

A white teacher reflects on institutional racism.

by Evelyn Hanssen

Institutional racism is not simply an "inconvenience" for a statistical minority, Ms. Hanssen reminds us. But until we are able to see its seriousness and pervasiveness, we will not be willing to commit the time and resources needed to confront this overwhelming challenge.

When I left my comfortable job at a university to go back to public school teaching, I was excited about the challenge of bringing new ideas and innovative strategies to often neglected urban settings. I felt a particular calling to work within the African American community. I knew I had a great deal to learn about and from that community, but I was recognized as a good teacher and felt confident that I could reach my goals.

I was hired as a reading/English teacher in a racially and economically heterogeneous urban high school. The school was in an area that had become more diverse in recent years, and the student body was becoming increasingly divided as a result of racial differences. Any sense of community in the classroom or loyalty to the school had all but disappeared. The hall-ways were becoming hostile places. Our European American faculty was becoming less able to capture the enthusiasm and respect of the students of color (largely African American) who made up half of the student population. Attendance was highly erratic, and even when students were present, the commitment to disciplined intellectual activity seemed low. At the time I was not always successful in recognizing and taking on these issues. The situation seemed like a cesspool of societal problems.

During my two years in this school I experienced much pain and frustration, as my classroom seemed continually to be dragged into the mire. In some ways, it was a time I would like to forget, but there was a great deal that the students taught me in the midst of my straggle. The challenges they presented are ones that I and others need to address as we continue to approach the problems associated with educating students in urban settings and in those suburban contexts that are gradually becoming more diverse, creating the circumstances typically associated with urban schools. I've framed some of these challenges in the form of three broad questions that I will discuss specifically in terms of my own teaching situation and invite others to consider in light of their experiences.

1. Are we recognizing the institutional racism that exists in our schools? As an academic, I thought I was fairly sophisticated about broader theoretical issues and how they were played out concretely in schools. But it took a while before I was able to recognize the various unintentional forms of racism that were hiding behind the standard practices of my hard-working, well-meaning colleagues (and that undoubtedly lurked in my own).

Curriculum. The literature in the English book room included very few titles by African American authors - or other minority authors, for that matter. Initially I tried to attribute that fact to a kind of benign neglect that is characteristic of teachers who are feeling pushed to the limit. While I saw diversity in the curriculum as an extremely high priority, I also tried to remember that becoming familiar with a whole new body of literature, in addition to taking on all the other demands of being a professionally active teacher, can be overwhelming. A department meeting later in the year, however, made me understand the situation differently.

We were beginning an International Baccalaureate (IB) program at the school, and one of our teachers was developing the freshman English curriculum, focusing on world literature. Her curriculum was applauded by the national IB review team, particularly her choice of literature. However, district policy requires that two teachers review each new work of literature that is proposed to be part of any core curriculum. So the IB English teacher brought her box of proposed books to the meeting to ask us to help read and review the new books or just write reviews if we had already read them. We discussed each title as she held it up, since someone in the department had read each one. I was surprised when the department decided that two of the titles - both by award-winning African American authors - were not acceptable. The teachers felt that these works were too sexually explicit, even though they acknowledged that there were also sexually explicit sections in some of the other books by the more traditionally "canonized" authors. The traditional authors, however, were seen as more "subtle" and, therefore, more acceptable.

But the term "sexually explicit" is a cultural notion. For example, the gyrating movements of some of the traditional African dancers I have seen seem very sexually suggestive to me, and I recognize that some people might even find them offensive. But I wonder how traditional Africans might view our ballroom dancing, in which men and women hold each other tightly as their bodies sway together. Perhaps they

would see that form of dance as far more sexually suggestive than their own.

I was amazed that none of the teachers even noticed that the only two works vetoed were by African Americans. Whether their judgment was correct or not, there should at least have been some acknowledgment that a kind of ethnocentrism might be operating. On other occasions I had conversations with a number of my colleagues about the underrepresentation of authors from various ethnic groups in our curriculum and talked about how positively the students of color were responding to books I had purchased with a small district grant. Most of them nodded politely. One proudly explained that she taught Langston Hughes in American literature - though she was careful not to point out that he was black. Only one teacher showed real interest or concern, eventually asking to borrow some of my books.

If we think that students don't notice the cultural biases in our curricula, we are wrong. However, the comments reflecting that awareness are often mumbled under the students' breath. One instance in which these comments rose to the surface came when the administration decided not to renew the contract of one of our history teachers. Many of the black students "knew" it was because she spent a lot of time on African American history and had a huge mural of Malcolm X in her classroom. Whether or not they were correct, their perception is important. And their belief was strong enough to cause a group to march out of school in protest.

Faculty. While I saw the lack of attention to racial diversity as a problem, members of the administration valued their "colorblindness" and proudly carried it into their hiring practices. Although we had no academic teachers who were African American (only a P.E. teacher and a band instructor - perpetuating existing stereotypes about the areas in which blacks excel), qualified African Americans continued to be overlooked. I do not think that these hiring decisions reflected a conscious racism; rather they were based on the administrators' belief that they wanted to choose the "best" person for the job. Not surprisingly, that best person always turned out to be the one who was most like the administrative team who did the hiring.

In one case an experienced African American male with a recent master's degree was passed over in favor of a new graduate who was white. Both shared similar theoretical perspectives on current approaches to the teaching of reading and writing. The administration admitted that both were strong candidates but saw the young white

teacher as having an edge because he interviewed well. They failed to recognize that the intangible edge during an interview will typically go to the person who most resembles those conducting the interview. If we rely on that subtle "impression" as the definitive factor, then people with different ethnic and racial backgrounds will almost always be at a disadvantage. What surprised and saddened me the most, however, was that the administration could not see how critical it was for our African American students to have a strong academic role model and what an important contribution the minority candidate could have made to conversations on various issues within the school, particularly those related to the students of color.

When I asked about that particular hiring decision, I had one of the oddest conversations of my life. The administrator agreed wholeheartedly with me that it was important to hire minority teachers but lamented how difficult it was to find applicants. I reminded her that we had had one and didn't hire him. She went on to talk about having contacted the other schools in our district to see if they had had any more luck in finding minority teachers, only to discover that they had also been unsuccessful. Again, I reminded her that we didn't hire the qualified minority applicant we did have. Then she began to talk about the incentives a larger, neighboring district was able to provide minority candidates and how that district attracted most of the eligible prospects. For a third time, I attempted to politely mention the qualified minority applicant we didn't hire. I was amazed and frustrated. A woman who could normally follow a line of conversation quite well began to sound ridiculous. (I wondered if these are the kinds of conversations blacks often experience when confronting the white power brokers controlling various institutions. If so, it is no wonder that many are enraged.) Only later did I find out that there were actually two highly qualified black males who were interviewed and not hired.

Ethos of the school. While the administrators and many of the teachers were walking around the school trying to be colorblind, many of our students of color were "seeing white." Even though there were lots of faces of color, it still felt like a white school to many of our nonwhite students.

While I was teaching at the school, I had a personal experience that gave me some sense of what they might be feeling. I had occasion to visit the church my brother attended. It was a mega-church with well over a thousand members and several ministers. Despite the fact that it was part of a mainline denomination in which over half of those in

seminaries are women, none of its ministers were female. The worship service used exclusively male religious imagery and highlighted men in both overt and subtle ways. Although there were lots of women in the congregation, it still felt like a male church. As a woman, I knew this was not a church that could ever truly be mine.

Similarly, as I listened more closely to our students of color, I began to hear some of the concrete ways in which they felt that the school wasn't theirs. With respect to the education they were receiving there, I heard comments about American history not reflecting the experience of African Americans. More than 20 years after the initial explosion of multicultural awareness, students were still experiencing a tremendous void in this area.

I heard African American students complain about the fact that there was no celebration of the Martin Luther King holiday. When I relayed these concerns to school officials, they proudly responded that they didn't want to single out any group, thereby leaving others feeling left out. Of course, even a celebration like a pep rally "singles out" a group. Their discomfort arose when race became a consideration.

The students' comments about their relationships with teachers and administrators were less direct. However, when they came into conflict with those in authority, many would either genuinely or disingenuously blame racism. For some, it was a way to avoid responsibility; for others, it was a way to lash out at an institution in which they felt little investment at best and alienation at worst.

My raising of these issues with members of the administration was met with anger and denial. They were hurt that there were suggestions of racism when they were trying to do their best. They simply could not see the impact of their positions. They didn't understand the ways in which the substance of the curriculum, the composition of the faculty, and the ethos of the school left a large percentage of students feeling that the school was not really theirs.

2. Once we acknowledge institutional racism, do we understand its complexity, and do our attempts to address it reflect that complexity? Like any good white liberal teacher, I was committed to doing whatever I could to create a more multicultural environment. I wanted to go beyond the usual superficial and awkward attempts to include different groups by occasionally shoving "minority" activities or lessons into a curriculum that really wasn't designed to reflect the minority experience. I remembered years earlier hearing a man ask what he

could do to support feminism. The feminist speaker responded, "Read our work." So I decided to begin by finding more literature by authors from various ethnic groups and bringing their voices into the classroom.

In one class, students had a choice of a number of novels - some of them were from the traditional canon, some were more contemporary, and two of them were autobiographical works by black women. As students did group presentations on the various books they read, the issues of racism contained in the two autobiographies came to the surface. The black students in this class were particularly articulate and were able to communicate, perhaps in ways that the other students had never heard before, the impact of racism in their daily lives. The emotion behind their thoughtful statements was strong - reflecting a deep level of anger, bordering on rage.

The other students couldn't deal with that naked anger. Some totally shut down. It was as if someone had simply flipped their "off" switches. Others argued that what the black students were saying simply wasn't true. A very light-skinned Latino boy was adamant that racism was not such a big problem. One white girl was on the verge of tears as she tried to convince us (particularly the black students) that it couldn't be that bad and that she wasn't a racist. She was so upset that she went to talk to the people in the office. A number of the other white students were silently angry. They privately revealed that they felt that we were wasting our time "arguing" about these issues.

Although our two-day discussion was not some superficial swipe at multiculturalism, I don't think that it was positive. It tapped into deep-seated thoughts and feelings, but I'm not sure it helped anyone reexamine them and possibly grow or change. Even though I did a good job of facilitating the conversation in terms of bringing the issues to the surface in clear and responsible ways, I didn't have the skills to help the group work through the emotions of this kind of exchange in a way that would make it a reflective, growing experience. I felt at the end that people hadn't learned anything. The black students had had the opportunity to vent, and the others were either unaffected or maybe a bit hurt. Probably all the students had simply become more entrenched in their existing perspectives. I wondered if I had done more harm than good. I learned many things from this experience, but one of the most important was the complexity of issues of racism. It is not simply a matter of talking things through and coming to a better understanding.

I went on to explore some of these issues with leaders in the African American community. I spoke with one middle-aged black woman who was an adjunct at a nearby graduate institution and was married to a man with a doctorate. I was surprised at her response when I raised the issue of hopelessness among many of my students. She maintained that her generation had placed their hope in education, but they had found that to be a lie. I was shocked! This pronouncement came from a woman who is a highly educated, successful leader in the religious community. If people like her feel that the promise of education has been a lie, I wonder what incentives we can provide for African American youths to come to school and work hard?

As I sought interactions with other blacks, I spoke to people who still hold on to the dream of the Civil Rights movement as articulated by Martin Luther King. They believe we all need to keep on working toward greater integration, toward greater understanding, and toward a time when people will truly be judged by the "content of their character." But increasingly, at least in some circles, those who hold this perspective are seen as the old guard, out of touch with newer separatist trends in the black community. Many African American political and religious leaders argue that the black community needs to heal itself from within; reinstitute all-black businesses, schools, and neighborhoods; and avoid "help" from the outside.

I had no idea where that left me. Listening to "another white woman" was clearly the last thing my 17-year-old black male students wanted to do. My concern about these issues was not enough. Racism and race relations, as we saw demonstrated so dramatically in the response to the O.J. Simpson trial, are far too complex. The gulf between the races is deep, and the level of suspicion seems insurmountable at times.

I have not come up with answers regarding the appropriate role of white teachers in supporting the advancement of communities of color. Despite the objections of some leaders within communities of color, I am assuming there is some contribution that people like me might make, particularly since most students of color are in the difficult position of having many white teachers. While I am clear that actively seeking the employment of teachers of color is a first step, in the meantime I must continue trying to figure out what my role might be. I am seeking to learn what I can by reading both literary and nonliterary texts related to issues of race. I am trying to listen to people of color, both public leaders and my own students. As much as possible, I am working to break through the walls of discomfort and

mistrust to engage in honest conversations. And I am constantly on the lookout for the possibility of developing professional relationships with educators of color. I suspect that it will be in collaboration with one of these colleagues that I may discover the most significant contributions I can make.

Although diversity and multiculturalism are held up in educational circles as wonderful objectives, we rarely acknowledge that genuine diversity of any type is extremely difficult to achieve. There are no easy answers, as each side is right and each side is wrong. In my school, I watched the institutional racism perpetuated by the administration and faculty (undoubtedly including myself), and I wanted to scream. On the other hand, I watched the irresponsible ways some students and parents responded, and I was frustrated with them too. There aren't clear good guys and bad guys. Racism is much more complex than that. Meaningful ways to address it will not easily be found. I believe we have to keep mucking about, often in awkward ways, stumbling together as people from a variety of communities in search of a better place.

3. Are we seeking out the help we need from the respective ethnic communities? After two years in a school that I fear is not atypical, I became convinced that in order for a faculty and an administration, particularly if they are largely white, to address issues of racism and other problems of urban education, they need to become more creative and collaborative. We educators need to seek substantive input from communities of color and to work with these communities in meaningful ways.

There are many areas in which we need input. One such area is the clash of cultural norms, which can occur on a regular basis. A colleague of mine was struggling with the behavior of the students in one of her classes. Students were continually shouting out comments when she was speaking or when a student was giving a presentation. Often other students in the class would respond to the comments, and there would be several exchanges across the room. My colleague became so frustrated that she started to dread that class, became grouchy, and suffered from headaches when it was over. I happened to ask her about the racial composition of the class. It turned out that it was predominantly African American.

We began to discuss other contexts in the African American community, such as the black church, and norms for appropriate behavior there. She was familiar with the spontaneous responsive

elements of worship in many black churches. I told her of an experience I had in a movie theater where most of the audience was black. Throughout the film, many people responded verbally to things that were happening. This is very different from what I experience in primarily white suburban theaters. In fact, white suburban theater patrons would most likely be so annoyed by audible talking throughout the movie that they would complain to the theater attendants, who might ask the talkers to leave. This conversation about different cultural norms helped my colleague be a bit less angry, but it didn't change her desire that her own cultural norms operate in her classroom.

I experienced a similar clash when I took a class with a large proportion of African American males to see a production by the drama class. I reprimanded my students for their constant talking throughout the play. They thought I was being totally unfair, since their comments were about the play. Their response was one of anger and frustration. If we had been in an all-black school, it might have been easier. However, in this context there were white students in the cast and in the audience who were likely to have seen this behavior as disrespectful. So which set of norms should win? Or is there a way to negotiate? Schools serve to educate students, but they also socialize our young people to accepted modes of interaction. We need to hear from communities of color about how they view those norms. We need to begin a dialogue.

There are probably many areas in which different cultural norms are creating difficulties. That is precisely why we need to have people of color intimately involved in the working of our schools, filling roles in which they can have a strong voice. Far too often, employees of color are not in a position of great influence, either because of their job status or because of their limited numbers. For example, the four security guards at our school were people of color. While they were valued for what they did, they were not expected to engage in a serious critique of the school. The school I am working at now has a bright, insightful African American teacher. But since she is the only teacher of color, she doesn't create many waves. On the rare occasion when she is asked about her perspective on an issue regarding the black community, the European Americans tend to be perplexed by her responses and walk away shaking their heads. Parents and other community members of color who are not employed by the school typically do not have sufficient access to be able to provide thorough evaluations or critical input. In order to get substantive input and involvement from communities of color, we will have to open up

schools in new ways and perhaps give up what we have traditionally seen as the "turf" of professional educators. This prospect presents a strong challenge both to our creativity and to our claims that we desire more multicultural schools.

We need to remember that institutional racism typically isn't ugly. Rather than being expressed through racial slurs, it tends to be wrapped in noble proclamations of tradition, fairness, and high standards. Rather than being a rare incident, it is woven into the fabric of our historically racist society.

The subtle and slippery forms of institutional racism vary in each context. We must all take responsibility for remaining highly observant and analytical concerning practices within our own schools that might reflect institutional racism. After identifying problems, we need to avoid the quick Band-Aid solutions that are so often employed. Real solutions will require a serious commitment of time and energy to more fully understand the problems we face and the hard work we will need to do over a long period of time to experiment with a variety of possible approaches.

Perhaps most important, we need to recognize that institutional racism is silently tearing at the fiber of our schools and our society. It is not simply an "inconvenience" for a statistical minority. Until we are able to see its seriousness and pervasiveness, we will not be willing to commit the time and resources needed to confront this overwhelming challenge.

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