THE INCREASING AMBIGUITY OF RACE IN THE UNITED STATES:

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE

John R. McConnell III
Austin Peay State University
mcconnellj@apsu.edu

Abstract

The racial and ethnic diversification of the United States is accelerating, thereby making race more difficult to delineate. Furthermore, multiracial children are now the fastest growing demographic in the population, and being able to embrace their multiracial identity benefits their psychological and social well-being. This leads to implications for educational policymakers and practitioners. By raising awareness, encouraging communication, and increasing exposure of multiracialism, educators can help multiracial children understand their own identity and maintain healthy self-esteem, thereby promoting their retention and success in school.

Keywords*: diversity, forced choice dilemma, multiracialism, racial identity, self-esteem

The Increasing Ambiguity of Race in the United States:

Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

According to the most recent census figures, the racial and ethnic diversification of

the United States is accelerating. Minorities constitute over one third of the U.S. population

and will outnumber the majority by 2044; for children, this will occur by 2020 (Colby &

Ortman, 2014). This increased diversification has resulted in more interracial couples and

births, with over nine million individuals identifying as multiracial, or belonging to two or

more races, in 2010 (see Table 1). This represents a 32% increase over the previous

decade (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, 2010).

Table 1

Total U.S. Population of Multiracial Individuals in 2000 and 2010

| Number of Races | 2000 U.S. Census | | | 2010 U.S. Census | | | Change | |
	Frequency	Percentage of Total	Percentage of Multiracial Population	Frequency	Percentage of Total	Percentage of Multiracial Population	Number	Percent
Two	6,368,075	2.26	93.29	8,265,318	2.68	91.74	1,897,243	29.79
Three	410,285	0.15	6.01	676,469	0.22	7.51	266,184	64.88
≥ Four	47,868	0.02	0.70	67,286	0.02	0.74	19,418	40.57
Total	6,826,228	2.43	100	9,009,073	2.9	100	2,182,845	31.98

Furthermore, multiracial children are now the fastest growing demographic group

under the age of 18 in the United States (Colby & Ortman, 2014). In 2010, there was a 38%

increase in the number of U.S. students belonging to two or more races over the previous

decade (see Table 2), with a projected figure for 2020 now surpassing those of all other

demographic groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000, 2010).

Table 2

Race/Ethnicity of U.S. Students in 2000 and 2010

Race	2000 U.S. Census		2010 U.S. Census		Change	
	Frequency	Percentage of Total Population	Frequency	Percentage of Total Population	Number	Percent
White	195,771	69.38	200,853	64.74	5,082	2.60
Black	34,414	12.20	37,985	12.24	3,571	10.38
Hispanic	35,629	12.63	49,726	16.03	14,097	39.57
Asian	10,436	3.70	14,083	4.54	3,647	34.95
Native American/Pacific Islander	369	0.13	452	0.15	83	22.49
American Indian/Alaska Native	2,104	0.75	2,392	0.77	288	13.69
Multiracial	3,436	1.33	4,743	1.53	1307	38.04
Total	282,158	100.00	310,233	100.00	28,075	9.95

Race has always been a complex issue, and the challenges and suggested supports

for biracial children in education have been detailed extensively in the literature (e.g.,

Buttery, 1987; Cheng & Klugman, 2010; Francis, 1992; Goldsmith, 2004; Lusk, Taylor,

Nanney, & Austin, 2010; Sever, 2014). Still, as racial lines blur further and society becomes

more racially ambiguous, the issues concerning the education of multiracial children

persist.

Racial Identification

Many U.S. states prohibited interracial marriages and relationships until the last of the anti-miscegenation laws were federally overturned in 1967. It was not until 2000 that the national census allowed respondents to select more than one race, which approximately 6.8 million people chose to do at that time (Jones & Bullock, 2012). As the politics and science of race have evolved, government efforts to measure this growing population have changed. Now, the census questionnaire defines the race of respondents based on geographical origins. However, this system of classification will become increasingly more difficult to apply as more interracial couples have children and those children have children.

Nonetheless, data on race are important to collect as demographic research informs many of the policy decisions that shape educational practice. For example, race information is used to identify areas where certain demographic groups need special services and to plan and implement educational programs that address those needs. Race information is also used to gauge the effects of administrative and instructional practices on different demographic populations.

One dilemma multiracial individuals encounter in the collection of demographic data is the imposed limitation of choosing only one racial group. This limitation in the collection of demographic data, referred to as the "forced choice dilemma," extends to multiracial children when they are pressured to affiliate with one racial group over another (Allen, Garriott, Reyes, & Hsieh, 2013; Sanchez, 2010). When surveying students, schools often present them with a single choice option for racial identification (Renn, 2009). This

artificial constraint of not being able to properly identify oneself may affect one's

psychological well-being and self-esteem, especially during childhood (Buttery, 1987;

Sanchez, 2010; Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker, 2009). Multiracial children should be

encouraged to understand that not fitting into one certain group can instead be viewed as

being able to fit in with multiple groups, which is often an asset when they enter adulthood.

As Binning, Unzueta, Huo, and Molina (2009) point out, these children could be able to

"seamlessly switch between their different cultures' ways of perceiving the world," thus

helping them navigate through racially diverse environments in the future (p. 46).

Implications for Educational Policy and Practice

Multiracial Awareness

With respect to the education of multiracial children, sound educational policy and

practice start with an awareness of multiracialism. This awareness is gained by

acknowledging and appreciating the historical and current attitudes toward mixed

marriages and births, the racial stereotypes and discrimination that all individuals face, and

the advantages and disadvantages of belonging to multiple races. Because current

prejudices usually derive from past ones, it is important to remember that mixed children

were once regarded as illegitimate results of relationships and marriages that were illegal

(Rocquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Root, 1996; Spickard, 1989; Williams-Leon & Nakashima,

2001).

Whereas public attitudes toward mixed individuals relaxed after interracial

marriage was decriminalized, systemic discrimination lingered. It is generally unacceptable

to call an African American "very articulate for a black person'' or "white-sounding," just as

it is to assume an Asian American is good at math or karate, but the discrimination that multiracial children face may be less overt or direct.

Multiracial Discrimination

One type of discrimination is the exclusion or isolation of a multiracial child due to his or her mixed status (Johnston & Nadal, 2010). For example, a black and white biracial child may not be treated the same as his or her monoracial peers in various social groups or at school functions simply because of his or her difference in appearance, no matter the predominant race of the group. Does an Asian and Hispanic biracial student join the Asian Student Union or the Hispanic Student Union? Heightened awareness of and sensitivity to this type of social dilemma at an institutional level offer opportunities for improvement in policy.

Another type of discrimination is the assumption or reduction of a multiracial individual as monoracial (Johnston & Nadal, 2010). Although he is just as much white as he is black, Barack Obama is commonly referred to as the first African American president, which completely ignores his white ancestry, heritage, and influences. President Obama could be perceived as a role model and influence other multiracial individuals, and this may lead a black and white biracial child to appear monoracial in order to stand out in a crowd of white students or fit in with a crowd of black students. Another example is when a child at a school telling Asian jokes to an Asian and white biracial child may assume the biracial child is white and therefore think it is acceptable to tell the jokes, when they are actually offensive to the biracial child. These types of discrimination, unique to mixed individuals,

can undermine their self-concept and self-esteem (Salahuddin & O'Brien, 2011), and efforts should be made to mitigate them.

Open Communication

In addition to increasing awareness and alleviating discrimination, educational policymakers and practitioners also need to communicate openly and freely with respect to multiracialism. This involves acknowledging and discussing multiracialism when it presents itself so as to facilitate an acceptance of and appreciation for that racial identity by all students. Multiracial students benefit from developing accepted and validated views of their blended background just as monoracial children do when they take pride in their own heritage. Research shows that an integrated multiracial identity is a positive factor in the mental and social well-being of multiracial individuals (Jackson, Yoo, Guevarra, & Harrington, 2012), while an unstable racial identity leads to low self-esteem and social isolation (Buttery, 1987; Sanchez, Shih, & Garcia, 2009).

Therefore, it is critical for school administrators, counselors, teachers, and other educational professionals to speak to their students about multiracialism and promote open, honest discussions about the similarities and differences in their various backgrounds. Likewise, educators should encourage parents of multiracial students to express pride in their children's identity by acknowledging and celebrating differences rather than shying away from them. Fostering healthy communication within the family, school, and community may help multiracial youth increase awareness of their own racial identity, thus building a sense of belonging for them amongst their peers.

Positive Exposure

Despite the large growth and improved classification of the multiracial population, those identifying with two or more races still comprises a small proportion of the total U.S. population (Jones & Bullock, 2012). Additionally, multiracial people in the media are typically portrayed as monoracial (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). It is not certain if this is responsible for or is a product of multiracial discrimination, but it certainly manifests an effect. Due to this lack of representation, multiracial youth can develop a "delusion of uniqueness," that is, thinking they are alone in their feelings about belonging or adequacy (Buttery, 1987). Without a multiracial community and role models to help them understand their mixed identity, multiracial youth may not come to terms with their own identity without developing an exceptional view of themselves (Shih & Sanchez, 2005), and this may lead them to detrimentally make excuses for problems they face.

Educators should ensure that multiracial students have positive role models in the literature, lessons, and curricula, so that they may gain insight into the backgrounds and experiences of people like them and how to deal with the prejudices and injustices they may encounter. Through positive exposure, these youth can learn to embrace their mixed identity and find constructive ways to cope with and counteract discrimination. Therefore, relatable role models are necessary for multiracial youth to establish a sense of community and belonging that will aid in their psychological and social adjustment (Iijima Hall, 2004; Sanchez & Garcia, 2009).

Conclusion

Multiracial children are not alone in their search for identity, nor should they be forced to pronounce any part of it over another. Instead, raising awareness, encouraging communication, and boosting exposure of multiracialism will help multiracial students make sense of their own identity and nurture their self-esteem, which in turn will contribute to their retention and success in school (Buttery, 1987). Research also shows that embracing a multiracial identity increases one's appreciation and tolerance for racial diversity in society (Shih & Sanchez, 2009).

Suggestions for further study include establishing, evaluating, and refining best practices and institutional policies to guide educators on how to encourage students to embrace their multiracial identity and to help all students be excited about the differences in individuals. For instance, current research indicates that mindset can have a profound impact on the way students make predictions and meaning of events in the world around them (Dweck, 2006; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Whereas those with fixed mindsets perceive personal attributes as largely unchangeable, those with growth mindsets describe personal attributes as "things you can cultivate through your efforts" (Dweck, 2006, p. 7). New pedagogical ideas for helping students cultivate the proper mindset with regards to race could help them to be better citizens and happier individuals, and this represents an apt area for research that could apply to both policy and practice.

With multiracial students less likely to place importance on race or hold an "us versus them" mentality, understanding how this comes to be and how it can be further shared by all students presents a promising teaching opportunity for educators. The reason

multiracial students are likely to understand that race is not a distinct biological trait, but a fluid social construct, may be the diversity reflected in themselves. In the future, as the nature of race becomes more individualized and societally ambiguous, it is anticipated that the institutional use for race will become less relevant and meaningful.

Author's Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to John R. McConnell III, Department of Educational Specialties, P.O. Box 4545, Austin Peay State University, Clarksville, Tennessee 37044. Phone: (931) 221-7757; Fax: (931) 221-1292; E-mail: mcconnellj@apsu.edu

References

Allen, G. E., Garriott, P., Reyes, C., & Hsieh, C. (2013). Racial identity, phenotype, and self-esteem among biracial Polynesian/white individuals. *Family Relations, 62*(1), 82-91.

Binning, K. R., Unzueta, M. M., Huo, Y. J., & Molina, L. E. (2009). The interpretation of multiracial status and its relation to social engagement and psychological well-being. *Journal of Social Issues, 65*(1), 35-49.

Buttery, T. J. (1987). Biracial children: Racial identification, self-esteem and school adjustment. *Kappa Delta Pi Record, 23*(2), 50-53.

Cheng, S., & Klugman, J. (2010). School racial composition and biracial adolescents' school attachment. *The Sociological Quarterly, 51*(1), 150-178.

Colby, S. L., & Ortman, J. M. (2014). *Projections of the size and composition of the U.S. population: 2014 to 2060* (Report No. P25-1143). Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindsets*. New York, NY: Random House.

Francis, W. (1992). Supporting the biracial children in the school setting. *Education and Treatment of Children, 15*(10), 163-172.

Goldsmith, P. A. (2004). Schools racial mix, students optimism, and the black-white and latino-white achievement gaps. *Sociology of Education 77*(2), 121-147.

Iijima Hall, C. C. (2004). Mixed race women: One more mountain to climb. *Women &*

Therapy. 27(1), 237-246.

Jackson, K. F., Yoo, H. C., Guevarra, R., & Harrington, B. A. (2012). Role of identity

integration on the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and

psychological adjustment of multiracial people. *Journal of Counseling Psychology,*

59(2), 240-250.

Johnston, M. P., & Nadal, K. L. (2010). Multiracial microaggressions: Exposing monoracism

in everyday life and clinical practice. In D. W. Sue (Ed.), *Microaggressions and*

marginality: Manifestation, dynamics, and impact (pp. 123-144). Hoboken, NJ: John

Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Jones, N. A., & Bullock, J. (2012). *The two or more races population: 2010* (Report No.

C2010BR-13). Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.

Lusk, E. M., Taylor, M. J., Nanney, J. T., & Austin, C. C. (2010). Biracial identity and its relation

to self-esteem and depression in mixed black/white biracial individuals. *Journal of*

Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 19(2), 109-126.

Renn, K. A. (2009). Educational policy, politics, and mixed heritage students in the United

States. *Journal of Social Issues, 65*(1), 165-183.

Rocquemore, K. A., & Brunsma, D. L. (2002). *Beyond black: Biracial identity in America*.

Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Root, M. P. P. (1996). The multiracial experience: Racial borders as a significant frontier in race relations. In M. P. P. Root (Ed.), *The multiracial experience: Racial borders as the new frontier* (pp. xiii-xxviii). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Salahuddin, N. M., & O'Brien, K. M. (2011). Challenges and resilience in the lives of urban, multiracial adults: An instrument development study. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 58*(4), 494-507.

Sanchez, D. T. (2010). How do forced-choice dilemmas affect multiracial people? The role of identity autonomy and public regard in depressive symptoms. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 40*(7), 1657-1677.

Sanchez, D. T., & Garcia, J. A. (2009). When race matters: Racially stigmatized others and perceiving race as a biological construction affect biracial people's daily well-being. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 35*(9), 1154-1164.

Sanchez, D. T., Shih, M., & Garcia, J. A. (2009). Juggling multiple racial identities: Malleable racial identification and psychological well-being. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 15*, 243–254.

Sever, M. (2014). Experiences of biracial female high school students in the United States. *Journal of Education and Future, 5*, 73-86.

Shih, M., & Sanchez, D. T. (2005). Perspectives and research on the positive and negative implications of having multiple racial identities. *Psychological Bulletin, 131*(4), 569-591.

Shih, M., & Sanchez, D. T. (2009). When race becomes even more complex: Toward

    understanding the landscape of multiracial identity and experiences. *Journal of*

    Social Issues, 65, 1–11.

Spickard, P. R. (1989). *Mixed blood: Intermarriage and ethnic identity in twentieth-century*

    America. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Townsend, S. S. M., Markus, H. R., & Bergsieker, H. B. (2009). My choice, your categories:

    The denial of multiracial identities. *Journal of Social Issues, 65*(1), 185-204.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2010). Redistricting data (P.L. 94-171). Summary File, Table PL1.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2000). Redistricting data (P.L. 94-171). Summary File, Table P1.

Williams-Leon, T., & Nakashima, C. (2001). *The sum of our parts: Mixed heritage Asian*

    Americans. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Yeager, D. S., & Dweck, C. S. (2012). Mindsets that promote resilience: When students

    believe that personal characteristics can be developed. *Educational Psychologist, 47*,

    302-314.