Different Perceptions of Race in Education: Racial Minority and White Teachers

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We analyze the perceptions of White and racial minority teachers concerning antiracist education in the Toronto Board of Education. The findings highlight five topics on which White and racial minority teachers have different perspectives: views of antiracist education; support for employment equity; racial minority teachers as role models; the role of principals in antiracist education; and the treatment of racial minority teachers. Racial minority teachers face greater barriers than White teachers in the education system, barriers that hamper the full recognition and importance of racial diversity in education. White teachers are generally less supportive than their racial minority colleagues of antiracist education that attempts to shape the institutional culture of schools.

Les auteurs analysent les perceptions des enseignants de race blanche et des enseignants faisant partie des minorités raciales au sujet de l'éducation antiraciste du Conseil scolaire de Toronto. Les conclusions de cette étude mettent en relief cinq sujets sur lesquels les points de vue des enseignants de race blanche et de ceux des minorités raciales diffèrent: les perceptions de l'éducation antiraciste, le soutien accordé à l'équité en matière d'emplois, les enseignants des minorités raciales comme modèles de comportement, le rôle des directeurs d'école dans l'éducation antiraciste, et la façon dont sont traités les enseignants des minorités raciales. Ces derniers font face à des obstacles plus grands que les enseignants de race blanche, des obstacles qui retardent la reconnaissance complète de l'importance de la diversité raciale dans l'éducation. En règle générale, les enseignants de race blanche sont, par rapport à leurs collègues faisant partie des minorités raciales, moins en faveur de l'éducation antiraciste qui essaie de façonner la culture institutionnelle du système d'éducation.

The aim of antiracist education is to change institutional structures, validate the lived experiences of an increasingly diverse student body, and alter inequitable power relations. Teachers play a crucial role in the effective implementation of antiracist education and the success of change-based policies. However, teachers' perceptions concerning racism and antiracist education have received little attention in the scholarly literature.

We present the findings of research conducted in 1994–1995 in the Toronto Board of Education on teachers' perceptions about race, racism, and antiracist education. The research question was: What are the views of racial minority and

White teachers, and how do these affect the implementation of antiracist education?

RACE IN EDUCATION

Individuals, groups, and institutions have often manipulated the concept of race to create or reinforce political and ideological regimes and myths (Alladin, 1995; Elliot & Fleras, 1992, pp. 26–47). Some researchers' arguments (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994; Rushton, 1994) are based on the belief that an individual's biological traits pre-determine his or her abilities; these arguments reinforce the notion of racial superiority. Notwithstanding such views, race is increasingly accepted as a social construction unconnected to individuals' intellectual, physical, or emotional capacity (Omi & Winant, 1993). Racial issues are particularly important in education because schools and teachers play a significant role in children's socialization.

Discussion of the relevance of race in education may start at underachievement and marginalization of some minority groups. Several researchers have noted imbalanced educational outcomes among different socio-economic, linguistic, ethnic, and racial groups. For instance, Porter (1965), and later Clement (1977), provided evidence of a hierarchical socio-economic system, skewed toward White, Anglophone men, with lesser degrees of opportunity for others. Shamai (1986) found stable patterns of educational achievement since 1921 in which "Jews" and "Asian"[1] groups have above-average achievement, "British" have average, "French" have below-average, and "Native People" score at the bottom (p. 7). Ahamad (1987) also reported that students of Jewish origin attained the highest educational outcomes, followed by those of Chinese origin; at the other end of the scale were Native students and those of Portuguese origin (p. ii). Recent data on secondary school students from the Toronto Board of Education show that many Black students are streamed into lower-level programs and have a higher-than-average drop-out rate (Yau, Cheng, & Ziegler, 1993). Findings consistently show that Blacks and Aboriginals have lower educational outcomes than other groups (Daenzer & Dei, 1994; Dei, 1993, 1995a, 1996; Lewis, 1992).

ROLE OF TEACHERS

A number of factors can explain the low educational outcomes or underperformance of some groups in schools: the formal — as well as the hidden — curriculum, involvement of parents, teacher effectiveness, beliefs of minority groups, and school culture. Teachers are, undoubtedly, an important factor, and the influence of the lived experiences of predominantly White teachers and administrators working with an increasingly racially diverse student body needs to be understood. Although student diversity in Ontario has greatly increased in recent times,

racial composition of the province's teaching corps has altered only slightly, remaining predominantly White (Carr, 1995). In Toronto, where almost 50% of secondary students are of racial minorities, only 10% of teachers are of racial minorities (Carr, 1995).

Baker (1983) characterized the unique role of the teacher as the

individual who determines how and when students begin to explore the pressures in society that encourage racist and sexist attitudes. The attitude of the teacher is crucial in helping students develop attitudes that will prepare them for a harmonious existence in a society that is culturally diverse. (p. 43)

Banks and Lynch (1986) contended that teachers must understand how "*race* and *culture* interact to cause educational problems for many ethnic minority students" (p. 16). James (1994) focused on the identity, or identities, of students, and observed that teachers have the power to make some children "feel invisible and insignificant and that their differences are irrelevant" through the choice of educational materials and teaching style (p. 27). Some researchers (Carr & Klassen, in press; Dei, 1996; Henry, 1992; hooks, 1992) have adopted a "critical" approach in examining the role and status of White teachers. This critical perspective maintains that teachers are not "neutral," and that their actions may reinforce inequalities. Kailin (1994) emphasized the many ways White privilege can "promote subtle and systemic racism, resulting negatively in the cognitive orientations, attitudes, beliefs, and opinions" (p. 175). This view represents a departure from multicultural education, which perceived teachers to be impartial (Dei, 1996).

New and Sleeter (1993) found that pre-service teachers, by placing more importance on behaviour than academic work, adversely affect racial minority children, who may not act in conformity with the teacher's culture. Similarly, Beady and Hansell (1981) reported that "Black teachers expected more of their students to enter and complete college than White teachers" (p. 191). Sleeter (1992) described how a group of White teachers used their lived experiences in the classroom:

Regardless of how little experience with racial or cultural diversity teachers have had, they enter the classroom with a considerably rich body of knowledge about social stratification, social mobility, and human differences based on their life experience. The analogies the White teachers in this study drew between racism and what they knew about sexism, class mobility, and the White ethnic experience tended to minimize or neutralize racism and multicultural education's implications for action. However, from the teachers' perspectives, they were accounting for racial discrimination, not ignoring it. . . . (p. 28)

According to Sleeter, discovering and problematizing the privilege of "Whiteness" should form part of the training and education of teachers.

Elsewhere, we have demonstrated that the racial minority teacher has a significant role to play in antiracist education (Carr & Klassen, in press). In our summary of the literature, we found six areas in which racial minority teachers can contribute positively to equity in education: enhancing cultural compatibility, demystifying the hidden curriculum, developing positive attitudes toward persons from a variety of backgrounds, expressing lived experiences, connecting with the students, and connecting with communities.

CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

The Toronto Board of Education (TBE) has 154 elementary and secondary schools, attended by approximately 76,000 full-time students, and staffed by more than 5,000 teachers and principals, of whom approximately 2,400 are in secondary schools. In addition, the Board has more than 100,000 adult and continuing education students. The Board administers an annual budget in excess of $600 million (TBE, 1993, 1994).

The demographic characteristics of the Board's student population illustrate a changing society (Yau et al., 1993). In 1991 the proportion of secondary students whose mother tongue was not English was 45%, of which the largest groups were Chinese (14%), Portuguese (7%), and Vietnamese (5%). Just over half (54%) of the Board's secondary students are White, about one-third (30%) are Asian, and just under one-tenth (9%) are Black. Over 40% of the students were born outside of Canada, with nearly a quarter of that group born in Asia. More than half (57%) of foreign-born students had arrived in Toronto in the past five years. In sum, the student population of the Toronto Board is highly diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, place of origin, length of time in Canada, and languages spoken. The proportion of racial minority teachers in TBE's secondary schools has increased little over time, hovering at about 10%[2] (Carr, 1995). The Board's senior officials — principals, superintendents, and director — are overwhelmingly White.

There are three overlapping phases to the TBE's experience with equity issues over the past 25 years: problem recognition (1970–1978), search for solutions (from 1979 to the mid-1980s), and implementation (mid-1980s to the present). In the early 1970s, in reaction to community pressure, student demographics, and economic changes a committee was established to review inequities in vocational schools. Stemming from the recognition of systemic barriers against students from some immigrant groups and lower socio-economic classes, multicultural programs (TBE, 1975, 1976) and heritage languages classes (Larter & Cheng, 1986) were established. Gender equity also featured in the Board's equity agenda in the late 1970s, resulting in the creation of an affirmative-action framework for women employees.

The concept of antiracist education was introduced during the second phase of the Board's approach to equity. A major race-relations report released by the

Board in 1979 provided a framework for examining a range of issues associated with human resources, the curriculum, and other aspects of diversity in education (TBE, 1979). The report made 119 recommendations on matters such as teacher hiring and training, and teaching materials. However, an evaluation of the implementation of these recommendations, in the mid-1980s, revealed little commitment to institutional change on the part of senior management, and inadequate follow-through by administrators in the schools (Hitner Starr Associates, 1985). Two institutional responses did occur in the 1980s: an Equal Opportunity Office was established, and a Race Relations Committee was formed.

The third phase in the 1990s has included substantive change through employment equity and curriculum reform (TBE, 1991a, 1991b). In 1994 a new racial and ethnocultural mistreatment policy (TBE, 1994) outlined how to deal with racial and ethnic complaints. During the 1990s, the employment equity program for racial minorities was accelerated, and training for teachers was improved.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research method for this study, which was conducted in 1994 and 1995, was composed of: (a) a random sample questionnaire mailed to 352 secondary school teachers (to which 70 [20%] responded); (b) a targeted questionnaire to 119 racial minority teachers (to which 25 [21%] responded); and (c) in-depth interviews with 22 racial minority teachers. For both the interviews and mailed questionnaires, a combination of closed and open-ended questions was used. The interviews were taped and then transcribed, and the questionnaire responses were analyzed using a computer program.[3] For the initial mailed questionnaire, a random sample of TBE secondary teachers was selected from a list of all permanent teachers working in the 1994–1995 school year. Of those who responded, 86% were White and 14% of racial minorities. The response rates for White and racial minority teachers are comparable to their proportions in the teaching corps.

To increase the number of responses from racial minorities, a targeted-sample questionnaire was necessary. The sample was obtained from the list of racial minority teachers compiled by the Board in 1990. For the interviews, 11 teachers were selected after they had expressed interest in being interviewed rather than completing the mailed questionnaire; 11 others were selected through a snowball sample.[4] In total, approximately 24% of all racial minority secondary teachers in the Board responded to the surveys or were interviewed, and all were asked to self-identify with respect to racial origin.[5] To ensure that participants' identity remains anonymous, and that the information they have supplied remains confidential, we use pseudonyms. Descriptors are used to indicate the participant's gender, whether or not he or she is White (W) or of a racial minority (R), and the number of years she or he has been in the Board (e.g., Robert-W-17).

The responses we examine are derived from both the questionnaires and the interviews. The interviews were open-ended in terms of breadth of subjects and level of detail provided, whereas the questionnaires contained five sections, each with a series of questions allowing participants to offer as much detail as they wished. The first section elicited general information about the teacher's employment status and demographic characteristics (gender, racial origin, and ethnicity). The second section asked about the level of racial discrimination in the TBE, and how the Board and schools defined and dealt with antiracist education. The third section asked teachers to comment on the leadership role played by principals in connection to antiracist education. The fourth section asked teachers about their level of commitment to and involvement in antiracist education, and about discrimination against racial minority teachers. The final section asked questions about departmental structure, the role of guidance counsellors, employment equity, and support for ethnocultural clubs.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Five topics exemplify the crucial differences between White and racial minority teachers in terms of vantage point and lived experience. The topics are all connected to race. However, because racial origin alone does not define one's identity, generalizations about racial groups should be avoided.

1. Views on Antiracist Education

When asked about their views of the Board's policies on, and commitment to, antiracist education, most White teachers reported that the Board was concerned with, and making progress in, implementing antiracist education. Some White teachers, however, expressed anxiety about how and why the Board was acting on antiracist education:

[The Board's reaction is] knee-jerk. It would be better to promote a "harassment" policy, rather than an antiracist or sexual harassment policy, because the former protects all students from unwanted behaviour whereas the latter protects minority and female students from Whites and/or men. (Madeleine-W-5)

A few White teachers stated that antiracist education should not be an area of concern because it had nothing or little to do with some disciplines:

Academic teachers dealing with technical (math/science) subjects are concerned with achievement only. (Patrick-W-30)

Finally, several White teachers suggested that antiracism efforts had been futile and should be stopped. As one teacher explained:

Most teachers consider antiracist education an unnecessary fad. They don't view themselves as racist (even if they are), so question why it is important. (Gary-W-4)

In sum, although most White teachers did not have particularly strong feelings about antiracist education, one small group was strongly in support of it, and another was strongly opposed. The group committed to antiracist educational change had a broad understanding of social justice issues, believing that inequities perpetuated by the curriculum, school culture, and teachers must be challenged. The group most resistant to antiracist education maintained that education should not be "politicized," and that race should not be an issue in the classroom.

Racial minority teachers were much more supportive of antiracist education than were Whites. Some racial minority teachers, noting the high level of discrimination and the underrepresentation of racial minorities in teaching, concluded that antiracist education should be improved in the schools. One reported:

Yes, there is a lot of racial discrimination. I say this because I see most positions of responsibility held by Whites — very few Black principals or V-Ps. (Felicity-R-17)

Some racial minority teachers believed that their White colleagues had often made it difficult for teachers of colour to carry out their duties or advance through the educational hierarchy. Several commented that racial minority teachers were relegated to the lower status English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) Department. One stated that:

We have a mixture of cultures on our staff. From what I have seen, a lot of "old-time" [implying White] teachers move together as a group to the exclusion of others. Not only do they not invite others to join in, they also make it hard for the outsiders to ask to be invited. Adult ESL students have very little say in the school's daily operations, field trips, curriculum, etc. (Alice-R-25)

Many racial minority teachers noted that they were often called upon to be "experts" in race relations or antiracist education. There was not the same range of views concerning antiracist education among racial minority teachers as among Whites. Racial minority teachers were extremely committed to and involved in antiracism activities, or were committed to the principles but not actively involved in the activities. No racial minority teacher discounted or trivialized the importance of antiracist education.

2. Support for Employment Equity

The issue of employment equity, and the role of merit, elicited a range of views from teachers. Most White teachers as well as many of racial minorities emphasized that the principle of seniority conflicted with employment equity:

There is lots of resistance to that [employment equity], even in the union. They are twisting that. The union doesn't accept that; they think it's reverse discrimination. Those outspoken people [in the union] seem to be against the policy, but most are pro-equity. (Eric-R-8)

The conflict is multifaceted: unions, or federations, have the mandate to protect their employees, regardless of minority status, and principals, who are members of the same union as teachers, must negotiate with teachers as well as arbitrate matters between teachers in a fair manner. On the other hand, the Board has a series of policies and initiatives around human-resources management and equity that seek to alter existing practices.

Some White teachers suggested that employment equity was creating barriers against them:

I fear that we will face some discriminatory practices in promotion although employment equity laws require promotion of all ethnic groups. (Faith-W-4)

Other White teachers believed that employment equity would interfere with the merit principle:

[I am against employment equity] Because I think there is a danger that it might override other factors. (Jacqueline-W-3)

A big part of teaching is helping students develop into solid citizens with a respect [for] and tolerance of others' difference. This is Canadian culture. Too many of those I have seen hired under employment equity have not been in Canada long enough to understand Canadian culture and are very intolerant of cultural differences and don't even believe there is a Canadian culture. (Ursula-W-19)

Most racial minority teachers suggested that there was a pressing need for employment equity, but recognized the problems associated with it.

This is a catch-22 question because yes, I do support legislation because good minority/ visible candidates are kept out of jobs, but on the other hand, the thought of colleagues saying you got the job because of a quota is demeaning. (Samuel-R-5)

The vast majority of White teachers contended that the Board was giving priority to hiring racial minority teachers, whereas racial minority teachers were divided on whether or not the TBE was placing an emphasis on hiring racial minority teachers. The perception that the Board had pro-active employment equity measures was greater amongst Whites, who viewed their chances of promotion dwindling; many more White than racial minority teachers emphasized seniority rights, which they claimed must override equity policies.

3. Racial Minority Teachers as Role Models

White and racial minority teachers agreed that the latter play a crucial role in connecting to racial minority students:

The racial minority kids are more comfortable with me. They're polite to me, let's put it that way. They cooperate more. (Pierre-R-24)

Teachers from visible minorities have started many clubs and teams. Students have places to go where they can feel at home and can have opportunities to excel. There has been a big improvement in the morale of teachers/students over the past four years. We are more cooperative, there are many more activities. (Faith-W-4)

Many racial minority teachers emphasized that they play a vital role in connecting all students, but particularly those of racial minorities, to the education system:

Students of colour feel comfortable with or find it easy to talk to teachers of racial minority [origin]. As a minority teacher I feel I have more patience and understanding of new students lacking some of the social aspects of schooling. On the other hand, they cannot fool me. I may know where they are coming from. (Felicity-R-17)

A few White teachers noted that racial minority teachers play an important role in legitimizing the education system for racial minority students. At the other end of the spectrum, some White participants did not view a teacher's race as an influence on learning:

I believe we all have influence equally. I don't believe somebody's skin colour does the modelling—the teaching does. (Tabitha-W-3)

Race does not determine impact or influence—ability does. (Ursula-W-19)

The majority of all teachers recognized the importance of racial minority teachers in role-modelling. However, White teachers for the most part viewed racial minority teachers as playing a more effective role in assisting racial minority students than White students, whereas racial minority teachers generally confirmed that they are role models for all students, regardless of racial origin.

4. Principals' Role in Antiracist Education

Most teachers, regardless of their racial origin, believed that principals play key roles in antiracist education:

He sets the tone or expectation for all. (Keith-W-25)

The principal of a high school is a god. He can direct policy by force of his personality. (Darrell-R-21)

There was some divergence, however, concerning principals' perceived commitment. Racial minority participants, in particular, questioned the degree to which the predominantly White principals were willing to show real leadership in antiracist education:

Though important, leadership from the principal is not critical. It is the teachers that must and do lead in concert with students for whom this is an important issue. (Walter-R-7)

A few teachers were extremely critical of their principals. This negative perception may be associated with these teachers' overall assessment of their principals, not necessarily only in terms of antiracist education.

In summary, both White and racial minority teachers believed that commitment of the principal is fundamental in setting the tone for antiracist education activities. To a greater extent than White teachers, racial minority teachers reported that their principals tended to have little commitment to antiracist education. Several racial minority teachers raised the issue of the underrepresentation of racial minority principals, and contended that White principals did not implement antiracist education initiatives because there were no real pressures forcing them to alter their management style.

5. Treatment of Racial Minority Teachers

Among the more sharply critical comments from racial minority teachers were those concerning their treatment by some White teachers. Many racial minority teachers believed that they do face barriers unknown to White teachers, and that discrimination had been commonplace in hiring and promotions by the Board:

Colour, accent, lack of Canadian proper and correct English decreases chances of promotions to positions of responsibility. Often, discouraged, the teacher gives up. (Alice-R-25)

[Racial minorities are adversely affected by] not knowing or not caring to play the political games required to move up. (Heather-R-21)

One racial minority teacher, Pierre, provided the example of how he was removed from the guidance department and replaced by a relative newcomer who was White and had no experience in that subject:

There was some politics going on. There was a guy in the [name of the] Department who didn't even have his guidance credentials. And I figured out what had happened. And this

guy was then brought into the Guidance Department the next year. I've been back in the department for five years. . . . I just thought it was important since the Black Parents Association had expressed concern over these [antiracist education] issues for some time. (Pierre-R-24)

Pierre went on to say that he was the only racial minority teacher in guidance, so his departure left a void, especially for the many Black students, who were generally poorly served. His greatest disappointment, however, was in how the principal and superintendent, who supported the idea of putting the less-experienced White teacher into the guidance department, handled his queries and appeals. His argument that he was doing a good job, was the most qualified, competent person for the job, and was filling an important void in connecting with many disaffected racial minority youth as well as their parents, was to no avail. He stopped pursuing the matter when the superintendent told him, "You have a contract with the Board, not with the guidance department," and then mentioned that he (the teacher) could ask for a transfer to another school.

About half the White participants thought that racial minority teachers did not face any barriers, at least not any more than Whites themselves had also to face. A few White participants commented that gender barriers were more significant than racial ones, and others argued that ethnicity was just as serious an issue. Several White teachers reported that they had not been personally affected by racial discrimination, nor had they ever witnessed it. On many occasions, racial minority interviewees expressed frustration at what they characterized as the privilege of being White. Several racial minority teachers acknowledged, or complained, that their accent was a factor in promotions, whereas White colleagues with equally thick Scottish or Australian accents moved up the system without penalty. Many racial minority teachers also perceived that White teachers were rewarded for pursuing antiracist education or equity issues in general, whereas racial minority teachers pursuing the same issues were made to feel that they were unidimensional or somehow "obsessed" with race and racism.

DISCUSSION

Our findings provide a portrait of how racial origin influences teachers' perceptions and reinforce the notion that lived experiences influence teachers' views about antiracist education. It is interesting to note that although few White teachers indicated that they were racist, they often commented that other White teachers were racist or had racist tendencies.

We contend that the validation of lived experiences around race is key to enhancing the educational experience of all students (Dei, 1993, 1995b). The weak understanding of individual and group identity formation, which can lead to the creation of stereotypes at one extreme, or can negate the significance of race altogether, at the other extreme, has hampered the full implementation of

antiracist education. It is imperative that teachers better understand the importance of race and racism in education, and, similarly, how institutional, structural barriers reinforce inequitable power relations. Gaining such understanding will require teachers to question critically their teaching approaches (Delpit, 1988). At the same time, educators should acquire a greater awareness of the linkages between marginalized groups and the ways in which race is tied to such activities as teacher training, curriculum development, student evaluation and recognition, and community consultation (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1993).

Our findings indicate that investigation of the diverse needs of racial and ethnocultural groups is required. The perception of many racial minority teachers that they are discriminated against in the school system severely hinders the long-term educational prospects of all students. More racial minority teachers should act as advocates and role models, if they wish to, with institutional support, within their schools. Racial minority teachers can be role models for all students, and can break down barriers both institutionally and individually (Carr, 1995; Carr & Klassen, in press). It is therefore troubling not only that a number of White teachers have a limited perspective on the contribution of racial minority teachers, but also that many White teachers think racial minority teachers' positive influence on students does not transcend racial lines (Sleeter, 1992).

How White teachers act toward antiracist education within the TBE has a far-reaching effect on students as well as on racial minority teachers. Although no group functions as a homogeneous, monolithic block, with one ideology or identity, White teachers on the whole are afforded the unique leverage of a skin colour that has traditionally benefited them in hiring, promotion, and general influence in the education system (Sleeter, 1992). Ironically, the key to the success of antiracist education rests, in large part, in the hands of those White teachers willing to endorse it within their schools. Without their vigorous support, evidence from this study suggests, there is a great risk of antiracism being trivialized.

NOTES

[1]   For Shamai's study the "Asian" group included, notably, those of Chinese and Japanese origin.

[2]   Gathering accurate data has been problematic over the years. Employment equity programs require voluntary self-identification, and participation in these programs has often been challenged. The few attempts that the Board has made to collect quantitative data on the representation of racial minority teachers has revealed that their numbers have never been greater than about 10% (Cheng 1987a, 1987b, 1987c; Cheng, Brown, & Lines, 1992).

[3]   All questionnaire responses were entered in the *Q and A* software package, allowing answers to be sorted according to characteristics of respondents, such as race.

[4]   A snowball sample, in the context of this study, refers to a method of obtaining names of other relevant contacts from initial interview participants.

[5]   This figure is based on the Board's data, which indicate that as of 1990, roughly 10% (240) of the teachers in the secondary system were of racial minorities. Therefore, the 22 interviews and 35 questionnaires result in an estimate that 24% of racial minority teachers were surveyed.

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