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Student, Parent, and Teacher Perceptions of School Racial Climate in a Charter Middle School in South Los Angeles: A Microcosm of Missed Opportunity

Joan Y. Wicks
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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

Student, Parent, and Teacher Perceptions of School Racial Climate in a Charter Middle School in
South Los Angeles: A Microcosm of Missed Opportunity

by

Joan Y. Wicks

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,
Loyola Marymount University,
in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Doctor of Education

2016

Student, Parent, and Teacher Perceptions of School Racial Climate in a Charter Middle School in
South Los Angeles: A Microcosm of Missed Opportunity

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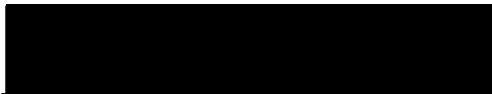
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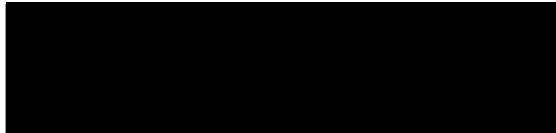
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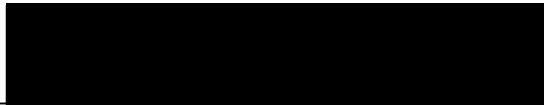
This dissertation written by Joan Y. Wicks, under the direction of the Dissertation Committee, is approved and accepted by all committee members, in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.

4/23/15
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Yvette Lapayese, Ph.D., Committee Member


Jill Bickett, Ed.D., Committee Member

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It has taken me nearly ten years to complete my master's degree and this doctoral degree. While this may seem like an inordinate amount of time, in reflecting on what it took just to get me to this point, what it took a for a single generation of my family to attend college, I know that in that respect, it has been just a blink in time. In the ten years of completing this degree I have lost the love of my life, my dear sister, Apryl Theresa Wicks, endured a 15-year court battle as a self-represented litigant, overcome serious illnesses, financial challenges, and a string of other extraordinary events. Most importantly, I have raised three fine young children. Many people ask me my secret, how did I raise such wonderful children? Little do they know, that's not the right question. The more accurate question would be: How did I raise such wonderful children, despite such incredible obstacles? The simple answer that I would put forward is love. Love is the day-in and day-out actions that you take because you feel passionate about a cause or an issue. That love is the source of the support that I received in order to complete this dissertation. The people who had a direct hand in helping me attain this goal demonstrated love and passion in a number of ways.

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I would like to thank the members of Cohort 6. You all inspired me to continue my work and I thank you for your kind words of support through our days together. Those were truly some of the most enjoyable times of my life and I miss you all.

I thank all of you for the love and passion you demonstrate for your chosen professions each and every day.

I would like to thank everyone at A Beacon of Light Middle School for supporting me in access to the school and your honest voices in revealing the multiple perspectives concerning conflict at the school. Collectively, your voices provide a model of understanding very simply how different perspectives reveal different realities. I hope that work like this will help generate tolerance, understanding, and inclusion.

Thanks to New Roads School for being a safe haven for my children, particularly my twins who had the privilege of attending school there from kindergarten through their current 12th grade year. My twins are two of the first and only four students ever to gain this accomplishment. My children's achievements, including college, are a direct result of the continuity and care they experienced at school.

I would also like to thank my friends the Rubensteins and the Haas Clan for your enduring support. I thank my sister, Apryl, now deceased, who despite your own challenges would drop everything and come to my aid when I needed you most. I miss you more than words can ever say.

I would like to thank my miniature poodle, Lulu, for your faithful companionship through the entirety of this process. The happy greetings, the vigilance, and the warm feeling I gain from

just being near you. You were a shelter dog, but you saved *us*. Our family has been forever changed by your loving presence. Thank you for making us better human beings.

My sincerest and most heart felt thank you goes to my children, Spencer, Amanda, and Gabrielle for literally going to school with me all those evenings when I had night classes. You literally grew up with me at LMU and so I thank you for your patience, understanding, and support as I worked to complete two degrees and a dissertation. All of you inspire me to be my best self and I am honored to be your mother. I love you all dearly.

Finally, I would like to thank God, simply for being. My spirituality continues to evolve, but my belief in your presence and guidance has been an enduring source of strength and support. My belief in your grace and the power of goodness help me know, love really and truly does conquer all.

DEDICATION

For my ancestors and for my children, it is with sincere gratitude that I dedicate the completion of this dissertation to my ancestors, the thousands of unknown people who came before me. This dissertation is in reverence to you who persevered through the Middle Passage in the bowels of slave ships. It is dedicated to those of you who likely found yourselves somewhere in the Caribbean under extremely harsh conditions. You managed to survive and bring forth new generations in the American South, ultimately landing in Mississippi, the only known traceable part of our ancestry. There you worked, hoped, prayed, laughed, and died hoping for freedom, and when it came, you watched your freedoms taken away for another 100 years under Jim Crow laws. Some of you left and went to Chicago as part of the great migration in hopes of a better life. And you succeeded, for there you found factory work, government work, and Catholic schools willing and some even eager to educate Blacks. You began to own homes, property, and businesses. And there, in this new land of hope, Chicago, I was born.

Due to your hard work, I became the first college graduate in our prolific clan of former slaves. It only took 300 years to achieve this single achievement in our family. I attribute this to one simple fact: I was born 99 years after the Emancipation Proclamation and entered kindergarten just after passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1965. I progressed through school with the expectation that I would attend and graduate college, a monumental shift in a single generation after more than 15 generations of simultaneous hope and despair.

These have not been easy years. They have been riddled with a collection of extraordinary challenges. I am the third generation of single mothers in my maternal line, all parenting, in three different geographical areas, without a spouse in undoubtedly a long chain of

broken families. However, I know that anything I must endure as a parent, woman, and human being pales in comparison to the challenges you endured.

And so I thank you for doing just that, for enduring, not giving up, and continuing to choose to live, love, and hope despite centuries of disappointment, so that another generation could stand on your shoulders in hopes of true freedom and justice. It has always been clear to me that I am a generational stepping-stone, a single stop in our generational struggle. I hope I honor you by doing my part, every day.

For my grandparents: Thank you for seeking a better life under the Chicago sun. In three generations, we have gone from sharecroppers in Mississippi to factory and government workers in Chicago and many different professions throughout the US.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my children: Spencer, Amanda, and Gabrielle. Among the many other successes in our family, we now boast our first family member to attend Harvard University and the first ever Los Angeles Youth Poet Laureate, my daughter, Amanda Gorman. We also hold an award-winning filmmaker and Presidential Scholar in the Arts nominee for cinematography, my daughter and Amanda's twin sister, Gabrielle Gorman, who will be attending UCLA in the highly selective Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media. I thank you both sincerely for being with me on this long journey and being a source of inspiration as I tried to finish the last leg of this lengthy process. You both provided key elements to our incredible endurance and resilience as a family—laughter and love. Both of you work so hard to achieve your dreams and I am honored and grateful to be your mother. Know that you hail from a people that have survived unimaginable experiences. You have now witnessed modern-day lynchings in the form of watching your brethren gunned down

in the streets, so our struggle is far from over. I am so proud that you have found your voices to protest, inspire, and uplift all who seek justice, equality, and fairness. Live your lives with the full knowledge that *your lives matter* for all perpetuity as has been shown by the strength and resilience of our ancestors and the continuation of all our achievements in life.

And always remember, like all of our ancestors, “I live through you!!!!!!!!!!”

With love always,

Mom

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ABSTRACT

Student, Parent, and Teacher Perceptions of School Racial Climate at a Charter Middle School
in South Los Angeles: A Microcosm of Missed Opportunity

by

Joan Y. Wicks

This qualitative case study explores student, parent, and teacher perceptions of school racial climate and its impact on students' academic and personal lives at a charter middle school in South Los Angeles. The study also explores teacher handling of the impact of racial tensions at this school with a majority Latin@ student enrollment and a predominantly Black teaching staff. School climate refers to the perceived quality of interpersonal interactions among teachers, students, staff, and parents. A positive school climate is associated with increased academic achievement and decreased disciplinary problems. Conversely, schools wrought with interethnic conflict or a poor *racial* climate divert focus and resources away from student learning and toward chronic disciplinary problems and teacher attrition. This case study demonstrates how Black administrators handled displacement by a large immigrant Latin@ population by instituting a system of Black privilege to protect political and economic space. The massive

immigration of Latin@s offered a critical opportunity for coalition building with Blacks. However, a competition-based framework emerged, rendering this case study a microcosm of missed opportunity in South Los Angeles and beyond.

CHAPTER ONE

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

At a teacher professional development meeting, I asked a well-respected colleague a typical question, “How’s it going?” It was the kind of small talk used to break the ice, not unlike asking about the weather. Naturally, I expected a typical answer, “It’s fine” or possibly, “Things are coming along,” even when they are not. In a casual encounter, no one really wants to know “*What’s going on?*” That takes too much time, energy, and focus, resources in short supply at a Saturday teacher professional development workshop with a reluctant audience.

I have known Bob for about two years. We meet quarterly at teacher professional development meetings geared toward project-based learning using technology. My question *obviously* referred to the integration of technology at Wonderland Tech, a charter high school in Watts, a high-crime, economically depressed section of South Los Angeles where Bob teaches. Wonderland Tech aspires to prepare typically underserved students for college and career by emphasizing the use of technology in the classroom, known as a *blended learning environment*. Since Wonderland Tech seems to be on the cutting edge in technology, any number of responses in this realm made logical, *social* sense. However, Bob does not cater to social convention, so I should not have been surprised by his atypical response. Bob casually remarked that his school was in its third year of operation and was “Finally able to focus on educating students.”

Completely perplexed, I wondered what Wonderland Tech could possibly have been doing for two solid years that *did not* involve educating students and briefly considered administrative incompetence, teacher apathy, or perhaps a measles epidemic. The delay? The first two years had focused on disciplinary issues including suspensions and expulsions for

constant and often violent conflicts between Black and Latin@ students. Bob shared his understanding of a violent and fatal conflict involving one of his high school students. Bob, a young, White male, calmly and objectively related these events, despite the fact that one of the students had assaulted him in class. The student, a Black male, shot and killed an infant who was being cradled by the intended victim, her father, a Latino male. The assailant fled the scene to avoid authorities.

In response and to expedite their version of justice, the *Mexican Mafia*, a “governance institution” of Los Angeles (Latino) gangs and incarcerated gang members, warned it would issue a “hit” on *any* African Americans in the neighboring area until the assailant was apprehended. According to Bob, within hours, the police held his student, the suspect, in custody. His mother had disclosed the location of her son, who was tried as an adult, convicted of murder, and sentenced to life in prison at the age of 16.

At Wonderland Tech, students, teachers, administrators, and parents grappled with a high conflict school environment due to a toxic cloud of racial tension that mushroomed in the entire community, rendering teaching only a subplot to an enduring drama that was supposed to feature student achievement. Teachers were unable to teach due to racial tension and aggression between African American and Latin@ students in the classroom, two statistically monitored subgroups of students that consistently and significantly demonstrated poor academic performance relative to other groups on state standardized achievement tests. These student groups can ill-afford additional distractions from their educational attainment, and the academic achievement gap places these students at greater risk of poor educational and life outcomes.

The events at Wonderland Tech caused me to reflect on my own positionality, as a Black female teacher, also working at a charter school in South Los Angeles. Our school, A Beacon of Light Middle School, is a *feeder* school for Wonderland Tech and former students enrolled at Wonderland Tech had already experienced repeated exposure to gun violence. We had three shootings within feet of the school in a single year, including one at dismissal with hundreds of students pouring into the streets. Although none of our students was injured, these random acts of violence remain unnerving, but at the same time they have been normalized as part of working and living in this community. While I found nothing at all normal about stray bullets, I took comfort in knowing that, as a teacher, the likelihood of being a victim of violence was extremely low. I had never heard of violence against one of my colleagues and assumed carrying a “teacher bag” and wearing “teacher keys” were amulets of protection like wearing a nun’s habit and a cross. People seemed to understand that teachers were at the school to do a service and were welcomed. On any given day, I have been greeted with warm smiles, offers of assistance, and reminders to move my car on street cleaning day. Now that Bob’s story had unraveled my veil of invincibility, I could not help but imagine myself a hapless target while getting in and out of my car, stopping for gas, or ordering *pupusas* in an area where I have been happy and honored to work. Although I would prefer to claim immunity to irrational fear, it was indeed, fear, I felt, although these events had long since passed. Though still terrifying, random shots fired in the vicinity are one thing. *Being hunted is entirely another.*

I was surprised by my ignorance of these events, and so was Bob, who said, “It was in the papers and on the news.” That was an understatement. A brief review revealed extensive South Los Angeles media coverage, which described conflict between Black and Latino youth as

“racially” based and invoked highly charged, hyperbolic terms such as “race wars” (Quinones, 2014), or catastrophic encounters that vilified both groups as a threat to students, schools, and entire communities—not to mention hapless teachers like me. The news, all of it, was scary, really scary. I could not reconcile these reports with the Black and Latino sixth-grade students I taught every day. Although I had experienced overwhelmingly positive encounters with the youth of both these groups, I seriously reconsidered my own personal safety. One of my students, a fat-cheeked, baby-faced Latino with a huge smile, had already been arrested for bringing a knife to school. I dismissed it as a silly, middle school prank. Still, I could not help but wonder if I should actually fear an 11-year old or his older brother who comes to back-to-school night?

Since I held these reactionary thoughts despite both my professional training and positive personal experience, I could not deny the potential negative impact of sensational reporting of “race wars” on the vast majority of well-meaning Black and Latino adults and children that live, work, and attend school in this community. I wondered how negative attitudes between these two racialized groups affect their behavior and how that behavior impacts school climate and student achievement. Put simply, how do racialized experiences at school conspire to shift students from baby-faced, big-grinned Blacks and Latin@s to warring, gun-wielding assailants only a few years later? *How did we get here?*

Demographic Change

During the second “Great Migration” of the 1940s, five million Blacks fled racism and joblessness in the South for greater economic opportunities in the Northeast, Midwest, and West. Due to opportunities in the defense industry, South Central Los Angeles became an enclave for

Black upward mobility (Pastor, 2014). Now, South Los Angeles, as the region has come to be known, is predominantly Latin@. Pastor (2014) cited two primary reasons for the dramatic shift, out-migration by Blacks from South Los Angeles and significantly increased immigration by Latin@s to South Los Angeles.

First, the civil unrest of 1965 and the lifting of racial covenants that restricted housing, respectively, created a push-and-pull effect in Los Angeles (Pastor, 2014). These events prompted many prosperous Blacks to leave the troubled central city in favor of more ethnically mixed and safer neighborhoods in the Crenshaw area. Another wave of upwardly mobile Blacks left the area in the 1980s for better living and economic conditions, leaving behind a more impoverished Black population (Morrison & Lowry, 1994). Finally, in the 1990s, the Black population declined further due to out-migration from Los Angeles County overall (Morrison & Lowry, 1994).

While South Los Angeles experienced a sharp decline in Black residents, the area experienced a dramatic increase in Latin@ immigrants. Los Angeles has a long history of American-born Latin@ residents, and it has historically been a primary destination for Latin@ immigrants as well. However, Latin@ immigrants have recently arrived in unprecedented numbers to Los Angeles and other cities across the nation due to globalization and the post-Cold War organization of nation states (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). This extraordinary change remaps the post-national world due to new information and communication technologies, global markets, and knowledge-intensive economies resulting in unprecedented levels of immigration and displacement, along with a dramatic increase in the enrollment of immigrant children in American schools (Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

In short, the erasing of borders through globalization denotes “deterritorialization – the hallmark of the post national – not only of markets, information, and symbols, but also of large and growing numbers of people” (Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 343). In contrast to pre-1965 immigration, the vast majority of new U.S. immigrants arrive from non-European and non-English speaking countries (Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Community Tensions

As part of this dramatic change, Latin@s surpassed Blacks as the largest minority group in the 2000 U.S. Census, fueling Blacks’ concerns regarding a loss of status and power. Confounding matters, attracted by the U.S. service sector, many new immigrants lack proper documentation and are poorly schooled (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). As a result, they become low-skilled, low-wage workers who settle in areas of deep poverty and racial segregation, which places them in direct competition for jobs held by other minorities, particularly Blacks in South Los Angeles.

Demographic shifts also boosted Latino voting power in South Los Angeles where Blacks and Latin@s contend for public office, public appointments, and public service jobs. Competition for institutional power and resources, such as state and municipal jobs, sparked chronic tension in communities, especially the City of Compton, where Blacks historically benefited from a majority population and political power gained from Whites in the post-Civil Rights era (Foner & Fredrickson, 2004). As Compton and other communities experienced rapid demographic change, Blacks struggled to maintain a stronghold on hard-won economic and political advances, often blocking similar advances by Latin@s (Foner & Fredrickson, 2004). Some Black leaders openly questioned Latin@ entitlement to political gains in public institutions

because they had not fought along with Blacks in the centuries old fight to gain civil rights. These sometimes openly hostile remarks angered members of the Latin@ community (Foner & Fredrickson, 2004).

The demographic changes within Los Angeles County predictably resulted in dramatic shifts in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second largest school district in the United States. Due to these rapid and dramatic demographic changes brought about by globalization, unparalleled numbers of children now immigrate to the U.S. (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). The Los Angeles Unified School District struggles to meet the academic needs of rapidly increasing immigrant, migrant, and language minority students from Mexico, Central, and South American countries.

Since the early 1990s, the percentage of Latin@ students in LAUSD has gone from 65% to 75%. Inglewood School District, just west of South Los Angeles, experienced a similar and profound shift in enrollment. However, the most dramatic shift has occurred in the Compton Unified School District, located southeast of South Los Angeles. Latin@ student enrollment increased from 50% to 75% (a 50% increase) in nearly 15 years (California Basic Educational Database, 2015)

Adding to the changes brought by demographic shifts, deep government spending cuts combined with an insufficient property tax base due to decaying urban centers have resulted in inadequate school funding entitlements for Angeleno students. The shortage of funds and these shifting demographics have provoked tensions between Black and Latin@ students, both high-need student populations with inadequate and inequitable educational resources.

Already grappling with the low achievement of many Black and Latin@ students, teachers often lack the necessary preparedness and additional resources to meet the needs of a shifting student population that speaks languages other than English, resulting in high dropout rates (Darder, 1991). Teachers also lack training in conflict resolution of any kind, let alone interethnic conflict often encountered in areas experiencing rapid demographic shift. Overall, the lack of teacher preparedness to meet the needs of impoverished students and deal with chronic conflict leads to low teacher morale and high teacher attrition rates, which further undermines student achievement.

Race Wars and Drug Wars

The merging of global markets and globalization placed Blacks and Latin@s in economic competition for service jobs; however, competition for the lucrative illegal drug market sparked intense violence in the early 1990s. The American crack epidemic of the late 1980s and early 1990s refers to a sharp increase in the use of crack cocaine. As the use of this highly addictive substance swept through the nation's urban centers, including Los Angeles, so too did a wave of gang violence over drug territory (DEA History Book, 1985–1990, 2006).

The increase in the Latin@ population prompted a rise in the number of Latino gangs as well. During this time, the Mexican Mafia, an incarcerated group of gang members, began issuing orders from prison to eliminate competition from Black gangs. An ensuing violence and killing spree escalated as Black and Latino gangs retaliated against one another to avenge murders and defend territory. “Drive-by shootings” became a commonplace means of tactical execution and drug warfare, often claiming the lives of innocents with no gang affiliation (Quinones, 2014).

At the same time, the Mexican Mafia began extorting local gangs for a “tax” on receipts from drug sales. Until that point, local gangs had been independent operators, oftentimes alongside Black gangs. Subsequently, Latino gangs came under the control of aging and even decrepit men none of the locals had ever even met, more than 500 miles away in Pelican Bay State Prison (PBSP) in Crescent City, California, which houses California’s most serious criminal offenders. The Mexican Mafia gained compliance with orders through threat and actual executions called “greenlighting” which could occur both in prison and on the streets (Quinones, 2014).

Finally, the Mafia issued orders to rid the barrios of Blacks entirely using threats, intimidation, harassment, and violence, turning what had been commercial warfare over drug territories to hate crimes against Blacks (Quinones, 2014). During this time, the Mexican Mafia indoctrinated incarcerated Latino gang members with racial hatred toward Blacks. Once on the outside, Latino gang members were pressured to specifically target and harass or even kill black people out of racial hatred. However, the true reasoning behind the killings was economic control of the illegal drug market, aptly called “Cocaine Capitalism” (Colett, 1988).

Due to the “War on Drugs,” public policy changed to allow tougher sentences. What had previously been lesser drug-related charges became felonies with mandatory jail time. This made the state penitentiary a revolving door for gang members, including devotees of the Mexican Mafia, who took their hate conditioning back home and to the streets of South Los Angeles (Quinones, 2014). The Mexican Mafia’s plan to eliminate competition from Black gangs had unintended consequences. Once the threat of Black gang competition had been largely removed, through incarceration, death, and relocation, the Latino gangs began to turn on

each other, resembling a “tank of piranhas” (Quinones, 2014, p. 293) and creating such volatile and violent conditions that now, more than 20,000 gang members remain in protective custody or sensitive needs yards (SNYs) due to execution orders that were issued for some real or perceived slight (Quinones, 2014).

Although these events were called a race war, a more accurate description would have been a drug war that used racial hatred to justify eliminating the competition. Still, the hate message became “catchy.” Former Latino gang members often later reported that they were compelled or even conditioned to harbor feelings of racial hatred that were transmuted from the prisons, to the neighborhood communities and even to the schools in areas where gangs operated (Pastor, 2014). Although gang violence and violence against Blacks has since subsided, the feelings of fear and mistrust on both sides of the ethnic wall remain imprinted throughout the region.

Media Culpability in Creating Conflict

The issues of demographic shift, gang violence, and drug wars during the 1990s occurred during the rising popularity of Gangsta’ Rap music and movies such as *Boyz in the Hood* (1991), *New Jack City* (1991), and *Menace II Society* (1993). These and other artistic expressions illuminated the plight of Black Americans and simultaneously fed the public’s growing voyeuristic interest in urban life and gang culture. Unfortunately, by profiteering from this troubling and violent era, the entertainment industry transformed the image of young Black men to a caricature of violence and criminality. While violence between Black and Latino gangs continued to escalate, and Latino gangs eventually dominated Los Angeles streets, the face of violence, particularly accompanied with the wearing of a hood, remained largely associated with

the Black male. Negative stereotypes impact interethnic relations, so the criminality of both Blacks and Latin@s generate apprehension and tension from both groups (Frasure-Yokely & Green, 2014).

Media coverage regarding Black and Latin@ relations during this time of dramatic demographic shift focused on conflict between the two groups with often exaggerated reports or partial stories that created the appearance of steadily escalating tensions (Pastor, 2014). Media coverage demonstrated a fascination with gang violence and an economic subtext that Latin@s, particularly immigrants, took jobs from Blacks (Frasure-Yokely & Green, 2014).

The influence of the media can be seen in the news coverage of Blacks and South Los Angeles Communities. In 1992, the acquittal of four White police officers for the beating of a Black man named Rodney King sparked an urban uprising, known as the “Rodney King Riots” (Morrison & Lowry, 1994). This uprising left 58 people dead, thousands arrested, and caused over one billion dollars in property damage (Morrison & Lowry, 1994).

Shah and Thornton (2004) conducted an extensive study of media coverage following the uprising from mainstream, Asian, Black, and Latin@ newspapers. As the researchers pointed out, with few exceptions, the news media mentioned conflict as the main theme when describing the interaction between any two ethnic groups. Consequently, “This focus in all the newspapers speaks to a prevailing journalistic bias toward conflict in coverage of race relations” (Shah & Thornton, 2004, p. 220) and fueled fierce, interethnic focus on difference.

Although the majority of those arrested were Latin@, *The Los Angeles Times* made almost no mention of this fact, due perhaps to the tendency to focus on a White and Black binary (Shah & Thornton, 2004) and the media’s emphasis on Black criminality. Media reports

overwhelmingly cited Blacks as the cause of the troubles, while neglecting to even mention Latin@s, which further perpetuated negative stereotypes.

Sensational journalism sells, and the media's tendency to over-report crime and racialized conflict further fanned the flames of tensions between Blacks and Latin@s, which became the prevailing media narrative regarding relations between these two groups (Ortiz Cuevas, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

A dramatic demographic shift began in the 1970s when Blacks started leaving South Los Angeles, a historically Black area, for better living conditions and safety in other communities. In the 1980s, globalization spawned additional demographic changes in the community causing the rapid, unprecedented increase of Latin@ immigrants who settled in the area. This shift resulted in points of contention for Blacks and Latin@s concerning jobs, political positions, neighborhoods, and public school resources. The most fiercely contested arena, competition over drug territory and lucrative drug sales, sparked intense violence in the early 1990s between Black and Latino gangs and initiated a chain reaction of unfortunate events that antagonized these two minority groups and expedited Black flight from the area (Pastor, 2014).

Latin@ immigrants and Blacks have aggressively competed for jobs in the service sector and other low-wage occupations, and undocumented Latin@s have been blamed for creating a culture of cheap labor and obedience that promotes unfair competition, further displacing Black workers. This conflict has been exacerbated by the outsourcing of jobs and factories to other countries as a result of globalization, leaving many Black workers in the area unemployed and compelled to find resources in the black market (Pastor, 2014).

The dramatic demographic shift in the general population has also affected school enrollments, policies, and actual educational practices. In South Los Angeles, the exploding enrollment of Latin@ students has coincided with a shrinking Black student body. The historical Black population of the area has been pushed out and moved to the suburbs searching for safer conditions. Now constant tension and conflict remain between the booming Latin@ population and the reduced, but powerful group of Black students, teachers, and administrators. Additionally, teachers of all ethnic backgrounds are ill-equipped to handle interethnic tensions between students and among themselves.

Conflict between Blacks and Latin@s produces serious negative consequences for individuals, schools, and communities. Individuals experiencing conflict contend with stress and anxiety, along with the associated physiological responses that make learning temporarily inaccessible. Real or perceived threats to safety create hostility and aggression that disrupt the learning environment (Mattison & Aber, 2007). Students embroiled in conflict may suffer physical, emotional, social, and school problems, including bullying, which researchers have correlated with these problems as well. A person is bullied when he or she is “exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons” (Olweus, 1993, p. 8).

Aggression and other behavioral problems associated with conflict, place students at risk for low-achievement and disciplinary actions, such as suspension and expulsion. Furthermore, these disciplinary actions are key factors in poor school outcomes that can lead to school dropout, gang affiliation, crime, drugs, teen pregnancy, and multigenerational poverty (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007).

Purpose of the Study

This study explored student, parent, and teacher perceptions of the tensions or conflicts between Black and Latin@ students and its impact on students' academic development and personal lives at a charter middle school in South Los Angeles. *School climate* refers to the perceived quality of interpersonal interactions among teachers, students, staff, and parents, (Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997) and can help account for students' feelings about the school environment. Stakeholders' perceptions of this enduring quality of the school environment affect their behavior, which in turn, affects the environment (Hoy & Miskel, 1996).

Studies have revealed that student, parent, and teacher perceptions of a positive school climate are associated with increased academic achievement and decreased disciplinary problems (Esposito, 1999; Mattison & Aber, 2007). Conversely, schools struggling with intergroup conflict or racial conflict redirect focus and resources away from educating students toward establishing a safe environment, reducing tension, and managing chronic disciplinary problems and high teacher attrition rates (Mattison & Aber, 2007). Schools provide a distinct public space where multiple ethnic groups converge and openly clash over resources and power. School leaders plagued with conflict between Blacks and Latin@s encounter vexing perplexity in unearthing and addressing varying perspectives concerning the conflict between students as well as their relation to students and each other (Michie, 2007).

Although an exhaustive list of studies has investigated low achievement among Black and Latin@ students (Coleman, 1996), comparative studies involving intergroup conflict have focused primarily on the Black-White binary in school settings. Prior studies regarding intergroup interaction between Blacks and Latin@s emphasized competition-cooperation

theories often intended to demonstrate past cooperation and sharing patterns (Kun & Pulido, 2014). Now, the community relationship between Blacks and Latin@s attracts greater attention due to rapid demographic shift and increased interest in addressing intergroup conflict and exploring opportunities for coalition building. Additionally, since schools have become more segregated within large urban centers like Los Angeles with high concentrations of non-Whites, research on Black and Latin@ relations is gaining momentum, albeit more than 20 years after the first dramatic waves of immigration.

This study adds to the growing body of comparative research by providing additional focus on the perception of middle school students, since this is the time of transition from childhood to adolescence and the beginning of ethnic identity development or the process of exploring and achieving an ethnic identity (Phinney, 1989). Conducting research during this key transitional period when students begin to self-segregate provides an opportunity to promote positive intergroup relations, reduce tensions, and engender better academic and personal outcomes for Black and Latin@ students, and the current urban, demographic reality in South Los Angeles.

Significance of the Study

Student, parent, and teacher perceptions of a positive school climate are linked to increased academic achievement and decreased disciplinary problems (Esposito, 1999). Yet few studies have examined the impact of school climate across racialized groups. A gap exists in the literature concerning perceptions of conflict between racialized groups, and how this conditions the interpersonal interactions that make up school climate; in other words, the literature does not examine school *racial climate* (Mattison & Aber, 2007).

Persistent conflict between Blacks and Latin@s places these students at risk for disciplinary actions such as suspensions and expulsions, resulting in a decrease in student engagement (operationalized as “attendance”) and academic achievement. *Zero Tolerance* discipline policies make even minor infractions like microaggressions a high-stakes behavior, and these policies place Black and Latin@ youth at greater risk to enter the *school to prison pipeline*, a disturbing national process that funnels students out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems (American Civil Liberties Union, 2015).

Two recent landmark policy changes in California demonstrated the importance of a positive school climate. In May 2013, the Board of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) approved the School Climate Bill of Rights to roll back "Zero Tolerance" discipline policies in all Los Angeles schools. This landmark decision, the first in the state, connected the significance of a positive school climate to improved academic outcomes for students in the second largest school district in the country.

Later, in July 2013, California’s governor, Jerry Brown, signed legislation that dramatically changed and increased school funding. The new Local Control Funding Formula granted local school districts, including teachers, parents, and students, greater control in deciding how to use funds to address the state’s top eight education priorities: student achievement, parental involvement, student engagement, implementation of the Common Core State Standards, school climate, basic services, other student outcomes, and course access (California Department of Education State Priority Related Resources, 2016). School climate measures include suspension and expulsion rates, disciplinary actions that respectively describe partial, temporary, or permanent removal from the school setting, and other measures associated

with school climate, such as student, teacher, and parent satisfaction surveys. These sweeping policy changes affirm the connection between a positive school climate and positive academic and personal outcomes for students.

Conversely, the negative impact of a conflict between Black and Latin@ students on student achievement has serious, negative, lifelong consequences because low achievement is one of four primary risk factors associated with later school dropout (Hammond, 2007). Without a high school diploma—the minimal educational standard to ensure gainful employment and self-sustainability—dropouts remain at risk of multigenerational educational, financial, and social disenfranchisement (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). Dropouts also experience increased risk of poor health, substance abuse (Hammond, 2007; Townsend, Flisher, & King, 2007), incarceration, and earlier death than those with high school diplomas. Researchers reported dropout rates as high as 30% nationally and 60% for Black males in urban areas like Chicago (Fulton, 2008). Two-thirds of prison inmates are dropouts, and 52% of all African American male dropouts in their early 30s, have prison records (Fulton, 2008). Given this statistical reality, the impact of interracial conflict on student achievement warrants critical scholarly attention.

Researchers have associated the perception of positive racial interactions and celebration of diversity with improved student outcomes (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003). Continued research on student relations might assist in the development of more cooperative relations, promote less conflict, and lower suspension, expulsion, and dropout rates and contribute to improved academic and life outcomes for Black and Latin@ students. Raising awareness about the racialization of people in support of promoting a global economy provides

an opportunity for transformative awareness to help liberate these two groups from the colonial shackles that bind and divide them in class struggle.

Greater awareness allows for a future of unity with all peoples, in fighting the forces of oppression and state-supported protection of capital. Unchecked oppressive forces and structures do not yield at the devastation of people, schools, or communities, but engineer and ensure the current planetary crisis, as capitalism has been termed, the very “enemy of nature” (Kovel, 2007). Andrzejewski, Baltodano, and Symcox (2009) echoed these sentiments, stating emphatically, “We see global capitalism as the system and common denominator which has formed and exacerbated human oppression: militarism, invasions and the destruction of the global environment” (p. 304).

This student self-awareness cannot come too soon since ethnic minorities will compose more than 50% of the U.S. population by 2050 (Passel & Cohn, 2008) when the current middle school population will be at the midlife stage. Many of these students will be parents or even grandparents while holding the majority vote in the United States. This democratic shift makes the urgency and opportunity of this awareness clear. This study is important to help thwart the school-to-prison pipeline and create more informed, equity-minded citizens who appreciate diversity. Since little has been done to study the impact of racial conflict between Blacks and Latin@s on middle school climate, investigating this link is an important topic of study.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that supports this research study is based on studies in globalization and the resulting tensions from demographic shift. Neoliberalism and critical race theories explore the structural forces that contribute to conflict. The study also considers the

usefulness of school and racial climate theories, and intergroup contact theory in understanding and improving the interactions and relationships between Blacks and Latin@s. This research study suggests that macro-level political and economic structures heavily influence micro-level, local tensions and conflicts between Blacks and Latin@s in a South Los Angeles middle school, severely limiting opportunities for both groups. Combined, these theories delineate the forces that brought large numbers of Latin@s in contact with Blacks, and the political and economic structures that limit opportunities prompting these groups to compete for an extremely small share of resources.

Globalization

Globalization, brought about in the post–Cold War era by rapid advances in technology and communications provided the impetus for a dramatic demographic shift in Los Angeles. Technological advances such as computers, the Internet, transportation and jet air travel greatly facilitate the movement of goods, services, information, ideas, people, and culture around the globe. This virtual erasure of borders renders the world more connected and interdependent (Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Demographic Shift and Community Tensions

The unprecedented changes brought by globalization resulted in a major demographic shift due to the arrival of millions of new immigrants to the United States (Suarez-Orozco, 2001) and provided the catalyst that brought large numbers of Latin@s in contact with Blacks in South Los Angeles. Diminished resources due to the decay of urban centers like Los Angeles provoked community tensions and conflicts between Blacks and Latin@s who compete for limited political, economic, community, and educational resources (Pastor, 2014). Territorial wars

between Black and Latin@ gangs for the lucrative illegal drug market further exacerbated serious and often violent conflicts between these two groups. Finally, media criminalization of Black males and emphasis on interethnic conflict have further ignited the flames of interethnic conflict.

Neoliberalism

The onset of globalization facilitated the exchange of all forms of capital around the world. A key factor in globalization rested in a shift in U.S. economic policy referred to as Neoliberalism that favors free markets. Neoliberalism describes sweeping policy changes to accommodate open market systems made available by globalization. These policy changes included shrinking the role of government in public welfare and the opening of traditionally public, state institutions to private investors and individuals—a process termed *privatization*—along with promoting the competition nature of corporate entities (Symcox, 2009). This shift in policy also altered views on public education, long deemed a cornerstone of public good. These changes created an environment conducive to the educational reform movement, including the California Charter School Act of 1992, which enabled the context for this study, a charter middle school in South Los Angeles

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory developed out of Critical Legal Studies (CLS), a form of legal study that explores the ways in which the American legal and judicial systems perpetuate institutional racism and discrimination (Ladson-Billings, 1999). CRT informs this study by contextualizing the treatment of people of color in the United States based on racism, a deeply embedded part of American society that institutionalizes support structures for White supremacy (Dixson &

Rousseau, 2006). Although initially focused on the justice system, CRT serves as the theoretical framework in other fields, including education.

School Climate and School Racial Climate

School climate and racial climate studies guided this research by describing how people experienced the setting. Researchers have shown that a positive school climate supported increased academic achievement and decreased disciplinary difficulties (Esposito, 1999; Mattison & Aber, 2007). Schools manifesting intergroup conflict or a poor *racial climate* detract focus and resources from student learning to reducing tension, managing disciplinary problems, and contending with high teacher attrition rates (Mattison & Aber, 2007). Actively seeking, promoting, and adopting conditions that make a positive school racial climate has the potential to reduce tensions between Blacks and Latin@s and improve student outcomes.

Intergroup Contact Theory

In an effort to help improve student race relations surrounding the desegregation of schools, Allport (1954) theorized that prejudice reduction could be achieved under certain conditions that included interracial contact, equal status, shared goals, and support from authorities. Intergroup contact theory played a major role in shaping the observation and interview protocols for this study. Research promoted the potential benefits for students with both in- and out-group friendships, where intergroup friendships provided additional social and cultural resources (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991). These friendships represented successful intergroup spaces that, along with an overall reduction in prejudice, enabled more positive interethnic student relations, and improved student academic achievement and personal well-being—a beacon of hope for the future.

The theoretical framework provides the lens to address the macro-level, global changes, national changes, and micro-level, local events, including human school interactions that impact Blacks and Latin@s in a South Los Angeles middle school. Collectively, these theories provided the framework used to answer the research questions under study.

Research Questions

The study explored the following research questions:

1. How do students and parents perceive and conceptualize the racial tensions that affect the school climate at a charter middle school in South Los Angeles?
2. How do students and their parents perceive the impact of these tensions and dynamics on the school's racial climate, and students' academic development and personal lives?
3. How do the faculty perceive and deal with the impact of these tensions on the school's racial climate, students' academic development, and personal lives?

Research Design and Methodology

Qualitative Methodology

This instrumental case study explored student, teacher, and parent perceptions of tensions between Blacks and Latin@s and the impact of these tensions on students' academic and personal lives. A critical framework focused on the political and economic forces at the root of oppression provided the lens for this study. This frame allowed me to interpret phenomena based on a set of assumptions that “the world is made up of historically situated structures that have real impact on the life chances of individuals” (Hatch, 2002, p. 16). Historically—and now increasingly due to globalization—worldwide political and economic structures heavily

influence Blacks and Latin@s by severely limiting their opportunities and encouraging them to compete for diminished resources.

In order to uncover student, parent, and teacher perceptions of racial tensions, I required a research method that would hear and record multiple voices and perspectives to develop a presentation of their collective lived realities. Individual voices reflect individual realities and, though seemingly accurate for the individual, they limit a holistic understanding of phenomena. This study gathered multiple perspectives, and used a multidimensional approach to provide a more complete representation of a collective reality in this study. Since qualitative researchers study subjects in their natural settings to make sense of them and interpret them in relation to the meaning people ascribe to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), this multidimensional approach provided multiple interpretations.

The interpretive and material practices embedded in qualitative research allowed me to access multidimensional perspectives revealed through observations, field notes, interviews, conversations, recordings, and memos that formed an interpretive, naturalist approach to the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Observations yielded additional information that interviews alone did not uncover. Since my research questions focused on the perception of conflict or tensions, I developed a protocol based on Allport's (1954) contact theory, which I used to record observations on specific types of contact in order to document those conditions in the setting. At the same time, the protocol documented evidence of the opposite of racial conflict: interethnic friendships. A finding of this nature represented a negative case analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1981), which later informed implications.

In short, as the researcher and a participant, I was an instrument in the study, and I used multiple methods of gathering data and complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic (Creswell, 2013). I used a multidimensional approach to identify the exceptions to racial conflict (interethnic friendships) and develop a more complete representation of the reality at the research site.

Case Study Design

In this investigation, I used a case study approach at A Beacon of Light Middle School (Light Middle School) in South Los Angeles, a natural setting where the problem of racial tensions between Blacks and Latin@s exists. This approach provided a qualitative research strategy that guided my investigation through detailed, in-depth data collection comprising multiple sources of information, and allowed me to use my experience as a teacher at Light Middle School to access, reflect, and develop in-depth understanding of student, teacher, and parent perceptions of a specific issue: tensions between Black and Latin@ students.

Research Site

I conducted this research study at A Beacon of Light Middle School, a charter school in a high-crime and high-unemployment area in South Los Angeles. The area was previously called South Central Los Angeles. In order to distance the area from the high rates of homicide and gang warfare spawned by the crack epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s, the City of Los Angeles changed its location name to South Los Angeles (Morrison & Lowry, 1994). However, the residual impacts of the violent era remain. South Los Angeles has the highest poverty rate (28%) in Los Angeles County. In alignment with area demographics, more than 95% of Light Middle School students qualified for free and reduced lunches (DataQuest, 2016). The school's

enrollment was representative of the rapid changes in LAUSD's student enrollment. In the last five years, the school had gone from 68% Latin@ and 28% Black to 83% Latin@ and 14% Black.

Light Middle School was run by a large charter management organization (CMO), a nonprofit corporation that served as the local school district for 26 other Los Angeles charter schools with the same mission. Since unlike regular public schools, charter schools must acquire and maintain their own facilities, school sites are often located in converted spaces not originally built for the purpose of schooling. As a result, Light Middle School sat directly on a busy street corner along with a bus stop populated by sex workers, drug addicts, and the indigent. Multiple incidents of gun violence had occurred within feet of the school.

Still, Light Middle School had been in operation for eight years and boasted outperforming neighboring schools on annual state achievement tests. In 2012, the last report available, the school had an Academic Performance Index (API) of 751, a disappointing one-point increase from the previous year, but still, nearly 200 points higher than any middle school in the area.

Participants and Sampling Criteria

In this study, I used convenience and purposeful sampling methods to select participants (Creswell, 2013). The convenience sample was comprised of students, parents, and teachers/staff, based on their availability and willingness to participate. Since the study investigated perceptions of Black and Latin@ tensions, I used purposeful sampling to gain participant voices from these two ethnic groups. These methods were used to help maximize

variability of participants in the study involving a cross-section of 19 participants among students, teachers, parents, and staff that represented the cultural diversity of the school site.

A naturalist method may also incorporate textual and document analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1981), so I reviewed documents from external evaluators such as the Los Angeles Unified School District and internal documents such as the school's charter petition, the School's Accountability Report Card (SARC), and other independent evaluations, which provided additional evidence that supported or refuted the research findings from interviews, observations, and field notes. The findings from document reviews allowed the triangulation of data that developed from the case study to fuse with my knowledge and experience in the natural setting (Hatch 2002; Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

I used semistructured interviews that combined specific and open-ended questions to access and record participants' voices and perspectives. This approach provided the opportunity for open-ended responses that set the stage for more specific questions that I posed later.

I used ethnographic field notes to document participant interactions in the research setting, Light Middle School. I conducted observations in common areas such as the lunch area, the after-school program, school assemblies, field trips, and other events. I used my cellular phone to record field notes for accuracy and easy access for later review and transcription of events that informed the study.

Data Analysis

After collecting data from interviews, I conducted inductive analysis to introduce themes revealed by participants during interviews and observations (Hatch, 2002). This individual parts-to-the-whole analysis started by gathering specific elements and finding patterns and connections

between them. Developing these patterns and connections provided the foundation I needed to make general statements about the phenomena under investigation.

The procedures I utilized in this study provided me with the flexibility to create codes as they emerged from the data, rather than working with the rigidity of categorizing data using prefabricated codes. This flexibility enabled me to develop themes with greater authenticity, because I was able to remain centered on participant responses rather than my anticipation of their responses. This approach lessened potential bias. According to Ragin and Becker (1992), strong preconceived notions impede conceptual development, and researchers may not know what the case is about until the research process is nearly completed, including written research findings. This broad focus, as advocated by Hatch (2002), provided me with the ability to gain meaning from complex data.

The inductive analysis approach produced a large volume of data, which remained accessible as I continued the research process. Conducting inductive analysis throughout the process helped me ensure that themes emerging from the interviews were represented in the document analysis and observation notes. I continued data analysis from the first data set collected until the findings were reported.

Limitations and Delimitations

In this study, I used a convenience sample comprised of approximately 19 stakeholders at Light Middle School, a small charter school with 450 students, compared to neighboring middle schools of over 600 students. While charter schools remain accountable to the Los Angeles Unified School District for meeting academic growth targets and following the academic program set forth in the schools' charter petition, charter schools maintain relative autonomy

from the Los Angeles Unified School District. Due to a charter school's status as an independently operated and run school, and the convenient as well as small sample size, this study cannot be used credibly to make generalizations relative to the roughly 650,000 students in Los Angeles Unified alone, not to mention schools in the State of California, nor the nation as a whole.

Due to demographic shift, Light Middle School experienced rapid decline in Black student enrollment and rapid increases in Latin@ enrollment, which may not be representative of other urban areas, particularly those still maintaining sizeable Black populations. Finally, the intense violence, brought on by the crack cocaine epidemic and ensuing drug wars between Black and Latin@ gangs in the 1990s remain uniquely characteristic of South Los Angeles and cannot be generalized to any other area. However, this study provides a unique opportunity to address a gap in the literature concerning the middle school student perception, so this investigation provides worthwhile data and adds to the scholarship that moves away from strictly Black-White race-based paradigms to critical, political, and economic paradigms with Black and Latin@ students that mirror the changing demographic reality in urban America.

Definition of Terms

Conflict: The resulting dilemma when individuals, groups, or communities, including countries, hold different and incompatible views on substantive issues that result in discord. Generally termed a *disagreement*, based on the perception that satisfying one side comes at the expense of the other side, known as “zero-sum” games (Owens, 2004).

Race: As it is understood in the United States of America, race is a social mechanism invented during the 18th century to refer to those populations brought together in colonial

America: the English and other European settlers, the conquered Indian peoples, and those peoples of Africa brought in to provide slave labor (American Anthropological Society, 2009).

Racialize: The association of racial meaning to relationships, social practices or groups that were not previously classified racially (Omi & Winant, 1993) in order to categorize people as non-White “others” for the purpose of exclusion, exploitation, and domination.

Racism: A theory of racial supremacy and race based world view that one race is superior to another, (Omi & Winant, 1993)

School Climate: The perceived quality of interpersonal interactions among teachers, students, staff, and parents (Haynes et al., 1997). Stakeholder perception of this enduring quality of the school environment affects their behavior, which in turn, affects the environment (Hoy & Miskel, 1996).

School Racial Climate: Factors that reference race, culture or ethnicity as they relate to school climate (Mattison & Aber, 2007).

Organization of Dissertation

This study explored the nature of conflict or tension between Black and Latin@ students and its impact on students in a South Los Angeles middle school. This study provides a snapshot of how stakeholders’ perceptions of school climate and racial tensions affects their behavior, which in turn, affects the environment (Hoy & Miskel, 1996). Chapter 1 introduced the problem and identifies the purpose and significance of the study as well as an outline of the research design, methodology, and data analysis. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical framework detailing the critical, political, and economic paradigm that contextualizes the study, and a review of the relevant literature spanning the racialization of people, the importance of the perception of

school climate relative to student achievement, and the middle school student perspective and the inevitability of conflict. Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology, which includes the interview and focus group protocols, document analysis, and statistics identified in the study. Chapter 4 includes the research study findings, and Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings as well as implications for cooperation and collaboration between Blacks and Latin@s, as well as other groups harmed by capital accumulation and globalization.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This qualitative case study investigated the nature of tensions or conflict between Black and Latin@ students and its impact on students' academic and personal lives in a middle school in South Los Angeles. Discord results when individuals, groups, or communities—including countries—hold different and incompatible views on substantive issues (Owens, 2004). This study argues that the source of interracial conflict between Black and Latin@ students is heavily influenced at the macro-level by political and economic structures that severely limit opportunities for both groups, encouraging them to compete for inadequate resources.

This chapter explores scholarship spanning the categorization and racialization of people for the purpose of exploitation and cheap labor. This review connects this historical justification of racialization, which has conditioned humans to see and ascribe physical, psychological, and social characteristics based on race. The review also demonstrates how the current impact of globalization on the international and domestic labor markets has triggered unprecedented dramatic demographic changes generated by immigration. Additional focus on language issues that spawned English-only policies and nativism further illuminate conflicting views. The final section dissects the media's culpability in exacerbating conflict between Blacks and Latin@s and the impact of these issues on communities, schools, students, parents, and teachers.

Critical Race Theory deconstructed the manner in which legal ideology and laws reproduced and legitimized inequality in American society (Ladson-Billings, 1999) based on race, a social construct with real lived consequences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Globalization mobilized millions of people, causing rapid, dramatic demographic shifts that have resulted in a

burgeoning Latin@ population and a shrinking Black population. These shifts raise concerns over economic competition for jobs as well as status and political power (Balarin, 2011; Darder & Torres, 2004; Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Media emphasis on conflict between Blacks and Latin@s as well as the perpetuation of negative stereotypes—particularly of Blacks—prompts negative attitudes by both groups and thwarts positive intergroup relations (Frasure-Yokley & Green, 2014). Schools represent a key area where points of contention arise, so this study references work that describes factors contributing to conflict—such as the rate of change of ethnic composition at a school site (Davidson, Hofmann, & Brown, 1978). The study draws on work that describes how students perceive their relationships at school, known as school climate (Hoy & Miskel, 1996), and the importance of this feeling for students' achievement and sense of well-being (Noguera, 2008; Valenzuela, 1999). The study highlights the perception of Black and Latin@ relations in terms of a zero-sum game, which assumes that gains by one group come at the loss of the other group, resulting in chronic conflict (Noguera, 2008).

Rather than looking at racial differences, this study points to political and economic structures and constructs that force Black and Latin@ populations to compete for a small, but highly coveted piece of the American Dream.

Race Theories and the Need for Races

“There is not a country in world history in which racism has been more important, for so long a time, as the United States” (Zinn, 2009, p. 23). This profound statement encapsulates a 400-year history of oppression of people of color.

In 1609, the first Virginia settlers were desperate to grow enough food for survival. During what became known as the “starving time” (1609–1610), despairing Virginians ate moldy, rotten, and worm-infested foodstuffs to survive. Original documents from the early Virginia colony indicate that settlers resorted to even more frantic, abhorrent efforts for sustenance, including cannibalism (and murder for cannibalism) and eating corpses that had been buried for days. All the while, those born native to the land, called *Indians*, flourished with the agricultural, hunting-and-gathering knowledge needed for sustenance in the same area. Despite threat and actual tortuous execution for living with Indians, considered to be *savages*, many settlers fled to be among those with food (Zinn, 2011).

These acts of desperation have not been added for shock value, but rather to demonstrate the conditions, including a refusal to develop a cooperative relationship with the Indians, that led the original settlers to seek additional agricultural labor. Later, in 1617, Virginians began exporting tobacco to England, a highly profitable endeavor that required an extensive labor force. Indians could not be enslaved due to their knowledge of the land, their numbers, and ability to retaliate, and White servants were too few in number. Black slaves, torn from their homeland, families, and culture, solved the labor problem for the early settlers, and this source of free labor supplied the economic foundation of the colonies and the eventual country, the United States of America (Zinn, 2011).

Slavery became a deeply embedded American institution that dictated the labor relation of Blacks to Whites. Although slavery existed elsewhere throughout history and around the globe, the difference in America was rooted in unprecedented profits from the free labor and the rationalization for the enslavement of Blacks. Zinn (2011) described “that special feeling,

whether hatred, or contempt, or pity, or patronization—that accompanied the inferior position of Blacks in America for the next 350 years—that combination of inferior status and derogatory thought we call racism” (p. 14).

Prior to the 19th century, race and race theories and ideologies that promoted racial prejudice, held no position in European scientific thought (Outlaw, 1990). However, the economic foundation of the New World in the Americas increasingly depended on the recognition and preservation of so-called racial distinctions that justified slavery and designated native peoples as primitive (Outlaw, 1990), a wanting justification for genocide and the seizure of their lands.

Now, 350 years later, “the color line,” an often-cited phrase by W. E. B. Dubois (1961) in *The Souls of Black Folks*, continues to be a fixation in the American psyche. Categorizing people through a color hierarchy provides a mechanism to accumulate and preserve power, privilege, and wealth, all of which harm the oppressed.

American Anthropological Association: Statement on Race

Although conflict, a predictable outcome of contact between any two groups with perceived difference, clearly exists between Blacks and Latin@s, dramatic scientific advances in the last century make one thing clear: conflict between Blacks and Latin@s cannot be racially based because there is no such thing as race. Instead conflict based on difference reflects human conditioning to *perceive* something *called* race.

In 1998, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) adopted a “Statement on ‘Race,’” declaring:

In the United States both scholars and the general public have been conditioned to viewing human races as natural and separate divisions within the human species based on visible physical differences, however...human populations are not unambiguous, clearly demarcated, biologically distinct groups. (American Anthropological Association [AAA], 1998, para. 1)

The AAA further stated that an analysis of DNA evidence showed that about 94% of physical variation “lies within so-called racial groups” (AAA, 1998, para. 1). This means that far greater variation exists *within* racialized groups than *between* them. Simply put, there is more genetic variation or difference among Blacks themselves or Latin@s themselves, or even Europeans themselves than there is genetic variation between any two of these groups.

The AAA statement affirmed the completely *made-up* nature of identifying people as different races to develop and justify a human hierarchy:

As they were constructing US society, leaders among European-Americans fabricated the cultural/behavioral characteristics associated with each "race," linking superior traits with Europeans and negative and inferior ones to blacks and Indians. Numerous arbitrary and fictitious beliefs about the different peoples were institutionalized and deeply embedded in American thought. (AAA, 1998, para. 5)

This is analogous to attributing major physical, emotional, psychological, and intellectual factors between two people based on one wearing a coat for cold weather and the other wearing a wide-brimmed hat for sun protection, rendering such classical race-related indicators such as long, straight hair and tightly curled hair as little more than weather-related fashion accessories.

Although the AAA made clear that Africans, Indians, and Europeans are not separate species, indeed, only a fabrication, race as an ideology about human differences became a “strategy for dividing, ranking, and controlling colonized people by colonial powers everywhere” (AAA, 1998, para. 7).

Recognizing the importance of exposing and debunking the oppressive categorization of peoples, theorists began deconstructing this centuries-old scheme long before American anthropologists gathered consensus to denounce it. These theorists attributed the foundational motivation to categorize or *racialize* people at all resided in the demand for cheap labor. Hierarchical categories enabled the reproduction of a system based on class separation that functions to distribute power, privilege, and wealth by colorizing and exploiting people for cheap or free labor (Zinn, 2009). In America, schools supply this source of labor.

Critical Race Theory

Foundationally, Critical Race Theory (CRT) contends that race is a social and historical construct (Omi & Winant, 1993), and that racism, which is discrimination or oppression on the basis of race, is an enduring, ubiquitous, and permanent part of American society (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). CRT situates racism as a social, historical act, committed by people, laws, and policies without any factual basis that people exist as races.

CRT holds four main tenets as the foundation of this framework. First, CRT contends that race is a social, historical construct, rather than an objective truth (Delgado & Stephancic, 2001; Omi & Winant, 1993). Second, CRT holds racism is a permanent part of American society. Third, CRT maintains that Blacks have only gained rights at times when it served to meet the needs of White people or, put another way, when Blacks and Whites shared common

interests termed *interest convergence*. Finally, CRT advocates hearing the narratives of oppressed people to counter racism by providing an alternative narrative (Delgado & Stephanic, 2001), a major component of this study.

Despite widely accepted scientific evidence to the contrary, state institutions and scholars alike continually cling to antiquated classifications of people denounced over 15 years ago by the AAA. Lacking any biological evidence to justify a race-based categorization, let alone “race wars,” racist ideology protects certain interests and leaves the true nature of conflicts between Blacks and Latin@s unexplored and unresolved.

This omission leaves the true culprit, capitalism, through capital accumulation, unchecked, with the power to wage international and domestic warfare by creating warring factions of would-be allies without ever revealing itself. This highly effective, stealthy attack on humanity rests in hegemony, the “insidious invisibility of dominant ideology” (Bartolome, 2007, p. 235), which serves to protect imperialism and White privilege.

Wood (1995) contended that focusing on race distracts from the fact that capitalism is the most “totalizing system” of social relations in the history of mankind (p. 75). This economic system hungered for land and justified the genocide of millions of indigenous peoples to create space for expansion and to feed a new, rapidly growing population of European peoples that replaced those that were already in lands now known as “America.” This economic system created an underclass comprised of generations of enslaved African descendants, which through their free labor and oppression fueled the economic growth and expansion of America’s original 13 colonies and the United States they became (Zinn, 2011).

Finally, to ensure their place as subordinate to new European arrivals, these peoples of African and Native descent, though often blended with European ancestry as well, remained “colorized,” a racialization of people that do not represent something called race. Identifying conflict strictly based on race masks the negative impact of oppressive structures and racialization on group interaction.

The Weather Forecast: Variability in School Climate

If one were to imagine a school described as “sunny and warm,” the expectation would be a collegial atmosphere with respectful, caring relationships between students, teachers, staff, and school leaders collectively demonstrating an ethic of care noted as critical to academic achievement (Noddings, 1995). In contrast, imagine a school forecast of “cold and windy, low clouds with a chance of rain.” While minimally functional, this school does not provide the caring and collegial environment students need to succeed. Finally, consider a school forecast of “searing heat with extremely poor air quality”; “students must remain indoors.” This report represents a clear threat to the safety, health, and well-being of students. These images provide insight into how students, teachers, and parents might experience the educational process based on their relationships at school, also regarded as the school’s climate.

School climate refers to the perceived quality of interpersonal interactions among teachers, students, staff, and parents (Haynes et al., 1997). Stakeholder perception of this enduring quality of the school environment affects their behavior, which in turn, affects the environment (Hoy & Miskel, 1996). In addition: “Research...suggests that the performance of African Americans, more so than any other students is influenced to a large degree by the social support and encouragement they receive from teachers... *the ethos of caring*...essential

ingredients of their success” (Noguera, 2008, pp. 36–37). Similarly, Mexican American and immigrant youth present a paradox to teachers oblivious to their needs, “Whereas teachers demand caring about school in the absence of relation” students’ precondition to caring about school is that they be “engaged in a caring relationship with an adult at school” (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 79). Black and Latin@ students share a heightened need for caring relationships at school in order to achieve academically.

Ethnic Identity and Positive Peer Relationships

Middle school represents a particularly tumultuous time as students navigate a key developmental milestone described as an identity crisis (Phinney, 1989). During this time, preteens begin the process of reevaluating their childhood selves and shaping the adult self they are to become (Erikson, 1968). Identity development requires further examination regarding the adolescent development of Black and Latin@ youth, who not only audition multiple adult selves, but also simultaneously develop an identity *within* an identity.

The first identity is the degree to which these students access, accept, and integrate aspects of social capital that align with the norms of the dominant culture such as speech, mannerisms, and preferences, role variants requiring expertise and often maturity (Phinney, 1998). At the same time, these students must navigate the development of their identities in relation to their group or *ethnic identity development* (Phinney, 1989). This can entail posturing or other behaviors like “tough fronts” (Dance, 2002), which can create tension and lead to conflict. Successfully navigating between behavior accepted by the dominant culture and the ethnic identity are critical to the development of happy, healthy, well-adjusted adolescents and adults (Noguera, 2008).

Expansive research has demonstrated the importance of positive peer relationships for healthy adolescent development as they help nurture social identities and a sense of belonging with others (Karpov, 2005; Peshkin, 1991). Theory and research promote the potential benefits for students with both in- and out-group friendships, where intergroup friendships provide additional social and cultural resources and perspectives to include in their developing sense of self (Aron et al., 1991). At the same time, intragroup friendships offer a sense of safety and closeness due to similar experiences and values (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1954). Positive relationships between Blacks and Latin@s enable better life outcomes for both groups since a collegial atmosphere allows greater focus on student achievement and less emphasis on disciplinary issues.

Researchers have attempted to study interracial relations amid developments since *Brown v. the Board of Education*. Segregated and integrated schools during the desegregation period of the 1960s and 1970s gave rise to numerous studies of intergroup relations focused on the Black-White binary and related educational outcomes, personal attitudes, and interracial friendships (McGill, Way, & Hughes, 2012). The extensive body of research findings on the interactions of these two groups revealed that integration could result in both collegial and hostile relations (St. John, 1975). However, despite the emphasis on race relations following the Civil Rights Movement and the era of desegregation, schools began slowly resegregating, and few schools are now being forced to integrate (Orfield & Yun, 1999).

In 2009, 85% of White public school students attended schools that were less than 50% non-White. The trend for Black students was the opposite: 71% attended schools that were more than 50% non-White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). These statistics indicate

that schools are becoming more segregated, with Whites attending primarily all White schools and Blacks attending primarily non-White schools. This demographic trending denotes the need for additional research outside the traditional Black/White binary.

Zero-Sum Games and the Inevitability of Conflict

Despite the benefits of positive peer relationships with both interethnic and intra-ethnic groups, conflict continues to permeate the school landscape. Researchers generally agree that conflict exists when two distinct and essential elements are present: (a) divergent or seemingly divergent views and (b) incompatibility of those views (Owens, 2004). Incompatibility produces a dilemma; the satisfaction of one side seemingly comes at the expense of another side.

However, “The pursuit of narrow self interest is not rational whenever there is some objective cooperative interest...even though it may be individually ‘rational’ in purely competitive situations” (Deutsch, 1974, p. 450).

Thus, the irrational view of conflict as a win/lose proposition, regardless of the contextual environment as determined by cooperative or competitive interests, predicts and determines a dysfunctional approach and outcome to organizational conflict. This approach also adds an affective component to conflict as one side actively campaigns to forward their agenda at the expense of the other, resulting in hostility (Owens, 2004).

One common area of concern in schools rests in the distribution of resources between academic tracks. Students taking advanced classes have access to better lab equipment, textbooks, teachers, and other resources than students in general classes (Gamoran, 1992). Racialized tracking in schools may therefore result in the unequal distribution of resources between ethnic groups. This creates inequitable access to goods and services offered in schools

and influences academic outcomes. When students in regular sections of classes, for example, notice that “students in honors classes have more current textbooks and that each student in those sections has her or his own copy while they do not, that realization creates tension among students” (Gamoran, 1992, p. 203). Often as a result, when there is more tracking that seems racially stratified, interethnic conflict often arises.

Similarly, Owens (2004) suggested that conflict manifests at various levels of human interaction and experience whereby intrapersonal conflict occurs when an individual is torn between two incompatible goals often resulting in stress or even physical manifestations that negatively affect an individual’s health. Conflict may also occur between individuals or social units and can lead to interpersonal or intergroup conflict such as that between Blacks and Latin@s. For example, competition-based relationships catalyzed by capitalistic structures and processes result in what is often characterized as “interracial” conflict but is actually contrived by external forces to preserve an endless supply of cheap labor through the colorization and exploitation of people, now on a global scale.

This common and highly effective “divide and conquer” political, economic, and military strategy has been used for millennia to gain and maintain power. This strategy was embedded in educational discourse concerning the English-only movement and subsequent passage of California Proposition 227 of 1998, which eliminated bilingual instruction, and negatively affected the academic achievement of language minority immigrant groups (Darder & Torres, 2004).

Differences of opinion are inevitable in educational management due to the complex, dynamic nature of the educational system alone, notwithstanding the complex interaction of this

system with myriad other systems, from the global economic system to the family system and all of the complex human interactions therein. More specifically, educational reform agendas require a component of change, including shifts in power, relationships, and resource allocation between classifications of people such as race, sex, and ability; this leads to conflict based on the assumption of justice as a zero-sum game (Noguero, 2008).

Educational leaders must allocate finite resources of time, money, facilities, and even decision-making power or power relations. As a natural result, there will be differing views on how those resources should be allocated with concerns that any gains to one group automatically come at the expense of another group (Meier, McClain, Polinard, & Wrinkle, 2004). This acceptance of a zero-sum expectation renders conflict an ongoing, pervasive aspect of educational management.

This research highlighted how the use of a fabricated construct called “race” promotes an ideology called racism, supported by political, economic, and societal structures, creates continuous conflict in U.S. society. Along with capitalism, this ideology acts as a significant barrier to Black and Latin@ student academic achievement. Unraveling the faux fabric of race by deconstructing and exposing the ways historically situated structural inequity undermines life chances for Black and Latin@ students may have a liberating impact.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study affirmed the existence of structural and attitudinal barriers that impact students’ academic and personal lives in South Los Angeles schools and requires critical engagement on these complex issues. The theoretical framework aided in the identifying the inherent nature of oppression in capitalistic structures in order to

deconstruct intergroup conflict as opposed to theory based on race, a social construct, and racism, an ideology based on that fabrication.

Contemporary theoretical perspectives take into account the complex dynamics in which minorities assume positions of power and use those positions to protect their economic spaces against newcomers, generating a new wave of nativism (Freire, 1970). This study posited that interracial conflict between Black and Latin@ students is heavily influenced at the macro-level by political and economic structures that severely limit opportunities for both groups, encouraging them to compete for extremely limited resources.

Globalization

Globalization involves dramatic changes in the global landscape due to new information and communication technologies, global markets, and knowledge-intensive economies. These changes have signaled a virtual erasure of borders and resulted in unprecedented levels of immigration and displacement (Suarez-Orozco, 2001). For example, in 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between the United States, Canada, and Mexico lifted duties and economic restrictions between the three nations, deregulating trade across the largest area worldwide. In short, the eraser of these trade borders enabled the rapid exchange of markets, information, and symbols, and the movement of large masses of people (Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

The impact of globalization in mobilizing millions of immigrants to the US and the concept of a new *global proletariat* (Suarez-Orozco, 2001) shapes the understanding of the forces that are causing rapid, dramatic demographic shifts resulting in a burgeoning Latin@ population and a shrinking Black population. These shifts raise concerns over economic

competition for jobs as well as status and political power (Balarin, 2011; Darder & Torres, 1998; Suarez-Orozco, 2001;).

Population Changes and Community Tensions

On the local level, a dramatic demographic shift started in the 1970s, when Blacks began leaving South Los Angeles, a historically Black area, for better living conditions and safety in other communities (Morrison & Lowry, 1994) thereby leaving behind a truly disenfranchised Black population in shared space with a rapidly growing Latina@ population. This rapid rate of change was a strong determining factor in Black and Latin@ relations (Davidson et al., 1978). This dramatic demographic shift resulted in points of contention for Blacks and Latin@s concerning jobs, political positions, neighborhoods, and public school resources.

The most fiercely contested arena, competition over drug territory and lucrative drug sales sparked intense violence in the early 1990s between Black and Latin@s gangs and further hastened Black flight. While Latin@ gangs emerged dominate in the struggle for drug territory and gangs, the troubles were attributed to Black males. This was a result of the entertainment media's glorification of and the news media's focus on gang violence and other negative stereotypical behavior of Blacks in music and film generating apprehension, tension, and conflict for both groups (Frasure-Yokely & Green, 2014). Media influences during this violent era branded the Black male as the symbolic and actual representation of violence and criminality. Finally, the media's shrewd portrayal of violent images within and between communities of color created a chasm between would-be allies of all shades in the struggle for equality.

Neoliberalism

A major shift in U.S. policy, neoliberalism, emerged, emphasizing a free market focused on profits and a smaller government less responsible for the welfare of workers and people (Symcox, 2009). Neoliberalism also transformed public education, long viewed as primarily a public good to a potential corporate asset with emphasis on profits (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006), and management teams subject to competition and increased accountability (Davies & Bansel, 2007).

In 1983, the Reagan Administration published a methodologically faulty and now-infamous report titled *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*, which blamed public schools for the economic decline of the United States (Symcox, 2009). This report engineered a public school reform movement that drastically changed the accountability and organization of public schools for the next 30 years, called *No Child Left Behind* (Symcox, 2009).

Neoliberalism frames the corporatization of public education through the charter school movement, which enabled a form of deregulation, open markets, and competition in the educational arena (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2006). Most charter schools are nonunionized, so this shift also changed the working conditions and protections for charter school teachers, who lack tenure, often working on “at-will” contracts, which allow termination without cause. The corporatization of charter schools in particular has a major impact on the school setting in this study and neoliberalism helps frame that understanding.

The Alliance for College Ready Public Schools (The Alliance), a large charter management organization (CMO), operated A Beacon of Light Middle School, the setting for

this case study. The Alliance typifies the growing corporate culture surrounding public schools and operates 26 schools with 11,000 students in high need South Los Angeles areas

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged from Critical Legal Studies (CLS), a branch of scholarship focused on deconstructing the manner in which the legal ideology and the law reproduce and legitimize inequality in American society (Ladson-Billings, 1999). In the 1970s, legal scholars and lawyers became impatient with the slow pace of reforms geared toward racial equality that followed the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and developed CRT as a lens for understanding the insidious and ubiquitous nature of racial discrimination in American law, government, and society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Although the emphasis on race dilutes the importance of political and economic structures in race formation, the tenets of CRT indicate that movements toward equality (i.e., Civil Rights Movement) were largely the result of interest convergence whereby the change benefitted the dominant society as well as the oppressed, not any specific form of altruism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The recognition of the importance of hearing the narratives of oppressed people also guided this study (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

CRT: Structural Inequity and Proposition 13. A California voter's initiative, Proposition 13 changed the way schools were funded, resulting in reduced public school funding, while the 1990s recession, resulted in inadequate and inequitable funding for South Los Angeles students, located in an already-decaying urban center (Chapman, 1998). The shortage of funds and these shifting demographics provoked tensions between Black and Latin@ students, both high-need student populations with inadequate educational resources, such as highly qualified teachers. Teachers needed more training to serve this population and were ill prepared to meet

the needs of these students, particularly at a time of rising accountability, which included close, watchful accountability measures for the very subgroups that lacked necessary funding.

This circular logic represented a set-up for the failure of both groups and the failure of public education in order to back corporate interests and privatize public education. This stealthy move can be contextualized by Critical Race Theory, which contends that race is a social and historical construct (Omi & Winant, 1994) and that racism, which is discrimination or oppression on the basis of race, is an enduring, ubiquitous permanent part of American society (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006) that perpetuates the marginalization of people of color.

As schools struggled to meet the new accountability measures, while receiving inadequate funding, more “planted” evidence accumulated on the supposed failure of public schools and the need for so-called *school choice*. Parents were offered different opportunities for schooling through private schools, school vouchers, charter schools, and for-profit contract schools (Cibulka, 2003).

Racial dynamics, tensions, and conflicts due to rapid demographic shift and scarcity of resources paralyzed teachers and administrators at many of these schools. This qualitative research study accessed the voices of those encountering conflict to tell the story of their lived realities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

School Climate and School Racial Climate

Research on interpersonal interactions, norms, and curricula within schools has described revealing features of the school context and inform how schools can promote the academic and personal lives of students. The school’s organization, including the material needs and instruction offered, the types of interactions and relationships, and the common expectations and

values within schools are referred to as school climate (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009).

When these elements reference race, culture, or ethnicity, they describe school racial climate (Mattison & Aber, 2007). In alignment with other studies, this examines how members of the school community experience the school climate, which includes the school racial climate. School climate research can help educators understand what aspects of the school environment are most relevant to positive youth outcomes in academic achievement and personal lives. As such, this study focuses primarily on uncovering and explaining the effects of school racial climate on student outcomes. Researchers cite the importance of a school racial climate that promotes positive interethnic interactions as well as positive messages about diversity and youth culture (Brand et al., 2003). Further, a large body of discrimination literature demonstrates the negative impact of unfair treatment on students and students of color in particular (Mattison & Aber, 2007).

Intergroup Contact Theory

Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory emerged in response to racial segregation and discrimination in the pre-Civil Rights era and continues to inform and influence research on school racial climate and multicultural education. Allport theorized on the development of prejudice and scenarios that would promote prejudice reduction at the individual and societal level. Allport (1954) posited that certain situational conditions would provide an environment that was conducive to changing individual attitudes, which would in turn lead to social change, citing four key conditions that promoted prejudice reduction: (a) opportunities for cross-race

contact, (b) equal status within the situation, (c) the opportunity to work toward common goals, and (d) support from authorities.

This research study looked to these contact conditions to assist in documenting tension or conflict relative to opportunities for prejudice reduction, positive intergroup peer relations, and the identification of interethnic friendships, which are associated with positive student outcomes (Aron et al., 1991). As such, Allport's (1954) contact theory played a major role in shaping the interview and observation protocols for this study.

This research highlights how the use of a fabricated construct called "race" promotes an ideology called racism, supported by political, economic, and societal structures, creates continuous conflict in U.S. society. Along with capitalism, this ideology acts as a significant barrier to Black and Latin@ student academic achievement. Deconstructing and exposing the ways historically situated structural inequity undermines life chances for Black and Latin@ students may have an emancipatory impact.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative case study, I investigated student, teacher, parent, and staff perceptions of tensions between Black and Latin@ students and the impact of these stressors on students' academic development and personal lives in a South Los Angeles middle school. This chapter begins with the research questions addressed in this study. The chapter then reviews the research design, methodology, setting, participants, methods of data collection, and analysis I used to answer the research questions. Finally, the chapter provides an assessment of research reliability, credibility, and trustworthiness.

Research Questions

In order to uncover the source of tensions or dynamics between Blacks and Latin@s, I used the following research questions to guide the study.

1. How do students and parents perceive and conceptualize the racial tensions that affect the school climate at a charter middle school in South Los Angeles?
2. How do students and their parents perceive the impact of these tensions and dynamics on the school's racial climate, and students' academic development and personal lives?
3. How do the faculty perceive and deal with the impact of these tensions on the school's racial climate, and students' academic development and personal lives?

Research Design

Qualitative Methodology

I conducted this research study to discover student, parent, and teacher perceptions of school climate and any racial tensions as well as the impact of these phenomena on students' academic and personal lives. I also wanted to unearth teachers' perceptions and handling of racial tensions. To accomplish these goals, I required a research method that would hear and record the unique voices of various school stakeholders. Qualitative research methods appropriately delve into the lived experiences of these study participants.

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) defined qualitative research as a “situated activity that locates the observer in the world, [and] consists of a set of interpretive and material practices that make the world visible...[and] transforms the world” (p. 3). These practices represented the world through field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos that encompassed an interpretive, naturalist approach to the world. In summary, qualitative researchers study subjects in their natural settings to make sense of them and interpret them in relation to the meaning people ascribe to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Moving from a general definition to the specific characteristics of qualitative research helps clarify important parameters of this case study. Generally accepted characteristics of qualitative research include a study conducted in a natural setting with the researcher as an instrument in the study, multiple methods of gathering data, and complex reasoning through inductive and deductive logic (Creswell, 2013).

First, this research study took place at a charter middle school in South Los Angeles, and I collected data in this natural setting where tensions exist between Blacks and Latin@s. I served

as a key instrument to gather data by conducting interviews and observing student and teacher behavior and interactions in this context. I also developed instruments such as open-ended questions to help answer the research questions based on student, parent, teacher, and staff perceptions. I used multiple data-gathering methods including interviews, observations, and document analysis to access participants' voices and gain insight about their unique reality as well as nuances embedded in their differing perspectives. Finally, I employed complex reasoning through inductive analysis, which revealed patterns, categories, and themes that I checked against the data. My interaction and collaboration with students, parents, and teachers shaped the themes that developed throughout this process of ongoing complex, dynamic reasoning (Creswell, 2013).

Qualitative research provided the methodological processes to access and understand complex information. In this study, I explored complex issues with several dynamic factors such as interethnic conflict and the interchange of political, economic, social, and educational structures. Exploring and understanding this complexity necessitated a qualitative approach to this research to bring forth the inner experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) of students, parents, and teachers to determine how they perceived tensions between Blacks and Latin@s and how this meaning was assigned through their lived experiences, which in turn, shaped their realities.

Case Study Design

This instrumental case study investigated tension between Blacks and Latin@s at Light Middle School, a charter school in South Los Angeles. A precise definition of what constitutes a case remains elusive due to varying researcher perspectives. Ragin and Becker (1992) suggested that a specific place and time sets boundaries for cases, however the precise nature of the case

may not be known until the research, including the final report were concluded. Ragin and Becker (1992) indicated the nature of the case will coalesce spontaneously over time, such that the final revelation of what the case is about offers the most critical aspect of bridging ideas and evidence. This guidance allowed me to proceed patiently while the data emerged and remain comfortable with this ambiguity until I had completed a thorough analysis.

I used the following procedures to conduct this case study: (a) Determine the appropriateness of using a case study design, (b) Identify the case, selecting the most useful type of case and sampling methods, (c) Conduct extensive data collection using a variety of information sources, (d) Analyze the data using a holistic or embedded approach, and (e) Interpret and report the case, assign meaning to findings and provide lessons learned from the study (Creswell, 2013). The specific procedures I used to conduct this case study are detailed in the next section of this chapter.

A case study research approach was the qualitative research strategy that guided this investigation through detailed, in-depth data collection comprised of multiple sources of information such as interviews, observations, and document analysis. A case study allowed for the use of my intuition and experience as a teacher at Light Middle School to access, reflect, and develop in-depth understanding of student, teacher, and parent participants' experiences on a specific issue: tensions between Blacks and Latin@s at a middle school in South Los Angeles. Consequently, my teaching position at this research setting provided me with access to the data with the intention of accurately reflecting the dynamic and complex variables that naturally occur when multiple realities of individuals with varying perspectives interact with one another (Wenger, 1998).

Research Setting

This case study involved a single case and took place at one setting, Light Middle School in South Los Angeles, to focus deeply on illuminating student, teacher, and parent perception of interethnic tensions, dynamics, and any possible conflict and the impact of these stressors on students' academic and personal lives. The profile of the research positioned this inquiry as a single *instrumental case study* to better understand a specific issue (Saxe, 1995): the source of conflict between Black and Latin@ students. Additionally, the case occurred at a specific place and time representing a *bounded system* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Collectively, these parameters indicated that a case study provided an appropriate methodology for this inquiry (Creswell, 2013).

Light Middle School was a charter school that serves 450 sixth- through eighth-grade students within a large charter management organization (CMO), The Alliance for College Ready Public Schools (The Alliance) that holds the governance and financial role of a local school district for 26 high schools and middle schools in high need areas of South and East Los Angeles. The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) granted the school's charter petition, which allows freedom from some California State Education Codes and provides the school with greater autonomy to provide innovative curriculum in exchange for certain accountability measures, while still under the supervision of LAUSD through periodic site reviews. An LAUSD oversight committee evaluates the school's performance in meeting schoolwide academic growth objectives, and adherence to the school's stated educational program, fiscal responsibility, sound governance, and compliance with the Ralph M. Brown Act of 1953. This California State law mandates transparent governance of organizations that

receive public funding such as charter schools. Based on a successful review, the sponsoring district, LAUSD, renews the school's charter for a specified period, usually three to five years, ensuring the school's continued operation and receipt of state per-pupil funding and other entitlements.

Historically, the California Department of Education mandated specific growth targets for all public schools as well as targets for “numerically significant subgroups” that require these groups to meet or exceed 80% of the schoolwide growth target. This special class of students, typically underserved students, must comprise at least 15% of the total school population and individually meet the specific definition of a subgroup including: (a) ethnic/racial, i.e., African American or Black (not of Hispanic origin), and Hispanic or Latin@; (b) socioeconomically disadvantaged consisting of students who meet one of the following criteria: (a) neither parent received a high school diploma or (b) qualify for the free or reduced lunch program; (c) English Learners; or (d) students with disabilities. Students may belong to multiple subgroups (DataQuest, 2015).

School Demographics

Light Middle School's demographic data reflected the rapid changes in LAUSD's student enrollment. In five years, the school transitioned from 68% Latin@ and 28% Black to 86% Latin@ and 14% Black. Black students have been a longtime “watch subgroup” in state reporting and accountability measures such as standardized tests. However, at Light Middle School, “Black” had been removed as a reportable subgroup. Due to rapid demographic shift, Black students now comprised less than 15% of the total student population and were deemed statistically insignificant based upon the subgroup definition parameters. However, Latin@s and

another subgroup, English Language Learners, continued to be monitored and were registered at 34% of the total student population (DataQuest, 2014).

Students' socioeconomic levels also reflected area statistics, with more than 95% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunches, so the school provided nutrition to all students as well. The school was located in a high-crime and high-unemployment section of South Los Angeles. Nearly 50% of residents were currently unemployed. Compared to other areas in Los Angeles County, this area had the highest poverty rate at 28% and the highest percentage of children living in poverty. The area held the lowest coupling rate (50%), which includes individuals married or living together (County of Los Angeles Department of Public Health [DPH], 2013).

According to Los Angeles County Key Indicators of Health in 2013, South Los Angeles almost unilaterally held the worst outcomes in any category concerning health and welfare with one notable exception. The area comprised the county's lowest suicide rate, *a beacon of light* that gleams off pages of seemingly hopeless statistics (DPH, 2013).

Blended Learning: BLAST

Light Middle School was the first Blended Learning for Alliance School Transformation (BLAST) middle school at The Alliance and continued to use the BLAST strategy as a fundamental aspect of its instructional program. Teachers incorporated computer technology into the daily aspects of their teaching practice using a station rotation model comprised of direct instruction, collaborative, and independent stations. Teachers were required to post all student work to the school website using a digital agenda. Many students arrived at the school with limited computer skills and often lacked computers and/or Internet access at home. The sixth-

grade instructional team acclimated each new cohort to this high-tech environment to meet one of the school's Expected Schoolwide Learning Results that students will become technologically savvy. This represents an inordinate task for a school with 34% of students designated as English Language Learners. Many incoming students completely lack computer skills and can barely read. Approximately 43% of sixth-grade students begin the school year at kindergarten through second-grade reading levels. Yet and still, they are expected to access all of their work by reading and navigating digital agendas, intricate and detailed documents that require tremendous effort to design and maintain, a major burden for novice teachers.

Light Middle School's instructional day includes an extended two-hour block schedule and operates on a traditional academic calendar consisting of 190 instructional days, 10 days longer than the LAUSD 180 day-academic calendar.

Community partners that work with the school include: Computers for Youth (CFY), which provides a laptop and assistance with low-cost Internet access for all incoming sixth graders. Due to this three-year partnership, every student has received a free computer for home use. Another partner, CollegeYes!, provides training, support, and technology for college and career and science project-based learning. Other partners include The United Way, The Rotary Club, a local nonprofit, Watts Labor Community Action Committee (WLCAC), and a local grocery store. Large individual donors and federal grants have funded the blended learning technology initiative. The school also receives significant funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for a pilot program on teacher effectiveness incentives also known as performance-based pay.

In 2014, Light Middle School concluded its seventh year of operation with the founding school principal still at the helm. During this time, the school consistently outperformed neighboring schools on annual state achievement tests. The school's 2013 Academic Performance Index (API), a measure of student performance based on standardized tests, of 751 was nearly 200 points higher than any middle school in the area. Additionally, parents were required to submit an application for their child to attend the school. Although the California State Education Code requires that student selection for enrollment be based on a random lottery, knowledge of the school, completing application materials, and meeting application deadlines imply access to social capital not required to attend the local public school. Parents also signed a contract to volunteer 40 hours to support the school. These indicators of heightened parental involvement and, particularly, parental expectations for college, represent strong positive correlations with student achievement and positive student outcomes such as high school graduation and college attendance (Fan & Chen, 2001).

Despite these key strengths, Light Middle School faces some distinct challenges. Aside from being located on a dangerous and busy street corner, the school was on a very small property. Overcrowding left very little space for any kind of aerobic activity. Instead, students had to walk 20 minutes in each direction through a high-crime neighborhood to get to the park for daily physical education. Although the seventh and eighth grades were located in a new two-story structure, the sixth grade remained in the original building, a converted clinic. Since the building was not intended for the purpose of schooling, classrooms were carved out of existing spaces, so some classrooms were incredibly small and none of them had windows, ventilation, or natural light. Classrooms also lacked uniformity and maintained load-bearing beams that

obstructed students' visibility during instruction. The building also shared a corner with a city bus stop, which provided no meaningful distance from the street, necessitating fortress-like walls without any windows to provide a basic level of protection and security from intruders. This proximity to the corner placed the school within feet of three shooting incidents and one accident involving a decapitation in the last year.

Light Middle School also struggled with a poor teacher retention rate with an average teacher employment term of three years. Teachers had at-will annual contracts and no form of tenure was offered, in contrast to LAUSD public school teachers who receive tenure after the second year of employment. Since as many as half of the school's teachers were from Teach for America (TFA), they tended to be young, recent college graduates. This placed incredibly young adults without any childrearing experience in a position of authority relative to parents and grandparents, who were raising multiple children. These teachers and parents were from different backgrounds and many parents were not fluent in English. The TFA employees generally served their two to three year contracts, working in high-need areas, and then leave, often for graduate or law school, positions within LAUSD, and other endeavors. Teacher turnover was so high that an entirely new crop of teachers cycled through the school every three years. Thus, the school was constantly training new teachers and as soon as they developed a basic level of competency—at the expense of students who deserved and required instruction from the most experienced teachers—those teachers were gone, making continuity of instruction extremely difficult. Then the cycle started again with these students serving as a training ground for new teachers. In stark contrast to the poor teacher retention rate, staff members had greater longevity and provided valuable insight to the study.

Mission Accomplished? School Success and School Failure

The mission of Light Middle School was “to prepare urban, secondary students to succeed in high school and continue on a path toward college; to live fulfilling self-directed lives, and to be effective in creating a just and humane world” (A Beacon of Light Middle School, 2015)

In the school’s first year, 2007–2008, Light Middle School earned a base API of 729. The school posted sizeable gains the next year and a small loss in the following year. For the 2010–2011 school year, Light Middle School earned a preliminary API score of 699, a 4% decline from its base. Even with the disappointing decline, Light Middle School was one of the highest-performing middle schools in the South Los Angeles area and the highest by far in and around the community of Watts. Based on the API result of 699, Light Middle School did not meet the growth target and was placed on *Program Improvement* or P.I. by LAUSD. P.I. is a watch status for schools that do not meet academic growth targets, and these schools risk closure with repeated inability to demonstrate prescribed school-wide academic progress as well as specified gains across all subgroups. Despite remaining the strongest academic performer in the area, P.I. status threatens charter school closure if the school continues to fail in meeting *growth* targets.

Light Middle School’s strengths converged in 2011 when the school experienced a 50-point increase in the school’s Academic Performance Index (API) (DataQuest, 2011). In that same year, Light Middle School also enjoyed student and parent satisfaction scores of 88% based on survey data (A Beacon of Light Middle School Accountability Report Card, 2011).

However, in 2012, Light Middle School's challenges in teacher retention may have contributed to the school's disappointing and barely perceptible one-point increase in the API and the school's failure to meet subgroup growth targets (Blacks, English Language Learners), which placed the school in Program Improvement status. Parent and staff satisfaction plummeted in that same year to 60% (Schools Accountability Report Card, 2012). During this time period, teacher retention remained very low and the entire faculty changed completely, perhaps contributing to the stalled Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and poor academic growth due to the lack of overall teacher experience at the school site.

Based on these and other reports, the school received a one-year extension of the charter from LAUSD with clear indicators of expected areas of improvement, particularly support for English Language Learners. Although Light Middle School was still one of the highest-performing middle schools in the South Los Angeles area and the highest by far in and around the community of Watts, a missed growth target placed the school on probation.

This peculiar predicament of being a high-performing school relative to neighboring schools while simultaneously being on school "probation" placed extreme pressure on teachers and administrators to perform at high levels above and beyond neighboring schools. This "catch-22" of being high-performing, while being on watch status exacerbated and possibly accelerated the school's abysmal teacher retention rate. Following the exodus of teachers, the school then had the inordinate task of recovering the past year losses in test scores with a new parade of teachers or face threat of closure.

In 2013, Light Middle School received a reprieve when Governor Brown signed Assembly Bill 484 (AB 484), which halted state testing and accountability measures, STAR and

the API, to prepare for a switch to the California Common Core Standards. This legislation terminated the California Standards Tests, or CSTs, and other assessments that formed the state's Standardized Testing and Reporting program, known as STAR, for the past 15 years. AB 484 also provided the state two years to create a master plan for future tests and an undetermined period after that to implement the plan (EdSource, 2014). Like other public schools, Light Middle School was busily preparing for the transition to the CCCS with frequent teacher professional development meetings on curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Participant Selection

This case study employed the purposeful sampling of individuals. According to Creswell (2013):

This is not a probability sample to enable the researcher to make statistical inferences to a population; rather it is purposeful to intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination. (p. 170)

In order to answer the research questions for this case study, three considerations informed this purposeful sample: (a) the participant criteria, (b) the specific sampling strategies, and (c) the sample size.

Participant Criteria

Hammersely and Atkinson (1995) suggested selection criteria based on gaining perspective in chronological time, people representative of culture from varying demographic groups, and the situations that lead to different types of behavior. Further along this continuum, Creswell (2013) suggested the use of maximum variation as a sampling strategy in order to gain

multiple, diverse perspectives, while considering access and rapport so that participants will provide detailed responses to inform the study.

Since the study sought understanding of student, teacher, and parent perceptions of the school climate at Light Middle School, including any racial dynamics, tensions, or conflicts among the different student groups, the selection criteria for the study included diversity in perspective, culture, and chronological time at the site of the case study. This involved a sample size of 19 total participants from different stakeholder and demographic groups to gain a variety of perspectives, while considering access, availability as well as rapport with me, a participant researcher and teacher at the school.

Teacher and staff participant selection was intentional to reflect all ethnicities on the school site (Black, Latin@, and White). Student and parent participants also reflected the ethnic diversity of the school. This purposeful sample provided diversity in cultural groups and perspective. Purposeful sampling also provided diversity in time by including seventh- and eighth-grade students and, when possible, variations with parents that had had multiple children enrolled in the school to satisfy diversity of longevity at the school site. Finally, the selection criteria enabled diversity of behavior such as the parent role versus the teacher role. Student participants included high-, middle-, and low-achieving students and English Language Learners. Students with excellent behavioral histories as well as students with chronic discipline issues were also part of the study.

The offer to participate was extended openly to students during two seventh-grade classes and two eighth-grade classes based on accessibility. The open offer for parent participation occurred during a parent workshop. Potential participants were advised that only a limited

number of participants were needed and that they would be selected to gain the greatest variation in perspective based on age/grade, gender, and ethnic group, and that in order to satisfy this criteria, participants would be selected on a first-come, first-serve basis. Combined, the open offer to participate, the selection criteria, and first-come, first-serve process placed greater control of selection with the potential participant, so that parents and students were not singled out for inclusion in or exclusion from the study. Collectively, the strategic use of these methods helped ensure a degree of variability, considering the relatively small sample of participants.

Sampling

Based on convenience, nine students, five teachers (including one former teacher), two staff members, and four parents, all representing the full spectrum of ethnic diversity at the school site, participated in the study. Four out of 20 certificated teachers at the school site were interviewed. These teachers represented ethnic groups currently working at the site: Blacks, Latin@s, and Whites. Two staff members, one Latina and one Black, were also interviewed. Nine students were interviewed, four Blacks and five Latin@s, six boys and three girls. Although this was not representative of the student population, more than one participant from each ethnic group was interviewed to allow for some degree of differing perspective. Four parents, two Black female parents, and two Latinas were also interviewed.

Access

In order to gain access to the site and participants, I asked my school site principal for permission. Both school administrators were supportive of my completing my doctoral program and offered full support. As a veteran teacher with the highest level of academic seniority on site, I have had the opportunity to build strong, collegial relationships with the school site

leadership, which was significant in terms of gaining access for the study and the study itself. Light Middle School has often been riddled with conflict among teachers and the administration, and I have been respected for my rapport with and between various stakeholder groups. This respect is gained through professionalism and maintaining a positive collegial attitude. I has also taken on a number of key projects for the school leadership including high visibility positions such as the teacher member of the charter school board of directors, and the facilitator of the only ongoing, fully thriving, not to mention government-funded group of Student Technology Leaders, called the S.T.L. Club.

Lastly, my embrace of and facility in the effective and innovative use of technology in the classroom had garnered positive high-level attention both for the school as well as the school's leadership. I had also developed a number of trusting relationships with parents and students, including multiple siblings, during my time as a teacher at the school. In short, my access, particularly due to the sensitivity of tensions between Blacks and Latin@s was aided by the strong relationships that I have built at the school.

Methods of Data Collection

A Beacon of Light Middle School community stakeholders such as students, teachers, staff, and parents were interviewed regarding their perception of tensions on the school site or in the area. Case study data collection procedures warrant extensive data collection using multiple information sources including interviews, focus groups, observation, audio-visual technologies, and document and artifact analysis. This naturalist approach requires dedicated observations in the participants' natural setting, Light Middle School, while taking care to avoid impacting the behavior of participants. Interviews captured participants' perception of dynamics, tensions, and

conflicts between Blacks and Latin@s. This case study used textual and document analysis to provide additional evidence that supported or refuted the research findings from interviews, observations, and field notes. Document reviews enabled the triangulation of data that developed from the case study in combination with the researcher's knowledge and experience in this natural setting (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Hatch 2002).

Data for this study was collected from January 2015 to April 2015, a total of four months. Prior to involvement with the interviews, the students (and their guardians), parent participants, teachers, and staff were provided a brief overview of the study and informed consent forms that outlined the parameters of the study. Students were also provided with child assent forms. This information was shared with participants in person and consent forms were collected prior to the interviews. Participants also received an Experimental Subject Bill of Rights. All documents were provided in English, Spanish, or both based on the participant's preferences. For student participants, a letter, child assent, and informed parental consent forms were sent home outlining the purpose of the research, the scope, and potential risks to participants.

Due to the nature of the study of existing tensions between two ethnic groups, additional protections for participants were added to the consent form for parents and students. This information was also shared verbally in reviewing the forms prior to commencing the interviews. These protections reminded participants that, as a mandated reporter, I would immediately report any suspected abuse. The forms also indicated that I could intervene on students' behalf if they were the targets of bullying. All participants were advised that they might feel discomfort in sharing their thoughts, feelings, and might have concerns about confidentiality. They were provided a list of free and low-cost counseling services, including the school counselor. I

provided contact information including a telephone number and email address for questions or clarification. Translation was required for one parent, and the school's parent liaison signed a confidentiality agreement and conducted the translation. Parents of student participants were advised that they could consent to or deny participation on behalf of their child. Children were advised that they needed to provide their own separate consent. Parents and students were made aware that the study was completely voluntary, would not impact the child's grades, and would have no repercussions, such as punishment or detention for participating in the study. All consent forms were reviewed and collected prior to conducting interviews.

A research application containing details of the case study, certification from the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative on protecting human subjects, and copies of the informed consent forms and the interview protocols (English and Spanish) were submitted to the Loyola Marymount University Institutional Review Board for review. This submission included the additional safeguards to ensure the protection of student participants, a protocol for reporting suspected child abuse and procedures for handling disclosures of bullying. Once the application was approved, data collection commenced as detailed in the next section.

Ethnographic Field Notes

Observations. The research process began with observation. I wanted to see the school site and observe student interactions for evidence of intergroup tensions, dynamics, or conflict. I used an observation protocol based on the study's theoretical framework to guide the data collection to ensure specific areas of focus were addressed during the observation. Using Allport's (1954) Contact Theory model, which cited four key conditions that promoted prejudice reduction, I specifically looked for (a) opportunities for cross-race contact, (b) equal status

within the situation, (c) the opportunity to work toward common goals, and (d) support from authorities.

In order to collect observation data in an organized and systematic manner, I developed an observation protocol that categorized two specific intergroup contact factors; frequency of interaction and quality of interaction (Allport, 1954). I added a third component; variety of interaction. Theory and research promoted the potential benefits for students with both in- and out-group friendships, where intergroup friendships provide additional social and cultural resources and perspectives (Aron & Aron, 1991). The addition of variety of interaction provided data on intergroup interactions that occurred across multiple settings, indicating an intergroup peer friendship. I defined an interethnic friendship group as two or more students from different ethnic backgrounds that could be observed together across multiple settings such as lunch *and* an assembly. Based on this definition, students observed together over multiple settings was a strong indication of a friendship as opposed to an acquaintance relationship.

By categorizing the observation data as frequency, quality, and variety of interactions, I was able to focus on the types of interactions that would inform a study on intergroup conflict. For frequency of interaction, I observed all areas of the school to determine the overall opportunities for students to have intergroup interactions. I also observed where, when, and how students had intergroup interactions. For quality of interaction, I described student behaviors in terms of the type and intensity of interaction based on language, communication, and space sharing, including physical closeness and personal contact. Variety of interaction data collection included intergroup interactions by location and documented repetition of intergroup interaction across multiple settings. These interactions denoted a friendship group. I also observed student

groups and described the way they negotiated shared space in the lunch area, hallways, and at school functions. Observations included how groups entered, occupied, shared, left, or exchanged spaces.

I operated as a participant observer in most instances, which allowed me to flow through student areas. I observed students in all common areas, including, the hallways, and the cafeteria area at lunch/nutrition, school assemblies, the afterschool program, the front area of the school, basketball practice, cheerleading practice, a school dance, and a field trip.

I used my cellphone to audio record my observations. People are accustomed to seeing individuals walking around talking on cellphones, so I was able to record very detailed notes of the environments, including my interactions, without drawing undue attention to myself. I listened to these recordings immediately following the observation to record any other pertinent information, questions, and areas of follow-up for next steps. I took notes from the recordings and transcribed those that contained descriptive data that I wanted to capture for later review. I also created voice memos to summarize or supplement what I observed, including any initial impressions, further areas of focus, or items that might be addressed during interviews. Finally, I used observation notes and notes taken from recordings to identify sections of the recordings that I would transcribe later for data analysis.

I used three methods to tabulate frequency, quality, and variety of interaction. During observations, I kept track of the frequency of interethnic interactions using a simple tick-mark each time I saw students from different ethnic groups interact. For this record, I included date, time, number of interactions, and location such as cafeteria area. For quality of interaction, I used the same format and added a note of the time on the recording where I described the quality

of the student interactions. Since I ended up with hours of voice recordings, this allowed me to easily identify the section of a recording that held descriptive data, and I transcribed this data as needed. For variety of interaction, I again documented the date, time, and location, but also added the names of students from different ethnic groups that interacted in each setting.

Tracking these interactions was facilitated by my familiarity with the students as well as the small number of Black students. For this reason, interethnic interactions were easily noticed and observed. Observations occurred before, during, and after the interviewing process during the months of January through April 2015 for a total of approximately four months.

Interviews. In order to answer the research questions, the participants' voices and perspectives were accessed through semistructured interviews that followed a specific protocol informed by studies on school climate and racial climate, and Allport's (1954) Contact Theory. However, probing techniques were employed for clarification or follow-up questions (Hatch, 2002). The interview protocol included a combination of specific and open-ended questions. This approach provided the opportunity for open-ended responses that helped set the stage for more specific questions.

Following initial observations, I interviewed one member from each stakeholder group in this order: teacher, student, parent, and staff, and transcribed these interviews immediately. I wanted to gain insight from multiple perspectives to help fine tune interview questions and inform later observations. I used this opportunity as a preview to validate or refute patterns that were already emerging from the data. This approach proved to be an invaluable time saver because the data gained from initial interviews and observations guided the rest of the investigation.

Since the purpose of the study was to uncover the perception of tension between groups, phrasing of interview questions was constructed to avoid bias and let participant voices emerge with their own perspectives and realities. Questions using words such as “race” or “power” held the potential to bias participant responses and were avoided. To limit bias in questioning, I developed questions based on prior research on intergroup conflict in schools. These questions were open-ended to provide the space for participants to interpret the questions and allow an appropriate response (Fetterman, 2010).

The interviews were guided by this list of questions and the issues they investigate (Merriam, 2009). The questions were designed to uncover the participant’s perception of racial tensions at the school and how those tensions impacted students academically and personally. The language used took into account the respondents’ worldview to improve the quality of the data (Hatch, 2002). I attempted to allow the participants to define their frame of reference. For example, some Latin@s referred to themselves as White, and one girl described herself as male, Black, White, Hispanic, and Latina. Girls of African descent preferred to be called African American instead of Black, and one participant described herself as queer (feminine).

The initial goal of the interviews was to help the participants feel at ease and comfortable. I reminded participants that I would tape the interview before beginning. Tape recording allowed me to fully engage during the interview without focusing on taking notes. Recording also provided the opportunity for accurate transcription of the data collected, and review of the data as needed. A limitation with recording was that participants might have been less open and honest regarding their perception of tensions. However, I did my best to put participants at ease. I believe I was highly successful in accessing many participants’ true thoughts and feelings by

building a strong rapport and providing assurances that interview information was confidential. Participants were advised that the names and sources of information would be removed to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants and the site. Finally, I advised participants of my ethical obligation to protect their identities. Combined, these steps helped alleviate concerns, and all participants were eager to have their voices heard.

One parent required some Spanish translation, and parts of the interview were conducted in English. The school's parent liaison signed a confidentiality agreement and performed translation services.

The student and parent interviews generally occurred shortly after the afternoon dismissal bell and were conducted in my classroom because there was no private space available on the school site. Teachers and staff were given the option to meet on-site in their classrooms or off-site if more convenient. One teacher chose the option to meet off-site. One interview with a former teacher occurred over the phone. Interviews took place as follows: (a) interviews with students took place in my classroom (even the school counselor lacks private space due to overcrowding on the campus); (b) interviews with teachers and the staff members occurred both in my classroom and the teacher's classroom; (c) interviews with parents took place in my classroom; and (d) two parent and three student interviews occurred at the child's home at the parents' request.

Focus group discussions. Focus groups were intended for the study, but were not approved by the internal review board, and not included in the study.

Data Analysis

Interviews and observations were transcribed as soon as possible. When this was not

possible, I used voice memos to record the tone of the encounter and any other pertinent information that might inform a later review of the data. I coded the data in several stages by reading transcriptions multiple times with a specific purpose: (a) develop familiarity, (b) uncover patterns and connections within the transcription, (c) document patterns across multiple transcriptions, and (d) reveal themes across all transcriptions. Following this protocol helped me to manage and analyze the large volume of data that accumulated over the study.

The first reading allowed me to familiarize myself with the actual interview again. During this read, I placed check marks near information that I wanted to review in greater detail during the second read. I made a few brief notes when this information sparked ideas or questions. During the second reading, I probed deeper, actively looking for patterns and connections within a single transcription, using a basic annotation strategy for written text by adding notes, circling central ideas, underlining key phrases, and writing down questions. As I read subsequent transcriptions, I used the same annotation strategy and began looking for patterns and connections across interviews by going back and rereading prior transcriptions. I kept handwritten notes that listed patterns that emerged across transcriptions and made additional notes when the patterns crossed stakeholder groups such as teacher and student or Black and Latin@.

I used inductive analysis to introduce themes revealed by participants during interviews (Hatch, 2002) and/or observations. I developed strict criteria for phenomena to be designated as a theme: (a) Responses must be endorsed by the majority of a stakeholder group, i.e. the majority of teachers; (b) responses must repeat across stakeholder groups (i.e. at least one student, one teacher/staff member, and one parent), and (c) responses must be endorsed by both ethnic

groups, at least one Black and one Latin@. This was to ensure that an issue was affirmed from all perspectives.

After patterns and connections emerged across all stakeholder groups, I went back and color-coded data based on emerging themes, and these thematic responses were categorized and tabulated for frequency. For example, I coded patterns of racial tensions in red as being thematic, and counted these occurrences, but actual themes were not designated until much later in the process.

This individual parts-to-the-whole strategic analysis started by gathering specific elements and finding patterns and connections between them. Developing these patterns and connections provided the foundation to make general statements about phenomena under investigation and guided other inquiry. Instead of data gathering to test a hypothesis, as seen in a deductive analysis, the theory emerged from the context of the study in this inductive analysis (Hatch, 2002). The comprehensiveness of the procedure utilized in this study provided significant flexibility to code responses as they emerged from the data, rather than using prefabricated themes. This flexibility afforded greater authenticity by allowing me to remain centered on participant responses rather than my own anticipation of results, which lessened possible bias.

Ragin and Becker (1992) argued that strong preconceived notions impede conceptual development and researchers may not know what the case is until the research process is nearly complete, including the writing of the research findings. This research study followed that pattern of the process of gathering data and analysis coalescing at the end to describe what the case was truly about. In fact, the title of this study changed multiple times until the final report

revealed the true nature of the case at the very end.

This broad focus as advocated by Hatch (2002), though not suitable for all kinds of qualitative work, provided the ability to gain meaning from complex data. The inductive analysis approach made large amounts of data accessible while I remained confident that the emerging themes represented the overall data collected in the investigation.

In analyzing data from a case study, Merriam (2009) suggested following the general process of other qualitative studies, while emphasizing a holistic and bounded case study analysis. Merriam (2009) also argued that by seeing the case study as a bounded unit, the researcher is more likely to focus on managing the data together to find patterns and interpretations. The data forms, such as individual interviews, were triangulated when this could strengthen the validity of the study. This information was also triangulated with documents and observations for the same purpose. Data analysis continued until the report was final.

Ethical Concerns

Intimacy and decreased distance between researcher and participant represent benefits to qualitative research as well as ethical dilemmas (Howe & Dougherty, 1993). In this study of tensions between Blacks and Latin@s, I interviewed several participants who shared deeply personal information with me. Several participants became very emotional during the interviews, but wanted to continue because sharing their perspective was cathartic. The interview seemed to provide a valuable service for the participants, as some students were victims of bullying and others had bullied other students. Concerns of discomfort did not manifest, and all of the students now drop by to say “Hello.” In any event, the Loyola Marymount University Internal Review Board approved the research methodology for this case

study after assessing ethical and procedural considerations and mandating an additional layer of safeguards on reporting suspected abuse and the handling of bullying. Participants seemed to have been comfortable with the process, based on the data they provided.

Timeframe

The study lasted four months. Interview and data analysis occurred from January 2015 to April 2015.

Limitations

This study used qualitative research methodology at one charter middle school site in South Los Angeles to unearth stakeholder perceptions of tensions between Black and Latin@ students. Since charter school law prescribes specialized operational capacities for charter schools, they are, by definition, exceptions to public schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District and the rest of the nation. In addition, charters like Light Middle School boast their consistent outperformance of neighborhood schools, amid claims that charter schools “cherry-pick” LAUSD’s top students while denying access to students with disabilities, stacking the achievement deck in favor of charter schools.

Although Light Middle School students with disabilities (12%) were in alignment with the district average of 12%, the study could not verify the school’s adherence to guidelines concerning the random enrollment lottery for school admission. The study also could not account for the degree of self-selection by parents who opted out of the local public school, an indicator of heightened parental expectations, aspirations, and involvement, which are positively correlated with student achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001). Finally, the local public school could not easily rid itself of problem students, which requires a lengthy procedural process reserved for

only the most serious, generally, criminal infractions. However, in my experience, charter schools have the ability to exit students from the school by threatening the students with an expulsion, which is a serious mark on the student's record. Without legal representation or knowledge of the "system," some parents choose to leave the school, unaware of the difficulty of this procedure that weighs heavily in their child's favor. In other words, charter schools can "bluff" students out of school, without actually leaving a paper trail of expulsion, which helps avoid accountability for disproportionate discipline practices. These actions deprive students of their civil right to due process, and students generally return to the local public school.

Due to the specificity of Light Middle School, including the delimitations noted here, the study might not be credibly generalized to other student populations. Based on reports from students and parents, the school had fewer discipline problems than the local, much larger public schools. However, Light Middle School's "particularity" (Creswell, 2013), provided a rich opportunity to place a narrow focus on participants in this unique setting.

Language Limitations

Two parents in the study were bilingual, and only one of those parents required some translation. The offer to participate occurred at a parent meeting, so this process automatically allowed parents, generally the most involved, to self-select into the study. The translator for the study was the school's parent liaison, a position created specifically to provide greater access and involvement for parents to support their child's education. The translator completed the National Institute of Health (NIH) training to ensure Internal Review Board (IRB) qualifications to study human subjects. The translator also signed a confidentiality agreement pledging to keep all information learned in the interviews confidential. In addition, the parent liaison assisted with

transcribing the part of the interview that was in Spanish. Providing this accommodation allowed me to collect and reflect the thoughts, feelings, and perspectives of bilingual participants who spoke Spanish as their primary language.

Light Middle School was a small, tight knit community to which, as a teacher, I had particular access while I attempted to avoid bias and I made every effort to do no harm to participants. Protecting participants' identities was carefully considered and executed. I received approval from the school site principal and the LMU Internal Review Board to conduct my study and I followed the protocols established for the study.

Positionality

I am a Black female conducting a study on Black and Latin@ conflict. I am a direct beneficiary of the modern Civil Rights Movement, and I attended outstanding schools both public and parochial (Catholic). I am the first college graduate from a prolific clan of former slaves and sharecroppers with no fewer than 600 people whom I call "cousin." It only took about 300 years for my family to attain this single achievement. I attribute this in large part to the fact that I entered kindergarten just after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed into law. I have always felt the obligation to make good on Dr. Martin Luther King's work, and I am old enough to have directly felt the immediate impact of that struggle and that time. Due to this positionality alone, throughout the planning and research process, I had to try to relinquish my "stake" in this game, a claim to being the minority that waited the longest and worked the hardest without reward for a piece of the American Dream. I understand the Black rage and fear of being "overtaken" and shut out once again, all too well. Although I cannot claim to have lived in poverty, I did spend a part of my early childhood on Chicago's Southside being raised by a

single Black mother. I am also fairly certain our household qualified for free and reduced lunch, but my mother was too proud to apply and for that I am grateful because I would not have wanted to produce a “blue” card to get a free lunch in my later childhood after we moved to a middle-class, White community in Orange County, California. I am also nearly twice as old as most of the teachers at my school site, a student, a former corporate manager and charter school board member and board president for another nonprofit. Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, I am a mother who raised three children with educational challenges and limited financial resources. Advocating for my children and helping them realize their potential was my first shocking insight into the inordinate challenge facing parents who encounter any difficulty, be it racialized bias, learning disabilities, poverty, or learning English as a second language. My empathy for these parents is fueled by my own experiences.

Collectively, these experiences provide me with a *bird's eye* view of the landscape, however, my doctoral education at a Jesuit university has provided my social justice lens to advocate for all people, not just “my people,” and I feel this obligation deeply. Still, I have never been an immigrant nor have any of my known ancestors. I do not speak English as a second language, and although my parents were limited to high school educations, both were extremely well-read and learned individuals. Until I began my master’s program, the only Latin@s I knew worked for me as a domestic or gardener. This is the honest to goodness, sad truth. Due to this limiting relationship, I, like many Angelenos, had no idea of the sheer numbers of Latin@s in South Los Angeles because I rarely traveled outside of West Los Angeles. No matter my resolve to eliminate bias, I am shaped by my experiences and I have tried to maintain a professional perspective throughout the process. I also reflected on my fieldwork with my dissertation chair,

a woman of Latin American descent who has studied and written extensively on Latin American culture and communities. Feedback during the process helped ensure an accurate and balanced analysis of data.

I also informed participants of my qualifications to conduct the study, including my doctoral studies and my passion for social justice. This passion fuels my desire to work in “this community” and study conflict among community stakeholders. Finally, it is precisely these experiences that have made me a person who engenders trust among all stakeholders. Although my seniority at Light Middle School (five years) was relatively minimal by LAUSD tenure standards at the time of the study, it was long enough to have developed trusting relationships with many stakeholders including not only current employees, but also those who had exited and may have felt more empowered to speak truthfully. At the time of this study, I was already an active and engaged member of the Light Middle School community. I had been a facilitator for a federal innovation grant that provides the opportunity to mentor Student Technology Leaders (S.T.L.) at the school site. I also assisted with the Girl Scout troop. Finally, I was the teacher board member representative of our school site, a role that required close collaboration with the parent liaison who served as the translator. I had had the opportunity to engage stakeholders on several levels.

Delimitations

This study focused on the qualitative research at one charter middle school site in Los Angeles to determine a cross section of stakeholder perceptions of tensions between Blacks and Latin@s at the school. Since the California Charter Schools Act of 1992 prescribes specialized operational capacities for charter schools, they are, by definition, exceptions to public schools in

the Los Angeles Unified School District and the rest of the nation. Due to the specificity of Light Middle School, the study cannot be generalized to other populations for the reasons specified in the previous section. However, Light Middle School's uniqueness provided a rich opportunity to place a narrow focus on the issue of interethnic tensions and served as a replicable model of a microcosm of interethnic tensions in Los Angeles and beyond.

Criteria of Trustworthiness

In order to establish the study's trustworthiness, internal and external validity, reliability and the degree to which the study could be replicated in another setting must be addressed (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Further refinement of the study's trustworthiness surrounded exploring the truth (internal validity), finding the applicability (external validity), exploring the consistency (reliability or reliability), and determining the neutrality (objectivity). In order to establish the study's trustworthiness, this study was assessed on these individual criteria as well.

Credibility

Building credibility boosts the internal validity of qualitative research studies, particularly in light of the degree to which the study matches reality, according to Merriam (2009). I was studying the environment in which I had worked for the past five years, and this closeness to the data strengthened the case study's credibility. I had witnessed the lived experiences of the school's stakeholders on-site and could verify the reflection of reality found throughout the data. Through observations of this natural setting, I was able to interpret and construct the reality of the participants (Merriam, 2009).

Additionally, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) strengthened the

credibility of the study. I conducted interviews, observations, and document analyses over a sustained 4-month period of time to allow enough time for data collection and allow more nuanced information to unfold. New data informs other possible components of tension or conflict to explore and enabled a more thorough study.

Transferability

Guba and Lincoln (1981) described the criteria for external validity as transferability or generalizability to other situations. This additional strength can be gained through detailed descriptions, typicality, and the use of multiple research settings. There are key challenges to the external validity of the study because Light Middle School participants are the product of a particular setting in South Los Angeles. No other urban city directly mirrors the experience of interethnic gang warfare combined with extensive imprisonment and dramatic demographic shifts as this area in the last 30 years.

Since the school was a charter school, it was by this very nature an exception to neighborhood public schools. The school's small size, 20% of any neighboring public school and small class size, 30 compared to 40 in LAUSD, made Light Middle School quite unique in the teachers' ability to develop caring relationships with students. This aided the students, but it was also another reason why the study could not be generalized with a degree of certainty to other student populations. However, despite these limitations, the study unearthed transferable themes concerning the handling of power relations by oppressed people.

Dependability

Researchers can credibly use several criteria to ensure dependability in their study (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). The first is to address their positionality. I was transparent in my

positionality, which is extensive considering my cultural group (Black). I believe this strengthens the study due to the insights I have not only as a member of one studied group, but also my age. I have the benefit of having lived through and experienced the entire time period from the first riots in South Los Angeles through the city's plague of gang warfare, and also the demographic shift. I have even been a victim of this violence myself (carjacking). Natural concerns regarding my bias based on gender, ethnicity, religion, education, and socioeconomic status, although valid, could be diminished with the use of triangulation (Guba & Lincoln, 1981), a part of this study's research design. This includes data from different interviews, focus groups, document analysis, and observations. I addressed the third criteria by developing an audit trail to carefully track the entire research process, so that it could be reconstructed with accuracy to improve the dependability of the study.

Conclusion

The qualitative case study approach was used to explore student, parent, and teacher perception of the dynamics, tensions, and conflicts between Black and Latin@ students and its impact on students' academic and personal lives at a charter middle school in South Los Angeles. This study helped to uncover the most impactful components for improving interethnic relationships and reducing tensions to improve outcomes in students' academic and personal lives.

Considering the massive and growing numbers of Latin@ immigrants and the pockets of spaces still occupied by Blacks, school leaders and teachers need guidance and training on the most impactful issues that can help or hinder these student relations. Improved student relations

carry the promise of improved student outcomes and an overall improved quality of life for those living together and perceive each other as different.

Furthermore, the outsourcing of jobs in a global economy and dramatically increasing immigration create points of contention for Blacks and Latin@s concerning jobs, political positions, neighborhoods, and public school resources, as well as the illegal drug market. These potential spaces of conflict will remain part of the urban landscape for the foreseeable future. Adult attitudes impact students, so schools will need long-term strategies, including coalition-building and political activism, to address tensions and promote positive academic and personal outcomes for students.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Restatement of the Purpose of the Study

This study explored student, parent, and teacher perception of the school climate and its impact on students' academic development and personal lives at a charter middle school in South Los Angeles. School climate refers to the perceived quality of interpersonal interactions among teachers, students, staff, and parents, (Haynes et al., 1997) and can help account for students' feelings about the school environment. Stakeholder perception of this enduring quality of the school environment affects their behavior, which in turn, affects the environment (Hoy & Miskel, 1996).

Research revealed that student, parent, and teacher perceptions of a positive school climate are associated with increased academic achievement and decreased disciplinary problems (Esposito, 1999; Mattison & Aber, 2007). Conversely, schools fraught with intergroup conflict or a poor *racial climate*, divert focus and resources from the primary mission of educating students to establishing a safe environment, reducing tension, managing a never-ending stream of disciplinary problems, and teacher attrition (Mattison & Aber, 2007). Schools represent a unique public space in which multiple ethnic groups converge and openly clash over resources and power. School leaders plagued with conflict between racialized groups such as Blacks and Latin@s encounter vexing perplexity in unearthing and addressing varying perspectives concerning the conflict between students as well as their relation to students and each other (Michie, 2007).

Although an exhaustive list of studies investigates low achievement among Black and Latin@ students (Coleman, 1996), comparative studies involving intergroup conflict have been largely focused on the Black-White binary in school settings. Prior studies regarding intergroup interaction between Blacks and Latin@s focused on the competition-cooperation theories often intended to demonstrate past cooperation and sharing patterns (Kun & Pulido, 2014). Now, the relationship between Blacks and Latin@s is gaining greater attention due to rapid demographic shift and increased interest regarding intergroup conflict and opportunities for coalition building. Additionally, since schools have become increasingly segregated within large urban centers like Los Angeles, maintaining high concentrations of non-Whites, research on Black and Latin@ relations is gaining momentum, albeit more than 20 years after the first dramatic waves of immigration.

This study adds to the growing body of comparative research by providing additional focus on the perception of middle school students since this is the time of transition from childhood to adolescence and the beginning of ethnic identity development, a process of exploring and achieving an ethnic identity (Phinney, 1989). Conducting research during this key transitional period when students begin to self-segregate provides an opportunity to promote positive intergroup relations, reduce tensions, and engender better academic and personal outcomes for Black and Latin@ students, the current urban, demographic reality in South Los Angeles.

Research Questions

1. How do students and parents perceive and conceptualize the racial tensions that affect the school climate at a charter middle school in South Los Angeles?

2. How do students and their parents perceive the impact of these tensions and dynamics on the school's racial climate, and students' academic development and personal lives?
3. How do the faculty perceive and deal with the impact of these tensions on the school's racial climate, and students' academic development and personal lives?

The Context for This Study

Setting

A Beacon of Light Middle School (Light Middle School) was currently in its seventh year of operation as one of the eight middle schools operated by the Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools and serviced students in the sixth through eighth grade. The Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools (The Alliance) was formed as a nonprofit charter management organization (CMO) to create a network of small, high-performing nine through 12 and six through eight public schools in historically underachieving, low-income communities of Los Angeles.

Light Middle School opened its doors beginning in the academic year 2007–2008 and resided in the heart of Watts, a low-income, residential community characterized by high rates of at-risk youth, victims of abuse, poverty, low-performing schools, and crime. The largest percentage of the population within the Light Middle School constituency was Hispanic (80%) and African American (20%). The community had the lowest reported household income in all of Los Angeles County.

The founding principal had been in post since the school opened with a single grade (grade six) and added a grade each year, drawing from surrounding traditional public elementary,

middle, and other charter schools such as Watts Learning Center. The first culminating class of eighth graders graduated in 2010. The school was now grades six through eight with 450 students and 20 teachers, including two resource specialists and an onsite school counselor. The school had an array of eight instructional aides, six staff members, and a plant manager.

Changing Demographics

Light Middle School's demographic data mirrored the rapid changes in LAUSD's student enrollment. In five years, the school had gone from 68% Latin@ and 28% Black to 83% Latin@ and 14% Black. Due to rapid demographic shift, at the time of this study, Black students comprised less than 15% of the total student population and were deemed statistically "insignificant" for tracking important subgroups in state accountability measures (CBEDS, 2014). However, the school maintained a teaching staff that was majority Black (60%), both administrators were Black, and the seventh-grade teaching staff was entirely Black.

Participants

This study explored student, parent, teacher, and staff perceptions of the school climate, including the racial climate at a charter middle school in South Los Angeles. Purposive sampling provided a total of 19 individual participant voices from these different stakeholder groups as shown in Table 1. This method was intended to maximize the variability of participants. Participants included 10 students, five teachers (including one former teacher), two staff members, and four parents, all representing the full spectrum of ethnic diversity at the school site.

Table 1

Participants in the Study

Participant	Pseudonym	Role	Cultural Group	Gender	Grade
1	Jerome	Student	Black	Male	Eighth
2	Terri	Student	Black	Female	Eighth
3	Bella	Student	Latina	Female	Eighth
4	Steve	Student	Latino	Male	Seventh
5	Maya	Student	Latino	Male	Seventh
6	Juan	Student	Latino	Male	Seventh
7	Ernesto	Student	Latino	Male	Seventh
8	Tanya	Student	Black	Female	Seventh
9	Isaac	Student	Black	Male	Seventh
10	Robert	Teacher	White	Male	N/A
11	Carl	Teacher	Black	Male	N/A
12	Evelyn	Teacher	Latina	Female	N/A
13	Moon	Teacher	Black	Female	N/A
14	Gayle	Former Teacher	White	Female	N/A
15	Sarah	Staff	Black	Female	N/A
16	Briana	Staff	Latina	Female	N/A
17	Samantha	Parent	Black	Female	Seventh
18	Antonia	Parent	Latina	Female	Eighth
19	Pamela	Parent	Black	Female	Eighth

Summary of Key Findings

Through an inductive analysis (Hatch, 2002), four themes emerged to assess student, parent, teacher, and staff perceptions of the school climate, including racial conflict or tensions and the impact on students' academic and personal lives. Since the study was intended to unearth conflict, themes were categorized as manifestations of phenomena that participants perceived as negatively impacting students' academic development and personal lives. In this respect, responses were decidedly negative. However, one positive theme emerged as a mitigating factor of positive influences that lessened the impact of the tensions and conflict.

The following themes emerged from the research process concerning student, parent, teacher, and staff perceptions of the school climate: (a) race matters and conflict, (b) language and communication issues, (c) unsafe space issues, and (d) culture of care and collaboration.

These four emerging themes were reviewed and analyzed in search of additional detail and nuances concerning the differing perceptions to give voice to individual participants across the stakeholder groups. Collectively, these voices provided evidence of the tensions and conflicts that exist at the school.

The key findings in this research study revealed themes verified by multiple perspectives and data collection over a four-month period. The next section introduces the study finding by theme.

Theme 1: Race Matters and Conflict

This overarching category included negative reports of tensions and conflicts in race matters, such as preferential treatment, self-segregation, bullying, and harassment. Members from all stakeholder groups reported a hierarchy whereby Black students and/or teachers received preferential treatment. Preferential treatment for teachers manifested primarily in hiring practices resulting in a majority Black teaching staff at a super-majority Latin@ school. Reports of pervasive preferential treatment for students included discipline, sports, clubs, field trips, and visibility on social media, including the school website.

The school was highly segregated by ethnic groups. A small minority (14%) of mostly Black students clung to close-knit, single-grade, single-gendered groups, although some maintained Latin@ or mixed-friendship groups. Home socialization, including familial gang affiliation, influenced students' dating and friendship choices. Prejudice and stereotypes, as well as racial slurs were also perpetuated by music and the news media.

All stakeholder groups cited a form of relational aggression such as bullying, intimidation, and harassment as major impediments to academic development and a sense of

well-being for students. Bullying and harassment took the form of so-called “trash talk” and “drama” such as gossip, spreading lies and rumors, gay-bashing, and racial slurs. With the exception of some teachers and staff, the overwhelming presence of generalized relational aggression experienced by students obscured the perception of any interethnic conflict at the school. However, students experiencing intra-ethnic conflict sometimes sought relief from interethnic friendships. All stakeholder groups acknowledged the fear of retaliation or being labeled a “snitch” as a major hindrance to student reporting of bullying or harassment. Research also revealed teacher-to-student as well as teacher-to-teacher race-based aggression and general harassment.

Theme 2: Language and Communication Issues

Teachers unanimously affirmed the inability of the overall teaching staff to communicate effectively and in a timely manner with the majority of parents, and cited this as a major obstacle for students’ academic and personal lives. Teachers reported that this communication barrier disempowered parents by preventing them from remaining actively involved in their child’s education. However, students, teachers, and parents reported benefits of bilingualism in the classroom and the opportunity for Black students to learn Spanish through peer support. Latin@ students appropriated language and physical gestures from Black students, which was perceived as personal power in both friendly and harassing interactions. Other communication issues involved some reporting of administrative inconsistency, ineffectiveness, or untimely communication with teachers and parents.

Theme 3: Unsafe Space Issues

Participants from all stakeholder groups cited the school's location at the corner of an unsafe and violent neighborhood, small physical open space, and tiny classroom space as physical and emotional threats to students' safety. Converted from a clinic to classrooms, the school's small physical space and resulting overcrowding provided no options for privacy or escape from bullies, and intensified interactions. Although the adults and some students saw the school's small size (enrollment) as beneficial, several students regarded the close-knit nature of the school as a definite drawback. These students suggested the familiarity students experienced with each other's personal lives magnified conflict. Latin@s' infrequent use of the afterschool program placed them at heightened risk because they tended to congregate outside of the protective walls of the school, where gun violence was more likely to occur.

Theme 4: Culture of Care and Collaboration

All stakeholder groups including students, teachers, staff, and parents endorsed a caring ethic at the school concerning the relationships between students and teachers. These varying perspectives indicated students' need for care and affirmed the meeting of this need by the school environment as provided by the teachers and staff. Students also derived tremendous benefits from peer support in academics, positive behavior support, antibullying, and school adjustment. Additionally, teachers reported strong collegial and collaborative teamwork across grade-level instructional teams.

Collectively, these systems of care and support positively impacted students' academic and personal lives. Care and collaboration served as strong protective factors that mitigated the challenging and harmful aspects of other reported themes (i.e. privilege, race and language

issues, bullying, and unsafe spaces). However, these issues, combined with extraordinarily high teacher attrition rates, novice teachers, and at-will contracts, posed an ongoing threat to the maintenance of a caring and collaborative culture, as well as to students' academic and personal lives.

The Research Process

In order to discover student, teacher/staff, and parent perceptions of the school's racial climate, I employed a qualitative case study methodology, which facilitated accessing the voices of differing perspectives in this singular environment, a charter middle school in South Los Angeles. In conducting a qualitative case study, I emphasized the unique narrative of participant voices to speak their own realities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001), reveal patterns, and evaluate comparisons, rather than rely on quantitative measures. As a qualitative researcher, I strove to understand behaviors, experiences, and ideologies from the participants' own frame of reference (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The advantages of conducting qualitative research rests in the credible results and theories based on experiences, the emergence of information to improve practice, and the ability to partner with the participants as opposed to simply studying them (Maxwell, 2005). Since there is a gap in the literature on conflict between Black and Latin@ students at the middle school level, students, teachers, staff, and parents provided a comprehensive investigation of their distinctive experiences and a critical analysis of the school environment.

Access

My position as a teacher at A Beacon of Light Middle School provided me with an insider's view throughout the research process (Hatch, 2002). At five years, I had the greatest

longevity on-site of any core academic teacher. The relationships I built prior to the study aided in diminishing my positionality as an authority figure and a Black female, as can be determined by the level of honesty and openness displayed by various stakeholders including students and Latin@s. This high degree of trust and professional credibility allowed me to gain access to a diverse group of participants that had varying perceptions as well as perspectives. The school principal granted site access to me.

Criteria of Trustworthiness

Due to my positionality as a current teacher and Black female, I endeavored to ensure the requirements for a trustworthy study were met in the research methods selected for the study. In order for participant experiences to be selected as a theme, I designated the following criteria: (a) Responses must be endorsed by the majority of a stakeholder group (i.e. the majority of teachers); (b) Responses must repeat across stakeholder groups (i.e. at least one student, one teacher/staff member, and parent); and (c) Responses must be endorsed by both ethnic groups, at least one Black and one Latin@. All four themes met these criteria.

An outlier, Mr. Olawale, Nigerian teacher. It should be noted that based on this criteria, one male teacher qualified as a theme all by himself due to the conflicts and tensions participants reported regarding their interactions with him. Educated in Nigeria, a vastly different educational and social culture, Mr. Olawale was mentioned by the majority of students, at least one person from every stakeholder groups (student, teacher/staff, parent), and Blacks as well as Latin@s. The responses concerning this teacher were decidedly negatively and had a perceptible impact on the data. Although Mr. Olawale met the criteria to be designated as a

theme, he has not been treated as a separate category for the purposes of this study because reports concerning him are included in the data reported by other themes.

Participant Selection

This case study employed the purposeful sampling of individuals. According to Creswell (2013), “This is not a probability sample to enable the researcher to make statistical inferences to a population; rather it is a purposeful sample that will intentionally sample a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination” (p. 170). In order to answer the research questions for this case study, three considerations informed this purposeful sample: (a) the participant criteria, (b) the specific sampling strategies, and (c) the sample size.

Participant Criteria

Hammersely and Atkinson (1995) suggested selection criteria based on gaining perspective in chronological time, people representative of culture from varying demographic groups, and the situations that lead to different types of behavior. Creswell (2013) suggested the use of maximum variation as a sampling strategy to gain multiple, diverse perspectives, while considering access and rapport.

The selection criteria for the study included diversity in perspective, culture, and chronological time at the site of the case study. This involved a sample size of 19 total participants from different stakeholder and demographic groups to gain a variety of perspectives, while considering access, availability as well as rapport. Teacher/staff participants were intended to and reflected all ethnicities on the school site (Black, Latin@, White).

This purposeful sample provided diversity in cultural groups and perspective, and time, including seventh- and eighth-grade students and when possible variations with parents that had had multiple children in the school to satisfy diversity of longevity at the school site.

Sample size. The study contained only seventh- and eighth-grade students, who were my former students, and excluded the sixth-grade students that I taught during the study. My current sixth-grade students were not part of the study due to ethical considerations for their emotional well-being. The sample represented the ethnicities of all teachers on site (Black, Latin@, White). Four parents participated in the study. The sample size contains a total of 19 participants to help provide variation in perspectives.

Observations

The research process began with observation. I wanted to see the school site and observe student interactions for evidence of intergroup tensions, dynamics, or conflict. I used an observation protocol based on the study's theoretical framework to guide the data collection to ensure specific areas of focus were addressed during the observation. Using Allport's (1954) Contact Theory model, I looked for conditions that promoted prejudice reduction such as cross-race contact, status arrangements, common goals, and support from authorities. Since theory and research promoted the potential benefits for students with both in- and out-group friendships, where intergroup friendships provide additional social and cultural resources and perspectives (Aron et al., 1991), I also looked for evidence of interethnic friendship groups. I defined an interethnic friendship group as two or more students from different ethnic backgrounds that could be observed together across multiple settings such as lunch *and* an assembly.

I operated as a participant observer in most instances, which allowed me to flow through student areas. I observed students in all common areas including the hallways and the cafeteria area at lunch/nutrition, school assemblies, the afterschool program, the front area of the school, basketball practice, cheerleading practice, a school dance, and a field trip.

Interviews

Following initial observations I interviewed one member from each stakeholder group in this order: student, teacher, parent, and staff member. This allowed me to gain a variety of perspectives and participant voices to shape further inquiry. I transcribed and reviewed the interviews, noting any patterns that emerged. Throughout the interview process, I continued observation in an attempt to validate themes emerging from the interviews. Interviews varied in length, primarily depending on the stakeholder group. Teacher interviews were the lengthiest, averaging 1 to 1-1/2 hours. Three interviews were recorded over multiple days or sittings. Student interviews lasted between 30 minutes and one hour. Staff and parent interviews were similar in length, 30 minutes to one hour.

I audio recorded each interview and took notes as well. Note taking was done to assist me in identifying information later. For example, if the participant mentioned a developing theme, I recorded the theme and noted the time on the recording. I also used notes to jog my memory for follow-up questions. I followed each interview with a brief reflection regarding the tenor, tone, and areas for follow-up questions. I also recorded additional thoughts and impressions while the information was fresh. Transcription was not always immediate, so the memos provided real-time data, preliminary data analysis, and review.

Interviews were conducted in my classroom or the teachers' classroom after-hours or during lunch. Student interviews were conducted in my classroom because I conduct tutoring and afterschool club meetings, so this location attracts the least attention since people are accustomed to seeing me interact with students one-on-one as well as groups. I also visited two homes at the parents' request. I used the interview protocol to guide the questioning, but added, deleted, and reordered the questions based on the participants' responses.

I completed seven of the transcriptions and my memos and observations, and a professional transcriptions service transcribed an additional 12 interviews. I reviewed each interview and coded them by hand, first in pencil and then with a highlighter to track themes. Analysis of the interview transcriptions occurred between February and April. I conducted member checks and followed up with participants with additional questions and clarification as needed.

Documents Review and Analysis

In order to triangulate the data, I reviewed the following documents, A Beacon of Light Middle School's Charter Petition, a Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) report, an independent evaluation report, The School Accountability Report Card (SARC), and the school's budget. I also perused the school's website.

Themes Emerging in the Data

During data collection, the following themes emerged that described student, parent, teacher, and staff perceptions of the school climate: (a) race matters and conflict, (b) language and communication issues, (c) unsafe space issues, and (d) culture of care and collaboration.

Theme 1: Race Matters and Conflict

The majority of teachers and staff as well as some students reported the existence of a hierarchy whereby Black students and/or teachers received preferential treatment from Black administrators. Preferential treatment for teachers manifested primarily in hiring practices. Pervasive preferential treatment for students included discipline, sports, clubs, field trips, and visibility on social media, including the school website. Parents and some students did not endorse this hierarchy. However, those respondents had varying perceptions of the existence of a hierarchy, often placing Latin@s at the top of an imaginary pyramid due to the perception of Latinas/os high academic achievement relative to that of Black students. Although not all stakeholders endorsed the presence of privilege, as some were direct beneficiaries of this privilege, teachers of all ethnicities, including Black teachers expressed extreme discomfort, aggravation, and even loathing of this status arrangement.

Staffing. Reported preferential treatment for Black teachers primarily took two forms: hiring and employment practices. The teaching staff at the school is 60% Black, and aftercare, instructional aides and other special positions are overwhelmingly Black. Latin@s generally hold positions requiring bilingualism such as the front office staff, school counselor, and certain other aides that work with English Language Learners and facilitate school-to-parent communications.

Teachers and students were most likely to identify the disproportionate representation of Black teachers relative to any other ethnic group and the Latin@ student population. Teachers cited several concerns regarding preferential hiring: (a) The deliberate and obvious nature of the preferential hiring practices, (b) The hiring and retention of teachers with poor qualifications, (c)

The lack of Latin@ teachers to whom the students can relate, (d) The loss of teacher credibility to students and parents, and (e) The lack of teachers able to communicate effectively with parents.

Kimberly, a Black teacher with four years on the site and aspirations to become an administrator, vehemently vocalized her disdain for the preferential treatment of Black students and teachers. Since the teaching staff at Light changed every three years, a teacher with four years on-site was not only considered a veteran, but also had had the opportunity to observe the operational practices of the school leadership over time. Kimberly illuminated the pervasiveness of blatant, discriminatory hiring practices, stating”:

I feel like I see race among the selection of staff purposefully. Who am I to determine who and who are not qualified for positions; that’s not my job yet...The vibe I’ve gotten here from day one has been hire people of color, whether they are qualified or not.

Students often remarked that Kimberly was their favorite teacher, so she is well-liked and well-respected. Kimberly shared her frustration over her inability to make changes in the school environment, “When you’re doing something that you’re passionate about but you’re not in a position to evoke the certain change that you think will be the best change, or that would be effective for kids, it just kind of sucks.” Kimberly considered leaving last year due in part to hiring practices that impeded student learning.

Vulnerable student populations. The student groups most impacted by reports of poor teaching were the students that could least afford to have unqualified teachers: English Language Learners and student with disabilities. Kimberly was quite vocal in her concern that the teacher in charge of intervention for English Language Learners, a Black female, lacked the

qualifications to improve student learning, stating with indignation, disbelief, and utter disgust, “You’re throwing (students) in a room with someone who is not prepared to teach them ...who’s not prepared to better their lives because you feel the need to help your culture by hiring more?”

The inadequacy of this teacher to manage the intervention program was made all the worse due to the fact that two Latin@/a teacher aides on-site would likely have done a better job. However, they were relegated to assisting teachers in class, and monitoring the lunch area and student dismissal by standing on the street corner. I had the pleasure of working with both of these professionals and was often disappointed when Mr. Alvarado was unable to coteach my sixth period because he had spent the entire period calling parents who speak Spanish to advise them that their child must remain on-site for detention. Students with disabilities comprised one-third of my sixth-period class. So, as a result, students who needed the most help did not receive the attention they needed and deserved because our instructional aide had been relegated to translation.

Robert, a White, male teacher, expressed his frustration with his inability to obtain a list of student accommodations from the current resource specialist, a Black female, despite repeatedly asking, stating, “And then I mentioned this in front of the administration and in two hours I got a very bad list of them and they all said the same thing that it did for the average student.”

Robert continued to explain that most of the conflict he observed at the school occurred last year surrounding the treatment of students with disabilities. The prior resource specialist, a White female, was fluent in Spanish, highly qualified and a dedicated advocate for students. She continually intervened on students’ behalf, which resulted in a number of confrontations with

some teachers who lacked the skill, sensitivity, training, and oftentimes, *desire*, to educate students with disabilities. The teachers' lack of qualifications led to students frequently being put out of class and left to sit in the hallway for an entire period over small infractions or repeated referrals to the office. The teacher who advocated for students, a Teach for America hire, left to attend law school when her three-year contract ended.

Robert explained that there were far fewer conflicts over special education now because, "The new one doesn't care enough about students to get into a conflict over them." Robert frequently complained about last-minute notices for Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings and repeated classroom interruptions in which the resource specialist popped in and said, "How are my kids doing?" rather than actually planning a meeting to discuss accommodations and progress. Finally, Robert pointed out the resource teacher's neglect of teaching duties, stating, "It's really sad. I think they dismiss a class period a day," referring to students with disabilities left to roam the cafeteria area for reasons unknown.

Lack of Latinas/os, chocolate, no latte. Teachers suggested that the lack of Latin@ instructors hindered the personal lives of students due to the lack of relatable teaching professionals available on-site. Evelyn's burden of being the sole Latina on-site placed additional strain on this teacher's already-overwhelming workload because Spanish-speaking parents frequently sought her counsel on academic and personal concerns. The dearth of Spanish-speaking professionals funneled this unfulfilled need to a single source, forcing this teacher to block her phone number. Although this teacher tried to be accessible to parents, the overload resulted in her becoming temporarily inaccessible to parents. However, determined to make a difference in students' lives, this particular teacher became an early adopter of new

technology, which allowed teachers to send mass text messages to parents while maintaining her boundaries and keeping her personal identifying information safe.

Kimberly also expressed a desire to see the teaching staff more accurately reflect the ethnic and language demographic of the school, so that more relatable educators would be available to students, who primarily saw Latin@s on-site among the staff personnel rather than in certificated, professional roles. Kimberly stated:

I am African American and I do feel like sometimes, what's wrong with adding a little Latin@ flavor in our staff...out of 150 kids we may have 30 African Americans in all of the seventh grade and all of the seventh-grade teachers are African American. So we're talking about being relatable, that's one easy way to make the course relatable, but if you know that somebody is hiring based on skin color, that's a problem.

Antonio, a seventh-grade Latin@ student, shared an inside joke that students use to mock the questionable nature of a majority Black staff at a school with a large Latin@ population saying, "I remember that a lot of people say that all of our teachers are chocolate. They said that chocolate because they're black. I don't think that's a problem."

Antonio was speaking to me, his former Black teacher, about the perception of other students and that he did not have a problem with Black teachers. Although my personal relationship with Antonio led me to believe that he was being honest to the degree that he could about feeling that a majority-Black teaching staff is not a problem, he may have been unaware of the personal benefit he would gain from having Latin@s as teachers and role models. Currently, there were no Latin@ males on the teaching staff. This left nearly 200 male students *without a single Latin@ role model on the teaching staff.*

The first time many parents became aware that the entire seventh-grade teaching staff was Black had occurred during recent parent teacher conferences. The school administration decided to limit conferences to students at risk of failing, gross underachievers, and those with behavioral or emotional concerns. Parents were given 30-minute slots to meet with all of their child's teachers at one time. Kimberly explained the awkwardness that continually occurred and the necessity of translation:

It's funny to see the seventh-grade meeting time mix when the parents come [and]...note it for the first time, "My kid has all the Black teachers." I can't really say how they feel or what they think . . . Of course nothing is said, but the [parents'] face, 'oh, okay'...it puts us in an awkward position as well, because most of our parents are Spanish speakers, so we consistently need a translator, which changes the communication. And we all know that translation changes communication.

The blatant and obvious nature of Black hiring preferences was shocking to teachers' sense of justice, fair play, and professionalism. However, due to at-will contracts, arrangements whereby teaching positions must be renewed each year, teachers did not complain about these clear violations of civil rights laws, something Blacks fought mightily to attain. Teacher concerns were well-founded. Administrators' flagrant displays of discrimination had gone seven years without any system of accountability, despite my personal knowledge of extremely unfavorable exit interviews from former employees.

Discipline disparities. Students, particularly Latin@s, who had themselves been frequent recipients of discipline were far more likely to cite preferential treatment for Blacks in general, and in the area of discipline in particular. Miguel, a Latino seventh grader, with

extraordinary higher order thinking skills, was the last child in a family of nine and the fourth member of his family I had taught. The longevity of my experience with his family, and his knowledge of my rapport with his prior siblings, allowed him to speak frankly with me on a variety of topics, without fear of reprisal. An astute observer, Miguel expressed his assessment of how Black students received preferential treatment:

They approach them differently. They approach them calm. Say if I was to get in trouble with the teacher they would scream at me...but the teacher would've told him [Black student] first like "oh, what did you just say to me" instead of just started screaming at him.

Miguel had had serious behavioral challenges with a variety of teachers, including me, so I queried him about his personal behavior to determine whether he thought this behavior was just directed at him or other Latin@s. Miguel's perception was that half of the seventh-grade teaching staff—three out of six teachers—engaged in behavior that was unfair to Latin@ students. Miguel was not alone in his assessment. During the prior year, I had attended a teacher professional development provided by the resource teacher, who shared extensive data indicating that Latino males, particularly those with disabilities, were being exited out of the school in grossly disproportionate numbers. Another former teacher, Gayle, a White female also added validity to Miguel's assessment stating, "There is a definite prejudice in favor of Black males...the attitude with them is 'boys will be boys.'"

Later, Miguel again provided searing insight into the preferential treatment of Black students:

The punishment is different, the way they are handled is different, the way the administrators and teachers talk to them is different. Sometimes [Blacks] get other things that other students don't. Sometimes teachers can be racist towards Mexicans and Blacks because sometimes, when Blacks get in trouble, they don't get as much of a bad—like a punishment as Latinos.

Preferential treatment for Blacks students is problematic alone, however, every stakeholder group, with the understandable exception of parents, cited Black students as the biggest behavior problem on campus. Carlton, a Black, male teacher, described this dynamic by comparing Black and Latin@ student behavior:

I hate to say it, most of our African American kids that come are mostly our behavior problems, which is really confusing because when you go to their household and all their families are Black, they don't have that behavior problem. Now the Latinos which are 85% (of the school) are usually not the problems and you would expect them to be the problems because there's more of them.

Sarah, a Black, female staff member, had worked at the school since the second year and was known as a tough disciplinarian, with a big heart for kids. Older than most teachers and staff members, Sarah stated proudly, "A lot of these kids call me grandma." I wasn't aware of this because I taught sixth grade, and apparently the privilege of calling her grandma came with time on-site, namely seventh and eighth graders. Sarah said, "I don't know the sixth graders like that." Sarah was initially reluctant to take on the role, let alone title of "grandma," stating, "At first I was offended...then I said wait a minute. I am old enough to be their grandma." Sarah became more accepting when one of the students told her that, "I reminded him of his grandma

and he thinks of me as his grandma...she died so it was a compliment.” Not surprising, Sarah had gained the respect of so many students because of the way she treated them:

I try to be fair with all the kids, and I try to let them see me be fair with other kids, because...I don't want the Hispanic children to think that I'm giving special privileges to the black kids and I don't want the black kids to think I'm giving special privileges to the Hispanic kids. I want them all to see that I'm fair, that I'm treating them all the same.

Sarah, a tiny woman, raised three gigantic Black males on her own, so she was highly experienced with managing behavior. However, she too expressed irritation with the behavior of Black students, while comparing them with the Latin@ students, who also at times misbehaved:

But...not like the black kids. It's so weird because sometimes I see the black kids getting into it and calling each other names and I look at the faces of the Hispanic kids and they look at them like, ugh, really? And they just look at them. And a couple of times I asked a couple of the little girls, I said, “Don't you get sick of them acting a fool all the time?”

Sarah went on to explain how much time these students wasted in the classroom and how it took away from the learning of the Latin@ students. During one of my lunch observations, I became a participant observer when two of the girls on the cheerleading squad, an all-Black club, had thrown trash on the ground and the plant manager, Mr. Juarez, asked them to pick it up, but they refused. The girls' response was disrespectful and entitled. I told them their behavior was unacceptable and they owed Mr. Juarez an apology. While they took their time thinking about it, Sarah joined the apparent stand-off, and used her grandmotherly skills to coax and finesse these girls into an eye-rolling apology. I was appalled.

Sarah discussed how this sense of privilege harmed these girls because they are living in a false reality, which rewarded them, Black girls no less, for low achievement, unacceptable behavior, and reveling in what I call a “culture of nastiness,” unprovoked, unapologetic, mean-spirited behavior toward others. Light Middle School intended to prepare students for college and careers, however, Sarah indicated that this behavior would not “play-out” in the real world, stating brashly, “The real world doesn’t operate like that. Okay. If you run that light, Miss Wicks, you getting a ticket. If I run the light I’m getting a ticket. [The Police] don’t care who your daddy is.”

In a time when police shooting of unarmed Blacks makes weekly headlines, rewarding Black youth for outrageously poor behavior placed them further at risk. At times, these students seemingly lacked boundaries on acceptable behavior and often did not feel compelled to respect authority.

Suspension and expulsion. Although a clear pattern for preferential treatment of Black students in terms of discipline emerged, state law, state educational priorities, and LAUSD policy dictated the handling of serious infractions concerning issues in the area of discipline. However, the pervasive existence of preferential treatment prompted students, teachers, and staff to attribute the handling of *all* disciplinary issues to special privileges. Evelyn, a Latina teacher, protested the school’s retention of students with chronic behavior problems:

Certain truancies...certain things that would not be accepted under circumstances at any other school, are being accepted here...and I do find that that is shameful, because then other kids say...What happened a couple of days ago with the fight and the fact that those

two kids are still at this school? Why don't they kick them out?" Oh, well, because she's certain, certain person's daughter, that's why.

Recent legal challenges to unfair disciplinary practices for Latin@ and African American students in particular make high suspension rates risky business for schools. LAUSD mandated that schools lower their suspension and expulsion rates. Administrators had expressed frustration with their actual *inability* to suspend students aside from the most severe infractions like weapons charges. Similarly, addressing truancy by putting a student out of school clearly defeated the purpose of getting them in and keeping them in school.

Sarah shared this frustration with chronic behavioral issues, insisting, "A lot of the things the kids do here, [at]...another school, you'll be kicked out or expelled. There's no way you can...do this. But I think a lot of kids here have that little privilege, and they use it."

Expulsion remained an extraordinarily difficult legal and procedural process to enact, yet teachers, staff, and students remained under the impression that serious behavior problems could be handled by exiting students, which was, in actuality, a violation of their civil rights.

The stakeholders that were the most comfortable describing Black students as the most troublesome compared to Latin@s were Blacks themselves, including Black students. Terri, a female eighth-grade Black student, thought highly of Latin@ students in general and stated:

They really take it seriously. Black people just want to goof off – not all of them – some of them (Latinos) will goof off too. It's like - but they really take their stuff seriously. I take it seriously too. They talk in class but they get their work done. Another group of black people just talk and sit there the whole time.

Enrollment. Terri was fair in her assessment that not all Black students had behavior problems because some of the highest-achieving students with excellent behavior and/or leadership skills were seventh-grade Black males. All three of these students started after the school year began. Light Middle School had a waitlist and, according to charter school law, students on the waitlist had to be selected for enrollment by a random lottery. Miraculously, all three of these high-achieving, well-mannered Black males managed to gain a spot after the start of the school year. This, however, may not have been random, but rather a manifestation of “Black privilege.” All three of these students were hand-selected by the administration to attend a college road trip to the San Francisco Bay area in the previous year. I have had all of these students and they were a sheer joy to work with. However, placing all of them on the college road trip lists was a definite example of special privileges for Black students.

Sports, clubs, and field trips. Teachers reported pervasive preferential treatment for Black students in sports and clubs, namely basketball, cheerleading/dance, and the Girl Scouts. Robert expressed irritation that the school’s only sport, basketball, served only a small percentage of students. Robert was perplexed by the administration’s refusal to correct this since he had made repeated attempts to volunteer his time to start and coach a soccer or wrestling team for free, which might cater to a wider segment of the student population. He speculated:

I think it’s because the school’s administration is less close to the students that want to play soccer than basketball...anybody that says that sports that are having follow through are sports that represent the school demographically are not legitimately [accurate?] ...I don’t think it’s malicious on anyone’s part...no one is naïve...every teacher at our school

is aware of it...the amount of afterschool activities being disproportionate...an 85% Latino school has 95% Black sports teams.

Naturally, the basketball team needed a group of cheerleaders. Terri, an eighth-grade Black female student had been part of the cheerleading team, but was no longer a participant, stating, "I don't really like it no more. She told me that I was going to be the captain but it really didn't matter. I stopped because I broke my arm...When I came back, it was just *different*." Indeed, it was. Terri maintained inter-ethnic friendships and in the previous year, when she was on the squad. At that time, it was led by a Black teacher who embraced and ensured a diverse group of girls. This year, the cheerleaders are being managed by the aftercare program, a group comprised of very young Black women that, according to Pamela, a Black female parent, engaged with students as if they were still students and acted, "hood" or low class. Pamela said that she did not like the way these women spoke to students including using profanity like "Sit your ass down!" The cheerleaders seemed to find the new aftercare leader relatable. However, this behavior did not appear comfortable for the Latinas, so none joined the squad this year. In the meantime, the squad's duties expanded, and they were now a dance team as well, called the Hip-Hop Dance Crew. They performed at the Black History Month assembly, and Evelyn, a Latina teacher, described her thoughts that day:

There were 20% Black kids there and there were 100% Black girls in that group. Some of those things are a little obvious, like "come on"...there are a lot of girls that would have loved to be a part of that...I know for a fact (that this) was one of the afterschool programs [emphasis] made available to the kids. That was probably the insider thing

nobody else knew...I didn't know there was a Hip-Hop Dance Crew at the school...if it was news to me, it was news to the kids.

When I asked Tanya, a seventh-grade Black female student, who the most troublesome students were, she said plainly, "The little dancing group." This was becoming just plain disturbing.

The cheerleaders were featured on the school website. They had behavior problems, and I knew from first-hand experience that two of the girls had extremely low reading achievement. When I attended the Valentine's Day Dance as a participant observer, two of them were the only girls I saw engage in a highly sexualized dance with boys, who approached them from behind. The girls moved their bodies against the boys in a way that was indescribable. The afterschool program was in charge of supervising the dance, but they were too busy on their phones to notice the vulgar dancing or did not care. Two of the boys the dance teams girls gyrated against were the prior-mentioned high-achieving Black males who were also in my advisory class. The next week, I spoke to the boys about their behavior, asking them how they would feel if they saw someone dancing like that with their sister, and I waited for an answer. After about 10 seconds, I said loudly and emphatically, "You took too long so you know that's completely inappropriate and I hope you remember that the next time there is a dance."

Kimberly was the most vocal against preferential treatment for field trips, particularly when selection overlooked or ignored some Black students' poor behavior or low achievement. She reflected:

Honestly, I hate it...selective field trips. You hear all the African Americans being called down to the office. It's obvious...you shouldn't go on a field trip just because you're

Black if you've had three fails, in our case, "NP's"...nobody checks their grades. Are they just going because they're Black?

To Kimberly, this was incredulous. She expressed embarrassment over these obvious displays of preferential treatment indicating that students, who were already putting forth little effort and falling behind academically, should be rewarded with special privileges:

You have students who are not doing so well participating in activities and leaving them further behind in their classes, because now they have missed a day or two of school and...they struggle with catching up because they're struggling already.

Kimberly continued with concern that preferential treatment undermined teachers' credibility and trust level with Latin@ students:

Some of the kids are aware of it and just don't say anything...because they feel like they're not necessarily outnumbered, but technically they are when it comes to adult figures here...which looks bad on us because they don't know who played a role in the selection.

However, in a word, administrators were "untouchable" and apparently felt comfortable with their actions, without regard for how the inequity looked to Latin@ students or parents, their own diverse teaching and office staff, or a teacher researcher conducting a study on the school site. Therefore, they acted with impunity. This attitude of entitlement and privilege trickled down to Black students as well. An all-Black basketball team and an all-Black cheerleading squad at an 86% Latin@ school lacked sight validity. It just looked bad. Black students began to appropriate the impunity of the school administrators, and had no impetus to change behavior because they were not held accountable for their behavior. This reinforced their

bad behavior, not unlike developing “bratty kids.” Good parents do not reward their children for bad behavior and neither should school officials. Both know better.

Workplace coercion. The lack of fairness left teachers with the impression that playing fair can carry negative consequences, such as disfavor from parents who expect privileges because they received them in the past. Evelyn, the Latina teacher, said she tries not to grant:

Any special privileges outside from the kids that need them...like...special needs [kids], but outside of that I try really hard. And if that leads to parents not liking me, well, I mean, so be it. I’m here to educate. You know?

Evelyn’s voice inflection sounded as if she were asking for permission to resist granting privileges. The implications were that since the top authority figures on-site, the administration, blatantly granted special privileges to Black students, then not granting those privileges broke an unspoken code of ethics: taking special care of the Black students. Administrative actions placed employees in an untenable situation. Although you might not be outright punished, rocking the boat might lead to a *loss of privileges*, which amounted to a form of workplace coercion. This did not bode well for a positive school climate.

Evelyn also reported that some Black students and parents perceive that they had special privileges, which resulted in truancy. According to Evelyn, the mother of one student in particular had a personal relationship with the school principal, and Evelyn reflected that the student, Gabrielle:

Does not come to school often, and also the parent feels that they can get some special privileges...the mom would come in and try to pull the student out 5 minutes before hand, without [an]...admin slip...and that would upset me because I know personally that

if that kid gets run over as soon as they walk out of here, it falls on me...I really struggled with...trying to manage that relationship with the parent.

Evelyn also complained that this student had missed half of the first quarter of this year without any administrative intervention, until I suggested that she send an attendance roster directly to the administration. The student returned to school the next day. Attendance rosters are like legal documents—they simply cannot be ignored because they provide direct evidence of possible neglect.

This parent spent extensive periods of time at the school with a young child in tow who was old enough for preschool. The young child often roamed around the school unescorted and walked into classrooms. I recall hearing this parent state under her breath, “You see she ain’t here anymore,” referring to a teacher that had not returned to the school to work the next year. This parent did not like the teacher, however, the parent may have had nothing to do with the non-return of that teacher, but her perception was that she did and there was power wrapped up in that perception. On another occasion, as I was leaving the school for the day, I stopped at the front desk to sign out. This parent was seated behind the counter as if she were an employee of the school. She was actually taking down her braids at the front desk! When, as a parent needed assistance with translation, she said, “I don’t speak no Spanish.” I asked one of the students nearby to translate for the parent and reported the incident to a school administrator the next day. The administrator assured me that this would not happen again and, to my knowledge, it did not.

The school website provided a visual aid that displayed the presence of preferential treatment for Black students. As an objective measure, I counted the actively scrolling pictures on the school website. A total of 11 (student) pictures were displayed. There were eight pictures

of Black students, including the cheerleaders and a Black rugby team, two pictures with a mix of Black and Latin@ students, and one picture of a Latin@ student. The ratio of Black pictures to Latin@ pictures was 8:1 or 800% at an 86% Latin@ school. There were also pictures of Black students visiting Black colleges such as the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and Morehouse College in Georgia.

Parents and some students did not endorse this hierarchy. However, these participants either benefitted directly from preferential treatment or had varying perceptions of the existence of a hierarchy, often placing Latin@s at the top of an imaginary pyramid due to the perception of Latin@s' high academic achievement relative to Black students based on their sheer numbers.

Kimberly and I both came to the point of tears during her interview when she spoke passionately about a parent's desire to educate his/her child and the child's entitlement to receive that education, regardless of the child's background. She insisted:

Being pro-Black or being pro-whatever your race or culture, whatever that is, nobody is saying something's wrong with that. If that's what you do, that's what you do. But when it comes to something like education that's universal, you can't. Education is universal. Everybody that walks in here, every child's parents that enrolled them, they enrolled them for something that's universal...that's the human part of it...this is something we all have an opportunity to do. This is not limited by our race and we should not make it limited. Our experiences period, should not be limited by our race.

Gayle, a former White female teacher, expressed the sentiment Kimberly and I became emotional over with her summation of the pain inherent in the decidedly protective behavior of Blacks in positions of authority, who were well-aware of anti-Black sentiments in the Latin@

community and how these two minority groups were forced to compete with one another for limited resources:

On the one hand they're being pitted against each other in obvious ways...I think the administration of the school caters to black children and very clearly has a black bias, in addition to being a really wounded black community that is being displaced by an immigrant population. They have experienced hate crimes in their apartment complexes...there is a lot of hostility in their community. The anti-black sentiment is not new in Latino communities.

Due to rapid demographic change, Black teachers and administrators had been placed in a precarious position whereby they must educate the population that threatened their displacement and, in some instances, resented them, looked down on them, or even hated them. Black professionals are not the first group to be in this position, nor will they be the last.

The temptation to provide certain privileges to Black students, despite some poor behavior, does not occur in a vacuum. The students are far more likely to be in foster care and some have endured unimaginable trauma. One particularly sad example is a young Black male who lived across the street from the school with his grandmother. His mother was a drug addict who congregated with other addicts at the bus stop diagonal to the school. The mother was also a sex worker at that corner and this information could not be shielded from her sixth-grade son, who sometimes went looking for her. Last fall, one of the corner addicts decided to walk under a semi-tractor trailer rather than walk a few feet to the crosswalk. The woman was decapitated when the light turned green and the truck moved forward. Although this was not the child's mother, I cannot imagine the horror this young man went through that day, or any day.

A former White, teacher, Gayle, summarized the context for some of the poor behavior of Black students, and explained her observations of:

Self-hatred and self-sabotage...[extraordinary] things would happen that didn't allow empathy; kids could do whatever [they wanted] to express stuff that was unnamable. To watch your neighborhood turn over. The Black community struggles to carry any sense of community in such an environment and I imagine and see all these families and people...its like the whole [Black] identity of the space is evaporating with these new people coming in with their own traumas and prejudices as well.

Miguel summarized the preferential treatment by clearly identifying a definite hierarchy and power dynamic. "Me, of course, I put the Blacks on top...because blacks have more power...because how the Mexicans or the Latin@s are treated differently and Blacks have more power and the teachers will always be on the Black side."

Based on the overwhelming evidence of preferential treatment for Blacks and the lack of empathy for how this felt for Latin@s, I did not disagree.

Theme 2: Language and Communication Issues

Race matters describe areas that concern the relations between Black and Latin@ students including any tensions or conflict and intergroup friendship, as well as phenomena that influence those outcomes. The primary race matters revolved around: (a) The segregation of Black and Latin@ students; (a) Tensions or **conflicts** between the two groups; (c) Interethnic friendships and cooperation; and (d) Home Socialization including the spectrum of tolerance and inclusion, colorblindness, prejudice and stereotypes, and the influence of gangs, music, and the media.

Teachers and staff differed on their views of conflict or tension between Black and Latin@ students, seemingly based entirely on their own ethnic group of origin. While Black teachers and staff indicated that students just liked to hang out with people like themselves, all other non-Black teachers and staff cited racial tension as a major problem at the school.

Segregation

The clearest manifestation of tension between students was segregation based on ethnic group, particularly during lunch, nutrition, and afterschool, as well as all other social activities, including school assemblies and school dances. Since the school was in a space formerly occupied by a clinic, it did not have an indoor cafeteria. Instead, the student eating area was what would have been the first floor of a three-story building. Although it had three walls that supported the rest of the building, it was not enclosed. Students ate on tight rows of long benches, when they can find seating.

My observations focused primarily on Black students; because there were so few of them, it was easier to assess segregation and integration by tracking them. Visually and numerically, the school simply looked Latin@, so seeking evidence of tensions entailed locating Black and Latin@s in proximity to one another. I observed the eating area on six different occasions and invariably, seventh- and eighth-grade Black students sat together based almost entirely based on single-grade, single-gender grouping. They were further segregated by sport, so that the cheerleaders formed an exclusive group, as did the basketball team, which had one female member.

However, there were exceptions, seventh- and eighth-grade Black males that were not part of the basketball team found Latin@ friendship groups as did seventh-grade Black girls who

were not part of the cheerleader/dance group. Although the school was 14% Black, the sixth-grade was less than 10% Black, so their few numbers made it more difficult to form similar groups. Even when Black sixth-graders sat together in groups—usually the boys—they were simultaneously absorbed into a larger Latin@s group. Black girls in the sixth grade had been completely absorbed as individuals into Latina groups due to their tiny number. Students perceived to have mixed parentage maintained Latin@s friendship groups. With the possible exception of Black-Latino twin boys, who are on the basketball team, I did not observe any Latin@s that joined Black friendship groups. In short, all students generally self-segregated in the cafeteria area. Blacks sat with Blacks, and Latin@s sat with Latin@s.

Normalization of Segregation

Black teachers and staff members indicated that social segregation was the normal state of affairs, but touted the ability of Blacks and Latin@s to work together and get along together outside the classroom. Kimberly explained her perception of the situation:

I don't see a lot of mingling among African Americans and Latinos here. They are usually grouped off based on their race. And that's not to say that they don't, you know, behave well with each other or even partner up or behave well in class. Everyone gets along, but when it comes to their personal friendships, it's very rare that you would see an African American student and a Latino like hand in hand as best friends. That's very rare.

Although these groups were rare, I observed several of them, which will be discussed later in this section. Still, the prevailing responses of Black teachers and staff indicated the normality of separation. Sarah shared this view:

It seems like different cultures, you know people like to be with their own kind. They do. You know, and there's not that many black kids here so...everybody have their own little group that they hang out with...[and]...for every 10 Mexican kids there's one black kid. So, you know, it's not too many people you can hang out with around here...Even in the classrooms most of the black kids sit together and all the Mexican kids sit together, but they still seem to interact with each other.

The implication of Sarah's perspective was that Black students had no choice but to hang together, otherwise they would not have anyone to hang out with. Kimberly added further support for students' desire to be with those like themselves and expressed:

Honestly, they're kids. You're gonna hang around with what looks familiar to you. You hang around the people that you think have more in common with you, listen to the same music you listen to, do the same things that you do. It's just natural, it happens pretty much in every school I've ever been to, so.

The problem at this particular school site at this particular setting was that certain students might have things in common such as a shared heritage or musical tastes, while having extreme differences in behavioral and academic expectations. Mrs. Thompson, a Black female parent, expressed the need to make choices based on the situation. During our interview, she indicated that although she did not like the crime, the one thing she did like about living in Watts was "Sometimes I like being around my people, Black people for that matter." However, she was more discerning when it came to her children's friendship choices, stating, "I think the small number of Black kids makes them feel like they have to stick together, but that's not always best

for them.” Mrs. Thompson’s children maintained interethnic friendship groups, and she indicated this had been beneficial for her children both socially and academically.

Two Schools After School: Unsafe for Latin@s

One area of concern revolved around the segregation of students afterschool, which posed a threat to the safety of Latin@ students. Miguel, a Latino seventh-grader, further delineated the separation in precise terms and stated, “We (Latin@s) have our own side of the school. They (Blacks) have the back and we have the front.” Robert, a White male teacher, provided context for this particular separation:

Different staff members create a safe and welcoming environment for different students almost entirely based on race. Afterschool Black female women tend to respond best with the Black students and the front office is entirely Latino and they tend to have more rapport with the Latino students...It means different kids are comfortable with different parts of the school.

For this reason, Latin@s were less likely to use the afterschool program, which placed them at risk. This is discussed in greater detail in Theme: 5, Unsafe Spaces.

Again, Miguel’s voice added a fresh perspective. When asked what he would most like to change about the school, using a magic wand that he could wave, of all the things he could have asked for, Miguel proposed changing the groupings:

It’s pretty chill to have Black friends because Black friends are usually funny and chill, but when it’s separated it’s different because...Mexicans are going to tell other Mexicans not to hang out with Blacks. That’s what usually happens here.

This was the same message disseminated and enforced by the Mexican Mafia through the prison yards, local communities, and, apparently, schools. Although the student groups were highly segregated, some Latin@ students might have desired more friendship options, however, clear social constraints seemed to hinder this option. In addition, there were so few Black students that Latin@ friendships with them were highly limited based on their small numbers alone.

Black and Latin@ Tensions

Response to the tension between Black and Latin@ students varied widely. Non-Black teachers were clear about the presence of tension and conflict, while all other respondents were on the spectrum of minimal tension, lack of awareness, or symptoms of colorblindness. In addition, relational aggression or bullying eclipsed most other school concerns for students, so their voices were heard most frequently in that theme. Teachers and staff generally agreed that in the past, conflict between Blacks and Latin@s had been frequent and that now it was seen primarily in the eighth grade when students got older. They were unsure of the cause of the change to more calm relations, though Carlton, a Black male teacher, thought it had to do with improvements in the attitudes and behavior of the teaching staff. No one cited the shift in the demographics. It was good common sense to avoid fighting when you are grossly outnumbered.

Robert, a White male teacher, called racial tension an “overarching theme” that no one addressed and that students were savvy enough to avoid attributing disagreements to race because “they know it will cause a huge uproar.” Robert explained that the administration was partially responsible for the segregation at the school:

The conflict is very quietly enforced at our school. Black and Latino students get very different experiences whether we are talking about after school programs school related things...so we end up with a system that makes more of a distinction...when you are aware of a distinction, you are going to feel some type of way about it.

Gayle, a White female former eighth-grade teacher, had only been gone one year and was adamant about the level of conflict, discrimination, and racism at the eighth-grade level:

When you show a video and someone in the video has dark skin they start calling out people with dark skin. "It was Jubilee!" I think it's more the Latino kids making fun of black kids for having dark skin. I've seen black on black for sure. At the end of the day internalized racism is internalized racism...[also]...you had Black students who had real trust issues and...really deep woundedness.

Gayle described a situation in which a Latin@ student had called a Black student a "slave," and she was so enraged that she could not maintain control. According to Gayle, the administration victimized the victim, the Black student in this case, and blamed her for the incident. The student had already been vulnerable; as the frequent recipient of mean-spirited insults regarding her weight, she could not recover from this incident and transferred to another school.

Robert, a White male teacher, supported the identification of interethnic conflict in the eighth grade:

I see it a lot. It's prevalent with them...the black students; they are very confrontational. It's usually [a complaint] to an adult in the area [to get the change they want]...they

perceive themselves as receiving different things...it grows out of a cultural boundary...that [the school] enforces rather than break down.

The school had limited space, so generally only one sport could be played at a time in the lunch area. Similarly, the school had limited funds; so presumably, it was difficult to fund more than one afterschool sport. Jerome, an eighth-grade Black male, attributed the existence of tension to sports:

Some (Latinos) want to play soccer and the Blacks want to play football. Most of the time, the Blacks take the soccer ball and they take the football and start keeping it away from each other until the teacher comes and tells them to give it back. That's mostly it; otherwise, we get along pretty good.

Other People's Children...Discipline Again

Another area of tensions included the discipline practices of teachers based on their background, including their ethnic group and socioeconomic class and how that impacted their effectiveness with student learning and discipline. Evelyn, a Latina teacher, expressed her concern that some of the Black students could not learn from her because they did not respect her either because she was a Latina or they did not take her seriously due to her mixture of nurturing and authoritative discipline practices. These few Black students were a major behavioral problem in her class.

Evelyn mentioned that another teacher, a Black female, and a strict disciplinarian, did not have the same behavioral challenges with these students. She yelled at students and spoke to them in a manner not unlike the aftercare providers. The Black teacher's approach resonated with the Black students. Even if they didn't like it, some were accustomed to this highly

aggressive and terrifying manner of speaking. The cost for keeping a few troublesome Black kids under control using this tactic was terrifying and possibly terrorizing all students. Evelyn explained:

I feel like they just don't respect me. I know for example there's another teacher here that, she can tell them something, like sit down and don't do that, and they'll do it in a heartbeat. And because maybe I don't look like them or I don't represent maybe what they feel I should be representing, or I don't relate to maybe the way they think that I should relate, that they feel like they don't have to listen to me.

A very tense moment occurred during parent-teacher conferences when a sixth-grade Latin@ student began to cry. He said that he did not do his work because a teacher was bullying him. He was too afraid to say who that teacher was. This situation arose due to poor teacher training. Teachers did not receive adequate training for the behavioral issues encountered in this community of students and, by the time they developed some expertise in discipline, they left the school.

Making Matters Worse

Some participants identified the things that made interethnic tensions worse. Mrs. Thompson, a Black female parent, and Antonio, a seventh-grade Latin@, both cited "taking sides" as causes that escalated conflict, suggesting that disagreements that had nothing to do with ethnic groups descended into melee when individuals took sides based solely on race. Terri, an eighth-grade girl, saw speaking Spanish as a potential agitator, explained:

When they speak Spanish and look at another person that person thinks that they're talking about them. They're like "What did you say?"...[When they explain]... it's like

they're trying to switch it up because this person will be saying he said this and the other guy will say no I said something else. It's like changing up.

Terri's inability to understand a language spoken around her made her suspicious of the intent of the words, even though she indicated she enjoyed learning Spanish words.

Racial Slurs

Several participants cited racial slurs as inciting events for conflict. Arguably one of the vilest words in the English language, the "N" word was used at the school. I expressed surprise that a Latin@ could call a Black student the N word and it not break out into fight. Evelyn provided a possible explanation:

I'm talking about the slang of that word...the more like laid back version of it...with the "a" at the end...like "don't be such a --"with an "a" at the end. It's like... "you shut up" [and] leads to bickering, but not like a fight...I think it's because they don't really know what they're saying a lot of the time...because it's in the music. If you ever hear...the kind of rap that they're listening to, it drives you crazy...I can't even fathom it.

Still, several students described instances when they were hurt or angered by the use of the word. They did not view it as a joke. Black and Latin@ students alike use the N word and seemed unaware of the devastating, destructive, and dehumanizing historical context of the use of that word. Gayle, a White female former teacher, explained the disconnect:

When I did the lesson when we were talking about the N word...we spent a whole period on agreements to create a safe space. I heard a lot of stories going in both directions about things kids experienced that is very painful to them. Latino students were confused because black students used the N word. So they were confused about...expectations.

Evelyn and I briefly touched on the influence of music in terms of racial slurs, but she also discussed the impact that it had regarding highly sexualized dance. Usher currently had a hit single entitled *I Don't Mind*, in which he gives his support to his girlfriend to continue “pole dancing,” as long as she comes home with him and does various other sorts of activities. I think the “booty-poppin” that he references in the song is the movement I saw at the school dance, and this song is on the “lite” end of the spectrum in terms of provocative lyrics. It has a catchy beat and I find myself singing it. Every generation has music and dance that sometimes makes the older generations uncomfortable. I have just never personally witnessed or heard of two consecutive generations of kids (our students *and* their parents) raised on the glorification of murder and criminality (Gangsta' Rap) and the sexual objectification of Black women. One cannot help but wonder the influence that music has had on these youth.

Evelyn, a Latina teacher, attributed the tensions and conflict between Blacks and Latin@s to gangs and explained her ability to identify current parents that were still involved in gang activities, based on her personal experience. Evelyn said:

Latinos are bifurcated in the sense that gangs are bifurcated; they are primarily only Latino or primarily only black. So if and when a kid here at this school has a relative that is part of either gang, they're going to have some influence from their home in their beliefs about who they should hang out with, who they shouldn't hang out with...they were wearing their particular shoes, shoelace colors...And that's some of the things that we try to like mitigate with the uniforms, but...the more older they get, the more they get like, baptized into the rules.

However, familial gang affiliation can also have a positive influence on interethnic relations as detailed by Miguel, a Latino. “My brother has a lot of friends that are bloods and they’re usually Black people. He usually gets along with them so we usually get along with them too.” From an earlier section, recall that Miguel wanted to use his magic wand offer to integrate Blacks and Mexicans.

Several students, a teacher, one staff member, all Latin@, revealed home socialization that promoted the acceptance of stereotypes that might prejudice them against Blacks. Antonio, a seventh-grade Latino, received home socialization to prejudice him against Blacks, yet a Black girl was his best friend, but he kept this information from his family. Although both of his parents were *former* gang members, they advised their son to stay away from Blacks due to criminality. Antonio was straightforward about the matter and reflected:

I'm not going to lie like my dad he doesn't like Black people...I don't know [why]...All he hears is about them being gangbangers and them being thugs, and stealing things. He thinks it's usually only black people right? When something happens when a black person gets involved he gets offended by it. “See I told you.” If the Mexican or White does it he doesn't think they did anything wrong.

I asked Antonio how he was able to resist the guidance of his family and embrace interethnic friendships, to which he responded, “Because I don't want to be like that. I even told my dad why you got to be messed up to Black people? They didn't do anything to you!” Antonio then sermonized, “There's bad people that are Mexican and bad people that are White and all that stuff. It's all the same thing. It doesn't matter your race.”

The Illusion of Colorblindness

Some students reported we are all the same type. One student, Jose, a seventh-grade Latino, thought racism was over and stated with confidence, “Because back then, they used to have the racism.” Jose attributed the change to the fact that he no longer witnessed violence between Blacks and Latin@s. Jose’s perception was in alignment with the overall decrease in Black and Brown gang violence in the area. Other participants perceived conflict between Blacks and Latin@s as visible community violence between the two groups.

Jose also attributed the change to Dr. Martin Luther King’s work. This common misconception that racism is over occurs because, during Black History month, teachers tout the success of Martin Luther King in helping Blacks gain civil rights and of his leadership to end discrimination and bring equality for Blacks and unify all people. Many students believed that Dr. King was highly successful in ending racism. Students believed this because they knew Dr. King has a holiday, a monument, streets named after him, and a Nobel Prize! The misconceptions surrounding Dr. King were so prevalent that, when polled, the majority of my students thought Martin Luther King freed the slaves. I finally realized this misunderstanding occurred because of these simple words, “Free at last, free at last. Thank God almighty we are free at last.” It is completely reasonable for a student, especially an English Language Learner, to glom onto these words, miss the metaphor, and interpret the phrase as an actual, recent, physical exodus from slavery. Therein lies the peril of having a history *month*.

No Crossing the Lines

I was made aware of only two students who dated outside of their ethnic group; however, they had the same gender, a Black female seventh-grader and a Latina sixth grader. Aside from

that, I did not observe any evidence of interracial dating among students. Although there had been a crush here and there, those feelings, from what I could learn from peers, had not been acted upon. Antonio had a crush on his Black best friend, and he said that lasted a week. He further explained, “I don't think there's racist people here, but I know a couple people who...they're friends with black people but they don't go out with a black person because they're black. That's how people are.”

Interethnic friendships. For a variety of reasons, I began observations first. I noticed phenomena that seemed noteworthy. Allport (1954) cited Contact Theory as cooperative work with common tasks and common goals, which can be predictors for improved intergroup relations, so I looked for these instances of contact. For example, at the first student assembly, I noticed interethnic friendship groups were limited primarily to three types of students: (a) Students in the Student Technology Leaders Club (S.T.L. Club), (b) Students with disabilities, or (c) Students with multi-ethnic backgrounds.

I noticed S.T.L. Club members seated together at the student assembly and at lunch. Most profound was one particular interaction at the school dance when a Black boy approached a Latino boy, and they simultaneously engaged in a popular dance in front of their separate peer groups and all of the girls. This occurred in the center of the dance floor. This was the only interethnic interaction among boys that I witnessed in an hour of observation. In addition to the STL Club, these two students also sat next to each other in their technology class. The close ties they developed through frequent interaction in the STL Club enabled them to engage in friendly contact outside of club. These STL Club out-group friendships crossed traditional grade, ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation boundaries.

I thought the interaction at the dance was profound because Black males and Latin@s occupied very separate and distinct spaces at the dance. The primary group of Black seventh-grade girls maintained a dominant position in the front center. A similarly sized group of Latino boys stood along the wall. When the Black boys temporarily vacated the space, the Latino boys entered the space together. When the Black boys returned, the Latino boys vacated the space and returned to the wall. This occurred seamlessly without a word. This was a spatial display of power and privilege. During observations, over and over again, I noticed that the primary students who took the opportunity to interact with out-group members or make friendship choices (and in some cases very healthy friendship choices) outside their group were students in the STL Club, either with another member of the STL Club or a different student altogether. In other words, the practice of reaching out in the STL Club gave them the needed confidence to explore other out-group friendships.

Besties: Latino boy and Black girl. One example of this dynamic at work concerned Denise, a Black seventh-grader and Antonio, a Latino seventh-grader, both STL Club members. Against the guidance of his family, Denise was Antonio's best friend. Antonio described them as best friends because, "We hang out a lot. We could tell each other everything. We help each other out." However, Denise had abruptly dropped her friendship with Antonio due to bad behavior. Antonio added, "When I was acting up I stopped doing my work...I don't know. I was being bad...I started being mean a little bit."

It should be noted that Antonio was an honors student. In the sixth grade, he came to school every day wearing a bowtie, which he still wore occasionally, and he was fairly short, yet he had supreme confidence, and did not experience bullying for his height, his tie, or his

friendship with Denise. Of all the students I would expect to make a sudden wrong turn, Antonio was not one of them, so I asked him “What changed? What allowed you to snap back?”

Antonio replied:

I love my best friend. That's why I changed back. It changed things. My attitude changed things so I went back to my normal self. And then I got my best friend back. I was still her best friend but like I was her third best friend not the first.

Although Antonio had been demoted in the process, he beamed a wide smile when he explained that their friendship had resumed. Denise had been in foster care for most of her schooling years. She experienced abuse, neglect, and malnutrition before her placement, as well as trauma due to the infanticide of her sister by her father. Yet and still, Denise maintained good behavior, partly evidenced by her decision to not hang out with the cheerleader group. Instead, Denise had Latina friendships.

Antonio was the second friendship Denise has had of this type. Her first best friendship was with Alejandro, a different seventh-grade Latino. She developed a crush on him, and he told her that he did not date Black girls. Denise was crushed because they were extremely close, or so she thought. Alejandro was also an honors student and a member of the STL Club. He had since dropped out of the club and had been hanging out with a troublesome group of boys. Antonio had the benefit of seeing how his predecessor's decision worked out. For whatever reason, possibly his resistance to his home socialization concerning interethnic friendships and his attachment to Denise, Antonio made a different choice and it served him well.

In every incidence of interethnic friendships that I observed, nine total, the friendship served as a protective factor for one or both members of the friendship.

Bullying and Harassment

All stakeholder groups reported bullying, intimidation, and harassment as major obstacles to students' academic development and sense of well-being. This pervasive student experience eclipsed their perception and reporting of interethnic tension because most bullying occurred within friendship groups that are stratified along racial lines. In other words, most observable forms of bullying and harassment occurred among Latin@s or among Blacks, not between the two groups.

Students reported the school's small, overcrowded site and small student body, 450 students relative to neighboring schools of 2000 students as a major causes of bullying and harassment, also known as relational aggression. Bella, an eighth-grade Latina shared her insights:

When a school is small, you know a person doesn't like you, they start saying rumors, and the rumors are spreading really fast...once you see the person you cared about the most believes that rumor...they stop being your friend. And 'cause the school is small, the rumors go faster.

Bullying and harassment at the school covered a spectrum of relational aggression behaviors such as so-called *trash talk* and *drama* such as spreading lies or rumors, and the use of explicit language or "*cussing*." Tanya, a Black seventh-grade female student described this as "Talking about their friends behind their back and then one friend hears it and go tell that friend what they heard."

Many students complained about cliques, groups of students that held a friendship group based on perceived status. Isaac, an eighth-grade Black male provided his insights,

“Everybody’s broken up. There’s always talking about each other when they need to be bringing each other up because some kids feel down about themselves.”

Students, staff, and teachers reported incidents of gay-bashing, racial slurs, pushing, shoving, hitting, and physical fights. Pointing to his G.A.P. sweatshirt, Antonio, a Latino, male, said, “A lot of people were talking about it you know. They weren’t talking about it bad, but they were trying to make it funny because it supposedly stands for ‘gay assed people.’”

Antonio is a very confident, outgoing student and he did not report being bothered by this. Still, every student had detailed information on bullying. Miguel offered his perception:

Well, do you want me to be honest with you?...this is how it usually plays out...There’s a bully right? But then that bully gets bullied by another bully. There’s basically a cycle of bullies. Me, I was a bully in the sixth grade, but I had got bullied by a seventh grader and those seventh graders got bullied by eighth graders. The eighth graders got bullied by eighth-grade teachers.

Verbal aggression occurred at or near the school site, however, participants also reported these behaviors, known as cyber-bullying, on social media such as Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram, and text messages. As a Blended Learning School, with a 1:1 ratio of students to iPads, students had continuous access to technology and the Internet. Cyber-bullying occurred before, during, and afterschool, and sometimes presented as stealthy attacks through online impersonation, where a student remained logged on and another student bullied a different student under the assumed identity of an innocent student. Steven, a seventh-grade Latino male, explained a cyber-bullying attack he endured at school:

I was bullied in different ways, physically and cyber...I think they did it here [at school] because I got an anonymous Facebook that said a user said, "You bitch fatass motherfucker" and I told my sister and she has my back so she told em that "If you have something to say come say it in person. Don't hide behind the Internet or other people.

All stakeholders, including students understood how to report bullying and harassment at the school. However, the vast majority, including teachers, indicated that students did not feel comfortable seeking assistance for fear of being labeled a *snitch* or being retaliated against.

Miguel stated, "They don't report it because they're too scared to be called a snitch and bullied even more. If they tell, it is going to cause even bigger problems."

Even staff members are not immune from being labeling a snitch. Sarah, a Black staff member, said students often accused her, "'Oh Miss Wilson, see...you're nothing but a snitch.' [And I say] 'That's right. They pay me to snitch and I'm gonna tell just what you're doing, watch this.'"

Kimberly said students did not seek intervention because they "Come from a demographic of toughness...a culture of machismo. Be a man, handle it sort of thing, you know what I mean? My Daddy walked me to my first fight and said 'Here, have at it!'" This is a common, "old school" tactic of Black parents (my mother included) to insist that their children fight immediately to avoid being beat up (before it was called bullying). However, it should be noted that a different set of passive defense instructions were meted out for White people in order to avoid unwanted problems with law enforcement and other authorizes.

For Steven, the threat of retaliation was terrifying. He said, "Some bullies [say] if you tell anyone, I'll kill you. I'll beat you up. Kids are being threatened or harassed by the bully."

While some victims of bullying do seek teacher or administrative assistance, most participants said they tended to suffer in silence until a friend intervened for them by standing up to the bully or seeking assistance from an authority figure on their behalf.

Jose, a seventh-grade Latino, intervened on the behalf of several kids, but described how this can be hazardous, “Cause one time, this kid, I stood up for him and the other kid almost like hit me. Then I tried to like defend myself.”

Students and teachers acknowledged extensive training on the negative impacts of bullying early in the school year. Jose explained further:

If it’s actually personal, like if it hurts them really bad, they commit suicide or like do something bad to theirself, or do something bad to them...I watched a bully movie in the 6th grade and that kid [killed himself]...That kid could do something to other kids like kill them or hurt them badly.

Students reported varying degrees of success with reporting bullying. When reported to teachers, bullying stopped in the moment, but persisted unless the teacher followed through with a meeting and checked in with the student as needed. Isaac, a seventh-grade Black student, described teacher ineffectiveness in bullying incidents, “Not very well because they say stop doing it and the person...don’t say it for that one class period and start doing it after that class period or for the rest of the day.” Belle, an eighth-grade Latina affirmed the continuous nature of bullying:

Some teachers they’re like “stop that” but nothing changes the thing much. But some teachers can bring you together and make you talk about it. Miss Williams did with me

and a student, and some teachers, okay don't do nothing, but then others... sometimes make you work it out.

Participants indicated that administrators take bullying seriously, and intervene immediately and effectively on behalf of victims. Unfortunately, students also reported that the presence of bullying generally came to the attention of administrators after the aggression had boiled over to a physical fight.

The impact of bullying. Students clearly articulated the negative impacts of bullying such as decreased academic performance, emotional distress, low self-esteem, and escalation to violence including homicide and suicide. Students were able to articulate that at a minimum, bullying negatively impacted a student's ability to focus in school and harmed their self-image.

Jose offered:

Just like when they come to class, they thinking about how to fix this and not really paying attention to what they supposed to be learning. They will be distracted by who's saying this and trying to stop it and not really thinking about school. It brings down their self-esteem.

Steven, a seventh-grade Latino, summarized the negative effects of bullying based on his personal experience:

I'm not gonna lie. Some students call me names... through my whole life I was always being bullied. They always called me worthless or nothing...they always judged me by the way I looked...[crying]... They always called me names... [like] "fat ass, you have big breasts [and] you're not worth anything." I looked like I didn't care, but when I went home, the first thing I did was just cry because I felt like my life wasn't worth

anything...and I was really scared. It affects me because it hurts a lot that I thought about suicide because I have...depression.

Yet and still students cited being seen as cool or powerful as the reason for bullying, while others indicated students engaged in this behavior for laughs.

Jose spoke to the manner in which other students joined in on the bullying or harassment, “When like something happen to one, then the other people start talking bad like they start laughing about [him] too.”

Antonio reiterated that students were trying to be funny. On G.A.P. for “gay ass people,” Antonio stated, “They weren’t trying to bully, they were just making a fun joke.”

After hearing bully after bully story, I finally asked Gerome, an eighth-grade Black boy, why students bully despite the extensive training we provided and understanding the harmful impact of bullying, to which he responded, “I think it’s just to get a laugh out of it.”

Minority populations: English language learners and Black students. Since students self-segregated along racial lines and Black students represent less than 15% of the student population, these students had fewer friendship options when in-group bullying occurs, and it often does with the girls. In these instances, Black students may “up their game” and become more aggressive themselves or changed friendship groups by joining the out-group, Latin@s. The former choice came with poor behavior and decreased academic performance, while students reported the latter rewarded students with improved behavior and academic performance. Tanya, a Black seventh-grade student explained the successful strategy:

It was just too much so I started hanging out with different people...because like either they lie or they act different when new people come... [now] I hang out with the kids-the

nice people who would be themselves.... They tell me how they started off coming here not knowing English and stuff and how that was hard and then they teach me how to speak the language and that's fun. The people I used to hang out with didn't teach me good things...you're too popular to do work...you didn't have to listen to the teachers and you can do whatever you want...Now that I hang out with different people they teach me you have to do your work...that it's good to be focused in school...you have to listen to grow up to be something that you want to be...*they show it*...and I used to act bad when I first became [friends] with them and they told me that's not pretty...you should change how you act.”

Tanya reported that both her behavior and her grades had improved.

English Language Learners or quiet students were most likely to be the victims of bullying. They did not have the quick “come back” of some Black students, English-only students, or those with more advanced English language skills. Jerome described them as “quiet” and “kind” and offered that bullying, “brings down their self-esteem...On some days, not every day, but some days, when they get talked about, they sit in a corner all by [themselves] and cry.”

One bad apple: Teacher aggression. Interviews also revealed reports of teacher-to-teacher harassment. One teacher reported that another teacher repeatedly hit him with a pencil during a professional development meeting. The teacher said aloud, “Are you f’..g kidding me?” The harassing teacher said he was “just playing.” This teacher met the criteria to be a theme because I recorded so many complaints about him including a teacher, a parent, and multiple

students, which impacted the data, but also provided an opportunity for students to demonstrate agency and form strategies to resist the oppressive behavior of this individual teacher.

Theme 3: Unsafe Space Issues

Teachers unanimously affirmed the inability to communicate effectively and in a timely manner with the majority of parents and cited this as a major obstacle for students' academic and personal lives. Teachers reported that this inability to communicate disempowered parents by preventing them from remaining actively involved in their child's education. However, students, teachers, and parents reported benefits of bilingualism in the classroom and second language learning for Black students through peer support from Spanish speaking students. Other communication issues involved some reporting of administrative inconsistency, ineffectiveness, or untimely communication with teachers and parents.

The inability of parents to communicate with their child's teachers disempowered them because of the difficulty they had in monitoring their child's progress. Evelyn discussed the cumulative impact of not being able to access a same language individual regarding basic questions or concerns about your child:

All those parents that felt and have felt for a long time that they cannot communicate with the person that is educating their child. So you can just imagine all these questions, all these thoughts...a lot of the conversation that I have with parents that ends up being exhausting. Because I'm talking to parents where they're having issues that have gone on for 9-10 years and now they're barely able to speak to somebody like really, somebody that listens to them or maybe understands what they're saying, and that's where it becomes such a daunting task because I feel I have so much on my plate in

regards to that. You know, so of course I don't want to let the parents down. I don't want to let the kids down, but at the same time I've had to start kind of setting some boundaries because I just can't, there's no way that I can humanly possible can talk to 100 parents all at once.

Evelyn, the only Latina teacher on-site expressed the dilemma she faced by being the only bilingual teacher:

A lot of the kids here, especially our Spanish speaking kids or English language learners, they'll talk to me about things that I know for a fact they wouldn't say to any other teacher here because they know they can tell me in Spanish or they feel like maybe they have some sort of connection or bond with me...they find me to be relatable in that sense, which is a double edge sword because I feel like sometimes they feel like they can get away something.

Teachers unanimously expressed concern for the lack of Spanish-speaking teachers on-site, however, none of the of teachers were in the process of learning Spanish. I asked Carlton, a Black male teacher and Light veteran, who has taught at the school since it opened if he would be willing to learn Spanish. Carlton explained that he already knew Spanish because he had taken a Spanish immersion class, "That's why I can catch words real quick." However, he struggled through the class and did not become or fluent, which he regretted, "That's one thing. I really wish I was bilingual." Considering foreign language is an entrance requirement for many colleges and universities and most people take Spanish, the fact that so few teachers speak Spanish points to a potential racial tension, a form of class struggle. Teachers may not have seen the value in learning the language of an oppressed group.

Appropriation of Language and Communication

Students, however, had a different approach. Latin@ students appropriated the language, gestures, and movement of power at the school that are used by Black students and at various times, Black teachers and administrators. Black language was most likely to be appropriated when the Latin@ student needed a sense of power in a verbal exchange, particularly when a quick-witted comeback or adeptness with curse words, might help them look good through humor, save face, thwart bullies, or posture in anticipation or avoidance of a fight.

Unfortunately, this language appropriation also helped when acting as the bully or to start fights. For example, Black and Latin@ boys make fun of each other's "hairline." Going to the barber and the importance of a well-trimmed hairline are extremely important in Black culture. Although I cannot say for certain that Latin@s appropriated the importance of going to the barber, I can state that being perceived as having a "messed up" hairline made students vulnerable to becoming the target of bullying. When consoling Latin@ males who have been bullied, particularly young students, their chief complaint often included someone was "Always talking about my hairline." A bad haircut is a serious problem and although wearing hats, hoods or any other headwear during school is against the school uniform policy, students with fresh haircuts often try to hide their hair for fear of being teased. Whether they have a good hairline or not, a fresh haircut is a magnet for trouble. This situation is particularly perilous for English Language Learners that lack the English language skills to verbally defend themselves.

I have encountered extremely quiet Latin@ students that described themselves in writing as funny, even hysterical, or mean (toward siblings). Yet these same students rarely utter a word in class. I soon learned that how the student related in their home language might differ

dramatically from how the student presented at school. As a matter of self-preservation, Latin@ students, including English Language Learners, quickly picked up the language and speech patterns of Black humor and aggression. On occasion, I have heard shocking utterances (nonracial cursing) from students that I had no idea of their facility with the English language. Although these students struggled with academic language, they seemed to have developed strong competencies in using aggressive language as a defensive tactic. I witnessed very few of these exchanges, but I am told of many, many others. Blacks did not use Spanish in my presence, but based on experience, they understood derogatory and curse words in Spanish. Apparently, it was important to know when you are being attacked especially on a campus with pervasive bullying.

Another interesting appropriation I observed included what I call, *old folks talk*. Black students picked up the cultural language of their elders either through visits with extended family, language that is passed down from elders, or sometimes a grandparent that was raising a student. It was not uncommon to hear an English Language Learner utter a phrase commonly associated with an older, Black woman, such as “That’s grown folks’ business,” with the accompanying sass that goes along with such a statement. The meaning was that a certain topic or information should not be discussed among young people. The student gains an immediate appropriation of power by demonstrating this adeptness with appropriate language and humor for the situation. In short, Latin@ students learn to *code switch* to the Black vernacular because it is the language of power at the school.

Students also appropriated traditionally Black hand gestures, such as fist bumps (fist version of the “high five”). As a teacher, I used high fives and fist bumps frequently, however,

the fist bump conveyed a slightly different meaning that is quite difficult to translate. It demonstrates a higher level of praise possibly because it was also an invitation into a brotherhood of solidarity. Possibly. Since it is hard to translate, it is hard to say for sure, but I know what it means and so do the students.

Students sometimes engaged in more intricate handshakes, with a series of hand movements that take the place of “Hello” and convey a deep mutual fondness, respect, and solidarity, known as giving someone ‘dap.’ Although these handshakes were generally the purview of Black boys, I observed a few instances in which Latin@ students greeted each other in this manner, usually afterschool. I witnessed this greeting between Latino boys and between Latin@ girls and boys. Not a word was spoken, but the encounter immediately conveyed a deep, mutual fondness and level of friendship as opposed to physical attraction.

One final area of communication appropriation concerned movement and occupying space, namely walking, posturing, and non-verbal communication while walking aka, ‘the nod.’ As students age, particularly Black males, they develop a particular stance and manner of walking that conveys strength, toughness, and coolness, called *swagger*. Students are highly adept at developing this nonverbal communication and the realm of acceptability on a middle school campus. Students know the boundary of coolness, without signifying too much aggression, gangbanging, or criminality because this behavior would attract unwanted attention and discipline from authority figures or ire from rival gangs. Students also know how to harden their stance or posture in offense or defense of aggression. There are nuances in the ways in which Blacks and Latin@s manifest posturing movements and stances or “tough fronts” (Dance, 2002), however, it is beyond my expertise to describe them precisely; I just know they exist.

The last nonverbal appropriation I observed was the ‘nod,’ a subtle lowering of the head in recognition of another Black person, often a stranger, and male-to-male, sometimes accompanied with a “Wassup” (what’s up?). The nod is an important part of Black culture and solidarity. It is our subtle way of greeting a stranger and without speaking, saying something in the realm of “I see you, I value and respect you as well as Blackness, I know it’s difficult out here (in the White world), I am in solidarity with you, I support you.” Again, it is difficult to translate something like this, but the meaning is well-understood.

I observed some semblance of the nod between Latino boys, although like movement and posturing, there were subtle differences. I did not observe this greeting between Blacks and Latin@s. This is not to say that it did not occur, only that I did not observe it.

All of these language, gesture, and movement appropriations are attempts to gain the language (verbal and nonverbal) of power at the school. Lacking adeptness and facility with English witticisms, idioms, movements, and gestures, Latin@ students appropriating Black communication was like taking a *power short cut*. No one is immune from using one form of this power or another, including teachers, staff, and administrators.

Theme 3: Unsafe Space Issues

All stakeholder groups cited the school’s location at the corner of an unsafe and violent neighborhood, small physical space, and tiny classroom space as physical and emotional threats to safety. The school was converted from a clinic to classrooms on a small lot. The school’s enrollment of 450 students pales in comparison to neighboring middle schools, which are more than four times as large at 2,000 students.

However, the school's small physical space created substantial overcrowding and provided few, if any, options for privacy. Latin@s' discomfort with the afterschool program providers resulted in their infrequent use of the afterschool program. This placed Latin@s at heightened risk because they tended to congregate outside of the protective walls of the school, where they were unsupervised and where gun violence was more likely to occur.

Parents' primary concerns were safety and their child's grades. Mrs. Thompson provided an example and stated;

I don't like the helicopters all the time, the killings, I don't like that...I don't ever really let my kids walk to school because I feel like the community is just bad. I don't want somebody to jump on them.

Some students specifically cited the walk to the park as scary. The school did not have a Physical Education (P.E.) facility, so students walked 20 minutes each way to the park. In the past, students had had guns and knives pulled on them, although that had not happened recently. However, last year, they did see a dead body at the park. Both Terri and Tanya, Black girls, said the walk to the park was scary and that there should be a bus to transport them to the park. Terri said she did feel that the P.E. teachers would keep her safe.

Students frequently complained about the school's small physical space. Jerome said, "Outside, it's so small, it's like you're boxed into one place. You can't move or do what you really want to do." This is especially true on Wednesdays, when all students had lunch together; so 450 students share a very small space. It is so crowded that during my observations, I wondered if this was a code violation. Antonio, a Latino boy, indicated that he would most like to change the environment, "It's so crowded outside like Wednesdays...I could barely sit down.

I sit on the floor. I have to keep moving around all the time.” This is not uncommon for charter schools, which often use converted spaces.

There was so little available space that the school counselor conducted counseling sessions in the lunch area in full view of other students. As a staff member, Sarah had frequent opportunities to watch this dynamic noting that she thought the students were “embarrassed, intimidated, and insecure.” The walls were extremely thin, so teachers who share walls with administrators, struggle to have private conversations with students.

Classroom space was irregular and tiny. One Latina student complained to me that she was extremely uncomfortable because she could not approach the board without getting too close to her male teacher. This situation was harassing for her and I intervened on her behalf.

Segregation and Safety: The Afterschool Program

As part of my observation protocol, I observed the afterschool program area, which also served as the lunch area. I also observed the front of the school. Although the school year began with a significant number of Latin@ students enrolled in the afterschool program, that number trickled off so that, by the second semester, the majority of students in the program were Black at this majority Latin@ school (86%). Instead of remaining active in the program, Latin@ students often hung out near the front of the school. This was probably unknown to their parents because no one tracked this activity.

After school dismissal, students were not allowed to linger in front of the school indefinitely because it was unsafe due to gun violence and other violent behaviors. Instead, students were told to remain inside the protective walls of the school or go home.

Administrators and instructional aides monitored dismissal to help ensure students boarded

buses, headed toward home and entered parents' cars. Once the daily security team returned to the inside of the school, the front went unsupervised and students on the outside of the gate remained vulnerable. After school, Latin@ students lingered near the school, but toward the middle of the block, just out of the sight of teachers, administrators, and afterschool staff. As a result, these students were unsupervised, and in this neighborhood, this situation was unsafe.

This segregation and safety issue is a prime example of how the selection of the afterschool program staff had serious consequences for students. I had no knowledge or evidence of preferential hiring or contracts for the afterschool program. This group might have been selected because they were local or low-cost. Still, the separation of students in this instance was decidedly not in their best interests.

The chaos and disruptions at the school site due to unsafe, overcrowded, and dangerous spaces characterize modern urban segregation. Charter schools in urban areas represent particularly vulnerable locations because they typically serve communities of color in grossly economically disenfranchised spaces. Due to the impact of unsafe spaces, the concept of race in relation to space is explored further in the next section.

Urban Geography: Race and Space

Until recently, race and racism held little import in the discipline of neoclassical geography. Prior to poststructuralism, race was not deemed an appropriate area of study in the science of space (Kobayashi, 2014). Beginning in the 1970s, more geographers began to focus on aspects of earlier work done by geographer Robert Park on the “moral order of the city” and shift focus away from the biological aspects of race to its socially constructed aspects. This

humanistic approach endeavored to capture the experiences of people living in racialized communities in America (Kobayashi, 2014).

Urban geographers have increasingly begun to deliberately apply a spatial approach to understanding racial patterns using the lens of critical race theories. Urban geographers now aim to directly link place, race, and privilege, and cite three dominant social forces that shape these linkages: sprawl, concentrated poverty, and segregation, all the result of policy and practices of capitalistic structures run by private and government institutions (Squires & Kubrin, 2005). This new perspective, sometimes termed the “urban political economy,” focuses analysis on class, race, and domination and subordination relations. Spatial and racial inequalities are commonly associated with all the available goods and services (Squires & Kubrin, 2005) desired for living a happy and productive life. However, racialized urban spaces like those at Light Middle School carried with them a host of problems due to extreme poverty and segregation, which shape opportunities, general health, and welfare across generations.

For example, health disparities manifest early in life through infant mortality rates in South Los Angeles. Less dire, but ever-present at Light Middle School, were the students with treatable conditions that went without basic care due to parents’ income. There were many students in obvious need of dental work. There were students who could not read because they lost their glasses and their parents could not replace them. There was a student who was partially blind, but his parents had not been able to arrange or afford the surgery. There was a partially deaf student that who did not have a hearing aid and did not feel entitled to ask for preferential seating. I regularly saw these students slipping through the urban cracks. Most of us did what we could to help by referring them for services that were often all too slow to appear, if at all.

Then there were any numbers of students who lost a parent, grandparent or aunt during the year. People in this community died young with too great a frequency. All of these issues impact students' ability to focus, learn, and matriculate in school.

Another quality of life factor—crime—was ever-present in the community. Nearly all of my students had witnessed violent crime or had a member of their family or extended family incarcerated. Students reported being afraid all the time; but due to tense relationships between the community and police, those tasked with the mission to “protect and serve” are often viewed as the enemy as opposed to a resource for safety.

Charter schools have been touted as an innovative solution to the problems plaguing public schools. However, increasingly, in racialized communities like Watts, charter schools crowd students in often unsuitable spaces that exacerbate tensions and conflicts due to the sheer number of close interactions in extremely limited, tightly controlled, enclosed spaces.

According to Barns (2014), the educational reform movement, rather than being singularly focused on the needs of racially oppressed communities, has instead spawned an “urban space economy” that allows White entrepreneurs to capitalize on children and communities of color. Managed by a large charter management organization (CMO), with White leadership, Light Middle School typifies the charter school that is part of a corporate venture. While any number of entrepreneurial vendors, publishers, and online educational service providers fill their coffers with the school's funding, the students endure a low-grade misery created by the physically unsafe place and limited space at Light Middle School.

Theme 4: Culture of Care and Collaboration

If bullying and privilege were the dark clouds hanging over the school, the silver lining would be the school's culture of care and collaboration. All stakeholder groups including students, teachers, staff, and parents endorsed a caring ethic at the school concerning the relationships between students and teachers. These varying perspectives indicated students' need for care, and affirmed the meeting of this need by the school environment as provided by the teachers and staff. There was, however, a contradiction between the pervasive reports of bullying, the challenges with one particular teacher, and reports that teachers cared and students feel cared for. This can be accounted for by the school's small size. Teachers had the opportunity to get to know students individually. Most of these particular students felt cared for and were more likely to volunteer for the study.

Students also derived tremendous benefits from peer support in academics, positive behavior support, antibullying, and school adjustment. The school's Blended Learning Model provided frequent opportunities for students to work in groups. This instructional strategy helped the school develop a strong collaborative culture for students. On the benefits of the collaborative station, Antonio said, "I get to work with my friends and we help each other out. If they have information and somebody else has different information we could put it together in one thing and I don't have to think by myself."

Teachers reported strong collegial and collaborative teamwork across grade-level instructional teams and used the word "family" to describe the relationships among colleagues. Collectively, these systems of care and support positively impacted students' academic development and personal lives. Care and collaboration served as strong protective factors that

mitigate the challenging and harmful aspects of other reported themes (i.e. privilege, race and language issues, bullying, and unsafe spaces).

However, teacher attrition, novice teachers, and at-will contracts posed an ongoing threat to the maintenance of a caring and collaborative culture, as well as students' academic and personal development.

This vignette featuring Miguel highlighted only one challenge of being a poorly trained teacher. Miguel explained:

A teacher got mad at me because I yawned. He was like "Oh, if you were at a funeral would you do that?" I told him, "This is not a funeral." He's like, "Oh, but just imagine if it was a funeral." I told him I can't imagine it...I can't imagine nobody dead here. He just stayed quiet and he [didn't] attack me.

Although Miguel "won" this round, he could very well have been sent to office, where I see him frequently for these types of behaviors. This cycle was not entirely Miguel's fault. It was a result of poor teacher training. This set up was a "rookie mistake." Basic classroom management techniques advise teachers to refrain from public "tit-for-tats" with students. The teacher started the showdown with an inappropriate question, and it backfired. Teachers in this situation often escalate the situation instead of ignoring the student and managing through proximity. Or, the teacher could have used humor; the situation seemed hysterical. The teacher could have done a big yawn back. The last thing the teacher should have done was put on a "show" with a really, really bright student. It is a dead-end for one or both of them.

Unfortunately, this was only the first curtain for Miguel, and this particular teacher resulting in repeat performances in front of the assistant principal's office.

Teachers at Light were ill-prepared to maintain effective and nonviolent, nondamaging control of a class, referred to as classroom management skills. The problem is that the school did not provide, nor suggest classroom management training to new teachers until there was a crisis or threat of nonrenewal of the teacher's contract. Teachers were left to figure it out on their own. This is the only profession I know of where the first year novice has exactly the same job responsibility as the 10-year veteran. There is no ramp-up period, no gradual release model with increasing responsibility. The job is the same, with the same level of expectations. By the time new teachers stumble and fall and begin to figure it out on their own, they leave the school or the teaching profession altogether.

During difficult times, Evelyn, a Latina teacher, tries to remind herself why she's here and reflected:

I went into the teaching profession because I really wanted to make a difference...I feel like if I can at least give a little bit of my heart and my love and attention to these kids, that it at least will go far. And I think back to the teachers who really made the biggest difference to me...really just stopped to ask me, 'Hey, are you ok? How are you?' High fives walking in...just like really stopped to really make me think they cared.

In general, teachers cited their own school experiences as contributory factors in joining the teaching profession.

Sarah, the grandmotherly, Black staff member, was very complimentary in her assessment of how much the teachers at the school care:

Most of the teachers are very loving and kind...I think they really feel for their students, and they really want the best for them. All the teachers that I talk to here work...really

hard at helping the kids here. And most of the teachers here they stay after school, they tutor the kids, they do whatever it takes. They even stay during their break time and, just to give them what they need or to help them. I think that they are a big support, a big influence on the children. I think it has a lot to do with it because, it's, what makes it very difficult for a person to learn or a kid to learn if someone is mean to them, or they feel like they're not wanted or somebody don't care about them.

All parents interviewed thought their children had caring teachers, with the notable exception of the Nigerian teacher, Mr, Olawale, already mentioned. Gerome's summary highlights the importance of a caring ethic. His voice cracked when he made this statement, and it caused a wave of emotion for both of us:

The teachers here at this school really want you to do your best at everything that you do and want the best for you and the future of your life...They back you up...It makes me want to push forward to the best of my ability. *It makes me feel like I can do anything.*

In summary, participants reported the presence of tensions and conflicts in race matters, such as preferential treatment for Blacks, self-segregation, bullying, and harassment. Members from all stakeholder groups reported a hierarchy whereby Black students and/or teachers received preferential treatment. Preferential treatment for teachers manifested primarily in hiring practices resulting in a majority Black teaching staff at a majority Latin@ school. Teachers unanimously reported the inability of the overall teaching staff to communicate effectively and in a timely manner with the majority of parents, and cited this as a major obstacle for students' academic achievement and personal development. Teachers reported this communication barrier

disempowered parents by preventing them from being meaningfully involved in their child's education.

Participants from all stakeholder groups cited the school's location at the corner of an unsafe and violent neighborhood, small physical space, and tiny classroom space as physical and emotional threats to students' safety. However, all stakeholder groups including students, teachers, staff, and parents endorsed a caring ethic at the school concerning the relationships between students and teachers. Students also benefitted from peer support in academics, positive behavior support, antibullying, and school adjustment. Lastly, teachers reported strong collegial and collaborative teamwork across grade-level instructional teams.

Collectively, these systems of care and support positively impacted students' academic and personal lives. And helped mitigate the challenging and harmful aspects of racial conflict, tensions, and unsafe spaces.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter reports the final research components in five parts: summary of the study, discussion of findings, implications, recommendations, and conclusion. The summary of the study reviews the purpose of the study and the research questions that guided the study. The discussion of the findings answers the research questions and explores themes that emerged from the study. The implications section informs the community stakeholders at A Beacon of Light Middle School and other schools with a diverse population of Latin@s and Blacks of important considerations that can be gained from this study including the complex interchange of conceptualization, perception, and agency, or the capacity to act within a sociocultural context (Ahearn, 2001) to affect a change. This chapter concludes with recommendations for future studies that will guide school personnel on improving Black and Latin@ student relations.

Summary of the Study

Purpose of the Study

This study explored student, parent, and teacher perceptions of school racial climate and its impact on students' academic and personal lives at a charter middle school in South Los Angeles. School climate is defined as the perceived quality of interpersonal interactions between students, teachers, staff, and parents, (Haynes et al., 1997) and can help account for students' feelings about the school environment. Stakeholder perception of this enduring quality of the school environment affects their behavior, which in turn, affects the environment (Hoy & Miskel, 1996).

Studies researched revealed that student, parent, and teacher perceptions of a positive school climate are associated with increased academic achievement and decreased disciplinary problems (Esposito, 1999; Mattison & Aber, 2007). Conversely, schools fraught with intergroup conflict or a poor racial climate, divert focus and resources away from student learning and toward establishing a safe environment, reducing tension, managing a never-ending stream of disciplinary problems, and poor teacher retention rates (Mattison & Aber, 2007). Comparative studies involving intergroup conflict have focused primarily on the Black-White binary in school settings, so teachers lack training and preparedness to handle tensions between Blacks and Latin@ students (Michie, 2007).

This study adds to the growing body of comparative research on Black and Latin@ relations by listening to multiple perspectives and providing additional focus on the perception of middle school students. This transition from childhood to adolescence often marks the beginning of ethnic identity development, a process of exploring and achieving an ethnic identity (Phinney, 1989). Conducting research during this key transitional period when students begin to self-segregate provides an opportunity to promote positive intergroup relations, reduce tensions, and engender better academic and personal outcomes for Black and Latin@ students, to help them navigate this new urban, demographic reality in South Los Angeles.

Research Questions

1. How do students and parents perceive and conceptualize the racial tensions that affect the school climate at a charter middle school in South Los Angeles?

2. How do students and their parents perceive the impact of these tensions and dynamics on the school's racial climate, and students' academic development and personal lives?
3. How do the faculty perceive and deal with the impact of these tensions on the school's racial climate, students' academic development, and personal lives?

Findings

During a four-month period, I interviewed 19 school stakeholders at Light Middle School, a charter school in South Los Angeles. I interviewed students, parents, teachers, and staff members to uncover their perception of interethnic tensions that were affecting the school climate and the impact of those stressors on the school's racial climate, and students' academic development and personal lives. I also explored teacher handling of the impact of racial tensions. As a participant-observer, I studied student interactions in all common areas including the hallways, the cafeteria area at lunch/nutrition, school assemblies, the afterschool program, the front area of the school, basketball practice, cheerleading practice, a school dance, and a field trip.

Several major changes occurred during the course of the study, (a) A number of schools within the Alliance (CMO) voted for unionization with United Teachers of America (UTLA); (b) The Alliance released a new performance-based pay scale that could increase teacher salaries by as much as 50% depending on teacher evaluations, test scores, and school climate survey data; (c) Additional funds provided more sports offerings, namely male and female soccer teams; and (d) An Alliance-run middle school was forced into closure because LAUSD did not renew its charter due to poor academic growth performance on standardized tests. This is a reminder of

the very real threat of school closure based on test results. The potential impact of these changes will be discussed in implications.

Through an inductive analysis (Hatch, 2002), four themes emerged to assess the student and parent conceptualization of the race-based dynamic and how that impacted their perception of racial tensions. The following four themes emerged from the research process concerning student, parent, teacher, and staff perceptions, conceptualizations, and the handling of racial tensions that impacted the school climate: (a) race matters and conflict, (b) language and communication issues, (c) unsafe space issues, and (d) care and collaboration. Since the study was intended to unearth tensions, themes were decidedly negative. However, one theme, care and collaboration, emerged as a potentially mitigating factor that lessened the impact of the tensions and conflict.

Discussion of Findings

By revealing the voices of students, parents, teachers, and staff, these different perspectives provided a multidimensional understanding about their lived reality of the school's overall climate and racial climate. Racial tension was conceptualized, perceived, and handled in a variety of ways based on role such as parent, child, student, teacher, and individual demographics, including ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and immigrant positionality. Perception of racial tension refers to how students experience tensions, conflict, or any dynamics. Conceptualization refers to myriad factors that help individuals organize information.

Participants perceived the school's racial climate as being impacted by race matters and conflict such as preferential treatment for Black students in sports, clubs, field trips, and discipline, student self-segregation, interethnic tensions/conflict, language barriers, and unsafe

spaces due to overcrowding and the violent, high-crime neighborhood. Communication issues, pervasive bullying, and harassment also negatively impacted the school's climate. These tensions and conflicts were found to have a negative impact on students' academic development and personal lives. Collaboration and care shared a role in mitigating school tensions.

This study revealed that parents did not perceive racial tensions, but were aware that students self-segregated. Parents conceptualized tensions as an issue that called for tolerance and inclusion, or they declared colorblindness. Students perceived racial tensions based on their relationships, which was minimally reported. The main area that students reported as problematic was in unfair discipline of Latin@s by teachers and administrators. Students conceptualized racial tension based on socialization from home, including parental attitudes of tolerance/inclusion, prejudice, or colorblindness. Students who received home support for tolerance and inclusion enjoyed multi-ethnic friendship groups, which served as protective factors.

Overall, teachers handled racial tensions involving the administrators with avoidance, venting, and some acts of resistance. The majority of the workforce at a predominantly Latin@ school (86%), Black teachers/staff, did not perceive any racial tension, so they did not take any direct action to handle it. In stark contrast, all non-Black teachers perceived ever-present racial tension, including the use of racial slurs by both Black and Latin@ students. These teachers took action in varying degrees based on the perception of their own agency, meaning how much power and control they thought they had in addressing the problem.

An overarching theme, Black school leaders handled displacement by a large immigrant Latin@ population by instituting a system of privilege for Black students to protect political and

economic space. These preferences provided some advantages, but primarily disadvantages to Black students, while disenfranchising Latin@s. The advantages to staff were preferential hiring, but this also disenfranchised Latin@ students, due to the lack of hiring Latin@ teachers that reflected their strong enrollment numbers. This resulted in a lack of bilingual and relatable teachers to properly support students and communicate with Spanish-speaking parents who were disempowered by this deficit. Unqualified teachers hired due to their ethnicity also harmed students who had those teachers, primarily students with disabilities or those classified as English Language Learners. Preferential treatment also harmed Latin@ students because they did not have a safe place to congregate and were disproportionately absent from extra-curricular activities. Preferential treatment harmed some Black students because their poor behavior was reinforced through unearned privilege. Lacking adequate consequences for unacceptable behavior, Black students had no incentive to improve neither their behavior nor their underachievement. Providing these students with special privileges placed them at greater risk.

The massive immigration of Latin@s to South Los Angeles offered a vital opportunity to build a coalition with Blacks. However, zero-sum games prevailed and a competition-based framework emerged, rendering this case study a microcosm of missed opportunity in the Greater Los Angeles area, and beyond.

Question 1: How do students and parents perceive and conceptualize the racial tensions that affect the school climate at a charter middle school in South Los Angeles?

Overall, parents did not perceive racial tensions or dynamics as a major issue in the school. Although minimally reported, parents perceived racial tension based on their ethnic background, immigration status, and their roles at the school site. The offer to participant in the

study was extended at a meeting in the parent center during the school day, indicating those parents were actively involved in their child's education. A total of four parents were interviewed, two Black females and two Latinas. One of the Black parents was recently hired as a part-time staff member at the school. This parent and both Latinas were current or former school board members. As an independent charter school, Light Middle School had a board of directors comprised of Alliance Corporate board members, parents, and teachers. Board members from all 26 Alliance schools attended one large board meeting in downtown Los Angeles. These quarterly board meetings were held in a nice hotel and parents were provided with a buffet breakfast, while being invited to hear and read the school's financial and academic reports. These parents had many opportunities to interact with the school principal and assistant principal, both of whom were Black as well as teachers and other staff. Based on their elevated status and privileges as board members, their perceptions of the school climate and the school racial climate were greatly positive, as would be expected.

In terms of reported themes, these highly involved parents did not perceive any racial tensions or dynamics, in part because their child did not report them. However, both Black parents affirmed the presence of preferential treatment toward Black students. The newly employed Black staff member, a possible recipient of preferential treatment in hiring herself, admitted to providing special treatment to Black students who were having major behavioral challenges referring to them as her "special projects." During her work duties, she would proactively monitor and encourage certain Black students because they reminded her of her own son. The other Black parent thought Latin@s received preferential treatment because the majority of them received a principal's and/ or vice principal's achievement medal at her

nephew's graduation ceremony last year. This parent was concerned that very few Black students had any achievement medals, including her nephew, whom she considered well-behaved and a good student.

While the part-time staff member monitored the cafeteria area during lunch, she did not view self-segregation as a problem because she thought students just liked being with people like themselves. However, the other Black parent perceived the self-segregation as a racial dynamic because the large number of Latin@ students made Black students feel like they had to stick together. Since the Black student population at the school was so small, feeling forced to "hang Black," severely limited the Black students' friendships options and, seemingly, strategies for academic success. Despite her perception about single-race friendships being the norm, this parent reported having two children at the school with interethnic friendships with Latinas.

The Latina parents did not report any racial tensions. They were very pleased with the overall school climate. Although they had concerns about race-based conflict that involved high school skirmishes and other community violence, they did not offer any critical feedback that related directly to Light Middle School's racial climate. Although they did mention some difficulty communicating, both were satisfied that Spanish translation was available when they needed it, including at board meetings, with front office staff, and in home-to-school communications such as parent letters and phone calls.

Parents conceptualized racial tensions as either an issue of tolerance and inclusion or individual sameness or colorblindness. The Black parents conceptualized racial tensions as a lack of tolerance. One Latina held the same view explaining that she had a gay brother and stressed the importance of accepting people as who they are without prejudice. As a result of her

experience with antigay sentiments, tolerance and inclusion were strong factors in how she conceptualized bias and racial tension. The other Latina conceptualized racial tensions as colorblindness saying that everyone was the same.

In this small sample of individuals, these highly involved parents compared to the general parent population did not report concerns regarding racial tensions. This finding aligns with Allport's (1954) suggestion that prejudice reduction occurs when individuals have an opportunity to work together on common goals. The three highly involved parents that were board members held the most positive views of the school, the administration, the teachers, and each other in terms of racial tensions. The other parent held positive views based on her children's collaboration with their Latina peers. It is also noteworthy that these parents collectively held a great deal of status relative to other parents.

Students were more likely to perceive the racial climate in terms of their relationships, and this was minimally perceived. Student perceptions of racial tensions were similar; however, there were key differences in perception generally based on their ethnic groups. Black students, 14% of the student population, formed a tiny minority. These students minimized or denied the presence of racial tensions, generally responding that students got along well. Although some students witnessed individual incidents of race-based conflict, they perceived them as isolated incidents of student misbehavior and did not generalize this information to affirm the overall existence of racial tension.

Latin@ students perceived conflict at the school in the same way, however, two seventh-grade students also reported that Black students received preferential treatment in discipline and that unfair discipline was a major source of racial tension in the school. They also thought that

some Black teachers were racist against Mexicans. These students reported that they were treated far more harshly for small behavioral issues and that they got in trouble far more often than Black students that had demonstrated far worse behavior, including talking back, without punishment. One of those students also perceived racial tension as Black students receiving benefits that Mexicans did not, such as access to technology, explaining that when computers were in short supply, teachers tended to take computers from Mexicans first.

Students from both ethnic groups noticed student self-segregation and did not see this as a problem because five of the participants maintained interethnic friendships. Students reported that there was no admitted interethnic dating; unless it involved same-sex interethnic dating. One final difference in student perception was that Latin@s perceived racial tension based on Black and Brown community violence. This included group fights, individual fighting and shouting matches that used racial slurs, and people getting “jumped” by people of a different ethnic group. This perception can be attributed to the aftermath of race wars and drug wars, when Black and Brown violence was rampant (Pastor, 2014). Now that the race wars and drug wars have subsided, some Latin@s generalized this information to mean that racial tensions had ceased.

Students’ conceptualization of racial tension was impacted by their socialization at home, and most of the students conceptualized the issue as a need for tolerance and inclusion because of racial prejudice and stereotypes. In contrast to the majority of the student respondents, two students held colorblind views insisting that people were all the same. Similar to parents, one of these students thought “the racism” was over based on the lack of presence of community-based

interethnic violence. There were no students in the study who reported that they conceptualized racial tension based on their own prejudice or belief in stereotypes.

School Climate and School Racial Climate

Research on interpersonal interactions, norms, and curricula within schools can help describe revealing features of the school context and inform how schools can promote the academic and personal development of students. The school's organization, including the material needs and instruction offered, the types of interactions and relationships, and the common expectations and values within schools, are referred to as school climate (Haynes et al., 1997). When these elements reference race, culture or ethnicity, they describe school racial climate (Mattison & Aber, 2007).

In terms of the overall school climate, all parents viewed the school as being far better than neighborhood schools due to its smaller size and relative safety. Parents thought the small size of the site was a good trade-off to get the education they wanted for their kids in a small environment where their students were known individually. In addition, technology was abundant at the site. Students had a personal iPad for their use at school and access to computers as well. Three of these parents received special privileges themselves due to strong involvement in the school. It would be difficult for parents to view the school as anything other than an enormous privilege for their child. This was particularly true for the two immigrant parents that have come to the United States seeking better living conditions and landed in a nice hotel, dining on delicacies while serving as a member of the school board.

Black students who received support at home for multi-ethnic friendships, had those friendships at school, which inoculated them from generalizing about racial tensions, and they

held a positive perception of tensions. These students were also grossly outnumbered, so the perception of tensions would seem an overwhelming threatening environment. As a consequence, these students were simultaneously invested in denying the presence of tensions, so student self-protection mechanisms may also be shielding them from the perception of tension.

Students interviewed conceptualized racial tension based on socialization at home. The Black students interviewed for the study received parental messages about openness to others, curiosity, inclusion, and the benefits of interethnic friendships including the cultural capital that could be gained from such friendships such as learning Spanish. Their children internalized and acted upon these messages when selecting friendship groups. Blacks were so few in numbers at the school that their friendship options were quite limited, decreasing from eighth grade down to very few options in the sixth grade due to demographic shift. If the trend continues, the Black student presence at the school will be barely perceptible. Quite possibly, the only reason the school had a Black presence at all was the over-abundance of Black administrators and teachers, so that the environment felt more welcoming to Black students.

Latin@ Student Perceptions

Students who received home socialization messages of tolerance and inclusion transferred those attitudes to the school site, generally resulting in mixed-friendship groups. Students that received prejudicial home socialization perceived the tension based on the manner in which they reconciled their parents' values with their own experiences that contradicted those values. The adoption or rejection of those values impacted the student's friendship choices. Two Latin@s interviewed in the study were the only students who reported receiving socialization at home with prejudicial messages. These students rejected or resisted parental

guidance based on their own critical thinking and incorporating evidence that countered parental claims. One student reported repeatedly challenging his parent on racist claims and providing examples of how the parent's racist views were illogical.

Student perceptions of ethnic tensions varied, whereby some participants generally thought Blacks and Latin@s got along well, but endorsed the overall perception that students self-segregate and do not date across ethnic groups. Other students, particularly Latin@ boys, cited preferential treatment for Black boys concerning discipline issues as a source of conflict. These reports of unfair treatment were directed primarily at a seventh-grade teacher that was raised and educated in Nigeria, a vastly different educational environment and culture than either American or African American culture. The Black seventh-grade students, a Black parent and another teacher also had complaints about this teacher. Disproportionately, harsh discipline practices can have dire consequences for male students enrolled in the school, so these reports placed students at increased risk (Huynh & Fuligni, 2010; Mattison & Aber, 2007). The most vocal and critical student participant also cited the distribution of material goods, such as computers and iPads, as a source of conflict.

Question 2: How do students and their parents perceive the impact of these tensions and dynamics on the school's racial climate, and students' academic development personal lives?

In alignment with other studies, this study examined how members of the school community experienced the school climate, which included the school racial climate. School climate research can help educators understand what aspects of the school environment are most relevant to positive youth outcomes in academic achievement and personal development.

As such, this study focused on the impact of the effects of school racial climate on student outcomes. Researchers cited the importance of a school racial climate that promotes positive interethnic interactions as well as positive messages about diversity and youth culture (Brand et al., 2003). Further, a large body of discrimination literature explored the negative impact of unfair treatment on students and students of color in particular (Mattison & Aber, 2007).

Since most students did not perceive racial tensions, they did not provide examples of how tension impacted their academic development or personal lives. The primary exception occurred in the reported area of preferential treatment due to disproportionate discipline and “Race Matters” based on student self-segregation. The primary students that complained of the discipline issue were the Latino boys who experienced unfair discipline practices. These unfair actions angered the Latin@s, and one developed a planned response saying that if teachers disrespected him, his job was to disrespect them. This dynamic resulted in repeated trips to the vice-principal’s office, time out of class, and a loss of academic instruction. Unfortunately, this student, Miguel, did not see how discipline problems were impacting his academic development because he was an “average” student. The other student reported that this dynamic impacted him academically because he does not try as hard and he was afraid to ask questions.

Miguel had a planned response to his perception of racial injustice, a form of student agency, because he was compelled to take action against oppression. This student received disciplinary action for trying to start a multicultural gang that also had a (reported) Black-bisexual female (who incidentally was dating a Latina). The goal of the gang was protection from anybody that wants to “mess with us.” This student agency was geared toward protection

against threatening individuals outside the school walls, however, there were substantiated reports that the gang was trying to rid the school of the Nigerian math teacher by using subversive tactics like making up events to get the teacher fired. However, Miguel would not confirm this. This student later reported that he was not having as many problems with this teacher because he had decided just to keep his mouth shut. Miguel was anything but an average student. He had exceptional mathematical abilities, a possible threat to the math teacher.

The only other report of students being impacted by racial tensions was the intra-ethnic friendship dynamic that was a result of self-segregation. Two students reported changing friendship groups from exclusively Black groups to Latina or mixed-friendship groups specifically to improve academic and behavioral outcomes. These students made this choice due to the poor behavior and low achievement of some, but not all, Black females in their grade.

Students that did not maintain interethnic friendships did not seem disadvantaged by these choices. They all seemed to enjoy a relatively healthy self-esteem. However, for students that maintained interethnic friendships, these friendships, universally, based on observation, knowledge, and experience, served as a protective factor that helped students attach to groups that had positive values, more secure home bases, social competencies, and other forms of additional capital. In other words, these students gained developmental assets (The Search Institute, 2015) and improved academic and personal outcomes. They also distanced themselves from bullying behavior. These values are associated with resilience, a healthy coping mechanism for a troubling environment.

Students were aware that Blacks and Latin@s generally maintained separate friendship groups, but they did not consider this a racial tension, so they did not report on the impact of

segregation. Parents did not report racial tensions and therefore did not report on the impacts of racial tensions on their child's academic or personal lives. Indirectly, one parent did indicate that Black students felt forced to hang out together because there were so many Latin@ students, but her child maintained interethnic friends due to the poor behavior of the main Black female friendship group at the school: the dance team girls.

Due to their discomfort with the afterschool program, segregation placed Latin@s at risk because they congregated, unsupervised, outside of the school walls where gun violence was more likely to occur.

Since segregation was the norm, integration expressed as inter-ethnic friendship groups was the negative case. The opportunity to work toward common goals (Allport, 1954) had the most positive impact on student relations, inter-ethnic student relations, and students' personal and academic development. This took four forms reported in this study: (a) Collaborative work in class improved academic development (four reports) and personal lives (two reports); (b) Peer support for increased academic achievement and/or positive behavior support (four reports); (c) The STL Club (nine interethnic friendships); and (d) Resisting oppressive structures, namely discipline procedures (one report).

Students that had the most opportunities for interethnic contact had a unifying mission such as the STL Club, which received support from authorities. These students reported or were observed as having interethnic friendships groups. The most diversified group was the group that was trying to fight oppression inside the school as in the case of the Nigerian teacher or outside the school against students from other middle schools.

Language, communication, and bullying were not perceived or reported as racial tensions by students or parents.

In summary, students that perceived racial tensions or dynamics used agency to resolve the issue. The Latin@s that experienced harsh discipline resisted by standing up to the teacher. This was interpreted as “talking back,” which resulted in more discipline. One Latino student formed a resistance group. The girls that had experienced bullying, “drama,” and poor behavior in Black female groups changed to Latina friendship groups. Together, they had a shared goal of positive peer support for meeting academic and behavior expectations of the school and a shared understanding of each other’s challenges.

Question 3: How do the faculty perceive and deal with the impact of these tensions on the school’s racial climate, and students’ academic development and personal lives?

Teachers and staff perceived the impact of tensions on the school’s racial climate based on their ethnic groups. Black teachers and staff normalized, minimized, and denied the presence of interethnic conflict. So, although Black teachers were able to cite some differences in students wanting to play different sports or separation by ethnic group in the cafeteria area, they did not describe this difference in terms of tensions with an impact on the school’s racial climate. All other non-Black teachers working on at the same school site held a vastly different reality and reported frequently hearing racial slurs between Blacks and Latin@s and among themselves and perceived racial tension as a major problem at the school. Teacher and staff handling of the impact of those tensions on the school's racial climate, and students' academic development and personal lives reflected their unique experience including their ethnic group and social status.

Teacher responses on the reported themes were extensive and warrant attention by theme, reordering the tensions so that preferential treatment is handled last.

Race matters. Black teachers and staff normalized, minimalized, and denied the presence of conflict and thought students related fairly well. Teachers may not have perceived racial tensions because they do not hear or observe racial tensions, such as racial slurs. A student was highly unlikely to utter a racial slur in the vicinity of a Black teacher out of fear or respect or both. In this regard, Black teachers did not have direct access to evidence of racial tension among students as manifested by racial slurs. These teachers saw the segregation of students as normal, rationalizing that people want to associate with those most like themselves, so self-segregation was not a cause for concern and held no particular implications.

Black teachers maintained the greatest longevity at the school site, so they were able to make comparisons indicating that overall interethnic conflict among students had decreased, but they did not know what caused the change. One teacher hypothesized that positive teacher modeling had improved the conflict. Since none of these teachers saw tensions as a major issue, they did not do anything in particular about it, however, to the extent that they could, they strove to build positive relationships with students and did not express serious concern about the degree to which Latin@ students related to them. The Black staff member, Sarah, went out of her way to ensure that students saw her as being fair. In contrast, Black teachers and staff focused on the unacceptable behavior of Black students, and all of them compared their behavior to the more positive behavior of most Latin@ students.

Non-Black teachers and staff. Non-Black teachers and staff perceived the negative impact of tensions on climate based on hearing racial slurs, primarily in the eighth grade. Two

of these teachers do not teach eighth grade, so their experiences in hearing racial slurs occurred while visiting other classrooms or casual settings when near eighth-grade students. The variety in settings indicated the ubiquitous use of language hurtful to Blacks. The former eighth-grade teacher reported an intense racial tension and conflict in her class, which was the last cohort to be viewed as a major behavioral problem.

All non-Black teachers counseled students against the use of racial slurs and addressed the tensions in various ways, discussed in other sections. Non-Black teachers and staff's perception and handling of conflict beyond hearing racial slurs differed based on their ethnic group and gender.

Latina teacher: Gangs, music, and media influences. The Latina teacher, Evelyn, attributed the tensions to gang influences, which were informed by students' socialization at home. Evelyn had extensive experience growing up in a neighbor divided by gang territories, and was well-aware of the gang-related rules that dictated Latin@ nonassociation with Blacks and how that permeated the family. Evelyn was aware of the use of racial slurs and tried to address the name-calling, including the N word, but this was reactionary guidance ("That's not ok."). These were not Evelyn's students, so she did not feel positioned to take further action. Evelyn expressed exasperation that things had not changed.

Evelyn also perceived the tensions as impediments to gaining respect from Black students. Evelyn completed the normal protocols—call home, have a meeting, put the student out of class—but she felt no lasting success at gaining students' respect and cooperation. It is noteworthy that although bothered by the preferential treatment for Black students, Evelyn did not display outrage. Instead, she seemed just as bothered by the lack of transparency concerning

the school assembly bell schedule as she did over the lack of Latinas on the all-Black Hip-Hop Dance Crew.

Although Evelyn was overwhelmed and frustrated by the lack of Spanish language support from other teachers, she only vented that there needed to be more Latinas. Evelyn did not identify the language barrier as a source of racial tension or as a sign of class struggle, but she did try to handle it by being an empathetic ear to the entire sixth-grade parent body. While Evelyn incorporated bilingualism in her class, she did not suggest any policy changes in the handling of English as a Second Language or express disappointment that other teachers had not bothered to learn Spanish even minimally. Although she sympathized with parents' lack of access to information to assist their children such as homework, she, not unlike Black teachers, emphasized that students needed to take school more seriously like she did and parents needed to get more involved.

In other words, Evelyn did not display righteous indignation in the way Latin@s were treated, at least not to me. Since she had the longest interview over two different sittings, she was very open and had ample opportunity to share thoughts, and I gained the impression that she was being honest and transparent. Despite being an 86% Latin@-populated school, and although she felt certain things should be different, Evelyn did not ask for or suggest any radicalism. In any event, Evelyn was at a loss as to what to do about the conflict, aside from telling students racial slurs were inappropriate. I summarize Evelyn's response as a lack of power or entitlement. Her response was that of an oppressed person.

White teachers. The last two teachers, White teachers, self-reported as middle or upper-middle class, both had master's degrees and perceived the Black student preferences as an

outgrowth of competition between oppressed groups and limited resources. They also identified the strain of immigration on the Black community. Although they noticed the preferences, they did not express outrage because they had empathy for the desperate situation of many Black students in the area (i.e. parents in jail or worse, and students in the foster care system). This is not to say that Latin@ students did not experience the same traumas. They did, including the trauma of parents who were deported. However, the situations of Black students were multigenerational and seemed more desperate to at least one of the teachers.

Both teachers thought the preferences made the racial climate worse. One thought the preferential treatment was of no value because it was unearned and therefore, did not authentically improve the self-esteem of Black students. It was, a "treat," as opposed to an actual reward.

The White teachers' handling of conflict was different, based on their gender and possibly their sexual orientation. Their demographic representations were White male (sexual orientation unknown) and queer (feminine, lesbian). The male teacher tried to enact changes through sports by starting a soccer team or wrestling team, an alternative to basketball and football. He also tried to be seen as fair, particularly in holding Black students accountable to rules for sports participation, namely planning and listing their teams, rather than just showing up and expecting to get playing privileges. This teacher played soccer and saw it as an international, inexpensive sport to which all students, male and female, could gain access. He lobbied for both sports, offering to volunteer his time, but kept encountering obstacles like the lack of administrative follow-through. Robert was extremely frustrated by the lack of support for universal access to sports for both Latin@s and females in general.

Since his interview, additional funds had been secured and Robert, along with the P.E. teacher, had organized both male and female soccer teams. So far, 60 males and 30 females had signed up. In addition, Robert had set strict academic standards for participation, and this was the first true leverage we have experienced for a handful of Latin@ students who are exceptional soccer players and gross underachievers.

The other teacher, self-identified as queer of the effeminate, was the only teacher able to identify oppressive structures and engage the students in social justice discourse. The teacher, Gayle, tried exercises like asking students to deconstruct racial slurs, attempting to radicalize her students. Although seeming at times to be fascinated with her work, the administration did not fully support it either.

Gayle's efforts were courageous, however, she now realizes that she did not have the training, skills, or frame of reference to handle consciousness-raising at the school because all of her prior training on institutionalized racism in schools focused on White supremacy and its effects on students of color and the black/white binary. Gayle indicated, that the "angle" of racism in her training did not prepare her to work under a Black principal, with a majority of Black teachers and Black-on-Brown conflicts between students that by and large, did not even know any White people.

Gayle regretted that she did not exercise more agency, however, the daily experience of witnessing student trauma and not being able to make impactful change was traumatizing for her and she left after being on-site for two years, an unfortunate, but typical teacher outcome. Gayle felt passionate about working in this challenging situation due to her own personal trauma concerning the development of her sexual orientation. According to Ladson-Billings (1999), this

is precisely the path of successful teachers of African American children and other oppressed children. They have undergone a transformative experience themselves.

Preferential treatment. Preferential treatment was a major reported theme, so teachers' perceptions of Black privilege warrants additional focus. Teachers' ability to identify preferential treatment specifically as an outgrowth of oppressive structures was determined by their class and education level. Although critical of preferential treatment for Blacks students, White teachers with master's degrees and training in social justice-based discourse were keenly aware of the forces behind the decision to prefer. These teachers identified forces, which include oppression and the impact of immigration in displacing Black residents as contributing factors to Black residents' loss of power and community. In this case, the class structure impacted the degree to which teachers could identify and conceptualize class structure as a problem.

The impact of preferential treatment. Teachers reported that preferential treatment in hiring negatively impacted students because some of their teachers were not qualified to teach or did not care about the students or both. One of these teachers, an instructional aide dedicated to a student with disabilities, came to class and read a book while her student played video games.

Teachers and staff members reported that preferential treatment for Black students:

1. Harmed them academically because they were already behind and would have more difficulty catching up (1 report)
2. Harmed students academically and personally because they did not experience consequences for their behavior and lacked accountability for grades and behavior (6/7 reports)
3. Harmed students personally because they had a false sense of entitlement (3 reports)

4. Harmed a student academically and personally because special privileges resulted in chronic truancy and this impacted her grades; she was in the bad habit of not coming to school, demonstrating a false sense of entitlement (1 report)
5. Harmed Black females particularly because Black males received unconditional preferential treatment and they did not, so they acted out in other ways to get attention
6. Harmed Latin@ students academically because they have to contend with poor Black student behavior because Black students are not held accountable (1 report).

The only teacher that did not directly connect the poor behavior of some Black students with a lack of accountability due to preferential treatment (point 2) was the only teacher that did not recognize preferential treatment as a problem at the school. This teacher was a Black male who was also the recipient of preferential treatment in part because he coached the sport that catered to Black students, basketball. He did, however, complain about chronic behavior problems from Black students.

Teacher handling of preferential treatment. There were certain ways teachers dealt with these tensions that they had in common: venting, avoiding, and resisting. Teachers vented a lot about this single issue, but teachers did not know how to deal with tensions, and they did not feel safe addressing the preferential treatment due to being novice teachers and/or being on at-will contracts. Teachers avoided talk about the issue and did not complain about it to the administration due to fear of reprisals or loss of privileges. Teachers also vented about the lack of fairness and how it looked to Latin@ students, but not other Black students, nor parents.

Resisting took two forms, purposeful displays of fairness and overcompensation by developing preferences for Latin@s. First, teachers tried hard to be seen as fair and did not want

their hands dirtied by the preferences scheme at the school, so they resisted and took advantage of opportunities to demonstrate fairness as a subtle form of resistance. The second way was by purposefully selecting Latin@s in anticipation of administrative selection of Black students. For example, for a recent college road trip, teachers of all ethnic groups selected only Latin@s for the trip in anticipation that the administration would use their “picks” (a questionable practice) to provide preferences for Black students. This tactic may have reinforced the administration’s perception that teachers could not be trusted to make competent choices, as high-achieving and well-behaved Black students were left off of the college trip list in anticipation that the administration would put them on and they *did*.

Teacher and staff responses were impacted by the degree of power and control felt in enacting change. Teachers' social class-level determined their sense of agency. The more privileged the teacher, including White privilege, the more likely he/she was to perceive racial tension as a systemic issue and take direct action in the form of dialogue on race or organizing, such as sports teams. The less privilege an individual held, the less likely he or she was to take action, which manifested as brief admonishments to students or total inaction. An outgrowth of class, teachers' education and occupation also informed their responses to tension, so staff members were least likely to vent or take direct action.

This high-conflict school environment was mitigated by a culture of care and collaboration, which was triangulated with an external evaluation of the school site. Students believed teachers cared based primarily on how hard they worked. Teachers expressed their care in terms of how hard they worked and their passion for helping the students they teach. In addition to support from teachers, students reported tremendous benefits from peer support in

academics, personal issues, including bullying, discipline, and safety. Teachers reported a strong collaborative culture that enabled them to teach in a challenging environment.

Ultimately, teachers dealt with dissatisfaction with the school climate with their feet; they left and the staff turns over every three years. This high rate of turnover is common in charter schools that typically have lower wages and poorer working conditions than traditional public schools because they lack union representation and are staffed by young, inexperienced teachers. In fact, based on my personal experience, many charter schools balance their budgets by ensuring a staff of less experienced teachers to lower operational costs for salaries.

Blacks may not have fully enjoyed the school climate, but they were less likely to leave over it. Since they lacked awareness of racial tension, they did not have to deal with it directly, aside from projects and festivals. Spared of this additional stressor in the workplace, Blacks enjoyed greater longevity at the school site. Black teachers indicated that students just liked to hang out with people like themselves. Perhaps this was also true of the Black teachers. Although they enjoyed staff members of different ethnic groups, based on observations, they also seem to enjoy being in a working environment where they were the majority.

Conflicting Narratives

Conflicting narratives arose concerning the existence of racial tensions. While Black teachers, students, and parents normalized segregation and minimized or denied the existence of racial tension, most non-Black participants cited racial tensions as a serious problem. These findings beg the question, how could different groups maintain such drastically different interpretations of a single phenomenon at a specific place and time? Even more vexing, how is it

that Blacks, historical targets of racism and discrimination and, thus, highly sensitive to these issues, be unaware of racial tensions?

Critical race theorists promote the use of narratives to open the door to alternate realities that might not be readily accessible even to well-intentioned members of the dominant culture. Accordingly, these divergent accounts of the reality reported by participants rest in their drastically different experiences of reality. Since Blacks were in a position of power at the school, they did not experience overt racial tensions such as racial slurs that other participants experienced because no reasonable person would utter them in their presence. Critical race theorists promote the incorporation of everyday experiences, perspectives, viewpoints, and “the power of stories and persuasion to come to a better understanding of how Americans see race” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 53). These stories help construct a more complete reality.

Race matters and tensions. Black participants experienced an alternate reality in terms of their ability to detect racial tensions. Even I, as a participant observer, experienced this alternate reality while I was *actively looking* for racial tension. Other than the obvious segregation of Blacks and Latin@s (which Blacks did not consider racial tension), it would have been nearly impossible for me to report the existence of racial tension because I have too much relative power and respect at the school to actually encounter it myself. The only way I personally had access to the extent of these tensions was through the narratives of others with alternate perspectives and realities. Although my experience was real to me, my power limited my reality. A more complete reality rested in the collective voices of participants in the study, which provided a more holistic, multidimensional view

Interest convergence and denial. Another explanation for the divergent narrative on racial tension might be attributed to interest convergence, also called material determinism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Blacks have little incentive to acknowledge racial tensions because they benefit materially and psychically (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) from preferential treatment, regardless of their status as student or teacher or their individual class level. The material advantages reside in being in a position of leadership and power with higher pay. Preferential treatment for Blacks may contribute to longevity at the school, which for teachers also results in higher pay, particularly since the school has transitioned to performance-based pay. The distribution of resources for primarily Black sports programs also demonstrates advantage.

The psychic advantage rests in being in a position of authority and implied superiority relative to Latin@s in the community that may lack access to financial, English language, social, and cultural capital necessary for academic and career success. However, perhaps more importantly, Blacks do not have to suffer with the pain of knowing that they work in service to promote the success and welfare of some members of a group that not only look down on them, but are also positioned to surpass them.

Blacks and Latin@s both remain affected by a color caste system inherited from colonialism. Though still an issue in the Black community, significant progress has been made through the Black Power Movement and the entry of darker skinned Blacks into positions of power and success due to the efforts of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Now, Latin@s stand to gain from a centuries-old struggle fought primarily by Blacks. Still, both groups have internalized the racist behaviors of their “masters.” Since the capitalistic structure of the entirety

of America has been built and maintained by racist ideology, the degree of an individual's whiteness remains an asset. Due to the history of racism in America, Blacks remain disadvantaged on the color caste continuum.

Denial might also account for the conflicting narratives. Denial can be a useful defense mechanism to shield people from painful knowledge and experiences. For many in the profession, teaching is a calling and it would be extremely painful to know that some of the people you are working so hard to help actually hold you and your "kind" in low regard and, in some instances, disdain. In this instance, denial actually helps to shape an alternate, positive reality for Blacks in a position of power at the school site.

Conflicting narratives in care and collaboration. Conflicting narratives also arose in the theme of care and collaboration versus all other themes, which held decidedly negative responses concerning the interactions of students, teachers, and parents that made up the school climate. How could stakeholders provide overwhelming reports of preferential treatment, relational aggression, unsafe spaces, and language issues and simultaneously affirm a culture of care and collaboration at the school?

Again, CRT demonstrates the importance of valuing storytelling in gaining multiple perspectives. Various individuals and groups may experience a caring and collaborative culture at different times, which may have mitigated some of the negative forces at play. However, another explanation might again rest in interest convergence. People believe what is beneficial for them to believe. In this case, the interests of all groups are served by maintaining belief in the existence of care and collaboration, otherwise the entire environment would seem hostile, which is not conducive to teaching or learning. As noted in the introduction, many schools in the

area experienced extreme and even violent hostilities. Now that overt demonstrations of hostility have subsided, maintaining at least some level of collegiality holds benefits for all stakeholder groups, not only at Light Middle School, but the entirety of Los Angeles as well. Possibly for these reasons, Black and Latin@ conflict is seldom discussed openly by community leaders, and in my personal and professional experience, it is seldom discussed privately.

In terms of the care and collaboration theme, participants reported these responses because they experienced them at various times in different situations and with different people. The negativity from the other themes did not overshadow participants' general good feelings about the school, even though participants expressed, anger, outrage, and even cried during interviews, they still felt that the school was a caring environment. So their experience of care was the reality of their experience at school. However, there are more forces at play, namely interest convergence. It is in everyone's best interests to feel cared for because it is a basic human need. Walking around, teaching, and learning in a consistently uncaring environment would make life and learning extremely difficult. I experience the school as a caring environment, primarily because I care, deeply.

However, I am keenly aware of situations that lack caring. For example, one day a seventh-grade Latin@ boy ran into the assistant principal's office with tears in his eyes, unable to speak. I immediately went to the student's aid and I soon realized that the student was choking. In my opinion, the administrator was very slow to move and when I told this person to call 911, his response indicated I was overreacting. As it turns out, the student had done what students at the site apparently do for fun, and consumed a large quantity of fiery hot Takis (chips), which temporarily asphyxiated him. Although this is not exactly the same as choking, a

choking sensation is what the student experienced and I experienced the situation as if the student was actually choking. The lack of immediate action on the part of this administrator did not seem caring. When you are a long time Latin@ staff member, what would make you think that the school is a caring environment when no one bothers to learn to communicate in Spanish and a disproportionate number of Black students are involved in sports and attend field trips? Then again, when you are the child of parents (or you yourself) crossed the border for better opportunities because you left a war-torn country, a murderous regime, and/or extreme poverty, Light Middle School, in comparison, may at times seem like a caring environment from your perspective. And then again, it is difficult to function in a place that you feel at the forefront of your mind is uncaring. It is a common self-defense mechanism to deny this unpleasantness until a time when it is necessary to deal with it. Unfortunately, denying the issues only ensure that they continue without change or resolution.

Power relations. Critical Race Theory focuses on the Black/White binary when using voices of color to counter the master narrative. It provides a way of allowing Whites to know what they cannot know because it is not their experience. Focus on the Black/White binary held a historical context and significance due to racism and discrimination in America, however, this focus falls short when deconstructing conflicting narratives between Blacks and Latin@s, such as the case of Light Middle School where Blacks hold the position of power. Although surrounded by micro-aggressions, Blacks in authority could not and did not, see, hear or experience them. When Blacks hold the clear position of the oppressed, any slight experienced from a White person is filtered through the “Is it because I’m Black?” lens. Due to a long history of racism and discrimination, every encounter is subject to Black vigilance concerning their

treatment by Whites. However, seemingly, no such lens exists for Blacks while in a position of power. Cloaked in Black privilege, micro-aggressions may simply escape Blacks' notice.

Blacks hold the master narrative at Light Middle School because they hold the power. From this standpoint, taking the narrative analysis inherent in CRT, it becomes necessary to momentarily de-colorize and focus on the power structure, because there is no precise language to describe racism *between* racialized people. The power structure that Blacks inherited is the capitalistic power structure in the United States. Even after removing Whites from the dominant position and placing the traditionally oppressed in the position of power, the power structure holds up. Those in a position of power (regardless of color) do not have access to the experience of the oppressed because their power shields them from experiencing the same phenomena as the oppressed.

This is not to say that those in a position of power at Light Middle School are evil perpetrators of racism or oppression, but instead have appropriated the master narrative precisely as the master prescribes. In other words, due to cultural hegemony, American society indoctrinates all cultural groups to accept the White, imperialistic, capitalistic, paternalistic dominant society (hooks, 2003) as the normal and accepted manner of being.

External forces that render them bit players in this monstrous plot where they are competing for a tiny share of leftover resources create the conflict between Blacks and Latin@s. The tensions these groups experience are a direct result of their vying for the leftover crumbs that capitalistic structures have created.

Placed in a position of power, Blacks are simply playing the only hand they know, that of the master, which involves capital accumulation, including landownership. "The very structure

of their thought has been conditioned...[and] This is their model of humanity...the oppressed, at a certain moment of their existential experience, adopt an attitude of ‘adhesion’ to the oppressor (Freire, 1970, p. 37). In short, they know no other way of being.

Culture of silence. The level of denial and silence across contradicting narratives also holds roots in capitalism. White teachers, trained in social justice, mentioned that Blacks and Latin@s were being “pitted against each other” or that they were competing for limited resources, which implies the awareness of external forces at play. However, no one actually identified the dominant culture as the main oppressor. Ominously missing from all talk of race, tension, and privilege were the words, *white supremacy*. Whiteness was not named, even among the most academically accomplished participants.

This inability to name whiteness is emblematic of the “Culture of Silence” of the dispossessed, their ignorance the direct result of the all-encompassing economic, social, and political domination and paternalism that has victimized them (Freire, 1970). This lack of awareness supports the elite dominion in a capitalistic structure. Unprepared to know or discouraged from knowing or addressing the concrete realities of their own existence, the oppressed remain in a state of subordination that makes critical consciousness nearly impossible. Freire (1970) indicts the whole educational system as one of the primary mechanisms for maintaining this culture of silence.

Points of resistance. When racial tensions rose to the level of consciousness, most participants took some action. And sometimes, that action was simply speaking to me for this study. In this regard, awareness and consciousness always preceded resistance, and it could be argued that to address conflict between Blacks and Latin@s at the school and beyond requires

consciousness raising. These critical moments held the space for change, but this does not come without discomfort, pain, or struggle. So entrenched in their resolve to maintain the hegemony, the oppressor may indeed resort to violence.

Resistance, however, need not necessitate a grand stage and the perils of grandstanding. It can be outwitting an incompetent, racist teacher, starting a sports team, or starting a dialogue on race, all of which happened at Light Middle School. These little tears in the seam of oppression were missed opportunities because they were singular instances of resistance rather than an overall approach to thwart oppression. I have taken up that gauntlet, in my little space in a sixth-grade classroom where we are learning about the history of America through the eyes of the oppressed, namely, *A Young People's History of the United States* (Zinn, 2004). The students love it.

It's a start.

Summary of Discussion

Racial dynamics and tensions between Black and Latin@ students on a middle school site in South Los Angeles were perceived as preferential treatment, racial slurs, disproportionate disciplinary actions, community violence, prejudice based on skin color, home, the media, and gang influence. All community stakeholders conceptualized and perceived tensions between Blacks and Latin@s based primarily on their ethnic group.

Parents did not perceive racial tensions because they were highly privileged and/or their child did not report it. Students were aware of prejudicial attitudes and separate seating group arrangements, but they did not report visible signs of racial tensions. Some students based their perception on community violence involving Blacks and Latin@s, and since that has subsided, they do not perceive other tensions as being a major problem. Students also did not perceive racial tension because pervasive intra-ethnic bullying and harassment obscured their perception of inter-ethnic tensions or conflict.

Students with parents/family that endorsed openness to others and tolerance transferred those values to school. Students without this support reconciled the discrepancy based on their experience and had interethnic friendships, which enhanced their lives. Students in the study with primary or mixed interethnic friendships (5) reported doing so specifically because they provided peer support that helped them improve academically or personally in terms of positive behavior and emotional support, or protection against bullying/aggression and actual assault from outsiders.

Preferential treatment in hiring, discipline, and extra-curricular activities was like a dark cloud hovering over the entire school, and it had the most significant negative impact on the

school's climate, racial climate, and students' academic and personal development. Preferential treatment was the most harmful racial dynamic to students because (a) Some teachers are unqualified and/or do not care about students; (b) Lack of accountability resulted in extremely poor behavior, low achievement and a false sense of entitlement including truancy among Black students; (c) Lost time away from class and instruction due to disproportionate focus on discipline; (d) Lost student learning because of peer misbehavior due to lack of behavioral accountability; and (e) Being invisible and feeling like you do not matter due to lack of privilege (this was not reported, but is implied).

Teachers and staff perceived tensions based solely on their ethnic groups. Black teachers normalized, minimalized, or denied the presence of racial tensions, while all other non-Blacks described racial tension as a major issue at the school. Young teachers with White privilege conceptualized racial tension as a systemic issue, whereby two oppressed groups were pitted against one another for limited resources. Systemic issues were hidden from the perception of non-White teachers, so their response to interethnic conflict was reactionary or nonexistent. Black teachers were shielded from handling the stressors of racial tension because they are protected from seeing or hearing it.

Implications of this Study

Based on the history of racism in America, teachers and school administrators should keep in mind that individuals have been conditioned to perceive themselves as separate races. Although the concept of race is a social construct, it has real implications for how people in the United States are treated and how they get along (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Administrators and teachers should assume, whether they see or hear it or not, that racial dynamics and tensions

exist whenever two different ethnic groups share a space and be proactive in developing a plan to address those issues in order to create an environment conducive to the academic achievement and well-being of their students.

Implications for school leaders and teachers. A proactive approach to reducing tension will engage community stakeholders in critical discourse to raise consciousness and provide a space for productive dialogue. However, school leaders and teachers need training on how to initiate and support conversations with groups outside of the Black/White binary. Training for improving Black and Latin@ relations will require guidance on specific, perplexing issues, such as who is calling whom the N-word and how that should be addressed. This planning would also need to include a facilitator or training to provide the sensitivity and competency to handle such an emotionally charged issue. Support for diversity training and discourse will take time away from California Common Core Standards in preparation for standardized testing protocols, so school leaders may be hesitant to engage in any such dialogue particularly since dialogue can spark tension and conflict. However, upon close inspection, schools may realize this instructional time is already being lost due to tensions, micro-aggressions, and conflict, and will allocate both the time and resources necessary to reduce student and faculty tension.

At A Beacon of Light Middle School, both Black and Latin@ students are using the N-word as both in-group and out-group put-downs in class and well as friendly banter, although it was not always clear how this was received by the person hearing it. This confusion resulted in hurt, anger, and confusion. Still, giving voice to students might help alleviate tensions, so that a productive dialogue evolves that can help them negotiate tension and conflict. Whether these tensions take a form of actual conflict, including discriminatory treatment, administrators can

take a proactive approach and endorse critical pedagogy, while providing a safe space for critical discourse including racial tensions. Teachers must endeavor to develop these competencies in order to serve their students. By addressing and releasing tensions in a way that values individual perspectives while developing organizational norms on inclusion and prejudice reduction, schools can decrease disciplinary actions, which improve student outcomes.

Arriaza (2012) outlined a model for transforming school intergroup relationships: (a) affirm identity, (b) build community, (c) cultivate student leadership, and (d) address root causes of conflict. Affirmation of identity activities involves acknowledging and valuing our differences by learning about the different demographic groups at the school. Building community emphasizes how we are all the same with shared goals such as school rules, behavior norms, and problem-solving and cooperative-learning opportunities. Student leadership might be cultivated through student voice and democratic participation. Finally, addressing the root causes of conflict includes acknowledging the structural and institutional structures that promote ethnic or other forms of intergroup conflict. This consists of addressing issues such as tracking that segregate students or encouraging dialogue to surface troublesome issues that negatively impact intergroup relationships. Sports teams and clubs serve as places for crossing borders and, when used effectively, can provide excellent opportunities for students to get to know each other and reduce interethnic conflict.

Implications for students and parents. Parent modeling sets the stage for a child's early development. Caring parents demonstrate a desire for the best options and outcomes for their children. Rather than fear interethnic contact and friendship groups, parents are well-advised to encourage their children to seek friends that will enhance their lives regardless of their ethnic groups. Maintaining both intra- and interethnic friendship groups brings additional social and cultural capital to students, which can positively impact their resiliency, a key survival trait in a dangerous community that lacks resources.

Implications for performance-based pay, unionization, and teacher retention. It remains to be seen how the protections of a union will gel with performance-based pay. Due to the competence they are able to attain as teachers with longevity on-site, Black teachers stand to enjoy substantial raises of \$17,000 to more than \$25,000 next year. It is unclear how these two generally opposing forces, unionization and merit pay, will impact the school. Since evaluations are subjective judgments performed by administrators, a lack of fairness can cost teachers thousands of dollars. This makes the performance evaluation a high-stakes assessment. Teachers may turn to the union and file grievances if they think their evaluation is unfair.

Finally, since 10% of teacher evaluations will be made up of school climate surveys, new attention might be focused on the relationships at school. One can hope.

Teachers may be more willing to struggle through challenges for much greater increases in pay, which could improve teacher retention. However, this change may yet bring more race-based conflict, in terms of actual or perceived preferential treatment for Blacks because Black administrators are responsible for the performance evaluations that determine teacher pay. Black

teachers also maintain greater longevity at the site and that might lead to improved performance, better performance evaluations and increased pay.

Future Research

Since people that openly express prejudice did not volunteer for the study, their voices were not heard. This is an unfortunate paradox because individuals or groups that cling to stereotypes and prejudice are likely to be major contributors to conflict. In order to reduce tension, it is important to learn more about their perspective and to gain input on ways to reduce prejudice and discrimination between Blacks and Latin@s.

Continued research needs to be done that considers gang influence, music, and digital media in exacerbating tensions as well as creating common ground. Finally, additional research is needed on the color caste (Doane & Bonilla-Silva, 2003), or entrenched prejudicial views based on gradations of skin color, especially in how it relates to Latin@ prejudices toward Blacks. Research might also explore where the perception of the importance of skin shade changes with successive generations postimmigration.

The nature of conflict between different ethnic groups requires openness that may not be comfortable for participants, so a mixed-methods approach would enable researchers to maintain the voice of participants, while gathering anonymous data on prejudicial viewpoints and the degrees of prejudice. Similarly, a multicultural research team might have more success gaining a greater variety of participant voices, particularly those that run contrary to inclusion and tolerance.

Community Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to improve the school climate at A Beacon of Light Middle School, a bounded, single-case study.

Light Middle School has a daily “Advisory” class that students attend twice a day for a total of three hours per week. Currently, the advisory classes are split up with students being assigned a new teacher each year. In past years, the advisory group remained together for the duration of middle school, three years. The school should consider returning the advisory class to a three-year loop to provide longevity and the opportunity for students to remain meaningfully connected to an adult who models appropriate behavior including conflict resolution. This will allow the members of an advisory group to develop as an extended family due to closeness and familiarity over time. Ideally, the trust and bonds established would assist students and teachers in feeling safe enough to take the risk in tackling critical discourse. This change would involve teacher training discussed in the prior section.

The school should continue with the antibullying program that is already planned for the beginning of the year. In addition, character education should be an ongoing curricular component of the advisory class to help students, along with continued dialogue on bullying behavior.

Light Middle School should also take definitive actions toward an inclusive, fair, and safe environment, such as:

Provide school-supported opportunities for conversational cross-language English and Spanish language acquisition for interested students and their parents

Provide incentives and/or opportunities for teachers and staff to learn Spanish

Diversify the staff so that students have access to teaching staff and role models that are reflective of them

Teach both Black history and Latin@ history allowing students to deconstruct the ways in which they are the same and different

Open a dialogue on race and inequity in the United States and how that impacts the local community

Provide teachers with better classroom management training that will assist in decreasing disciplinary action.

Provide monthly disciplinary reports tracked by individual teacher and ethnic group to spot and address trends in disproportionate discipline.

Clearly communicate issues to the teaching staff, i.e. the need for student antibullying training due to the severity of bullying on campus. This was not made clear and appeared to be the administrative “menu of the day,” particularly for teachers whom students respect and share positive relationships; they are unaware because they rarely witness this behavior.

Develop a safe system for voicing concerns anonymously, such as a suggestion box.

Follow the school’s justice-based mission as an ideal and in practice.

Filter decisions through the lens of fairness.

Eliminate special privileges for students based on ethnic group. It is harmful to the student and the school community as a whole.

Community Recommendations

Strategic alliances. The only way to end oppression is through unity. This truth can be demonstrated in the tireless efforts of the oppressors to prevent the unification of the oppressed.

This state of affairs can be traced to the beginning of settlements in America. The only thing planters feared more than slave revolts was the unification of poor Whites and slaves (Zinn, 2004). Unification then and now presents a serious threat to the hegemony of the ruling elite and domination of the oppressed by manipulating their values, beliefs, and norms, so that the ruling class worldview becomes the normal, accepted way of being. Since racist ideology is part of that worldview, so is division based on race, a social construct. In this regard, racism functions well to help divide and isolate racialized groups thereby preventing their unification.

Strategic alliances to end oppression require the development of racial consciousness or “Conscientizacao ... learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 37). Blacks and Latin@s would need to start with a dialogue on interethnic conflict and examine capitalist structures as the root cause. This critical consciousness may help these two groups, as well as whites, recognize their common struggle for equality and their interest to become strong allies.

Policy Recommendations

Teacher bilingualism. Policy makers must recognize the refusal to learn a second language, particularly Spanish, as a class struggle. Many Americans do not see the need to bother learning Spanish. Due to the burgeoning Latin@ numbers, Blacks stand to benefit from learning Spanish as a second language. Schools and communities should provide opportunities for students to learn Spanish and recognize the importance of having bilingual teachers by providing second language acquisition incentives for teachers.

Support funding for extra-curricular activities. This study affirmed that the opportunity for students to work toward common goals resulted in prejudice reduction as seen by interethnic friendship. The simplest way to provide this opportunity is through clubs, such as the Student Technology Leaders Club that I run. When Black and Latin@ relations were the poorest, schools were also the poorest. There was not enough funding for extracurricular activities and no opportunities for the two groups to get to know one another.

Personal Reflection

As an insider-researcher at Light Middle School, I enjoyed all of the advantages generally associated with this unique position including an understanding of the existing culture, the ability to observe without disrupting social interaction, and having already-established intimate relationships that promote the telling and assessing of truth (Bonner & Tollhurst, 2002). I also knew the politics of the school and who among teachers and staff I could approach to yield the best data. Students with whom I had a strong rapport and who also had a story (often disturbing), or information they wanted to share were the most likely to volunteer for the study. In other words, the richness, truthfulness, and insight of the data I received were a direct result of

my trusted insider status across all stakeholder groups at the school. This extraordinary access was also a double-edged sword, and I was wounded on multiple occasions.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed the data collection process. I especially enjoyed the intense focus required during observations. I studied and saw the students at the school in a way that I had never seen them before and this was absolutely fascinating. I was particularly intrigued by the way students occupied, entered, and left space, as I had never thought to observe this phenomenon. There was a definite pattern and rhythm to it all. I especially enjoyed seeing how interethnic friendships navigated those spaces. I felt very proud of the work I had done as a Student Technology Leaders Club leader because most of the enduring interethnic friendships I observed were a direct result of my leadership of this ethnically mixed club.

I was captivated by each and every interview I conducted. I learned so much from every participant that I remain forever grateful for the ways in which my life was enriched simply by hearing their stories. One of my true gifts is conveying empathy and participants opened their hearts and minds to me. I received a report of suspected abuse, which required the mandated report of a colleague. Although the allegations were not substantiated to the point of activating an investigation, this entire situation created tremendous anxiety for the teacher, the student, and me. I felt like I had let a bomb off on the entire school. I thought I was doing the right thing and I stand by my decision, but I may have encountered some of the pitfalls of being an insider, conflicting roles, loss of objectivity, and potential bias based on prior knowledge. I am also the parent of twin teenage girls. If a young girl discloses information to me concerning possible abuse, I am going to call it in. This could have been sensitivity or loss of objectivity and to this

day, I am not entirely sure, but I sleep better knowing that whatever the reason, I acted on the side of caution in terms of the best interests of the student.

One male student disclosed serious prior abuse and is still very much impacted by this event. Although I have always had a fondness for this student, I now feel a much higher level of responsibility for his well-being because he is still distressed and he comes by to see me all the time. I cannot stop his sadness and this is painful.

At times, this all seemed too much to bear and I wanted to hide. It was like a thrill ride. I enjoyed it all, but simultaneously, but I could not wait for it to end.

Since participants disclosed so much personal information concerning their lives, struggles, disappointments, and fears, I felt helpless in terms of being able to make change. This sense of powerless weighed on me heavily. Students should not have to walk 20 minutes in each direction to go to P.E. and they definitely should not have to worry about experiencing gun violence along the way. Sixth graders should be able to run around at lunch. With obesity an epidemic and extremely low literacy levels in the community, students should not be seated at lunch playing games on iPads. Students with higher order thinking skills and a quick wit should be viewed as an asset to the class, not a chronic disciplinary problem. Teachers should be able to communicate with parents. Period. Unqualified people should not be working with students with disabilities or English Language Learners. Period.

Students that I loved should not be going around saying the N word behind my back. The aspect of racial tensions on the site, in the community, the city, and the country at-large, were perhaps the most painful for me to confront personally and professionally. I know why people do not want to talk about the conflict between Blacks and Latin@s, it is scary or it is painful and

most often, both. On some level, I think many of us realize, we should be natural allies, and we do not know why we are not. The answer is possibly lurking underneath our consciousness, buried in generational knowledge of centuries of oppression and pain. It is along the same lines of why so many Blacks claim Native American ancestry to explain the lighter hues of our family line, yet we were seldom in contact with indigenous peoples. Even my grandmother told elaborate stories of native ancestry, but that was all a way to mask the truth. The pain of centuries of sexual violence explains my color. No one can or wants to talk about that. Blacks and Latin@s have endured centuries of oppression from European colonial rule. Racism and colorism have and continue to divide us. *That's all part of the master's plan.*

Many of us would like to forget about the past and move on. Maybe this particular education at this particular charter school can help us move on. We cannot truly know all of the structural forces at work that ensnare us in unsafe spaces with sprawl, extreme poverty, segregation, and crime. How can we know that with every step we take to raise ourselves up in a capitalistic structure, we ensure our own demise, as we cannot end our oppression by becoming more a part of an oppressive system. So we live in denial.

Instead, we need to raise our consciousness in order to oppose the forces that keep us in shackles and this takes a painful awakening, even for an insider-researcher like me.

My People...

The school website is a serious problem. It makes the school look mostly Black. When, as part of my teacher residency, I was offered the choice of schools, I went to the various school websites and chose the one that looked the most Black. I wanted to return to the community and help "my people." It was not until I reported to work that I realized that my people, the Black

people, were gone. This was a shocking revelation, and each year the numbers dwindled further. I do not know exactly where all the Black people went. I just know that they are not here.

This is mostly acceptable because I have found new people. An interesting mix of first-generation Latin@s that sometimes sound Black or have Black mannerisms. I now know Black kids, who, despite their frequent toughness, by being in the proximity with Latin@s have developed a certain sweetness that comes from the contagion of immigrant hope. I have developed an entirely new level of empathy and understanding. These children of immigrants, the disposed, and the incarcerated by and large work so hard to make the most of the sacrifices their parents have made for them or the sacrifices they must make because of their parents...and sometimes both of these.

My life has been so enriched for the opportunity to work with the Light Middle School community, both as a teacher and an insider-researcher.

Conclusion

The differences in the manner in which teachers conceptualized, perceived, and addressed the problem of racial tensions, highlights the importance of social justice teaching in education. Conceptualization went from the seemingly simplistic, people like to be with people like themselves, to the inextricably complex, neighborhood gangs, music, and media, to structural oppression.

Perception of racial tension also varied greatly at the site. How could some people perceive major tensions and the others not see it all? It seems like Blacks have a completely different, alternate reality where privilege allows people, in this case, Black people, to be

ignorant of how their Black privilege protects them from knowing or dealing with unpleasant realities others are experiencing while occupying the same physical space and at the same time.

Historically, Blacks have not been the recipients of systemic privilege so it is noteworthy how this micro-system of privilege operated in this singular, bounded case study, “Where the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors” (Freire, 1970).

Conflicts between Blacks and Latin@s are an outcome of a larger, systemic, economic exploitation whereby competing groups vie for a disproportionately small and shrinking piece of the “American Dream” caused by demographic shifts and a capitalistic global economy. The dehumanizing aspects of capitalism can be seen in the way would-be allies against oppression hurt each other with racial epithets and exclusion from special privileges.

The social justice framework provides an alternative worldview, a game plan, and a map for handling limited resources when dealing with two oppressed groups. The massive shift in the Latin@ population in Los Angeles has been a monumental opportunity. This group encountered Black Americans who, not too far removed from the Civil Rights Movement and knowledgeable about the political system, might have followed Dr. King’s teachings of uniting all people against poverty and oppression.

With an alternative framework to guide decisions, Blacks and Latin@s might not have seen each other as desperate competitors, but rather as strong allies. Without another way of perceiving the world, Black administrators appropriated the very structures that oppress them. The color of the skin did not matter. Brown skin could be cloaked in privilege with the same

oppressive outcomes provided by white privilege. What mattered was the system of privilege, based on race, a social construct.

This one school site has had over 1,500 students pass through its doors. The outcomes might have been drastically different if the school principal had been an advocate for social justice and approached the newly arrived immigrants with hopes of creating awareness, agency, and action.

The conceptualization, perception and handling of a scarcity of resources by the administration at this school site served as a microcosm for race-based conflict in the United States. Training in conflict resolution and critical discourse within a social justice framework would have aided the school community in developing institutional agency to reduce conflict and improve student outcomes while developing the agency needed to fight racism and oppression. Unfortunately, zero-sum games were the preferred conceptualization and competition prevailed, rendering the school's handling of demographic shift: a microcosm of missed opportunity in Los Angeles and beyond.

Afterthoughts

I conducted a brief observation just yesterday, and already the tiny cafeteria space has changed. Latin@ and Black boys were throwing the one football back and forth, with mixed teams. But I saw something new. Something I have never seen in five years at the school site. The Latinas and one Black female (LGBT) were in the middle of the football flight path, kicking the soccer ball back and forth, back and forth.

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