Teachers in Transition: The Impact of Antiracist Professional Development on Classroom Practice

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This article examines the impact of an antiracist professional development project on eighty-four suburban white teachers, all of whom are part of a voluntary desegregation program. Analysis of writing-sample data reveals that forty-eight of the eighty-four participants took antiracist actions as a result of their new learning about race and racism. In all, 142 specific actions were noted. The categories of action-taking related to three parameters of schooling: the quality of interpersonal interactions among school and community members, the curriculum, and the institution's policies regarding support services for students of color. The relationship between changes in the educators' racial-identity development and their behaviors is discussed as are the elements that contributed to the antiracist educational outcomes.

My understanding of cultural, institutional racism has been permanently changed, as has my understanding of the experiences of people of color. I've had opportunities to be an ally, and haven't been brave enough. Now I definitely will! I intend to make different choices in my personal life regarding where I live and the groups I join. As an educator, I will continue to learn about racism and antiracism and teach it directly in my classroom. I intend to be vocal in all areas of my life.

—A white female elementary classroom teacher

The quote featured above was taken from an evaluation form, completed at the end of a semester-long professional development course that examined the impact of racism on teacher expectations, classroom practice, and school climate. Is this teacher's response typical? She declares a heightened level of awareness, and expresses an intention to take antiracist actions, personally and professionally. Will she "walk her talk"? This question is central to the effectiveness of antiracist teacher education programs and in-service professional development opportunities. Do educators in these programs actually change their behaviors in ways that make a difference for their students? This question will be the focus of this article.
Due to the continuing social segregation of American society, most white teachers in the current teaching force have had limited contact with people of color. Their knowledge of communities of color is often misinformed by stereotypes or distortions communicated in the media and by family and friends. Their own educational experiences have typically been monocultural rather than multicultural, with major omissions concerning the contributions and achievements of people of color. This limited perspective leaves white educators ill-equipped to prepare their own students, both white and of color, to function effectively in a multiracial society.

The need for professional development efforts to help white educators expand their perspective and deepen their understanding of the ways in which race and racism have affected their own education as well as that of their students is evident (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997; Sleeter, 1992; Zeichner, 1993). Yet many white people, educators included, are reluctant to talk about race. It is a taboo topic that whites are socialized to avoid (Sleeter, 1994; Tatum, 1992). Many white teachers are fearful that conversations about race will degenerate into angry, personalized accusations of racism. In order to prevent this possibility, there is an active avoidance of the “r” word in many schools (Britzman, Santiago-Valles, Jimenez-Munoz, & Lamash, 1993; Grant & Zozakiewicz, 1995).

WHITE RACIAL IDENTITY AND ANTIRACIST PEDAGOGY

One consequence of this silence about race is the unexamined impact of racial identity on interracial and intraracial interactions. Many white people do not even think of themselves as “white” (Frankenberg, 1993; Tatum, 1992). As one experienced teacher said in an interview conducted by Sandra Lawrence for an earlier study (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997):

I am thirty-five years old and I never really started thinking about race too much until now, and that makes me feel uncomfortable ... I just think for some reason I didn’t know. No one taught us. That’s what I tell my students.

When white teachers fail to acknowledge their own racial identity, this lack of acknowledgement becomes a barrier for understanding and connecting with the developmental needs of children of color. It is the teacher who does not acknowledge her or his own racial or ethnic identity, for example, who will not recognize the need for children of color to affirm their own. Similarly, they cannot be role models for white students who are struggling to understand and change the racial realities of the world in which they live (Tatum, 1994). One might predict then that the preparation of white teachers for working effectively in multiracial environments must attend to issues of white racial identity development (Carter & Goodwin, 1994).
Racial-identity development involves the psychological implications of racial group membership, specifically, the belief systems that evolve in response to racial-group categorizations. In contemporary American society, where racial-group membership is an important determinant of social status, it is assumed that the development of a racial identity will occur to some degree in everyone (Helms, 1990). However, the process unfolds differently for whites than it does for people of color, because of the inequities in social position. For whites, the process involves becoming aware of one's whiteness, learning to accept this aspect of one's identity as socially meaningful and personally salient, and ultimately internalizing a "realistically positive view of what it means to be White" (Helms, 1990, p. 55). Janet Helms describes this process for whites using a six-stage psychological model. Progression along Helms's continuum is necessary for teachers to be successful first learning about and then teaching in ways that constitute antiracist pedagogy (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997).

Antiracist pedagogy is central to a philosophy of education that bears many names—"multicultural education" (Banks, 1993; Grant & Sleeter, 1989; Nieto, 1992), "teaching for social justice" (Bigelow, Christensen, Karp, Miner, & Peterson, 1994), and "culturally relevant teaching" (Ladson-Billings, 1994), just to name a few. The aim of antiracist pedagogy is equitable education for students from all racial and cultural groups. Teaching and learning processes that are explicitly antiracist examine the ways racism influences schools and the people in them, teach students about the racial stratification that exists, and empower learners to take responsibility for and/or challenge the racial status quo. Antiracist educator Enid Lee maintains (1995) that antiracist pedagogy must be the "business of all teachers" (p. 9) if it is to be effective in changing the inequity of schools. She further specifies three realms where antiracist action must occur: (1) antiracist education must permeate the form and frequency of the interactions among school personnel, students, and teachers; (2) race and racism must be an integral component of the curriculum; and (3) supports for students of color, rather than obstacles, are necessary for their academic success (Lee, 1995).

In previous work (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997), we investigated whether white educators who engaged in professional development focusing on antiracist pedagogy experienced a change in their racial identity. We found that most of the white participants began the course with a limited awareness of the institutionalized nature of racism and the systematic advantages white people receive as a consequence of racial privilege. Though not "color-blind," they failed to acknowledge the social power associated with being white. Our findings from this earlier study suggest that the professional course helped these participants view themselves as
racial beings, fostered the development of their own racial identity, and led to frequent expressions of antiracist attitudes.

Other studies too suggest that some teachers do make fundamental changes in their racial attitudes (and presumably in their racial identity) as a result of professional development efforts with an antiracist focus (Redman, 1977; Sleeter, 1992; Washington, 1981). Do they, however, alter their daily teaching practice to reflect their changed attitudes? Some previous studies suggest that often they do not (Sleeter, 1993). With this question in mind, our current study looked again at the impact of an explicitly antiracist professional development program to see what kinds of antiracist educational practices, if any, resulted as a consequence of participants' shifts in thinking about race and racism.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The course under study, Anti-Racist and Effective Classroom Practice for All Students, was first offered in 1993 to suburban educators participating in the METCO program, a voluntary school desegregation program in the Boston area. An explicit goal of the professional development project was to create an intervention that might positively impact teacher effectiveness in working with black students participating in the METCO program. Since its inception, the course has been taught by a biracial team of instructors, one of whom is Beverly Daniel Tatum, an African-American woman and co-author of this article. The present study is based on an analysis of data collected from the first three iterations of the course.

DESCRIPTION OF THE COURSE

The course was specifically designed to help educators recognize the personal, cultural, and institutional manifestations of racism and to become more proactive in response to racism within their school settings. Topics covered include an examination of the concepts of prejudice, racism, white privilege, and internalized oppression. In addition, theories of racial identity development for both whites and people of color were discussed, along with an investigation of the historical connection between scientific racism, intelligence testing, and assumptions about the "fixed nature" of student intellectual capacity. The implications of these ideas for classroom practice were explicitly discussed. Course activities included lectures, videos, small- and large-group discussions, and experiential exercises.

Between class meetings, participants wrote reflection papers in response to required readings and engaged in special assignments such as an analysis of cultural stereotypes and omissions and distortions in their curricular
materials. They were also encouraged to actively interrogate their expectations and assumptions about the success potential of students of color. This course content served as a catalyst for white educators in particular to acknowledge their own racial-group membership and its social meaning in the racial order of contemporary society. For many, such acknowledgement and self-exploration was a new and profound experience.

All of the participants who took the course did so voluntarily. Initially, because this professional development effort had a leadership-development component, those educators who had already shown interest in racial issues and who might provide antiracist leadership within their schools were actively sought. After the first offering, however, participants enrolled largely as the result of "word-of-mouth" course recommendations. The approximately 110 educators who participated in the first three sections of this course are a predominantly white group, reflecting the racial composition of the communities in which they work. As a group, they represent elementary, middle-school, and secondary teachers, as well as administrators, educational specialists, and counselors.

At the beginning of each course, participants were asked about their willingness to participate in ongoing research regarding the course. Specifically, they were asked if photocopies of their written assignments could be used for later analysis. Eighty-four white participants agreed to participate, and it is their reflection papers, case studies, and other essays that form the data base for this study.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Written materials were analyzed with particular attention to descriptions of specific antiracist actions they had taken in or out of school. We described an antiracist action as any behavior that challenges, interrupts, or calls into question individual, cultural, or institutional manifestations of racism. School-related actions were considered antiracist if they involved any of the following behaviors: introducing topics of race into the curriculum, teaching critical examination of cultural stereotypes, making curriculum more inclusive, displaying high expectations by taking initiative with students of color, reaching out to parents of color, working to change classroom grouping practices, encouraging the formation of cultural-identity groups or other student support groups, engaging with colleagues to discuss issues of race, applying an understanding of racial-identity development in interactions with students, interrupting offensive racial comments/behaviors made by school personnel, further educating oneself or others about racial identity and related issues, encouraging equity in hiring practices, and advocating for students of color in meetings with other educators. These
categories, generated originally from the data, are also representative of the kinds of behaviors described by others as consistent with antiracist, multicultural education (Banks, 1993; Grant & Sleeter, 1989; Lee, 1995; Nieto, 1994). Once categories were established and frequencies noted, we found it useful to examine the impact of the professional development course in terms of the participants' ability to effect change in the three parameters of schooling posited by Enid Lee (1995): relationships among school and community members, the curriculum, and the institution's efforts regarding support services for students of color.

ANTIRACIST EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

Of the eighty-four white participants whose documents were analyzed, forty-eight educators described 142 specific antiracist actions they had taken during the course: More than half (52%) of the actions involved improving relationships among teachers, students, and parents; nearly a third of the practices (27%) constituted curriculum transformations; and one fifth (20%) of the antiracist actions involved changes at the institutional level regarding support services for students of color (see Table 1).

SCHOOL/COMMUNITY INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Antiracist educational practices at the interpersonal level focus on three key actors who influence the daily life of children in schools: the teachers, the students themselves, and their parents. Given that teachers comprised the majority of course participants and their greatest degree of influence is within the classroom, it makes sense that teachers who want to effect change would begin by trying to improve communication between themselves and their students. In fact, 19 percent of all actions recorded focused on taking initiatives with students of color as a way of communicating high-performance expectations. After seeing evidence on film, as well as hearing testimonies by colleagues of color, about the prevalence among teachers of low expectations for students of color and the subsequent effect low expectancy has on student academic performance and self-esteem, white teachers began to reflect on their own past behavior interacting with students of color and some began to institute change. One teacher, for example, described her own reevaluation of her teaching in this arena:

I'd like to believe that I have not stereotyped the black students in my class as less capable learners than whites. However, I may not have acted as resolutely as I could to ensure their success. Since communicating my expectations and standards to the students, the results have
### Table 1: Antiracist Educational Practices in Three Parameters of Schooling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter of schooling</th>
<th>Type of antiracist educational practice (action) taken</th>
<th>Frequency of action (n=142)</th>
<th>Percent of action-taking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>School/community interpersonal relationships</strong></td>
<td>Communicating high expectations to students of color</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Educating white colleagues and parents</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Further educating self</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outreach to parents of color</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advocating for students of color</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>74</strong></td>
<td><strong>52</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Movements toward curricular transformation</strong></td>
<td>Including multicultural literature and themes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Racism as a curriculum topic</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching about racial-identity development</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teaching about stereotypes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Including perspectives of people of color in social studies</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>39</strong></td>
<td><strong>27</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional efforts and support</strong></td>
<td>Question assessments for special education</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenging racist behaviors among current or prospective staff</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Changing grouping or testing practices</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Providing support programs for students of color</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>29</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

been positive. Already one student has a perfect homework record (little or none done last year), another is volunteering his opinions in a group of 25 (rarely spoke in class discussions before), and a third is convinced he’s a “writer.”

Another classroom teacher described in more detail her efforts to encourage a particular black male student in her class.

In class discussions I have begun to call on D. and stick with him giving him support as needed. As time has gone on I notice that he more often raises his hand on his own. When he answers incorrectly I find ways to respond that let him know I’m proud he took the risk to answer or that even if incorrect it shows good thinking skills. I find sincere occasions to tell D. that I think he’s smart.
Though several of the examples involved these kinds of classroom behaviors which could be easily applied in a large group, others described more highly individualized initiatives. For example, a high school teacher described her work with a black female student whose academic self-confidence seemed quite low:

She already presented herself as a student with very little self-esteem and when anything new was presented, immediately stated that she could not and would not do it. This behavior was seen globally in all classes and with her counselor as well.

I must credit this course with giving me the initiative to see if I could somehow make her see what she was doing to herself and offer her my unconditional support in trying to reverse this behavior. . . . From the date we started the Journal . . . we agreed that she would date and write how she felt each day she came to class. She would then give the Journal back to me and I would write a response to what she had said and how I had perceived her in class that day. . . . I put the Journal on her desk without saying anything at the beginning of the class and she would make her entry sometime before the end of the period and give it back to me. Before I leave my classroom I write a response to her and sometime during the period we have a short conversation about her entry for that day. Once a month I make a concerted effort to verbally reprocess things as I see them and then ask her for a verbal reflection. . . . This student is no longer saying I can’t do this before I even start my explanation.

Though most of the initiatives described at this level involved in-school contact, teachers also described outreach efforts that included parental contact and after-school phone calls. This middle-school teacher described one of six such efforts noted:

I have a METCO student who could be an above average student if she did her homework. At the beginning of the year, she was choosing not to do it most of the time. Consequently she was a prime candidate for my tenacity challenge. Fortunately for me, her father is totally supportive . . . he has become an ally, and together we are helping K. turn around . . . . He, K., and I sat down and we strongly stated the fact that not doing homework was unacceptable, we set parameters for acceptable work, we established a means of communication, and we set consequences for late work. . . . I left a daily message on her father’s answering machine about the condition of her homework . . . . I then arranged with her father to call every two or three days, and I began to call on days when I had real positives about a particularly difficult assignment K. had done well or a good test score. . . . K. began to do her work more thoroughly and much more consistently.
One consequence of a heightened awareness of racism is a desire to share this new awareness with others. In fact, as whites become aware of their own racial identity, such efforts to educate others is a predictable response (Helms, 1990). Descriptions of actions involving efforts to raise other people's awareness about racial issues constituted 16 percent of all actions taken. After reading about the construct of whiteness in works by Helms (1990), Sleeter (1994), and McIntosh (1989), teachers attempted to raise their colleagues' awareness of racism in myriad ways. For instance, a guidance counselor began to share articles from the course with other counselors during their monthly staff meetings. Similarly, a school administrator discussed course topics at faculty meetings and recommended course readings to her staff.

Additionally, some educators used their new knowledge and awareness specifically in advocacy roles. Because of their new insight, they could recognize the narrow perspectives that colleagues sometimes had when evaluating children of color, and attempted to intervene. For example, when colleagues felt that one student was "too far gone to turn around," a health educator decided to become an advocate on her behalf. In a reflection paper, she described what motivated her to take this action:

Time to reflect on the many things I've learned in this course has me committed to arranging a meeting with this student's teacher, guidance counselor and the Principal/Assistant Principals to develop an intervention plan for this child. I want to have a role to play, actively with this child—I don't even know her by sight, but my gut feeling is that this is a child who is crying out for someone who will believe in her and not give up. I have the time and determination to do just that.

Action-taking sometimes led educators beyond the confines of the school building. For example, one school administrator used her position to influence parents by contributing short articles with antiracist themes to the PTA newsletter. Another worked with colleagues to plan a community forum to explicitly discuss racism in the local community. In anticipation of this event, she wrote:

We are hopeful we can get many people thinking about how we can dismantle racism. At the very least bringing the subject of racism out in the open to be discussed in a mixed racial group is a good first step. . . . I am hopeful that with my benchmark ever in front of me and my allies around me I can continue to confront racism in myself and in the community as well as continue to learn and grow.

This teacher's desire for continued growth was also expressed by twelve others as they progressed through the course. They began to recognize the
gaps in their own monocultural education and felt the need to “catch up.” One teacher described her plan for addressing her deficiency:

I want to learn more about black, Latino, and Asian history and culture. This course has really whet my appetite to learn about the poets, the scientists, the musicians, writers, and leaders. In fact, I belong to a book club, and I recommended that we read Zora Neale Hurston for our next author. I am watching the news and talk shows and listening to the radio with different ears.

Another teacher describes how the course made her aware of not only the omissions in her education, but the distortions in it as well.

I am also trying to learn the history that I was never taught in school. I am more questioning of the history I learned and more reflective on how issues and concepts are presented. I no longer believe everything I read!

Ultimately, these educators wanted to ensure that their students had a more complete educational experience than they did, but in order to do that, self-education was necessary.

MOVEMENTS TOWARD CURRICULAR TRANSFORMATION

As part of the professional development course, participants were asked to evaluate their curricular materials according to specific antiracist guidelines (Council on Interracial Books for Children, 1994). As a result of this exercise, thirty-nine instances of steps toward curricular transformation were noted. Infusing courses with multicultural literature and themes was one method teachers used to alter curriculum; determining how to talk to children about racism was another. For example, teachers often get stuck when teaching about slavery, a commonly included part of a social studies curriculum. As one elementary teacher explained,

It is hard to tell small children about slavery, hard to explain that black young men were lynched, and that police turned fire hoses on children while other men bombed churches, killing black children at their prayers. This history is a terrible legacy for all of us. The other day a teacher told me that she could not look into the faces of her students when she taught about these things. It was too painful, and too embarrassing. . . . If we are all uncomfortable, something is wrong in our approach.

By studying Helms's (1990) and Cross's (1991) theories of racial-identity development, teachers gained new insights about their own racial identity
and those of their students. This background combined with models of lessons presented in *Rethinking Our Classrooms: Teaching for Equity and Justice* (Bigelow et al., 1994) enabled teachers to envision effective ways of addressing topics of race in their curricula. One middle-school teacher, for example, determined how to discuss the topic of slavery, as well as other forms of racial victimization, in ways that empower African-American students rather than further victimizing them. In the following excerpt this teacher describes his reevaluation of a social studies unit and the subsequent changes he made in it as a result of new learning about himself and his students.

The area which has really benefited from the message of the course is my approach to the social studies curriculum. In the "Justice Delayed" unit, which is essentially a study of African-American History, I have chosen to focus more on the resistance shown by the slaves, rather than the oppression directed against them. This resistance, both spiritual and physical, seemed to put a more positive side on the institution of slavery. I have come to realize that the African-American students do not want to be saturated with details of cruelty to the slaves. In the unit "Justice Denied," which concludes with an investigation of the Holocaust, I have conducted some research on the "black victims," especially the black colonial soldiers of the French army. Obviously, the black victims were minimal compared with the destruction of the Jewish people, but the African-American students were better able to understand the plight of those who suffered under Nazi Germany.

This curricular action is a great example of the kind of critical analysis race-conscious teachers can achieve. This teacher recognized the significance of the black students' minority status in his classroom and their emerging racial identity as middle schoolers. He effectively combined an understanding of racial-identity theory with pedagogical knowledge in a way that was meaningful and beneficial to all the students in the class.

As a result of being more comfortable addressing the topic of race with students, some teachers were able to initiate new kinds of conversations. During an English class, for example, one teacher utilized an essay that dealt with stereotypical language used by sports announcers to model aspects of effective essay writing. Though the lesson was specifically focused on language arts, the content of the essay, "Calling the Plays in Black and White," started to "raise students' awareness of racial stereotyping" (Jackson, 1989). Students were helped to recognize the harmful implications of announcers' referrals to white players as intelligent strategists and to African-American players as only physically powerful athletes. This teacher then continued to build several lessons on the article, one of
which required students to watch athletic activities on television and critique the announcer's portrayal of black and white athletes. This curricular action demonstrates yet another way that course participants found to break the silence about race in their classes.

INSTITUTIONAL EFForts And Support

Although the antiracist interventions mentioned previously involved individual actions by individual educators, 20 percent of the actions taken by participants represented changes at the institutional level from the "way things have always been." As the course progressed, some participants began to question whether particular school- and district-wide policies were enhancing the academic performance of their students or contributing to conditions that were detrimental to the academic success of their students, especially their students of color. As a result of that questioning, they began to examine what it would mean for their school to eliminate tracking and how such a policy might influence the academic achievement of their students.

Nine teachers, either directly or indirectly involved with special education, began to question the criteria they used for assessment of students. After studying the historical evolution of the construct of intelligence and the underlying assumptions of intelligence testing, these educators could no longer feel confident in using such testing as the basis for placing students, especially students of color. One educator described how his thinking has changed about testing procedures:

Our readings and discussions, especially those related to The Bell Curve, have helped to move me to action by helping me to see the racism built into the whole process (let alone the other limitations of IQ tests as guides for developing educational plans).

His new awareness of the impact of institutional racism has motivated him to speak out and try to change the degree to which other educators rely on such tests. He has also become more of a student advocate in educational assessment meetings. Reflecting in a final paper, he commented that these are actions that he would not have taken prior to the course.

Several educators recognized that changes had to be made in the ways students from the METCO program were supported at their schools. Although each school has a METCO coordinator who is a person of color, most often METCO students feel isolated and alienated from the predominately white structures that exist at the school. After learning in the course how the formation of cultural-identity groups could influence students' views of themselves and others, some participants latched on to the idea
and began to investigate the ways that such groups could assist their students as well. In fact, two school principals decided to begin such groups at their schools. In the excerpt that follows, they outline their rationale for initiating the formation of cultural-affinity groups in their school district to ease the transition for METCO students as they move from elementary to middle school:

We propose to establish affinity groups of students that travel between the elementary and middle schools. Specifically, current middle-school students would meet for the purpose of visiting the elementary schools to meet with the younger METCO students. This would place students in a role model situation. The older students could share with the younger students a reflection of their own experiences in elementary school and offer their counsel and advice. In turn the younger students could speak to "peer authorities" regarding their anxieties and concerns. . . . We believe that the driving force behind our energies is the maximization of academic and social success of our students.

Clearly for these administrators, their students' well-being was of primary concern, a perspective made more apparent through their application of black racial-identity development theory (Cross, 1991) as well as that of cultural-identity group practices (Greeley & Mizell, 1993) in their school district.

As a result of new learning about the prevalence of racism and its subtle (and not so subtle) manifestations, participants who were school administrators also took action to challenge racist attitudes and behaviors displayed by school employees. When faced with information about white educators who targeted students of color in harmful ways, for example, one administrator could no longer remain silent. In a reflection paper, she reviewed her thinking and the action she took when she learned about a teacher who was less than equitable in her interactions with students:

During the course of the conversation, one teacher said there had been a substitute for art. She remarked that when her class walked in, the art teacher immediately focused on N., the only boy of color in the class, and asked if he was going to be trouble. All the boy did was bounce into class with a smile on his face. . . . I told the teacher that I wished she had told me immediately because I would have followed it up further. I reminded her that any language or racial reactions which caused one child to be singled out, particularly a lone male child of color, goes against our belief system. I wrote a memo stating I would not invite that substitute into my building without further discussion about what we believe.
The firm action-taking from this principal illustrates her commitment to an antiracist belief system, not just for the teachers and staff in her building but for all who may enter the school.

CONCLUSION

We began this discussion with the question “Do educators who have participated in a semester-long, explicitly antiracist, professional development course actually change their behaviors in ways that make a difference for their students?” Our evidence, though limited to the self-reports of the participants, suggests that many do: The forty-eight educators studied here went beyond just verbalizing good intentions. In addition, many of the educational practices put into action were unlike the superficial “heroes and holidays” treatments of culture and ethnicity that often follow multicultural professional development (Sleeter, 1992). By contrast, teachers’ efforts were genuine attempts to alter their practice in ways that empower all students, not just a few. They made antiracism the “business” (Lee, 1995) of their teaching—not just in curriculum content, which is often the first realm where change is evident (Banks, 1993), but in interactions with students and families of color as well. They reached out to students of color and encouraged them to succeed, while initiating contact with parents to involve them in decision making, often for the first time. Similarly, the administrators present, recognizing their ability to foster antiracist school environments, took steps to design programs and set policies that were supportive, rather than just tolerant, of students of color. All of these antiracist moves made by white educators seemed to grow out of their greater understanding of the social significance of race, an evolving sense of their own racial identity, and a heightened recognition of the detrimental effect of racism on themselves and their students.

We believe that there are a few key components of the course that may have facilitated the changes described here. First, the course was explicit in its intention to break the silence about racism; make visible the personal, cultural, and institutional manifestations of racism in schools; and acknowledge the sources of resistance to learning about racism. Because of this focus, course facilitators thought systematically about what materials, classroom experiences, and assignments would be helpful in bringing forms of racism into clearer view. Facilitators then shared their materials and rationale with the participants so that they might make equally informed choices in their own teaching.

The second factor is the length of the program. Unlike the “flash-and-dash” one- or two-day workshop model commonly used as in-service staff development, this course allowed for regular meetings over the course of a
semester. The additional time provided an opportunity not only to raise awareness about the manifestations of racism, but also to do problem solving and action planning in response. With time between meetings to process emotionally challenging information and to test out ideas in their work settings, educators were able to internalize new ideas and begin to reconceptualize themselves as change agents in ways that briefer interventions do not allow.

The interactive nature of the class sessions was also a contributing factor. Course facilitators used a variety of instructional activities that enhanced open conversations specifically about race among participants. Throughout the course, a significant amount of time and attention was devoted to the processing of information, in both large- and small-group formats, and creating a community of learners to talk about race, which for many was unique and long overdue.

But while participants were energized by their new learning, they also expressed anxiety about becoming isolated in their schools as lone antiracist voices. This feeling is well founded and is common to those embarking on an antiracist journey. Maintaining one's momentum as an antiracist educator without support and opportunities for continued growth is difficult (Ayvazian, 1995). Consequently, school districts interested in implementing the type of professional development described here need to provide for ongoing opportunities for continued discussion and mutual support in order to ensure that antiracist educational practice will continue and the gains made will not be lost.

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Karen Kraham with coding of the data.

Notes

1 Beverly Daniel Tatum, who has worked with hundreds of teachers in "unlearning racism" workshops, has been struck by how strongly white teachers express this fear that they might be labeled "racist." One teacher described it as equivalent to "low-life scum." Even when planning workshops that will explicitly focus on racism, school administrators are often reluctant to put the word *racism* in the workshop title, preferring to euphemistically use "diversity" or "multiculturalism" instead.

2 For more detailed information about the readings, films, and exercises used in this course, see Lawrence & Tatum, 1997.

3 Since in many cases participants had the option to write about class activities, readings, and other reflections on the content of the course and/or how it was affecting their lives, it may well be that some of the other thirty-six participants also took antiracist actions in their schools but chose instead to write about different aspects of their learning.

References


