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Socioeconomic Diversity in Independent High Schools

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

by

Josh Brody

2016

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Socioeconomic Diversity in Independent High Schools

by

Josh Brody

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Wellford W. Wilms, Chair

Most California independent schools are failing to meet the benchmark set by National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) to enroll 20%-25% of their students on financial aid. The evidence is clear that many school leaders do not fully understand the impact of socioeconomic diversity on their students' experiences; thus, they cannot make the most informed decisions possible regarding their school's financial aid budgets, policies and programs. The purpose of this study was to explore the impact socioeconomic diversity has at independent secondary schools that exceed NAIS benchmarks.

The study builds on research from higher education on the impact of racial and ethnic diversity on student learning outcomes. Through a qualitative comparative case study design, the researcher sought to answer the research questions of how socioeconomic diversity influences students' learning experiences; their civic, professional, and educational lives after high school;

and the schools' policies and programs. To answer the research questions, the researcher interviewed students, alumni, teachers, and administrators at three schools in Los Angeles and San Francisco, using individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Themes from the interviews included that attending schools with socioeconomically diverse peers helped students gain comfort interacting with different people from different backgrounds, helped dispel negative stereotypes, and contributed to students' understanding of complexity and nuance in course content. The results indicate that diversity can enrich learning for all students, and that more school communities should create spaces and policies that support students and teachers exploration of different perspectives based on their social and cultural backgrounds.

The dissertation of Josh Brody is approved.

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2016

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, Renee Brody, who has touched the lives of so many students and their families. She has been and continues to be my inspiration as an educator. It is also dedicated to the memory of my Father, Bruce Brody. His incredible curiosity and love of learning still remind me to stay curious about the world.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Background of the Study

A recent article in the *New York Times* business section described how the Norwegian Cruise Line promoted economic segregation to increase profits. Schwartz (2016), journalist for the *Times*, stated that within the newest ship, behind a locked door, existed a “ship within a ship” (para. 1) called the Haven, which the majority of passengers will never see. The Haven is an oasis for a small elite selection of passengers to receive luxury services and avoid the crowds elsewhere on the larger ship. Because of this special treatment, the Norwegian Cruise Line can charge a large premium to the Haven’s passengers. Norwegian’s former chief executive, who helped design the Haven with the hopes of attracting a richer clientele, said, “That segment of the population wants to be surrounded by people with similar characteristics” (as cited by Schwartz, 2016, para. 4).

It may make sense that in order to increase revenues a private business would propagate economic segregation by taking advantage of the large income disparities in American society and the desire that wealthy people have to socialize with each other. Schools, however, exist to fulfill a public purpose. Widstrom (2014) stated that he expected institutions, such as schools, to fulfill a public purpose, part of which is preparing young people to participate democratically in a diverse society. Researchers posited even independent schools, as nonprofit public benefit corporations, have some obligation to the greater society (Flaxman et al., 2013; Fram & Kim, 2012; Kainz & Pan, 2014; Owens, 2014). Nonetheless, researchers have shown that economic segregation occurs in independent schools, which represents a focus in this study (Flaxman, Kuscera, Orfield, Ayscue, & Siegel-Hawley, 2013; Fram & Kim, 2012; Kainz & Pan, 2014; Owens, 2014). Recognizing the obligation to fulfill a public purpose, and with a backdrop of

increased income disparities and socioeconomic stratification, the last decade has seen increased efforts by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS; 2008, 2016) to increase student diversity. In 2008, NAIS, the largest network of independent schools in the country, adopted a policy targeting schools' diversity (Torres, 2015). NAIS (2016) requires that all schools attest to "demonstrated commitment to ethnic and economic diversity" (Mitchell & Flanagan, 2013, para. 1) to gain admission as members of the organization.

The portion of this policy that related to economic diversity derived from a benchmark containing the percentage of students at a given school on need based financial aid, which policymakers often use as a proxy for economic diversity (Bassett, 2013). The benchmark stipulated that 20%-25% of the student body should receive need based financial aid. The former president of NAIS (2008, 2016), Pat Bassett (2013), explained that schools should meet this benchmark "to not only claim, but to manifest that they have socioeconomic diversity represented in the school" (para. 2).

The required commitment to economic diversity and the concrete benchmarks related to financial aid were bold measures by NAIS (2008, 2016). This is particularly true when compared to the modest engagement independent schools had made with the economic diversity of their student bodies over the previous quarter century (Powell, 1996). However, in spite of these intensified efforts around economic diversity, recent data from the NAIS (2008, 2016) place the median percentage of students receiving financial aid at independent schools nationally at 19%, with a slightly lower median of 18% in California. These data mean that less than half of NAIS (2008, 2016) member schools are meeting the benchmark for the percentage of students receiving financial aid, and many are falling well below.

The fact that a majority of independent schools are not meeting the benchmark set by NAIS (2008, 2016) for a percentage of students on financial aid represents a problem. First, it conflicts with the stated membership policy of the organization. Second, research from higher education shows diversity is critical to the educational enterprise: Diversity provides benefits to individual students, institutions, and broader society (Bollinger, 1997; Duster, 1993; Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, Hurtado, & Allen, 1998; Rudenstine, 1997; Smith & Associates, 1997; Tierney, 1993). While the research on diversity targets race and ethnicity, it has applications to socioeconomic diversity, which also shapes students' beliefs, assumptions, and identities (Banks, 2015).

Researchers have shown that cross-racial interaction fosters:

- greater cognitive development (Astin, 1993; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Hurtado, 2001),
- increased cultural awareness/understanding (Antonio, 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Astin, 1993; Gurin et al., 2002; Milem, 1994; Sax & Astin, 1997),
- more positive academic and social concept (Chang, 1999; Gurin et al., 2002),
- an increase in students' interest to influence society, participation in volunteer service, and ability to work effectively in a diverse society (Gurin, 1999).

While educational researchers have shown the benefits of racial/ethnic diversity in higher education and in the secondary setting, little research exists about the impact of socioeconomic diversity in independent schools (Coleman & Stevenson, 2014).

Hence, this study represented one of the first to explore the impact of socioeconomic diversity in the independent school setting. In particular, I focused on the influence socioeconomic diversity in the school community had on the learning outcomes for current students and the civic, professional, and educational lives of alumni. Furthermore, I investigated the policies schools put in place to foster an inclusive socioeconomically diverse school community and to maximize learning opportunities in the diverse setting.

Statement of the Problem

The problem is that school leaders do not fully understand the impact of socioeconomic diversity on their students' experiences. Thus, they cannot make the most informed decisions possible regarding their financial aid budgets. In addition, they do not have sufficient research to inform programs and policies to take advantage of socioeconomic diversity in their student bodies to enrich learning. Many educational institutions do not have purposefully designed policies around the budgeting and allocation of financial aid (Brody, 2010). This lack of intentionality surrounding the decisions regarding financial aid may contribute to schools falling short of NAIS (2008, 2016) diversity benchmarks. Furthermore, more information about diversity's impact on students' experiences could help inform school leaders' decisions related to financial aid and other diversity related policies (Coleman & Stevenson, 2014; Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2001).

Preliminary interviews with independent school leaders, as well as my experience as an independent school head, showed that research, such as this study, might help provide direction to budgetary priorities. When the school I lead was attempting to shift from a financial aid model in which 25% of the students received need-based aid to an indexed tuition model in which approximately 40% of the students paid less than the top tuition, many trustees asked me whether there was research documenting the effects of socioeconomic diversity within schools. I could not find any that would have been helpful to guide this policy discussion. One of the heads of school I interviewed reported that without the ability to demonstrate the impact on the school of more socioeconomic diversity, she would be hard pressed to prioritize funding financial aid over the other competing budgetary needs, such as facility upgrades and salary increases (Brody, 2010). Again, this pointed to the practical use school leaders would make of this proposed study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact socioeconomic diversity had at independent secondary schools that exceed NAIS (2008, 2016) benchmarks of 20%-25% of students on financial aid at an average award of half the tuition. My primary objective in conducting this research was to inspire and facilitate dialogue among independent school leaders around socioeconomic diversity, so that policy and budgetary decisions related to financial aid might be more purposeful and strategic. To that end, I planned to visit a local area head group meeting to present my research findings and have conversations with school heads around issues related to socioeconomic diversity in their schools.

As a member of the San Gabriel Valley Head's group and a school head myself, I knew that these meetings throughout Southern and Northern California provided fertile ground for dialogue around governance and policy at independent schools. In addition, I planned to convene a session at the annual California Association of Independent Schools (CAIS) meeting for School Heads and Trustees in which I presented the research findings and facilitated dialogue. I planned to convene a similar type of session at the annual meeting put on by NAIS (2016). Finally, I planned to write an article based on the findings for *Independent School Magazine*, a publication of NAIS (2016) read widely by independent school leaders.

Research Questions

RQ1. According to students, teachers, and administrators, in what ways, if any, does socioeconomic diversity influence students learning skills such as empathy, identifying and engaging with complex thoughts and issues, and understanding diverse perspectives?

RQ2. According to former students, in what ways, if any, does socioeconomic diversity influence the civic, professional, and educational lives of students after high school?

RQ3. What programs and policies do schools create to maximize learning opportunities given the socioeconomically diverse learning environment and in what ways do students, teachers, and administrators perceive those policies and programs as effective?

Theoretical Framework

Social constructivism theory served as the framework for the current study. Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) developed this theory of learning in the 1920s and 30s by building on the theory of cognitive constructivism developed by Jean Piaget (1976). Piaget (1976) suggested that through a process of accommodation and assimilation, learners could construct new knowledge based on their experiences. He argued that learners did not just respond to external phenomena, they also responded to their interpretation of those phenomena (Wertsch, 1985). Vygotsky (1978) agreed with the assumption that individuals actively construct knowledge based on experience, but unlike Piaget (1976), he surmised that it is impossible to separate learning from its social context.

Social constructivists made the epistemological assumption that knowledge is socially and culturally constructed (Gredler, 1997). In other words, people co-construct meaning through their interactions with each other and with the environment in which they live. This epistemological stance has implications for learning. Social constructivists view learning as a collaborative process in which learners create knowledge and ascribe meaning through an ongoing dialogue and negotiation with social groups (Schunk, 2000; Green & Gredler, 2002; Prawat & Floden, 1994). While social constructivists have not specifically spoken about student diversity in education, they see the context for learning as critically important, which the learners create themselves with the social and cultural assumptions they bring to the given environment (Gredler, 1997). For the current study, I agreed with the social constructivism theory and

believed that the social context where the students receive their education had a significant role to play in shaping their learning.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

I made several assumptions for this qualitative study. I assumed that participants of the study took their involvement seriously and provided meaningful and honest responses to my questions. I also assumed that they knew their participation was willing and voluntary in nature. Another assumption was that the perceptions of the respondents could serve as good indicators of the issues I explored. In addition, I assumed that the sample size was adequate to produce meaningful findings.

This study faced some limitations. First, the qualitative nature of the study limited the results. Without quantitative data, I could not quantify socioeconomic conditions of the students and the correlation to the explored outcomes. However, because the goal included understanding the phenomenon through the students, teachers, and administration's perceptions, I deemed the qualitative approach as appropriate. Moreover, I delimited the study to schools that exceeded NAIS (2008, 2016) benchmarks. Thus, I focused my study on schools that significantly exceeded these benchmarks for need-based financial aid established based on NAIS (2016) data. Hence, I cannot guarantee the generalizability of the findings to other schools.

Definition of Terms

Structural diversity. Structural diversity refers to the racial and ethnic composition of the student body (Gurin, 1999).

Classroom diversity. Classroom diversity refers to the incorporation of knowledge about diverse groups into curricula (Gurin, 1999).

Interactional diversity. Interactional diversity refers to opportunities to interact with students from diverse backgrounds in the broader campus environment (Gurin, 1999).

Nature of the Study

The data collected to answer these questions were qualitative because little research had previously occurred on this topic, and the research questions related to complex and nuanced perceptions of various students and stakeholders in independent schools. I conducted three comparative case studies, so that I could compare the data I collected at multiple sites. Studying multiple school sites created a richer picture of the impact socioeconomic diversity had on schools and their stakeholders.

I intended to describe and interpret qualitative data that I collected at three separate school sites. Each site had at least 35% of the student body on need-based financial aid, with an average award of half the tuition, well exceeding the benchmarks for financial aid set by NAIS (2008, 2016). In addition, because I looked for best practices related to socioeconomic diversity at independent schools, each site demonstrated socioeconomic diversity, and in some way, articulated diversity within their mission statements. Table 1 is a simple demographic data table of the three schools.

Table 1

Demographics/Diversity Data on Three School Sites

Characteristics	Hill		Willow		Lake	
# Of Students (9th-12th grade)	265	100%	461	100%	263	100%
Ethnic Background						
Caucasians	114	43%	194	42%	127	48%
Asians	57	22%	155	34%	2	1%
African Americans	13	5%	33	7%	37	14%
Hispanic	23	9%	48	10%	41	16%
Middle Eastern	5	2%	0	0%	7	3%
Bi-racial/Mixed Race	41	15%	0	0%	49	19%
Others/Unknown	12	5%	31	7%	0	0%
Financial Aid	38%		36%		40%	
Highest Fin Aid	30600		37538		31275	
Lowest Fin Aid	2500		3038		2330	
Tuition						
Highest Tuition	30600		38038		30275	
Lowest Tuition	300		500		500	

I collected the majority of the data through semi-structured interviews. I interviewed students and alumni from a broad range of socioeconomic backgrounds. I also interviewed teachers, and administrators, including heads of school, assistant heads, and business managers.

Significance of the Study

To determine school leaders' need for and use of such research related to socioeconomic diversity, I interviewed heads and assistant heads of schools at five independent secondary schools in Southern California. Three of the schools, Orizon, Waller, and Pillow, are either at or below the national median level of students on financial aid at 16%-18%. Two of the schools, Polenorth and Fieldcrest, have between 25% and 30% of students on financial aid, exceeding the NAIS (2008, 2016) benchmark. Both Polenorth and Fieldcrest also exceeded the NAIS (2008, 2016) recommendation of an average financial aid award of at least half the tuition. In addition to school heads and assistant heads, I interviewed Jim McManus, the executive director of CAIS.

I also determined basic areas of interest for school heads about issues of socioeconomic diversity and the ways this research would inform decision-making about budgets and policies around financial aid.

From the interviews, it emerged that school heads were interested in the influence of socioeconomic diversity on student learning, on civic, professional, and educational lives of alumni, and on school programs and operations. In addition, of the five schools in which I conducted interviews, none used research related to economic diversity and financial aid to guide policy decisions. In fact, none knew of such research, and all said they would use such research were it available. The following remarks from CAIS executive director Jim McManus illustrated his desire for more strategic thinking and research at independent schools related to financial aid:

Schools need to sit down and think clearly about what we are trying to accomplish with financial aid. I think the first instinct is that we are trying to provide access for students who could not otherwise afford independent schools. But we need to be strategic and ask second and third round questions of ourselves. What else do we want to say about this issue besides we are trying to do good and increase access? This points to the need for more thinking and research about socioeconomic diversity in independent schools to help guide budgetary decisions and policy. (personal communication, January, 21, 2010)

Based on these interviews, I designed the current study with this in mind.

Summary

My preliminary study and document analysis showed that many independent school leaders postulated that diversity could enrich a school's educational environment. Al Adams, the head of San Francisco's well-known Lick-Wilmerding School, recently observed in the NAIS (2008) publication *Affordability and Access*, "Another thing we have learned is that providing access to less-than-affluent families is not, in the end, about the school 'doing good.' It is, instead, about enriching the learning and living environment for all our students" (as cited in Davidson & Goldberg, 2009, p. 98). Jim MacManus, executive director of the CAIS, echoed the

importance of socioeconomic diversity at independent schools when he stated, “Economic diversity at Independent schools is important because when there are more students from more diverse backgrounds, there is a richer educational environment for all students” (personal communication, November 24, 2009). Furthermore, preliminary interviews showed that independent school leaders said they would make decisions that are more effective in allocating funds for financial aid if they had research available to them that documented the impact socioeconomic diversity had on students’ experiences (Brodie, 2010).

Consequently, the goals of this study were to explore the impact socioeconomic diversity had at independent secondary schools that exceeded NAIS (2008, 2016) benchmarks of 20%-25% of students on financial aid at an average award of half the tuition and to understand programs and policies schools could use to enrich learning based on their socioeconomically diverse student bodies. To achieve these goals, I conducted three comparative case studies, so that I could compare the data I collected at multiple sites. Studying multiple school sites created a richer picture of the impact socioeconomic diversity had on schools. I planned to describe and interpret qualitative data that I collected at three separate school sites. Since I looked for best practices related to socioeconomic diversity at independent schools, each site had socioeconomic diversity, in some way, articulated in their missions. The next chapter is the review of related literature, which serves as the main foundation of the current research.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction

Each year independent school leaders make policy and budgetary decisions related to financial aid at their schools. Financial aid competes for funds with other important areas of school budgets, such as teacher and administrator salaries, facilities, technology, and maintenance. Although NAIS (2016) provides benchmarks related to financial aid, most independent schools are not meeting those benchmarks. Based on my experiences as the head of an independent school, and according to what I have learned from school heads in preliminary interviews, research on the impact of socioeconomic diversity would be helpful to inform budgetary and policy decisions related to financial aid.

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact socioeconomic diversity had at independent secondary schools that exceeded NAIS (2008, 2016) benchmarks of 20%-25% of students on financial aid at an average award of half the tuition and to understand programs and policies schools could use to enrich learning based on their socioeconomically diverse student bodies. My primary objective in conducting this research was to inspire and facilitate dialogue among independent school leaders, so that policy and budgetary decisions related to financial aid might be more purposeful and strategic. To that end, I planned to visit a local area head, to attend group meetings to present my research findings, and to have conversations with school heads around issues related to socioeconomic diversity in their schools.

In this chapter, drawing on literature from various fields as well as my preliminary interviews with independent school leaders, I provide a framework through which to examine the potential impact of socioeconomic diversity on independent schools. I begin by reviewing the work of social psychologists whose theories may help illuminate the relationship between

diversity and individual student thought processes and knowledge formation. I then provide some historical context to ideas around diversity in American education. Next, I articulate the reasons why contemporary writers, who address shifting dynamics within education, economics, and society, place importance on diversity. As there exists a dearth of prior literature on this topic area, I use racial/ethnic diversity research in higher education to provide a backdrop for the ways in which researchers already know that diversity influences students and the learning environment. Finally, I use preliminary interviews that I conducted with independent school leaders to situate the study and establish its relevance in the contemporary independent school context.

Theoretical Foundation

To narrow the focus of ideas about diversity and education from the broad context of society, economy and politics to individual thought processes and knowledge, I looked into the field of social psychology. Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) developed a theory of learning in the 1920s and 30s by building on the theory of cognitive constructivism developed by Jean Piaget (1976). Piaget (1976) suggested that through a process of accommodation and assimilation learners construct new knowledge based on their experiences. He argued that learners did not just respond to external phenomena, they responded to their interpretation of those phenomena (Wertsch, 1985). Vygotsky (1978) agreed with the assumption that individuals actively constructed knowledge based on experience, but unlike Piaget (1976), he thought it was impossible to separate learning from its social context.

Social constructivists made the epistemological assumption that knowledge is socially and culturally constructed (Gredler, 1997). In other words, people co-construct meaning through their interactions with each other and with the environment they in which they live. This

epistemological stance had implications for learning. Social constructivists viewed learning as a collaborative process in which learners create knowledge and ascribe meaning through an ongoing dialogue and negotiation within social groups (Schunk, 2000; Green & Gredler, 2002; Prawat & Floden, 1994). While social constructivists have not specifically spoken about student diversity in education, they see the context for learning as critically important. The learners bring their social and cultural assumptions to the given environment, which informs the context for learning (Gredler, 1997). The crucial role social context plays in creating the learning environment points to the need for school leaders to give thought to the composition of the students that make up the school environment and the socio-cultural backgrounds from which those students derive.

Piaget (1976) developed disequilibrium as an idea that has implications for the consideration of diversity in schools. According to Piaget (1976), an important step in the process of moving towards thinking that is more complex is the experience of cognitive conflict. The individual becomes aware that he or she holds contradictory views about a situation and that those views must be reconciled. Piaget (1976) asserted that going through a process of disequilibrium is an important element of learning. Thus, it is possible that when students are confronted by diverse others, who bring different assumptions to the conversation and the analysis of content, it does not just affect the content of what they learn, but also the actual mode of thought.

Research by social psychologists related to automatic thought and action speaks to the need for students to have novel experiences with people who will challenge them to think in new ways. Bargh and Chartrand (1999) reviewed research evidence demonstrating that automatic psychological processes play a large role in emotional reactions, determination of goals, and

evaluative thinking (1997). Bargh and Chartrand (1999) described these automatic processes that influence thinking as preconscious. While this process of preconscious thinking serves an important cognitive function and is often necessary in the course of daily activity, Langer (1978) described the benefits people may derive from having preconscious thought processes interrupted so that they use more active, mindful modes of thinking. She demonstrated through multiple experiments that such active, mindful thinking increases alertness and mental activity, which in turn fosters increased learning. Conditions that foster this type of active thinking, according to Langer (1978), are situations in which individuals interact inconsistently with their experiences. Hence, diversity in the learning environment may likely contribute to this type of environment that enables novel experiences, fostering active thinking.

Review of Related Literature

American Education and Diversity

The conversation about the value of diversity in civic life dates back to the time of Aristotle (as cited by Pitkin & Shumer, 2001). He argued that diverse perspectives help citizens solve problems within society, thus strengthening the polity (Pitkin & Shumer, 2001). Similar ideas, regarding the value of diversity, developed early on in American educational discourse. In the late 1800s, American philosopher, William James (as cited by Richardson, 2006), described the purpose of education as enlarging our horizon and perspective, multiplying ideals and bringing new ones into view, which represented an ideal difficult to achieve in a homogenous environment. Horace Mann (1868), the principal advocate of the 19th century common-school movement, listed six key principles for education in *The Common School Journal*, one of which was that education would best occur in schools that embrace children from a variety of

backgrounds (Falk, 2014). In the early 20th century, John Dewey (1916), perhaps the best known American philosopher of education, commented directly on the value of diversity within schools:

It is the office of the school environment to balance the various elements in the social environment, and to see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group from which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment. (p. 24)

Even with such well-known proponents of diversity in education, not all American schools sought a diverse student population. In fact, up until the 1960s, American independent schools rejected diversity for homogeneity. Independent school administrators believed that commonality of religion, race, and socioeconomic background may help to create a strong school community and led to the common academic purpose (Powell, 1996). However, this dismissal of diversity on the part of independent schools did not last long. In the 1950s and 60s, a critique of independent schools that their homogeneous student bodies diminished the quality of education emerged (Powell, 1996). By the end of the 1960s, schools claimed to value diversity, and by the 1980s, many schools saw diversity as an essential ingredient of the school community (Powell, 1996). However, according to Arthur Powell's (1996) *Lessons from Privilege*, a book that chronicles the history of independent schools, by the late 1990s, more schools were apt to celebrate diversity than attain it.

Education and Diversity in the 21st Century

As the 21st century begins, educators continue to grapple with the issue of diversity on campus. They began questioning if the realities of the 21st century, including hyper-globalization, rapid social, and heightened technological changes, made the issues surrounding diversity on campus more important. However, the question is not simply confined to asking if diversity is important, educators are also asking how important it is. This last question is particularly relevant about economic diversity in independent schools, as these schools depended

on tuition and contributed income from students' families to meet expenses. Creating a socioeconomically diverse student body means admitting students from families who can neither pay full tuition nor contribute to fundraising campaigns. This potentially creates financial challenges for the given school. An independent school must make a significant long-term investment if it wants to sustain an economically diverse school community. Thus, there would need to be a compelling reason to foster economic diversity in the student body, given the financial challenges that come with achieving that diversity. An exploration of the thoughts and theories of some of today's most well known social critics provided a means to understand why diversity in learning environments might represent a compelling objective for educational leaders.

As previously stated, in the 19th and 20th centuries, Horace Mann (1868) and John Dewey (1916) argued that a diverse school environment helps students to become better citizens by broadening their perspectives (Falk, 2014). As the 21st century begins, it is not just educators or those concerned with democratic governance, but also writers on business and society who are articulating the value that diversity brings to education. In 2008, the keynote speaker at the annual NAIS conference was Daniel Pink (2006), author of *A Whole New Mind*. Pink (2006) began his book by explaining that society is leaving the information age and entering the conceptual age. He argued that three questions exist that business leaders must ask themselves in the conceptual age, including:

1. Can a computer do it faster?
2. Is what I am offering in demand in an age of abundance?
3. Can someone overseas do it cheaper?

Given this backdrop, Pink (2006) made the case that six essential qualities existed that students must cultivate to be successful in the Conceptual Age, which he summarized as symphony, empathy, story, play design, and meaning. Of these six attributes critical for success

in the 21st century, the cultivation of the first three connect to diversity within the learning environment.

Pink (2006) described symphony as the ability to take a diverse group of concepts or people, detect patterns within that diversity, and combine elements to create something new. Empathy, according to Pink (2006), is the ability to imagine oneself in someone else's position and imagine what that person is feeling. Finally, the story is the ability to encapsulate, contextualize, and emotionalize. It represented the ability to place facts in context and understand their emotional impact (Pink, 2006). Each of these attributes, critical to success in the 21st century, are effective only if diversity exists in the learning environment. It takes practice to bring together disparate elements and see broad patterns. For today's students to get this practice, the disparate elements and backgrounds must have representation in the learning environment. Learning to empathize with different types of people, one must face exposure to different types of people, who in turn must be present in the school. In addition, to understand the emotion that surrounds facts, learners improve by hearing a diversity of people tell their stories related to those facts and content introduced as part of the academic program.

Thomas Friedman (2006), well-known author and *New York Times* columnist, echoed Pink (2006) when he spoke about the skills and education necessary to thrive in the 21st century, or what Friedman (2006) referred to as a globalized or "flat" (p. 10) world. Similar to Pink (2006), Friedman (2006) said that interacting well with a variety of people is critical for success. He acknowledged that this had always been important, but insisted that it was even more so now. Friedman (2006) added, "I don't know how you teach that as part of a classroom curriculum, but someone had better figure it out" (p. 306).

Finally, Howard Gardner (2006), one of the more influential theorists in education today, described the qualities or “minds” (p. 8) that he thinks people might need to thrive in the future in his book, *Five Minds for the Future*. Gardner (2006) posited people should welcome difference between individuals and between groups, try to understand these others, and learn to work effectively with them. Gardner (2006) continued to say that doing all these actions would equip these individuals for what is expected, as well as what cannot be anticipated in the future. Clearly, diversity within the educational environment would be needed to cultivate the quality of welcoming and understanding difference, which Gardner (2006) asserted was important in the new millennium.

Pink (2006), Friedman (2006), and Gardner’s (2006) assertions derived from particular observations they made about a changing local and global society. They observed a world where hyper-globalization and technology might necessitate new ways of learning and thinking (Pink, 2006; Friedman, 2006; Gardner, 2006). Thus, central to this exploration of diversity in independent schools was the dynamic societal backdrop that these authors argued would privilege different skills and ways of thinking.

Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Higher Education

In 2003, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled for the University of Michigan Law School’s practice of considering race in admissions (*Grutter v Bollinger*, n.d.). Writing for the majority, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor stated that student body diversity is a compelling state interest (*Grutter v Bollinger*, n.d.). Writing in dissent, Justice Antonin Scalia disagreed that diversity was a compelling state interest and questioned whether there is an educational value associated with diversity (*Grutter v Bollinger*, n.d.).

Attention to the legality of race conscious admissions in higher education and the Supreme Court's questions around educational benefits associated with diversity prompted a body of research focusing on racial/ethnic diversity in higher education. In the absence of relevant research on the impact of socioeconomic diversity on student outcomes, I looked to this body of research on racial and ethnic diversity in higher education to frame my questions and assumptions about the impact of socioeconomic diversity on students at independent high schools.

Generally, researchers demonstrated that diversity in higher education benefits individual students, the academic institutions, the private sector, the economy, and the broader society (Antonio, 2001a, 2001b, 2004; Hurtado, Dey, Gurin, & Gurin; 2003; Millem & Hakuta, 2000; Milem et al., 1998). For framing my proposed research on the impact of diversity on students in independent schools, I focused on investigators who explored the impact of diversity on individual students. Patricia Gurin (1999) conducted some of the most compelling research related to the impact on students of diversity in higher education, compiled in an expert report in defense of the University of Michigan's admissions policies. For the report, Gurin (1999) analyzed large longitudinal sets of data from the University of Michigan in addition to data from other colleges and universities across the country. The data set from the University of Michigan consisted of detailed questionnaires filled out by a racially mixed group of 1,321 students after their first, second and fourth years. The Cooperative Institutional Research Program and the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute collected the other data set, consisting of 9,316 students.

The variables, Gurin (1999) used in her study, related to three different aspects of diversity in higher education:

- *Structural diversity*, referring to the racial and ethnic composition of the student body;
- *Classroom diversity*, referring to incorporation of knowledge about diverse groups into curricula; and
- *Interactional diversity*, referring to opportunities to interact with students from diverse backgrounds in the broader campus environment.

Related to these variables, Gurin (1999) examined various student outcomes. She broke the outcomes down into three categories. The first category was learning outcomes. Gurin (1999) found that students with the most experience with diversity in college increased their scores on measures testing active thinking. Active thinking is the motivation to understand human behavior, a preference for complex rather than simple explanations, and the tendency to think about underlying processes involved in causal analysis (Gurin, 1999). Using the same data sets, Gurin et al. (2002) found that informal interactional diversity was especially influential in accounting for higher levels of intellectual engagement and self-assessed academic skills. This demonstrated the importance of actual experiences and interactions with diverse others, as opposed to just including material about diverse others in training and course work.

The next category Gurin (1999) called democracy outcomes. Gurin (1999) found a consistently positive relationship between experience with diversity (both classroom and interactional) and the understanding that group difference was compatible with societal unity. Furthermore, experience with diversity had an association with students' motivation to participate in activities that affect society and the political structure (Gurin, 1999). Gurin (1999) analysis found that experience with diversity has an association with the tendency to consider other people's viewpoints. Additionally, the final category of findings Gurin (1999) identified was called living in a diverse society. Gurin (1999) found that the structural diversity of the student body influenced the extent to which students would live racially and ethnically integrated lives after graduation from college. Similarly, students who had informal interaction with diverse

peers identified the feelings that their undergraduate experiences prepared them for their current jobs.

These seminal studies on diversity in higher education that involved detailed analyses of large longitudinal data sets were useful in helping to frame the categories and types of results I looked for in my study of socioeconomic diversity in independent high schools. These studies, however, were quantitative in nature and separated out distinct variables, including structural diversity, classroom diversity, and interactional diversity. My study relied on qualitative data, and used structural diversity as a point of departure. I chose research sites based on the structural presence of socioeconomic diversity at the school. Each school site exceeded NAIS (2008, 2016) benchmarks with at least 35% of the student body on financial aid at an average aid award of half the tuition. When greater diversity within the student body existed, students have increased opportunities for interactions with diverse others (Antonio, 2004; Chang, 1999). Increased interactions, in turn, can influence individual student outcomes. Based on the work of social psychologists, such as Piaget (1976) and Vygotsky (1978) previously cited in this literature review, it was no surprise that interaction with peers would play an important role in the cognitive and social development of students. Astin (1999) established the influence of the peer group on individual learning outcomes for college students. In Kuh's (1993) qualitative study, undergraduate students identified multiple categories of outcomes that came because of interactions with peers. These categories were knowledge acquisition, self-awareness, confidence, altruism, and gaining knowledge about different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Kuh, 1993). Thus, when considering the influence that diversity had on student learning, cross-racial interaction amongst peers represented an important area of exploration.

In Anthony Antonio's (2001b) study of the role of interracial interaction in the development of leadership skills and cultural understanding, he found that frequent interracial interaction might be even more important in developing greater cultural awareness than more formal activities such as workshops or coursework. Other studies have linked cross-racial interaction to greater cognitive development (Astin, 1993; Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2001), higher levels of civic engagement (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2001), and increased cultural awareness (Antonio, 2001b; Astin, 1993; Milem, 1994). Moreover, many types of cross-racial interaction exist. Based on this, Hurtado et al. (2003) studied students in higher education, examining the types of people who attend college, their experiences in college, and the types of people they became once they graduated from college. Hurtado et al. (2003) revealed that the educational environments that the students encountered during their journey through the postsecondary education enterprise could influence their college and post-college experience and personalities. Hurtado et al. (2003) found that students who reported that they frequently studied with peers from ethnic backgrounds varied from their reported growth in problem solving skills, critical thinking, and their abilities to work collaboratively. The authors also reported discovering an increased tolerance for different beliefs and greater cultural awareness (Hurtado et al., 2003).

In a more recent study, Antonio (2004) examined different forms of cross-racial interaction including studying with, dining with, or dating someone from a different ethnic background. They also found that the activity of studying with diverse others had the most robust affects across outcomes. Antonio (2004) suggested that one of the reasons for the influence on student outcomes, resulting from the cross-racial interaction, was that students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds had different assumptions and viewpoints about the world. Chang, Astin, and Kim (2004) explored this notion as well. In their study, the researchers asked students

10 questions targeting contemporary social, political, or economic issues. Chang et al. (2004) showed consistent and significant differences in responses to the questions between racial groups. Chang et al. (2004) posited the cross-racial interaction with others who hold different viewpoints could cause students to reexamine their beliefs in ways that facilitate active, complex thinking.

Most of the studies in this review were qualitative in nature. This represented a strong method to use for the exploration of this topic because the focus was mainly on the participants' experiences and perceptions. Furthermore, in examining the impact of socioeconomic diversity on students at independent high schools, I aimed to identify the mechanisms behind any potential influence. This line of inquiry would center on exploring the types of interactions with diverse others that students identify as influencing their thinking. Also, I would like to understand whether significant differences of opinion on issues existed, based on socioeconomic background, and from where students thought those differences of opinion developed.

One study on diversity in higher education of particular relevance to my research examined influences on students' openness to diversity and intellectual challenge in the first year of college (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996). Building on the work of Astin (1993) and Chickering and Reisser (1993), Pascarella et al. (1996) developed four independent variables relating to the following:

1. Students' precollege characteristics,
2. Environmental characteristics of the institution attended,
3. Students' first year academic experiences, and
4. Dimensions of the students' first year non-academic experiences.

The data analysis found that the students' precollege openness to diversity and the intellectual challenge was, by far, the strongest predictor of the students' openness to diversity and intellectual challenge after the first year of college (Pascarella et al., 1996). Research on the

effects of desegregation in high schools reinforces the implication of Pascarella et al.'s (1996) findings, which is that the demographic composition of the student body in high school has a lasting impact on individual students.

Wells, Holme, Revilla, and Atanda (2005) interviewed more than 500 graduates, educators, and policy makers who had been involved in racially mixed public high schools in different communities in the late 1970s. The central finding of the study was that attending school in a racially diverse environment made students less racially prejudiced and more comfortable around people of different backgrounds. Furthermore, graduates from the integrated schools reported that they were more open minded and better prepared to function in a diverse society and a highly competitive global economy compared to their peers from more segregated schools (Wells et al., 2005). The findings were of significance to this study because these researchers found that socioeconomic diversity in the high school setting contributes to students' openness to diversity and intellectual challenge in a similar way, as racial and ethnic diversity did. Consequently, using this as a foundation for my own study, the evidence might suggest that socioeconomic diversity could represent a significant predictor of a student's openness to diversity and intellectual challenge after their first year of college, as well. It would be an influence greater than any characteristic of their college environment, or even their academic or social experiences during their first year of college.

The body of research from higher education demonstrated that racial and ethnic diversity could enrich the college learning environment and influence student outcomes in a variety of domains (Howard, 2015; Mickelson, Bottia, & Lambert, 2013). Evidence also existed that racial and ethnic diversity enriches the learning environment in public high schools, precollege characteristics of students were partly shaped by the demographic composition of their high

schools, and that these represent a significant influence on students into college and beyond (Mickelson et al., 2013; Palardy, 2013).

Socioeconomic Diversity in Independent Schools

The notion that diversity can enrich a school's educational environment is not foreign to independent schools. Al Adams, head of the well-known Lick Wilmerding School, recently observed, "Another thing we have learned is that providing access to less-than-affluent families is not, in the end, about the school 'doing good.' It is, instead, about enriching the learning and living environment for all our students" (as cited by Davidson & Goldberg, 2009, p. 98). Jim MacManus, Executive Director of the CAIS, echoed the importance of socioeconomic diversity at independent schools: "Economic diversity at Independent schools is important because when there are more students from more diverse backgrounds, there is a richer educational environment for all students" (personal communication, November 24, 2009). Unlike in higher education, however, there has not been researching done to support this point of view. Preliminary interviews have shown that independent school leaders feel they would be able to make more effective decisions regarding the allocation of funds for financial aid versus other competing budgetary needs if research existed on this subject (Brody, 2010).

I conducted preliminary interviews at five secondary schools in Southern California. Three of the schools, Orizon, Waller, and Pillow are either at or below the national median level of students on financial aid at 16%-18%, and two of the schools, Polenorth and Fieldcrest, have between 25% and 30% of students on financial aid, exceeding the NAIS (2008, 2016) benchmark. Both Polenorth and Fieldcrest also exceed the NAIS (2008, 2016) recommendation of an average financial aid award of at least half the tuition. Also, I interviewed Jim McManus, the executive director of CAIS. The purpose of these interviews was to determine basic areas of

interest for school heads related to socioeconomic diversity and to establish whether this research might help inform decision making related to budgets and policies around financial aid.

From the interviews, it emerged that many school leaders do not base decisions related to financial aid on research related to socioeconomic diversity or, for that matter, any other type of research. No administrator that I spoke with knew of any research related to socioeconomic diversity in independent schools. While all interviewees were familiar with the NAIS (2008, 2016) benchmark for financial aid, none had an idea as to the rationale behind choosing those quantitative benchmarks. The following remarks from CAIS executive director Jim McManus illustrate the need he sees for more strategic thinking and research at independent schools related to financial aid.

Schools need to sit down and think clearly about what we are trying to accomplish with financial aid. I think the first instinct is that we are trying to provide access for students who could not otherwise afford independent schools. But, we need to be strategic and ask second and third round questions of ourselves. What else do we want to say about this issue besides we are trying to do good and increase access? This points to the need for more thinking and research about socioeconomic diversity in independent schools to help guide budgetary decisions and policy. (personal communication, January 21, 2010)

The administrators from the three schools not meeting NAIS (2008, 2016) benchmarks for students on financial aid talked about financial aid and socioeconomic diversity regarding individual student access. The Head of Waller School explained,

In my admissions talks I talk about why it's beneficial for students to be in a classroom with other students who are not necessarily like them, and I talk about why it is valuable to be in a community that is ethnically and racially diverse, then I talk about financial aid and giving access to students from families with fewer financial resources, but I don't talk about the value socioeconomic diversity brings to the whole community. It is easier to talk about the value of ethnic and racial diversity in the school in an overt way. I think it's a little clearer to everybody what the benefit of a racially and ethnically diverse community is. I don't think it's as clear to people what the value of having a socioeconomically diverse school is, but I certainly do think there is value in that. (Personal communication, December 15, 2009)

In a similar vein, the assistant head at Pillow School said,

“I don’t know that we have thought of economic diversity as enriching the educational environment. I think the discussion around financial aid is how our school benefits the given kid. I don’t think we have thought very much about how the kid can benefit the school. But it is interesting to think about how economic diversity might affect a school... We do have diversity here. We have a racial and ethnic mix. Then you get into the socioeconomic mix, and that’s another issue not necessarily related because we have very wealthy minority groups here. Because we already have racial diversity, and that is more visible, trustees might not think as much about economic diversity. (Personal communication, December 16, 2009)

While ethnic and racial diversity may be more visible than economic diversity, as reported by some administrators, the head of Fieldcrest School, a school that has been trying to steadily increase the number of students on financial aid and now has approximately 30%, said that even though racial and ethnic diversity may be more visible, he thinks that many students are more aware of their socioeconomic differences than their racial differences. In speaking with one African American graduate of Fieldcrest, the student was much more aware of ways the socioeconomic differences between himself and many of his peers played out than the racial difference (personal communication, December 18, 2009).

Hence, it is important to note that my research did not attempt to compare ethnic and economic diversity or establish one type of diversity as more important than the other. The NAIS (2016) spoke of the “Big Eight” cultural identifiers, which are race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, in addition to ability, age, gender, religion, and sexual orientation. According to NAIS (2016), schools should be aware of all these cultural identifiers related to diversity, multiculturalism, equity, and justice. Of all of these cultural identifiers related to diversity, students’ socioeconomic status is the one most directly influenced by budgetary decisions and related policy. Thus, I chose to focus my research on economic diversity in hopes of better informing school leaders’ strategic thinking around plans and decisions related to financial aid.

Both the head of Fieldcrest and the head of Polenorth, two schools meeting or exceeding the NAIS (2008, 2016) benchmarks for financial aid, reported that neither school has a specific design around the percentage of students on aid or the average aid award. They each said, however, that there are plans to create some task force to give recommendations related to financial aid and economic diversity at their respective schools. The head of Polenorth explained that it was important to her to have a financial aid program that was more “purposeful” compared to what they currently had in place, and thus prompting the creation of the board taskforce to examine the issue (personal communication, December 17, 2009). The head of Fieldcrest explained that examining issues of socio-economic diversity at independent schools is particularly important and particularly difficult because “historically private schools have been defined by economic exclusivity, and these issues of socioeconomic diversity are often even more difficult to discuss at these schools than other types of diversity such as racial and ethnic diversity” (personal communication, December 18, 2009).

Summary and Conclusions

The literature review showed that diversity represented an influential factor behind student outcomes in higher education. However, a question that remains is whether socioeconomic diversity adds a similar richness to the learning environment in independent secondary schools. If socioeconomic diversity enhances the learning environment, an equally important question becomes by what means it enhances the environment. Another issue is the ways schools should cultivate and support a socioeconomically diverse student body and facilitate learning opportunities related to that socioeconomic diversity. Moreover, interviewing independent school leaders revealed that an interest exists in obtaining research that addresses the impact socioeconomic diversity has at independent schools. In each instance, the school

heads stated that they would find it useful to employ such information to help inform budgetary and policy decisions related to programs and financial aid. The next chapter is a discussion of the methodology.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

This chapter describes the research design, methods, the population and data sampling, the instrumentation, and the data analysis methods.

Research Design and Methods

The goal of this research was to understand the perceptions individuals at independent schools have about socioeconomic diversity on their campus and the various ways socioeconomic diversity in the learning environment influences students. To this end, I chose a case study design. I conducted three comparative case studies, so that I could compare the data I collected at multiple sites. Studying multiple school sites created a richer picture of the impact socioeconomic diversity had on schools. I considered the case study design the most appropriate for the purpose of the study. A case study represents a study, defined by its own boundaries (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Case studies enable the researcher to explore a theory or phenomenon in depth (Hancock & Algozzine, 2015; Houghton, Murphy, Shaw, & Casey, 2015; Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014; Yin, 2013).

My main method was qualitative, because data from interviews could provide a more nuanced understanding of answers to my questions than quantitative methods. Quantitative research represents the empirical method more appropriate when the researcher plans to use data that could be easily reduced to a single data point (Britt, 2014; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012; Ragin, 2014). With this method, researchers can better see the answers to their questions. However, the main limitation of the quantitative approach is that it does not allow the researcher to undertake a detailed exploration or to explore the “human” side of the phenomenon or issue (Britt, 2014; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012; Ragin, 2014). Qualitative research allows for greater depth and insight

into the problem at hand (Britt, 2014; Goertz & Mahoney, 2012; Ragin, 2014) and this is what is more appropriate and necessary for the current research. Qualitative methods and analysis are more authentic because they are based on the natural settings and real-life experiences of the participants of the study (Rosnow and Rosenthal, 1996, p. 122).

According to Creswell (2012), “we conduct qualitative research because a problem or issue needs to be explored” (p. 47). In a qualitative study, researchers ask open-ended questions to participants so that they can share their stories, experiences, and perceptions and to gain a deeper understanding of the problem (Creswell, 2012). For most qualitative research studies, the data collection method is the use of data generated by face-to-face interviews with the participants (Creswell, 2012).

Interviews represented the primary data-gathering instrument that I used to conduct this research. I carried out the interviews in a semi-structured format. This allowed me to respond to particular situations and emerging themes within each particular interview, which I recorded and transcribed. I conducted the interviews individually, rather than in groups for students and alumni, as the material discussed related to socioeconomic statuses that might have been sensitive. The individual interview format allowed the participants to express their opinions more freely compared to if they were in a group setting. I conducted the interviews on campus in a private location, allowing participants to answer questions as freely as possible. I anticipated each interview to last approximately 45 minutes. Prior to conducting the actual interviews, I conducted practice interviews with the various constituency groups at a school not included in my actual study.

I conducted interviews of teachers and administrators in both individual and small group settings. Teachers and administrators conversed freely, even in the presence of other colleagues,

as they did not discuss their own socioeconomic backgrounds. The small group interview allowed a wider bank of data to emerge through the group interaction. In addition, my archival research represented the analysis of mission and policy documents at each school.

Through conducting interviews with a variety of constituency groups at each respective school site, I generated data related to perceptions of the impact of socioeconomic diversity at those schools. Every school had a unique and complex context; thus, I conducted the study at multiple school sites and conduct cross-case analysis to increase both the ability to generalize and the utility of the findings for policymakers (Merriam, 1998).

Instrumentation

Many researchers consider a semi- or quasi-structured interview one of the most advantageous approaches for gathering data in this specific research (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013). Completely unstructured interviews may remain risky for the researcher because sometimes these types of interviews can lead to not gathering some required information. On the other hand, using an inflexible or formal structure might not allow the researcher to receive practical and revealing insights because the flow of information is restricted (Doody & Noonan, 2013; Irvine, Drew, & Sainsbury, 2013). With the use of open-ended interviews, the interviewer can have preliminary questions prepared for gathering information and yet ask follow-up questions to gather more in-depth information from the participants depending on their answers (Yin, 2012)

Based on interview data, I interpreted and described the mechanisms by which socioeconomic diversity in the learning environment might influence student experiences both while at school and beyond into their adult lives (Merriam, 1998).

Further, I probed deeply into what students felt and the reasons for those feelings, which was best accomplished through qualitative research (Kaplan & Maxwell, 2005). While a survey of alumni, students, teachers, and administrators might generate some of the same data as interviews, it would not allow for in-depth discussion and nuanced perspectives regarding perceptions and beliefs about a controversial topic, such as socioeconomic diversity. Finally, interviews allowed me to understand the ways in which different independent school constituencies perceive the efficacy of programs and policies related to socioeconomic diversity and financial aid, and the rationale behind those perspectives.

Site Selection and Access

Marshall and Rossman (1999) stated, “The research design section of a proposal should contain plans for negotiating access to the site and/or participants through formal and informal gatekeepers in an organization” (p. 21-22). For my study sites, I chose three independent high schools based on their proportional mix of students from various socioeconomic backgrounds. The schools all had at least 35% of their student body receiving need-based financial aid, at an average aid award of half the tuition. In addition, all the schools in the study have articulated diversity as part of their explicit missions, making them more likely to have policies and programs in place related to socioeconomic diversity.

The schools were located in the greater metropolitan areas of Los Angeles and San Francisco. I had access to the schools based on pre-existing relationships I have with the heads of the respective schools. I formed these relationships through independent school head networks. The credibility I have with the schools was important because I asked schools for sensitive information related to the socioeconomic status of students and families.

Sample Selection

I considered several sampling methodologies for the study, but I chose the best one based on the purpose of the study: purposeful sampling. According to Fowler (2009), how a sample can serve as an effective representation of a population derives from the sample frame, the sample size, and the selection procedure. Purposeful sampling refers to the method of selecting participants according to the research questions. Purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research because it is the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). I employed purposeful sampling to choose participants. The following sections are a list of constituency groups that I interviewed and the criteria by which I selected individuals to participate in the study.

Students. I interviewed students for the study deriving from a variety of economic backgrounds. I interviewed three students from each school who received financial aid, with at least one of the three paying little to no tuition. I also interviewed three students from each school who received no financial aid. Interviewing at least three students from each school from varying socioeconomic backgrounds helped me to see patterns in their testimony. In addition, I interviewed students from a variety of ethnic and gender backgrounds to see what, if any, ways these other cultural identifiers influence notions of and experiences with socioeconomic diversity. The students I interviewed were those in their junior or senior years, so I could draw on a wealth of experiences from the participants that might have accumulated over multiple years at the given high school.

Alumni. I selected two groups of alumni from each school. The first group I interviewed was in college. I interviewed three alumni from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and three from higher socioeconomic backgrounds who could reflect on how socioeconomic diversity in

high school had influenced aspects of their college experiences. I also interviewed alumni from each school who have been out of college for at least 10 years and engaged in professional and civic life as adults. Again, three of these alumni derived from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and three from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

Teacher. I interviewed the teachers of high school juniors and seniors. The teachers were those who taught English, history, and social science. I looked for teachers who had experience working with students in social committees and extra-curricular activities, as well as in the classroom, so that they could comment on a full range of student activities.

Administrators. I interviewed heads of school, business managers, financial aid administrators (if separate from business managers), and academic deans at each school. These individuals helped explain school-wide programs and policies.

Role of Researcher

My main roles were as the interviewer and the observer. To help reduce any subjectivity on my part that might affect the study, I describe my concepts and assumptions upfront to reveal any potential influence on data selection (Kaplan & Maxwell, 2005). As an independent school leader who led a school in deepening its commitment to financial aid and socioeconomic diversity, I had to take care not to just look for data that supported the assumption that socioeconomic diversity enriches the learning environment. In addition, I have formulated a framework through examining theoretical and research literature that suggests ways in which diversity contributes to education both historically and in the twenty-first century. The data settings, in the context of independent high schools, may not apply to previous research and theories deriving from different contexts.

To guard against my own bias, I tried to stay critically reflective of the way I interpreted data. I pilot tested interviews with members of various constituency groups to avoid leading questions and to be as unbiased as possible. In addition, I stated my background and possible biases directly; thus, all involved in this study could maintain subjectivity. I kept the research in mind and allowed all involved in this study to make their own judgments about the validity of the findings.

Methods of Data Analysis

I conducted a qualitative analysis of all interview data to isolate findings that answer my research questions. I personally conducted each session, utilizing two audio recorders to capture questions and participant responses. Then, I had the audio recordings transcribed into Microsoft Word documents. I uploaded all of the documents into Dedoose, an online platform, coding and analyzing the qualitative data. I coded the data according to different categories of influence on life and learning outcomes that emerged related to socioeconomic diversity of the student body. After coding each of these areas, I looked for recurring themes across school sites to include the most often cited answers by various constituency groups. To answer my research question about the efficacy of policies and programs at each school related to socioeconomic diversity, I looked for commonalities and differences among programs and policies at each school and analyzed which programs were effective and why. The use of interviews with multiple constituency groups at multiple schools provided me with the data I needed to answer my research questions and develop meaningful findings.

Validity

Credibility

To increase credibility, Stake (1995) stated it is “better to give the reader a good look at the researcher” (p. 95). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended several strategies to improve credibility, including peer debriefing and member checking. Peer debriefing refers to “a process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session and for the purpose of exploring aspects of the inquiry that might otherwise remain only implicit within the inquirer’s mind” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Member checking enables the researcher to represent “those multiple constructions adequately; that is, that the reconstructions that have been arrived at via the inquiry are credible to the constructors of the original multiple realities” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 296). Member checking also improves the quality of the findings by “regularly providing critical observations and interpretations” (Stake, 1995, p. 115). It involves allowing the participants to check the transcripts and the researchers’ notes and analysis to make sure these stay accurate. For the current research, I performed peer debriefing and member checking throughout the project.

Transferability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested the use of the term “transferability” (p. 288) to discuss notions of generalizability and external validity obtained from a qualitative inquiry. Having transferability means that conclusions can be transferred in other settings or a wider population (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316). In this sense, transferability depends on the presentation of “solid descriptive data” or “thick description” (Patton, 1990, p. 20) to determine the “degree of similarity between sending and receiving contexts” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 297). Therefore, I strived to do this as well.

Ethical Procedures

The study involved human subjects as participants; hence, the study required ethical assurances. The first step was ensuring that I obtained permissions and authorizations from the institutional review board (IRB). Next, I ensured the voluntary nature of the participation by signing the informed consent form. The form detailed everything that the participants needed to know about the project, their rights, the associated risks (which are minimal), and the possible rewards. I informed participants of their rights right from the start. The informed consent form represents a way to foster the trust between the inquirer and the participants (Seidman, 2013). Signing the consent form indicated that the participants understood what the study entailed and the terms of consent. I made them aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time. I only allowed participants who signed the informed consent form to participate.

With any interview, the risk of participant reactivity exists, including the unintended influence that I, as the researcher, might have had on the testimony of participants. To protect against this possibility, I ensured confidentiality of participants by using pseudonyms and holding interviews in private locations. I also conducted pilot interviews to practice not using leading questions when I conducted the actual interviews. Finally, in the preliminary interviews that I conducted about socioeconomic diversity with the heads of schools, the participants were candid in their testimony. Consequently, I believe that I also received candid testimony when conducting interviews at the actual study sites.

Chapter 4. Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact socioeconomic diversity had at independent secondary schools that exceeded NAIS (2008, 2016) benchmarks of 20%-25% of students on financial aid at an average award of half the tuition. My primary objective in conducting this research was to inspire and facilitate dialogue among independent school leaders around socioeconomic diversity, so that policy and budgetary decisions related to financial aid might be more purposeful and strategic. To that end, I planned to visit local area head group meetings to present my research findings and have conversations with school heads around issues related to socioeconomic diversity in their schools. Table 2 is a demographic chart of the schools where I conducted my research.

Table 2

Demographics/Financial Aid Data on Three School Sites

Name of School	Size	Characteristics of Students	Financial Aid
Hill	265	Majority Whites, Followed By Asian, and then other Minority Racial Groups	38%
Willow	462	Majority Whites, Followed By Asian, and then other Minority Racial Groups	36%
Lake	331	Majority Whites, Followed By Asian, and then other Minority Racial Groups	40%

RQ1. According to students, teachers, and administrators, in what ways, if any, does socioeconomic diversity influence students learning skills such as empathy, identifying and engaging with complex thoughts and issues, and understanding diverse perspectives?

RQ2. According to former students, in what ways, if any, does socioeconomic diversity influence the civic, professional, and educational lives of students after high school?

RQ3. What programs and policies do schools create to maximize learning opportunities given the socioeconomically diverse learning environment and in what ways do students, teachers, and administrators perceive those policies and programs as effective?

I set out to explore the extent to which socioeconomic diversity among students in independent schools influences their experiences and to identify the path of this influence. I conducted interviews with 36 students, 17 alumni, 15 teachers, and 11 administrators at 3 independent high schools in California and report the findings in this chapter. In this chapter, I describe both the similarities that I found across schools and the differences between them.

Chapter 4 begins by describing perceptions from those in schools around socioeconomic backgrounds. I showed that students and staff have an awareness of socioeconomic differences in the student body. Then, I identified where conversations related to socioeconomic differences occurred, and the factors that facilitated and inhibited those conversations. This discussion was about the particular complexity of socioeconomic diversity in the independent school setting and the ways that socioeconomic diversity intersected with and diverges from ethnic and racial diversity. Finally, I reported on the ways that students, alumni, teachers, and administrators viewed the influence of socioeconomic diversity on student learning and experience.

Participants' Perceptions of Socioeconomic Diversity

One of the most fundamental things to understand about a diverse socioeconomic composition of students at independent high schools is whether members of the school community are even aware of differences in students' economic backgrounds. Without awareness, it is less likely that diversity among students may have a palpable influence on their experience. I was interested in what students saw concerning their peers' backgrounds. Were

students and staff aware of economic differences? What situations raised their awareness? What did they regard as an indication of socioeconomic status?

My interviews revealed that this diversity was readily apparent to students, teachers, and administrators. Each of the 36 students I interviewed said he or she was aware of socioeconomic differences among their peers. Students' perceptions were apparent through a variety of means. One of the most basic ways included the amount of spending money (or lack of it) that students had for social activities after school. Jared, a White male student, paying full tuition at Lake School, observed:

People who have more spending money can go to like Starbucks or 7-11 after school and get snacks every day, and then go somewhere else and buy dinner, but then there are people who are, I guess, limited in their after-school activities by the amount of money they can spend. It was interesting seeing that for the first time because I was never really used to having people like, "Oh, I can't really do that," or like, "Can you cover for me this time," or, "I don't want to do that because then you'll have to pay for me," and they feel bad. It just brings in like a new dynamic in the hangout with friends, so I think it's beneficial for people to experience, I guess, differences in those kinds of situations or else people will assume that everyone can be like them.

Another straightforward way by which students judged each other's socioeconomic background was by using affordable technology. Chris, an African American male student, paying partial tuition at Lake explained:

There are some people who you can tell they're from the same socioeconomic background. Like, I'm going to use the example of phones. There are those friends who all have the same model of phone. But then, there are those people who are still miles and miles behind, like, not even on smartphones.

Furthermore, items that are more expensive serve as symbols of wealth to students. Olivia, a recent Latina graduate from Lake with subsidized tuition, compared her friends' luxury cars to her father's more modest car. Olivia described how low income students were acutely aware of the expense of all the things used by them and their peers, everything from backpacks to cars:

It is apparent and even though people weren't so apparent about or so obvious about it, I would say we didn't have girls coming into class with designer bags or anything like that. But, you knew, you knew that when you are a low income student, you know what that type of stuff is worth, the brands, the backpacks, the cars, all of it.

The ways Hill students identified their peers' relative wealth was similar to those of students at Lake. However, at Hill, the relative differences in wealth seemed subtler, at least in perception. Students all wore similar school uniforms. According to one student, people tried not to seem ostentatious with their wealth. Nevertheless, Stephanie, a White student, paying around half tuition, stated,

I think unintentionally they show their wealth. I have a friend here whose family is pretty well off. Like every Christmas, she gets a bag or new purse. This year it was a Chanel purse. These statements showed that like the students at Lake, students at the Hill School for Girls perceived their peers to be from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds.

Sharon, an Asian American Hill student paying full tuition, said that while she saw income differences in classmates' backgrounds, her perception of the variation was not as significant within the school as it was on her athletic team outside of school:

I still think it's pretty much a bubble. I play on the softball team outside of school with a lot of girls who are in a very different financial situation than I am so I would say that contributes a lot to how I see the school. I think there are definitely a lot of benefits to having at least some diversity I guess and talking about it, but it's weird contrasting the school environment and my softball team.

At Willow school, students were also clear that economic diversity existed among their peers. Shawn, an African American male student paying partial tuition, explained that the reflection of wealth in students' homes was hard to miss because high school students visited each other's homes for parties and other activities:

It's just more homogeneous, I guess, in middle school and people we're all kind of the same group, I guess you could say, or if they weren't, you didn't really notice it as much. Now in high school, everybody has parties, and they're like Gatsby houses look like five stories and a spiral staircase.

Shawn also pointed out that in middle school income differences amongst students were not as obvious because without as much social interaction outside of school, kids seemed more similarly situated. In contrast, he explained that high school differences were unmistakable because age and mobility brought more insight into the personal lives of peers. Amanda, one of Shawn's White female peers paying full tuition, observed that everything from houses, to modes of transportation, to shopping money, revealed a student's economic background. Some students described more subtle ways to identify economic difference. According to Victor, one of Willow's male Latino students paying partial tuition:

You can kind of deduce it like if they leave stuff because people usually clean up for them. Our biggest problem right now is the senior section in the cafeteria because people just leave their plates on the table thinking that somebody is going to clean it up. So, you kind of see that, the privilege without even knowing that they have it. It bugs me sometimes but I try not to think about it too much.

For these last two Willow students, it was not just the explicit physical manifestations of wealth, but also attitudes, such as entitlement not to clean up or a feeling of obligation to volunteer, which gave a window into socioeconomic background. The findings on the preceding pages illustrated what I heard repeatedly from students at all three schools. A multitude of ways exists, both subtle and straightforward, that students across gender, ethnic, and financial backgrounds use to assess and perceive the economic backgrounds of their peers and their peers' families.

Students also gained an understanding of their peers' backgrounds through classroom experiences. At each school, students explained that course content and school activities, aimed at facilitating dialogue about socioeconomic diversity, revealed class differences among peers. I expand on this point later in the chapter when I discuss what schools do to facilitate and or inhibit conversation around these differences.

Students did not represent the only constituency who perceived differences in socioeconomic backgrounds. Each teacher I spoke with at the three schools also was aware of differences, based on many of the same reasons cited by the students. Deborah, a history teacher at Lake, explained,

I'm definitely aware.... [such as by the] things they do outside of school whether they have access to travel, whether they own their own cars. The kinds of things they do with their friends on the weekend are usually a pretty strong indication.

Lake administrators did not inform their teachers which particular students received financial aid. The administrators informed the teachers of the proportion of Lake students who received financial aid; thus, they were aware that a large portion of their students came from families that could not afford full tuition. Some teachers were clear about the proportion; some teachers even knew how the proportions compared to other schools. David, a veteran history teacher I spoke with, said, "We try to provide financial assistance or moderated tuition to about 40% of our students – where at most schools it's about 20%." Other teachers did not have the same level of clarity, but still had a general awareness.

Unique to the teachers at Lake, many reported they gained understanding of their students' backgrounds from finding out about the neighborhoods students came from. The surrounding neighborhoods that Lake draws its student body from are each associated with a specific economic status. One teacher explained:

I've met their parents and I know what neighborhoods they're from and they also talk about what neighborhoods they're from... if you're living in Thorne or Wood that's different in terms of socioeconomics than if you're from Tan or Herm or someplace like that.

Sometimes, teachers knew about the neighborhoods from conversations; other times, teachers knew from different types of involvement with students: "Through conversations,

through accident, I've dropped a few students off at home after sporting events or something at school where they needed a ride so I've been in different neighborhoods.”

One of Lake's sociology teachers, Ian, described a class project that made him aware of different student backgrounds: “Well another course I taught last year was Sociology so obviously that came up when we were talking about urban ethnography and city neighborhoods. We presented one day on the neighborhoods where we live and we mapped them virtually.” Lake teachers' awareness of their students' backgrounds developed from the close relationships they formed with their students as advisors and classroom teachers. It also developed from some school-facilitated activities geared towards heightening teachers' awareness of students' backgrounds. For example, Jeanine, the Head of School at Lake, described an activity she led for the faculty to kick off the school year:

Our summer reading book was “Class Matters” which is a series of articles, actually, from the New York Times. That actually opened up some really good conversations for us about what class looks like in our classrooms. I designed the opening activity for everybody where I sent everybody out into the different neighborhoods where our students live. That was a catalyst for more discussion around how our students bring themselves to school every day... Then, for the entire faculty as we were sitting together and looking at these very brief presentations of all these different neighborhoods where our students are from... nearly unanimously, people felt like we gave them a better picture of who was sitting in front of them, which then of course could increase their sensitivity to how they were leading conversations.

At Hill, teachers reported that they gained the most insight into their students' backgrounds through the work each one of them did with students as advisors. Jane explained, “All the teachers here basically are advisers as well. It's generally a requirement and I think that gives us a rich, different kind of relationship with students and we find out more about them.” At Willow, Lois, a humanities teacher, described learning about students from patterns of dress and speech: “Just sort of difference of dress and ways of speech that didn't quite match the kind of dominant wealthy White sort of cultural paradigm.”

Having provided a textured picture of the ways students and teachers in the schools perceived the obvious and more subtle differences in student background, the next section has a description of where and how these conversations about socioeconomic diversity occurred. Then, I discuss how differences in students socioeconomic backgrounds influence students' experiences in independent high schools.

Conversations around Socioeconomic Diversity

Responses to interviews revealed that students were aware of the socioeconomic diversity among their school peers. One of the most striking things that emerged from my interviews was the difficulty students had in discussing issues related to socioeconomic class. There were many theories advanced by students, alumni, teachers, and administrators as to why this was the case. One theme that repeated was a difficulty in discussing money and social class at schools, which might have reflected the discomfort experienced when this topic occurs in the greater American society.

Jeanine, the head of Lake School, said staff did not want to know which students received financial assistance. She associated this with the idea that in American culture, discussing money is impolite. She claimed it was more difficult to discuss socioeconomic diversity than other types of diversity, such as race and gender:

I mean all these kinds of paradoxes that go along with it. I do think there is this kind of weird piece of the American psyche where we tend to believe that you have as much money as you deserve to have. I think that that's part of it, too. It's harder to talk about this stuff than it is to talk about race or gender.

Renee, an administrator at Willow, had similar ideas about the discomfort in American society about discussing money. She felt the idea that value judgments and estimations of self-worth had an association with income levels:

We, Americans, we don't talk about our salaries to each other because then we'll be judged on if I make \$5,000.00 less than you, I'm less valued, I'm less capable. Some of that came across I think in the conversations with the kids ... talk about ethnicity or gender, you're generally not exposing somebody to say, "Well, he was a man, dah, dah, dah. He was a White man," but socioeconomics, it feels like you're kind of exposing people and setting them up for judgment. Like, "This kid's incredibly poor, we have to pay his bus tickets, he doesn't have enough to eat and he doesn't have resources.

Barbara, the head at Hill, agreed that discussing socioeconomic background is one of the remaining taboos in American society. She also pointed out that the school uniformly tried to equalize visible signs of economic differences by requiring a common uniform, trying to mitigate economic differences as a factor in students' lives:

We're very polite. We like to be very democratic. I think that we naturally veer away from having the conversation about it if in case we make people feel uncomfortable. So, I think there's a sort of politeness thing that we feel uncomfortable crossing at times to have more explicit conversations about it, especially when we're trying so hard not to make it a factor.

Jeanine, Renee, and Barbara all identified a similar tension that they noticed as leaders within their respective schools. Each of their schools is committed to socioeconomic diversity in the form of resources for financial aid and to diversity as part of their institutional missions. They all wanted diversity to enrich the learning environment for their students, yet they acknowledged that speaking about money and differences in social class felt uncomfortable, and they each worked to hide signs of economic difference.

Administrators at Willow school pointed out that independent school settings seemed not just to value socioeconomic diversity, but also depended on wealthy families to pay high tuitions. This could make independent schools particularly complicated places to discuss social class and economic diversity. Doreen, at Willow, explained how it felt when she brought up the issue:

Socioeconomic diversity is apparently a value of ours, right? So, I'm doing lots of things there. I'm questioning the values of the school even though I'm not trying to do that. I'm questioning the execution of the values or the implementation of them. I'm talking about class, which is really taboo here.

Angela stated,

I remember there was one question where it was like – we had to take it out because the administration of that time didn't want it but it was like, “If you're on financial aid, stand up. If you're not, stand” - because that opens up another like monster I guess that they weren't ready to take on. I think a lot of independent schools are not ready to take on class and what that means, the privilege that comes from being a part of – or having money.

Lisa agreed, saying, “We have had lots of conversation about race and gender and sexual orientation over the years, but it's a tricky one to have about social class.” Willow students and alumni agreed with administrators that the topic of money and social class represented a difficult topic at their school.

One African American male alumnus, Theodore, who graduated about a decade ago, described the situation bluntly, “Nobody really wanted to talk about financial background. The rich didn't want to let everyone know they were rich and then the poor, they really didn't want anybody to know they were poor.” Interestingly, both wealthier and poorer students expressed discomfort related to their economic backgrounds. Sabrina, a female Latina alumna from Lake School, stated, “You don't want to talk about anything that lets people know how shitty your life is compared to the other people.” She continued,

We're so close by the end of four years because it was such a small environment. We were very comfortable talking to each other. However, prior to that, it was such a hard topic of discussion because you don't want to expose yourself out there that you live in a one-bedroom house that you have to wake up at 6:00 and be the first person to go to school because your parents work at 7:00 or they have to stay late until 7:00 or 8:00 and be the last one to leave school because you don't have a computer at home. Frankly, I didn't want anyone to feel sorry for me.

As Doreen, one of the Willow administrators, already pointed out, people ascribe personal value to levels of wealth, so students who come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds feel a certain degree of shame. This, many interviewees pointed out, was in contrast

to the pride that many students felt about other aspects of their identity that might seem outside of the mainstream, such as race. For example, all three of the schools had affinity groups around characteristics such as race, religion, and sexual orientation. However, no affinity groups existed concerning socioeconomic backgrounds.

Students from wealthier backgrounds also felt uncomfortable discussing money, although the dynamic was different, as explained by a female Willow alumna:

So I think people who are below average in the socioeconomic scale felt uncomfortable sharing that with maybe more affluent classmates and then also the other way around with who were more privileged also felt uncomfortable with sharing, or gloating, or showing off their wealth.

In a similar vein, a Latina Hill student paying full tuition reported,

There are a lot of girls who go here who are of higher socioeconomic status. They don't want to show off which is obviously understandable. They want everything to be kind of equal in a way and they don't want people to be intimidated, and they don't want people to feel left out of something. People in general would rather avoid it than talk about it.

I heard from students from poorer backgrounds of their embarrassment about their houses or apartments. Lauren, a White female paying full tuition at Willow, also spoke of her discomfort, but about living in a more lavish home:

Why don't the students feel comfortable talking about social diversity? I think because there's like double fear if you don't have a lot of money that you're going to be looked down on or something and then fear if you're up there that everyone's going to get mad at you or something. I know sometimes if someone comes to my house and I have a nice house and they say, "Wow, nice house," then they kind of like look at me and I'm kind of like, "Oh my God." I was like, "Sorry. I don't know what to do." Or it's kind of the idea like when I say, "Oh where do you live?" "Oh, I live in Red Canyon," and then I'm like, "Oh."

In the picture painted by members of the three school communities, there was a general awareness of socioeconomic differences, while at the same time, general discomfort in acknowledging and speaking about those differences on the part of students from both lower and

higher income levels. In spite of the discomfort, there were times when students' conversations specifically related to or seemed informed by their socioeconomic class.

Spaces and Times for Conversation

While students reported general discomfort about discussing their socioeconomic differences, they also described times and places when conversations took place. At all three schools, students, alumni, and teachers identified multiple settings in which these conversations occurred. According to the participants, these conversations took place informally and among peers (a) during extracurricular activities, during free time at school, or outside of school; (b) during school-sponsored activities, such as clubs or assemblies organized to address cultural differences; and, (3) during classes in response to curricular content.

Informally Among Friends

I most frequently heard from students, teachers, and alumni that their conversations related to differences in socioeconomic backgrounds predominantly happened in informal settings. Marco, a history teacher from Lake, articulated his impression:

There's one conversation that happens in a classroom and there's this whole other conversation that happens beyond my vision and...it happens in different ways, and it happens in subtle comments, and it happens in more fully formed conversations that kids might have at lunch depending on their groups.

Irene, a Latina alumna from Lake, similarly explained that conversations about economic differences happened among peers: "If we ever talked about wealth, it was within our groups of students." Stephen, a White male student paying full tuition at Lake, described a similar dynamic of conversations about relative wealth occurring amongst friends. Stephen opined that such conversations occurred most often between closer friends because peers felt more comfortable talking about personal money issues with familiar people.

Students at Hill also felt that conversations around sensitive topics, such as economic differences, happened in less structured environments outside of school. Julian, an African American student paying full tuition, reported, “I feel like with my friends, people are a lot more open because it’s not a structured thing necessarily.” According to Denise, a White student at Hill paying around half tuition, lunch with friends represented a time when these kinds of topics come up; “So, I would say definitely like lunch when I’m just talking to my friends we’ll talk about things like financial aid for college.”

An alumnus from Willow recalled all of the experiences he had outside of class with his diverse peers and their families that left an impact on him:

It’s more sort of the out-of-school experiences, or at least out-of-the-classroom experiences. It might have been at school eating lunch or those types of scenarios... the enrichment that I felt from the diversity that I was exposed to, what I recall is more prevalent on the out-of-classroom experiences, like going over to people’s houses and meeting their families, meeting their parents, and meeting their sibling ..

Peer conversations across economic differences, however, were predicated on students spending time in diverse social groups. Gordon, a White male student paying full tuition at Lake, observed,

If you’re one of those kids who hangs out with people who are in the same situation as you, you probably won’t get any lesson outside of school from just hanging out with friends, whereas if you’re a person who’s around people who are in totally different situations, then you’ll see how they are influenced by their financial situation in hanging out with friends.

While Gordon’s observation that social groups must have economically diverse members to have conversations about their class differences seemed more commonsensical than revelatory, it was important to this study. To varying degrees, students and alumni at the three schools described being segregated when it came to their friendship groups. They cited a variety of reasons for this segregation, with both similarities and differences across schools.

Social Groups

At all three schools, students, alumni, and teachers identified multiple settings in which students formed and maintained friendship groups. These groups formed based on factors, including the close proximity of student homes to each other, exposure to, and interest in similar extracurricular activities, and access to spending money. The majority of interviewees from each of the respondent groups attributed these friendship drivers to similarities in students' socioeconomic backgrounds.

At Lake School, many respondents pointed out that those students from particular geographic areas shared certain socioeconomic characteristics. One example, repeatedly provided, was the wealth and resources of students who lived near the beach. Connor, a White male paying full tuition, represented one of the people who pointed this out:

There's a group in my grade where it's a bunch of boys from very similar economic backgrounds. They all live in Flower Beach or the beach cities. They all have similar interests... I don't know if it's consciously or like a subconscious – like these are people who I'm comfortable being around because they have around the same interest that I have, so I'm going to hang out with them.

Connor is clear that peers from similar backgrounds gravitated towards one another; although, he did not seem sure whether it was a conscious choice or just a matter of students subconsciously finding comfort in similarity. Austin, a male history teacher from Lake, made a similar observation about students from the beach cities:

I would imagine socioeconomic diversity would have a potential effect on relationships and friendships and I know it has an effect in terms of the clumping of particularly the boys in the ninth and 10th grades. It starts to break up a little bit in the 11th and 12th grade but White boys from the beach cities, they clump because - they think it's because they have all the same interests and play the same sports.

Additionally, he observed that students gravitated towards each other based on a shared interest; however, these common interests derived from their shared access to resources and their

family backgrounds. Students with more limited resources could have concrete, logistical obstacles to spending time with friends after school or on weekends. Lorraine, a Latina alum, explained that the physical distance of her home from campus and her lack of transportation influenced whom she spent time. It was not until she had a car that she started making friends.

Over time, and with the acquisition of a car, the peers Lorraine socially spent time with changed to some extent. Like the Humanities teacher who saw the clump of similar boys break up by junior and senior year, Lorraine observed that by the end of high school she was friends with many different types of people, though not always outside of school:

My first two years, I was mostly hanging out with my fellow Latina students, students more like me. But, once I got to senior year – junior and senior year, I had a lot of friends. African Americans, I had a lot of Asian friends, Middle Eastern, and White but not so much Whites. The White was always like I knew everyone, everyone was very cool with me, they would talk to me, we would hang out in school but outside school, not so much.

Francesca, another Latina alum, described a comparable social trajectory:

I think when I first got there I sort of gravitated towards other Latinos and other poorer kids. I think that was just basically because... I was the first one from my middle school to go to Lake and so I didn't know anybody so I just kind of gravitated toward people like me. But then as we all got to know each other, I think that Lake was small enough that people just got to know each other because there weren't that many students to get to know so it just eventually just became me being friends with everybody.

The distinct pattern that emerged out of my conversations with students and alumni at Lake was that friendship groups in the earlier years were heavily influenced by socioeconomic background (and to some extent race), with noticeable integration by junior and senior year. This pattern was also observed by Jeanine, the Head of School at Lake:

Sometimes they will come in in groups with some pre-formed friendships and those will remain through the course of their time there. I think more often than that... they end up kind of hooking up together based on relationships that sometimes begin in classrooms just because of their class schedules. Sometimes, they form because they're on sports teams together or in the play together... When friendships form that way, obviously, it's going to cut across racial and ethnic and socioeconomic lines.

Jeanine noticed the same pattern of friendships described by the students. She said that over time classroom experiences and extracurricular activities might lead students to form friendships across cultural differences, although those friendships did not always extend to time outside of school. However, not everyone agreed that students usually formed friend groups based on common backgrounds. Mario, a male African-American student paying around half tuition, explained that while many different backgrounds occurred within the student body, they all seemed connected. In spite of the awareness students had of varying economic situations, there was not a splintering of students from families with more or less wealth. He contrasted the intimate setting of his independent school to public school, where he thought there would be more of a clear divide.

At Willow School, some students described more pronounced segregation, especially among social groups, as compared to reports from Lake. Sheila, one female African American student paying partial tuition, described a strong sense of isolation:

It was just so different and it was just really weird for me to be in this school. There were no Black people, no poor people, and I didn't have any friends here. Like I told you before, a lot of the kids, they'd already know each other before coming in to Willow. So, it's hard for me to find my group when everybody else already had theirs and I didn't know anybody. I was alone.

Based on her race and class, Sheila experienced a sense of alienation. Sheila also had the impression that many other students already knew each other before arriving at Willow.

Theodore, an African American male alumnus, also remembered segregated social groups at Willow based on race and class. He theorized that students from the wealthy dominant culture did not explicitly try to exclude people from different backgrounds, but that it was easier for them to spend time and socialize with other students who shared their perspectives. Theodore stated,

I really feel that those people [students from the dominant culture]... had a certain way of thinking that was just fundamentally different from my own, what my mom raised me to value, what my mom raised me to believe. Before I went there my mom said, "You go here, you're going to encounter a lot of racism with all this other stuff," and at 14 years old, of course I thought I knew everything in the world. My thoughts were "What other 14 year old boy or girl is going to really treat me differently just because I look different?" We were both right. They never "Oh he's black, he's poor so let's be mean to him." It was more of "Oh he's different and we don't understand his perspective or where he comes from. So since we don't understand his perspective, let's just hang out with the kids whose perspective we do understand.

Theodore further explained, "It was never that blunt. It was more of I wouldn't get invited to other student's little get downs because I was, the best way to put it, I was not one of them." Gary, a White male student paying half tuition at Willow, noticed segregation among social groups, which he found ironic given that diversity is a marketed core value at school:

I think one of the things that is important to keep in mind with that question is that although I observed some diversity at Willow it's so much more clear in other schools, like way more clear than at our school. They're not mixing. The crazy thing is we - it's ironic but although we - the first thing on our brochure that you see is the diversity and inclusion and interweaves community. You go to Hammer School [a local public school], and they have none of that on its brochure. It doesn't even have a brochure. It's so much more diverse and it's so much more connected than it ever is here.

One reason that segregation in social groups, based on race and class, might seem more significant at Willow, despite the explicit value placed on diversity in the school's marketing, was that the students derived from a greater variety of schools and backgrounds compared to the other independent schools I visited. This might mean that the more variation in ethnicity and socioeconomic status of students, the greater the potential for segregation, based on those diverse backgrounds. An additional factor leading to perceived segregation based on race and socioeconomic status at Willow included the split of incoming students between independent and public schools. Sophia, a Willow administrator, explained that Willow emphasized admitting students from a wide variety of schools, and in particular, a variety of public schools.

In spite of the wide variety of schools that Willow received new students from, the students who attended independent schools tended to know each other and ended up gravitating toward each other. They may have had siblings that knew each other or had common experiences based on religious background. Blake, the Head at Willow, echoed this sentiment: “In this year’s freshmen class 46% came from public and parochial schools. The rest came from independent schools.” He went on to point out that while many independent school students coalesced more readily into social groups, as some of the independent feeder schools became more diverse, those groupings became more diverse as well. Nonetheless, there is a divide between students from public schools versus independent schools because of their common backgrounds and interests.

Richard, a White male student paying half tuition, explained that the segregation among friend groups, based on shared background, was not necessarily conscious or intentional: “It’s not that they’re intentionally excluding. It’s just that they’re comfortably including which indirectly means excluding.” Some of the Willow alumni echoed this sentiment, describing it as primarily keeping in touch with people from similar backgrounds:

I think the people that I was the closest to, we all came from similar backgrounds. The people that I keep in touch primarily, we all came from similar backgrounds, although I wouldn’t say that was the case for my entire friend group.

Some of the Willow teachers also agreed that they did not see a lot of diversity in friend groups. They brought up reasons similar to ones heard from students at both Willow and Lake, including neighborhood geography and shared interests informed by socioeconomic backgrounds. The following quote from Wanda, an English teacher at Willow, is illustrative of points made by others as well:

We have kids from tons of different middle schools but somehow girls from the all-girls, very elite private school in Atlantic Crest find girls who went to the other all girls, elite... They didn’t come from the same school, but I do think that they find some affinity of some way because the clubs that they’re in.

Wanda also described how geography factored into the equation:

This is also where geography comes in. Kids that hang out together on the weekends are often in the same neighborhood or kind of, ‘Oh, we’re going to go shopping together. We’re going to do this together and you live two blocks away. We’re in the same car pool because you’re close.’

While I did hear more Willow students and staff speak of segregated friend groups compared to the other two schools, this factor did not tell the whole story. Some students noticed more integration of friend groups by the time they were seniors. Elijah, an administrator at Willow, reflected, “By the time students have been here a couple years, their social groups are often more integrated.” For example, participants described extracurricular activities, especially sports, as one way those friendships formed at Willow, despite differences. One of the academic administrators agreed, “Sports is a great way that kids make friends outside of their community because they spend a lot of time with each other.” Moreover, another alumna echoed this sentiment.

In contrast to the students at Lake and Willow, students at Hill school reported friendship groups with more of a mix of students from differing economic and racial backgrounds. Nora, an African American student paying around half tuition, succinctly summed up her opinion, “I don’t think there is one group of friends that’s all one type.” Samantha, a White student paying partial tuition, concurred, reflecting that her friend group during high school consisted of teammates from her soccer team and she still stayed in touch with those peers: “I know my group, a lot of us were on the soccer team together. I don’t know. I think mostly for me, it was my extracurricular, like outside of school things.” She continued to explain that even when potential obstacles existed for friend groups with students from diverse backgrounds, her experience was that with a little problem solving and flexibility, the obstacles did not become big issues:

It's more just like maybe the social aspect of it sometimes is kind of like – I don't know - this is like a silly thing but like a lot of my friends will be like, "Oh, let's just go to Disneyland whenever," and then I'll be like, "Oh, let's do something else." It's just silly things like that versus something really heavy. It affects you in small ways but it never hindered me in anyway, I guess.

However, according to Hill alumni, the friendship groups at Hill were not always so diverse. One alum who graduated in the 90s put it quite bluntly, "There were not many poor kids or kids of color when I went to Hill, so we mostly hung out together." Another alumna who graduated in the 90s observed, "Poor people are something you talked about in history. It wasn't something that you talked about today or talked about in class, or people you hung out with at school." It seems that, over time, as the general student population of Hill became more diverse, so did the friendship groups.

The testimony at the three schools revealed patterns about the types of conversations that occurred between students related to differences in their socioeconomic status. Students across schools agreed that these conversations typically took place informally among friends. They also agreed that the conversations were often subtle and did not necessarily address differences in economic backgrounds head on. The level of diversity within social groups also varied across schools. Hill seemed to have more diversity in its friendship groups, although alumni reported that had not always been the case. One reason for the steady increase in diversity within social groups at Hill might be the greater amount of diversity in the student body now compared to before. Current Hill students perceived socioeconomic diversity as existing, while alumni from the 1990s perceived the student body as more homogeneous. Lorraine, a Hill administrator, pointed to another factor that might occur. She wondered whether part of the more fluid integration of student friendships at Hill came from an overemphasis at the school on people

being nice and getting along. Lorraine questioned whether students were concealing genuinely diverse perspectives in an effort to integrate and get along.

Students at each of the schools reported that the most likely place for conversations related to differences in their socioeconomic backgrounds occurred informally among friends; however, many friend groups were not socioeconomically diverse presents a challenge for schools that would like to enrich students' experiences through social interactions with diverse peers. While Hill, Lake, and Willow each committed a significant amount of resources towards having a student body with diverse economic backgrounds, if in-depth conversation does not happen, relating differences in students' backgrounds within friendship groups, then students might miss a significant opportunity to learn from friends who have different backgrounds compared to them.

The significance of this finding was not lost on school leaders. An administrator at Willow explained, "This is the Holy Grail. How do you get people to not segregate?" Students, at all three schools, said that segregation among social groups did not necessarily happen explicitly, but represented a more subtle process of people who felt more comfortable with each other, based on common backgrounds forming friend groups together. As Connie, a White female student from Willow paying around half tuition told me, "The school can't just force people to be friends." While schools were not forcing people to be friends, teachers and administrators, with whom I spoke with at each of the schools, thought deeply about how to create settings and environments that might facilitate the formation of diverse social groups. Extracurricular activities, such as sports and performing arts, were common to many high schools. Hence, based on my interviews, these activities brought people together to form

friendships based on common interests. However, other strategies existed that Hill, Lake, and Willow employed to create environments that encouraged friendships despite differences.

School Strategies for Diverse Social Groups

At each of the schools, school leaders and administrators shared the belief that socioeconomic diversity could enrich the experience of their students. They felt clear that although they hoped diverse friendship groups would form, this is impossible to mandate. Thus, none of the schools depended on informal interactions among friends as the only way to ensure diversity enriched students' experiences. Each of the schools used strategies, including developing specific programs and creating spaces, aimed at facilitating and provoking conversations related to differences in students' backgrounds.

At Willow, where students derived from a wide range of feeder schools, including many public schools, the administration was intentional about how they populated advisory groups. The general idea behind advisory at Willow (and the other two schools in this study) was that a group of students from the same grade met on a reoccurring basis with the same teacher for social emotional and intra- and inter-personal learning. The goal was to have more intimate and personal conversations compared to what was possible during academic class periods. The advisory groups at Willow formed with the goal of having a group of diverse peers. Glenn, an administrator at the school, explained, "Advising is intentionally diverse. Groups of like 12 pretty much and they're assigned to one faculty member for four years and they do all kinds of things together." He further explained that creating a space for diverse students to interact over a number of years led to authentic friendships.

Another Willow administrator pointed out that faculty completed ongoing work to support them in modeling the collaborative behavior they desired to see in their students. Lake

school also has an intentionally diverse advisory program that students remain in for all four years. School administrators' rationale is that students get a sustained period over the four years to interact with diverse peers, which leads to deep conversations and friendships. In addition, both students and administrators at Lake pointed out the role the student life center played in bringing diverse students together. Gabriella, an alumna from Lake, contrasted what she described as the typical school cafeteria with the student commons at Lake, stating this brought students together:

Do you know the stereotypical high school cafeteria where people just sit with people like them? I mean, Lake doesn't have a cafeteria instead they have this area where you come in – it's just like a commons. So we have couches, we have the counselor's office in the background, you have computers, we have so many chairs, and then we have a bunch of like games we would play. So, during lunch hour students would leave and buy lunch and come back.

Gabriella believed that the configuration of the Student Life Center helped bring students together:

The have to sit it together and everyday it's a totally different type of scenario. So you're always forced to go to somewhere else and go and talk or see anyone else and that helps. You know, it seems so simple, but it helps bring students together.

Emily, a Lake administrator, similarly observed that the commons played an important role in creating a culture where diverse students came together in their free time:

On almost any given day, I can look out at the commons at 5:30 and they'll be - the most diverse groups of kids, 9th through 12th grade, all shades, – and they're kind of hanging out waiting for rides or procrastinating.

William, a Lake alumnus, also gave the example of morning meetings as a school-facilitated activity that created culture and space leading to student interaction across difference.

William said,

To open up morning meeting someone in the school has to read. So every day there's a different student and once you're done with all the students, and that's - morning

meetings are usually the time for you to read a poem or something that appeals to your interest. So, that itself opens a way for students to interact with each other.

At Hill School, where students seemed most easily to form diverse friendship groups, administrators emphasized they gave students power in creating spaces to have conversations about and across differences. One administrator, who works specifically on issues related to student culture and activities, had a whole list of reasons that she felt contributed to integrated social groups. Moreover, she highlighted schools' efforts not to have the conversation as the main reason for social group integration. There is "a conscious effort within the school culture to have integration, and not to ask class-related/class exposing questions out of respect." These strategies, she suggested, all purposefully work towards mitigating some of the most noticeable class differences between students.

Structuring Opportunities for Conversations

The two primary ways, outside of subject area curricula, with which the schools created space and facilitated conversations about differences included advisory groups and assemblies. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, advisory groups at Willow are intentionally diverse. Many administrators confirmed this, as well as Armando, a teacher who told me, "I have diversity racially, ethnically, family makeup, the way the homes look and as well socioeconomically. Yes. It seems like I have a pretty good spectrum of kids in my advisory."

Part of the idea behind advisory was to have diverse groups gain comfort with each other; hence, they could have deeper conversations across differences. Nevertheless, while opportunities for rich conversations exist in advisory, Armando explained that no intentional curriculum exists to easily facilitate and encourage these conversations. While advisory at Willow did not have specific curriculum around diversity, during the year, special programs and assemblies did focus on diversity; on the rarer occasion, they even particularly focused on

socioeconomic diversity. Alicia, a Willow administrator whose responsibilities were working around equity and inclusion, explained, “Kids cannot graduate from Willow without having conversations around this stuff, even if they hate, it because we put on assemblies every year.”

Nevertheless, it could be difficult to gauge accurately the efficacy of assemblies and programs targeted specifically at diversity. Students at all three schools told me that when schools forced the conversations around sensitive diversity topics, it did not always work well.

Corina, a White student paying full tuition at Hill, reported,

A couple of months ago, we had a school-wide conversation where we were split into groups, with people we don't know, and we're forced to discuss socioeconomic diversity. I'm not sure how effective the conversation was but it was moving towards talking about it which is great and important.

For Corina, even though the conversation that the school facilitated might have felt a bit forced and she questioned how effective it was, she felt that it at least brought the topic up.

Corina continued that later on with her friends, she did have a more genuine conversation about economic differences: “Later on, I actually kept talking about our families' backgrounds with my friends.”

However, even when assemblies occurred about diversity, assemblies about socioeconomic diversity are atypical. This was true across schools. Alanis, a White female student paying full tuition from Willow, explained her theory about why there might not be as many conferences or assemblies about economic diversity:

What's weird about that is it is changeable so race is something that people really get mad about because like, “I can't help it. I was born this way.” Whereas with maybe if you're poor they would see it like, “Oh American Dream. You should just work your way up.” I don't know. We really don't talk about it in that same sense.

Beatrice, a teacher from Hill, described an assembly activity designed to help students think about social capital. In this activity, she would instruct students to stand up upon hearing

particular elements of their identities called out. She felt that it was particularly revealing that student unwillingness to associate attributes related to economic class occurred. She also pointed out that when students could answer anonymously, they seemed more honest about their backgrounds, particularly when it came to questions about relative wealth. This seemed to reflect some degree of embarrassment associated with existing in lower income classes, which prompted a decrease in the numbers of those freely associating with such income brackets, as compared to when asked anonymously. While this activity was staff directed, administrators at Hill felt the key to success at these assemblies about sensitive diversity issues showed in their willingness to give almost complete control to students in the planning, coordination, and facilitation of the gatherings. Loretta, a Hill administrator, elaborated, “We’ve been making the space and making the time.” She explained that instead of presenting themed assemblies on topics of diversity, the school had sponsored themed events where a speaker would attend, and then students broke into small groups for discussions. In addition, they had let students take the lead:

We did one on mental health,” she says. “We thought, is this even a diversity thing? Yes, no, it doesn’t matter, we have the space. This is what the kids want to talk about. If they want to have a conversation about whatever’s going on, there is a space. I think that’s major because people want to control stuff and adults want to control things. I have to keep myself from doing that and knowing that I have to be more of a facilitator, to create this space to listen and encourage and just make time.

Loretta felt that one of the most important things a school could do was create space where students could be their true selves, including a space where students from different cultural backgrounds could bring those backgrounds to bear at school. She felt that school efforts to create that space was important, but she also stated that it could be difficult to create an environment in which cultural minority students could feel comfortable to share their diverse perspectives. Loretta continued, stating how even a seemingly minor issue about food habits at a

school-sponsored breakfast could potentially cause internal conflict in a student about the need to assimilate versus staying open about habits not necessarily associated with “White” culture. She said some felt worried about what others would think if they acted not according to the “White” culture, even in minor incidences, such as food habits.

Thus, even at Hill, where students reported more integration among friendship groups compared to other schools, there are inhibitions to bringing cultural differences together in an authentic way. As this anecdote demonstrated, it might be difficult for cultural minority students to express themselves, even around something as seemingly innocuous, as whether they want hot sauce on their potatoes. It also emphasized that if schools were not proactive about intentionally creating space for conversations to happen across student differences, cultural minority students might not feel comfortable sharing their backgrounds.

Theodore, an African American male alumnus who paid partial tuition at Willow, explained that coming from a different socio-cultural background from the mainstream at his school made it challenging to share his perspectives. Theodore further explained that if the school supported him more effectively, he could have more readily shared his perspectives:

I think if the school had stood up and I’m going to put myself in the little guy role here, I felt that if the school stood up for the little guy here, those other people may have understood the perspective of the little guy.

As described earlier, creating space that effectively supports student dialogue across differences can be difficult. Theodore’s experience supported this concept, when he described a way the school tried to facilitate dialogue around diversity that was not effective.

One occasion I remember we had what we called a fishbowl discussion, which was done in the assembly, which is where essentially people of minority populations can discuss how they felt at the school. It was supposed to – I don’t even know - in hindsight, I have no idea what the purpose of it was because we had it and then everything went on staying exactly the same.

Theodore also reflected that even though he had different perspectives compared to many of his more mainstream peers, those peers often did not hear his perspectives because he purposefully did not share them. Therefore, one obvious issue that schools must overcome is the discomfort of students whose experiences fall outside the dominant culture. Furthermore, as detailed in the section on friendship groups, if schools do not react to this need, then conversations enriched by students' diverse backgrounds will not occur, except in the relative comfort and safety of their friendship groups; furthermore, this may not happen because those social groups are often segregated.

In the classroom. Teachers and administrators across all three schools articulated the potential for enriching the classroom environment through student diversity. Many students also reported that they appreciated the opportunity to hear in class from peers from different backgrounds than their own. I heard from students that conversations in class were more interesting when peers would have a variety of opinions or interpretations about the curricular content. Many attributed those differences in interpretations to diversity of backgrounds, as explained by Audrey, a White female student from Willow paying full tuition. Audrey also described how her peers from different socioeconomic classes provided viewpoints that was markedly different from her own and how that made an impression on her:

There are a number of factors that contribute to the extent to which socioeconomic diversity of the students in a class enrich classroom learning and discussions, which are (1) curriculum design; (2) student comfort in sharing their backgrounds; and (3) teachers drawing on student experiences.

Curriculum design. As Audrey described above, in classes such as English and history, interpretation of course content and an exchange of ideas about that content is a significant part of the learning process. Audrey also opined that if students from different backgrounds existed in a class, potentially greater varieties of interpretations existed, which could make the class more

interesting. In addition, Audrey pointed out that it was difficult to identify which part of the difference in someone's background contributed to the difference in interpretation. While there were many complicated and interwoven elements that inform one's background and identity, for the purposes of this study, I specifically asked study participants about socioeconomic diversity. Teachers at Lake School reported that economic diversity influenced students' classroom conversations. Raymond, an English teacher, compared his class at Lake to the classes he taught at a previous school with a more homogeneous student population:

Yes, I have taught at schools that where – you know let's say a school in Chicago that was a high-powered traditional prep school for Ivy bound elite from the Gold Coast. There I would teach similar materials in a similar way but the discussions would be very different simply because of the sensibilities and sensitivities of the students to socioeconomic questions.

Raymond noticed differences in discussions related to similar material with the more diverse student body at Lake. He explained:

There is a better understanding of the various socioeconomic situations, positions, predicaments of characters in literature or in history when you have a more diverse socioeconomic classroom. You look at those questions more frequently and more analytically than you would where that socioeconomic diversity is absent. When it is absent, then it's much more of an examination of personal individual qualities rather than broader societal or sociological aspects of the character in literature.

Blake, the Head of Willow School, offered a specific example of the way students from outside the more wealthy independent mainstream school advanced a distinct perspective in their class work.

There is a young man who lives in Roger's Deer Heights, which for years fought to close this power plant – and the rates of the asthma in that community are incredibly high. They're near the old shipyard, which has tons of toxic material in it. He can speak personally from his experience living in that neighborhood seeing the health effects of his neighbors.

Blake stated that in an honors Chemistry class, students created films for the senior film festival: "He made a beautiful film about living in his neighborhood that won some prize.

Without that personal experience, it would be different.” Blake continued, explaining how these diverse perspectives could affect class discussion, as opposed to reading those perspectives in a text:

It’s so easy to objectify a text I think. It’s becoming more difficult to object to a person when they’re in front of you and they become your friend, right? One of my favorite quotes is Hannah Arendt says that, “Morality doesn’t exist in people. It exists in the space between people.” It’s not about who we are or who you are. It’s about how do we connect in that space between us? That’s what ultimately influences the world. I think that’s a hard thing to do in a text. I think you have to be in the same room and on the same team and working together on a project. Just that experience changes it, changes how you feel.

Leticia, a Willow alumna, made a similar point, reflecting that books and conferences could only take one’s knowledge so far. She insisted that personal, face-to-face experiences with friends and peers allowed students to gain a more mature understanding of diversity. Amber, a teacher from Lake, echoed the sentiment that engaging in conversations with peers from diverse backgrounds provided a more meaningful experience than learning about different perspectives from course material alone. Moreover, more people than just teachers and administrators noticed a greater variety of perspectives in a more diverse classroom. Ann, a White student paying partial tuition at Hill, observed the differences in viewpoints when people came from different backgrounds:

I think in English classes are really good example: when you’re looking at some piece of literature, some work, and someone is just like, “When I read it I thought of this. This is what I think this means.” For the exact same passage, [somebody else has] a totally different idea of what it meant and it what meant to them using the exact same evidence. That’s mostly happening when people are coming from different backgrounds.

Eloise, a Humanities teacher at Lake, noticed the way economic diversity enriched the ways students understood American History, particularly when curricular material related to economic issues that students might understand differently, depending on their social class. Another Humanities teacher at Lake, Edwin, described curriculum he designed related to

socioeconomic background that developed from an exercise teachers did in which they read material about social classes in America, and then went out to explore the various neighborhoods where their students lived:

We read the book *Class Matters*. We read that compilation of *New York Times* stories and it was over the summer. That was our summer reading as teachers and then we opened the year with that discussion. I found it really eye opening. We had a great little project where we got into small groups of teachers and we actually ventured out into the communities that our school serves. I was assigned to Looperville. That got me thinking and wondering how many of the kids that live not four or five miles away from Looperville have ever been to Looperville, from the beach cities in particular.

Still another Lake Humanities teacher, Natasha, described an exercise in which reflections on their homes enabled students from various economic backgrounds to analyze perceptions and stereotypes around social classes and to process and exchange ideas about their particular backgrounds:

Sometimes, some of them write about how that makes them feel very uncomfortable, as well, because they're uncomfortable with that situation they're in. Then, other students write other narratives about how hard it was for them to get into this school, how hard they worked to make it. Really exciting stories about just getting in the nick of time and what they believe their education is going to do for them in terms of class climbing. Or they write about where they're from and sort of the street scenes, the bus rides, the home scenarios are so different than the other students. This is a space where they can all write.... They're not all as equally comfortable talking and sharing about it but it definitely creates a space where if they are, they can.

These teachers designed curricula that drew out their students varied socioeconomic backgrounds. This, however, was more the exception than the rule, according to Lisa from Hill: "When we think about diversity in our curriculum, we think about typically racial diversity... We probably don't think about socioeconomic diversity in that respect."

In summary, students, teachers, and administrators reported that diversity enriched their classroom conversations. Furthermore, stories from diverse peers had a greater impact on students compared to just reading about diverse perspectives in texts. When teachers planned

curricula with their students' economic diversities in mind, greater and more meaningful opportunities occurred for student diversity to enrich classroom conversations. Few teachers, however, designed curricula with economic diversity in mind.

Student Comfort in Sharing Their Backgrounds

While some teachers designed curriculum more explicitly to create space for students to analyze and reflect on differences in economic situations and class backgrounds, others found it difficult to implement curriculum where conversation around social classes developed because they felt it caused too much discomfort for students. Even within the same school, some teachers intentionally attempted to draw out the conversation about economic differences, while others decided that these types of discussions and reflections would potentially cause shame for students, particularly for those from poorer backgrounds. Mitchell, a Lake teacher, explained the difficulty of a project designed to identify rent zones within the community:

Well I remember I used to assign this project where they would have to zoom in on their neighborhood and have to identify the different zones within their community...I don't do this anymore because I found that it was degrading for certain students to have to self-identify with being in a lower economic class based on their neighborhood.

Mitchell stopped doing this class project because it brought focus to students' economic backgrounds in a way that he felt could feel degrading to the students from poorer families.

Another Lake teacher, Judith, observed that it was also just more difficult in general for students whose parents were less affluent and not college educated to participate in class. Her colleague, Noelle, observed, "Wealthier students spoke more confidently without thinking about it."

Soren, an alumna from Willow, also remembered students from lower economic backgrounds being more reticent to share their opinions in class:

I saw people from my socioeconomic background and some people below find it a little harder for us to get in our opinions because there are definitely those people in each class that had the aggressive streak and they really wanted to make their points. So, a lot of

people from the lower socioeconomic backgrounds kind of were reserved and shy and didn't really speak up.

Soren stated he now realized that he did not need to feel so much shame about his background and that if he had to do it over again, he would not be so afraid to expose himself. Furthermore, Margot, a teacher from Hill, acknowledged that economic diversity represented an uncomfortable topic for class discussions. Nonetheless, she explained her strategies to create a safe classroom space for students to disagree, ensuring that rich opportunities to discuss difference could take place in spite of the discomfort:

Economic diversity is hard to talk about because it's also something that the kids are slightly uncomfortable with. The fact is, the richest moments are when a student challenges another student and we do have some really rich discussions that way.

Stella, a Lake teacher, also recognized that when student's backgrounds and experiences were valued, they felt more comfortable sharing those experiences in class. Stella felt that valuing students' experiences was part of the ethos of her school that created a comfortable environment to share differences. In addition, Jeanine, the Head of Lake, asserted that if educators wanted students to feel comfortable sharing their diverse backgrounds in class, then it was important for the adults at the school to model that behavior:

It's not just about us encouraging students to share themselves with each other. It's also about us, the adult community, sharing ourselves with each other. Because again if your identity matters and all the complexity that that brings with it, then adults have to model that as well.

In addition to student diversity and curriculum designed to facilitate meaningful conversations across economic differences, the schools faced the challenge of creating classroom environments in which students felt comfortable exposing their families' backgrounds. In addition, while schools did seem to have specific strategies to support students based on non-

mainstream identities related to race, gender, or sexual orientation, those strategies were not as apparent regarding the subject of socioeconomic status.

Teachers Drawing on Student Experiences

If student diversity is to enrich classroom conversations with multiple perspectives, then there must be space for students' backgrounds and experiences to inform classroom conversation. However, many tensions exist when it comes to creating this type of space. Many teachers whom I spoke with used words like *facilitator* or *guide* to describe their role in the classroom. According to Nora, one of the Humanities teachers from Lake, "As a facilitator, I want to give them enough background in whatever topic that we're covering. That they can feel expert enough to begin launching out on their own and making their own critical judgments about things." Rosie, another teacher, stated, "I'm a guider, so I guide students to learning." Kevin, one of their colleagues, saw himself more as a conductor providing resources and bringing together disparate voices to get everyone involved in the learning.

This type of teaching, with teacher as facilitator, is an approach that provides space for and puts an emphasis on student participation in class. One of the concerns I heard from multiple study participants, however, while they wanted student backgrounds to enrich classroom conversation, they did not want conversations to become therapy sessions. There was concern that a balance was necessary between stories based on or about individual experiences, versus focus on the content of the course. According to Eric, a White Willow alumnus: "The notion of the class becoming a therapy session is something to watch out for and I know that at Willow it was definitely like that."

Another tension revealed during interviews was that covering large amounts of required course content, while simultaneously taking advantage of classroom diversity to delve deeper

into particular topics. Janet, a history teacher at Hill school, recalled an occasion when her U.S. History class was studying immigration and she realized that some of the students in her class were recent immigrants. She knew that their families had experienced some challenges common to the U.S. She recalled wanting to spend more time with the class discussing the immigrant experience, but instead had to move on because there was too much content left to cover.

Students noticed and appreciated the efforts teachers made to have the students connect course material to their lives outside of the classroom. Karen, a White female paying full tuition at Willow, described the ways a teacher would engage students and encourage them both during and after class to relate their experiences to the text and to share their opinions with each other:

During the class discussions sometimes, the types of questions they ask or the prompts they have that aren't just about the book. They would be, "What about the book connects to blank in your life?" I always remember as a freshman, I used to see the seniors like walking out of class and still having conversation with their teacher and they would be talking about the book but they're talking about how the book relates to some kind of thing now, just in the spirit of inquiry and stuff happening in and out of the classroom, always encouraging us to share with them and each other.

Having listened to the voices of teachers, administrators, students, and alumni describe how, where, and when conversations about socioeconomic diversity play out in their schools, this next section is about the impact that diversity had on students' learning and experiences.

Impact of Diversity

The majority of the respondents revealed that socioeconomic diversity had a great influence on students' learning outcomes. From the majority of the staff at all three schools, I heard some version of the following:

It's always been a core understanding that we're trying to prepare students to live in a diverse world. The world is becoming more diverse, interconnected and there's more mixing in the world and students will be better equipped if they're familiar with that diversity and comfortable with that diversity.

This quote was from, Orlando, a teacher at Lake, but this sentiment was shared by business managers, admissions staff, heads of school, and teachers at all three schools. Adults at the schools were clear that American society is diverse and the greater global society is diverse; to best prepare students for their lives in that diverse society, the respondents all felt that students should feel comfortable interacting with people from diverse backgrounds.

This somewhat broad idea about the value of gaining comfort with diversity was one that resonated with many of the alumni with whom I spoke. Many alumni reflected that one of the most valuable and relevant skills they developed from high school was the ability to work well with people from a variety of backgrounds. Alumni, in fields such as education, public health, marketing, job placement, and law, explicitly connected their high school experience of learning from and developing relationships with peers from diverse backgrounds to success in their chosen professions. Martell, an alumnus from Willow, explained that in addition to helping him in his professional life, his work on a nonprofit board was made more effective by his experiences at Willow learning to relate to people across differences: “It definitely applies to what I do beyond just my profession. I mean for example, I’m the current chair of a nonprofit that’s in San Francisco that’s dedicated to the provision of services for youth, primarily underprivileged youth.” These children had a different background from his, yet he felt he could relate to them, partly based on his experiences with diverse peers in high school.

Martell continued that he was not sure if a direct causal relationship existed between his experiences at Willow and his ability to relate well across differences. He did feel, however, that these skills were refined during his time at Willow. Antoinette, another Willow alumna, explained that the comfort she gained in her diverse high school setting encouraged her to seek out a diverse work setting:

I work now at a community college that is extremely diverse in many ways, including economic diversity. I chose that specifically because I had been in previous jobs that did not offer me any of that diversity. So, I feel more comfortable in a more diverse setting. I don't know to what degree my experience at Willow might be a part of that but I certainly think that it was somewhat influenced by that.

On the other hand, Alisha, an alumna from Hill School, attributed her capacity to interact easily with a variety of types of people to her high school experiences:

I think that for me... that has helped cultivate my personal confidence just in interacting with people on a day-to-day level. I really feel like my communication skills, my ability to just kind of pickup conversation with anyone, to be able to work with a multitude of different personalities whether they are similar or different from my own. I think all of that kind of goes back to that general root at Hill.

Another Hill alumna, Jessica, connected the skills she gained in high school interacting with a diverse group of students to her success as a job placement officer:

Basically, my job is to interview people all day and connect with people that need to trust me, find common ground, because that's how you get excited about a job opportunity and when it comes down to the offer time, they trust you and believe.

An administrator from Lake postulated that her students' experiences with diverse peers in high school made them more likely to seek out diversity in college. She gave one example of an alumna who went off to Boston College and sought out diverse peers:

I don't think Boston College is hugely diverse, but Danielle's friends were. She was the only White girl in the picture. So, when she got to college, consciously or unconsciously, the people she was seeking out and ended up being her friends were this incredibly diverse group of young women that probably had she – and she was from Marble Beach.

Empathy

Jeanine, the Head of Lake, thought that when students had personal relationships with peers from diverse backgrounds, they seemed more likely to develop empathy. Current students and alumni agreed with this assertion. Alumni spoke of the empathy they developed interacting with diverse peers. Many, including Stan from Willow, reported that some of the most important lessons he learned in high school was understanding others' perspectives:

I mean the biggest thing is kind of the empathy. Being able to be empathize with someone else and kind of understand where they're coming from... one the most important lessons I've realized is not just being able to see from your own shoes but to see from someone else's.

Linda, another Willow alumna, thought her high school experience helped her effectively engage in conversation with people from different perspectives in a respectful way. In addition, she reflected that those high school experiences gave her an advantage when she went to college because she knew how to navigate conversations across differences. Michael, a Latino student from Lake paying half tuition, also felt that his diverse school environment helped him stay more open to other's viewpoints and have respectful dialogue with people with whom he disagreed.

Challenging Stereotypes and Preconceived Notions

Some respondents discussed specific examples of ways that students' preconceived notions and stereotypes were challenged by being part of an economically diverse student body. Angel, a Willow alumnus from a lower economic background, recalled having this notion that wealthy students were all spoiled and entitled:

I got to know students who came from such a background. I realized that not everyone is like that. Though maybe some of them are, I shouldn't necessarily make that assumption. So it helped me I think be able to see both sides of the issues.

Joanne, a teacher at Hill, recalled one of her students who had the idea that people who earned less money did not work as hard and had that simplistic assumption challenged by other students in the class.

Other times, students had enriched learning because students from different income levels had varied perspectives on class material. For example, Mohan, a teacher from Lake, recalled a concrete example of this happening. Mohan relayed a time when different groups of students had different ideas about a corner restaurant portrayed in a film and how dialogue about those different perspectives helped students understand how differently people could view urban

spaces, depending on their social class. Mohan also noticed that having students from mixed economic backgrounds challenged their stereotypes about each other.

Different Value for Different People

The question of whether socioeconomic diversity had an influence on student experience represented a difficult question to answer, especially in an independent school setting. Because independent schools historically serve wealthy, White students, at first, the question could seem as though it stated, “Does having some poor students in attendance enrich the experience for the more typical wealthy independent school student?” For instance, Blake, the Head of Willow School, was clear that when he spoke of Willow’s diverse student body, he defined it as a benefit for all Willow students:

I mean, we market ourselves as a very diverse community and that we are purposely creating a diverse community for the benefit of all students. We don't market to wealthy families to say like come play with the poor kids.

Yet students perceived the type and perception of benefits reaped from diversity differently, depending on one’s social class. Henry, a teacher from Lake, thought wealthier students had more appreciation of diversity at the school:

It’s interesting I think sometimes the kids from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are more consciously appreciative of it. I think the ones from lower backgrounds appreciate the level of education that they get here and opportunity to come here.

I heard from lower income students; however, that they actually felt appreciative attending school with peers from a variety of income levels. Some, like Jake, an African American student with less means compared to most of his Willow peers, were explicit about what they thought they learned by attending school with wealthier peers:

Because there is just such a giant cultural difference between those people because I’m African-American and because I did not come from the same means as they did, it was hard as hell; but at the same time I learned so much at Willow not only in school but I don’t even know, I learned more about life there than I would ever learn anywhere else.

Sally, an alumna from Hill, had a slightly different take on what she gained by attending high school with higher income peers. She realized that her presence at Hill was important, so that her peers, who she speculates might later be in positions of power, would have the opportunity to learn from people from different backgrounds with varying perspectives. With that in mind, she felt that she did belong at Hill and that she should speak up:

I do remember understanding why it was important that I was there with my background and my ethnicity. Because I realized I must speak up at every opportunity because otherwise these girls who have money and have power will go to college and will have opportunities to effect policy won't have heard any other perspective.

Sally continued, reflecting on the advantages she had and continued to have by learning about how people from backgrounds of privilege and power operate. She never felt intimidated interacting with wealthy and powerful people and that comfort level helped her as an adult in her career. Furthermore, students and staff perceived that attending a socioeconomically diverse high school represented a positive experience for wealthier students. Gregory, a teacher from Willow summed up his thoughts on the topic, succinctly:

I think it's very good because otherwise, you tend to find very privileged kids who have no sense of how the rest of America lives and I think it's very important that even in the independent school setting, they still be exposed to kids from different ethnic backgrounds, from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Noah, a teacher from Lake, explained why he thought diversity was so important for wealthy students at his school who typically resided in segregated neighborhoods:

The fact remains we have a lot of wealthy students and they're Milford Heights which is about as privileged as you can get. Some students find that when they get to Lake, this is the first time they've met or become friends with people of a very different socioeconomic background. I think that helps make a whole person, to meet and join a community where there are all these different socioeconomic backgrounds. I think it's vital to the child's education.

Evelyn, a White female student from Lake paying full tuition, explained that putting names and faces to places helped her think differently about an area of the city she once considered a poor area where her parents told her not to go. Vilma, a White student paying full tuition from Hill, explained that attending school exclusively with peers whose families could afford high tuitions would just represent a limiting experience.

Finally, some students reported that attending an economically diverse high school helped them get to know themselves better. Nate, a Willow alumnus, said that more than helping him change the outside world, his experiences with a diverse student body at Willow helped him understand himself. Devon, an African-American student paying half tuition at Lake felt that the diversity at his school helped him to understand what made his family strong and why. Moreover, Edwin, a Lake alumnus, reflected that being with economically diverse peers helped him understand that people's situations were not so obvious and that he wanted to relate and empathize with all of them. Stacy, an administrator at Willow, took it a step further when she posited that the most important learning that happens at Willow included the learning that develops from different people's stories, learning respect for one another, despite and across difference.

Summary

The findings revealed that students and staff were aware of socioeconomic difference in the student body. However, they felt uncomfortable discussing economic differences. In Chapter 5, I will summarize and discuss these findings.

Chapter 5. Summary of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Summary of Findings

Chapter 4 discussed the perceptions at the schools around students' backgrounds. The findings revealed that students and staff were aware of socioeconomic differences in the student body. It was clear, however, that although students and teachers were cognizant of socioeconomic diversity, they felt uncomfortable discussing economic differences. When conversations related to differences in wealth took place at Hill, Willow, and Lake, they were most likely to occur out of the classroom and within groups of friends. Social groups, however, were often segregated between wealthier and poorer students.

In the classroom, meaningful conversations informed by socioeconomic backgrounds could and did happen, but these conversations occurred relatively infrequently, especially considering the central value of diversity at Hill, Lake, and Willow. The extent and quality of these conversations depended on a number of factors, including

- Whether the curriculum design has students' economic differences in mind;
- Whether teachers actively draw out students' backgrounds and experiences to inform discussion;
- Whether there is sufficient time to have extended student discussion; and
- Whether students, particularly those from poorer families, feel comfortable exposing their backgrounds.

Other places where conversations about class differences took place were in the classrooms, assemblies, and specific school programs designed to provoke conversations related to diversity. Assemblies and programs about social class and social capital can feel forced, but help create an environment where conversations happen afterward in ways that are more organic. The programs seem most effective when students have agency in designing the experiences. Schools can also set up structures that facilitate meaningful conversations across differences, such as advisories, in which students from different economic backgrounds get to know each

other through directed and sustained contact over the 4-year high school period. In addition, I found that relationships across economic differences formed around common extracurricular interests, such as sports or theater, and with more ease, the longer students remained in school together.

At each of the three schools, the socioeconomic diversity of the respective school's student body influenced students' experiences. Students, alumni, teachers, and administrators all agreed that going to school in a diverse setting helped students to gain comfort from interacting with people across differences. Alumni from each of the schools reported that their high school experiences with diverse peers contributed to greater comfort with diversity and helped them in their civic and professional lives by enabling them to work effectively with people from diverse backgrounds. Current students at the schools explained that attending school with peers from different economic backgrounds helped dispel stereotypes about people from financial backgrounds different from their own. Teachers also noticed that students could better see the complexity and nuance of issues when diverse peers added their viewpoints.

Depending on their class background, however, some students saw the value of attending economically diverse schools differently. Students from poorer backgrounds focused more on the advantage they gained becoming conversant with a culture of privilege and power, while students from wealthier backgrounds articulated the benefit of learning to collaborate well across differences. Many students felt that the socioeconomically diverse settings of their high schools helped them reflect on whom they were and what they valued. When conversations related to differences in wealth took place at Hill, Willow, and Lake, they were most likely to occur out of the classroom within groups of friends. Segregation between wealthier and poorer students was also a reality. In the classroom, meaningful conversations informed by socioeconomic

backgrounds could and did happen, but these conversations occurred relatively infrequently, especially considering the central value of diversity at Hill, Lake, and Willow. The extent and quality of these conversations depended on (a) whether the curriculum design had students' economic differences in mind; (b) whether teachers actively drew out students' backgrounds and experiences to inform discussion; (c) whether sufficient time to have extended student discussion existed; and (d) whether students, particularly those from poorer families, felt comfortable exposing their backgrounds.

The findings highlighted the value of school programs designed to provoke conversations related to diversity. Assemblies and programs about social classes and social capital can feel forced, but these can also help create an environment where conversations happen afterward in ways that are more organic. Schools can also set up structures that facilitate meaningful conversations across differences, such as advisories, in which students from different economic backgrounds get to know each other through directed and sustained contact over the 4-year high school period.

Implications

Perception of Socioeconomic Diversity

The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) has engaged in work around diversity almost since its inception, first establishing an Office of Minority Affairs in the late 1960s. In 1989, it became the Office of Diversity and Multicultural Services, and is now the Office of Equity and Justice. That office began sponsoring the annual People of Color Conference (PoCC) for faculty and staff in NAIS (2016) member schools in 1986. However, considering the amount of conversations occurring around diversity at NAIS (2016) and its member schools, socioeconomic diversity has not been a large part of that dialogue. Rather, as

the names of the offices and conferences imply, the term, diversity, in the independent school setting is often associated with racial/ethnic diversity. In one of my preliminary interviews, the head of Fieldcrest explained that examining issues of socioeconomic diversity at independent schools was important. However, it was particularly difficult because “historically private schools have been defined by economic exclusivity, and these issues of socioeconomic diversity are often even more difficult to discuss at these schools than other types of diversity such as racial and ethnic diversity” (personal communication, December 18, 2009). My findings supported his assertion.

The findings of the study revealed several reasons socioeconomic diversity was not often discussed, many of which I reported in Chapter 4 of this study. One of these was the idea that students perceive elements of identity, such as race and gender, as immutable. They perceived economic status as something achieved through hard work and talent. According to respondents, the identification of having less money was often associated with less talent and less inherent value. Consequently, this association could contribute to students’ fear of exposing their respective class backgrounds.

While socioeconomic diversity is certainly more mutable compared to race and gender, less economic mobility and more stratification exists in contemporary American society compared to any time since the early 1900s (Galliott, 2015; Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015; Spruyt, 2015). If the schools addressed the misconception about the connection between wealth, hard work, and talent, it could create greater comfort for students about sharing their class backgrounds (Galliott, 2015; Hollifield-Hoyle & Hammons, 2015; Spruyt, 2015). Because socioeconomic diversity is so often seen as opaque, one might assume that it plays an insignificant role in the lives of students.

Discomfort Discussing Socioeconomic Diversity

It was apparent at all three schools that students and teachers felt uncomfortable discussing economic differences. This was true for students from both higher and lower economic backgrounds. However, of particular significance was the shame felt by students from lower economic backgrounds. While the schools I researched were leaders when it came to enrolling students from financially diverse backgrounds and working to create inclusive environments, even at these schools, students felt embarrassed to come from poorer families. This led those students to offer opinions, informed by their more modest income backgrounds, with less frequency. This shame had negative consequences, most importantly for the student experiencing that shame, but also for other students in the school who did not get the opportunity to know the personal background and stories associated with the family backgrounds of their peers.

A theme that came up throughout my interviews and findings was the important and complex challenge of creating spaces where all students felt comfortable sharing themselves with the school community. Testimony shared with me from students, teachers, and alumni indicated that despite much effort and multiple strategies, creating a safe environment represented a somewhat elusive goal, even for schools dedicated to its pursuit. Descriptions of the difficulty students and teachers experienced discussing economic differences pointed to the need for schools to devote more time and thought to creating safe spaces for these conversations to occur. In addition, it is important for schools to note that achieving demographic diversity in their student bodies does not necessarily translate into an enriched learning environment if students are hesitant to inform conversation with important elements of their identities. The different

opinions that students share, based on their identities, enriches the learning (Chang et al., 2004; Coleman & Stevenson, 2014; Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2001).

Social Groups and Strategies for Integration

According to a majority of the students who participated in the study, they are most likely to have discussions related to economic differences informally among their friends. Because friendship groups are the most likely space for these meaningful conversations to occur, it is important for school leaders to understand the composition of social groups within their schools (Antonio, 2001a). Furthermore, given Antonio's (2001a) finding that frequent interracial interaction may be even more important in developing greater cultural awareness than more formal activities such as workshops or coursework, friendship groups are potentially as or more important a site for economic diversity to enrich learning as more formal school programming in workshops or academic courses.

Students reported a high degree of segregation in their social groups along economic lines. Proximity to peers' homes, shared interests, and access to activities outside of school, factors all influenced by financial background, impact formation of social groups. Literature revealed that there is indeed a tendency towards segregation in schools. Understanding the tendency towards segregation in social groups also stresses the importance for schools to think through the ways to facilitate interactions across economic differences in the classroom and through clubs and assemblies (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Palardy, 2013; Rotberg, 2014). While schools cannot mandate friendships, they can make efforts to increase structures within the school that lead to more integration both on and off-campus (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Palardy, 2013; Rotberg, 2014).

Finally, schools had some differences related to the segregation of social groups. This is evident in students' responses. According to students, Hill School seemed to have the most integration in its social groups. Hill had a couple of distinguishing factors that may have led to greater integration. The first is that Hill is an all-girls school. Both girls and boys at the three schools were aware of economic differences among their peers. However, students may have greater comfort with each other being in a single sex environment like Hill, which may then translate into greater comfort forming friendships across differences. The second is that, unlike Lake and Willow, Hill does not enroll high school students exclusively. Hill serves grades 4 through 12. At all of the schools, both comfort discussing economic differences and integration of social groups increase over time. Because the majority of Hill students are together starting in elementary and middle school, they have more time to gain comfort with peers from diverse backgrounds. Thirdly, there were many things in the Hill environment aimed at making economic differences less visible. This was everything from requiring uniforms to the more tacit agreement articulated by a Hill administrator to "all pretend like they are middle class." This effort to de-emphasize economic differences among students may have led to more integrated social groups, but possibly at the expense of students sharing their disparate family backgrounds openly and freely.

The actual differences in student backgrounds seemed to be most significant at Willow and least significant at Hill. This was my impression from speaking with and observing students at the schools, but also based on the amount of students receiving discounted tuition and the size of those discounts. In addition, unlike the other schools, Willow makes an explicit effort to recruit half of their students from public schools. The greater diversity may have led to greater tension across students from different backgrounds and more segregation. This echoes a study

done in 1998 by the Friends Council on Education, “Embracing the Tension.” This study reported that schools with the least amount of diversity reported the highest level of tolerance. Schools that reported greater tension also had greater diversity. Increased demographic diversity might cause increased tension and increased learning opportunities deriving from diversity among peers.

Recommendations

The findings from this study demonstrated that students have much to gain by attending classes with peers from diverse economic backgrounds. Students reported that varied opinions related to course material made coursework more interesting. In a study by Chang et al. (2004), the researchers asked students 10 questions targeting contemporary social, political, or economic issues. The study showed consistent and significant differences in responses to the questions between racial groups (Chang et al., 2004). Similarly, students in my study reported that their peers from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds seemed to have different interpretations of material than those who shared similar family backgrounds, thus enriching the learning experience.

In addition, one of the ideas I highlighted as an important skill in Chapter 2 was the ability to place facts in context and understand their emotional impact (Pink, 2006). Students and alumni reflected that the experience of knowing peers from different backgrounds and understanding their feelings and opinions related to various idea and concepts, left a lasting and meaningful impression. Many said that the face-to-face interactions and conversations with peers provided a richer and more memorable learning experience than just reading about different perspectives in a text. The specific examples I reported on from students and alumni and teachers provide concrete documentation of the ways classroom learning is enriched for students by

economically diverse peers. While this evidence is anecdotal, it substantiates the assumption put forward by many independent school leaders (Davidson & Goldberg, 2009) that diversity enriches the learning environment.

There is unmet potential, however, for socioeconomic diversity to enrich the classroom-learning environment. My interviews revealed a tension for teachers and administrators to navigate between covering large amounts of course content corresponding to the demands of rigorous prep school curricula and taking advantage of students' experiences and personal reflections to deepen learning related to literary and historical themes. While most teachers I interviewed expressed a desire to increase classroom conversation among students to facilitate understanding about class differences, they identified a tension between covering vast amounts of course content and slowing down for extended student conversation around critical topics. There is no easy answer to the correct balance between content coverage and deeper conversation. However, if schools are allocating resources towards achieving greater demographic diversity, claiming that diversity enriches the learning environment, and aspiring for their students to develop greater empathy and work well across differences, the stakeholders should consider the amount of class time for discussion required to achieve these goals.

Finally, while teachers often design curriculum with racial/ethnic diversity in mind, the same is not true for economic diversity. Nor is there usually professional development for teachers focused on economic diversity. Teachers at Lake School reported that when their summer reading and in house professional development was focused on understanding differences in social class, they were intentional about providing classroom activities that would take advantage of the diverse student backgrounds to enrich the learning.

This study also documented the positive impact that attending socioeconomically diverse independent high schools had on students. The data reveal that economic diversity contributes to students' ability to understand the perspectives of peers from different family backgrounds and thus, work effectively across differences. Again, this documentation is important because, while educational leaders and the broader society have identified these as important modern skills (Friedman, 2006; Gardner, 2006; Pink, 2006), there has been little documentation of the ways socioeconomic diversity contributes to students attaining these skills.

The finding that alumni reflecting back on their high school experiences identified the skills they developed working with people across differences as perhaps the most relevant skill to their work in a variety of professional fields provides reason for school leaders to strongly consider the resources they allocate towards enrolling and supporting an economically diverse student body. In addition, the anecdotal evidence from this study showing students from diverse independent high schools are more likely to seek out diversity in college supports the notion from the literature that diversity in the high school setting has a powerful influence on whether students are open to diversity in college and beyond (Pascarella et al., 1996).

Furthermore, students reported that interactions with their diverse peers facilitated active thinking, helping them to see the world as complex as opposed to Black and White. These findings suggest that just as racial/ethnic diversity in higher education increases openness to diversity, problem solving across differences, and empathy for those from different backgrounds, something similar occurs with socioeconomic diversity in independent high schools (Gurin, 1999). In addition, alumni reported that their experiences in high school with economic diversity made them more effective in their civic engagement, also echoing a finding from racial diversity in higher education (Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2001)

All these findings showed that diversity is something that schools should start focusing on more than ever. Diversity transcends racial and gender diversity. Socioeconomic diversity is also important (Kalogrides & Loeb, 2013; Palardy, 2013; Rotberg, 2014).

In conclusion, this documentation can be useful for schools. While people may have ideas about if and how students perceive economic differences at schools, no documentation exists about what this actually looks like. When school board members are wondering whether the diversity that results from their school's investment in financial aid is recognizable within the school, this documentation may help them understand more concretely that the investment plays a visible role in the life of the school. In addition, there are policies schools could put in place that can help to either increase or decrease the visibility of economic differences. Understanding what makes those differences in financial background visible to students and teachers is a first step in thinking through the types of policies a school might construct.

Limitations

Like others, this study has some limitations. There is not a lot of research done at independent schools about the impact of diverse class backgrounds. In addition, there is not a body of literature about the impact of socioeconomic diversity on student learning and experience. Existing research on economic diversity mainly focuses on the impact that mixed socioeconomic backgrounds has on the academic achievement of students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Kahlenberg, 2001). This lack of research posed a challenge in constructing a conceptual framework.

For many of the reasons explained in this study economic diversity is a sensitive topic. Consequently, it was difficult to find schools willing to grant me the necessary access for my research. Even after I found heads of school who were willing to let me use their schools as

study sites, it took much time and effort to recruit the study participants I needed. At one school, I was not able to get enough participants so I had to find a different school.

This study grew out of my experiences leading an independent school and the questions I received from parents and trustees. In spite of the limitations and extended period it took me to complete the study, I expect it to be both relevant and useful to practitioners in the field. School leaders must have strategic conversations and make high stakes budgetary decisions about financial aid. Researchers may use the findings of this study to understand what the potential impact for students is of investing in financial aid and the strategies required creating a learning environment where socioeconomic diversity enriches the learning for all students. This study also highlights how fraught and complex people's attitudes are in relation to economic diversity. It points to the need for explicit school-wide conversations around the importance of socioeconomic diversity and ongoing efforts to make all students feel included so they might share their class backgrounds. Moreover, the participants at all three schools showed similarities in their perspectives and attitudes, but also demonstrated enough differences that nuances were detectable. While these findings are particular to the three schools I used for case studies, the lessons learned can help to frame conversations about economic diversity at other independent high schools.

Recommendations for Further Research

The body of literature requires further research in order to understand in more depth the nuanced relationship between socioeconomic diversity and racial/ethnic diversity. Based on data from my interviews, I was not able to draw conclusions about intersects and differences between the different types of diversity. Race and class function together in complicated ways. Research

that teases out the way each informs the other could be useful to independent school leaders and educators.

Based on qualitative data, students' opinions about contemporary social issues varied based on economic background. Chang et al. (2004) used quantitative data and analysis to demonstrate that race influences students' opinions about social, political, and economic issues. Future researchers could use a similar methodology to Chang et al.'s (2004); however, future researchers should substitute diverse economic backgrounds for diverse racial backgrounds. This could further establish the influence of socioeconomic background on students' opinions.

While my data provided some rich descriptions related to some topics, the mechanisms by which socioeconomic background influences students' perspectives needs to be further elaborated. Finally, this study focused on schools that have a large number of students receiving financial aid. I found it interesting when study participants compared their experiences at their current diverse school to a previous, less diverse one. Research at schools with smaller numbers of students receiving financial assistance and without diversity woven into their missions could inform useful comparisons.

Final Thoughts

Like all institutions, independent schools must set priorities in the way they use time, energy, and resources. School leaders must make difficult choices when it comes to constructing budgets and setting course schedules and curriculum. Making the sacrifices necessary to enroll students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds is understandably difficult for institutions funded by tuition and contributed income. Providing the support necessary to students and educators so that all students in a socioeconomically diverse student body can learn from each other and thrive requires tremendous effort. It is my hope that this study contributes to the

important conversation independent school leaders have begun about how to take the next step in both enrolling and supporting racially and socioeconomically diverse students.

This coming fall, 55 new students will enroll as the founding students of Sequoyah High School. More than half of those enrolling are students of color and around half will be paying below the top tuition. Approximately half of those students are matriculating from public schools. As the founding Head of the new high school, I can apply lessons learned from this dissertation to my leadership of the school as it begins and grows. It has become clear that diversity will enrich learning for all of our students and that the school community should undertake efforts to create space for students and teachers to explore different perspectives based on who they are and from where they come. This work requires difficult choices and conversations that are an important part of preparing the next generation of students to learn and live in a diverse society.

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