in the interview data. Students' perceptions are formed within the particular environments of their own high schools, therefore it is critical to situate students' comments within the social and structural contexts of each high school institution (Herman 2009).

Findings

Comprehensive High: Racial/Ethnic Atmospheres Vary by Curriculum Track

Comprehensive High segregates its students rigidly into curriculum tracks. Students who are enrolled in honors and AP courses do sometimes cross tracks, meaning that they might take advanced level math and science classes, while taking general curriculum history, for example, yet distinct identities exist at Comprehensive High between students who consider themselves honors/AP and students who do not. Part of that distinction is an ethnoracial one, as the general curriculum is perceived to be heavily occupied by Latino students, and honors/AP is

perceived as heavily occupied by white and Asian students, despite the school's well-established and thriving Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program. AVID targets high potential students who are ethnoracial minorities and supplements their curriculum with academic mentoring and tutoring, which helps secure placement for AVID students in honors and AP courses.

The prevalent distinction between honors/AP students as predominately white or Asian and “regular” students as Latino is a dynamic that contributes to Comprehensive High students being more attuned to the ways in which race and ethnicity play a role in school success, compared to their counterparts at Alternative High, for example. Nearly half of the students I interviewed here acknowledge that race/ethnicity matters in school success. Many of these responses, however, cast Latinos in negative positions as poor decision makers or as culturally impoverished. For example, Claire, a white freshman in honors courses, says: "I think it's easier for Latinos to fall into the whole gang situation...a lot of them don't really value education. I don't know why—their families...come over here and they try to give their kids education and they don't take advantage of it, which confuses me...I don't want to sound like a horrible person." Like Claire, several students I spoke to expressed awkwardness or ambivalence about voicing negative statements about Latino classmates, which exposes an additional layer of racial/ethnic awareness and tension at Comprehensive High. White students recognize that their comments might sound racist or “horrible”, yet such negative explanations for poor academic success among Latino classmates are often the only explanations that make sense to the white students I talked to at Comprehensive High.

Latino students themselves voice different explanations than white students for low academic success among Latinos, however their explanations also tend to be negative, portraying Latinos as poor decision makers. Sandra, a Latina sophomore in general curriculum, for example, criticizes her fellow Latino schoolmates, but offers some insight into the incentives for abandoning school for other pursuits: "I think like the Mexican people, they just see that most of the other parents, their friends, their brothers and sisters, have just gone off into construction... they think that's a career and they're going to make a lot of money in that line. They could actually be like the other people and go to class, be there on time, do their homework, turn it in and actually be more than a construction worker." Recent work by Van Hook and Bean (2009) find a strong cultural work ethic among Mexican immigrants in the labor market, which might explain Sandra's schoolmates' preference for quick entry into gainful employment such as construction over the delayed rewards of educational attainment. Nonetheless, Sandra is typical of the students I interviewed at Comprehensive High in her condemnation of (fellow) Latino students for not making academic achievement a higher priority.

Other students, albeit few, such as Diana, a white sophomore in general curriculum, suggest that the ethnoracial differences in school success have more to do with structural advantages that white students enjoy, rather than Latinos' deficient decision making. Diana says: "I think that most of the white kids have it easier [in school], not because they are white, but because most of them are from these prosperous families and they have someone at home that helps them and someone to pay for them to go to tutors...they have more resources available to

them." While Diana's is a more sympathetic perspective, indicating that lack of family tutelage and wealth are the culprits for low academic success among Latinos, it nonetheless demonstrates the pervasiveness of the understanding at Comprehensive High that Latinos are lower academic achievers than whites. At Comprehensive High, race/ethnicity is far from irrelevant to school success in students' minds. Instead "white" and "Latino" are categories that students associate with academic achievement.

AP English Class: A White Space

In this ethnically charged environment at Comprehensive High, I find stark differences between the AP English class and the general curriculum World History class I observed. The AP English class is a relatively small class at Comprehensive High, with 22 total students, comprised of 10 white students, 7 Latinos, 4 Asian Americans (including one Korean immigrant), and 1 African American. While Latinos make up the majority of the total student body at Comprehensive High, their representation here is not drastically disproportional, though they are slightly underrepresented. Interestingly, the Latino students I talked to in the class perceive it to be overpopulated with whites, along with their other AP courses. René, a Latino junior describes it this way: "Another thing I've noticed is that with AP it's like 90% white people, a couple of black people and a couple of Hispanic people—not 90% white, but a mix between Asians and whites."

Yvonne, a Latina junior, makes a similar assessment and offers an explanation for the disparity, one that implicates teachers and administrators at her

school: "I don't know if you have noticed, but the AP classes are full of white students and that makes me uncomfortable. Lots of my [Latino] friends are plenty smart to be in AP classes, but they just don't know about it, or haven't been encouraged to go into them." Yvonne and René both are describing their AP classes in general here, and in other moments of the interviews, they make it clear that their AP English class is not an exception to their perceptions of AP classes as "full of white students," even though the English class has only 3 more white students than Latinos.

Based on my observation data, I suggest that one reason that students such as René and Yvonne perceive their AP classes as overpopulated by whites, even though non-white students are well represented, might be because the space of the classroom *feels* white. By this I mean that the styles of interaction, modes of humor, and general sensibilities that dominate the classroom space are aligned with white and middle class values. This was very much the case in Yvonne's and René's AP English class that I observed.

The atmosphere in the AP English classroom is very interactive, which seems to be a positive goal of the teacher's pedagogy, even though the interaction very often gets beyond the teacher's control. Students continually collaborate with each other and the teacher in developing points and fleshing out definitions and examples. In general, students are comfortable jumping into an ongoing discussion without raised hands—though this comes with the usual consequence of less assertive students (of all ethnoracial groups) being left out of the verbal interaction. However, three white students, Stephanie, Erin, and Brett, dominate the verbal

space of the classroom. They set the pace and timber of the majority of the open interaction, in much the same way that Adler and Adler (1996) explain that popular students can control classroom climate, including other students' comfort with calling out answers in class. Further, these three students, Stephanie, Erin, and Brett, are able to draw the teacher's attention away from her interactions with quieter classmates, even for non-academic comments and questions. When this happens, I notice that the quieter student often does not get the teacher's attention returned to her or him.

These three, Stephanie, Erin, and Brett, as well as other students in the class, exhibit a strong sense of entitlement, what Annette Lareau (2003) posits is a byproduct of "concerted cultivation" child rearing strategies of middle class parents. Lareau argues that middle class youngsters are taught to feel comfortable confronting adults as relative equals and "to put pressure on persons in positions of power in institutions to accommodate their needs" (2003:163). While Lareau finds this to be a characteristic of middle class children's upbringings, a feature that crosses racial categories, in this particular AP English classroom at Comprehensive High, these characteristics are embodied exclusively in white students. Non-white middle class students such as René, who is quoted above, and Sierra, the only African American student in the class behave in perceptively different ways. They are more restrained in their interactions and more traditionally respectful to the teacher.

The entitlement that white students exhibit in this class often takes the form of complaints and negotiations about class work. It also surfaces in the form of

playful banter with the teacher, where students show their comfort in addressing the teacher as a relative equal. For example, one morning, the class settles in to a multiple-choice exam, and the teacher sits at her table, and opens a copy of Cliff Notes to *Romeo and Juliette*. "Hey," Stephanie calls out to the teacher playfully, "why do you get to read when we have to take this test?" Brett adds, smiling, "If the students have to put in the work, the teacher should too!"

Similarly, on another day Erin nearly yells at the teacher when the teacher admits that she has still not graded exams they took a month earlier: "What!? You didn't grade the benchmark [practice for the California Standards Test]. That's an outrage!" Erin's tone is friendly, but also heavily accusatory. Erin calls the teacher "lazy" and offers to run the papers through the scantron machine for her.

Sometimes this entitlement moves beyond the boundaries of what the teacher finds acceptable, such as one morning at the start of class when the teacher is describing summer opportunities that are available to students. While the teacher is talking, Stephanie, Brett and two other students who sit nearby all huddle together over homework for another class, with textbooks and papers spread out over their desks. The teacher interrupts her discussion and asks in an irritated voice what they are doing. Brett immediately responds, without looking up from his homework, "Don't worry! I can multitask." Stephanie chimes in without missing a beat, "You *know* I can." The teacher responds by threatening to count the day's practice AP test for credit, but she does not demand that the foursome put away their history papers and books. Nor does she later make good on her threat to count the practice test.

While it might be tempting to see this teacher as weak or bullied by her students, this would be a misreading of the scene. Rather, the teacher seems to believe in open interactions and collaborative discussions as valuable pedagogical tools. In order to achieve a free-moving dialogue, she is willing to accommodate some extraneous commentary, and even some irritating behavior. Moreover, the teacher interacts with students in the class in a way that makes it evident that she too endorses the middle-class philosophy of "concerted cultivation" childrearing, as outlined by Lareau. She encourages her students to debate with her and disagree; and she endeavors to respect their comments and opinions in a clear effort to stimulate their intellectual growth and self-confidence.

One of the consequences of this lively, open verbal space that the AP English teacher fosters is that non-white and non-middle class students must conform to the norms of interaction there, or be relegated to near-silence, which is most often the case with Sierra, Yvonne, and René, whom I mention above. This dynamic is similar to what Ochoa and Pineda (2008) find in their college course: Latino students refrained from verbally challenging their white peers' domination of discussions, even when Latino students passionately disagreed with their classmates' comments. Ochoa and Pineda explain that their self-restraint was due to Latino students feeling intimidated and linguistically unprepared to "talk like the middle and upper-middle class white students" whose backgrounds and educational training allowed them to be more articulate, academic-sounding speakers (2008: 50).

In the AP English class at Comprehensive High, some Latino students such as Flavia and Ricardo, as well as Sierra, the sole African American in the class, do jump

into ongoing discussions occasionally. However, these students more often take unassertive roles in class. That is not to say that they are passive, they simply do not stake out territory, so to speak, in the verbal space of the classroom very aggressively. For example, one morning when the teacher asks an open question to the class about the text they are reading. Ricardo answers it quietly to his neighbor, a white boy named Derek, rather than shouting it out. Hearing no responses to her question, the teacher answers it herself to the class, using nearly the identical words Ricardo just whispered to his friend. Ricardo is very pleased at having known the correct answer, and he congratulates himself proudly—but again quietly—to his neighbor Derek. All of this passes without the teacher taking notice.

Ricardo's behavior stands in sharp contrast to the normal dynamics of the class, where students boldly and frequently shout out ideas for the teacher to hear and acknowledge. Although atypical for the class in general, Ricardo's more quiet participation in the lesson is typical of the interaction styles most often employed by non-white and non-middle class students in this class. While white students comprise less than half of the total number of students (10 out of 22), the class dynamics and environment are dominated by white and middle class sensibilities, making the class *feel* like it is "full of white students," as Yvonne characterizes it.

General Curriculum World History: A Latino Space

The classroom dynamics are markedly different in the general curriculum World History class I observed. While the AP English class *feels* white, the World

History class is a space where Latino sensibilities dominate. It *feels* Latino. In this class, it is the white students who are more often noticeably silent.

Part of the difference between these two classroom spaces is due to the pedagogical approaches of the two teachers. The World History teacher creates a much more structured, time-oriented environment, meaning that the class time is broken up into discrete segments for discrete activities, each lasting a predetermined number of minutes. The teacher does a fair amount of lecturing from slides on an overhead projector, and runs discussions by calling on students with raised hands to contribute. Thus, there is a great deal less open interaction in the World History class compared to the AP English class, however, there is also a great deal less time spent straying from academic topics in the World History class, and no oligarchy of student personalities dominate the verbal space of this classroom. Further, students here do not exhibit the same sense of entitlement as do students in the AP English class; they do not outwardly embody characteristics of "concerted cultivation" child rearing.

Of course, the World History class is also much larger and it is more difficult to keep a lesson on track if 37 voices are free to openly contribute to the presentation of material, compared to 22 in the AP English class. Nonetheless, the differences also correspond to findings in the literature on curriculum tracks which suggest that upper-track classes have students and teachers who expect the class to be managed in a discussion-oriented, collaborative way; and lower-track classes tend to have both students and teachers who expect the class to be managed in a more disciplined, top-down way (Metz 1978; Oakes 1985).

The teacher dominates the verbal space of the World History class. However, Latino students largely perform the action in the room, as well as the interaction that does take place in the verbal space. Latinos make up 21 of the 37 total students, the rest are white (15); with the addition of one Asian American. What I mean by "the action in the room" is that during the course of the class period, if students are milling about the room, they are almost always Latino students. They sharpen pencils, stretch their legs, retrieve items from the teacher's worktable, borrow paper from a friend across the room, and so on. During free moments many classmates chat amongst themselves in Spanish. The room is visibly and audibly populated by a Latino presence. Importantly, Latino students are comfortable in this space: Spanish chatter is not confined to hushed voices, nor are Latino students' bodies confined to seats and desks.

Also, several students eat iconic Mexican treats during class, often a powder candy dispensed from a small plastic bottle. This item is particularly visible because to eat it one pours the powder into one's palm and then licks it off. While there is nothing distinctively Latino about eating food in class, the high visibility of distinctive Mexican items being consumed does help create an atmosphere of a Latino *feel* to the room, as opposed to the AP English class for example where I often saw students eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, a more typical food item of whites. The Mexican candy, free physical movement, and Spanish conversations all contribute to a Latino *feel* to the space of this classroom.

Moreover, if students are ejecting comments or jokes into the teacher's lectures, it nearly always comes from Latino students. One student, Sebastián, is a

good example, if a bit extreme. If the group can be said to have a class clown, that person is Sebastián. He sits in the back corner of the class, and his attempts to joke with the teacher can be (purposefully) heard across the entire room. A typical example of this happens when the teacher catches Sebastián copying a neighbor's paper and asks Sebastián to move to the front row. Sebastián explains loudly—with a half-cocked smile—that he could not see the board well enough to write down the questions, so he had to copy those from his friend instead. The teacher responds with a stern look and points Sebastián to an empty seat in the front row, a directive with which Sebastián grinningly complies. Sebastián regularly tests the teacher's limits, and takes such opportunities to entertain himself and his classmates.

Sebastiàn's clowning attempts are another example of how comfortable Latino students feel in the World History class, as opposed to the AP English class where Yvonne, for example, says that the whiteness of the classroom space makes her feel "uncomfortable." Latinos' comfort in World History is also evident in students' chosen seats. Most of the 15 white students in the World History class sit in seats that are not congregated near other white students, but instead are isolated from other whites, or at least mainly surrounded by Latinos. Latino students, on the other hand, do congregate. In fact, classroom collaboration is organized around several clusters of Latino classmates who routinely work together on assignments. For example, four Latinas who sit in the very front of the room begin each class period by dragging their desks closer together to facilitate collaboration and chatting.

Another detail that exemplifies the Latino *feel* of this classroom, is that most of the Latino students do not call the teacher by his name, Mr. Rockport. Instead, they call him "Mister." Only Latino students do this, but it is a frequently heard form of address in the class, e.g. "Mister, I have a question," or "Mister, is this due tomorrow?" or "Mister, this test was hard." It is clearly used as a respectful form of address, akin to the use of "Señor" in Spanish. The teacher is not Latino himself; he is white. However, Mr. Rockport exhibits sincere interest in his students' lives and engages his Latino students in side conversations about their recent vacations in Mexico, their opinions on the then-current immigration rights protests happening in California, and other topics during free moments before class and during breaks. Thus, he actively fosters a pro-Latino atmosphere in the class. Mr. Rockport's rapport with his students can best be described as what Valenzuela (1999) refers to as "authentic caring," which garners both respect and devotion from the class (Noddings 1984).

Putting Cross-Racial Collaboration in Context

To be clear, the action in the room and the interaction of the vocal space are not exclusively performed by Latino students in the World History class, but mostly so. Just as in the AP English class, it is not the case that Latino students *never* dive into the ongoing stream of interaction. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that both of these classrooms are sites where Latino and white students cooperate with one another. During my observation period, I did not witness any instances of visible racialized conflicts or tensions among students. Quite the opposite, I noticed

many occasions when whites and Latinos spontaneously chose to work together on assignments; shared jokes; or commiserated on school issues. Nonetheless, the spirit of cooperation and collaboration that exists at Comprehensive High must be taken in the context of larger classroom dynamics. Indeed, I find classroom dynamics to be highly racialized. The AP English class I observed is a decidedly white space, while the general curriculum World History class a decidedly Latino space. Even though Latinos make up the majority of the student body at Comprehensive High and white students do not outnumber non-white students in the AP English class, the class is experienced just as the literature on curriculum tracking depicts honors and AP courses: as white and middle class (Gamoran 1992; Hallinan 1994; Mehan, Hubbard, Villanueva, and Lintz 1996; Oakes 1985; Rosenbaum 1976).

Alternative High: Support for Overcoming Cross-Racial Tensions in the Classroom

Alternative High is also a majority-minority school, however, unlike Comprehensive High where Latinos make up the majority with whites as the second largest population, the proportions of African Americans and Latinos are roughly equal, just over 35% of the total student body each, while whites comprise just less than 20%. Alternative High structures cross-racial collaboration effectively by creating intimate, family-like environments among classmates. This is accomplished largely through the structure of homeroom groups. Alternative High does not practice curriculum tracking. Students are organized into homeroom classes where they spend the entire school day surrounded by 20 or so homeroom classmates and

homeroom teacher. Subject-specific teachers, e.g. the math teacher, come into each homeroom to deliver lessons. Keeping students integrated in the same college preparatory curriculum is part of Alternative High's educational mission, and the school day is designed to have enough flexibility to accommodate students' individual learning speeds without stratifying the curriculum.

Students I interviewed at Alternative High are very aware of race, perhaps partly due to the fact that the vast majority of the student body (80%) is non-white. However, most of the students I talked to express confidence that race does not matter for how successful someone can be in school. For example, when I ask Keesha, an African American sophomore, whether or not different races or ethnic groups have an easier or tougher time in school, she replies: "Everybody is in the same boat. Why would it be any different?" Her classmate Sheena, who is also African American, says something similar: "It's not like blacks have it better or whites have it better, it's not like that at our school at all. Because I don't think nobody's ever focused on race there."

The mission of Alternative high explicitly encourages an attitude that race does not stand in students' way, and teachers and administrators actively endorsed this attitude in their daily interactions with students. Several students I talked to espouse this attitude, and many use precisely the same terms, describing race as an "excuse" for low school performance. Enrique, a Latino freshman gives a typical example. When I ask Enrique whether different races or ethnic groups have a tougher or easier time in school, he responds curtly: "No. That's just an excuse."

Other students, like Monique, an African American sophomore, acknowledge that the potential exists for race to complicate students' educational experiences, however, she also dismisses it as an excuse. She explains: "Some people might claim that it is harder. They might feel like 'my teacher is white and we're black folks, so they're all racist'...and 'why do we get all the bad grades and the people like your kind get the high grades?' I personally [say] 'you guys are dumb. I have A's'...Some people just make up excuses."

While these comments capture the prevailing sentiment at Alternative High that race does not matter to one's ability to pursue school success, I also witnessed episodes of racial tension between students at Alternative High. It seems that race is not immaterial to students' lives here even though they express confidence that it is irrelevant to scholastic achievement.

Racial Tensions Outside of Academics

Interestingly, I only observed racial tension in the 9th grade class in my sample. As mentioned above, students are not separated into curriculum tracks, however, students are rigidly separated by grade level. I observed in one 9th grade class and one 10th grade class in order to be able to make comparisons within the school. Through my observations I found that the pace and atmosphere of both classes are remarkably similar. The one dimension on which the two classes markedly differ is racial dynamics. Whereas conflict was conspicuous in the 9th grade class, it was not evident in the 10th grade class. This is perhaps due to the fact that the 9th graders are newer to the environment of Alternative High. Many of the

African American and Latino students attended nearly all-minority middle schools and elementary schools, where getting to know white schoolmates—and getting *along* with white schoolmates—was not part of the educational goal.

Like all homeroom classes at Alternative High, the 9th grade class I observed was in a small, intimate setting. The class is comprised of 4 white students, 1 Asian American, 7 African Americans, and 8 Latinos; 20 altogether. Several of the African American 9th graders exhibit distrust of and distaste for their white classmates, who, to make matters even more provocative, are more economically well-off than the rest of the class. The most remarkable example of racial tension I witnessed happens early one morning before school, while the teacher is out of the room. Several students are hanging out inside when Jaynah, an African American classmate enters the classroom, puts down her backpack and calls out loudly in an agitated voice: “You need to turn that white boy music off. It is giving me a headache!” Two white males, Peter and Jesse, in the back of the room glance up surprised and silently comply by reducing the volume of the song playing on Jesse’s computer. Neither boy responds verbally to the challenge, but the volume is left at a high enough level to still be heard across the classroom, signaling a refusal to be completely pushed around. Jaynah, for her part continues to rant—mainly to herself—about the intolerable qualities of “white” music. In private interviews with me, each of these boys expresses disappointment and some astonishment that they are targets of racial frustration, feeling that they have done little to warrant animosity from classmates. To all the students’ credit, actual fights are routinely avoided.

In the 10th grade classroom I did not witness any similar episodes of racial tension, nor was it a topic that the homeroom teacher addressed with the class in my presence, something that the 9th grade homeroom teacher did on more than one occasion. For example, one morning instead of beginning their schoolwork, the 9th grade homeroom teacher has the students sit in a circle to discuss an event that has happened between two classmates the previous afternoon at the bus stop. Lamont, an African American, got into an argument with Maya, a Latina, and a heated exchange ended in Lamont calling out "you dominatrix!" at the top of his voice as he ran off to board his bus. Maya was very upset by this and relayed the story to her friends, who later reported the insult to the homeroom teacher.

When the class discussion starts that morning, Maya is not entirely sure what the term "dominatrix" means, but she thinks it is associated with illicit sexual behavior, and she is also suspicious that it is somehow an insult to Latinas. The homeroom teacher not only defines the term for the class, but spurs dialog on building harmonious relationships with classmates, specifically relationships across ethnoracial lines. It turns out that Lamont himself did not know what "dominatrix" meant when he yelled it at Maya, and he had only been trying to get in the last word in their argument. Further, he makes it clear that he had no intention of disparaging Maya for being a Latina. He apologizes publicly to Maya in front of the class. From my perspective as an outside observer, the homeroom teacher's skill in leading the class discussion successfully diffused the racially charged dynamic from Lamont's and Maya's quarrel, even though the two of them remained on unfriendly terms.

Putting Racial Tensions in Context

Working through ethnoracial issues like this in the 9th grade might be an important part of the reason why no visible racial tension surfaced during my observations of the 10th grade homeroom group. The 10th graders have already spent an entire year together as ninth graders, and now they carry out daily classroom life in ways not unlike a large family. Not everyone gets along well, and the same people do not necessarily get along with each other every single day, but by and large the students and teacher fall into familiar work routines and everyone seems to know what to expect from everyone else in the room.

Strong evidence of the cross-ethnoracial congeniality in this class lies in the fact that multiple pairs of 10th grade classmates profess to be best friends, and many of them are cross-ethnoracial pairings. For example Keesha, an African American can hardly be separated from her best friend Angelique, a Filipina. Similarly, Sherie, an African American and her best friend Tammy, who is white, sit next to each other and collaborate on schoolwork every chance they get. Even students who do not claim to be best friends exhibit high levels of comfort with classmates of different ethnoracial groups. For example, during silent reading time, some students lie down on the carpet to read and it is not uncommon to see Latasha, an African American, use her white classmate Samuel's shoulder for a pillow.

While racial dynamics confront students daily at Alternative High, it seems that at least many students in their second year at this school have developed deep friendships across ethnoracial lines, indicating that their classroom experiences of cooperation contribute to more embracing cross-ethnoracial attitudes overall.

Elite Charter High: High Levels of Collaboration, Low Levels of Cross-Ethnoracial Understanding

At Elite Charter High I observed classroom activities that structured impressive levels of collaboration among classmates. I observed in an AP Chemistry class and in a remedial English class, and in both contexts the teachers enjoyed highly successful responses to their attempts to have students work together. Ultimately, however, for very different reasons, neither class' collaborative efforts help build cross-ethnoracial relationships among students, nor do they help improve one group's understanding of the other group. The overall effect of the classroom experiences I observed contributes to white students' perceptions of Latinos at Elite Charter High as inferior both academically and socially.

Elite Charter High's student body is nearly 85% white. Latinos make up approximately 10%, and Asians 5%. From the perspective of many students I interviewed whites and Latinos are the only two appreciable ethnoracial categories on campus.

In the AP Chemistry course I observed one student is Asian American and one has a Spanish surname, though in appearance his ethnicity is ambiguous. The remaining 33 students are white. The course is fast-paced and demanding, so despite the fact that they are sitting in a room designed for many fewer students than 35, most students are so busy taking notes and working through formulas that they do not spend any energy complaining about their lack of space. Having desks that are already crowded together in their intended arrangement is also conducive

to segments of the class period when students are free to work together. When not lecturing, the AP Chemistry teacher encourages students to help each other on homework and labs, emphasizing that students are each other's resources.

This collaboration promotes a very open atmosphere with a cooperative and collaborative dynamic. Shouts of "Ah hah!" or "HOW did you get that?" are common to hear during homework sessions. Students' close interaction with each other on assignments and test review also helps foster a competitive spirit among classmates. I observed students openly rejoice when they outperform others on exams—while others publicly swallow defeat. In private interviews with me, many students express their heavy emotional involvement in the friendly (and sometimes not so friendly) classmate rivalry in the AP Chemistry course. These exciting dynamics in the class cannot be heralded as cross-ethnoracial collaboration, however, because the AP Chemistry class is almost exclusively white.

Putting Collaboration in Context

I argue that the competitive spirit of advanced courses such as the AP Chemistry class has a negative effect on ethnic relations at Elite Charter High. Their sense of rivalry carries over to AP students' perceptions of general curriculum students as lesser students and lower achievers. The Latino population at this school is only 10%, which makes them less visible in classes. Additionally, many of these students are placed in general curriculum classes rather than honors and AP courses. AP students I talked to have generally come to the conclusion that Latino students are inferior academically.

Jenny, a white sophomore in the AP Chemistry class, describes it bluntly: "I guess, like not being racist or anything, but like Mexican—like families—tend to be on like the lower skill of doing well in school." Brandon, a white junior, holds a similar impression; specifically that Latinos are general track students, not honors/AP students. He says, "I don't really have any Latino people in my classes. And then like when I see them around school, they're always like acting like the people who are in the normal [non-AP] classes." Brandon's and Jenny's comments are far from atypical. Only 6 of the 21 students I interviewed at Elite Charter High assert that race/ethnicity does not matter for how easy or tough it is for a student to be successful in school. Most students I talked to suggest that Latino students have a tougher time performing well academically.

A few students, like Alexis, a white AP sophomore, offer structural explanations for Latino schoolmates' lower academic situation. Alexis says, "a lot of their parents might not be as educated...maybe it's a support issue...[or] an experience issue, like they haven't had that [college] experience so they're not as like focused on it for their kids." Other of Alexis' classmates, however, are less generous in their explanations for Latino students' low academic position at Elite Charter High. Jackie, a white AP sophomore says: "I think the Latinos have it a lot harder. From what I've seen is that a lot of them don't try."

Certainly Latino students can be found in advanced curriculum courses at Elite Charter High, and the school has an established AVID program. Nonetheless, the perception of Latino students as being inferior academically persists among

most of the white AP students I talked to. For example, Rebecca, a white AP sophomore describes a Latina classmate in her advanced curriculum English class:

Honestly, like I have one Latino girl in—who I'm friends with—but she's in my English honors class and, you know, we are all like "whoa, you know, there's a Latino-uh-Spanish speaking person in here." And like wow, she is very quiet; she doesn't say anything in the class. And I don't know if she really belongs there or if they didn't have room for her somewhere else and they just stuck her in class or something, right—or they wanted to make themselves look better. I have no idea...but there definitely is some separate thinking like, "oh, what is she—or *how* is she in this class?"

Rebecca's comments here illustrate how heavily ethnicity colors students' perceptions of classmates' academic abilities. In a school that prides itself on high achievement (e.g. stellar California Standards Test scores and a 98% college-going rate), students who are visibly Latino are associated with inferior academic success.

AP students' unflattering perceptions of Latinos' school success at Elite Charter High is part of larger pattern of sentiments in California that are often at best ambivalent towards Latinos and at worst staunchly anti-Latino (Baldassare 2000; Berg 2009; Cornelius 2002; Jiménez 2008; Jones 2001; Simon 1993). Latinos, particularly new immigrants, are often accused of putting a drain on public services, including deteriorating the quality of public schools in the United States by flooding districts with non-English speaking students (Martin 1995; Suarez-Orozco 1996). They are also widely associated with undocumented status and menial work as day laborers, as Jackie notes: "I see a lot of Latinos doing yards and that type of thing, and so they are just kind of being forced into that lower way of life." The neighborhood surrounding Elite Charter High supports this perception of Latinos as struggling laborers. Multiple parking lots and gas stations in this small suburb serve

as unofficial labor depots where large groups of Latino males wait for contractors or others to drive up and offer work. This is known to be a cause of anxiety and irritation among locals in such neighborhoods (Eisenstadt and Thorup 1994).

Larger economic and social dynamics are clearly at play in Elite Charter High students' perceptions of their Latino schoolmates. While bringing white teens and Latino teens together at school has the potential to break down ethnoracial misperceptions and social barriers, this does not seem to be happening at Elite Charter High, at least partly, I argue, due to the separation of students in curriculum tracks, where Latinos can be visibly identified as belonging to lower curriculum as well as lower socioeconomic class status. As Denise, a white sophomore in the AP Chemistry class observes, "basically in the California school range, like the poorer kids would generally be considered the Hispanics. Because that's just how it's been." White Elite Charter High students by and large come from financially comfortable homes, and this adds to their perception of Latino schoolmates as not only different from themselves, but socially inferior.

Deliberate Efforts and Missed Opportunities in the Classroom

The remedial English class I observed is a great opportunity for students at Elite Charter High to bridge ethnic boundaries. There are only eight students in the class, and unlike literature on tracking would predict (Metz 1978; Oakes 1985; Rosenbaum 1976), the remedial English teacher takes great pains to create a comfortable, encouraging environment where these eight students can feel competent in language. Five of the eight students are English learners, all Latino,

and three are white students who suffer from mild learning disabilities or simply struggle tremendously with reading and writing. There are four girls and four boys in the class. Such a warm, intimate space with so few students could easily allow the group to build friendships, perhaps even to become a close, family-like environment similar to what I find at Alternative High.

The teacher rather loosely controls the verbal space of this classroom. Her pedagogical focus is on self-expression and self-confidence, and she tolerates and accommodates a great deal of calling out by students during class discussions and even during her delivery of instructions to the class. She responds to questions and comments that are unrelated to the topic at hand, often pausing a lesson to foster a class discussion on an unrelated topic if the students seem interested in talking about it. Such discussions are almost exclusively dominated by the white students in the class, and by two boys, Ralph and Gary, in particular. As these boys are native speakers of English, they are not inhibited in verbal communication, unlike their classmates who are native speakers of Spanish, and who tend to contribute more shyly to class discussions if they contribute at all.

An additional layer to the class' dynamics lies in the fact that four of the five Latino students are female. The four Latinas sit together on the far side of the room and they choose each other as group work partners as much as possible. They tend to be quiet and passive during class discussions—often completely silent unless the teacher directly calls on one of them to contribute. The teacher expresses concern to me on several occasions about how quiet and shy her four female students are in class, however her concern always centers on the issue of a gender divide in the

class; she never once suggests that the girls might be ethnically intimidated by the verbally dominant white males in the class.

In an effort to break the gender divide that the teacher perceives in the class, she frequently structures activities where students are required to work in assigned pairs. These activities tend to be fill-in-the-gap grammar tasks where the students collaborate and decide together what word or word-form is the best answer for each item. The teacher purposefully assigns boy-girl pairs to work together, and this inadvertently creates cross-ethnic collaboration in the class as well, since the three white boys are necessarily paired with Latina classmates.

I observed excellent cooperation between the Latina-white pairs of students during these activities. However the cooperation and collaboration on these academic assignments did not take on the character of friendship-building exercises. Instead, what I saw was the white boys taking disinterested and largely passive roles in the pair-work. One example is when Maria and Ralph are paired together. For each item on the worksheet, Maria suggests a possible answer, and Ralph agrees by saying, "sounds good to me." Ralph does not pull out a pen or pencil, and Maria realizes that she must take the initiative to write in all their responses herself after noticing that they had agreed on three answers yet the worksheet was still blank. While Ralph is not outwardly rude or uncooperative, he does not volunteer answers and his body language and interaction with Maria is lackadaisical. He twists around in his seat, so that his head is more or less facing the worksheet and his partner, but the rest of his body is oriented away from Maria and from their assigned task.

During other class activities, Ralph is easily distracted and fidgety, so his body language in this example is not necessarily uncharacteristic. However, he contributes boisterously to class discussions, even dominating them along with his friend Gary, and he frequently volunteers answers aloud to academic questions the teacher asks to the class. Thus, it is his passivity in the pair work with Maria that is uncharacteristic. While he is perfectly comfortable engaging in discussion and debate with the teacher and others in the open space of the classroom, he seems much less comfortable, or at least much less willing to invest himself in one-on-one interaction with Maria.

I cannot claim that examples like this one are instances of ethnic tension or discomfort. There are multiple factors involved, and it is difficult to separate out what the root might be: gender dynamics; ethnic dynamics; more general teenage awkwardness; or even feelings of inadequacy in the grammar task at hand. What I would like to emphasize here, however, is that these structured activities in the classroom are excellent opportunities for cross-ethnic collaboration to build friendships, or at least opportunities to improve understanding and mutual appreciation between Latina and white classmates. Yet, such desirable results do not seem to come about. Instead, I characterize it as cooperation that does not yield changed perspectives for students at Elite Charter High.

Conclusion

In sum, I argue that in order to understand students' attitudes about the ways that race/ethnicity affects school success, we need to contextualize students'

perceptions and experiences in their own school environments. I find that cross-ethnoracial collaboration happens in classrooms in all three schools in my study, however, the different ways that the collaboration is structured create classroom dynamics that contribute to school-level perceptions of ethnoracial groups and school success.

At Comprehensive High: In both the AP English and the general curriculum World History class, the cross-ethnoracial collaboration that is structured into daily academic activities happens successfully, but more through the suppression of one group's open expression of ideas, perspectives, and humor than through the type of sincere exchange which might inspire greater understanding to develop across ethnoracial groups. These classroom dynamics contribute to prevailing student attitudes at Comprehensive High that race/ethnicity matters for school success: specifically, that high achievement is more difficult for Latino students to come by.

At Alternative High, the classroom design of homeroom groups fosters the creation of meaningful relationships among classmates. While ethnoracial tensions exist, particularly in the 9th grade class I observed, Alternative High students' classroom experiences of cooperation and collaboration seem to contribute to more embracing cross-ethnoracial attitudes overall. Although Alternative High's student population is 80% non-white and students exhibit great awareness of ethnoracial differences, the prevailing attitude at this school is that race/ethnicity is irrelevant to school success: academic achievement is the domain of students of color and white students alike.

At Elite Charter High, on the other hand, negative stereotypes influence white students' perceptions of their Latino schoolmates, and curriculum track placement exacerbates the issue. Students' classroom experiences at Elite Charter High reinforce ethnic boundaries rather than bridge them. In this high school context, prevailing student attitudes posit that Latino students (10% of the student body) are academically inferior to whites (more than 80% of the student body).

Two school environments in this study foster dynamics of academic success that are ethnoracially charged: Comprehensive High and Elite Charter High. Scholarship demonstrates that tensions frequently exist between race/ethnicity and academic performance. We know from literature on the school opposition that this tension sometimes results in students resisting school (Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Fordham and Ogbu 1987; Matute-Bianchi 1986; Tyson 2002; Tyson, Darity, and Castellino 2005); however my study focuses on students who do not resist school, but rather, accept school. I find that for such students, tensions between race/ethnicity and academics still exist, but these tensions are experienced differently in different school contexts. Ethnoracial tensions surrounding academic success are shaped by a combination of: classroom collaboration experiences among students, teachers' leadership, and wider attitudes about race/ethnicity that are prevalent in each high school context

At Alternative High, tensions between academic success and race/ethnicity are largely relieved for students. Efforts by teachers and by the school institution help students consciously overcome negative ethnoracial stereotypes regarding both school success and cross-ethnoracial relationships among classmates.

At Comprehensive High, I suggest that the tension between race/ethnicity and academic performance is only partially relieved. By this I mean that in the general curriculum World History class I observed, Latino students did not express concerns that participating in class and endeavoring to do well were in any way at odds with their identities as Latinos. Further, my observations of the class demonstrate that Latino students felt very comfortable there. However, in AP class environments at Comprehensive High, Latino students do experience these tensions between race/ethnicity and academic performance. They perceive AP classes to be white spaces, and multiple Latinos I spoke to acknowledge feeling uncomfortable in those spaces, which hinders their participation in academic discussions in the classroom. My observations of the AP English class support their perception of the class as a space where white and middle class sensibilities dominate.

At Elite Charter High, I find that tensions between race/ethnicity and academic performance are not relieved for students, not even partially. In fact, Elite Charter High's practice of curriculum tracking and the competitive academic spirit among high achieving students serves to intensify ethnoracial tensions around school success by fueling white students' negative perceptions of Latino students' academic abilities.

This study demonstrates that the structure of the classroom shapes inter-ethnoracial interactions. Students experience ethnoracial tensions around school success in their everyday school lives. Classroom dynamics can exacerbate or diffuse these tensions, which in turn leads students to reinforce or overcome ethnoracial stereotypes about academic success in their personal lives.

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