School Leadership and Racism: An Ecological Perspective

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Abstract
This article reports results from a single-school case study that explored the ways racism influences (and is influenced by) racism. The study examined the ways racism is manifest at different levels of the system: individual, dyadic, subcultural, institutional, and societal. In doing so, the authors sought to understand how racism influences leadership practice within and across each of these levels, meaning as a whole they were considered as an ecological model. Findings suggested pretext, context and posttext are important, and that individual educators’ leadership is influenced by ever-changing racial dynamics in their school.

Keywords
school leadership, systemic racism, institutional racism, socio-cultural context

Racism is a problem in America’s urban schools (Hacker, 1992; Orfield, 2014). Scholars and practitioners have documented cases where racism impeded student achievement, teacher efficacy, and school-community dynamics (Brieschke, 1998; Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegel-Hawley, 2012; Reardon, Grewal, Kalogrides, & Greenberg, 2012). Moreover, it is clear that

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racism occurs at multiple levels of the educational system—meaning racism is manifest at individual, dyadic, subcultural, institutional, and societal levels (J. S. Brooks, 2012; J. S. Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007; Hacker, 1992; E. Y. Young, 2011). These levels interact with one another in ways that make racism a constantly shifting and changing force of oppression in schools (Scheurich & Young, 1997). That said, few studies have focused their attention on understanding these levels of racism, the ways they interact with one another and the agency of school leaders to positively and negatively influence such dynamics.

The purpose of this study was to explore how leadership practice influences (and is influenced by) racism at various levels in urban schools. As this purpose demands a nuanced and rich understanding of cultural dynamics and because racism is a cultural construction (Banks & Banks, 2009; J. S. Brooks, 2012; Carroll Massey, Vaughn Scott, & Dornbusch, 1975; Leonardo, 2013), the sample was limited to a single urban high school and an ethnographic research design was employed (Creswell, 2014; Wolcott, 1997, 1999). The study utilized a conceptual framework that drew from both research on educational leadership (Brown, 2005) and from cultural anthropological research in racism (Fluehr-Lobban, 2006). The subsequent sections of this article explain key concepts from a systematic review of literature, the research methods we employed, a presentation of findings, and a discussion of how this study may help scholars think about educational leadership and racism in urban schools. Last, we offer salient paths for race-conscious urban school leadership.

Racism and School Leadership: A Review of Literature

We began this research with an inductive review of extant literature (Blanche, Durrheim, & Painter, 2006) related to racism and school leadership. This began broadly by reading through studies that focused on race and school leadership. Three themes emerged from our reading in this area: (a) phenotype and school leadership, (b) racism and school leadership as cultural constructions, and (c) the importance of pretext, context, and posttext. This lead us to also investigate literature related to organizational levels of racism in education, specifically examining (a) individual racism, (b) dyadic racism, (c) subcultural racism, (d) institutional racism, and (e) societal racism. We drew from these reviews to then craft an exploratory conceptual framework that was used to guide subsequent analysis of empirical data. In the following sections, we relate our work from the review of literature.
Race and School Leadership

Race matters in schools—and as such school leaders both influence racism and are influenced by it (J. S. Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007; Jackson, 1988). Second only to teachers, school leaders have a profound effect on student achievement (Leithwood & Louis, 2011) and their decisions affect students’ life chances (Jean-Marie & Mansfield, 2013; Singleton, 2014). In a 2013 study of the nearly 90,000 U.S. public school principals, findings revealed, “80 percent were non-Hispanic White, 10 percent were non-Hispanic Black or African American, 7 percent were Hispanic, and 3 percent were another race/ethnicity”. This disparity is palpable and undermines the positive correlation between racially diverse school leaders and student achievement. Specifically, African American school leaders were found to have a positive effect on the educational outcomes of African American children (Walker, 1996; Tillman, 2004). Walker (1996) noted the agency of Black school leadership pre-Brown v. Board of Education (1954). She found that despite inadequate funding, many schools operated by African American school leaders for African American children provided a curriculum and environment that rivaled many of their White counterparts.

Despite the fact that African American school leaders were found to challenge deficit ideologies that serve to disenfranchise Black children (Lomotey & Lowery, 2015), they are either overlooked within the context of traditional leadership theories (see Blake & Mouton, 1964; House, 1971; Stogdill, 1948) or regulated to “teacher leaders.” The latter term serves to further delimit Black women in particular as it is often used by traditional (read White) researchers to refer to White women who do not occupy the principal’s office as well as Black women who have earned the title of “school principal” (Tillman, 2004). The heart of the matter is that the majority of paradigms of school leadership privilege White people in general and White children in particular. Moreover, using a variety of methods and conceptual orientations, educational leadership scholars have consistently found that racism can influence school leaders’ decisions (Brooks, Arnold, & Brooks, 2013; Brown, 2005; Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Rivera-McCutchen & Watson, 2014; Tillman, 2002; M. D. Young & Laible, 2000).

Although evidence of school leaders’ race-based decision making is surely cause for alarm, there is likewise evidence that school leaders can also influence the ways racism is manifested in schools (J. S. Brooks, 2012; J. S. Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007; Theoharis, 2009; Watson & Bogtoch, 2015; Watson & Rivera-McCutchen, 2016). Over the past several decades, some scholars have developed useful analytic approaches such as equity audits (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003) to help school leaders identify inequitable
processes and outcomes in their systems and to offer them practical advice about strategies they might implement to address these issues (Theoharis, 2009). All considered, educational leaders and scholars still have a great deal of work ahead of them before they begin to develop the kinds of deep and dynamic analyses and approaches needed to address racism in education. Yet, to investigate how racism operates in schools and the ways leaders influence (and are influenced by) racism, it is important to understand several key aspects related to the ways racism operates in schools.

**Phenotype and school leadership.** In schools, racism has often been explained and understood by phenotype. That is, someone counts up the number of people who are identified or identify as belonging to a certain race or ethnicity and then examine processes and outcomes in relation to these groups and subgroups. As J. S. Brooks (2012) explained,

> In U.S. schools, phenotype drives many of the ostensibly equity-related policy conversations and laws. It also has to do with the sorting and counting of students based on the way they look and via self-identification, rather than based on their academic performance. Phenotype is at the heart of racial quotas and many diversity initiatives. Looking at race this way is important in that it allows a way for us to understand marginalization, access, and opportunity at a systemic level, and in the hands of astute and ethical educational leaders such information can be key to leveraging resources toward greater systemic equity. (p. 5)

Phenotype, then, is the kind of analysis that tells us things such as: How many students of color are achieving certain levels in relation to their White peers? How many teachers of color provide instruction to students of color in a given school system? How many students of color are reported for behavior issues in schools? How many teachers of color become principals of color in a given school system? Clearly, given that many school districts and states around the country routinely report such data, such analyses can help us understand longitudinal trends and can help provide insight about certain educational issues. This is helpful to a point, but understanding racism vis-à-vis such numeric outputs only paints part of a more complicated cultural portrait.

**Racism and school leadership as cultural constructions.** Along with the numbers and trends phenotypic analyses generate, it is also important to understand racism as a cultural construction that allows one group to oppress another based on their race or ethnicity (Fluehr-Lobban, 2006). In relation to schools,
Larson and Ovando (2001) found many teachers and school leaders have mental models grounded in deficit thinking. Villegas and Lucas (2002) explained, “Such perceived superiority makes the cultural norms of the dominant group the legitimate standard for the United States and its institutions. Cultures that differ from the dominant norm are believed to be inferior” (p. 36). Yosso (2005) employed critical race theory, a framework created by scholars of color to understand (and remedy) how society organizes itself among racial lines and hierarchies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), to highlight the cultural capital students of color possess, but often go unnoticed in classrooms across the nation.

Schools construct inequitable cultural systems in many ways. First, they do so via microaggressions. Sue (2010) defined microaggressions as the words and language used by well-meaning members of the dominant culture that denigrates individuals and cultural practices, which fail to align to their way of life. As such, microagressions are small slights that communicate to students and faculty of color they are considered less than White students. Microaggressions can take the form of noninclusive or culturally incongruent language, instruction, and curricula; policies that unfairly penalize students and faculty of color, and hiring and promotion practices that prioritize White students and faculty over students and faculty of color. It is important to note that microaggressions are at times (un)intended acts of racism committed by unsuspecting members of the dominant culture (Sue, 2010). Nevertheless, its impact is detrimental to all parties.

A second way culture is shaped around racism is overt aggressive racism—This is when people use either discriminatory language or engage in violent practices ranging from actual physical violence to psychological, economic, social, or political violence (J. S. Brooks, 2012; M. C. Brooks & Brooks, 2013). This can take many forms, and when we speak of racism in school systems, it is critical to know that both the act itself and the way the system responds to the act shape a culture of racism. So, when people exhibit racist behavior and escape punishment, it is in essence a double blow to the culture of racism in a system. Similarly, culture is shaped by racism via existential threat, meaning there is a systemic and pervasive racist organizational quality that shapes the everyday life of people of color in the system. This may cause in students of color a general ennui, feeling of worthlessness, and will prompt many to experience stereotype threat, causing people of color to wonder if they are unwittingly reinforcing stereotypes through their behavior (M. C. Brooks & Brooks, 2013; Delpit, 1995). This last cultural dynamic is often the result of generations of racist culture permeating schools and society (Hacker, 1992).
Racism and school leadership: Pretext–context–posttext. It is also important to take into consideration that racism occurs in the context of multiple histories. Specifically, there are three temporal aspects of racism when considering how it operates in the context of schools: pretext, context, and posttext. Pretext recognizes that each person, organization, and community has a history in relation to racism. Organizations may, for example, be characterized as perpetuating institutional racism where racist attitudes and behaviors have become so engrained in the culture that violence and inequity have become part of the school’s values, beliefs, and norms. Moreover, each person has an individual pretext with racism. This will include early life experiences (or being oblivious to racism due to White privilege or other cultural dynamics), critical incidents, and encountering (or not encountering) critical texts or ideas as part of a formal and informal education related to issues of race (Theoharis & Brooks, 2012). Understanding how racial pretext then informs the way we think about and behave in context is important. Context refers to ways the physical, social, cultural, political, and economic environment shapes awareness, understanding, interactions, and initiatives related to race in a school (Larson & Ovando, 2001). Importantly, context is protean and it flows into and out of the school, being intimately connected to emic and etic racial dynamics in community and society (J. S. Brooks, 2012). Educators and students shape the school context in relation to race by educating themselves, critically reflecting on their attitudes and behavior, having difficult and at times confrontational conversations about race, and by crafting and implementing race-conscious policies and procedures throughout the school (Scheurich, 2002).

Posttext is a future-oriented way of thinking about racial dynamics in a school. As much of the work of educational leaders is focused on the future (e.g., missions, goals, strategic plans, etc.), it is important that issues of racial equity assume an important place in the future work of the school (Brooks, 2012). If racial equity is not part of a school’s plan for the future, it will be much harder to address racism as anything more than random acts of improvement rather than as sustained and coherent proactive redundancy (Brooks, 2012; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003).

Levels of Racism in Education

Racism is a reality (Bell, 2004). Scheurich and Young (1997) argued that racism occurs at multiple levels simultaneously, ranging from individual to civilizational. Although we agree with this basic assertion, we draw from a different set of literature, combining ideas from cultural anthropology with educational leadership research to explore and delineate levels of
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racism differently. Instead of Scheurich and Young’s individual, institutional, societal, and civilizational levels, this article explored (a) individual racism, (b) dyadic racism, (c) subcultural racism, (d) institutional racism, and (e) societal racism. In the subsequent subsections, we briefly describe how racism and educational leadership function at each level.

**Individual racism.** People living and working in a racist society and in a racist school system are likely to adopt racist attitudes and behaviors (Fluehr-Lobban, 2006; Hacker, 1992). This can work either by commission (holding racist attitudes and behaving in a racist manner) or by omission (being oblivious to or complicit, yet contributing to the status quo of a racist system). People’s attitudes and behaviors in relation to racism begin early, and are shaped by critical incidents throughout their lifetime. Such critical incidents can be firsthand experiences as oppressor or oppressed; they can be reading racist or antiracist works that have a profound impact on them, or any number of other individual experiences (J. S. Brooks, 2009; Wellman, 1993). Typically, people will have many overt and covert experiences throughout their life that raise their awareness of racism and in others diminish their grasp of racism (Scheurich & Young, 1997). It is likely then, that people’s awareness of their attitudes toward racism must be unlearned, as they will have been engrained from an early age (Wells & Crain, 1997). For school leaders then, unlearning their miseducation about race likely means increasing awareness of their own relationship with racism, looking at the forms of privilege from which they benefit and behaviors from which they may suffer. It will also mean developing the skills to have difficult conversations about race with students, staff, and community members—skills seldom taught in preparatory programs for educational leaders (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; Rivera-McCutchen & Watson, 2014; Shields, 2010; Watson & Rivera-McCutchen, 2016).

**Dyadic racism.** Although there is general agreement that educational leadership is a relational endeavor (Bryant, 1998), there is little recognition or interest in the ways racial dynamics shape individual relationship in schools, or specifically individual relationships between leaders and followers (J. S. Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007). Social network scholars have documented the importance of leadership in building educational networks that positively influence a school community (Finnigan & Daly, 2014), but they have not yet examined the importance of individual relationships in perpetuating or abolishing racist attitudes and practices in schools. As leaders bring with them a particular power and agency to the relationship, they are well-positioned to influence individual follower’s work in a positive manner and to help raise their awareness and attention to issues related to racism.
Subcultural racism. J. S. Brooks and Jean-Marie (2007) conducted a case study of racial subcultures. They found that leadership was practiced within and between racial subcultures in an urban school. The study suggested it may be more helpful to study racism in schools by conceptualizing the school as a collection of subcultures rather than as a single plenary culture. Their use of a moiety framework allowed them to explore the norms (values and beliefs of distinct subcultures in the school) and to show how interactions among subcultures were shaped by racism. This is in line with contemporary thinking about leadership as a distributed or organization-wide phenomenon rather than as a force that only influences along lines of formal authority. That is, looking at leadership as something that happens throughout a school and not only as something practiced by administrators prompts us to understand the way various people lead small groups throughout the school as a potential driver of racial equity or enmity.

Institutional racism. Institutional racism occurs at both the micro- and macro-levels and in the places we call schools. As Scheurich and Young (1997) explained,

Institutional racism exists when institutions or organizations, including educational ones, have standard operating procedures (intended or unintended) that hurt members of one or more races in relation to members of the dominant race. . . institutional racism also exists when institutional or organizational cultures, rules, habits, or symbols have the same biasing effect. (p. 5)

Institutional racism, then, is potentially at play both in the institution of the individual school and the larger school systems in which a school leader operates, such as a district or state. Institutional racism is particularly problematic in that it can reinforce racist attitudes and behaviors throughout a student or educator’s experiences with the entire system. Consider that it is quite possible that students, educators, and school leaders have their educational experience compromised at every level of an educational system—whether they matriculate upward through the system as a student or work in various capacities as an educator. Thus, students, educators, and school leaders may experience multiple inequities that accumulate despite the best intentions of a few committed educators and student activists.

Societal racism. The United States is most certainly a racist society when considered as a whole (Terkel, 1992). Racism has become institutionalized at this level and can be seen in countless indicators of health, education, incarceration, or inequity of access and attainment. Despite its espoused belief in
equality, the United States has created a reinforced system of haves and have-nots along racial lines—there are, in effect many nations within one nation—racialized enclaves with their own experiences and their own internal and external racialized problems or privileges. It is important to keep in mind schools and school leadership more specifically, operate within this overarching context, one in which inequity and inequality are the norm rather than the exception.

In summation, this literature review employed a systematic approach to understand the pathology of racism and its impact on school leadership. Based on our findings, the following concepts were explored: race and school leadership, phenotype and school leadership, racism and school leadership as cultural constructions, racism and school leadership: pretext–context–posttext. Importantly, the literature review pointed toward a gap in our understanding of the levels of racism in education, and this omission provided the impetus for the study at hand. In the next section, we present the conceptual framework utilized in this study.

**Ecologies of Racism and Urban School Leadership: An Exploratory Conceptual Framework**

To explore racism and urban school leadership, and based on our review of the literature, we developed an exploratory conceptual framework to help guide an empirical investigation (Figure 1).

The framework looks at the aforementioned levels of schooling and looks at them not as levels but rather as ecologies, meaning they are all connected to one another, exerting reciprocal influence on each other. Moreover, in an effort to understand the ways pretext, context, and posttext influence the ways racism and leadership are shaped at each of these ecological levels, we examined how they exert influence within each level, and then also explored the ways they influence across ecological levels.

**Research Methods**

Given that the topic of interest related to culture, broadly speaking, this research was conducted using ethnography as a research design (Creswell, 2014; Wolcott, 1997). The study took place in a single urban high school located in a city with a population of approximately 400,000 in the Southeastern United States over the course of 2 academic years (pseudonymous DuBois High School). The site was selected primarily because the instructional and administrative staff was divided racially, in a phenotypic
The district employed approximately 80 teachers at the school, one principal, three assistant principals, an academic dean, and a dozen educational specialists to serve approximately 1,300 children, Grades 9 to 12. The student population is reported as 85% African American and 12% White (with 3% listed as “Other”). Yet the teaching staff is split almost into two halves: 37 White, 39 Black. Two teachers identified themselves as Hispanic and one teacher self-described as Arab (J. S. Brooks, 2012).

**Data Collection**

The lead author collected all data for this study. Data collection included 85 formal semistructured interviews with 42 different teachers and administrators, each of which lasted between 40 min and 3 hr. As we were primarily interested teachers’ and leaders’ leadership behavior, we approached these as elite interviews (Brooks & Normore, 2015). Data were also generated via 252 hr of observation. Technical documents such as the school’s school improvement
plan, a regional accreditation report, discipline plans, meeting agendas, and memos were collected whenever available.

Data Analysis

Data were initially analyzed using a priori codes derived from the conceptual framework. First, we sought to understand how the data we collected helped describe each aspect of the conceptual framework. As we were also interested in understanding the ways these aspects influenced one another, we also sought to create axial codes between these a priori categories (Brooks & Normore, 2015). Then, using an iterative and inductive coding process, we identified patterns of racialized leadership attitudes and behaviors. After exploring the resulting codes and the relationships between them using the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1997), we then sought to identify patterns within the data.

Trustworthiness

As a means of establishing trustworthiness, we conducted systematic and ongoing member checks with teachers and administrators throughout the duration of the study (Silverman, 2001). During these checks, participants offered their assessment of the accuracy of researchers’ interpretations of the cultures and subcultures of the school. In nearly every instance, member checks urged the researchers to explore and refine themes further; at no point did a participant suggest that analyses were incorrect. Findings presented in this article were consistent with both researchers’ interpretations and members’ perspectives.

Findings

We began this study using a conceptual framework that helped us understand various ways that racism is manifested in relation to leadership at individual, dyadic, subcultural, institutional, and societal levels. We began by asking participants about each of these levels and explored how their pretext, context and posttext influenced their leadership practice. Rather than report on each level, our analysis led us to organize findings into five major themes: (a) critical incidents, critical texts, critical conversations; (b) friends and enemies, then and now: the importance of relationships; (c) what we say versus what we do: subcultural and institutional racism; (d) space ship on another planet: the school as a closed system of racist practice; and (e) ecologies of racism and school leadership: a constantly shifting landscape. In the subsequent
subsections, we explain the meaning of each and provide data and interpretation of the theme.

**Critical Incidents, Critical Texts, Critical Conversations**

Educators throughout the school explained that critical incidents, critical texts, and critical conversations heavily influenced their practice of school leadership. Some of these came about due to formal education experiences, whereas others were the result of informal experiences in school or society.

**Books/films/television/songs.** Most leaders indicated that specific books, films, television programs, or songs had helped raise their awareness of racial issues. As one African American administrator explained,

I remember seeing *Roots* when I was a kid. It horrified me. The images of the way that man was treated haunted me for a long time and I struggled trying to figure out how that guy’s experience related to mine. As I got older I realized that while I couldn’t relate to some of what he went through in terms of physical and psychological punishment in some ways I was a slave just like he was a slave. Now, that sounds dramatic, but I mean that it’s a different kind of slavery that we have these days. We have a slavery of the mind and a slavery of the neighborhood. Black people are still treated like slaves by the police and in some ways even in places like this school where I don’t dare speak the wrong word, don’t dare challenge the wrong person. It’s ironic, because while I probably have more insights on racism than a lot of people I’m less able to speak up than white people.

Interestingly, many suggested that these encounters with critical texts were part of their pretext rather than anything that necessarily shaped their context or shaped their thinking about the posttext of the school. A White teacher observed as being particularly outspoken as an advocate for African American students talked about how they found the most important readings that influenced their thinking some time ago.

When I think about it, most of what I know about race is from a long time ago. I remember reading some of Martin Luther King’s works and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. These gave me great insight into the range of emotions and possible reactions that come along with suffering from racism. I also remember reading some of the activist stuff and Alice Walker’s book and the one by Toni Morrison. Those were so powerful to me and they helped me be more sensitive to the destructive power of racism. But, when you get right down to it, I don’t think I’ve read anything recently about race. I think I understand the issues but
I guess maybe I’m not entirely up-to-date and I definitely don’t know much about what people say about the future of race in the U.S.

Two teachers, both currently working toward their doctoral degrees, mentioned that education scholars helped shape their thinking about race, one mentioned the work of Gloria Ladson–Billings and the other cited Patricia Hill Collins and Beverly Tatum as being influential.

Still other leaders suggested that films and television played an important role in shaping their thinking about racism and leadership. When I asked teachers and administrators about influences related to their ideas about racism, many said they were moved by films (The Color Purple, Do the Right Thing, Mississippi Burning, Amistad, American History X) or by television programs, such as Archie Bunker. Three different teachers brought up a particular Archie Bunker episode as being something that made them realize that different generations help different views about race. Many said that while they recognized that many of the central characters in these works of fiction were inspirational, they did not see themselves as a leader in relation to issues of race beyond their classroom walls. Even then, the White teachers seemed much more comfortable claiming that they were leaders in relation to issues of race and explaining that they, as one White teacher put it, “could be like the heroes” in those stories and make a difference in the school.

*Silence/critical friends/(un)comfortable conversations.* Teachers and administrators alike explained that DuBois was a place of silence, uncomfortable conversations and whispered consultations with trusted critical friends. For a school with such racial diversity located in an urban center, there was a noticeable absence of dialogue about issues of race. As one teacher explained, for the most part, racism was an elephant in the room:

Racism is everywhere here. People here just act like it doesn’t exist or like it isn’t professional to bring it up. Years ago I was on the Executive Committee and I remember trying to get someone to do something about our discipline referrals. It’s ridiculous—at that time we were suspending or giving In-School Suspension to something like 10 Black kids for every White kid. I put that out there. Had the data and everything, but everyone just stared at me with these bank expressions—the principal, the Assistant Principals, everyone. No one wanted to do anything about it. . . After a while I just started to focus on what I could change in my classroom and let those larger battles go.

This kind of focus on a certain, immediate level of education to the exclusion of others was common among educators in the school.
Other teachers also noted that no one seemed comfortable talking about race in the school, and for a long-time administrators had discouraged such conversations. One tactic that many teachers mentioned was redirecting conversations about issues of race by saying that they were focused on “the whole child, not just their race” or “that we can’t do anything about that. We’re here to help kids learn.” However, while administrators may have felt more comfortable avoiding racialized conversations or looking at data around racial issues, this aggressive attempt to maintain a difference-blind approach to leadership left others cold. These responses were typical teachers’ reactions to questions about the lack of a dialogue around race in the school:

We all know it’s a problem. How will we address it if we don’t talk about it?

I hate the way we don’t address racism here. As an African American man, it makes me wonder if there isn’t a lot of racist whispering behind my back. I can definitely feel it when I walk into a room with white-only colleagues.

I don’t know what kind of conversations we should or could be having about race, but we don’t have any.

The principal keeps saying that race has nothing to do with learning, and we’re here to focus on learning. I just know that it’s a huge tension among students and in the community, so how could it not be in the school?

The silence in the school was problematic, in that educators seemed to be making sense of racism on their own—left to interpret how it influenced their practice and encouraged to guess or ignore the ways that others in the school might be making sense of it in their own work. This transcended day-to-day work in the classroom and also extended into the professional development they received.

Professional development. A review of training material for teachers and administrators showed that professional development sessions did not address issues of race at all. There was no training related to cultural sensitivity or student voice/engagement. Instead, teachers and administrators at DuBois attended workshops around data management, even though as one teacher said, “we never receive data in a timely manner or in a format we can use. It’s ridiculous, all the time we spend learning how to analyze the data we never get.” Two teachers in particular raised professional development as a missed opportunity to address issues of race in the school:
Teacher 1: I wish we would spend our PD time looking at culturally relevant pedagogy or strategies people are using to engage students or discuss issues of race with students. It’s crazy that we can’t even have these conversations with each other, can’t facilitate them with the kids and then we send them back out into the community to do what? We haven’t changed anything, for ourselves or for them. We should be taking that issue head-on.

Teacher 2: I find our PD to be irrelevant. It’s not that the people planning it don’t work hard, but it always feels like it is written for another school, maybe one of the mostly-white schools in the suburbs. We get these “do this” and “do that” idea that might sound good in a college classroom, but to be honest my biggest issue is that I’m a young White woman trying to teach a classroom full of Black students who don’t care what I have to say. I need strategies for connecting to them, for learning about their take on things—I don’t need someone to tell me that race doesn’t matter, because it does.

Although formal professional development in the school largely ignored the institutional context and individual needs, educators’ dyadic relationship and informal interactions had a significant influence on their understanding of race in the school.

**Friends and Enemies, Then and Now: The Importance of Relationships**

Teachers and administrators nearly all explained that relationships, both in and out of school, were critical for them to understand issues of race and to inform their leadership practice. One problem, perhaps, is that these were seen as two distinct and different conversations that required different friends. Many educators explained that the most important and meaningful conversations they had about race and racism took place outside of school, and most had taken place years ago. It was common for teachers and administrators to explain that they had their first conversations about race and racism with family members or childhood friends. For many people, these conversations took place decades ago but still had a profound impact on their practice. For example, one African American teacher told me that her Daddy had to tell me about inequity when I was a little girl, because it was in our face all the time. He had to warn me about the way I talk to white People and the situations I put myself in. I still take that with me today into my professional life. My Black friends know me as hella loud! They think I’m
crazy, outspoken and funny. People at school often ask why I’m so quiet. I don’t speak up in meetings. I don’t ask questions. I don’t want those headaches. I’m Black so I keep quiet. It’s what I was taught.

Another White teacher explained a nearly inverse perception,

I was told to speak up and say something when I see a problem. I was brought up to speak my mind, and I think that if you speak truth to people they will listen. I generally know what I’m talking about. I came from a good school and my parents raised me to be bold. If I see racism in school, I will call it out. I don’t believe in that and I will get rid of it. Seriously, though, I’ve been here three years and I don’t see any racism at DuBois. Kids are kids. Teachers are teachers. Some just come from a rougher background.

The differences in the way that White and Black teachers in the school viewed themselves and others was striking, and influenced the people they chose to work with and the people with whom they developed personal and professional relationships.

There was a stark contrast to the way that Black and White teachers and administrators explained the ways that they chose friends. To a person, Black teachers and administrators suggested that they made easier and more trusting friendships with other Black educators. Some attributed it to being from the same neighborhood or having gone through the same preparation programs, but most also said that they felt more affinity and more secure with same-race relationships. In contrast, White teachers downplayed the importance of same-race relationships and to a person noted that they had many Black friends in the school, though very few were friends past professional hours. An African American administrator explained,

Look, I’ve been around long enough to know that I don’t trust everyone. You stick with the people who share your experience, and for me that’s the other Black folk in the school. I know their families and in some cases I even taught their parents. The God’s honest truth is that . . . and I’m retiring at the end of the year so I’m going to tell it like it is. . . I’ve been burned by a lot of White people. I’ve been promised promotions that never happened. I’ve been told I would get a certain room and then it was given to a pretty little White girl. I’ve seen great teachers fired because they were Black and I’ve seen people treated awful because they were Black. Racism is real and white people just don’t get it here. I can’t trust them or understand them, so they ain’t my friends. They’re not enemies, well, not most of them. . . but they’re not my friends.

Whether friends or enemies, the individual relationships, and ultimately the sub-cultural groupings of educators in the school were shaped by racial affinity.
What We Say Versus What We Do: Subcultural and Institutional Racism

There was ample evidence that racism was at play both in subcultural and institutional levels. This was marked, as one teacher explained, by an approach to leadership called “what we say vs. what we do.” Other teacher corroborated this perspective, suggesting that there were distinct subcultures throughout the school and that they each had their own leaders. Some were more active than others, with clear motives and aggressive tactics or getting what they wanted, whereas others were more subtle and discrete. Interestingly, educators all suggested that there were two major subcultures in the school: White educators and Black educators. Each had their own norms, values, and beliefs and looked out for their members in various ways. For example, Black educators described the White educator subculture as one with more resources, more power and where people were awarded promotions and showered with accolades because they were White. From the perspective of many Black educators, White educators had a highly developed system of looking out for each and promoting each other through the system, regardless of the accomplishments of their Black colleagues. White educators, on the contrary, believed that Black educators looked out for each other and routinely put up barriers to race relations and interrace dialogue and understanding. Several White teachers talked about how they felt excluded from Black educators’ networks and about how they felt that Black educators looked out for one another. Importantly, these subcultural networks extended throughout the district, meaning that Black educators throughout the district knew each other and actively supported each other’s careers, but predominantly this happened among rather than across racial lines.

Space Ship From Another Planet: The School as a Closed System of Racist Practice

A few teachers explained that racist incidents that happened outside of the school, in the community, nation or globally, were generally not discussed in the school. This served to turn the school into a closed system, that one teacher described as “a Space Ship from Another Planet.” He went on to explain that

we all talk about sports or things that happened in the arts, like the Oscars, but when something racist happens you’d never know by visiting our school. I remember a few years ago there was a terrible hate crime committed just a few blocks from here. It was all over the papers and even got into the national news,
but we were told not to discuss the incident. In fact, we were threatened and
told we’d get in trouble if we “stirred up” anything related to it.

There was other evidence of the school’s disconnect from societal racial
issues. During the years of this study, the first African American mayoral
candidate in the city’s history was running for office. Although several teach-
ers and one administrator were active in campaigning for them, they were
careful to never discuss their weekend activities in the school. This dynamic
underscored the lack of dialogue about issues of race in the school, as the
community and country were occasionally engaged in heated debates about
various racialized incidents. They rarely surfaced in informal conversations
and were never addressed in formal school conversations or initiatives.

Ecologies of Racism and School Leadership: A Constantly
Shifting Landscape

Teachers and administrators repeatedly explained that one of the most impor-
tant issues in relation to racism and school leadership practice was change.
People change, students change, policies change, and attitudes and willing-
ness to address racism change due to the unique interaction of these people
and dynamics. Moreover, people change over time—developing their aware-
ness and behavior to actively work against racism, to perpetuate an ever-
shifting status quo or to negatively influence the situation. As one African
American teacher explained,

I have a few friends that have been there since day one, since we were kids, and
of course my family has my back. Beyond that, I’ve come to realize that schools
change so totally and so quickly that those are the only people that I can really
trust—everyone else will be gone, or I’ll be gone. The kids will leave the
system one way or another and the only constant, really, is me.

Another teacher commented,

The system reinvents itself every few years here. I used to try and get things
going. We’re always told that collaboration is key—that it’s the way to go—but
when 50% of the teachers in this school turn over every few years. . . well, it
just doesn’t work that way around here.

In addition to impermanence, several teachers and administrators said that
the instability in their support systems meant that while their personal support
networks may be strong, their professional networks were fleeting and weak.
As one White teacher said,
When I started, I had a great principal. She checked in on me all the time and I could talk about anything. We would even discuss race in relation to instruction and student engagement. She was only there for my first two years, and then she moved on to a central office role. I’ve worked for 14 principals in the 21 years I’ve been a teacher, and I’ve worked in four different schools during that time. While I was moving, everyone else was moving and I do think that while there may be a few core issues that speak to you: band and debate for me, you tend to feel like some issues like racism are bigger than we can address, precisely because people move some much into and out of our schools. Nothing that makes a difference can take hold.

An administrator who spent 22 years in DuBois related a similar sentiment:

You ask about my networks and how those networks have addressed racism . . . I’ve known people who were very passionate about doing something in relation to racism. We’ve had people who quote Dr. King, we’ve had people who start programs or speak up in meetings, but my main experience has been that while individual people care, the system doesn’t care. There is no one at the top, demanding that things change over time and working on it from all levels of the system. What that means is that I do my thing, other people do their thing, and that’s it. We all try to do our best, I guess, but I’m not sure if we do anything about racism as a collective.

In summary, findings suggested that leaders are influenced by racism and race relations at individual, dyadic, subcultural, institutional, and societal levels. It is interesting that while dynamics manifest at all levels, there were only conversations or sense-making happening in some and not others. The idea that societal issues related to racism were not discussed openly in the school seemed to lead educators to interpret a message that such conversations were not welcome, and that race was not an acceptable topic for educational professionals.

Discussion

This study suggested several key dynamics that give cause for reflection and call into question some extant assertions about racism and urban school leadership. The first of these is that people, leadership, and policies are all key to addressing racism in urban schools, but all three are constantly shifting in a nonlinear fashion. As people learn from sources such as books, films, discussions, and their own experiences, they deconstruct, reconstruct, and coconstruct leadership in multiple ways that change over time and from situation to situation (M. D. Young & Laible, 2000). These ever-evolving and changing
ways of understanding and practicing issues related to race and educational leadership mean that schools are protean cultural, political, and educational contexts that do not “improve” in any simple way, but instead develop as dynamic individual and institutional racial ecologies change and interact. They are likely improving, declining, ignoring, and engaging at once, creating a constantly moving kaleidoscope of thought and action about racism and leadership in schools (Dantley, 2002). Put differently, individual educators have idiosyncratic racialized experiences, some of which occur in isolation whereas others are shared. Moreover, every person, group, and school is filled with as many complicated and fluctuating ecologies of race as there are people in the organization (Leonardo, 2009).

Practitioners and scholars should question whether or not traditional approaches to school leadership and individual development are sufficient to address issues of racism in schools (Parker & Villalpando, 2007). Strategies such as raising awareness, gaining consensus, developing initiatives and interventions, assessing their impact and reconceptualizing for a new cycle seem nearly impossible in a system where leaders, followers, policies, ideas, and students come and go so often and so quickly—and where all of them are constantly changing (Gillborn, 2008). Programs may have some value in helping individuals increase their understanding or enhance their skills in relation to engaging race in schools, but it is unclear whether their influence is sustained for either individuals or organizations (J. S. Brooks, 2012). It may be important to establish system-wide policies at the district, state, or national level and to see that practices are changed and shaped by proactive redundancy at all levels and by all people, so that antiracism is an individual and organizational quality (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). It may also be important to support people and to focus on their personal growth and ability to grow support networks beyond the school level, and to encourage programs that extend into the community or that come from the community into the school. Importantly, each person who works in a school is at the center of an individual ecology of racism. This study suggested that the ecological model posited in Figure 1 may be helpful as a point of departure for understanding levels of racism, but each person’s experience is unique, and both influences those around them as they are likewise influenced by the past, present, and their thoughts about the future.

All of these points suggest that the ecology of racism framework is a helpful construct that helps us understand the ways that racism is manifest in schools and the ways that it influences leadership. More research is needed to explore and refine this framework, but it is a useful step toward developing a sensitivity of the ways that individuals and groups make sense of racism in schools. In particular, the notion that each person makes sense of racism in relation to their
pretext and posttext as much as their context should compel scholars and practitioners to expand the scope of their research and leadership.

Conclusion

It is important for scholars and educators to begin to analyze racism in a deeper and more nuanced manner than is currently common practice. This begins with reflection, followed by awareness and learning before translating into action and ultimately leadership. Each individual has a personal and lifelong relationship with race and racism that should be taken into account as an evolving dynamic shaped by relationships and environment (Banks & Banks, 2009). This study draws particular attention to the importance of pretext—specifically early life relationships and encounters with racism through experience and critical texts—in people’s development. It also focuses on posttext, the racial futures that people can imagine and the powerful ways in which it seems to shape their leadership practice. That is, if they can envision more equitable possibilities, individuals can see that their current practice is a means toward a more just future. If they are discouraged by their context and jaded by their pretext, then it is difficult for them to lead toward social justice. Being that urban schools are unstable environments, it may be important to focus on understanding these individual trajectories rather than relying on the system to ameliorate long-standing racist institutions (Carroll Massey et al., 1975).

The study also suggests issues that leadership preparation programs might consider. In particular, the degree to which programs are sensitive to the racial pretexts, contexts, and posttexts of applicants, students, and alumni (let alone those who teach them) could help us re-envision preparation as something that is part of a punctuated equilibrium stemming from each person’s ongoing relationship with race and racism (Diem & Carpenter, 2013). Put differently, we need to understand the racial histories of leadership preparation participants, interrogate the contextual dynamics around race in our programs, and then help students visualize a socially just future so they can lead schools for equity and excellence. Also, such programs will want to understand that people’s contexts are dynamic. This is in part because contexts are by nature continually becoming pretexts, but it is also continually shifting based on the educators in the school, the teachers in the classrooms and the larger world that we share via small interactions and plenary experiences (Diem & Carpenter, 2013).

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