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Ethnic Identity, Gender, and Adolescent Attitude toward School: Adaptive Perspectives in Diverse Settings

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The relationships between adolescent ethnic identity and attitudes toward school and school climate are investigated in a small, multiracial/multiethnic city in the Great Lakes region with ethnically diverse adolescents taught by primarily White teachers. The mixed methods investigation of 986 eighth through eleventh grade students during the 2010-2011 academic year suggests that the relationship between ethnic identity and attitude toward school is a complex interaction among individual characteristics of ethnicity/race, ethnic identity, gender, and ecological context. Quantitative results reveal that White female and Hispanic and African American male students exhibit strong ethnic identity that correlates positively with school attitude; however, qualitative results indicate very different paths in getting to those outcomes. Hispanic students appear to benefit from a strong ethnic identity that assists with positive relationships at school, while African American male students utilize parental cultural socialization as a protective function in school. The results emphasize the implications of positive school climates for all students.

Adolescents' sense of belonging in an educational setting and their perceptions of their relationships with others in school can influence their overall attitudes toward school. Concurrently, as communities across the U.S. experience increasing ethnic and cultural diversity, educational systems must understand the relationship between ethnicity and student perception of their school climate. This investigation is particularly important as a result of the increasingly ethnically diverse student populations in schools where the professional educators continue to be predominantly White. Furthermore, official ethnic classifications/identifications do not necessarily reflect the reality of an adolescent's personal ethnic identity. As such, the goal of this study was to determine if a measure of ethnic *identity*, rather than a measure of ethnic *classification*, would have a stronger association with school perceptions (of climate and attitude). Finally, as ethnic identity and self-esteem are both part of one's self-appraisal, this

study also examined whether there was a relationship between the two variables within this particular school context.

Authentic investigations of adolescent students and ethnic diversity must be conducted in contextually appropriate schools that reflect the changing demographics of the nation and position youth within a genuine academic environment. As a result, this study is situated in the Lakeport City School District (LCSD)¹, an ethnically diverse school system centered in a small, multiracial/multiethnic city and surrounding rural farmland in the Great Lakes region of Ohio. This particular setting reflects a growing demographic trend in the U.S., as smaller and medium sized school districts in non-urban areas become increasingly diverse. The mixed methods study draws on three cycles of survey and interview data across eighteen months of a larger four-year longitudinal study. The use of mixed methods enhances the richness of the results through triangulation.

Conceptual Framework

While various theoretical perspectives will be utilized throughout the study, this paper will primarily utilize Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development to frame its purpose of studying youth identity development within the context of their learning environments. The theory posits the need for a more thorough understanding of the "coordination between social systems at the micro-level of immediate settings (home, school, peer-group), and in the dynamic mesosystem relations between these settings" (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000, p. 120). Because this framework assumes that developmental outcomes are shaped by the interplay between characteristics of the individual and characteristics of the individual's environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), we must investigate the reciprocal relationship between these psychological characteristics and variables within the school climate. As a result, it is necessary to conceptualize the framework, which includes the development of the adolescent's identity, especially ethnic identity; the development of the adolescent's sense of self within this particular school context; and the influence of variables within the school climate, within this ecological system.

The Development of Adolescent Identity

The significance of ethnic identity. Erik Erikson (1950) significantly influenced the study of adolescents with his theoretical emphasis on the importance of the development of self-image during this stage. Expanding on Erikson's theory, Marcia (1966) has postulated that adolescents exhibit up to four different identity statuses, and that a status is related to the degree to which an individual is struggling with life crisis and commitment to ideology. As part of the process of identity formation, a growing body of research has found adolescence to be a critical time for the development of ethnic identity. While scholars have defined the development of ethnic identity differently, it is recognized that the development of ethnic identity is multi-faceted. Some researchers have interpreted ethnic identity as including a sense of belonging and commitment to an ethnic group, in addition to an understanding of related behavior, language, and history (Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992). Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1990) emphasize that ethnic identity is different from ethnic identification, which is limited to one's "ability to define

¹ Lakeport is a pseudonym for this study in order to protect school staff and student identity.

him/herself as a member of a certain group” (p. 298). For them, identification is a more narrow classification of the self, as compared to ethnic identity. The process of developing ethnic identity is heightened as adolescents experience increased exposure to people from backgrounds different from their own. While young children often understand ethnic differences in concrete ways, such as skin color, adolescents are able to understand and explore the cultural implications of their ethnicity (Phinney, 2006).

Research has also consistently demonstrated that ethnic identity is usually more salient for youth who are not members of the dominant racial or ethnic culture (Phinney, 1992, 2008; Roberts, et al., 1999). Within some cultures, especially among African American families, parents often take on a more active role of cultural socialization that requires a clear explanation of race within the broader context of other ethnic groups (McHale, et al., 2006). This also involves “a clear explanation of minority status and its meaning and significance relative to race, gender, body type, physical size, and response to authority” from parents (Swanson, Spencer, dell’Angelo, Harpalani, & Spencer, 2002, p. 81). While ethnic identity can assume a protective function within a school context, resulting in “resiliency and school adjustment,” it can also contribute to “problem behavior and academic disengagement” (Swanson et al., 2002, p. 82). Some research has found outcomes to be related to the family context and also to who within the family, either the mother or father, is providing the socialization (McHale et al., 2006).

Depending on context, youth who do not see themselves as part of the mainstream dominant culture may either struggle with their own ethnic identity development (Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992), or they could draw strength from their ethnic identity, as was found by Swanson et al. (2002) among African American females. By contrast, ethnic identity has been found to be less salient for Whites who, as participants in the dominant culture, are less likely to experience conflicts regarding how their identity is socially constructed (Phinney, 1989; Turner & Brown, 2007).

Adolescent self-appraisals within the school context. As a result of the emphasis on identity development among adolescents, researchers have been encouraged to investigate the impact that ecological and cultural contexts have on the self-appraisals, including self-esteem and self-concept, of adolescents. Within the school context, investigations of self-esteem measures often note the significant influence of school climate (Gendron, Williams, & Guerra, 2011; Scott, 1999) in addition to teacher dispositions (Helm, 2007) on self-esteem. The *symbolic interactionist perspective* (Harter, 1999) suggests that individuals internalize the appraisals of significant others (from family, school, and community) in their formulation of self-concept and self-esteem. Evidence demonstrates the impact of teachers on adolescent self-concept (Booth & Sheehan, 2008) and the reciprocal nature of self-esteem and academic achievement (Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller, & Baumert, 2006). Studies on self-esteem also note the impact of gender, finding that self-esteem is generally more vulnerable among girls in the U.S. during early adolescence (Baldwin & Hoffmann, 2002; Blyth, Simmons & Carlton-Ford, 1983; Morin, Maïano, Marsh, & Nagengast, 2013). This study builds upon our general understanding of the adolescent sense of self within the school context, with specific analysis of possible ethnic/racial and gender variations.

Adolescents and school climate. Empirical research increasingly supports the necessity of understanding effective learning environments that are sensitive to the needs of students. Researchers investigating school climate have defined climate as reflecting the social system of shared norms and expectations (Brookover, et al., 1978) or the shared perceptions of the academic environment (Gregory, Henry, & Schoeny, 2007). Many studies have found the most significant aspect of climate to be related to students' perception of their relationships with others at school (Thapa, Cohen, Higgins-D'Alessandro, & Guffey, 2012). This includes overall satisfaction with other students in the building (Loukas & Robinson, 2004), in addition to the significance of student-teacher relationships (Beets et al., 2008; Goodenow, 1993).

Most problematic for middle school students has been a *lack of fit* between adolescents' needs and their environments (Eccles & Midgley, 1990). With the increase in popularity of the middle school model in the 1980s and 1990s, research on school climate in these contexts proliferated. Studies found that school climates that demonstrated more pronounced teacher control and poor quality teacher-student relationships can contribute to a decrease in academic motivation, a more negative self-image, and an increase in behavioral problems for students during the middle school years (Eccles & Roeser, 1998; Eccles et al., 1993). These challenges were found to be most salient for girls (Blyth et al., 1983; Simmons, Burgeson, Carlton-Ford, & Blyth, 1987). Still other studies have found that when these students move on to secondary school, they often perceive the teachers in these schools as being less friendly and less caring and more critical than teachers in their earlier grades (Reddy, Rhodes, & Mulhall, 2003). As a result, Eccles & Midgley (1990) have noted that problems arise when early adolescents' developmental stage does not fit the environment; thus, a lack of *stage environment fit*.

To contextualize the present study, the literature on adolescent ethnic identity, adolescent sense of self within the school context, and school climate reveals ample evidence suggesting the importance of healthy, positive relationships for youth in the development of their sense of self, including their ethnic identity. Research also suggests that adolescent self-appraisals and their attitude toward school are impacted by school climate, including their relationships with and feelings about their peers and teachers. However, there is inadequate research exploring the impact of middle and high school climate on youth from diverse ethnic backgrounds, and how adolescents of various ethnic/racial identities are influenced by the Euro-centric ecologies that remain prevalent in U.S. schools.

Methodology

This mixed methods study utilized a multi-strand concurrent design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003) in order to explore issues of ethnic identity and school contextual climate. As part of a larger longitudinal study examining the interrelationships between school context and several socio-emotional and sociocultural characteristics, it contributes to laying the foundation for continued analysis of ethnic/racial and gender interactions as the larger research project progresses. The study carved out for this paper takes the following as its foci:

- 1) whether stated adolescent ethnic identity, as compared to official ethnic status/identification, associates with attitudes toward school and perceptions of school climate; and,
- 2) possible associations that self-esteem may have with ethnic identity.

These two questions are investigated using both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to explore the directionality of effects, *why* associations may be found between ethnic status or ethnic identity and school perceptions, and whether students from different ethnic backgrounds do interpret the ecological environments of the schools differently.

Research Setting

The Lakeport City School District (LCSD) is unique because its ethno-racial demography is much closer to national averages than other small cities in the Great Lakes region (U.S. Census, 2010). Like other cities in the region, Lakeport has recently experienced high unemployment and low population growth. The city's population of 16,500 is slowly shrinking, though the school district population was stable at around 31,000 in 2010 (U.S. Census, 2010). Typical of many small cities in Northern Ohio, Lakeport was populated by German and Irish immigrants in the 19th century. Its strong agricultural base began attracting Hispanic migrant workers in the 1920s, who continue to settle in the city and region today (Valdés, 2000). Industrial work attracted many African American southerners to Lakeport between 1920 and 1950. The combination of ethnic diversity and economic pressure make Lakeport a unique context to study adolescents.

The Ohio Department of Education classifies LCSD as "Group 1," meaning districts with higher than average poverty, the lowest median income level, and the lowest percentage of population with college degrees (Ohio Department of Education, 2007). In 2009-2010, when data for this paper were collected, the average daily student enrollment of 4,213 students was 15.1% Hispanic, 7.5% African-American, 12.8% multiracial, and 64.0% White, ratios that are similar to that of the city. Over half (57.8%) of the students are categorized as economically disadvantaged, 6.9% as English language learners, and 1.0% as migrant children (ODE, 2010). As in the city of Lakeport, the numbers of White and African American students in LCSD are slowly decreasing, while the percentage of children identified as Hispanic and Multiracial are increasing. The Hispanic population is about three times higher than the state average, and is approaching the national average. Similarly, the number of Multiracial students and residents (which may include Hispanic) is over four times higher than state and national averages. However, like many other districts, LCSD's teachers remain overwhelmingly White and female. The U.S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics (2008) found that females comprised 75.6% of the teaching force in the nation. In Lakeport, female teachers outnumber male teachers at the middle school (70% female) and the high school (58% female); with 98.2% of the middle school and 100% of the high school teachers identifying as White in 2009-2010 (ODE, 2012).

LCSD's 2009-2010 graduation rate of 88.5% does not meet the state's 90% requirement. Disparities in graduation rates are evident among the Hispanic students; 76.2% of these students completed school in 2008-09, while 85.1% of their White counterparts graduated (ODE, 2010). Lakeport's economically disadvantaged students, as well as African American students, did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP) in reading in 2008-2009, but all groups did in 2009-2010. However, since Hispanic students achieved AYP in reading and math, their comparatively low graduation rate suggests they are negatively influenced by additional characteristics outside of scholastic progress, requiring further investigation.

Participants

A total of 1,044 students—518 middle schoolers (grades 7-8) and 526 high schoolers (grades 9-10)—participated in the larger longitudinal project begun in fall 2009. At the beginning of this larger study, all students in the relevant grades received research project literature and permission slips for parents and guardians for approval. The participants included in this article's study consisted of students who voluntarily continued in the project during its second year (2010-11 academic year), when a thorough investigation of ethnic identity was added and conducted. Ultimately, data from 986 students (eighth to twelfth graders) were analyzed in this study. The drop in response rate from the first to second year was the result of school transfers, absences, or the preliminary removal of largely incomplete surveys; statistical software using listwise deletion further narrowed the available data for specific statistical analyses. In this study, 486 students (49.29%) were male and 497 (50.41%) were female; three students did not report their gender. One-quarter, or 25.3% ($n = 249$), of the students were in the 8th grade, 27.8% ($n = 274$) were in 9th grade, 29.1% ($n = 287$) were in 10th grade, 16.9% ($n = 167$) were in 11th grade, and 0.2% ($n = 2$) reported a 12th grade academic standing but were officially in 11th grade. Seven students did not report their grade level. All students completed surveys that included measures of self-esteem, ethnic identity, school attitude, school climate, and school connectedness during fall 2010.

A sub-sample of 38 students participated in one-on-one interviews in order to qualitatively investigate perceptions of school climate. The selection of this smaller group of students followed a stratified random sampling process where the total list of students was broken down into sub-groups based on ethnicity and gender, representative of their proportion of students found in the school. As a result, these 38 students included 12 White, 9 Multiethnic, 8 Hispanic, and 9 African-American adolescents who were now in grades 8 through 11.

The disproportionate number of White students in the quantitative sample size was representative of the school population. While this presents some limitations to the variety of statistical analyses available, the mixed methods approach assists in providing confidence in the results, triangulating various sources of quantitative and qualitative data.

Data Sources and Measures

Youth self-appraisal measures. Self-esteem was assessed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1989), a widely used 10-item measure. Sample items included “I am a person of self-worth” and “I am satisfied with myself.” This measure was selected as a result of both its consistently successful use in self-esteem research and its appropriately short length for youth. The scale's Cronbach's alpha reliability are typically in the range of .77 to .88 (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1993; Rosenberg, 1986). Ethnic identity was measured by using a moderately revised Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) by Jean Phinney (1992), who developed her scale within the context of the developmental theories of Erikson (1950) and Marcia (Phinney, 1990). Phinney's (1992) scale includes “14 items assessing three aspects of ethnic identity: positive ethnic attitudes and ethnic belonging (5 items); ethnic identity achievement, including both exploration and resolution of identity issues (7 items); and ethnic behaviors or practices (2

items)” (p. 164). While each section can be used as a sub-scale, a total is used for a total ethnic identity score (as was obtained in this study). Phinney’s overall reliable coefficient (Cronbach’s alpha) for high school students was .81.

School variable measures. Two measures were employed to assess student perceptions of the school environment. School attitudes were measured with the 20-item School Attitude Scale (Marjoribanks, 2002). Items were designed to tap students’ affective attitudes about enjoyment related to schooling (e.g., “Overall, I like school a lot”) as well as concrete attitudes about the perceived importance of schooling (e.g., “Going to school is a waste of time”). School climate was assessed with a modified version of Marjoribanks’ Perceived Social Capital Scale (PSCS; Marjoribanks, 2002). Each of the school context scales was based on a four-point response format that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Higher scores on these scales reflected more positive evaluations of the school context. Marjoribanks’ scales were used as a result of their applicability to students, teachers, and parents, a necessary element of the larger longitudinal investigation. Marjoribank’s use of the scales together has resulted in alpha reliability estimates from .76 to .80 (Marjoribanks, 2004).

Interviews. Qualitative procedures relied heavily on semi-structured, open response interviews, averaging 30 minutes in length, and conducted once (in January 2011) with the sub-sample of 38 students. One interviewer from the research team and one scribe participated in each individual interview. While sessions were recorded, the scribe also took participatory-observant notes of the interview content, attitude, and pace. These interviews were designed to explore topics pertaining to school climate, relationships with teachers and peers, and self-image inquiry based on qualitative questions from the Simmons and Rosenberg self-image interview protocol (Simmons, Rosenberg, & Rosenberg, 1973). Additionally, for this article’s research, open-ended questions pertaining to students’ thoughts about their ethnic identity, similar to the explorations in the MEIM Ethnic Identity questionnaire, were also included.

Procedures

During the fall of 2010, students were given a survey which included the described measures. A team of researchers from the university, including faculty and trained research assistants, visited mandatory Language Arts classes in order to assure consistent and total coverage of survey distribution to the entire group of participants. Language Arts teachers also assisted by identifying any students who had not received permission to participate in the study and monitoring classroom procedures. Face to face distribution of paper surveys, rather than a link to an electronic survey, was necessary as a result of the teachers’ concerns regarding consistent access to computers at home.

In interviews, adolescents were asked how they interpreted questionnaires that included checkboxes for race/ethnicity and their level of comfort with such surveys. We also discussed the extent to which they actively participated in cultural activities and/or explored their own ethnic/cultural background. Given varying interpretations of the concepts of ethnicity and race, interviews began with a short conversation about both, including asking students how they interpreted the terms. It was quickly notable that the vast majority of students most naturally used the term “race” to identify their own and other students’ backgrounds, and also used “race”

and “culture” interchangeably. They also used the term “ethnic background” and when asked what they meant by that, they defined it through a racial lens. Occasionally, White students might indicate specific European heritage (such as German or French); however, when they did, they made it clear they were referring to being “White.”

Data Analysis

Primary data analysis strategies for quantitative information included standard parametric statistical tests. In general, differences in perceptions of climate and attitudes toward school by major race categorizations (African American, Multiracial, Hispanic, and White) were examined using Analysis of Variance and Tukey’s post hoc tests. Relationships between continuously scaled variables were identified using Pearson r . Results of statistical analyses were deemed statistically significant, though not necessarily practically significant, when $p < .05$.

Strategies employed for the qualitative analysis relied heavily on a constant comparative process (Corbin and Strauss, 1990) with elements drawing heavily from methodological approaches in grounded theory, including the use of open, axial, and finally selective coding. Discussions among the researchers took place in post-interview periods to compare emerging concepts and to detect common dead-end questioning. This informed the structure of future interviews without influencing the necessary consistent elements for the longitudinal investigation. After each wave of interviews, two researchers coded the qualitative data sets separately, later comparing their analysis to uncover a richer composite of results. In addition to this concurrent analysis of the qualitative and quantitative results, additional post-hoc investigations were also conducted with the qualitative data as a result of the statistical analysis of quantitative data, in order to strengthen the concurrent mixed-methods design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). A discourse analysis strategy was not seen as necessary due to the preponderance of common short answers to questions, not unusual for adolescents. While variations did occur, generally, this age group preferred to get their point across with as little discourse as possible.

Results

In order to investigate the relationship between adolescent ethnicity and perception of school climate, the first step was to explore the strength of ethnic/racial identity and ethnic/racial identification/classification within this adolescent group. The second step was to understand students’ self-appraisals more thoroughly by investigating the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem. Finally, the last step was to explore how strength of personal ethnic/racial identity (rather than ethnic/racial classification) and self-appraisal is related to perceptions of school climate and attitudes toward school.

Quantitative Results: Ethnic Identity and Self-Appraisals

Strength of ethnic identity. As adolescents, the participants in this study should be experiencing some degree of identity development, which includes ethnic identity. As a result, the degree to which students actually identify with particular ethnicities may be more significant than their official ethnic classification. The ethnic identity of the participants was first measured using a modified *Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure* (MEIM) (Phinney, 1992). Then the importance of

ethnic identity was explored by investigating the relationship between the strength of this ethnic identity and the students' perception of school (attitudes toward school and perception of school climate). The initial step in this process was to first see if students from different ethnic groups (African American, Hispanic, Multiracial and White) varied in the strength of their own ethnic identity.

Overall differences in strength of ethnic identity by major race classifications were identified, $F(3, 657) = 14.558, p < .001$. Both African American students and Hispanic students expressed a significantly stronger sense of ethnic identity than Multiracial and White students. In addition, African American students' responses did not differ significantly from Hispanic students' responses, and Multiracial students' responses did not differ significantly from White students' responses.

Table 1. *Strength of Ethnic Identity by Race and Gender*

Group	<i>n</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>s</i>
White	413	2.58	.45
Male	204	2.58	.46
Female	209	2.59	.46
Multiracial	128	2.65	.48
Male	66	2.64	.51
Female	62	2.66	.62
Hispanic	75	2.85	.48
Male	34	2.78	.46
Female	41	2.91	.49
African American	45	2.96	.42
Male	27	2.83	.27
Female	18	3.16	.53

Considering just the male participants, African American, Multiracial, Hispanic, and White males were compared in terms of strength of ethnic identity and significant differences were identified, $F(3, 327) = 3.811, p = .010$. African American males expressed significantly stronger ethnic identity than White males. No other statistically significant pair-wise comparisons were identified using Tukey's HSD post hoc procedure.

When just the females were included in the analysis, statistically significant differences were identified between major race classifications on ethnic identity, $F(3, 326) = 12.672, p < .001$. Post hoc analysis indicates that African American females expressed significantly stronger ethnic identity than Multiracial females ($p < .001$) and White females ($p < .001$). Additionally, Hispanic females were also found to express significantly stronger ethnic identity than Multiracial ($p = .044$) and White females ($p < .001$).

Self-esteem, ethnic identity, and gender. Because the MEIM and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale are both measures of self-appraisals, an analysis was conducted to examine possible relationships between ethnic identity and self-esteem before investigating whether a relationship existed between ethnic identity and school perceptions. Pearson's product moment correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the strength of the linear association between self-esteem and ethnic identity. When all students in the data set are considered together, the relationship between self-esteem and ethnic identity was positive and statistically significant, yet very weak ($r(790) = .197, p < .001$). While statistically reliable, this relationship is of little practical significance.

When considering only the male students, there is a relatively weak, but statistically significant, positive correlation between ethnic identity and self-esteem. This means that there is a weak tendency for males with stronger ethnic identities to report higher self-esteem. When just the male students are considered but examined by race, a linear association between ethnic identity and self-esteem is positive for African American males, but it is weak and statistically insignificant. Likewise, ethnic identity is not significantly related to self-esteem for Multiracial males. The linear association between ethnic identity and self-esteem is positive and statistically significant for White males, but it is somewhat weak. However, the linear association between ethnic identity and self-esteem is moderate, positive, and highly significant for Hispanic males ($r(30) = .481, p = .005$). At least for Hispanic males, there appears to be a systematic tendency for higher ethnic identity scores to be associated with higher self-esteem.

Table 2. *Relationship between Ethnic Identity and Self Esteem*

Group	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
Male	300	.238	.001
Female	312	.198	.001
White	387	.230	.001
Male	188	.297	.003
Female	199	.184	.009
Multiracial	117	.040	.642
Male	58	-.035	.793
Female	59	.130	.327
Hispanic	71	.440	.001
Male	32	.481	.005
Female	39	.414	.009
African American	37	.330	.172
Male	22	.305	.167
Female	15	.468	.079

The data for female students yields a very weak but reliable positive correlation between ethnic identity and self-esteem. This means there is something of a tendency for females with stronger ethnic identities to identify as having higher self-esteem. Similar to the pattern found for African American males, ethnic identity was not found to be significantly related to self-esteem for African American females. However, it may be worthwhile to note that this relationship is approaching statistical significance and this result may be meaningful given such a small sample size. Additionally, ethnic identity was not found to be significantly related to self-esteem for Multiracial females. As was observed for White males, the linear association between ethnic identity and self-esteem was positive and statistically significant for White females, but also weak. While statistically significant, given the large sample size and the weak correlation, this result lacks practical significance. As was observed with the Hispanic males, ethnic identity was found to be significantly related to self-esteem for Hispanic females. The correlation is moderate and positive; stronger ethnic identity tends to be associated with higher self-esteem for Hispanic females.

Quantitative Results: Perceptions of School

Ethnic group comparisons. When descriptively comparing the four groups (African American, Multiracial, Hispanic, and White) on their measures of school climate and attitude toward school, White students expressed the most positive perceptions of school climate and Multiracial students expressed the least positive. However, there were no significant differences found between the groups on perceptions of school climate, $F(3, 641) = 2.542, p = .055$. Similarly, when the data are examined descriptively, White students held the most positive attitudes toward school and Multiracial students held the least positive attitudes toward school of the four groups. Again, there were no significant differences found between the groups on attitudes toward school, $F(3, 673) = 1.423, p = .235$.

Students were again grouped according to two dimensions: major race and gender. The eight resulting race/gender groups were compared to one another using the school climate and attitude towards school variables. When examining the eight major race/gender groups in terms of their perceptions of climate, it was found that White females appeared to hold the most favorable perceptions of school climate with African American males holding the second most favorable perceptions. Multiracial males and African American females expressed the least favorable perceptions of school climate. The overall differences between groups, however, were not statistically significant ($F(7, 637) = 1.816, p = .082$).

When these eight race/gender groups were compared in terms of their attitudes toward school, differences were found to be highly significant ($F(7, 669) = 4.115, p < .001$.) A Tukey's HSD post hoc analysis was used to identify significant pair-wise comparisons. White females were found to hold significantly more positive attitudes toward school than Multiracial males ($p = .012$), Hispanic males ($p = .019$), and White males ($p < .001$). No other statistically significant pair-wise comparisons were found.

When just the male students are singled out for analysis and compared by major race, perceptions of school climate were very similar to each other. African American males appeared to hold the most favorable perceptions of climate, while Multiracial males held the least favorable. However, there were no statistically significant differences found between the males

of the major race categories, $F(3, 312) = 0.897, p = .443$. Males of the major race classifications were compared on their attitudes toward school as well, and while average responses ranged from 2.57 ($s = .40$) for Hispanic males to 2.72 ($s = .36$) for African American males, there were no statistically significant differences found, $F(3, 334) = 0.905, p = .439$.

When comparing the four major race classifications after singling out the female responses, it was found that White females appeared to hold the most favorable perceptions of climate, while African American females held the least favorable. The overall differences between female racial groups approached statistical significance, but fell short ($F(3, 325) = 2.239, p = .084$).

Additionally, females of the major race classifications were also compared on their attitudes toward school and similar patterns of response were identified; however, differences between groups were found to be minimal and statistically insignificant, $F(3, 335) = 1.939, p = .123$.

Table 3. *Perception of School Climate and Attitude toward School by Race and Gender*

Group	<i>Perception of School Climate</i>			<i>Attitude toward School</i>		
	<i>n</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>s</i>
White	407	2.67	.39	428	2.70	.37
Male	197	2.62	.39	210	2.63	.35
Female	210	2.71	.41	216	2.79	.34
Multiracial	119	2.55	.41	130	2.64	.38
Male	59	2.53	.42	67	2.61	.39
Female	60	2.57	.41	63	2.68	.37
Hispanic	75	2.62	.40	82	2.66	.38
Male	32	2.62	.39	37	2.57	.41
Female	43	2.63	.41	45	2.73	.35
African American	44	2.61	.45	39	2.70	.37
Male	28	2.64	.41	24	2.72	.33
Female	16	2.55	.53	15	2.67	.43

Ethnic identity, gender, and school perceptions. The strength of ethnic/racial identity, rather than ethnic classification, was then investigated among these adolescents. Pearson's product moment correlation coefficients were calculated to assess the strength of the linear association between ethnic identity, climate, and attitude. This was done for all students; by gender (females only and males only); and by race/gender classifications. When considering all students together, there was a statistically significant (while weak) positive correlation between ethnic identity and perception of climate (see Table 4 for these analyses). There was also a statistically significant, positive correlation between ethnic identity and attitude toward school. In other words, there was a reliable tendency for students with stronger ethnic identities to hold more favorable perceptions of school climate and to express more positive attitudes toward school.

When considering the female students as a group there was a very weak, but statistically significant, positive correlation between ethnic identity and perception of climate ($r(313) = .129$, $p = .022$). As a result, there was a mild tendency for females with stronger ethnic identities to hold more favorable perceptions of climate. The linear association between ethnic identity and attitude toward school, however, was not statistically significant ($p = .129$) for female students. When broken down by race, ethnic identity was not significantly related to perceptions of school climate or to attitudes toward school for African American, Multiracial, or Hispanic females. The correlations found between ethnic identity and climate and ethnic identity and attitude for White females were the only significant correlations found. The linear association between ethnic identity and perception of climate was positive and statistically significant for White females, but it was relatively weak. A similar result was found in examining the correlation between ethnic identity and attitude toward school for this group.

Table 4. *Relationship between Ethnic Identity, Perception of School Climate and Attitude toward School*

	<i>n</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Perception of School Climate</i>	759	.192	.001
Male			
White	181	.216	.003
Multiracial	54	.195	.159
Hispanic	28	.495	.007
African American	26	.264	.193
Female			
White	189	.272	.001
Multiracial	56	.010	.940
Hispanic	40	.124	.445
African American	15	.250	.369
<i>Attitude toward School</i>	791	.209	.001
Male			
White	192	.247	.001
Multiracial	64	.214	.089
Hispanic	33	.620	.001
African American	21	.437	.048
Female			
White	195	.159	.027
Multiracial	59	.073	.581
Hispanic	40	.157	.334
African American	14	-.017	.955

Statistical analysis for the male students yielded a weak, but statistically significant positive correlation between ethnic identity and perception of climate ($r(298) = .227, p < .001$). This means that there was a weak tendency for males with stronger ethnic identities to hold more favorable perceptions of climate. Unlike the pattern observed in the female data, there was also a weak but statistically significant positive correlation between ethnic identity and attitude toward school ($r(308) = .275, p < .001$). The linear association between ethnic identity and perception of climate was positive for African American males, but weak and statistically insignificant. However, the linear relationship between ethnic identity and attitude toward school was statistically significant for the same group. For Multiracial males, ethnic identity was not found to be significantly related to perceptions of school climate or to attitudes toward school. By contrast, the linear association between ethnic identity and perception of climate was positive and statistically significant for White males, but weak. A similar result was found in examining the linear relationship between ethnic identity and attitude toward school for the same group. The relationship between ethnic identity and perception of climate was found to be moderate, positive, and highly significant for Hispanic males. Likewise, the linear relationship between ethnic identity and attitude toward school for Hispanic males was moderately strong, positive, and highly significant.

Qualitative Results: The Development of Ethnic/Racial Identity

Ethnic/racial categorization vs. ethnic identity. To triangulate these quantitative findings, a sub-sample of 38 students was interviewed about their attitudes toward school. Conversations about ethnic/racial categorization (e.g. census classifications) complemented some of the quantitative results which revealed strong ethnic identity among the African American and Hispanic students. Furthermore, qualitative analysis often informed the choice of statistical analysis.

In order to qualitatively add to our understanding of these youths' perception of their ethnicity/race categorization versus their personal ethnic identity, we asked them: *Whenever you are given a race/ethnicity form to fill-out, do you ever find it confusing? What race/ethnicity do you check on these forms?* None of the 12 interviewed White students found the forms confusing. Likewise, seven of the eight Hispanic youth and seven of the nine African American youth also had no problems with the forms, expressing little to no confusion. However, six of the nine (67%) Multiracial adolescents expressed considerable concern about the forms. One eighth grade girl said she had problems "because I'm three different races, Mexican, French, and Black. I put 'other' sometimes or African American." Likewise, another ninth grade female said she was confused because "my mom's White and my dad's part Mexican, but I look more Mexican so I don't know what to fill out." Even in tenth grade, there was still confusion, with one male stating that he normally checks "other.... But it actually gets sort of complicated. My mom's biological dad is Black and then everyone else is pretty much White." One of his classmates jokingly concluded, "if all else fails, check 'other'." Overall, the Multiracial students most regularly expressed confusion over racial/ethnic categorizations.

Because ethnic identity is connected to understanding ethnic ancestry or origins, the youth were also asked if they ever had conversations with their parents about their ethnicity. The frequency of having conversations with parents complements the statistical results. Only 33% of the

multiethnic group discussed their ethnicity with their parents, which was less than the other students. In contrast, more than any other group of students, over half of the Hispanic students regularly discussed their ethnic heritage with their parents. Furthermore, the majority of these Hispanic students' conversations with parents were positive discussions about Mexican traditions, music, food, and the use of the Spanish language as part of their heritage (the vast majority of the Hispanic students' families in this geographic region originated from Mexico). These conversations generally positively affirmed their Mexican heritage as they spoke of cultural practices with pride.

Almost half (four of nine) of the interviewed African American students said that they did have conversations with their parents where they discussed ethnicity. Yet, unlike the Hispanic males, two of these male students described conversations that were negative in tone. For instance, one male in eleventh grade said that once when his family was at a country club, "my mom said.... like don't act your color. Which means like don't be all loud. She thinks that everybody thinks that we are all loud and obnoxious." Another ninth grade male expressed concern about college because he said that when he talked with his mother about college, she said that "you gotta watch where you go to college since you can really tell that you are mixed, you will get teased. She just said you can't change your color." The only cautionary ethnicity-oriented comments in interviews came from these African American males.

The Multiracial students' infrequency of discussing ethnicity with parents may be connected to their previously stated confusion over ethnic categorization. Further, while both Hispanic and African American students demonstrated a strong connection with their ethnicity, the positively expressed description of the Hispanic students contrasted with the examples of negatively expressed narration from African American males.

Qualitative Results: Perceptions of School Climate

Gendered trends. Qualitative comments from the individual interviews demonstrated a general trend for girls to speak more positively about school than boys, overall. When students were asked how they liked school currently in comparison to previous years, females as a group talked about school in a more positive manner as compared to the males. However, White girls openly expressed the most favorable interpretation of their schools, emphasizing positive relations with teachers and peers. Representative comments included: "There are friendlier teachers here" (10th grade female) and "The teachers help here more.... They compliment me" (10th grade female). Furthermore, peer relationships were addressed more positively than negatively; a representative remark from a seventh grade girl was "I have a lot more friends at this school," and others spoke of "less drama"² at school. On the other hand, when boys were asked how they liked school, perceptions of social relationships with both peers and teachers were often volunteered with a more negative tone. One White 8th grade male noted "In this school there are bullies," and he was echoed by others. On the other hand, even moderately positive comments could contain skepticism, such as the statement from one Multiethnic 7th grade boy who said: "I thought I'd get bullied at the beginning of the year but I wasn't" and another White 10th grade male who said: "I don't think anyone likes school but it's bearable."

² The term "drama" was commonly used to refer to social conflict between peers. It most often seemed to refer to female conflict over other social relationships, often involving gossip.

There was also a notable difference in the focus of the conversations about relationships in schools, depending on whether the interviewee was male or female. Girls (of all ethnicities and from both middle and high school) stressed the significance of peer relationships. They felt fairly positive about school because of the friendships they developed and the wide variety of peers they had from which to choose friends. However, all male ethnic groups spoke about disciplinary issues with other students at school. The African American males most consistently complained about other kids “goofing off” and “screwing around” or “dealing in drugs.”

Ethnic identity and perceptions of school climate. The quantitative results indicate that there was a tendency for higher ethnic identity scores to be associated with more positive attitudes toward school for White males and females and to some extent for African American males, but most strongly for Hispanic males. Individual interviews with students provided additional insight about ethnic identity and how identity could possibly be related to comfort level and behavior in school. The following examples illustrate attitudes about school that may clarify why the Hispanic students (especially boys) have a better attitude toward school when their ethnic identity is strong.

Hispanic students’ comments consistently spoke to the greater comfort level they felt in school when they knew people *in* the school (peers, teachers, and staff) from relationships *outside* the school. For both the Hispanic boys and girls in the middle and high school, the presence of personal relationships is critical. As a tenth grade Hispanic girl revealed, “High school is better because my family’s here. My brother’s 15 and my sister is a junior.” An eighth grade girl had preferred elementary school to middle school because previously, she had her “older sister and close friends. I knew the teachers more.” Likewise, it was common to hear Hispanic boys stress the need for close relationships with people at school; one eighth grade boy liked middle school now, but hadn’t before, because “I didn’t know anyone when I first started but I know people now. Like all my friends were on a different team.” Another Hispanic boy in the same class still preferred elementary school because he got to “know everyone” there. However, “here, there’s a lot of people [I] still don’t know.”

On the other hand, for African American males, building relationships at school was often difficult as a result of social coaching at home, which often steered these boys away from developing positive relationships. For instance, when asked if he had good relationships with people at school, a ninth grade African American male expressed concern about how he could build any sort of positive relationship with teachers when his father warned him that “just because I am a big African-American, I sometimes pose a threat to teachers. He said I got to be real careful how I approach them and how I speak to them.” In addition to warnings like this, African American males also said that they had trouble developing relationships with other students who were not African American because White or Hispanic parents would not permit their children to invite them home. Further, the African American males felt pressured to avoid dating girls who were not African American.

Discussion & Conclusions

This study investigated the relationship between ethnic identity and attitude about school and school climate among a diverse group of youth in a town in the Great Lakes region. The area is

demographically representative of the growing diversity among similar sized towns in the region, and as such can pave the way for similar understanding of these ecological contexts. The results of this study demonstrate the significance of understanding the complex interaction between the active individual and at least one micro-system, the school. Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1989) begins with the individual (in this case the adolescent) who is central to the entire ecological system and interacts reciprocally with those systems. This study demonstrates the significance of that individual's development within this microsystem and to some extent the mesosystem when school and family or neighborhood interacts.

Investigating ethnic identity for these adolescents within their school context has opened the door to understanding that personal ethnic identity (more than ethnic identification/classification) does appear to influence student adaptation within their environment, but variably for different students. For example, while the African American and Hispanic students in this study demonstrated a stronger ethnic identity than the Multiracial and White students, the implications of the strength of this identity seem to have varied for each group.

The results of this study complement Phinney's (1989) research suggesting that Whites, as a part of the dominant culture, think less about their ethnic/racial identity, and as a result think less about its implications within school. In particular, the combined quantitative and qualitative results from this analysis suggest that these middle and high schools are fairly comfortable places for White females. These students most consistently have a positive attitude toward school and an essential element of this sentiment is the positive relationships that they believe they have built with peers and teachers in their buildings. While their ethnicity and gender appear to influence their comfort, they rarely think about either (Phinney, 1989). Considering Harter's (1999) *symbolic interactionist perspective*, it is not surprising that these girls have more positive attitudes about school, as they share greater similarities with the adults in the building (White females) than the other students in school. These White girls may be able to interpret the appraisals of and interactions with their teachers with less effort, resulting in a level of comfort not as available to other students.

Reviewing the quantitative results, this study also suggests that the strength of ethnic identity did not appear to be a significant factor for the Multiracial youth. Qualitatively, they also expressed confusion about their ethnic status on both surveys and in interviews. Students from this group stated most often that they have friends from all ethnicities/races at school and that ethnicity was not something they thought about unless they were directly asked about it. They often stated that they were boundary-crossers and felt comfortable with that role. As multiracial or multiethnic youth, they may also see themselves as members of all cultures (including White) and therefore experience less conflict (Phinney, 1989) within the largely White adult school population. On the other hand, they also did not feel significantly positive about their relationships with the teachers at school, falling somewhere in the middle with attitude. Consequently, the results for this group are often contradictory, with their qualitative comments often not matching the quantitative results.

Contrary to the Multiracial group, the Hispanic youth (largely Mexican-American) expressed a strong ethnic identity, and the strength of one's ethnic identity was also positively associated with self-esteem for both males and females in this population. This finding supports other

research which has found that Mexican American youth exhibit a strong ethnic identity that is correlated with self-esteem and as a result could also contribute to positive psychological well-being (Piña-Watson, Ojeda, Castellon, & Dornhecker, 2013; Roberts, et al., 1999). Parents of these students seem to have taken on an active role, as suggested by McHale et al. (2006), in order to lay the foundation of a positive cultural socialization within the broader context of an ethnic society. These conversations seem to contribute a protective factor for their children in school, resulting in resiliency (Swanson, et al., 2002), and appear to be particularly important for Hispanic adolescent males who view school in a more positive light when they have a strong ethnic identity. However, the strength of ethnic identity in this study did not associate with Hispanic girls' perceptions of school. It could be that because females, as a group, consistently scored higher than males on attitude toward school and perception of school climate, and as a result Hispanic girls do not necessarily *need* the extra boost in positive cultural socialization to assist with their attitude toward school. As Phinney and Rosenthal (1992) suggest, when adolescents see themselves as part of the dominant culture, they struggle less with their own identity, and Hispanic girls in a female-oriented environment may already feel fairly comfortable.

The research on the influence of parental cultural socialization has demonstrated various possible outcomes for youth (McHale, et al., 2006; Swanson, et al., 2002). This study found that the African American student population may have the most complex associations among ethnic identity, self-esteem, and school perceptions. While the African American students identified strongly with their ethnic identity (similar to Hispanics), this identification was not always vocalized as positive, especially for males. Many of the African American males in this group have been cautioned by parents not to “act Black” in public venues or to make sure they self-regulate their behaviors at school, *because* they are African American males. As Swanson et al. (2002) suggest, in this case, the protective socialization by parents appears to be building some resiliency for this group of males who have also articulated demonstrating self-regulatory behaviors in school. While these parental cautions may have influenced relationship building between their sons and teachers, they do not appear to have negatively influenced their self-esteem (as demonstrated by the quantitative results). What is hopeful here is the fact that the African American students did not feel negatively about school climate. The positive correlation between African American males' ethnic identity and attitude toward school may suggest that strong positive feelings about their identity do assist in the development of relationships at school, especially when they have been mentored about how to develop careful relationships. While they appear to remain cautious of society at large, they seem to feel safe in school.

While Eccles and Midgley (1990) largely focused on the relationship between maturational development and school climate to analyze a student's *stage environment fit*, this research illustrates that the *goodness of fit* for students in school is a complicated formula. The combined quantitative and qualitative results suggest that the strength of ethnic identity is a significant characteristic in the development of the sense of self for some ethnic groups (e.g. Hispanic youth) but not necessarily all (e.g. Multiracial youth). While maturational development is an essential element of that formula, so too are the unique individual characteristics of the student's ethnicity/race, strength of ethnic identity, and gender.

Phinney and Rosenthal's (1992) conceptualization of ethnic identity is a solid starting point for understanding the influence of ethnicity. However, this study demonstrates the necessity for understanding the entire ecological environment, including the reciprocal relationship between the individual and his/her microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Both Hispanic and African American males demonstrate quantitative associations between ethnic identity and school attitude. However, the qualitative analysis demonstrated different internal filtering for the two groups. While both male groups were consciously very aware of their identity, the differing characteristics of their socialization paths (positive vs. cautionary) manifested along with positive attitudes toward school. White female participants also demonstrated a linear association between ethnic identity and perception of school climate. They were also the most consistently positive about school. However, the quantitative and qualitative results both suggest that these White females actually *think about* their ethnicity less than other students. As a result, the quantitative outcomes of some of these students' self-appraisals may appear similar at a glance, but how they got there reflects very different psychological paths.

While this study's focus on one year of data restricts us to an exploratory analysis of this cross-sectional sample and therefore has limitations for a developmental analysis, it does offer notable patterns that provide the starting point for later longitudinal analysis. These findings provide even clearer evidence that the climate of schools generally favors White female girls in terms of feeling the most comfortable within that climate. While the two study schools appear to be creating a climate that is not particularly threatening to other students, it appears not to be as positive as it is for the White females. Further applied research should investigate what other characteristics of the school should be developed to make the environment equally inviting and nurturing for all students. This may be particularly challenging when the majority of the staff is female and also White. Consequently, it may be necessary for schools like those in Lakeport, with limited diversity on their staffs, to make extra efforts to create programs (both long-term and short-term events) that bring in adults from various ethnic and gendered backgrounds to assist in creating a climate where all students can see themselves as part of that environment.

Furthermore, if a positive identification with one's ethnicity appears to improve most students' attitudes toward school, this could have challenging implications for the multiracial students who express confusion as to their ethnic identity. It is notable that the Hispanic population is primarily of Mexican American descent; as a result, of all of the racial/ethnic groups in this study, they may be the most homogeneous in their interpretation of their ethnic identity. On the other hand, the Multiracial group is the least homogenous with various combinations of African American, Hispanic, and White racial/ethnic compositions found among the families. This brings challenges to interpreting the findings (when Multiracial means so many different things). However, this intersectionality is also the reality among the Multiracial populations in the United States (as they become more heterogeneous), and as a result, requires further examination within the context of school environments.

A further limitation of the study pertains to the variability in sample size between the ethnic groups, resulting in limitations to the strength of confidence in some of the quantitative findings. However, the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative methods provides additional confidence to the results. In the end, this study does provide evidence of ethnic and gender trends, which can be investigated in more detail at the end of the longitudinal study when three

years (with six waves) of data pertaining to the topic of ethnic identity will be available. It also provides other researchers with a foundation for the exploration of similar ecological contexts.

Finally, in order to understand the real present day context of today's schools, educational research must be conducted in authentic settings, such as this one. This project's setting, as with so many schools in the U.S., includes schools that are staffed with personnel who are primarily White and female. Within these ecological contexts, we must have a thorough understanding of the influence that our school climates have for the development of positive relationships in school for all students. As American municipalities, schools, neighborhoods, and families become increasingly diverse, it is essential to understand how youth interpret their own ethnic identity within the context of their ecological settings and how that interpretation may influence them individually in order to create healthy environments for them.

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