Educational Administrators’ Perceptions of Racism in Diverse School Contexts

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School leaders of today face many challenges. Prominent among these challenges is the task of ensuring that all—and not just some—students perform well in their respective institutions. This is no small task, given the history of variable student achievement and the reality that this variability is not random. Compelling evidence now exists that shows that student success and failure follows particular patterns. One of the most noticeable of these patterns revolves around ‘race’ and ethnicity. In Western countries like Canada, the USA, the UK and Australia, students who do not belong to the dominant ethnic (Anglo) group routinely have to overcome significant barriers if they are to succeed in these countries’ educational institutions. These systematic barriers are in some ways associated with a phenomenon we have come to refer to as racism. Some scholars go so far as to say that racism and issues of ‘race’ are the main reason why students of colour do poorly in schools (Ogbu, 1994; Young & Laible, 2000). While racism has undoubtedly always existed in some form or another in schools, it has become more obvious in recent times, particularly with the increase in diversity in Western countries. Many researchers (e.g. McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993; Troyna, 1993; Gillborn, 1995; Alladin, 1996; Dei et al., 1997; McLaren & Torres, 1999) have documented its pervasive presence in educational institutions.

Given this presence then, racism ought to be a serious concern for educational leaders, particularly those who hold positions of responsibility in schools, like principals and headteachers. This is because the place where racism is often most evident is at the school level. It is here that the various and complex forms of racism emerge in their obvious and not so obvious guises, in the name-calling, harassment and the interpersonal conflict, in the subtle stereotyping and taken-for-granted understandings and practices, and in curricular and organisational patterns. It is also at this site, despite efforts in recent times to (re)centralise control over schools in Western countries like the UK and Canada, for example, that principals and headteachers exert substantial influence. While their power to control school activities may be diminished in some areas, school leaders still have the capacity to
influence the day-to-day actions of teachers and students perhaps more than any other single individual. Indeed, Troyna and Hatcher (1992) and Gillborn (1995) have demonstrated in their research that school administrators can have a decisive effect on racist and anti-racist practices in their respective schools. This is why it is so important for them both to acknowledge the presence of racism in their schools and to understand it in a way that provides a basis for constructive responses to it. Unfortunately, the slim empirical evidence that does exist—most of it in studies that focus on other issues or individuals—indicates that school leaders tend not to notice nor attend to racism or issues of ‘race’ (Anderson, 1990; Lipman, 1998; Taylor, 1998; Young & Laible, 2000). It also indicates that administrators do not understand the many ways in which racism works (Young & Laible, 2000), even though such understanding is crucial in formulating effective strategies for preventing future racist practice (Henze et al., 2000). The study described here documents how school administrators—principals in this case—perceived racism in their respective schools. Among other things, it explores the extent to which these administrators believe racism exists in their schools and the ways in which they understand it.

Racism, Education and Administrators

Racism is a much-contested concept. Over the years, scholars, practitioners and policy-makers have attributed a number of meanings to it. Of the many different understandings of racism, two stand out. One views racism as a form of individual prejudice. The other considers racism as a more global, systemic phenomenon. Many advocates of the latter perspective also acknowledge that racism is both individualistic and systemic. This territory has been covered extensively over the past few years (see, for example, Henriques, 1984; Troyna & Hatcher, 1992; Rizvi, 1993a; Troyna, 1993; West, 1994; Shohat & Stam, 1994; Gillborn, 1995). These and other scholars have identified these two versions of racism, mined their respective meanings and drawn out the consequences of adopting them. The reason that I revisit these issues, as will become apparent, is their relevance to the ways in which administrators of schools (and students and parents) perceive racism. Administrators’ preference for one particular understanding of racism will inevitably have significant consequences for what they do about the actions associated with racism.

Inquiry into ‘race’ and racism in education has a comparatively short history. In the USA some of the earlier research was conducted by Coleman et al. (1966). More sustained efforts to explore the area were undertaken by researchers in the UK. Much of this research was quantitative. While earlier inquiries of this sort (e.g. Maughan & Rutter, 1986; Kysel, 1988) were misleading, subsequent advances in quantitative research (e.g. Smith & Tomlinson, 1989) made it possible to delineate in clearer ways the interaction of selected and student achievement (Gillborn, 1995). The problem with some of this research, however, was that it often saw racism in terms of the ‘overt’ variety, ignoring the more subtle and widespread forms. This also was one of the criticisms of multicultural education at the time. Troyna (1984,
1987), for example, argued that attention to the more superficial aspects of ‘culture’, and a view of racism as a form of individual prejudice, deflected attention away from the more enduring, insidious and less visible effects of racism. Despite the shortcomings, this and future research would document the inequities between dominant and non-dominant ethnic groups in educational institutions.

Recently, more scholars have explored racism in schools from a perspective that acknowledges its systemic and subtle character. Among other things, they have probed the implications of the study of racism and practice of anti-racism in education (e.g. Troyna, 1983; McCarthy & Crichlow, 1993; Gillborn, 1995; McLaren & Torres, 1999). Academics have also conducted empirical studies that have explored, for example, racism in children’s lives (Troyna & Hatcher, 1992; Short & Carrington, 1999), the perspectives of Black students and parents (Gillborn, 1995; Dei, 1996; Dei et al., 1997), the attitudes and views of White teachers (Sleeter, 1994), racist discourse in curricular materials (Johnston, 1996; Ryan, 1999) and issues of language and identity (Ibrahim, 1999). But while scholars have attended to the perspectives of students, teachers and parents, they have largely ignored educational administrators. With a few exceptions of inquiry into administration and diversity (Valverde, 1988; McKeown, 1989; Anderson, 1990, 1996; Reyes & Capper, 1991; Winfield et. al., 1993; May, 1994; Derkatz, 1996; Ryan & Wignall, 1996; Lipman, 1998; Maxcy, 1998; Ryan, 1998a; Riehl, 2000), little, if any attention has been accorded to ‘race’ or racism and administration. The few articles that do address racism/‘race’ and administration, often as a peripheral issue, as mentioned earlier, indicate the tendency of administrators not to recognise racism in their schools (Anderson, 1990; Lipman, 1998; Taylor, 1998; Young & Laible, 2000). And for those administrators who do acknowledge its presence, evidence suggests that it is crucial that they understand it in a way that is helpful in eliminating or reducing its effects (Henze et al., 2000).

The Study

The study described here was part of a larger four-year inquiry into how principals dealt with the challenges associated with ethnocultural diversity in schools. It consisted of three stages. The first stage involved personal interviews with 35 principals. These administrators were selected from two large Canadian school districts that shared a common border. One district was urban, while the other covered both urban and rural territory. The former was highly diverse and had been recognised as such for a number of years. Even so, its diversity has continued to increase. In this district it was not uncommon for students in one school to identify with upwards of 60 different heritages. The second district varied in its ethnocultural composition. The urban portion of the board was as diverse as the former district, while the rural part was considerably less so. The unique characteristic of this district was the fact that this diversity was rapidly moving northwards out from the more urban region to the rural one. Both districts had policies that were designed to
discourage racism. We chose the schools on the basis of their diversity, and not the individual who occupied the role of school administrator. While most of the schools displayed obvious levels of diversity, a few, mostly rural schools, were decidedly less so. These latter schools had only a handful of students who were not Anglo. The sample included a representative number of elementary and secondary schools. The size of schools varied from small elementary schools of around 100 students to larger secondary schools with student populations of over 2000. Although not initially intended, the gender balance of principals was approximately even. With the exception of two administrators, all were of Anglo or European heritage.

The research team (myself and a research assistant) asked administrators open-ended questions about how they dealt with the challenges that accompanied ethnocultural diversity in their respective schools. Originally we attempted, using a framework developed by Leithwood and Stager (1989), to discover how principals made decisions in this area. We focused on how they interpreted the various issues, what goals they set for themselves, what principles they followed and what constraints they experienced as they attempted to attain these goals. We directed our questions to the areas of (1) curriculum and instruction, (2) students and teachers, (3) the community, (4) school organisation and structure, and (5) resource allocation. Although we wanted to explore these areas, the questions we asked were open-ended enough to allow administrators to talk about areas of concern to them that we had not anticipated. Also, as the study proceeded and various other themes became evident, we pursued them. One of the most prominent themes was racism. We recognised after the first few interviews that this issue was important, so we followed up on this theme in the subsequent interviews.

The second stage of the study involved spending an extended period of time in one particular school. None of the data from this stage is used in this article. The third stage involved the development and circulation of a survey. We used the data from the first two stages to design questions that would probe principals’ perceptions of significant areas related to diversity issues. Perceptions of racism was one of these areas. The racism question asked principals, ‘If you have ever had any occurrences of racism in your school, please indicate the form and frequency on a five-point scale’. So a 1 would indicate that there was no racism and 5 would signify that it was pervasive. The individual items probed were (1) stereotyping by students and (2) educators, (3) harassment of students and (4) educators, (5) violence, (6) graffiti, (7) name-calling, (8) exclusion, (9) fairness, and (10) classroom portrayals. Respondents were also asked to indicate whether the school was elementary or secondary, its size and the approximate percentages of various ethnic groups. Before the survey was sent out, it was distributed to administrators, graduate students and research officers, and subsequently altered to address their various concerns.

We chose 32 school districts across Canada to participate in the study. We targeted these particular districts because Canadian census data indicated that there was a strong possibility of culturally diverse school communities in these areas. We sent letters to the chief executive officers of these districts requesting permission to carry out the study. Twenty-two agreed to participate. We asked these districts to
forward us the names and addresses of 10 principals to whom we could send the surveys. We sent out 220 surveys and had 104 returned.

The data were treated in a number of ways. First, we calculated the means for each of the items. Since responses were registered on a five-point scale, the means could only run from a possible low of 1 to a high of 5. We also ran two- and three-way analysis of variance. We did this to see if there were any differences in the ways in which principals in different settings responded to the survey items. The analyses of variance were performed to establish if there were any differences among (1) the perceptions of elementary and secondary school principals, (2) principals of 23 small (85–300 students), 53 medium (301–800 students) and 25 large (801–2200 students) schools (three respondents did not indicate the size of their respective schools), and (3) principals of school with various mixes of diversity (i.e. schools with more or less than 50% Anglo, more or less than 20% African, schools where no group was larger than 40%, and schools where Anglos exceeded 70%).

The Presence of Racism

Many principals were reluctant to acknowledge that racism occurred in their schools. Moreover, those who did acknowledge it tended to emphasise its insignificant nature. This was true for those administrators who were interviewed, just as it was for those who completed the surveys. One of the survey respondents actually wrote ‘No incidents’ on his form. The results of the survey perhaps testify more eloquently to the general ambivalence towards racism. The best indicator of this was in the responses to the query ‘If you have ever had any occurrences of racism in your school, please indicate the form and frequency of occurrence on a five point scale’. The mean response was 1.9, which in this case roughly meant between ‘none’ and ‘little’. While this figure in itself is revealing, the difference between the mean response to this question and the other questions in the survey that dealt with issues other than racism was even more revealing. This is because all other means were at least 3 and some were as high as 4.

Given the diverse nature of most of these administrators’ schools and the documented nature of racism at both personal and systemic levels, these responses are both puzzling and troubling. Why is it that principals are reluctant to admit to the presence of racism in their schools? There are several plausible explanations. One is that administrators simply could not see racism or issues of ‘race’ in their respective schools. This phenomenon is not something that is necessarily unique to these principals, however. In an American context, for example, Anderson (1990) documents the inability of the administrators in his study to notice what he perceived as pressing issues of race in their school communities. He contends that they were conditioned to ignore the constraints that worked against students of African heritage and to believe in the promise of upward mobility for all students. The result was that they did not—or could not—acknowledge the presence of these students or the injustices that were associated with them. Anderson (1990) also notes that this is a problem that goes well beyond schools. He argues that, with a few exceptions,
Black Americans have been rendered invisible throughout American history. But this is not something that remains in the past. Anderson (1990) contends that while racism continued to be perhaps the most pressing contemporary social issue in the USA, it rarely formed part of any public discourse.

There are at least two more explanations for administrators’ failure to acknowledge racism. The first revolves around the implications of acknowledging racism in schools. Most principals may feel obliged to convey a positive image of their respective schools to parents, the larger community and the district office. Acknowledging the presence of racism or other undesirable elements like violence, for example, risks characterisations of their school as racist or violent. Such labels may inevitably reflect badly on the principal him or herself and the school community generally. Acknowledging racism, however, may also convey an unrealistic image of the school. This image consciousness is perhaps even more pronounced in those places where market or quasi-market conditions exist, like in the UK or Slovenia. In these places schools (and administrators) are under considerable pressure to construct images of their schools that would motivate potential clients to choose them over others (Ball et al., 1994; Trnavecic, 2000). Potential clients would quite possibly be less willing to select schools that were perceived as racist or violent. But even where boundaries and clientele are for the most part fixed, as in Ontario for example, administrators may still feel the pressure to present an unblemished image.

The last reason that principals may not acknowledge racism in their schools is because of the narrow way in which they view racism. There is evidence in their interview responses to indicate that this may be the case. Their statements reveal that administrators generally equate racism with individual acts on the part of people who they believe are malicious, ignorant or not capable of exercising good judgement. In other words, most administrators do not see racism as systemic. This contrasts with accounts of how students and parents may see racism.

**Administrator Perceptions of Racism**

Those administrators who acknowledged the existence of racism in their schools identified a number of its forms. They maintained that racism emerged in incidents of harassment, in situations associated with the school, and in graffiti and other similar forms of representation. Administrators also acknowledged the presence of stereotyping, but generally did not equate stereotyping with racism. In all of this they saw racism primarily in terms of individual actions or isolated incidents.

**Harassment**

A number of administrators identified acts of harassment as occurring in their schools. In the survey items, the mean response (on a 5-point scale, 1 meaning never, and 5 frequently) for harassment of teachers was 1.6, for students, 2.3, and others, 2.0. Harassment of students was significantly higher ($p = < 0.05$) in schools with an Anglo population of 70% or larger than in schools of different mixes. Incidents of physical violence and name-calling were also significantly higher
administrators’ reluctance to acknowledge the presence of racism is typically reflected in Tom’s view and in the views of many others in this study. These administrators believed that racist name-calling is not actually racist, but a tactic used by children who do not always understand what they are doing to get the better of their protagonists in a conflict situation. In their study, Verma et al. (1994) also had this sense. They reported that students used racial/ethnic names as weapons or reinforcers in the context of student–student abusiveness. The names happened to be just one of many potential resources for these students, and they put them to use in the heat of the moment. While this may true in some cases, it need not apply to all situations. In another study conducted in the UK at the elementary level, Troyna and Hatcher (1992) found that name-calling occurred in a range of settings—from situations where some children employed deliberate, ‘cold’, repeated harassment of Black children to assert dominance over them to situations where children used it much the same way as described earlier. Moreover, some children expressed regret afterwards and others insisted that they used racist language as a means of defence. But whether or not the intentions of the children are ‘racist’, they nevertheless draw on an already available racist repertoire or racist ideologies (Troyna & Hatcher, 1992) to help them achieve what they want. And in doing so, they continue to breathe life into this racist culture. Furthermore, despite some perpetrators’ wishes for the name-calling not to be ‘racially hurtful’, it is difficult to temper the effects of
this sort of practice. Edward, for example, maintained that any kind of racial name-calling, whether or not it is employed with racist intent, is hurtful to some of his students. He is the principal of a high school that serves a handful of Native students, and contended that name-calling has a particularly negative impact on his Native students.

My Native students are most sensitive about anything that could be construed as name-calling, some sort of put down... At the same time... that’s also an issue for my non-Native students. It seems it’s almost a way these days for kids to be hurtful of others. So it’s kids in general... But it seems to be heightened when you bring in the culture because right away the Native student will say, ‘They name-called me because I’m Indian’.

This feeling coincides with the impact that name-calling had on the some of the students who participated in Dei et al.’s (1997) study of Black high school students. Students were particularly disillusioned by these name-calling experiences and frustrated when little or nothing was done about the harassment. This is an experience not shared entirely by Anglos, who administrators say are sometimes the objects of racist name-calling. They refer to this as ‘reverse’ racism. Noreen, who is principal of a large and diverse high school, explained that:

We’ve had several reverse racial comments. We find Black students calling our kids names—’honkies’, things like that. You know mostly you concentrate on the White kids calling Black kids names; that’s kind of the traditional white racism. We get more the other way and our kids are really surprised by that and have a hard time with it. They don’t really know how to deal with it because it’s never happened to them before.

Despite the fact that Noreen believed that ‘our [White] kids’ have a ‘hard time’ with being called ‘honkies’, it is difficult to equate their experience with harassed Black students, for example. To begin with, the former’s heritage or lineage is never really threatened. It is continually reinforced through institutionalised practices and discourses, through the media and in personal interaction. So aside from a personal affront that could come from any confrontational interchange, the effects of being called a ‘honky’ are likely not to go much beyond the situation. On the other hand, hearing racist and derogatory comments from fellow students only builds on the obvious and not so obvious negative images that Black students encounter in the media, in the school curriculum, and from countless other sources and situations. These reinforce for many of these students the negative or not-so-positive things they continually hear about themselves and the groups to which they belong in other aspects of their lives. This does not mean that racist name-calling directed at White students should be condoned, or that such charges by these students be ignored or minimised (see, for example, Gillborn, 1995). Rather, it merely signifies that racist name-calling will produce different effects on those who belong to traditionally marginalised groups than it does on those who identify with dominant and privileged groups.
‘School’ Racism

A few administrators acknowledged forms of racism that originated with the school—whether it was in the curriculum or in the actions of educators. These administrators talked mostly about students and parents who accused the school of being racist. They rarely referred to incidents where they believed school personnel acted in a racist manner. When they did, it was either in very general terms or they attributed the actions to aberrant individuals. In this sense, it is typical of the kinds of reactions that Sleeter (1996) observed of teachers in her research. She found that White educators were generally reluctant to address issues of White racism. To do so might undermine their secure positions of privilege and also cause them a certain amount of personal discomfort. For many White people it would simply be easier to sidestep or ignore such issues, and in doing so, preserve images of themselves as good people.

A few administrators in the study acknowledged the presence of racism in their schools. Peter conceded that some teachers in his diverse secondary school may be racist. He said, ‘I think we just assume that our teachers are okay, that we don’t have racist teachers … and it’s wrong to do that. It’s wrong to make that assumption about our teachers’. Mary, an administrator in a large and diverse secondary school, also noticed racism among some teachers. She maintained that ‘we had a few teachers make some fairly derogatory remarks about East Indian students’. She noted one teacher in particular who would:

Do things like call down to the office. I remember this one time [when she said] ‘I want the [vice principal] up here. There’s a number of East Indian students in the hall’. I mean she would call us if ‘There’s a number of Black students bugging my kids. There’s a number of Italian people in the hall’. You know, when you think of all the things, it sounds ludicrous, but she didn’t mind saying that in front of her whole class, over the PA. And she mentioned today this little girl came back to class and ‘Oh she was wearing all these robes’, she said and, ‘Oh god, she smells’.

The characterisation of racism in this and other cases is in terms of acts perpetrated by individual teachers who are mistaken and perhaps malicious in their intentions. In the latter case, this particular teacher possessed racist attitudes that led her to say and do things that were harmful to individuals and groups. Mary, the administrator, makes an obvious effort to distance herself from these views and actions, implying that she or the school do not sanction them. However, in subsequent dialogue she said little about how she deals with the actions of this teacher or others like her.

When administrators spoke of school racism it was usually in the context of describing the charges of racism by students and parents. Most of their talk about racism revolved around their concerns over student and parent beliefs that the school was racist. One reaction that administrators said they have to deal with on a regular basis is the accusation that they are picking on certain students because they are Black. Larry, who is the principal of a diverse high school, said that he has heard the statement, ‘You’re picking on me because I’m Black’ many times. He believed
that these charges are ‘ploys’ to get school officials to back off. He recalled one student who regularly took this tack:

My vice principal has dealt more with him ... I just remember my vice principal mentioning it to me once when he was dealing with him over something, not terribly serious, just pesky behaviour that was inappropriate and taking up the teacher’s time, and maybe people aggravated at him sort of thing ... Every once in a while he goes too far with his comments or whatever and he puts them off. But I suspect maybe this was just a ploy that he was using too, that maybe he thought we would back off if he used this statement.

It is little wonder that members of the Black/African community feel somewhat oppressed, and as a consequence, believe that educators react negatively to them on the basis of their ‘race’. There is little question that they are the objects of both subtle and more obvious forms of racism. Among other things, Black students are the specific target of stereotypical discourses in schools. In a study of a diverse school (Ryan, 1999), both teachers and students saw Black students, particularly the males, as ‘threatening’ and ‘violent’. They also believed that Black students—both male and female—were less academically able than other students. These views—supplemented by other similar views circulating in the wider society—affected the way in which these educators subsequently interacted with students. For example, some teachers would be more likely to suspect Black students who do well on tests to achieve this standing by cheating. One student in this study eloquently described how she had to work much harder than other students to achieve the same standing as them (Ryan, 1999, p. 105). One only has to read a few of the statements of the high school students who Dei et al. (1997) interviewed to get a sense of the desperation, frustration and sense of hopelessness that Black students feel as a result of the unfair treatment they received in schools. So while there may be some instances where Black students use the ‘picking on’ charge as a ploy, it is easy to understand why many others would legitimately make such a claim. These claims are a response not only to individual situations but to a whole range of situations and patterns that penalise them specifically because they are Black. Thus, students of colour may well be in a better position to ferret out the racist implications and meanings of particular words and actions than more naïve or less informed teachers and administrators (see also Gillborn, 1995).

All the administrators who brought these issues up reacted in similar ways to the accusations, generally dismissing them as inaccurate, and insisting that they are responding to the students’ behaviours only. Larry, for example, said that he responds to students by saying:

It has nothing to do with what colour you are. It has to do with your behaviour and you’re being treated the same way as everybody else here. We have a code of behaviour and we have expectations. We expect people to live by it and live up to it.

Like many of the other administrators with whom we spoke, Larry maintained that
he was colour-blind when it came to dealing with students who were not White. This belief is something that is not unique to these administrators, as I observed earlier. Studies of teachers (Rist, 1978; Sleeter, 1993, 1996) indicate that many educators believe that they are also colour-blind. This view assumes that there is no difference between black and white, that people are all the same under the skin (Henriques, 1984). It also assumes that ‘race’ plays no part in the way people perceive things or in the actions they take that flow from these perceptions. However, considerable evidence exists to the contrary, as West (1994) maintains in the title of his book, Race Matters. What happens with these administrators is that they try to suppress negative images that they commonly associate with people of colour, an exercise that, according to Sleeter, requires considerable energy. The result is that they adopt this colour-blind discourse to justify their actions, even though their perceptions and actions are ultimately ‘racialised’.

One of the most striking aspects of administrators’ talk of charges of racism is how they differ from the ways in which students and parents see racism. Administrators, as illustrated earlier, tend to view racism in terms of mistaken, intentional and/or malicious acts perpetrated by individuals. Student and parent complainants, on the other hand, take a more global view. They identify systemic patterns in the ways in which the school (and society) treats them. This was also found to be the case in another study (Ryan, 1999). In that study a student of African heritage eloquently described the treatment that he and his friends received as systemic in nature. He believed that racism was part of a system that provided advantages for some, while ‘keeping minorities down’. It seems that those who are the objects of oppression are often better able to gain insight into the manner in which they are oppressed than those who are not or those who, however unwittingly, are part of that system of oppression (see also Taylor, 1998; Nieto, 1999). It is apparent that administrators may not be able to appreciate references to systemic forms of disadvantage. In the following passage, Pat, an administrator in a secondary school, was unable to understand what some students mean by their references to ‘we’. He said:

I have a real concern that the Black kids in this school feel alienated and feel that ‘we’re’ out to get them. And when we ask them who’s the ‘we’, they don’t have an answer. So it’s vague—‘There’s somebody out to get us; they want to get rid of “us” from the school’.

Pat acknowledged that Black students in his school felt alienated, but he had difficulty understanding their articulation of the source of this alienation. One way of interpreting this impasse is to see it in terms of the different meanings that the two parties associate with ‘we/them’. On the one hand, the students’ ‘we’ can be understood as an attempt on their part to identify the source of their feelings of oppression. Their vagueness need not necessarily be seen as an inability to understand what it is they are experiencing, but an effort to articulate a complex system of oppression that goes beyond those individuals who are merely its messengers, a system that is ‘at once grindingly quotidian and maddeningly abstract’ (Shohat & Stam, 1994, p. 23). While individuals may be part of this persistent pattern of
oppression, their acts need not always be overtly racist, even though when combined with other series of acts, they may well have the same effect as more explicitly racist acts. Pat, on the other hand, questions the vagueness of the students’ ‘we’. He believes that the students are vague because they lack credibility. For him, identifying racism means fingering those individuals who are responsible for perpetrating specific and identifiable acts. And because students cannot do this, he believes that there is no racism in his school. For him, racism is exclusively associated with misguided or malicious individuals, and not with wider and more subtle practices and patterns.

**Graffiti**

Although not common, a few administrators also note the presence of racist graffiti in their schools (mean = 1.9). The presence of this graffiti was significantly greater ($p = < 0.05$) in schools with an Anglo population of at least 70% than in schools with other mixes of school populations, in larger rather than smaller schools, and in secondary as opposed to elementary schools. The symbol that appeared most on the walls and other surfaces, according to these administrators, was the swastika. Many were not sure, however, whether those who drew them were aware of their significance. Mary, an administrator in a diverse secondary school, for example, did not ‘think that these people know what it means … [To them] it’s just a symbol, and they’re really doing it backwards too which leads me to believe that they don’t really know what they’re up to. But it is a symbol of hatred and that is worrisome’. Cathy, another secondary administrator, also described a situation in which she believed the offender didn’t know what the swastika meant. She said that ‘one of the kids one time drew swastikas on a paper he handed in to his Jewish teacher and she was devastated. And it really hurt because she thought this was a nice kid who really liked her’. Cathy discovered in conversation with the young man that he didn’t know what the symbol stood for, and as a consequence, was very upset when its significance was explained to him.

Administrators identified other sources of racist representations. Pat told of the time the student newspaper in his school published a story that he considered racist. Although the paper was usually checked for potentially offending pieces by the school staff, the article slipped by them on this occasion.

**Stereotyping**

Administrators also referred to issues of stereotyping in the interviews. Most, however, did not consider stereotyping as a form of racism. Many administrators believed that stereotypes were mistaken beliefs that distorted how people perceived certain groups of people. A lack of knowledge or understanding, in their view, prevented men, women and children from seeing groups and the individuals associated with these groups as they really were. There were a few administrators who denied that stereotyping was a problem in their schools. Noreen, for example, an administrator in a diverse elementary school, said that ‘we don’t find it [stereotyp-
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Perceptions in terms of racial groups, cultural groups. She did admit though that it may be lurking ‘below the surface’, although she had not ‘picked up on it’. She also maintained that her staff tells her that ‘we don’t have things like this happen in our school’. The surveys, on the other hand, reveal that administrators believe that stereotyping practices occur in their schools. However, they also indicated that the levels of stereotyping were low. Administrators indicated that there was very little stereotyping on the part of teachers (mean = 1.8). On the other hand, they felt that stereotyping was more common among students (mean = 2.4). The findings also indicate higher incidents (according to administrators) of stereotyping in larger and medium-sized schools than in smaller ones (p = <0.05). The latter would seem to support the notion that stereotyping does not occur as much in contexts where people have the opportunity to get to know one another, as would presumably be the case in smaller schools. However, there is also evidence, presented below, that knowing someone is not always sufficient to counteract stereotypical views.

Administrators’ perceptions of stereotypes in their schools follow familiar patterns. They spoke of groups who they believed were unjustly depicted, negatively, as less intelligent and more violent than others. They also spoke, with concern, of ‘positive’ stereotypes, groups who they saw as being portrayed as more athletically or academically gifted than others. They are correct to be concerned about such ‘positive’ stereotypes. This is because the consequences that result from the employment of them are not always as obvious as those associated with negative stereotypes. Their use assumes an unnatural commonality among members of the group associated with this stereotype; individuals who employ this generally overlook the diversity within such groups. This is particularly true when it comes to depictions of the ‘model minorities’. In his study of Oriental students in the USA, Lee (1996) unravels the stereotype associated with this model minority. He documents the diversity within this group, dispelling, among other things, the myth that all of these students are ideal students. While some of these students perform well academically, others do not. Still others are engaged in resistant activities not normally associated with these students. The problem for the less able students is that they may have difficulty living up to unrealistically high expectations placed upon them by teachers and others. These students may feel undue pressure and experience frustration at their inability to achieve levels beyond their capacity (see also Ryan, 1998b, 1999).

Administrators also alluded to those ‘hidden things’—things of which we are not always aware—that lead us to view things in mistaken and harmful ways. Pat, for example, said that ‘there are all sorts of hidden things that we do in dealing with races different than us, and we’ve got to be cognisant of them’. He doesn’t elaborate any more on this process other than to say that we need to know about them, to understand them, and presumably ourselves. His views coincide with the views of other administrators who believed that stereotypes result from ignorance. Diane, for example, maintained that ‘a lot of stereotypes come about because we don’t understand. And it’s that fear or ignorance that creates negative stereotypes’. Diane adds the element of fear to the mix here, believing that fear and ignorance prevent understanding and in the process create harmful stereotypes. The implication is that the understanding that would come from knowing more about the group or groups
in question would help those in educational communities to see the truth and penetrate these stereotypes. Among other things, it would, as one administrator believed, result in ‘people who are looking at people as individuals’ and not as members of stereotyped groups. Administrators, however, also pointed out that this would be no easy task, given the static nature of their teaching staffs. While the student population over the past few years has become increasingly diverse, the teaching staffs have not changed a great deal. They are still primarily composed of Anglos who often know little about the many groups of students they teach. Larry, for example, maintained that ‘the teachers here ... have been here for quite a while. There probably should have been more staff turnover, but there hasn’t been. And so they haven’t had a lot of experience with other groups of nationalities’. Verma et al. (1994) describe similar things in their study in the UK. They found that teachers tended to concede their lack of knowledge of students’ cultural backgrounds, regardless of what they were. Furthermore, schools did not know enough about the demographic profiles of their student intakes.

While some administrators in the study recognised the harmful effects of stereotyping, most did not see this as a form of racism. Yet the effects of stereotypes can be even more devastating than the more explicit forms of racism. This is because stereotypes can easily become a taken for granted and accepted way of life; they can be harder to recognise and ultimately to challenge than more obvious forms of racism. However, the view of stereotypes that many administrators take—that of mistaken images—is not helpful in combating them. This is because it assumes that representations should (and should be able to) accurately portray the designated group as it really exists. Unfortunately, such a stance ignores, among other things, the perpetually evolving character of groups, the diversity between and among group members and the social and political nature of the construction of group images. Quite simply, it is impossible to expect to be able to portray either in words or images an entirely accurate representation of a group of people. It is also equally unrealistic to expect that these images will be inherently positive (Shohat & Stam, 1994; Ryan, 1998b). A more sensible view is to see images of groups as the products of politically grounded sense-making frameworks or discourses. The task for educators, then, is not to attempt to supply illusory accurate information, but to construct and circulate discourses that work in the interests of groups who are most often stereotyped.

**Conservative Leadership**

School leaders have an important role to play in the battle against racism. Principals and headteachers, in particular, are in unique positions to influence the course of events at those sites where racism is most prevalent. But in order for them to be able to lead others in such an undertaking they must be willing and able to acknowledge the presence of racism in their respective schools and to understand it in a way that enables them to do something constructive about it. As the results of this study indicate, however, this is not always an easy thing for administrators to do. While there are exceptions, many administrators are reluctant to acknowledge the presence
of racism in their schools, and if they do, prefer to minimise it. Moreover, when they do make reference to racism, they generally view it as a form of individual prejudice. These findings are not unique to this study, however. The slim evidence that does exist in other inquiries (Anderson, 1990; Lipman, 1998; Taylor, 1998; Young & Laible, 2000) also suggests that administrators tend to overlook issues of ‘race’. Many may have difficulty even saying the word racism (Rizvi, 1993b). On the other hand, there is also evidence that indicates that there are administrators who do acknowledge issues of ‘race’ and are able to see past the more superficial manifestations of the conflict in their schools that are associated with it (Henke et al., 2000). We need to learn from these latter results and build on them.

There are a number of reasons why school administrators are ambivalent about ‘race’ and racism, and I have mentioned a couple of these already. The most obvious one, and the one that pervades the study data, is that administrators see racism as a form of individual prejudice. This view is reflected in their accounts of harassment, ‘school’ racism, and stereotyping. In all of this, most administrators attributed the racism that they saw to individual men, women and children. Only a minority recognised its more subtle and widespread patterns. Even so, the racism that administrators recognise in their schools represents just a tip of the much larger iceberg. Institutional racism extends far beyond the school. The crucial point here is that if administrators are to have an impact on the racism that finds its way into their schools, they need to be able to recognise its pervasive and subtle character.

This failure to recognise or acknowledge systemic racism and administrators’ reluctance to question, challenge and change the system that fosters it is associated with administrators’ contradictory role as change agents and also with their feelings of guilt. While administrators are increasingly seen as change agents (Leithwood et al., 1999), they may also find themselves identifying strongly with the very system, or parts of it, that they are trying to change. Most administrators are conservative in their practice (Rizvi, 1993b; Riehl, 2000). They tend to orient their actions toward supporting and conserving the system in which they work and have difficulty when it comes to challenging or changing integral parts of it. These tendencies are engendered by the context in which administrators work and the manner of their socialisation.

Rizvi (1993b) maintains that most administrative work takes place in a context that is inherently conservative, one that does not permit radical reform. Most schools and school systems foster uniformity rather than diversity (Solomon, 2001); they strive to find ways to get everyone to meet common goals and purposes. This preoccupation is perhaps best reflected in recent moves toward common curricula and standardised or criterion-referenced testing. Achieving these common ends requires that schools emphasise order, control and discipline. Indeed, the bureaucratic-like cultures that pervade contemporary school systems are seen by many as the best (and only) way to organise large groups of people to achieve these common goals, despite lip service to the contrary, particularly among conservative-minded groups. So in the pursuit of these ends, schools actually foster in students forms of compliant thinking and work to prevent expressions of social and cultural differences. Even though they may on the surface look to promote values of democracy,
creativity, and diversity, they actually operate under conditions that embody a competing set of values, like obedience, compliance, routine, conformity and homogeneity. Rizvi (1993b) emphasises, however, that it is not just students who are the recipients (and messengers) of this ideology; administrators also work in this system and, like students, are subject to the pressures of this hidden curriculum. But administrators are implicated perhaps more deeply in this culture than students, for they are they ones who design, champion and monitor it.

It is this dominant and (superficially) homogeneous culture into which administrators are socialised (Marshall, 1993). This socialisation process does not begin, however, with an administrator’s first appointment. It starts when they first enter educational institutions as students and continues as they take up positions as teachers. Indeed, by the time they are prepared to take up their roles as administrators, they are well socialised into a system that discourages social and cultural differences. If they had not by this time been perceived as ‘company people’ who are enthusiastic supporters of the systems in which they work, they would probably have never been offered administrative positions in the first place. Being chosen for an administrative track would normally require that potential candidates demonstrate higher levels of allegiance than their fellow teachers who either do not seek out such appointments or who are unsuccessful in their efforts. Leithwood (2001) provides evidence that administrators demonstrate higher levels of system allegiance than teachers. In a series of studies where he asked similar questions of both administrators and teachers, administrators consistently scored significantly higher than teachers on those questions that implied support for the system.

The effects of this socialisation process are also enhanced by the investment that administrators have in the system. Over the years they have benefited from the system, and they continue to benefit from it. Among other things, the system has bequeathed to them skills, attitudes and knowledge that have made it possible for them to acquire their current comparatively elite positions. It is this system and its procedures, practices and processes that provides them with their current identity and the means of making a good living. Moreover, any future ambitions within the system will depend, in part, on demonstrations of their allegiance to, and support for, the system. These demonstrations may take any number of forms. For example, principals and headteachers may routinely find themselves in the position of having to defend integral parts of their school and school system—teachers, teaching practices, curriculum, organisational patterns, rules and policies—to parents, students, fellow educators and members of the public. These and other such tasks would be difficult, if not impossible, to carry out for people who do not identify with, or support, the system.

This identification with and support for the system will influence, in many important ways, the manner in which administrators approach change. Many administrators in this study approached change in the way that Wolcott’s (1973) Ed Bell does. In his seemingly insignificant day-to-day activities, Ed works subtly to conserve, that is, to ensure the continuity of an organisation that he supports. There is no sense here that anything is wrong with the system of schooling over which he presides, and as a consequence, Ed does not entertain any considerations of
substantive or radical change. Rather, he sees his primary task as doing what it takes to ensure the smooth running of his school. Likewise, many administrators in this study were not comfortable with fundamental challenges and changes to a system that they, like Ed Bell, support and in which they have an investment. To begin with, it would be difficult to get them, as the data illustrate, to recognise that the system that gave, and continues to give them so much, could be fundamentally flawed. Most administrators were more likely to attribute problems to defective parts or technical malfunctions. They were comfortable attributing the cause of overtly racist acts to the individuals who committed them rather than to the system in which these actions occurred. Doing so did not seriously threaten their long established values and world-views or a system to which they owed their allegiance. Likewise, whatever changes they did champion involved piecemeal rather than fundamental alterations. They were, to use Henriques’ (1984) metaphor, more comfortable extracting a few rotten apples than overturning the apple cart.

Getting administrators to abandon their conservative tendencies so that they will be able to acknowledge and challenge systemic racism in their schools and elsewhere will not be easy. But it is nevertheless something that needs to be done. One approach that might help in this regard is an educative one. Administrators need to be provided with opportunities to learn critically about diversity processes in ways that assist them in understanding the nature and consequences of racism. These opportunities need to be part of preparation and developmental education programmes. With regard to the former, universities and state preparation programmes need to take responsibility for sensitising prospective administrators to diversity and equity issues. Unfortunately, this has not always been the case. In the USA, for example, of the 505 university programmes in educational administration, few address racism in a meaningful way (Young & Laible, 2000). Opportunities of this sort require that they be built into courses and programmes to give future administrators, most of whom belong to the majority culture, the chance to critically reflect on, and experience first-hand, diversity and issues of ‘race’. Although few in number, there are programmes that do just this. Herrity and Glassman (1999), for example, describe a programme that features in-depth fieldwork, internships and real-life simulations that link learners with a wide range of diverse settings. For all this to happen in a meaningful way though, universities and school districts need to collaborate.

Developmental activities and opportunities for practising administrators require action on the part of school districts and communities. So in this regard, trustees, board members, school council members, governors and central office personnel have an important role to play. They need to build educational opportunities for educators and administrators into a whole district or community approach. This would work best if they could initiate and foster district and community cultures that featured ongoing learning for their teachers and administrators. This learning, however, will need to be of a critical and questioning nature. And it also needs to be supplemented not only by planned learning activities but by other related practices that both encourage and reward risk-taking, critical thinking and experimentation. One thing that school districts can do to promote these practices is
emphasise the accompanying values in such things as performance appraisals of administrators and in school improvement plans. If school districts and communities are to be serious about combating racism they need to give their administrators the freedom and the tools to think and act critically. Administrators will be more likely to question, challenge and work to change systems if they are given the latitude, resources and encouragement to do so. While the battle against racism requires action that goes far beyond schools and school systems, these and other such moves represent an important beginning in the struggle to eliminate racism from our schools and from our world.

References


