The Psychological Experiences of Students of Color
By: Michael Thompson & Kathy Schultz

In the last 20 years, independent schools have collectively taken many meaningful steps to become more diverse and more socially equitable places. Almost every school has undergone - or is undergoing – a significant evolution in its thinking about racial diversity. These schools have admitted more and more students of color, administrators have made determined efforts to recruit faculty of color, and heads and boards of trustees have made a moral commitment to using the school's resources to increase diversity. Though there are miles to go in this journey, independent schools have achieved a great deal in the area over the past two decades.

I (Michael Thompson) am particularly proud of the gains at the school where I serve as a psychologist and at many of the schools with whom I’ve consulted over the years. In spite of my pride in what has been accomplished, when I listen to a lonely student of color describe his life, I sometimes have a dramatically different view. For the individual students on the frontline of change, the psychological price for being a minority student in a majority white school is often heavy. I often come close to asking, "Is this worth it for you? I know this is a great education, and I know your parents think this is the most important thing you can do with your life, but can you bear it?"

In pursuing the issue of social isolation and the psychological challenges that students of color experience in independent schools, I became involved with a group composed of heads of school, trustees, and educators who specialize in diversity work. They had been invited by the New England Association of Schools and Colleges to explore the issue of equity in the educational experience for students of color, and to determine how to effect change in schools, beginning with the top decision-making bodies. There I met Kathy Schultz, director of graduate support for Nativity Preparatory School in the Boston area. Nativity Prep is a Jesuit-run middle school of boys in grades five through eight that takes disadvantaged boys - primarily black, Hispanic, and immigrant boys from poor families - and prepares them to go on to independent schools and public high schools. Kathy's job is to follow these young men after they leave Nativity, through their high school and college years. Nativity encourages and supports its graduates emotionally - and financially when needed - so they do not get thrown off track due to lack of familiarity with the world of secondary and higher education. Kathy knows intimately the psychological pressures that students of color face in many different independent schools, and she shared the experiences of her graduates with the group. It became clear that we both responded to these issues in the same way, and wanted to share our thoughts with a wider audience. Based on our experiences in supporting students of color in independent schools, we would like to suggest that there are six particularly difficult psychological experiences which most - not all - of these students are likely to face: (1) social loneliness, (2) racial visibility and social invisibility, (3) class and cultural discomfort among white parents and administrators, (4) the burden of explaining oneself to white people, (5) completing studies at a demanding school with minimal parent participation, and (6) the burden of having to feel grateful all the time. Some other writers, with a more political or sociological point of view, would rightly describe all of these experiences as aspects of racism.

Because we are counselors and not sociologists, because we work with individuals and not societies, we remain content to call them psychological burdens. When students talk to us, they don't experience these stresses as something cultural or societal. In the moment, what a child experiences always feels unique and personal. It is only with experience and detachment
that a student can come to see that what is happening to him or her is a result of being a "student of color." As they grow older they may come to recognize and label behaviors as "racist." The label that may help take the sting out of those behaviors, and enable a student to maintain some emotional distance. However, that emotional distance, to the extent that it can ever be achieved, is an achievement of maturity that only begins developing in middle school and high school.

In many ways, what we want to say boils down to this: Repeated hurtful experiences can have a long-term psychological impact. They are painful and depressing and can make a child feel lonely and defective. They may drive a child into a state of psychological distress, which he or she may be reluctant to share with administrators, teachers, and even with his or her own parents. As obvious as it may be, however, there seems a certain reluctance in independent schools to acknowledge the basic fact that schools with a white majority - even those schools strongly committed to diversity - often are psychologically complicated and painful places for students of color in ways these schools are not painful for white students. This is true regardless of class, but it's particularly true for students of color from poor, urban environments. We encourage schools to consider these psychological burdens and what they can do to reduce them - and, thus, better fulfill their promises to these students.

**Social Loneliness**

There are three psychological difficulties that contribute to the loneliness of a child of color in a majority-white school. First, in a school where you are in the minority, you may not feel as if you have - indeed, you do not have - the same social pool available to you as white kids do. That is because all children tend to connect with others who are "like them," and all children's social groups seek homogeneity as a first goal. Being the only child of color in a class, or one of a few students of color, is enough to make some children feel unbearably lonely. Second, a child who previously attended a school with a majority of students of color may have no experience in having white friends or approaching an all-white social group; as a result he or she may withdraw socially. Third, white kids may not have any experience in having children of color in their group, and don't know how to extend an invitation, or may not want to extend an invitation, for social engagement. Students of color often report that they are not invited to join informal social groups and they don't feel comfortable approaching. The result is a social stand-off. For white students, this isn't particularly problematic, since they have a large social circle of other white students. But for students of color with few students to befriend, the psychological impact is immense.

**Racial invisibility and Social Invisibility**

Everyone in the white community is keenly aware of who the "kids of color" are, but a significant number of people in the school, both faculty and parents, are interested in these children only insofar as they participate in the white community, or have meaning for the white community. Many whites are not, for a variety of reasons, interested in knowing about the complete life of a child of color. They cannot visualize where these kids live, what they have to do to get to Sunnybrook-by-the-Sea School, what their parents' background is like. The paradox is that while the kids become important to the community as symbols - "We're diverse!" - They often feel personally neglected and devalued. Schools continuously demand that students of color respect the values of the school, but the schools don't have much interest in respecting the values of the culture from which the student comes. Aaron, an African-American boy we know,
is familiar with this scenario. When he arrived at his day school, he said he was assigned a host family.

The family was most kind. They invited him into their home and their life, and, on one occasion, invited his parents for dinner. Aaron's family reciprocated by extending an invitation to the host family several times, but the white family apparently felt uncomfortable visiting his home in the inner city and never accepted. Because he was so hurt by the imbalance, Aaron stopped visiting the home of his host family.

**Class and Cultural Discomfort Among White Parents and Administrators**

At a parent meeting, one father at an elementary school waved his hand in a sweeping, inclusive gesture and declared, "This has always been a neighborhood school." He was referring to a neighborhood where the average housing price is above two million dollars. Actually, because of the commitment of the head and the board to diversity, this man's school was rapidly becoming racially diverse, but it was comforting to him at many levels to think of the school as being filled with people like his neighbors. It no longer was, not only because there were children off-color his school, but because there were poor children of color there. These students had the kind of parents, as one African-American mother pointed out, who might well have worked as maids in this man's home. Affluent school populations have little idea about the realities of the day-to-day life of the less affluent, even what it takes to get their child to school.

An African-American mother of three children, each of whom attend different independent schools in the Boston area, could no longer take her youngest son to school on the subway and hold onto her job. She agonized about the decision, but finally, when the City of Boston provided him with a bus pass at age ten, she allowed him to take the subway to school on his own. She used their regular trips as practice runs. She quizzed him on the stops; she prepared him in every way and nervously sent him off on the subway with a cell phone in his pocket. When he started arriving at school on his own, many white parents in the school reacted with anxiety or began remarking unfavorably on his mother. Senior girls in schools in Manhattan often comment on the length of their trips and the commitment of time they make to come to school from their homes in Queens and Brooklyn. The trips can take over an hour each way, with a long walk to the station. It is only recently that private schools have started to arrange for shuttles from their nearest public transportation stops. These older girls say that many people do not want to know what they have to go through to get to the schools they attend. We believe the fundamental discomfort here is with the discrepancy in wealth that makes the well-to-do majority uncomfortable. These matters, however, always cut both ways. Jeannine, a senior from a school in New York who had an extraordinarily successful career in her school from almost every point of view, admitted that she feels envious part of every day of the week. She thrived academically at her school, will have her choice of college, is considered a leader and has made friends among students of color and white students. She has one particularly close friend, Amanda, who is wealthy and white. As close as they are, there are some topics she can not talk about with Amanda: her lack of money and her friend's extraordinary wealth. Why? "Because I feel as though she'd change the way she looks at me.... In our society, money equals success.... I'd be lying to you if I said that it didn't matter."

**The Burden of Explaining Oneself to White People**

We had an African-American boy at Belmont Hill who was a powerful leader in the community, the president of his class, captain of the wrestling team, and the informal leader of
every student of color on campus. To the astonishment of many people, he chose to go to Howard University. He was the first and only graduate ever to attend a historically black college. When, as a senior, he was asked why, he said, "I'm tired of educating white people." He also noted reasons why Howard was the right university for him, but the initial comment speaks volumes about the difficult weight of explaining oneself - sometimes justifying oneself - to others.

Students of color are often asked to educate white students. They are asked to be representatives for their race and culture. They also carry the added burden of explaining to white students and adults the importance of race consciousness in this country. They are often asked to take the lead here while white students can sit back or join in as they wish. It shouldn’t be surprising that bright students of color get tired of this and seek out college communities where they can simply be themselves. Perhaps equally tiring to students of color is the degree to which they have to switch "selves" - in essence, maintain two identities. Sometimes students of color try to hold onto pieces of their former personal identity while trying to acclimate to the culture of the new school. One girl described it as "talking white and talking black."

Completing Studies at a Demanding School with Minimal Parent Participation

Most independent schools are difficult to survive with your parents’ help. To do it without your parents is very tough. Many parents know how to navigate the waters of a school culture simply because they have been through it themselves. If a student runs up against a problem, the parent usually has a sense of where to go for a solution. But parents who did not attend a private school, or have access to higher education in any form, do not have this ability to help. This is especially true among certain immigrant groups. They not only don't know where to turn, they barely recognize the problem, except that it is damaging their child. Students are left turning to school advisors and mentors, who rarely realize the depth of this need. One of the advantages of white privilege is having your parents feel comfortable at your school. For reasons of education, class, and culture, many parents of color never come to the school. We know a Nigerian woman, a cabdriver, who drives up to the school, parks her cab and goes to parent events in the red-and-white checked flannel shirt she wears when she's at work. She is spectacularly proud and totally at her ease. She is also the exception to the rule. One parent, who runs groups for parents of color at her children's school, says that many parents of color don't come to school because they don’t want to experience the subtle turning of the backs that happens to many black parents.

The Burden of Being Grateful for the Opportunity

No one likes to feel grateful all the time. Students of color may find it painful to be reminded constantly of "what an opportunity this is" when they are feeling lonely or misunderstood in the setting. It is true that many of independent schools invest substantial amounts of money in scholarships for minority students (as well as for many white students). In return for this, they get a student body that better reflects the reality of our nation and creates a far greater learning environment than one would find in a homogeneous school community. At the very least, schools should see the myriad ways in which the white-majority community unconsciously expects gratitude from students of color - and how this makes students of color feel. Schools need to acknowledge what a risk the child took to come to the school, and show some gratitude for the student’s willingness to stick it out. Schools know that they have to provide support on the academic side for kids (white students and students of color) who enter
with inadequate preparation, and they are prepared to do so. But it's clear that they also need to look more fully at the lives of students of color - consider how the experience of an independent school will be Different for them than for white students in a variety of ways. Even as they educate, identify, and treat the anxiety, stress-related disorders, substance abuse problems, and/or eating disorders of the white majority (the dark side of upper-middle-class life), they often don't take the time to familiarize themselves with the psychological needs of students of color, especially poor children, and, therefore, are often ill-equipped to address them. There are, of course, many systemic things schools can do to alleviate the psychological barriers to success of students of color. Simply achieving a critical mass of Students of color, hiring more teachers and administrators of color, and appointing trustees of color will help tremendously. Schools should also examine their curriculum, openly discuss white privilege, and develop support mechanisms for students of color, and recognize the value of formal and informal affinity groups.

For some students of color, the psychological stresses of attending majority-white schools are too much, and they need to leave for their own mental health. Most students remain and thrive, though they may struggle psychologically. What makes their psychological pain bearable? It is to have it heard and acknowledged by others, and to have others help bear that pain. When boys and young men flock back to Nativity Prep from their various schools for the annual Christmas party, they have a chance to do exactly that: to share their stories with their old teachers and bear the difficulties together. Their reunion helps them renew their commitments to the sometimes difficult environments they find at their schools. This past year, Richard Melvoin, the headmaster of Belmont Hill, invited four alumni to the school (two African-American, one Asian-American, and a white student who had been on financial aid) to come back from college and describe their high school experiences to their old faculty - experiences not just on campus, but also in the broader community. The teachers were spellbound by the honest, articulate testimony they heard from their former students about their years at the school. However, the young men held up a mirror to the community and it was at times uncomfortable. At moments, many in the room must have thought, "This is too painful. It cannot have been worth it for these boys to come to school here." At one point, however, one of the students, after making some powerfully critical remarks, looked around the room at the faculty and said, "You know, eight of the most important people in my life are in this room. My life was changed for the better because I came here." At the end of the meeting, the faculty must have looked stunned and quite serious, because he added, "Don't worry, we talk like this at Brown all the time." If students talk like this in college, we can encourage them to speak of their experiences while they are in our care - so that we, too, may learn and grow and challenge both ourselves and the broader culture in which we work and live.

Michael Thompson is a school psychologist and coauthor of numerous books on the social and emotional life of children, including Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children. Kathy Schultz is director of graduate support at Nativity Preparatory School in Boston.