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# Eliciting Student Voice to Explore the Need for Culturally Responsive Teaching in Secondary Schools

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**Eliciting Student Voice to Explore the Need for Culturally Responsive  
Teaching in Secondary Schools**

By

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A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in  
partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Education

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this research was to elicit student voice in regard to school climate, belonging, racial identity, and culturally responsive teaching. The study focused on gleaning a greater understanding of important factors that influence the academic achievement gap in a secondary school with predominantly White students and a minority group of students of color. Current studies are limited when it comes student perspective on the effects of culturally responsive teaching, identity formation, belonging, and school climate in this specific demographic. Methodology included an anonymous online survey with 52 participants and three distinct focus groups with 13 total participants. Findings indicate that while a large body of research has shown the value of culturally responsive teaching for students of color, belonging and school climate matter to all students. Student participants identified three major themes that contribute to lived experience of belonging and positive school climate. Firstly, pervasive awareness of similarities and differences and its effects on identity-formation affected students sense of belonging and school climate in that students who did not self-identify as part of the school community, or identified other groups as not part of the school community, did so on the basis of perceived differences. Secondly, daily interactions with school peers had a profound effect on student perception of school climate. Lastly, personalized educational experiences constructed by adults were indicated as extremely impactful for both belonging and school climate.

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## Introduction

Ever since the integration efforts of the 1950's and 1960's, schools in the U.S. have grappled with the challenges of the academic achievement gap (Zirkel & Pollack, 2016). The academic achievement gap is defined as when two groups of students with comparable abilities have markedly different academic achievement levels (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002). When it comes to the academic achievement gap, researchers tend to focus on three large groups: English learners, poor students, and students of color (Hammond & Jackson, 2015). It is of note that the racial achievement gap transcends all other identifiers, and affects students of color regardless of financial status, language proficiency, or intersectionality with other identities of privilege (Singham, 2005; Singleton, 2015).

Extensive research shows that there is indeed a racial achievement gap in secondary schools in the United States of America (Fordham, 1985; Hammond & Jackson, 2015; Singham, 2005). At the important developmental stage of adolescence, identity becomes an especially important factor toward academic achievement. Additional research shows that students' academic achievement is positively impacted by multiple factors including: school climates that are perceived to be positive; a sense of belonging forged through peer-peer relationships; and strong peer-adult relationships (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2016; Gallardo, Barrasa, & Gevara-Viejo, 2016; Stelmach, Kovach, & Steeves, 2017). Through a Critical Race Theory lens, it is impossible to view identity, perceived climate, belonging, or relationships without also examining the role race plays in these constructs. Culturally responsive teaching is one framework for addressing race and culture as crucial factors in student academic and



social success (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2017; Fordham, 1985; Hammond, 2015; Moon & Singh, 2015; Singham, 2005).

Research into the achievement gap often gets mired in the focus on socioeconomics and resources. This has led to a gap in research along several lines. First, there are limited studies exploring the effects of culturally responsive teaching, identity formation, belonging, and school climate. Second, there is a lack of research that focuses on a population of students where the majority of the secondary school is affluent and White, and the minority is lower income students of color. Finally, there is a significant lack of research drawing directly from student voice; instead, many studies exploring the achievement gap rely on the analysis of testing data, GPAs, or broad state-wide surveys. With the number of supportive programs and extra focus on the achievement gap that is possible with the resources of a well-financed district, it is important to elicit student voice to see how they are experiencing daily life on campus.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to understand the lived experiences of students in a secondary school with predominantly White students and a minority group of students of color. This research aims to elicit student voice in regard to school climate, belonging, racial identity, and culturally responsive teaching, to glean a greater understanding of major factors influencing the academic achievement gap.

### **Site Level Impact**

This research takes place at a secondary school, referred to in this research by the pseudonym “Fairview High School.” At Fairview, there is a unique system where students feed into the school from many diverse towns, while the majority of students are

from the town in which the school is located (referred to as Fairview City). Students who attended much smaller middle schools than the nearby middle school arrive at the high school with a completely different background and understanding—both academic and social—from the majority of the students. For example, according to Ed-Data (a website in partnership with the California Department of Education, EdSource, and the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team/California School Information Services (FCMAT/CSIS) (2018)), a local middle school, referred to as Central Middle School in this study, reports demographics for the 2016-2017 school year of 1% Black/African American; 4.5% Asian; 7.5% Hispanic/Latino; 7.6% two or more races; and 78.8% White. At Central, 4.5% of students receive free or reduced lunch. A smaller and more diverse middle school in the area, referred to as Meridian Middle School in this study, reports demographics for the 2016-2017 school year of 50.9% Black/African American; 8.7% Asian; 29.2% Hispanic/Latino; 3.7% two or more races; 2.5% Filipino; and 5% White. Free or reduced lunch is received by 65.2% of the students at Meridian. A third small feeder school, referred to as Bella Vista, is a K-8 and is at a farther distance from Fairview High School. Focusing only on grades 6-8, the 2016-2017 demographics are <1% Black/African American; <1% Asian; 24% Hispanic/Latino; 12% two or more races; and 62% White. At Bella Vista, free and reduced lunch is received by 39.4% across all grades K-8. Once these and other students reach high school, the demographics are 68.4% White with only 7.5% free or reduced lunch (Education Data Partnership, 2018). Research has shown that achievement among our students does not fall along lines of where students are coming from, it falls along lines of race (Fordham, 1985; Singham, 2005; Singleton, 2012).

Students of color at Fairview High School face a huge gap compared to White students. In order to close this gap, the school and community have implemented a variety of different programs aimed to help students of color navigate the realities of the academically rigorous high school environment and overcome any systemic racism or inequity that has led them to arrive less prepared for success than White students. A few examples of these programs include a summer transition program; after school tutoring; a program that offers concurrent enrollment in a local community college; and individual mentoring. In addition to these programs, students also have the option to be a part of clubs, extracurricular activities such as athletics or music, or other campus-specific organizations or activities. This research attempts to understand what elements of campus environment help students of color feel a sense of belonging in the school community.

With so many different programs in place to support these students, it is crucial to analyze what is working and needs to be augmented; and conversely, what gaps there might be, or what is not working quite as well. Additionally, it is important to analyze whether students are experiencing positive school climate and personal connections with peers and with adults on campus. If they are finding a sense of belonging, is that happening as a result of the programs they take part in, or is this sense of belonging related to the daily interactions with students, teachers, and staff?

This research will impact the lives of future students of color at this high school, as well as potentially impact the careers of teachers and staff in the community. It will also impact the lives of future White students at this high school, as research shows that strategies intended to shrink the achievement gap are really strategies that will enhance the learning and growth of all students (Singham, 2003). By identifying what is working

to create a more inclusive school culture, adults can make efforts to incorporate those best practices into their daily lives, the school can enhance working programs, and current student voices will pave the path toward making this school a more welcoming environment for current and future students.

In order to begin to demystify the student experience in terms of school climate, research was conducted in a mixed-methods design including both quantitative surveys given to a large number of participants and qualitative focus groups with a smaller number of students (Creswell, 2014). As the primary researcher conducting this study, I have chosen a mixed-methods research design in order to elicit student voice from a wide variety of participants through anonymous online surveys, while still allowing for an in-depth exploration of lived experience through focus groups.

### **Summary of Findings**

Across all races and living situations, student participants identified three major themes that contribute to lived experience of belonging and positive school climate: 1) pervasive awareness of similarities and differences and its effects on identity-formation; 2) daily interactions with school peers; and 3) personalized educational experiences constructed by adults. These three themes relate directly to major philosophies of culturally responsive teaching.

### **Literature Review**

The racial achievement gap in secondary schools in the United States of America remains a formidable obstacle in the country-wide efforts toward equitable education for all students. It is starkly clear that the racial achievement gap is an issue in our schools. When year after year testing statistics, dropout rates, and post-high school success

consistently expose a major gap in achievement between White students and students of color, it needs to be directly addressed. Rather than focusing on deficit thinking where students themselves (or student backgrounds) are blamed for the achievement gap, I choose to focus on determining how current practices in a secondary school with a predominantly White population affect the daily lives of students. In the following sections, I will discuss the Critical Race Theory perspective on the racial achievement gap, and how ethnic and racial identity (ERI) plays a role in student academic and social achievement. Second, I will identify aspects of the culturally responsive teaching philosophy that directly address ERI and suggest that strong interpersonal connections, belonging, and positive school climate can directly influence the achievement gap with positive results. Third, I will explore the concept of belonging in a school setting and its affects on academic achievement. This study will elicit student voice to better understand the daily student experience of secondary school as it relates to Critical Race Theory, culturally responsive teaching, school climate, race, identity, and belonging.

### **Critical Race Theory—Race Affects Educational Experience**

Critical Race Theory argues that White racism is systemic and historic, and is perpetuated by beliefs, narratives, laws, culture, and politics. To identify with Critical Race Theory is to step away from the idea that a researcher can be sterile, uninvolved, objective, and above the controversy. Critical Race theorists instead, in efforts toward liberation of oppressed groups, acknowledge that all identities are inherently politicized and we thus have a profound responsibility to add to the counter narrative that dismantles the current cultural realities that bolster White supremacy (Moon & Singh, 2015; Simba, 2014).

White supremacy is the belief that White people are inherently superior to others (Caffrey, 2015). Naming White supremacy is a direct way of identifying that in our country, White people have privileges based solely on the color of their skin. The Civil Rights Movement resulted in a narrative shift challenging the pervasive belief of the intrinsic superiority of White people. Still, data reveals the same unequal outcomes as have always persisted in the U.S., despite the narrative of equality. This is due to a complex system of norms in the dominant culture that perpetuate the current system. One of these norms is the false binary that racists are bad people, so good people cannot possibly perpetuate racism. This allows White people to ignore implicit biases as long as they do not express or witness any explicit biases. Another current norm is segregation. Our schools and neighborhoods across the country are undeniably segregated based on race (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). A third norm is the strident cultural belief in universalism. Believing we are all fundamentally the same and have access to the same opportunities erases the lived experience of what it means to be a person of color in this country (Di Angelo, 2015). It is essential to move beyond this fallacy of “color blindness” and live in a state of race consciousness. In terms of education, this means a direct awareness that the color of a student’s skin has a significant impact on their academic experience beginning as early as preschool, and continuing through higher education (Moon & Singh, 2015; Simba, 2014).

Critical Race Theory asks us to challenge the societal underpinnings that preserve “Whiteness” as the dominant culture. In order to achieve this, we must look to the experiences of people of color, which starts with acknowledging that people of color have significantly different life experiences than White people. A framework that clearly

expresses this is Du Bois' (1903) color line, which identifies the dual consciousness that people of color face—not just the understanding of themselves as individuals, but also the understanding of themselves as they relate to Whiteness. While the norms described above allow White people to live in a state of ignorance as to what Whiteness really means, they simultaneously force people of color to adjust their daily lives through that lens (Di Angelo, 2015; Du Bois, 1903; Glenn, 2015).

**The racial achievement gap.** One of the most fascinating and frustrating aspects of the racial achievement gap is that so many highly educated people prefer to believe it does not exist. It is much easier to attribute the racial achievement gap to a series of myths than it is to confront the fact that, in 2017, in the United States of America, we are still dealing with structural racism and inequity based on the color of a student's skin (Singham, 2003). The most common not non-racialized reason given for the achievement gap is socioeconomic status (SES). Some researchers suggest that it is a lack of resources that create the achievement gap in education. These researchers state that lower SES students face lower parent involvement, limited educational opportunities, and school districts with less money per student (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Huang, 2015, Singham, 2003). Going beyond the idea that parents cannot be as involved in their students' educations due to the need to work long hours, other researchers point to cultural and social reasons for the achievement gap, suggesting that the gap is almost purely a result of environmental factors. These researchers suggest tests are biased toward White students' cultural understandings, parents of color may not value education as much as White parents, or that students of color—especially immigrant adolescents—face so many life stressors that they cannot possibly be expected to focus their energies

on learning when they are so traumatized by daily life (Patel, Barrera, Strambler, Muñoz, & Macciomei, 2016; Singham, 1998). Still others, whether overtly or implicitly, point to genetic differences as a possible contributor to the racial achievement gap (Bainbridge & Lasley, 2002; Singham, 1998; Singham, 2005).

While many of these factors do, of course, impact the achievement gap, research clearly supports the claim that race is the single most impactful indicator of academic success for students in the United States of America (Blau, 2003; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Socioeconomic status also impacts the academic success of all students. There is no arguing with the fact that students with more financial security will have more access to experienced tutors, test prep programs, and other resources. Students with more financial security also most likely avoid needing part-time occupations while in secondary school in order for their family to survive, and their home responsibilities in other regards may also be less demanding. However, in a study about the 2011 SATs, although socioeconomic status significantly affected academic achievement for all students, race was an unambiguous indicator of success. Black students whose families earned \$200,000 or more per year, the highest income level represented in the study, performed at about the same score level ( $\approx 1500$ ) as White students whose families earned below \$20,000 per year, the lowest income level represented in the study (Singleton, 2015). Singham (2003) expounds on this by citing research showing that through integration of Black and White students, the test score gap does shrink, but not significantly. He states, “Traditional measures of socioeconomic status (consisting of income, wealth, and parental education) account for at most one-third of the gap” (p. 587).



It is equally true that social factors impact the achievement gap. Students with turbulent lives outside of school will logically face more challenges that may affect their ability to concentrate on school curriculum (Patel et al., 2016). Turbulent and traumatic home lives is not a challenge unique to students of color, however, and yet the achievement gap is racial. School efforts to amend curriculum to be multicultural, or increase student of color enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) courses, have unimpressive impacts on the achievement gap (Colgren & Sappington, 2015). Amending curriculum lends itself only to a surface-level celebration of diversity; a focus on heroes and holidays, foods and folk-dancing (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Increased enrollment in AP courses for students of color did not impact the achievement gap at all, and research on this strategy, instead, calls for a structural transformation, not a quick fix (Colgren & Sappington, 2015). Lastly, the idea that all students of color experience fraught home lives is a vast overgeneralization and cannot adequately account for the achievement gap when the gap exists across all socioeconomic and class levels (Singleton, 2015).

Most current research into the achievement gap does not go so far as to overtly suggest that race is biological and students should have different capacities due to their genetic make-up, as this is a fallacy of understanding long promoted but also long debunked. Still, internalized superiority is an implicit bias many educators and researchers hold (Di Angelo, 2015; Yudell, Roberts, DeSalle, & Tishkoff, 2016). Though it is widely-accepted that race is a social construct—a conclusion first drawn by Du Bois (1903)—race contributes to the achievement gap in the ways that those in power approach the issue and implement changes in efforts to address it.

In one case, a controversial and public debate at a high school in Berkeley, California revealed strongly-held social beliefs that students of color who were struggling to graduate should not receive funds diverted from high-achieving predominantly White students. Researchers showed that the community perceived these low-performing students of color as not “worthy” of the resources, and clung to a colorblind perspective, suggesting that these students were underperforming as a result of a lack of talent or effort. Parents of high-achieving students felt attempts to address racial inequities were “unfair.” These narratives that define some students as worthy and others as unworthy fall along racial lines, exposing underlying beliefs that their worthiness is linked to a natural capacity for success that is given at birth, and inextricable from the visible identifier of skin color. These narratives impact policy and funding in the educational system and help to perpetuate the racial achievement gap (Zirkel & Pollack, 2016).

These ideas that the racial achievement gap is a result of socioeconomic status, social environments, or biology are all examples of the deficit thinking paradigm. As Hammond (2015) defines it,

When operating from a deficit thinking paradigm, educators and policymakers believe that culturally and linguistically diverse students fail in school because of their own deficiencies or because their families don’t value education, not because of social inequities, unfair school policies, or differential treatment in the classroom (p. 59).

Deficit thinking is dangerous because it suggests the problem is the students themselves and leads to decision-making with the intention of “fixing” these students, rather than examining structural and overarching realities that could be creating a school

environment that continues to promote Whiteness as the dominant culture at the expense of all other cultures (Blaisdell, 2016; Hammond, 2015). Singham (2003) suggests a better way to approach the racial achievement gap is not to approach it at all, but to focus on other changes that can be made that will benefit all students and will in turn shrink the gap. He argues that when we focus on the achievement gap, we turn it into a problem specific to minority populations, opening the door to patronizing and trivializing of the issue when the truth of the matter is that this is a widespread problem; when the problem is effectively addressed, it will positively affect students of all backgrounds, including those currently at the top of the achievement graph.

Research shows that methods that shrink the achievement gap also increase the performance of students who are already in the top levels of achievement. One study by Schoenfeld (2002), for example, focused on data generated from reformed mathematics instruction that considered culturally responsive teaching methods such as visual aids, hands-on materials, and teaching for understanding rather than memorization. The results of this study clearly showed a smaller achievement gap as well as greater performance for all students of all races (Schoenfeld, 2002; Singham, 2003).

Critical Race Theory demands that the insidiousness of deficit thinking be confronted and challenged with a counter narrative. If research shows that the problems do not lie with the students, and do not stem from SES, culture, or biology, then we must look to the larger truths of how our individual choices as educators and policy makers contribute to a system that perpetuates the hegemony at the cost of all others.

**Adolescent identity formation—the importance of self-efficacy.** The lens of Critical Race Theory requires awareness that race does absolutely play a determining role

in academic achievement. As race is inextricably a part of one's identity, it is thus necessary to explore the impact of race on students at an individual level. Adolescent identity formation is extremely complex, and the subject of a vast amount of research. I will use two frameworks to explore identity: Erikson's (1968) theory of identity versus role confusion, and Ethnic and Racial Identity (ERI) (Berk, 2012; Booth, Abercrombie, & Frey, 2017). Importantly, I will then examine the impact of both on self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is defined as one's own beliefs about one's capabilities and capacities to achieve desired goals, and strongly influences student academic achievement (Schunk, 2003).

Erikson's (1968) theory of identity versus role confusion states that in ages 13-21, adolescents begin to discover their own individual identities while struggling with the confusion of the differing roles with which they identify. At this point in their lives, adolescents first grapple with the existential questions of who they are and where they fit in society. This developmental stage is marked as a crossroads between childhood and adulthood. In order to navigate the path toward a mature identity, adolescents question the status quo, challenge values and beliefs of their parents and authority figures, and develop their own priorities in life. A realized self-concept results from exploring different views and coming to a sense of well-being and security in their own current perspective on the world. These different views generally fall into three categories: 1) aptitudes and interests; 2) connections to others; and 3) place in society (Berk, 2012, p. 600; Booth, et al., 2017).

For many adolescents, this process is not a traumatic crisis, but instead "a process of exploration followed by commitment" (Berk, 2012, p. 600). For students of color and other minoritized student populations, the potential for a more challenging process exists

because their experiences at home can clash with what they see at school, providing even more opportunity for role confusion. When adolescents are exposed to positive family, peer, and community models of their ethnic identity, it is more likely that they will strengthen their connections to others, and thus develop a stronger sense of ethnic and racial identity (ERI). This, in turn, leads to a greater sense of belonging, commitment, and self-identification with that ethnic or racial group, and can help protect students from acts of discrimination. When students attend a school that maintains an ideology of colorblindness, this process of forging a healthy ERI is stunted by the perception that recognizing differences is taboo and unaccepted. It is worth noting that adolescents who are part of the dominant culture do not develop a strong ERI, nor do they need to, as they are not forced to compare who they are with how they perceive society to be (Booth, et al., 2017). This is another example of the effect Du Bois' (1903) concept of the color line has on identity development—students of color must contend with discerning who they are within their communities as well as who they are within the dominant culture, whereas White students have no impetus to even recognize that a dominant culture exists, since it is their own.

Research shows that a strong ERI is an indicator of a robust sense of self-efficacy, which in turn is a predictor of academic success (Booth, et al., 2017). A student's expectations for their achievement match their outcomes with eerie accuracy. Beyond self-esteem, or even self-concept as described above, self-efficacy directly impacts both motivation and learning (Booth, et al., 2017; Schunk, 2003). Self-efficacy tends to work as a positive feedback loop: when a student believes they will succeed on a specific task, and they do, it strengthens their self-efficacy, and they then approach the next task with

an even greater sense of self-efficacy and an even greater probability of success, and so on and so forth.

In both Erikson's theory of identity and the framework of ERI, connection to others is a crucial part of developing a sense of self, and the same is true for self-efficacy. Students can even develop self-efficacy vicariously: if a student sees a person with whom they identify modeling success, that student can experience an increased sense of self-efficacy based on that model. Without having to experience the initial success themselves, viewing others who look or act like them achieve their goals boosts a student's perception that they may also achieve those goals (Booth, et al., 2017; Fordham, 1985; Modica, 2015; Schunk, 2003). The implication of this research is that as minorities in a dominant White culture, minority students will have fewer opportunities to identify with adults or peers, and thus fewer opportunities to develop self-efficacy through exposure to modeling.

An example of this is one of the oldest and most frustrating barriers to academic success for students of color: the "fear of acting White" (Fordham, 1985; Ogbu, 2004). Adolescents struggle to find their individual identities as well as their places in society, so if there exists a social construct that academic success is a White trait, it can preclude the academic success of many students of color. As students seek to move past role confusion and strengthen their ERIs, equating Whiteness with academic success creates a cognitive dissonance where one cannot be both Black (or Brown) *and* a good student.

One facet of maintaining control is that the dominant culture portrays individual people of color as representatives of their entire race, often described as "ambassadors to their race." This means that inherent strengths—and weaknesses—are attributed to the

entire race, as an undifferentiated mass (Fordham, 1985; Modica, 2015). As a result of this behavior of the dominant-culture, people of color forge what is called a “fictive kinship.” For example, in the Black community, people call each other terms such as “brother,” “soul sister,” or “homie” without any actual familial relation. Therefore, being Black within the community itself is not determined by skin color (as it is by the dominant-culture); instead, being Black is a membership determined by one’s behaviors, activities, and choices (Fordham, 1985).

During the Civil Rights Movement, Black communities saw a success of one Black person as a success for the whole race. Therefore, when Thurgood Marshall became a Supreme Court Justice or when Arthur Ashe became a tennis champion, they were considered torchbearers for what would soon be the rest of the Black community finally partaking in the American Dream (Singham, 1998). These and other successful Black leaders earned their positions within a White system, by assimilating to the dominant culture, excusable as a temporary necessity in order to benefit the whole community. As history has shown, however, instead of foreshadowing a coming racial equality in America, those successes did not change things for the general population; individual achievements did not transfer to the rest of the community. When Blacks experience success, it is seen as an individual success, but when Blacks experience failures, these failures are attributed to their entire race (Fordham, 1985; Singham, 1998). This brings even more relevance and meaning to the fear of acting White as it means that by choosing to focus on academics, students are essentially seen as sacrificing their own race or ethnicity—individual success at the expense of collective belonging.

Through a Critical Race Theory lens, this narrative of academic success as a White trait is exposed as a side effect of the systemic racism of the country, as is the idea that in order for students of color to succeed, their only path is to adopt the attitudes and behaviors of White culture. If adolescence is such a crucial life stage for the development of individual identity and self-efficacy, and these two things are strengthened by connection to and affirmation of one's ethnicity and race, students of color are up against a myriad of challenges that White students do not have to face. White students are surrounded by positive modeling of adults of their race, both in the predominantly White field of education and in the highly prevalent media that is disproportionately White as well. White students do not have to compare themselves to the dominant culture as an "other," and do not generally develop an awareness of race or ethnicity. White students can see both their successes and failures as individual successes and failures, with no bearing on the status White people will have as a whole. Most importantly, White students are not faced with the binary of having to choose between their ERI and academic success. This is not in any way intended to demonize White students, but rather to provide an awareness of the obstacles students of color must overcome on the same journey toward self-efficacy and academic achievement.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching, Race, and Culture in the Classroom**

As defined by Howard (2010),

Culturally responsive pedagogy assumes that if teachers are able to make connections between the cultural knowledge, beliefs, and practices that students bring from home, and the content and pedagogy that they use in their classrooms,



the academic performance and overall schooling experiences of learners from culturally diverse groups will improve (p. 67-69).

The scope of factors resulting in the racial achievement gap is vast, and can seem overwhelming. As Singleton (2015) suggests, the best way for an individual to do the work and shrink the achievement gap is to focus on what is actually within one's power to change. Systemic racism is too large a foe to take on at once, but we can affect positive change in our immediate spheres of influence. Culturally responsive practices empower teachers to make a difference in their own classrooms, with the students they interact with daily. The two primary aspects of culturally responsive teaching that are the most directly applicable when it comes to the racial achievement gap are Hammond's (2015) "culturally responsive brain rules," and the effect of strong student connections with adults at their schools (p. 46).

**Neurological findings inform culturally responsive teaching.** Hammond (2015) delineates six different findings from neuroscience that inform culturally responsive teaching and thus shrink the racial achievement gap. To paraphrase, the findings are: 1) the brain seeks to minimize threats and maximize connection; 2) positive relationships temper our fight or flight reactions; 3) we process information based on our culture; 4) all learning is driven by attention; 5) new information can only be learned if tied to prior knowledge; and 6) the brain physically expands due to challenge and rigor.

The first finding speaks to just how important it is for students to feel free from perceived or real threats in the classroom. As Hammond (2015) explains, some of the biggest threats to student learning are microaggressions. These are subtle, often unintentional messages that portray insulting or derogatory beliefs toward a marginalized

group. Teachers practicing culturally responsive pedagogy will be aware of these microaggressions and create an environment where they are not overlooked or dismissed, even when covert.

Secondly, Hammond (2015) expands on this idea that safety lies in strong relationships. Teachers must not only keep the environment free of physical or psychological threats toward their students, but also actively promote relationships and belonging—two concepts that will be examined in the next section.

Hammond (2015) goes on to eschew the traditional method of instruction in which an adult stands at the front of the room and lectures while students in straight rows furiously scribble notes. This model of instruction supports systemic inequity because it promotes an individualist model of learning and provides no opportunities for collectivism or group learning. Varied learning experiences are crucial for maximum learning not only for students of color, but all students who do not conform to traditional learning modalities.

Following closely on the heels of creating a more varied learning experience, Hammond's (2015) findings show that if students are not engaged, they are not learning. Learning must be active and dynamic in order to guide students toward personal growth.

In addition to varied instruction, for learning to happen, new information must build on prior knowledge for students. If students do not have the prerequisite understanding of the topic, they have no foundation from which to build more intricate and advanced learning. Again, this is true for all students, but culturally responsive pedagogy highlights that White students often have a shared dominant culture to which students of color may not have previously had access.

Lastly, Hammond (2015) addresses the common myth that in order to shrink the achievement gap, curriculum must be “dumbed down” to make it accessible to students who otherwise underperform standards. Culturally responsive pedagogy argues that one of the most crucial factors toward shrinking the achievement gap is to deny this deficit paradigm of thinking and provide ample enriching opportunities for rigorous academic challenges to students of color.

**The impact of strong student connections with adults at their schools.**

Hammond’s (2015) second finding that positive relationships provide a sense of safety that encourages learning is not solely true of peer-to-peer relationships, but also of adult-to-student relationships. Research focusing on Black male teens has shown a clear link between close adult-student relationships and improved academic achievement for those students (Yaffe, 2013). Another study focusing on Saskatchewan aboriginal students revealed that three main aspects of adult-student relationships had the biggest impact on student desire to attend school each day: 1) empathy toward the student as a whole person; 2) teacher personality and outlook; and 3) responsiveness to the student’s life beyond school (Stelmach et al., 2017). In fact, positive adult-student relationships not only promote student attendance in school, engagement in class, and overall academic achievement, but negative adult-student relationships can have a profound effect in the opposite ways (Bottiani et al., 2016; Stelmach, et al., 2017).

Adults who presented themselves as universalist and race-blind ultimately alienated students, promoted stereotyping and prejudice, and held on to prior expectations about students (Bottiani et al., 2017). For example, adults who actively—whether implicitly or explicitly—subscribe to stereotypes and hold expectations that students of

color will have increased behavior issues contribute to a well-documented history of unequal disciplinary action between students of color and White students (Anyon, Zhang, & Hazel, 2016). This significantly impacts adult-student relationships, creating a mistrust between students of color and adults in education. This mistrust creates an unsafe learning space, and academic achievement suffers. The often-exclusionary nature of school discipline compounds this; suspensions take away from class time and our most vulnerable students are then put even farther behind by missing school hours (Anyon et al., 2016; Bottiani et al., 2017; Hammond, 2015).

Adults who handled issues of culture and race with best practices, on the other hand, engaged with the students, promoted reflective dialogue, and created an opportunity for collective learning. This resulted in greater safety for students, more efficacy both for adults and students, and meaningful inclusion (Gutiérrez, Larson, Raffaelli, Fernandez, & Guzman, 2017). The need for best practices is profound, as merely staying neutral does not positively impact the environment. In reflection of this, Nieto (2008) points out the importance of recognizing that just being a nice person is not sufficient when it comes to building positive relationships with students of color. Many “nice” people still act as cogs in institutionalized racism rather than disrupting the system, and promote lower standards, dismissive comments, or meritocracy-based thinking (Di Angelo, 2015). The ideal for teachers is to be critical of what it means to care for students, and work toward seeing each student as an individual worthy of building a unique relationship with (Nieto, 2008).

Just as adult-student relationships can positively affect the racial achievement gap, student sense of belonging and positive school environment have been shown to

significantly shrink the achievement gap. Research around belonging and school climate supports Hammond's (2015) first neurological finding; in order for students to effectively learn, they need to feel safe and valued.

### **Belonging**

This concept of belonging is not merely a desire, but researchers argue that it is truly a necessity for survival—a vital part of the human condition (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hammond, 2015). Belonging is formed through connections individuals feel to the greater community. This could be shared experiences, values, and feelings; strong relationships; or even mere proximity (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As Erikson's theory of identity suggests, adolescence is the time when students begin to push back against the norms of their families and seek connections and understandings in their peer groups to forge their individual identities (Berk, 2012). Positive social relationships have a significant impact on academic success, promoting increased sense of attachment to school as well. Friendships give students a support system to combat the stereotyping, cliques, and social pitfalls of middle school and high school. Students with positive peer-to-peer relationships support each other in classwork, develop a strong sense of community, and associate that sense of belonging with their school (Gallardo, et al., 2016; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005).

In lieu of organic friend groups, school groups such as band, ROTC, or technical programs can help students find a sense of belonging through a specific niche, which can result in the same positive views of school and similar advances in academic achievement (Brigham, Parker, Morocco, & Zigmond, 2006). African American students with peer networks that affirm both academic success and racial identity provide a direct solution to

the pervasive fear of “acting White” with which many students of color grapple. When peer-to-peer relations create a sense of belonging that promotes and celebrates both ERI and academic success, the latter becomes disassociated with being White and becomes achievable to students without sacrificing their identities. Therefore, friendships at school can be among the most influential and powerful social factors toward shrinking the achievement gap (Datnow & Cooper, 1997).

Belonging contributes to students’ overall emotional health, by providing them with that sense of safety that is a vital environmental characteristic for any learning to take place. Students’ emotions toward school have a direct correlation to their academic success. Emotions such as hope, joy, and pride are associated with higher performance, while emotions such as hopelessness or boredom are extremely detrimental to academic performance (Lam, Chen, Zhang, & Liang, 2015).

**Discrete school environments.** School environment is a major contributor to students’ sense of belonging. For example, students who believed the overarching goals at their school were mastery and self-improvement had a stronger sense of belonging than students who viewed the school climate as competitive or focused on incentivized grades (Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996). School climate can also be determined by positive feelings of safety, connectedness, and opportunities for social, emotional, and academic development (Conderman, Walker, Neto, & Kackar-Cam, 2013; De Pedro, Gilreath, & Berkowitz, 2016; Voight, Hanson, O’Malley, & Adekanye, 2015). School environment has been shown to affect attendance, motivation, test scores, risk behavior, bullying, drug and alcohol use, overall well-being, and ultimately academic achievement (De Pedro, et al., 2016; Reynolds, Lee, Turner, Bromhead, & Subasic, 2017). Perception of school

environment can have an even greater academic impact on students of color than on White students.

In a study focused on African American students at the university level with European American students as a comparison group, Walton and Cohen (2011) found that by aiding African American students to see adversity as a common and temporary reality, they significantly increased GPAs, halved the achievement gap, and reduced doctor visits. Their study showed that even one experience of exclusion could impact a student's IQ test results and self-control. A single experience of microaggression, for example, could have a significant impact on student social emotional health and academic achievement. Perceived racial discrimination can affect school success and stress for students (Bottiani, et al., 2016). By reframing these instances of exclusion as just a part of life that all students experience, researchers were able to circumvent the fears of African American students that they were already unwelcome due to their skin color (Walton & Cohen, 2011). Perhaps most importantly, researchers emphasize that school climate and inclusivity are not objective facts, but the perception of each individual is their truth, and is what—negatively or positively—impacts their academic achievement. Schools with a greater achievement gap also have a greater school climate gap. The very term “school climate” suggests that there is one climate that pervades the whole school, but research clearly shows that the same climate may be perceived completely differently by students of different races (Conderman, et al., 2013; Voight, et al., 2015; Walton & Cohen, 2011). This results in discrete school environments, or the idea that in the same community or school, perceived climate can vary greatly depending on to which student the question is asked.

Barriers to positive climate include: low expectations, labeling of students, ethnocentric curricula, lack of faculty diversity, emphasis on meritocracy, segregation, and racial discrimination (Bottiani, et al., 2016; Gosine & Islam, 2014; Means, 2016). One approach to combating these barriers is a program in Canada where White Canadian teachers who are entering the workforce are required to spend at least a year immersed in a high school with an image that has been “demonized” by the broader community. By physically inserting themselves into a school perceived negatively, teachers gain the opportunity to interrogate the narrative and learn about individual students and unique climates within the school. This experience disrupts the flattening of differences that often happens with multicultural curriculum and essentializing all students of color into one palatable understanding by revealing that each population has its own challenges, merits, and unique assets and achievements. It is through this cross-cultural communication that teachers learn to erode the barriers to positive school environment and contribute to a safe space to learn for all students (Butler, Kane, & Morshead, 2017).

### **Conclusion**

The achievement gap is one of the most prevalent topics of discussion and research in the realm of education. As the above literature shows, researchers have done extensive studies on the myths and realities of the achievement gap, and have clearly shown that it is a *racial* achievement gap—a result of skin color, not socioeconomic, cultural differences, or biology. Other researchers have explored student identity in the face of systemic racism, and have examined adolescents navigating this life crossroads while contending with inequities and undue pressures to represent their entire race. In efforts to address the racial achievement gap, research has shown that culturally



responsive teaching, a sense of belonging, and a positive school environment can have a significant positive impact on the academic achievement and social development of students of color.

While there exists an increasing body of data regarding the racial achievement gap that focuses on comparing school populations of predominantly students of color with school populations of predominantly White students, and a noteworthy amount of that research does elicit student voice, there is a lack of research into student voice from schools that are majority White students with a smaller minority of students of color. If schools where the majority of the population is White serve a predominantly upper middle-class student population, they will not be forced to confront common issues stemming from a lack of resources, so the socioeconomic impacts discussed in so much of the above research are not entirely relevant. Likewise, much of the research on belonging and school climate either focuses on students of color in highly diverse schools, or takes place at predominantly White schools and does not identify race as a factor.

Research findings suggest that creating connections to adults and to peers can have a positive impact on belonging and school climate, which in turn advance academic achievement, but do not explore these connections within the same school demographics found in the current study. Most importantly, research demonstrates that race and identity are crucial factors in student academic and social success, and an in-depth look at the effect of race in the lived experiences of students of color in a majority White school is worth a careful exploration (Booth et al., 2017; Hammond & Jackson, 2015; Moon & Singh, 2015). The purpose of this research is to discover how students experience

culturally responsive practices in a school with predominantly White students and staff and to understand how school programs, extracurricular programs, and actions by other students and teachers affect students' day to day experiences in school.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Questions**

Two central questions guide this research. First, how does race affect students' day-to-day experience in a school with predominantly White students and staff? And second, how do school programs, extracurricular programs, and actions by other students and teachers affect students' perception of school climate and belonging?

### **Description and Rationale for Research Approach**

I hold a constructivist worldview and employ a phenomenological mixed-methods approach toward the research. The constructivist world view is built upon the belief that individuals construct complex meaning out of the world around them (Creswell, 2014). Phenomenological inquiry seeks to describe and document the lived reality of participants experiencing the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). Going beyond merely acquiring factual accounts of experiences, a constructivist world view involves understanding that participants forge meanings surrounding factual points. Building on this worldview, the phenomenological approach asks what it is like to go through that specific experience and construct meanings. The mixed-methods approach is considered convergent and parallel, as data was collected concurrently, analyzed separately, and then compared and contrasted (Creswell, 2014).

I chose both the constructivist worldview and the phenomenological approach because the design encourages looking to participants as a source of deep, complex,

understanding of a phenomenon. Many studies regarding the achievement gap focus on solely quantitative data such as grade point averages, test scores, and family income. Similarly, many programs focused on addressing the achievement gap revolve around test prep, resources, and academic strategies. The phenomenological approach allowed me to move beyond statistics and work towards a greater understanding of what daily life is like in a school where resources are not a barrier, but the racial achievement gap persists.

The goal of this research is to bring attention to subjective student perspectives and ideas surrounding the topics at hand (Seidman, 2013). The open-ended questions used in both the surveys and the focus groups in this study allow participants to tell their stories, and share previously-constructed meanings, while actively creating new meanings by speaking through the stories out loud (Seidman, 2013). This study focuses specifically on student participants because previous research indicates student voice can be one of the most powerful catalysts for change, improve student learning and teacher efficacy, and positively impact student-teacher relationships (Mitra, 2008). Therefore, a major goal of this research is to elicit student voice through open-ended questions in order to highlight the participants' view of the school experience in terms of school climate, belonging, racial identity, and culturally responsive teaching. Through these approaches, student understanding of daily life is at the center of analysis.

One concern with the constructivist phenomenological approach is that participants are asked to recount examples that have already happened, so there is an inherent element of lost accuracy due to time passed. Researchers using this approach do their best to guide participant answers toward turning the past into the present when recounting these experiences and events (Seidman, 2013). In this case, however, this

concern is mitigated by the fact that the phenomenon is constantly occurring, and participants' interpretations and memories of past occurrences—whether factually accurate or not—are just as important as the events themselves. The constructivist view acknowledges that there are multiple and varied realities as perceived by each party present for any given phenomenon. Meaning is constructed based on the backgrounds and prior conceptions of those experiencing the event, and is fluid and modifiable as time passes (Bazeley, 2013). In fact, when it comes to lived experiences (such as microaggressions), the literal words used or the intention behind them both matter less than the perceived experience of the recipient (Singleton, 2015). Both constructivist and phenomenological approaches support an in-depth exploration of how students are experiencing race, school climate, and belonging, and the meanings they are forming and reforming on a daily basis surrounding the topics.

### **Research Site**

Research took place at a secondary school in California, U.S.A. This high school has a population of approximately 1,500 students, 31% of which are considered minorities, and 7.5% of which are classified as economically disadvantaged (Education Data Partnership, 2018). I am a current teacher at this high school with approximately 165 students in my classes/tutorials. This site was selected not only because I am a member of the staff, but also because it represents a demographic for which there is an information gap—a school with a predominantly White and affluent population and a minority of students of color and economically disadvantaged students. The study was conducted outside of school hours, and therefore did not interfere with school activities or provide any disruption. I discussed the methods and purpose with the site principal and

with administration at the district level, and obtained written permission to conduct the study from the principal.

### **Participants**

Participants were high school students ages 14-18. These students were of both genders and had a wide variety of ethnic/racial backgrounds. Of the 52 survey participants, participants were 51.9% female and 48.1% male. Ethnicities represented were thirty-three White students, seven Hispanic or Latino students, six Asian or Pacific Islander students, three Black or African American students, and three students who selected “other” and self-identified as “part Native American, part White,” “Ugandan, and “White and Latino.”

One focus group included seven student participants and two included three student participants each, for a total of 13 students. Throughout my findings, I will be using pseudonyms in lieu of identifying names of people or places in order to protect the participants of the study. To increase student feeling of their voices being honored and heard, I asked them to choose their own pseudonyms. In the first focus group participants were Alex (Asian or Pacific Islander male), Chris (White female), Elodia (White female), Gem (Asian or Pacific Islander female), Lucy (White female), Olivia (White and Hispanic or Latina female), and Yen (Asian or Pacific Islander female). In the second focus group, participants were Jordan (Hispanic or Latina female), Karina (Black or African American female), and Patricia (Hispanic or Latina female). In the third focus group, participants were Samantha (Hispanic or Latina female), Sol (Hispanic or Latina female), and Sophia (Asian or Pacific Islander female).

While all students can be considered vulnerable or sensitive populations due to their status as minors, it is worth noting that students of color who participated face the added vulnerability of being members of the non-dominant culture. Students take part in a wide variety of programming at the school campus, some specifically created in order to address the achievement gap (such as after school tutoring, concurrent enrollment in the local community college, and other external programs). Some programs, instead, are focused on student involvement on campus, such as athletics, music, and theater. Still other programs directly address school climate and belonging, such as the student leadership programs that include student council and freshmen transition activities. Some student participants take part in none of the above programming, while others take part in multiple overlapping programs, providing a wide range of student experiences.

### **Sampling Procedure**

I spoke in person with students in my classes, in my tutorial advisory, and in ancillary programs (such as after school tutoring and clubs), to first verbally explain the scope of my research project. Potential participants were also provided a written explanation of the research and then asked to bring permission letters to parents/guardians for consent to the research participation.

Parents/guardians had the option of allowing children to participate in just the anonymous survey, just the focus group, or both. Therefore, both students and parents were aware of the research project and had the choice of whether they participated fully/allowed their children to participate fully, participated in only one form of data collection/allowed their children to participate in one form of data collection, or chose not to participate/allow their children to participate at all.

Since participants were all students at the high school where I teach, and I predominantly solicited participants from my own classes, the dual relationship was, therefore, that I am not just a researcher, but also in many cases their teacher. I made it explicit to students that participation would, in no way, affect their grades for class or my opinion of them. Additionally, much of the data came in the form of anonymous surveys, so there was no way in which I could retaliate if students chose not to participate or compensate for participation.

### **Methods**

I have utilized a convergent parallel mixed-methods research design in order to collect quantitative data from a larger number of students and qualitative data from a smaller focus group of students (Creswell, 2014). Specifically, I provided the majority of student participants with quantitative surveys and created three separate smaller focus groups to gather qualitative data. The mixed-method design is ideal for this research as the purpose is to elicit student voice. With quantitative surveys, more participants can be reached; while with qualitative focus groups the participants can express themselves with more depth.

Fifty-two participants completed an online survey that consisted primarily of scaled quantitative questions and four short answer questions focusing on demographics, school climate, belonging, racial identity, and culturally responsive teaching. A smaller group of participants participated in focus groups with open-ended questions focusing on the same topics. Three focus groups sessions occurred outside of academic instructional hours in my classroom at three different dates in January, allowing participants to choose a time that worked for their schedules. Participation in the focus groups was an open

invitation to all students whose parents/guardians consented. Each focus group lasted approximately 45 minutes. Focus groups were audio recorded, but not video recorded. Notes were taken during focus groups but did not include any names or identifying information (e.g., addresses, phone numbers, personal references).

### **Researcher Positionality**

As a White teacher, positionality is a concern for me. Though I am half-Persian, the color of my skin affords me with all of the privileges associated with Whiteness. I will thus never fully understand the experiences of my students of color who can be so quickly “othered” based on their physical appearance. However, my experience as a biracial person and my experience as a minority (as a queer woman) do help me empathize with what it means to navigate intersectional identities that do not match the majority. Additionally, since I interact on an almost-daily basis with the student participants in the study, I have built strong relationships with students so asking them to speak about their personal experiences became a conversation between people who wanted to reach deeper truths about the experiences of students in this community.

My biggest focus in this research was enabling students to feel a sense of belonging, as research shows the positive impact of this on the achievement gap (Bottiani, et al., 2017; Walton & Cohen, 2011). It is difficult to effectively quantify such a deep and abstract experience as “belonging,” but school environment plays a huge role in how students perceive themselves as a part of, or distant from, the community. With a deeper understanding of the experiences these students are having, we (as educators) can better focus our efforts to create a positive school climate that can, in turn support, students’ academic success and help shrink the achievement gap. One aim of this study is



to explore how current school practices affect students from the perspectives of the students themselves, not just from statistics.

### **Data Analysis**

Data from the convergent parallel mixed-methods research was collected concurrently, analyzed separately, compared and contrasted, and ultimately presented as a side-by-side comparison throughout the findings. This comparison allows for a fuller understanding of student voice as it highlights all participant data for a specific theme in the same section, making parallels and disparities apparent (Creswell, 2014).

Qualitative data was analyzed both inductively and deductively. Beginning with the direct responses from the short answers in the anonymous online survey, and the transcriptions of the three focus groups, I organized the data into increasingly more specific groupings of similar concepts expressed. Once I had a preliminary understanding of which codes applied to the data, I worked back and forth between the codes and the data itself to sort into more comprehensive themes (Bazeley, 2013). The process began as inductive in that I started by looking to the data to generate codes, then continued as deductive as I reviewed from the codes to the data and back to the codes in order to develop themes and draw connections between the codes (Creswell, 2014).

Quantitative data was analyzed by looking at the diction in the short answers of the anonymous online survey and calculating what percent of answers displayed specific word choices. Additionally, when looking at the scaled quantitative questions, I graphed answers question-by-question displaying the number selected by White students and by students of color. The goal of this simple representation of the data is to allow readers to

see the results without additional manipulation or excessive interpretation, so as to form their own opinions about significance in addition to the ones I provide.

### **Validity and Reliability**

One potential concern with a mixed-methods approach is that it does not adhere directly to either specific method (Bazeley, 2013). In order for the quantitative portion to be reliable, the surveys were anonymous and given with ample time for students to think through answers without pressure. The same exact survey was provided to each participant. Attempts to ensure validity include disclosing researcher bias and having just one researcher (myself) conduct all three of the focus groups. The constructivist phenomenological approach utilized in data analysis avoids sweeping generalizations about entire populations and, instead, explores students' perceptions of their daily lived experiences. Lastly, the mixed-methods approach to the research design allows for the chance to look for and analyze internal consistency across multiple different data points by triangulating between focus groups, surveys, and observations.

### **Findings**

While a large body of research has shown the value of culturally responsive teaching for students of color, this research demonstrates that belonging and school climate matter to all students. Within the demographic of a student population comprised of majority White and affluent students and minority lower socioeconomic status students of color, student participants identified three major themes that contribute to lived experience of belonging and positive school climate.

The first theme is pervasive awareness of similarities and differences and its effects on identity-formation. Erikson's (1968) theory of identity versus role confusion

explains that adolescence is an important life stage for developing individual identities while grappling with the confusion of the differing personal and societal roles with which they identify. This was evident in the data in that, in all three focus groups, students brought up how they see themselves as compared to other students, and discussed the widespread acknowledgement of difference within the student body. The ability to identify a specified role within a community contributes to a sense of belonging in that students feel secure that they fit in. Being aware of differences among peers allows students to explore role confusion and contend with threats to their sense of identity. Even in identifying the differences of others, they solidify their own “sameness” with their core friends, thus strengthening interpersonal bonds and sense of belonging at school. The awareness of similarities and differences correlates to culturally responsive teaching in relation to the first finding Hammond (2015) describes: the brain is designed to thrive on connection, while diminishing any threats to safety or wellbeing. In comparing themselves to other students, adolescents are navigating their identities. As they become aware of similarities, their connections with peers are strengthened. Recognizing differences, however, they become attuned to potential threats to their wellbeing.

The next theme to come out of all sources of data was the importance of the daily interactions students hold with each other. This is also in line with Erikson’s (1968) theory of identity versus role confusion in that it is through interactions with each other that adolescents are able to fully explore who they are currently and who they want to be as individuals. The importance of peer relationships also factors into the second neurological finding described by Hammond (2015). She explains that positive

relationships are the brain's first line of defense against a fight-or-flight reaction.

Through building relationships with each other, students fortify their feelings of safety and lower their affective filter, which in turn allows them to maintain a receptive headspace for learning.

The third theme is that students clearly (and across the board) identified was the significance of personalized educational experiences constructed by adults. Throughout the data, there was one glaring topic that no student mentioned when speaking about school climate or belonging—academic course content. Based on student voice, class content does not affect whether students feel a sense of belonging in a course—personal interactions with teachers do. This supports Hammond's (2015) finding that relationships between teachers and students are key in creating a threat-free learning environment. It also mirrors research that shows that positive relationships with adults can increase attendance, engagement, and academic achievement (Bottiani, et al., 2016; Stelmach, et al., 2017; Yaffe, 2013).

Additionally, culturally responsive teaching suggests that students cannot learn new material unless it is connected to their own prior knowledge, not just academically but also in their own lives. For teachers to know how to connect new content to what students already know, it is vital that they spend the time to get to know students and build an understanding of with what prior knowledge each individual arrives in class.

Lastly, culturally responsive teaching posits that if students are not engaged, they are not learning. Though this may seem to be a common-sense concept, the data derived from this study suggests that one key way for students to become more engaged in a

specific class setting is to feel connected not just to other students in that class, but also to the teacher.

### **Pervasive Awareness of Differences and its Effects on Identity-Formation**

As noted above, in comparing themselves to others, students strive to solidify their identities by forming connections, which, according to culturally responsive teaching research, can calm the parasympathetic system and mitigate a fight-or-flight response (Hammond, 2015). While students did remark on similarities they share, and ways in which they make and keep school-based friendships, many participants spoke at length about differences they notice between themselves and other students. These differences include diverse living situations and locales, the effects of campus architecture and layout on making connections with others, and some visual markers of difference such as race or clothing choice.

**Distance from home to campus affects social connections.** One way in which the awareness of the distance of home to campus became especially clear was when students spoke about the way the physical environment affects their school lives. Students feel disconnected from their peers and from the school culture due to two major factors present at this site: the distance students live from campus, and the school campus layout. As mentioned earlier, there is one large middle school in close proximity to the high school as well as numerous smaller feeder middle schools that range to as far as twelve or more miles away. This difference in the home locations for students who attend the same high school affects friendships by making it more challenging to meet each other outside of school hours. In the first focus group, Elodia said with some wistfulness in her voice, “I have some friends that because of them doing sports and not having any

classes with them and because I live far away from school that I just completely stop seeing ever unless I specifically reached out or something.” In the second focus group Karina expressed mirroring sentiments:

I live in Fernando so I don't really hang out with anyone from school because I don't drive personally yet, and it would take too much work to see other people or go to games and stuff like that. I feel like it [my ownership of campus] would be stronger if we were still able to have good social communication with the kids who go here, we'd feel more a part of it if we still had a social life with Fairview outside of school. Because as soon as it's Friday I know I won't talk to anyone until Monday, it's like two different things [school and home].

Patricia, a student who lives near the high school in Fairview reflected that, despite living close to the school, her family situation and the distance of her friends' homes impact her social life: “I don't really hang out with friends or anything because most of my friends live far away, so they don't hang out. Also, my parents can't be going back and forth to pick me up.”

In the third focus group, physical location of home versus school was a major theme as well, but rather than focusing on friendships, students pointed out how living farther from campus affects their sense of belonging in the school community by restricting their access to after school events. Jordan stated,

Because of where I live, that makes me feel not a part of the community here.

Because I live all the way in Bella Vista, so I feel disconnected from the school not being able to be a part of the spirit of Fairview. When I want to come [to the games] I'm not able to because I'm all the way in Bella Vista.

Sol agreed with the sentiment and added,

I've only been to one basketball game, I haven't been to any plays, I haven't really been a part of everything because my parents work late, and I can't take the bus by myself at night...I don't really get the full experience, I guess.

Sophia also expressed that she could not go to late night events. She said, "There are like late games too that start at seven to nine and I just don't want to go see that," then laughed and exchanged glances with her friends, making it clear with her body language that it was not that she did not want to see the game itself, but rather that she did not want to go at that time of night. Samantha, a player on the school's softball team, rounded out the conversation by summarizing her sense of exclusion and expressing hope for the future, "It makes me feel like I'm missing some *thing* about Fairview. Next year I hope to watch more games." She lingered on the word "thing," lending the word an air of both significance and ambiguity, a reflection of the fact that she herself was not sure exactly what she was missing by living far away from the campus.

In all three focus groups, students highlighted that being unable to attend these after school activities such as games or plays was seen as experiencing high school differently from the majority of students—students who live closer to the school and have access to transportation to and from home. Samantha identified that,

I know a whole bunch of people that take the bus and they can't be late for the bus to go home so it's kind of difficult. Also, because Meridian is like a freeway away, but Fairview City—I feel like it's so much closer to where a lot of people live here.

The physical distance from Fairview of students who live farther away and went to smaller feeder schools such as Bella Vista or Meridian affects their ability to participate in after school events that are frequently a major part of the social life of Fairview High School students, and they are very aware that this leads to a feeling of disconnection from others, and from the school zeitgeist.

**Campus layout hinders connections.** The layout of the campus is also not designed to increase connections among students, which comes as a surprise to students representing many of the feeder middle schools. Whether it is the locations of buildings or the sheer size of the campus, students recognized that the physical environment impacts their ability to connect with each other. Lucy broached the subject in the first focus group in response to my question, “In what ways are you a part of the community at this high school?” She said,

So I came to Fairview which has this strange dynamic. Like, Central Middle School is a different dynamic; we had the weird pod system where we all had this communal learning space in the middle, and then Fairview is the exact opposite where it’s like all spread out. So even the community life between Fairview and Central is different, and I feel like for everybody there was a little bit of a culture shock. Like if you have big siblings you kind of know Fairview from the outside then you get to know Fairview from the inside and you’re like “Ok, there’s a giant mob of people between buildings, that’s strange,” and then campus is deserted at lunch, that’s nice as well, I mean, it’s kind of quiet, but it’s strange as well. And it’s nothing like pop media or culture would say.



Alex was especially fascinated by the idea of layout affecting interactions and excitedly jumped into the conversation,

I notice that the architecture of some schools influences how people get together. Like as you [Lucy] said, at Central the pod systems kind of force people to be together, and they form these little social circles because they are so close to each other all the time. And then you move to more open space like Fairview, where things spread out, and you have to go in between different buildings. People have already formed those circles so it's harder to get in. Once you're in this open space they're still trying to hold on to that kind of system that they had.

As he spoke, the other students nodded their agreement with his analysis.

In focus group two, students focused on the big size of the high school campus. The conversation sounded more like an offhand chat between friends than it did an answer to my question. Sol began by pointing out, "There's so many people. We all came from small schools and just coming into this school it's like ten times bigger than the schools we went to and it was scary." Samantha chimed in, "Like population and campus-wise the campus is huge..." at which point Sol interjected, "The campus is so big," while Samantha continued, "Like with so many stairs. But I'm getting used to it." Sophia waited for the two to finish before somewhat smugly remarking, "I went on so many tours of Fairview, so I knew where everything was." Sol and Samantha bravely expressed how vulnerable the big campus made them feel, and how disconnected, while Sophia's tone of voice supported the idea that a sense of connection to school helps students feel more comfortable and more confident in themselves.

**Visual markers of identity further impede connections.** Lucy used the theme of school layout to springboard to another aspect of the school climate that differentiated students from each other—race.

So, you see them [African American students at this school] and I walk home every day and I go down the stairs and I go down the street and there's literally a group of African American kids who sit in that one little planter right outside the pick-up lot and all the White kids stand over by the gym or right by the crosswalk and there's literally almost a line in the sand.

In a school with such a large majority of White students, any students who visually appear different are quickly identified. As Lucy points out, students often stand in segregated groups. Chris expressed one of the more commonly heard narrative to explain this phenomenon: “The majority of the people in Fairview are also White, and...there's a much larger majority of people of color coming from other places, so there's an automatic separation depending on what school people went to.” As described above, the location students live can have a large impact on who they spend time with, and as in much of the country, the cities in this county are segregated (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As students navigate campus, whether or not they look like the dominant culture can affect their identity formation and the groups to which they feel able to bond.

In focus group one, students embarked on a discussion of what the “popular” students at the high school wear, which can be seen as a discussion of which visual markers of identity make up the dominant culture. Lucy stated, “There is a specific clothing, it's leggings, crop tops, and bulky Adidas shoes.” Olivia jumped in quickly to add more important brands, “And lululemon, especially, that's a big one, a lot of

Patagonia, those Levi denim jackets with the wool inside, like, I'm not above that, I own one, they're awesome, but there's a look." As Olivia described the above, Lucy affirmed each brand with an "Mmm hmm" or a "Yeah," and after "Patagonia" Alex agreed with an "Mmm hmmm definitely." Lucy continued by saying,

For girls it's like you have a closet full of black leggings, crop tops and maybe a couple pairs of the shoes that look exactly the same. For boys it's like khakis, t-shirts, and vans. And then you know people who aren't in that crowd.

In her last sentence Lucy began to identify the fact that if students can be identified as part of that crowd by what they wear, then it follows that students can be identified as *not* part of that crowd by what they wear. Chris jumped in to bring up a different point, "There's also an element of more confidence, like usually the people who would be considered the popular ones...are not only the ones who dress like that, but are mostly ultimately the ones who have the most confidence in themselves," suggesting that visual clues are not just materialistic, but also behavioral. Olivia added to the behavioral description by saying, "They're often very loud," to which every student in the focus group loudly assented in different terms of agreement.

Though Chris did not appear to self-identify as part of the popular group above, she did remark upon how being part of the dominant culture affects the way she experiences the world,

I feel like being White has kind of in a way—not just in school, but in other situations—has given me this kind of presumed innocence and good intent. And also that I feel like people trust me more, and are not trying to like—what's the word?—victimize, vilify, or make me look bad; they're not trying to find a way in

which I mess up, or trying to *antagonize* me, that's the word. Like anyone, authority, a teacher...

Though she did not state it outright, in suggesting she is not antagonized by authorities because she is White, Chris intimates that in her perspective people of color are antagonized due to their skin color.

In a conversation that was mostly dominated by the White students in the room up until this point, the topic of race inspired a conversation between three students in the first focus group who identify as Asian or Pacific Islander. Yen began by describing her first impression of Fairview,

I used to live in Southern California and I was living in this town or whatever where a third of it was Asian basically. So, I went to a school where there's all these Korean kids and all these Asian kids, so I just grew up thinking "Oh that's probably what it's like everywhere, you know, a third of the school is Asian, cool." So then I moved up here and I was like "wow, White." I was just really shocked and even my mom asked me like, "It's really racially different up here than it was down there" and I told her what I just said; I grew up thinking everyone has a third of its town is Asian because I just grew up like that, so coming up here was really different. In my history class, there are four Asian kids and I was like "Wow that's a lot of Asian kids in one class. That's...a milestone."

Yen laughed, and the rest of the group joined her in the laughter. Alex added with a hint of jealousy, "I'm lucky if I can get two." Gem added, "Kind of to your point, I'm in your history class so we're two of the four." The specific numbers these students cite indicates

not only how small the minority is, but also that they are keenly aware of not looking like the majority and therefore seek out the students who do look like them.

In the second focus group, two freshmen who both identify as Hispanic or Latina disagreed on how they were perceived on campus based on their looks. Jordan began the conversation with a contradiction, “People are judgy, people aren’t judgy,” in an attempt to explain that not all people act in the same way. She continued, however, by describing what it is like when people do judge: “Like they judge you on your looks instead of the inside personality-wise, like side glares stuff like that.” Patricia replied, “I don’t get judged, I don’t think so, people can judge, like, in their minds, but I don’t know.” An answer in the anonymous online survey also reflected this uncertainty in evaluating whether they were being treated with disrespect or racism due to how they look,

I don't know if this counts as disrespectful but one time during class... a girl came up to me and started touching my hair and playing with it. She told me (while still touching my hair) that she liked Asian hair because it was super dark and shiny. I didn't really feel “disrespected” but I was sort of shocked and didn't know how to respond.

Though the girl described by this student literally said that she liked her hair due to the participant’s race, the participant still qualifies whether the action is “disrespectful,” revealing his or her own lack of education surrounding how to interpret racially-motivated behaviors.

This topic especially energized two students who did not necessarily have as much to say in earlier parts of the discussion. Each student spoke at length about her experience with looking different from the majority. Karina, a twelfth grader who had

moved from across the state to begin her eleventh-grade year at Fairview, talked about the difficulty of not looking like everyone else. She begins by acknowledging Jordan's earlier remark about "side glares."

I can relate to the side glances like that, I just want to say if my side glances have anything to do with race because people aren't sure what I am, they just know I'm not one thing in general. I feel like it throws people off on how they want to communicate with me because there are stereotypes at school about different races, so then when it comes to me they're not really sure which one I go with, so they just don't know what to do about that, that's kind of it. ...It would make me feel worse if I was treated more poorly like other students of color I've seen get treated because of it, because I'm not obvious. Like with the Meridian kids they're...I feel like because I've been to other schools with different races and stuff I feel like here there's a very big stereotype with the Meridian kids that they're, like it's obvious that their living conditions are different, but people also treat them here differently because of that, and I don't have to deal with that. So that's noticeably different, and that makes me and their communication different because they know that I don't get treated the same way they do even though we share a major race together... It was harder for me to make friends because where I was from there wasn't a lot of diversity, not a lot of different races. So immediately I wanted to go towards more like the Meridian friends like trying to have more Black friends. And because of how they're treated here, it changes their attitudes and how they notice that I wasn't treated the same it was hard for

me to make friends with them because we all we just clashed basically so it was pretty hard.

Gem, an eleventh-grade student, spoke at length about what it means to look Asian or Pacific Islander in this demographic.

In my school I went to before I was one of the only Asian kids in the whole entire school like *entire school*. There was maybe like three and a couple half-Asian kids, but I was basically one of the only Asian kids, and I was excited to come to Fairview because one thing I was looking for a lot at Fairview was diversity and I came to Fairview and I was like “Oh yeah there are a couple Asian kids.” But then I started to realize as I saw everybody I was like there really isn’t that many [sic]. I think one of the reasons is we live in this county and it’s so... I mean everyone that lives—not everyone but most people here—to live here you have to have some wealth because it’s so expensive, and I think that plays a lot into it. But yeah, I was kind of looking for more of a diverse school. When I went back to China, well, because I was born in China, but when I went back to China it was interesting because there everyone else looked like me like; I was not the outlier. It was kind of funny because I was walking around and everyone looked like me and a lot of them tried to talk in Chinese to me and I was “I’m sorry I don’t speak Chinese,” which was weird, and so then I came back here and I was like “Wow there really—especially in this county there just isn’t much diversity.” And sometimes—this may sound weird—but sometimes I just go into the city to be around people that look like me because there just aren’t very many here.

Students like Karina and Gem found that when they sought to make connections with students they perceived to be of their own race, they were either met with a cultural divide due to living situations, or a literal lack of students on campus who look like them. In terms of seeking connection to calm the fight-or-flight response, their experiences show a dearth of opportunity for students of color to forge meaningful relationships with students they perceive to be similar to themselves. They also reveal a lack of positive role models with whom students can identify. In terms of self-efficacy, research suggests that a person's sense of ability can be positively impacted by the vicarious experience of another's success, when that person identifies with the model. Findings show that students of color on this campus may not have easy access to role models of their race, thus negatively impacting their self-efficacy.

**Racism and stereotyping on campus.** A major aspect of the school climate at Fairview that came up across all data sources was the pervasiveness of subtle racism between students on campus, often in the form of jokes. In the anonymous online survey, in response to the short-answer question, "Please provide an example of an instance when you or another student were disrespected by an adult or another student at this school because of your (or their) race, ethnicity, or culture," 60% of students described an example of racism or racist jokes, while 40% of students wrote a version of "Not Applicable" such as "None" or "Does not apply." Breaking that down by race, 70% of students of color indicated an example of an instance of disrespect to themselves or others, while only 54% of White students wrote a substantive answer. In the first focus group, Chris also spoke to this theme,



I feel like there isn't a lot of really direct racism at this school, but there's definitely a lot of microaggression, and I think that's the way it is for issues of sexism and homophobia and anything like that; people making jokes all the time and talking about things in a not very caring way is very common. It's like everyone assumes we're in such a liberal time there's no racism, there's no issues, but there is some of that that's underlying that's less of a direct hatred more like lack of understanding.

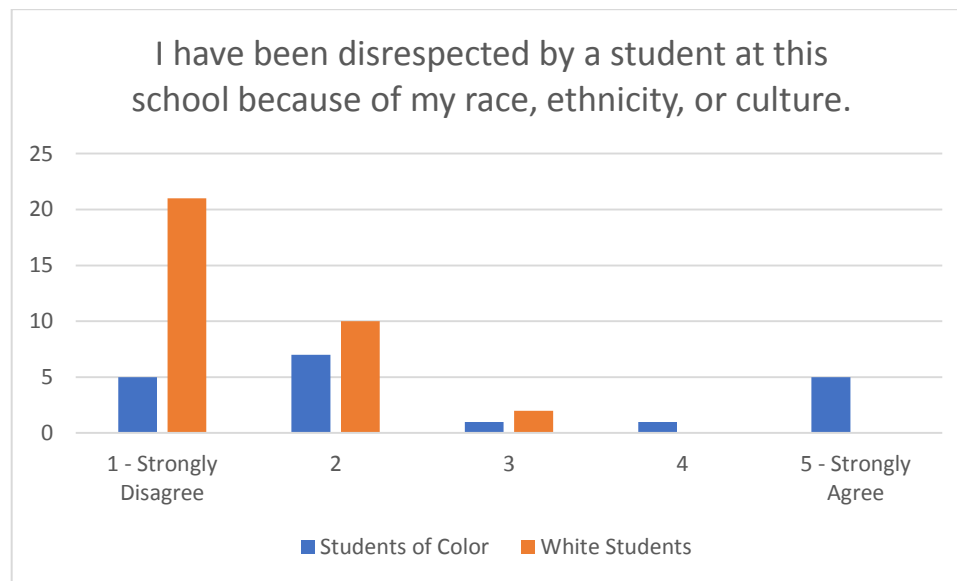
Lucy described an instance of students stereotyping a peer as a member of the "model-minority," a stereotype that is seen as positive, but is racist nevertheless.

I have a half-Asian friend who is a sophomore in calculus and I feel like as someone who is White and semi-struggles with math, he's like a math whiz, and everyone's like "Oh yeah, it's because he's Asian"...but it's kind of interesting because he perpetuates that and he makes the jokes he's like "Yeah it's 'cause I'm Asian that's why I'm like super smart" and when people say that he's Asian so he's smart he laughs at that too.

When I asked her if she could perhaps empathize with why he has that reaction to the stereotyping, she mused, "I think maybe...that people know about and they see it, and maybe they joke about it too, and so it's like, the only way I can accept it is if I joke about it too."

On a question scaled one to five, one being "Strongly Disagree" and five being "Strongly Agree," student responses to the question "I have been disrespected by a student at this school because of my race, ethnicity, or culture" is shown in the graph

below. This question goes beyond jokes to try to evaluate how many students have experiences racially-motivated mistreatment by their peers.



*Figure 1: I have been disrespected by a student at this school because of my race, ethnicity, or culture.*

While most students fell on the side of “Strongly Disagree,” it is interesting that for categories four and five, the “Strongly Agree” options, we find only students of color.

Two examples that underscored overt racism in peer-to-peer interactions came from Alex and Gem. Alex stated, “There’s certainly animosity coming from other students per say, like in freshman year this kid put a picture of me as his Instagram profile and had a speech bubble coming off of it that said I’m a—and then a racial slur.” He continued, his voice taking on a sarcastic tone, “Which was great for me.” He then described the ramifications of the experience,

[Racism] coming from other students isn’t great especially because you have to be in several classes with them...so it just kind of amplifies it like if one person doesn’t like you maybe they’ll tell their friends to not like you or if you have to be

in the same classes with them a lot it just makes it worse because you can't really get away from them.

Gem described a similar experience,

There was only like one time when there was direct racism toward me. I think it was freshman year. I was walking back from lunch and some kids saw me and they were trying to talk in a Chinese accent and they were trying to act as if they were doing something with Chinese take-out, like a Chinese take-out place. I wasn't too fazed by it and I just kind of ignored it and kept walking because I didn't want to have to you know, I was, like, "Okay." And I felt more in a way sorry for them than I did for me because for them to do that there must have been something that was bothering them for them to do something to me like that. So I wasn't fazed by that too much but that was like the one time where I felt direct racism to me like that.

Participants in the online surveys expressed similar experiences. One student wrote that their friends joked that they "eat dogs and cats" and identified that this was racist, but nonetheless did not bother them. Another student wrote

An example that I have seen was a remark concerning someone who received an award on a standardized test for being in a high percentile of Hispanic students who took the test. The remark was that it was easy to get such an award, because Hispanic students are generally unintelligent, and therefore usually receive low scores.

Coded racism also affects the way students experience the school climate. For example, students from Meridian are often stereotyped for coming from that part of the

county. In words, these stereotypes blame geography or poverty, but they do not acknowledge that the city is also predominantly people of color. When the subject came up in the second focus group, Patricia noted, “I guess I’ve heard it’s a bad neighborhood,” to which Jordan replied,

Oh yeah didn’t Sophie tell us because she lives in Meridian...she was having a birthday party and she was like “Yeah a lot of people don’t want to come because it’s in Meridian and they’re like ‘Oh it’s a bad neighborhood.’”

In the online survey, one student wrote, “Meridian kids are treated differently for their race and where they live.” Another anonymous student wrote, “There appears to be social segregation between Fairview and Meridian kids.” This mirrors Karina’s comments earlier about difficulties interacting with “Meridian kids” despite “sharing a major race.”

The lack of understanding affects student perceptions of each other in all directions. For example, Karina noted that to her, White students on campus seem entitled. When I asked what entitled meant, she explained,

The person thinks they’re better than everyone else because of what they come from and what they have is different from other people and it’s just not a good trait or kind of quality it seems like a lot of people have that here because some of these kids don’t go out and see other life situations they don’t see what’s going on they only want to see what’s happening here.

Samantha mirrored this concept in the third focus group,

People are basically born to stereotype like it’s already in us. We’ve probably stereotyped before and all. So no one can say that they haven’t stereotyped someone. It [being of the dominant culture] gives them a more different

perspective on the world I guess. Because they've been living in this small community, they haven't reached out I believe.

Lucy expressed a similar sentiment in the first focus group,

It's like instilled racism that you may not know about but you were raised to understand and I think that that is a big part of our community because a term that's thrown around is the "Fairview bubble" because we are literally a rich mostly White community and people of color are either half White or they were adopted by people who are White.

As she concluded her sentence, both Gem and Yen burst out in somewhat awkward laughter. When I asked why they laughed, Gem replied, "That's both of us, it's true though," revealing that both Asian- or Pacific Islander-identifying students were adopted by White parents, and therefore have direct access to the dominant culture.

Students also noted examples of racism or stereotyping from teachers and staff toward students. Within the 60% of answers mentioned above that indicated racism, stereotyping, or jokes, 43% of those answers specified actions from teachers. Jordan described how this can happen in the classroom, through,

Stereotypes, judging, and not being able to express yourself. Like at the end of the first semester my teacher started writing on my papers a lot and showing them in front of the whole class on the projector and started writing that I was wrong on these and saying that pretty much in front of the entire class. So that made me feel kind of self-conscious. He said my name in front of the whole class. It made it harder [for me to learn in class] but also made me want to make the teacher respect me more by trying harder to do everything right.

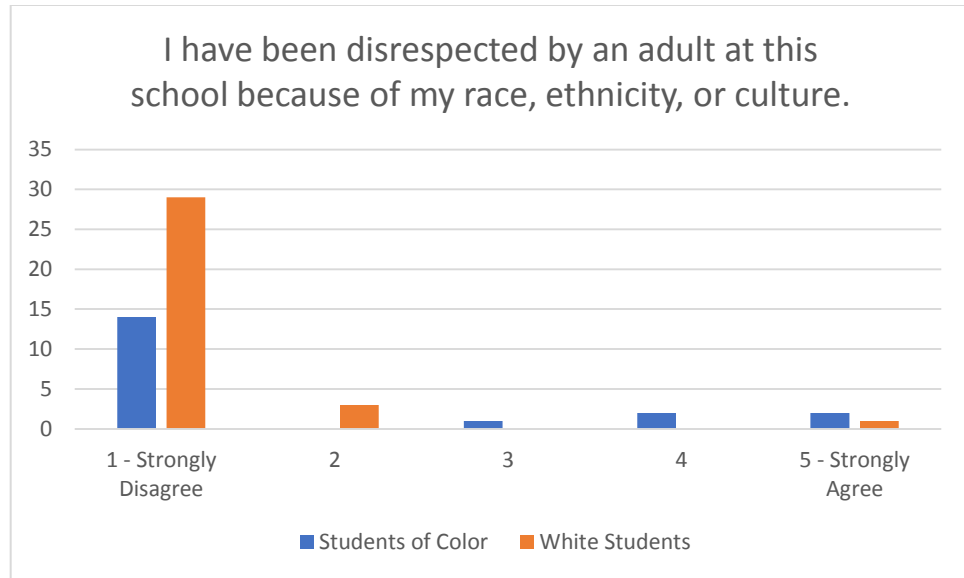
In the second focus group, Samantha said,

I've seen it like some teachers think that this one kid will be bad news or like would be trouble to their class just because of how he looks or something like that, so it might be like harder sometimes but not all the time because most teachers are really nice and don't do that.

Karina, a student who identifies as Black or African American, described how shocked she was by the actions of a teacher when she first arrived at Fairview:

Like when I came here last year and I got into different all my new classes because I started my junior year here I noticed that one of my teachers put all of us Black kids in the back row because she thought that maybe we needed more help, but she still didn't help us, but she made the seating chart that way so that we were all still close to each other and I've never had that before in a school like when they'd purposely do that.

Perhaps because as a teacher myself, my presence in the focus groups made it less likely for students to speak out against teachers, most of the remarks on this subject came from the anonymous online survey. On another scaled question, student response to the statement "I have been disrespected by an adult at this school because of my race, ethnicity, or culture" is shown in the graph below.



*Figure 2: I have been disrespected by an adult at this school because of my race, ethnicity, or culture.*

Though the clear majority of participants of all races chose “Strongly Disagree” in response, it is worth noting that again as the numbers climb to “Strongly Agree” we find a greater number of students of color. In short answer questions on the survey, students often spoke about instances they had seen that had happened to their peers, rather than to themselves. One student said, “A kid was considered not as smart by a teacher because he was Hispanic before even asking him the question.” Another said, “When a Mexican student was giving an answer in class, a substitute teacher made a comment about how ‘Our country doesn't need them.’” Another anonymous comment was,

I knew a girl who was half Black and told by a teacher that she was not going to get anywhere in life because of her skin color and that is the way things are. I also knew of someone who was Black and was told by a teacher that her kind did not deserve to be educated.

Similarly, someone wrote, “Some teachers expect less of colored students, so they don’t pay as much attention to them, and when they don’t participate the teachers don’t care.”

Another comment was, “A lot of the students of color get patronized by teachers, maybe without the teachers realizing it.” In the same theme, another student wrote,

I personally have not experienced any social or institutional racism, but I know that plenty of students of color are treated differently by students due to the social segregation that exists at Fairview or by teachers due to preconceived ideas that they lack the desire to learn or try.

Similar to what Karina described in her math class, a White student wrote, “I have heard of a math teacher separating Black kids in the class to a different section of the room and giving them easier work.”

A few students anonymously reported negative experiences with teachers or staff directed at themselves. One student wrote,

I wouldn’t necessarily say “disrespect” but I’ve had multiple teachers before who were biased towards one race which I guess you can say is human nature. There are multiple instances where I’ve been in a group project, I do unfair majority of the project, yet my fellow White classmates receive a better grade than me. I can definitely say with certainty that I have had to work harder than the White students at Fairview to gain respect from teachers and authority figures at Fairview.

Another student explained,

Last year in math class my math teacher would makes subtle jokes about my religion (Judaism). Whenever they had a math problem with a banker or coins



involved they would use my name as an example. This happened enough for me to realize that they were using my name to promote a Jewish stereotype.

One student described how they perceived that race influenced disciplinary measures,

In the 10th grade during one of the walk outs that had to do with the Trump election one of Trump's supporters, a senior at the time, after calling me an immigrant and telling me I would get deported, shoved me onto the floor and I ended up getting suspended. So not only did the guy get away with that, but I was obligated to write him an apology letter.

Three different students identified teachers who—perhaps in efforts to be anti-racist by creating awareness of racial differences—instead created a hostile learning environment for all students. I have used pseudonyms here as throughout the rest of the paper. One student wrote, “Mr. Smith often disregards students’ comments because he says they have a disproportionate viewpoint because they are either White or grew up in Fairview City.” Another student contributed, “Mr. Jones has referred to our class as White and entitled and blames our lack of work ethic on this occasionally.” Lastly, a student expressed how exclusive of the minority this language can be, even while it is simultaneously intended to humble or humiliate the majority, “One teacher calls us all rich kids from Central but not everyone is.” Shutting down student voice based on race or socioeconomic status is not a culturally responsive practice, regardless of whether it is addressing marginalized students or students of the dominant culture. Instead of fostering an environment of connection and learning, it threatens students’ sense of safety and immediately sends the brain into fight-or-flight. Comments like these are also extremely divisive, and inherently pit students of different racial backgrounds against each other.

### **Daily Interactions with School Peers**

Based on the results of this study, it is tempting to say that student life revolves entirely around friendships. Almost every participant, whether in focus groups or in the online anonymous survey, mentioned their peers in one way or another. In culturally responsive teaching, the value of these connections is noted by the effect relationships have on the brain. Namely, with strong and positive relationships, the amygdala is less easily triggered, and flight-or-flight is a less-frequent state (Hammond, 2015). In efforts to explore what creates positive school climate and sense of belonging, the importance of friendship cannot be overstated. Students spoke about interactions with peers not just in terms of those they already have bonds with, however. They also mentioned the difficulties inherent in a transition from middle school to high school, the impact of extracurricular activities, and the effect of Fairview's culture of college readiness on peer interactions.

**Friendships.** In the anonymous online survey, I asked the question "What makes you look forward to going to school?" While many students spoke about specific classes, sports, or extra-curricular activities, 70% of student responses included wording about seeing friends. In each of my focus groups when I asked, "What do other students do to make you feel like you belong here?" the first thing that came up was simple acts of kindness. Elodia said,

Maybe it's just me and it's kind of subtle but I feel like one of the things that makes me feel like I fit in more than anything else is when people do simple things like just say "Hi" to me or laugh at the joke that I told. I feel like simple things that would make any person just feel like they actually are valued and

remembered in the community as somebody, in the school, which matters so much to everybody especially teenagers feeling like they belong in some way. Gem reiterated the value of just being said “Hello” to by someone perceived to be just an acquaintance, and how that gesture made her feel like maybe they were more like friends than acquaintances. Olivia agreed, saying, “It’s definitely the little things that make you feel welcome,” and then described an experience where she often gave tape to a classmate she saw as just an acquaintance, and how impactful it was to her when at the end of the year the classmate bought her replacement tape. She explained the significance of the act, “It’s kind of nice to know that they still think about you enough to do something for you even if you’re not close.” Gem remarked, “It’s like “Oh wow someone remembered I existed, that’s kind of cool.” Sophia similarly mentioned the power of being greeted, “For me I was on the tennis team, too, and they’ll just come up to me and be like ‘Hi, what’s up?’”

**The transition from middle school to high school.** The transition from middle school to high school was a major feature of the conversation when it came to how students found a sense of belonging at Fairview. Although Chris quickly said, “As somebody who did go to Central Middle School and go to Central Elementary School, I felt like going from middle school to high school wasn’t that much of a catastrophic change,” the majority of students did express challenges in the transition into Fairview. Talking about how friendships got formed brought up many questions about whether or not cliques exist at Fairview, and if they do, if they are directly related to middle school friend groups or not. Olivia explained,

A lot of friend groups at Fairview are the already pre-established people that went to Central and then from all the other feeder schools like Bella Vista, Meridian, Skyline, they all kind of integrate themselves into the already pre-established Central groups.

Gem, a student who came from a much smaller private feeder school, Skyline, agreed with this and shared her own experience,

Coming into Fairview, it was kind of a little bit of a shock just because it's so big and coming from a school where the biggest graduating class was sixteen it was a little hard—intimidating in a way—to come into such a big school and have so many people especially because everyone knows each other from Central there aren't that many kids who come in from smaller schools and it's harder to work yourself into friend groups just because they've been with each other all the way in middle school and everyone already knows each other.

Elodia felt that friend groups were also often formed in middle school, adding that

Sometimes the kids if they're in classes together they become friends, and there are close groups of friends, but it doesn't have to do with how smart you are or what necessarily you're involved in, and everyone floats around from group to group.

Olivia expanded on the thought by emphasizing that she had a similar experience coming from Bella Vista,

I moved around a lot so I learned how to change schools and integrate myself into that school so I had a little bit of an advantage over some of my friends and it was definitely [hard] seeing them navigate a big school...I feel like I had to help other

people out with like how to navigate Fairview because it was such a difference between Bella Vista and here even though they're like ten miles apart.

All three students in the third focus group attended Meridian Middle School before Fairview, and although they had a rough transition, at the time of the conversation (mid-way through second semester) they felt more adjusted. Sophia said,

At Meridian it's so different from here. There we barely had any classes; I thought that everything was easy. But now here there's like so many, like seven different classes, and a lot of things you have to do for each class.

All three students pointed to friendships as the main catalyst for their greater sense of belonging. Sol said,

I actually really like this school now. At the beginning of the year I didn't feel like I was a part of it. But I guess that was because we were freshmen and it was just a few months in, but now I'm really starting to really like it and it's fun going to school. Like a few months ago, I used to not want to go to school because I didn't have anything to look forward to, but now it's like "Oh yeah, I get to see my friends in class, I get to talk to my friends in class, I get to hang out with them" and so that's just exciting now.

Samantha added,

I wanted to go to a private high school, but I couldn't get in due to financial-wise, so now I'm at Fairview. At the beginning of the year Fairview was at the very bottom of my high school list—like at the very bottom—because I just didn't *feel* like...I didn't go with Fairview, like it wasn't my school. But now it's like I just get to see more friends and, I don't know, I just like it.

Sophia agreed,

For the first semester I guess I felt lost—not like literally—but figuratively or whatever, because I didn't know like where are my friends, like who are my friends, and now I know who are the people I like and stuff.

Most students pointed out that the friendships they had were based almost entirely on scheduling—which classes or activities you have determine who you spend your time with, and thus who you become friends with. Olivia stated,

I had a friend group freshmen year we were like “this,” [she showed her fingers crossed tightly together]. I had classes with them, we hung out all the time, there didn't go one day when I didn't even see them. This year I totally got separated from that friend group and I barely talk to them anymore. Just because we don't have classes together, you get so spread out and you have no way to stay in contact.

Lucy agreed, “I didn't talk to a girl since we were in third grade and all of a sudden this year we have six classes together, and we're like best friends now...you become friends with people in your classes.” Elodia gave an example of the lack of shared schedules having as strong an effect: “I've completely lost contact with some people just because I don't have classes with them. Sometimes just because you're so busy with your lives.”

**Extra-curricular activities impact friendship and sense of belonging.** In addition to friendships formed in middle school or in classes, extra-curricular activities such as sports, music, or clubs form an important role in the relationships students create as a part of their high school experience. My first question in each focus group was, “In what ways are you a part of the community at this high school?” While many participants

first said, “Student,” the majority went on to describe that they were a part of drama, band, sports, or clubs. Olivia pointed out that student involvement in so many activities was one of the reasons friend groups can be so fluid,

Fairview kids are doing everything because that’s the culture here; you do sports, and school, and ASB [Associated Student Body], and some after school activities like drama or volunteering. It’s the culture here to do as much as you can so...it’s both like you have your sport group, you have your drama group, you have the people you hang out with when you’re doing whatever extracurricular you do, and then you have your friend in each class maybe that friend repeats in each class but with a lot of people I know the case is you have several different groups that you rotate around depending on the time of day basically.

Ultimately, students agreed that while Fairview did not necessarily have the same static cliques portrayed in popular media, friend groups were vitally important to a sense of belonging on campus, but also fluid as time progressed.

Students talked about how participation in extra-curricular activities and programs helped motivate them to do better academically. Karina explained that if she did not get good grades, she could not go on a trip to Europe with the art department. Patricia cited a similar situation that she could only go to a summer sports camp if she got good enough grades to get a scholarship to attend. Students also spoke favorably about after school tutoring programs, concurrent-enrollment in college programs, and mentoring programs that motivate them to apply themselves to homework and succeed in their high school classes. Sol pointed out that her race made it easier to be a student at this high school because she was asked to be in programs specifically due to her race, and these programs

made her feel a greater sense of belonging. Sol, Sophia, and Samantha agreed that the college enrollment program they are in together helped them to make friends that did not go to the same middle school as they did. Sophia said, “I have a close relationship with most of the people there now.” On the anonymous online survey, 88% of students reported participating in at least one school program, and yet only 9% mentioned any type of extra-curricular activity or program as a reason they look forward to going to school, compared to the 70% who look forward to seeing friends.

**Culture of college readiness.** Although there is often a perception that the creation of a school’s climate and culture falls solely on the shoulders of faculty and staff, students in this study across the board pointed predominantly to other students as the major messengers of a college readiness mentality. While participants also pointed to parental pressure, they suggested that teachers and staff tended to serve as the opposite voice, one of trying to convince students to take easier, more high-interest classes, or fewer Honors or AP selections. Lucy described the contradicting perspectives students contend with on a regular basis:

I find it quite funny because everyone at this school is like “It doesn’t matter if you go to college, it’s totally fine, you can do what you want, just take the classes you want. If you don’t know what you’re going to do in life, that’s okay, experiment while you’re in high school” and then the underlying concept is like “Find what you want to do, get things on your applications that it’ll look good to colleges, like you have something that you did beside school which replaces your social life.” You socialize during your sport, or your extracurricular, your drama,



then you do homework for the classes like the five or six APs you took, because *we don't have to go to college.*

She emphasized the italicized words to show that the message of “Do what you want” is the opposite of the expectations colleges hold for students.

Olivia and Alex murmured their agreement, and Elodia expressed almost an identical sentiment about the conflict between, the verbal message of “You don’t have to go to college” and the cultural pressure to be as attractive to colleges as possible. She added:

I think the school actually doesn’t pressure us to do it that much... The most pressure I feel like is from parents to their students, and then from students to their peers. The most pressure I’ve gotten to challenge myself and to be in good classes is from my closest friends. There is pressure to do stuff and get stuff done which can be kind of overwhelming.

Olivia said,

I think the heart of why everyone feels so pressured to do well in school is because this community is so wealthy and affluent a lot of the parents went to college and a lot of the parents did all of this in high school and they want the same for the kids, so they pressure them to do that. And then all of us are under the pressure from our parents, and seeing all of our friends do all that, you kind of feel like you need to live up to this standard. I know I’m friends with a lot of people that seriously—I have one friend she does ASB in the morning, journalism, she’s in yearbook, she plays several sports, she volunteers after school, and I feel pressure to live up to that, and she still gets flawless grades, and

I have to—I don't know why, but I feel pressure to do that too, just because like you're close to that person and she's talking about it and it's like "Oh that's what I have to do to get into college."

In talking about friendships and extra-curricular activities, Elodia expressed that interacting with older students in drama is "refreshing" because they already know where they are going to college and already have plans for their lives. Olivia agreed,

I'm in leadership and I have to work with a lot of the older students too and it helps to talk to them about things like college and stuff because they're going through it right now, so it helps you be more prepared.

Alex said that the push for college becomes more paramount in selecting high school courses than friendship does,

They just cram it into you. "You need to go to college and you need to do those things so colleges will pick you first!" So I think we're actually kind of prioritizing our classes, and whatever our friends pick is just secondary, like if they're in the same class, "Oh great that's fine, I can probably concentrate in class better," but mostly it's the school's pressure [to get us into college] is kind of separating us.

Chris suggested the results of this pressure might be even more detrimental than we imagine:

I feel like that whole thing where you spend all your time taking all of these Honors classes and AP classes, and then you just socialize during your sport, then you spend all your other time doing your homework or something else, I think that—more than the introduction of technology and texting and social media and

stuff—has made other people more introverted. I think it's more of that, that taking up all your time, rather than kids are on their phones all day.

In my third focus group, the discussion of the college-focused culture of Fairview came up in a slightly different way, mainly focused on a push from adults at school. These students grew up in Meridian and said that they started hearing about how important getting into college was in second grade. Interestingly, the conversation was interrupted by the three of them disagreeing about whether or not a middle school was up and running in Meridian when they were in second grade, speaking a bit to the structural turmoil Meridian students have experienced in their educational histories. They eventually agreed that the middle school opened when they were in third grade. Sol suggested that exposure to college as a goal began so early because, “Meridian is...the majority is low income, so more people want to help out with the kids and the community there and get them stronger education and go to college, which is the main focus for all schools in Meridian.” The three of them agreed and began to reconstruct memory of what it was like when they first started experiencing the college push. Samantha said, “We would have our morning announcements and then our Principal would be like...we would have a cheer, right?” Sophia nodded. Sol said, “It was every Friday or something.” Samantha continued, “Like ‘We’re going to college!’ Or something like that. All the teachers would march down with where they graduated from. So it was like since second grade where it was like, ‘You want to go to college.’”

When asked if the environment at Fairview was the same or different than Meridian, they agreed that it felt the same, because they have extra support programs. Sol

spoke to the previously-mentioned contradiction between adults telling students to relax, and students telling each other to take on more work. She said,

We had to take a test for Honors and my teacher was saying that we could double up sciences, and a lot of my friends, they want to do it. And when I tell them that I don't want to double up in a science or I don't want to take Honors science they're like "Oh, why don't you want to do that? It's better for your grade" or whatever. But all the teachers are like "No, it's not necessary, you don't have to do it if you don't want to." My science teacher was telling me and said if we want to take art because that's what we like, that's what we should do, and not double up on a science just because we think it's going to make our grades better. So I don't really feel the pressure with the teachers, it's maybe mostly with the students.

The high-pressure college readiness environment of Fairview clearly affects all students, regardless of their middle school or origin or their race. This can manifest in ways that reduce connections, and make the school climate less positive, which ironically can impact academic achievement negatively (Bottiani, Bradshaw, & Mendelson, 2016; Gallardo, Barrasa, & Gevara-Viejo, 2016; Stelmach, Kovach, & Steeves, 2017).

### **Personalized Educational Experiences Constructed by Adults**

When it comes to how adults interact with students, so far themes have illuminated that some adults have alienated or disrespected students due to race, and that some adults have sent mixed-messages in terms of college pressure. Therefore, it is extremely meaningful to explore what adults are doing that positively affects students at Fairview. In order to inspire data on the subject I asked, "What do teachers do to make

you feel like you belong here?” in the three focus groups and, “When an adult is helpful to you, what are they doing?” in the anonymous online surveys. Results show that students value personal interactions, simple kindness, and support toward self-efficacy.

**Personal interactions and kindness.** Similar to the conversations students had about what their peers do to make them feel like they belong, multiple participants mentioned that when adults on campus make as simple a gesture as saying “Hello,” it makes them feel a greater sense of belonging at the school. Yen reflected, “This teacher...he just came up and said, ‘Good morning.’ He didn’t say my name, because he didn’t know me, but he just said good morning. That was a nice thing. Even if you don’t know the student.” Gem agreed, “Yeah it definitely is nice when a teacher will have a conversation with you at the start of class or at the end of class.” Gem went on to describe a teacher who only taught her math class for just a few weeks of her freshmen year, but still says hi to her today. “She remembers my name from the classes she taught, and it’s just nice when that happens.” Karina had a similar experience,

Paula in the office—I love her to death...every time I’d walk into the office, she’d just say “Oh hey, pretty lady” like she obviously remembers me and says “Hi” and stuff like that. And same with the custodian Roger; you’ve seen how he’s nice to me. So those little things make you feel like you’re part of the school. I’m close with a lot of the staff members more than students, but I still feel like I belong because of all the staff members.

Teachers and staff who went beyond a simple greeting and actually had conversations with students about non-academic topics were discussed with great excitement and appreciation. Lucy remarked,

A couple times I'll be talking to my friends about something and we'll walk into class ...and it's always fun when a teacher interjects. It's when you're not talking about school, that's when you get to know the most about people, so when teachers get off track and they talk about their sons or lecture us about not eating Tide Pods<sup>1</sup>, it's when it's not about school you hear the best things from teachers and you meet them as people and not facts.

Elodia agreed,

Teachers are guiders and people that kids can trust, and I really appreciate when teachers are honest and form those connections with me, and I can talk to them after class. I just love when teachers reach out to you personally, because they have so many students, and it makes you feel like you are someone that they remember, and you are part of the student body when they point you out in some way, like it's super subtle.

Sophia mentioned that a math teacher of hers visited her middle school to help scaffold for graduating eighth graders. She said this made her feel like she belonged because when she later saw him on campus she could say, "Oh, yeah, I know him."

Students were quick to express that there is a line that it is important that teachers and staff maintain—while it makes students feel a sense of belonging and connection

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<sup>1</sup> Participant refers to an internet phenomenon at the time of this research that included teenagers filming themselves eating or pretending to eat Tide Pods laundry detergent.

when adults open up about their lives, it also can alienate students and make them feel uncomfortable when adults overshare. That being said, there was some disagreement as to where that line exists. Gem was sure that teachers should not share too much about their personal lives, while Elodia felt that the more they shared the more she liked them. While this could be a cultural difference, more research would be needed to explore this specific point. As Alex said,

There are certain spectrums of teachers. There are some that really like to learn about their students and what they like, and there are some teachers that are too professional; they don't open up enough and come off as really cold and unapproachable.

In general, it is the teachers that students feel they can relate to who gain their trust. Lucy remarked, "There are teachers—like a certain unmentionable teacher—who the only thing he could relate to us on is a level of complaining about his own life." She later continued:

The first time that you meet a teacher, you're going to know how the year is like. If you enter and they're like "Hi, what's your name? I'm going to memorize your name so I can relate to you later," or you enter and he starts telling you a joke and you're like "Okay, I like this guy, he's humorous." Or you enter and the first thing he says is "Hi, this is a fact about me, this is how this class is going to be, y'all are going to suffer."

Warming to the subject, Lucy emphatically described another teacher's demeanor as, "I won't tell anything about you, and you won't tell anything about me, and we'll just learn about anything I don't know about because I'm not a good teacher." The conversation

turned away from current Fairview staff, and the students delighted in reminiscing about a favorite middle school history teacher. Some key quotations were, that his “Grading scale was really strict, and he had really clear instructions, but as a person he was so warm and approachable,” that “You could be doing bad in his class and still like him as a person,” and that “The *thing* is he related to his students.”

**Best practices—according to students.** When asked what adults on campus do to make students feel like they belong, students went beyond simple kindness and interaction to describe specific classroom environments that made them feel safe. This feeling of safety is crucial to learning according to culturally responsive teaching (Hammond, 2015). One theme that came up was fun activities within the classroom (notably not content-related) that encouraged students to look forward to class. Alex brought up a quote board where students could write inside jokes that occurred while in the class: “You see something that someone said, and you’re like ‘Oh that’s funny, it’s entertaining, so it kind of brings us closer together.” Lucy brought up a birthday calendar, and a “countdown” where on the class white board students could number the days up until an important event.

Another common trend—again relating back to how important social interaction and friendship are—was how helpful it can be for teachers to put students into groups for collaborative work in class. Olivia explained, “It can help you make new friends, but at the same time if you don’t know anyone in that class it’s not terrifying having to scramble for someone you sort of kind of know but it’s awkward to ask.” Lucy agreed that forming groupings for students is, “Giving kids an option to jump out of their comfort zone and maybe make a friend who also maybe is closed in their [own] comfort



zone.” Alex added that it is through these groupings that you might find out peers you have not previously interacted with could have the same interests as you and be potential friends. Samantha and Sol had a similar conversation about how seating charts in class can help forge friendships. Samantha said,

They [teachers] make you sit with other people you don’t know. For example, in my math class they make you sit four people to a table. I didn’t know these three people, but now I have a really good connection with them and I talk with them throughout math class...and sometimes we talk outside of class. It’s made me reach out.

Another best practice that came up frequently was that teachers should provide consistent expectations (parallel to the note above about the beloved middle school teacher). Students in the second focus group described a challenging situation with a teacher who was hard to read, expressing that inconsistency in teacher expectations or moods makes students feel uncomfortable and not part of the community. Jordan explained,

Sometimes when we’re the quietest she wants us to be talking to each other and collaborating with each other with the work that she gave us, and when she’s not trying to have us quiet, she gets mad at us if we’re talking even though we were just doing something. It’s like, “What do you want us to do?” Just clearly state them before we do everything.

Patricia agreed, “There are just days when she’s really cranky, and then other days when she’s weird and crazy and fun...so we never know.” When students feel unsafe around

adults due to their unpredictability, they are unable to focus on learning because they are spending more time in that fight-or-flight reactionary state (Hammond, 2015).

Many participants mentioned the importance of finding the right balance of including students in classroom activities without putting them on the spot. Lucy suggested the best thing a teacher can do is “Give a person a chance to be accepted or to share their individual thoughts or actions.” Samantha said,

If you don’t talk as much, then they [teachers] would include you and be like “What do you think of this? What’s your opinion on this quote?” Or something like that, which makes you talk and makes you think more, and can make you contribute to the conversation more...but not specifically [drawing you out] but like in a little humble way so they would just ask you a question and then like it’s kind of like they’re making you think. So of course you would answer the question and then you would think more deeply on what the topic is about, think of more ideas, and then by yourself you can contribute more to the conversation.

Sol suggested,

They [teachers] treat you like any other student. They wouldn’t help you more or call on you more just because you’re not like the other kids. They just treat you like every other student; that’s how I think they include me.

Patricia used almost the same language, in a different focus group, to express that being treated the same as other students made her feel like she belongs, to which Jordan quickly agreed in her own words.

**Self-efficacy.** Students feel the most helped and supported when adults are guiding them toward self-efficacy, not giving them all the answers, but giving them the

tools and understandings necessary for them to encounter the answers on their own. This reflects the culturally responsive teaching practice suggesting that the ideal “Learning partnership” between teachers and students is “Anchored in affirmation, mutual respect, and validation that breeds an unshakable belief that marginalized students not only *can* but *will* improve their school achievement” (Hammond, 2015, p. 75). Sol expressed that the way in which adults helped her the most was in helping her navigate the system:

By telling us that we can do it and giving us options of what we could do to make our grades better. Like telling us that if we don't get this done we're not going to be able to graduate or something like that. I had a terrible grade in math at the beginning of the year, and then I was talking to Andrea [a site coordinator for the concurrent college enrollment program] and she told me that because I got a D in math last semester, if I didn't get better than a C, I was going to have to retake that class, and I really don't want to do that. So now I've got an A- in that class...

Sol paused to laugh shyly. “Because I've actually tried, and I've done my homework, and I've studied and prepared for that class, so I think telling us what we need to do or how we need to do it [is helpful].” Samantha agreed, “I feel telling the reality, not covering it up with something else, it's just the reality, straightforward.” Sophia also emphasized the questions adults help to answer,

Adults [at the concurrent enrollment program] really helped, counselor too, my mentor, they basically like cleared out your questions. You could ask them any question, and they'd be happy to answer... They'll help you mentally if you're not good like, they encourage you to do more stuff at Fairview.

Self-efficacy was a repeated theme in the anonymous online survey as well. For the question, “When an adult is helpful to you, what are they doing?” participants almost unanimously approached the word “adult” as meaning “teacher.” 23% of participants wrote that an adult is helpful when answering questions. 49% wrote that it entailed explaining academic concepts. 9% mentioned a personal aspect such as getting to know the student or expressing empathy. 8% specified that the adult should not provide the answer, but instead help the student reach the answer on their own. Repeated words of note throughout the responses were, “Extra time,” “Push,” “Understand,” Listen,” “Different way,” and “Effort.”

While the majority of students expressed self-efficacy as something adults at Fairview help them toward, three students talked about how their own personal attributes helped them navigate the transition from middle school to high school, and how that differed from their peers. Gem said,

It was a little harder to integrate with no connections to anyone at Central, because none of my friends were from there. I think it also helps that maybe I’m slightly more of a people-person; I like talking to people. I’m a little more an extrovert than an introvert. But I can see how if you are an introvert coming from that situation it would be really, really hard.

As cited above, Olivia felt she also had an easier transition due to her experience moving from school to school growing up. She even expressed that her self-efficacy in navigating a new system allowed her to support friends of hers who did not have that advantage. Lastly, Alex shared that his home life required him to develop self-efficacy in terms of education in general: “My mom was an immigrant here, so she really doesn’t know

anything about the education system—I had to do all that.” Though these three students arrived at Fairview with some sense of self-efficacy, the majority of participants reflected on the theme as a work-in-progress, and something that the adults in their lives certainly have the capacity to influence for the better.

Throughout the data gathered, student responses to the online survey and to the focus groups reflected consistent themes across age, gender, and race. Participants noted a significant awareness of indicators of difference among their peers including distance from home to campus, social segregation on campus, clothing choice, and overt racism and stereotyping. These factors overall contributed to a lack of a sense of belonging for many students, and an acknowledgement of the “other” status of some of their peers if they themselves felt they belonged. Factors that brought students a greater sense of belonging and positive school climate were friendships and positive relationships with adults. Despite challenging transitions from middle school to high school or the pressures of a climate of college readiness, participants identified experiences that brought them a stronger connection to their peers, to teachers and staff, and to their high school as a community.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study suggest that the best predictors for a sense of belonging have to do with relationships. These relationships occur between peers through friendships and daily interactions, and between students and staff both in the classroom and around campus. When students feel connection, they are more able to experience a positive school climate. When awareness of differences impedes that feeling of connection, it is noticed not only by those students separated from the majority but by the

students who make up the majority as well. Across all data sources, students highlighted the facts that 1) There is a significant awareness of similarities and differences between students at Fairview that both support and threaten sense of belonging, respectively; 2) Although there are many barriers to connection in the Fairview community, simple acts of kindness and relatability go a long way toward forging a sense of belonging; and 3) Personalized educational experiences that lead to greater self-efficacy are of great importance. This supports the practices of culturally responsive teaching in that the brain strives for human connection and can only learn in an environment of perceived safety, and that rigor and self-efficacy are crucial to provide for marginalized students in order to shrink the achievement gap.

### **Implications for the Literature**

The findings of the study join a body of literature that strongly reveals the value of belonging and school climate in academic achievement by contributing student voice that illuminates how exactly belonging and positive school climate can be achieved or obstructed. In this specific demographic, one that is not often represented in research, I expected to find extremely disparate answers from students with different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Instead, the overarching themes remained fairly constant for all populations, and thoroughly paralleled the philosophy behind culturally responsive teaching.

What most stands out among the findings of this study is that students gave such concrete examples of experiences they either had themselves or witnessed involving disrespect from other students or adults based on race, ethnicity, or culture. With the rise of the acknowledgement of implicit bias has seem to come a belief that overtly racist acts

do not happen “here.” This idea that a community can be so liberal and progressive as to be beyond racism borders on (if not exemplifies) the philosophy of colorblindness and makes it exceedingly difficult for students of color to develop strong ethnic and racial identities (ERI) (Booth, et al., 2017). One White participant spoke to this in describing the county as a place liberal enough that there is no “hate,” but that instead there are rampant microaggressions due to lack of understanding. When asked how teachers make them feel like they belong, students of color emphasized that they wanted to be treated “like any other student,” which in this demographic means like White students, in essence asking for their race to be ignored. With a strong ERI, students would potentially look for an acknowledgement or celebration of differences, rather than a minimizing of them. This speaks strongly to the culture of the community—without significant exposure to role models of their ethnic identity at school, or space for conversation about differences, students seek to blend in with the rest of the population and not be singled out for race. This implies that, in student experiences, acknowledging race is a negative thing. Differences are seen as deficits, not assets. In fact, until survey or focus group questions directly asked about race, it did not come up as a factor of how students experience a sense of belonging. Unless specifically prompted, participants were much more likely to speak about living location or socioeconomic status than race. This supports the findings of Singleton (2015)—it is crucial to isolate for race, because it is so much more comfortable to talk about any other social issue rather than acknowledge this one. Student experience, however, revealed that, despite a widespread assumption that the community is post-racial, race and racism are extremely prevalent and need to be discussed.

One fascinating trend in the findings was that there is a growing emphasis and awareness of racism as described by students of the dominant culture. When the topic of race came up, students of color who were in the midst of solidifying their ethnic and racial identities due to their immediately visible difference from the majority did speak up about their experience at Fairview. Additionally, students of the dominant culture took steps to recognize their “Whiteness” and described privilege derived from their belonging to that culture. Though they did not yet have the tools to actively integrate with students of different races, they expressed confusion that friend groups were often segregated by race. Students of color were reluctant to point out adverse experiences on campus due to their race, and when they did it was with an air of resilience and minimizing. They did not, for the most part, define a sense of being an “other,” or describe themselves in direct opposition to the majority White demographic. And even when describing acts of racism perpetrated against them as individuals, rather than seeing themselves as part of a community of people of their race, students of color in the study processed these events on their own. In general, participants did not seem to have clear understandings of ERI.

Another result of the findings was the discussion of college readiness that surfaced in each focus group. Based on student feedback—and especially noteworthy considering original interview questions did not address this concept at all—the goal of being accepted into a competitive college is one that pervades Fairview High School at all levels, to the point of being a strident feature of the school’s culture. Students saw the emphasis on college acceptance as a barrier to connection, which correlates with previous literature. Roeser et al. (1996) found that students who perceived school climate to be competitive or grades-driven had a weaker sense of belonging than students who



perceived their school to be more focused on mastery or self-improvement. Students at Fairview mirrored this finding when they expressed that the demand to be attractive candidates for higher education creates competition and adds stress in friendships, as well as occupies much of their time both in and out of school, therefore limiting the time they could spend developing meaningful friendships. In the literature, there is an emphasis on discrete environments—that rather than one school climate experienced by all students at that school, different student groups can experience different climates on the same campus (Conderman, et al., 2013; Voight, et al., 2015; Walton & Cohen, 2011). This suggests that perhaps not all student populations would face the same level of expectations regarding college readiness. This seemed to be true in varying degrees at Fairview. Each student in my focus group agreed the culture of college readiness was a huge factor in Fairview High School, but while students from Fairview City spoke exclusively about the push for college in high school, students from Meridian expressed that it started well before reaching secondary school. One student suggested that the focus on college is present in all schools in Meridian and attributed this specifically to the fact that it is a low-income area and “people want to help out.” Students across the data suggested that, at Fairview, this culture was not always created by teachers or staff, but instead by parents and peers, and gave concrete examples of what that peer pressure looked like. Although students of color similarly described peers as a source of the college readiness culture, they also spoke to the number of organizations on campus catering specifically to supporting students of color toward going to college (again, though, they specified that they thought the programs approached them because they lived in Meridian, rather than because of race). White students only mentioned parents

and peers as enforcers of this college readiness mentality, and did not bring up any programming. When mentioning Fairview teachers, participants described an insistence that they not become so preoccupied with competitive courses. This suggests that, though we may be able to mitigate the stress of college pressure in our own spheres of influence as teachers or school staff, the issue may be a broader one involving our country's structure of higher education admittance and how it affects families before even reaching a formal school setting.

When we *do* consider our impact on students, however, an awareness of how we speak to students of color versus White students is needed. It is possible that, by consistently pushing students of color toward programs intended to get them college-ready while simultaneously encouraging White students to slow down, enjoy high school, and relax, we are in fact operating from a racist lens. This inconsistency of how we approach different students assumes that White students will be going to college no matter what school staff members say, and we need to champion their mental health. Conversely, it assumes that students of color will not be going to college unless school staff members swoop in and energize them to the goal.

One of the most notable results of the study was that when asked about belonging and school climate, students did not focus on course content at all, even when asked what actions teachers take that make students feel like they belong. This was true not just for White students, but for students of color who participated as well. Regardless of how well or how poorly students were doing academically, they did not point to either successful or failing grades as indicators of exclusion from the school community. In culturally responsive teaching, one major finding is that it is important that all students be given

rigorous academic content, and provided with the scaffolds to master it, rather than lowering expectations for struggling populations (Hammond, 2015; Singham, 2003). It was therefore surprising to me that rigor did not surface in the data.

Though academic content was not specified, self-efficacy was a very prevalent subject for many participants. Rather than have teachers give them answers, students clearly prefer adults to give them the tools to find the answers themselves. This was true for students of all races. The focus on both relationships and self-efficacy rather than academic content indicates that while students may not be analyzing how effective instructional strategies in class are, they very well may be evaluating whether or not they are being treated as sentient young adults. Students feel more supported and academically capable when adults take the time to guide, rather than tell.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

When teachers embody a culturally responsive pedagogy, they do not just reach students of color with more effectiveness, but truly reach all students. Just because White students are currently navigating the system well enough to earn high grades does not mean they are learning at their highest potential. Data shows that students of color are certainly not learning at their highest potential. Culturally responsive theories developed to give students of color more access to education correspond to what all students crave in their educational environment. This suggests that methods geared toward closing the achievement gap can positively impact the educations of all of our students, while going a long way toward making school an environment more adapted to the needs of traditionally marginalized minorities.

It is worthwhile (and perhaps essential) that teachers begin to incorporate culturally responsive teaching in their classrooms. While many teachers may already employ a great many of the practices, it is critical that we each reflect on what is currently aligned to best serve students of color, and what could be modified to be more culturally responsive. More importantly, culturally responsive teaching is not a checklist or a set of rules, and it cannot be achieved through superficial celebrations of heroes and holidays; it is a mindset and a philosophy. This means that each teacher must individually come to an understanding of what that means for their specific content area and teaching style. At the most basic level, teachers can say “Hello” to students in the hallways. To take it a step further, teachers can work to get to know students on a personal level and develop relationships beyond grades and homework checks. To foster a greater sense of community within the classroom, teachers can recognize the effectiveness of setting aside class time to help students get to know one another. Even if it means getting a chapter behind or missing a few extra problem sets, the time spent supporting students toward stronger interpersonal bonds could make the difference in how much they learn that year. It is impossible to understate the importance of making the classroom a space for fun and play if we want to maximize learning. If teachers start with those basics, they are already well on the way to creating a more positive school environment and sense of belonging for their students.

Within Fairview, the school could provide more opportunities for interpersonal communication and relationship-building structured into the day. There are currently so many extracurricular programs, sports, and more, and yet students do not have much space to merely form relationships with each other. Rather than a focus on studying,

tutoring, and catching up on missing work (all valid in their own time), the school could make space for students to interact with peers that they may not yet know. School sites can also increase student sense of belonging by addressing the stressful atmosphere created by pressure to go to college through parent education series that focus on the enormous emotional pressure students face on a daily basis rather than focusing on how to get their children into college. Both parents and students need to be empowered to cope with the ever-increasing competitiveness of higher education. Additionally, the school can begin to create a climate of acknowledging and celebrating race, thus providing more opportunities for students to develop a strong ERI. Overall, the reactions of the student participants in this research reflected a population of young people ready to have courageous conversations about race and enthusiastic about learning more about themselves and others.

At a district or perhaps state level, culturally responsive teaching should be included in credentialing and induction programs. Though there is already a diversity education requirement in many states, it could be extremely beneficial to incorporate a social emotional learning component to these courses. Additionally, school staff should be educated on how to form relationships with students on campus and how to relate on a developmentally and professionally appropriate level. Though this may seem to be a common-sense directive, many teachers enter the profession unaware of the impact their personal interactions with students can have, as credential and induction programs tend to focus on skills required for academic instruction and assessment.

Culturally responsive teaching is not a panacea that will immediately close the achievement gap. It is not a program that can be implemented and duplicated in a

standardized way across the country. Rather, it emphasizes the fact that each of our students is an individual, and each has background experiences, cultural understandings, and educational needs that are unlikely to match every student in the classroom. It is a philosophy and set of theories and findings that enable teachers to make education a more equitable place for students of color. It is a practice that can be constantly honed no matter how long a teacher has been doing the work. Through culturally responsive pedagogy, teachers are empowered to make a change within their sphere of influence, regardless of outside forces that may not be so quick to change. If all teachers seriously consider the perspectives of the participants of this study and how their voices so clearly match a teaching philosophy none of them has ever heard of, the achievement gap can be slowly but surely shrunk.

### **Limitations of the Study**

One limitation of the study is that it focuses on one site. This research site has a specific demographic with the unique situation of small feeder schools with majority students of color and one large feeder school with majority White students, creating a high school that is a majority White population. At the same time, there are many high schools around the country with similar enough demographics; this research could impact them as well.

Another limitation is in which particular students showed up as participants in each focus group. Ideally, each focus group would have had between five to seven participants, as the group with seven had a much easier time bouncing ideas back and forth than did the groups of three. Not only were there fewer student participants per group than hoped, there were also two significant missing perspectives in this research:

students identifying as Black or African American who live in Meridian, and students who do not have a personal connection to me as the researcher.

Despite parent consent from a handful of students in the demographic of Black or African American students from Meridian, only one female student participated in the anonymous online survey, and no students in the demographic participated in the focus groups. Many student participants mentioned that these students get treated differently by other students and by teachers, and many described that they perceived social segregation between students from Meridian and students from the local town, Fairview. Without the voices of these students to substantiate the claims of unfair or different treatment, this research can only claim that there is a perception of disparity on campus from students of other racial and ethnic backgrounds toward Black or African American students from Meridian.

As seen above, Karina even mentions that, as a student who identifies as Black or African American and someone who sought out friendships with these students, the Meridian students' identities were based so strongly on where they were from and how they were treated because of it, their common race did not allow for fluid communication or connection. If she experienced such an inability to forge connections with these students, I think it is imperative to hear whether these students feel that they have connections on campus. If I were able to continue this research beyond the scope of this thesis, I would ask these students why they believe they were not able to create friendships with Karina. Without their voices in the research, it is unclear whether they experience the isolation others perceive them to, or if they have the sense of belonging on

campus that other participants described about themselves. When conducting research on the achievement gap, missing data from this population is a vast limitation.

The second population of students whose voices have not been represented include students who do not like my course or who do not feel they have a personal connection with me. As participation in this study was completely voluntary and had no connection to grades or otherwise, the only real incentives students had to participate were the snacks I provided and the fact that I was the one asking this favor of them. This means that the students who showed up were engaged, predominantly enthusiastic students who were willing to give up their personal time to help a teacher out. It is very possible that there are still discrete climates experienced on this campus, and that members of those climates that are not quite as positive may have opted out of the study, and thus are not represented in the results.

My identity as a White woman potentially affected which students participated in this research. Participants in the focus group were largely female, and majority White, Hispanic or Latino, or Asian. As these are all cultures that I navigate with ease for the most part, these are students with whom a personal connection was not a challenge to develop. I wonder if I would have had different participants if I were male, or if I were visibly a person of color. If this were a larger research design, it would ideally include a variety of focus group leaders representing different ethnic and racial backgrounds so that students felt more represented by the adult in the room, and thus potentially more willing to participate.



**Directions for Future Research**

As noted, the purpose of this research was to elicit student voice in regard to how they experience race on a daily basis, and what practices of other students or adults help them feel a sense of belonging and positive school climate. I would encourage further research that branches from the focus of this study in two different directions: 1) The achievement gap, and 2) School climate, belonging, and academic success in this demographic. Firstly, though there is a large body of research on the achievement gap, there are no studies that get the direct student perception of the achievement gap. It could be fascinating to explore how aware or unaware students are of the achievement gap, and what factors they believe contribute to it. Future research could examine student awareness of the achievement gap itself, student conceptualization of the causes of the achievement gap, and suggested strategies schools could implement to reduce the achievement gap. As Mitra (2008) indicates, student voice can act as a major change agent and can shine a light on potential changes adults would not originate. Secondly, future research could examine if there is a correlation between perceived school climate and belonging, and academic success, in a demographic that mirrors Fairview High School. I would encourage more direct research into whether or not students who express a sense of belonging on campus or believe the school climate to be positive achieve higher (academically) than students who express the opposite. Lastly, it would be illuminating to analyze whether or not students achieve higher academically in classes where they feel they have a positive relationship with the teacher.

### **Conclusion**

The racial achievement gap in schools across the U.S. is a pervasive and worrisome reality. While it is encouraging that there is a growing awareness of the achievement gap and a large body of research into measures to reduce the gap, researchers and school policy makers tend to focus on the academic factors underlying the gap more than anything else. However, important findings on school climate and the impact of belonging or exclusion suggest that these social-emotional issues can have an equally important impact on academic performance. Culturally responsive teaching provides a framework through which to address school climate and belonging through a culturally competent lens, thereby incorporating important tenets of Critical Race Theory and addressing the needs of marginalized students.

Based on the findings of this study, a culturally responsive teaching philosophy can positively affect the experiences of not just students of color, but students of the dominant culture as well. All students spoke to the same major themes when discussing what helped them experience a sense of belonging in high school, regardless of racial or ethnic background. Strong relationships between students and their peers, and between students and adults on campus helped students feel a sense of connection and ease. Students identified that simple acts of kindness such as saying “Hello,” promoting activities that guide students toward meeting new peers, and including personalized interactions not necessarily related to course content all provide opportunities for students to feel more connected to the school culture. In terms of academic content, student responses highlighted the importance of self-efficacy—they do not want answers handed to them; they want to be supported in figuring out answers on their own. Students also

identified many ways in which the current environment at Fairview High School is not aligned to culturally responsive practices. The high-pressure culture of college readiness, the challenges of living far from campus, and the toxic environment created by racism and stereotyping from other students and from teachers are all factors that promote disconnectedness to peers and to school. It is in these fraught revelations that the processes perpetuating the achievement gap can be seen.

In a demographic such as Fairview High School, with such a large population of White students and small population of students of color, it is crucial that not just policy makers, but the entire community learn and adopt culturally responsive practices. Findings show that, when seeing the world through a deficit-centered lens, differences between students turn into chasms that cannot easily be broached by tutoring programs or de-tracking. The othering of marginalized students negatively impacts the sense of belonging of all students on campus. Most importantly, research shows that at the root of positive school climate and sense of belonging are strong relationships. Schools must begin to value and provide space for increased social emotional learning, friendship-building, and personalized interactions on campus. By taking the spotlight away from academics every once in a while, educators can actually increase academic achievement. When focusing on academics, educators must learn to create safe learning environments that foster connections and lower affective filters, while maintaining a rigorous level of content and providing opportunities for students to access prior understandings.

Ultimately, the most important finding to come out of this study is that students themselves hold many of the answers we are searching for as educators. Participants in this study had no previous experience with the concepts presented in culturally

responsive teaching, nor did they know the research on school climate or belonging. Despite this, student responses across the board supported the research discussed in the literature review in sometimes astounding ways. Additionally, students imparted experiences that adults on campus would potentially otherwise never hear, that are incredibly elucidating as to the lived school climate and how race affects their everyday lives. If we want to know the best ways to reach our students and the most effective practices to foster more equitable access to education for all students, perhaps the most efficient and impactful way to move forward is to consult the students themselves.

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