Racism in the Classroom

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Introduction
This paper reports on preliminary findings from a research study
currently being conducted in the South Coast region of New South Wales
and funded by an ARC Small Grant at the University of Wollongong.
Although originally conceived as a means of exploring the ways in which
children's intelligence is manifested in classrooms and concomitantly
to develop in teachers a broader conceptualisation of intelligence, the
study is highlighting differences between teachers' rhetoric and their
classroom behaviours. The preliminary data reveal a number of ways in
which covert racism is operating in classrooms to position children
from non-English-speaking backgrounds (hereafter termed NESB) as
non-achievers. A selection of examples from these data will be
discussed.

Aims of the Study
This study aims to address the differences in school achievement of
children from differing socioeconomic groups. From Terman's studies
early this century to the current time, children from low socioeconomic
groups and certain ethnic minority groups have been over-represented in
school failure statistics and special education classes. Studies have
variously attributed such imbalance to the cultural bias of
standardised testing (Davis, 1948) or the perceptions and expectations
of middle-class teachers (Heath, 1983). The current study, therefore,
focuses on developing more ecologically-valid assessment techniques
that are sensitive to children from non-mainstream groups. A crucial
element of the study is the collaboration between the researcher and
the teachers in order to facilitate the translation of theory into
practice. It was anticipated that through the collaborative
development and implementation of the assessment techniques, teachers
would broaden their perceptions of intellectual performance and develop
the requisite skills to nurture students' abilities. The aim of the
study, therefore, is threefold:
* To develop assessment activities and protocols that can be readily
  implemented by teachers in their classrooms;
* To enhance teachers' skills in identifying and nurturing the
  cognitive abilities of each student, thereby altering their perceptions
  of the nature of intelligence; and,
* To work towards the development of model classrooms based on Multiple
  Intelligences Theory (Gardner, 1983) that will promote the diverse
  cognitive abilities of the students.

Significance of the Project
Despite a century of heated debate, psychologists are no closer to an agreed conception of the nature of intelligence (Sternberg & Detterman, 1986). Nevertheless, throughout this century, standardised intelligence tests have been influential in shaping the perceptions of educators regarding the nature of intelligence. Schools have readily embraced the "one-shot instantiation" (Bruner, 1986, p. 51) of so-called objective measures such as IQ tests in determining the abilities of the students. Such tests, however, consistently fail to identify children from non-mainstream groups (including low socioeconomic and ethnic minority groups) as possessing high cognitive abilities (Gould, 1981; Staples, 1986). Research has clearly

demonstrated that stereotypical attitudes toward race, for example, have adversely affected the educational attainments of children with minority status (McAdoo and McAdoo, 1985). The failure of the school system to adequately identify and nurture non-mainstream students' intellectual strengths can be linked to the following issues:
1. Traditional measures of intelligence are culturally biased (Davis, 1948; Gould, 1981);
2. A belief among teachers, administrators and community members that high intelligence cannot exist in economically disadvantaged environments (Clark, 1992; Frasier, 1987);
3. Peer and community pressure leading to accepted patterns of underachievement (Supplee, 1990);
4. A mismatch between the language and value systems of school and home that bias the teachers' perceptions of their students (Heath, 1983); and,
5. A focus on learning deficits in students from economically disadvantaged groups (Sisk, 1988).
The narrow conception of intelligence that is apparent in the issues enumerated above has been challenged by more recent theoretical perspectives on intelligence (Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1985; Ceci, 1990). For example, Gardner's (1983) theory of Multiple Intelligences (hereafter termed MI theory) contends that people possess at least seven discrete intelligences which include linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligence. The theory has been successfully implemented in a large number of projects throughout the United States, but primarily in Project Spectrum. From 1986 to 1988, the Spectrum researchers developed activities in the seven intelligence domains for the preschoolers in the day-care facility located at Tufts University. Observations of the children were recorded with each child's relative strengths and weaknesses reported at the end of each year (Krechevsky & Gardner, 1990). The researchers concluded that children as young as four years of age had distinctive intellectual profiles with differing patterns of strengths and weaknesses (Krechevsky and Gardner, 1990). Additionally, the majority of the

children possessed a strength in at least one intelligence domain
(Krechevsky & Gardner, 1990; Gardner & Hatch, 1989).   These
conclusions, though, were based on a limited sample of children drawn
from a white, middle- to high-income population.

The current author believed that Gardner's framework would be
particularly useful for identifying the intellectual strengths of
children in non-mainstream groups whose proclivities often failed to
match the pattern valued by the school. This view was supported in the
literature on the school achievement of African-American students (see
Hale-Benson, 1986). In collaboration with Dr Hilda Rosselli and funded
by the Children's Board of Hillsborough County, the author conducted an
eight-month research project called the Prism Study. Utilising
Gardner's theory and the research and assessment protocols of Project
Spectrum, the study was conducted in 1991 at five day-care facilities
in Florida whose clientele were living in poverty.

Using ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviews,
Vialle (1991) developed multiple case studies of a number of
African-American children. The data thus collected, clearly
demonstrated that young children displayed differing profiles of
intellectual strengths and weaknesses across domains. Gardner's theory
provided the framework that enabled Vialle and her co-researchers to
identify children whose intellectual strengths lay in different domains
from the traditional linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences
(Vialle, 1991; 1993).

Gardner's theory and Vialle's study, therefore, provide a useful
framework for responding to the differing intellectual proclivities of
children from non-mainstream groups and for developing the positive
academic self concepts in all children that will enhance their future
intellectual development in general. Teachers have a key role in
recognising and responding positively to the differing intellectual
profiles of all their students, but with regard to the achievement of
economically disadvantaged and ethnic minorities, the quality of
teacher-student interaction is particularly significant (Abatso, 1985;
Nobles, 1981; Spencer, Brookins and Allen, 1985). The Prism Study
demonstrated that children's achievements improved across the
traditional linguistic and logical-mathematical domains as the day-care
providers focused on their individual strengths in other domains
(Vialle, 1991). Therefore, the establishment of a classroom in which
children can develop and demonstrate their potential in a range of
intellectual tasks seems to be a promising approach for the education
of children from economically disadvantaged and minority groups. The
current study, therefore, seeks to determine whether such an approach
would enhance the educational attainments of economically disadvantaged
and minority children in this country.

Design of the Study

The research design, which is ethnographic in nature, is compatible
with the approach to the study of minority children advocated by a
number of researchers (Holliday, 1985; Hale-Benson, 1986). Holliday
(1985), for example, argues that such research should be
"competence-oriented" (p. 55). She highlights the following
characteristics as central to the undertaking:

(1) a focus on psychological and behavioral strengths;
(2) adoption of an ecological perspective as reflected by the absence
of laboratory tasks, use of multiple indicators of environment,
investigation of multiple attributes and behaviors across two or more
settings, and emphasis on interactive (rather than cause-effect)
relationships; and
(3) abandonment of a racial comparative design (Holliday, 1985, p.
55).

This study seeks to establish children's strengths in differing
intelligence domains by closely observing their behaviour in the
classroom as they interact with others and undertake tasks in the seven
intelligences. An "ecological perspective" has been adopted as the
researcher is working in intact classroom settings with the children's
regular teachers. An attempt to obtain multiple perspectives of the
children is gained by triangulating data obtained from classroom
observations, and interviews with children, families and teachers.
Where feasible, children may be observed in multiple settings although
the majority of observations will occur in their normal classrooms.
Finally, no comparisons across groups of children are being made; the
focus of the research is on the development of classroom-based
assessment tasks that will assist teachers in the identification of
children's intellectual potential.

Examples of assessment activities include structured creative movement
activities with accompanying checklists to rate skill development;
guidelines for analysing art portfolios; assembly tasks of common
household objects (eg garden sprayer unit); and puzzles and games
requiring manipulation of mathematical symbols (see table below).

Intelligence	Assessment Tasks
Linguistic	* story-building activity, taped * giving directions, taped
Logical-mathematical	* classification task * game requiring manipulation of multiple symbols
Spatial	* art portfolio * assembly task - common objects

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Musical               * rhythm, pitch tests
                      * experimentation with instruments

Bodily-kinesthetic   * creative movement tasks
                      * athletic motor co-ordination task
                      * fine craft task

Interpersonal         * classroom simulation task
                      * classroom interactions, taped

Intrapersonal        * self-reflection tasks
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The study was designed to be conducted over a two-year period in the
kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms at three different school sites:
School A: a school with a high proportion of children from Non-English
 Speaking Backgrounds; it is situated in a low socioeconomic community.
School B: a school with a high proportion of children from Non-English
 Speaking Backgrounds; it is situated in close proximity to the
 university.
School C: a small school in the ACT catering to a range of
 socioeconomic groups; it is strongly committed to issues of social
 justice and human rights.

The selection of schools was motivated by a desire to apply the
theoretical framework to children who may be economically disadvantaged
or belong to an ethnic minority or both. While some researchers
attribute poorer school and IQ test performance to lower socio-economic
status (Davis, 1948), more recent literature in Black studies argue
that it is not possible to separate socioeconomic status from racial
factors (Hale-Benson, 1986; Baldwin, 1987). The over-representation of
particular ethnic groups, such as African-Americans, in low income and
poverty statistics (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1986)
suggests that cultural factors and socioeconomic status are
inextricably related.

Phase One of the study (1994) has involved the researcher working
intensively with the designated teachers at the school. The focus at
this phase is depicted below:

Objective 1: To develop assessment activities and protocols that can be
readily implemented by teachers in their classrooms

Researcher Activities	Timeline
Initial teacher training in MI theory	Term 1, 1994
Initial interviews with teachers	Term 1, 1994

Establishment of classroom procedures   Term 1, 1994

Development of relevant classroom activities   Terms 1-2, 1994

Interviews with children and family members   Terms 2-4, 1994

Development of observation guidelines   Terms 2-4, 1994

Development of assessment tasks and protocols   Terms 1-4, 1994

Observation notes of children in classrooms   Terms 1-4, 1994

Thus, by the end of the first phase in December, 1994, the researcher
will have developed the assessment activities and protocols for
teachers to use in their classrooms, thereby meeting the first
objective.

Phase Two of the study (1995) will involve the implementation of the
classroom strategies and assessment activities in the three classrooms.
The focus at this phase is depicted below:

Objective 2: To enhance teachers' skills in identifying and nurturing
the cognitive abilities of each student, thereby
altering their perceptions of the nature of intelligence

Objective 3: To work towards the development of model classrooms based
on MI Theory (Gardner, 1983) that will promote the diverse cognitive
abilities of the students

Researcher Activities   Timeline

Ongoing collaboration between researcher and teachers Terms 1-4, 1995

Implementation of relevant classroom activities   Terms 1-4, 1995

Implementation of assessment tasks and protocols   Terms 1-4, 1995

Interviews with children and family members   Terms 2-3, 1995

Observation notes of children in classrooms   Terms 2-4, 1995

Classroom visits by other teachers   Term 4, 1995

Exit interviews with teachers   Term 4, 1995

Conclusions of study shared with participants   Early 1996

It is anticipated that at the end of this phase, the researcher will
have:

1. Established three model classrooms based on MI Theory that focus on
the diverse cognitive abilities of the students.
2. Broadened the teachers' perceptions of the nature of intelligence

and enhanced their skills in identifying and nurturing the cognitive
abilities of each student.

Covert Racism
Many researchers on racism have explored the ways in which the
institutions of the majority culture disadvantage members of ethnic
minorities in all aspects of life, including school (Mirza, 1992;
Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Kozol, 1991; Wellman, 1993; Howitt &
Owusu-Bempah, 1994). In particular, these authors demonstrate that
racism is not simply a matter of overt prejudice but permeates every
aspect of our interactions. Thus, even those people who would avow
their "colour-blind" tendencies, hold assumptions and stereotypes, and
interact in such a way that reinforces inferior status on minority
groups.

Although the collection and analysis of data of the current study are
still in the preliminary stages, a number of interesting patterns have
emerged. Each of these relates to ways in which children from NESB
backgrounds are subject to the type of covert racism alluded to above.
The patterns are as follows:
* teachers equate standard English usage with level of intelligence;
* the conduct of ESL classrooms can provide children with an
 impoverished linguistic environment rather than an enriched one;
* children from particular ethnic groups are treated homogeneously;
 and,
* compliance is highly regarded in NESB children.

The following examples have been selected to illustrate the patterns
indicated above. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of
the participants.

Teachers equate standard English usage with level of intelligence
At Schools A and B, teachers acknowledged a wide range of abilities as
indicative of giftedness in their discussions with the researcher.
However, when they were asked to nominate which children in their
class were gifted, they invariably selected children whose verbal
proficiency in English was superior to other children. Thus, at School
A, Rhonda selected Leah, Abdullah and Davidóall children exhibited an
ability to speak, read and write well in standard Englishóas the
brightest in her Grade 1 class; these children were allowed to work
independently on activities while the other children were required to
remain in the slower-paced teacher-directed activities. By contrast, a
Filipino child who demonstrated an outstanding analytical ability and
eye for detail was not considered by the teacher to be bright. All the
teachers in the study made similar judgements about the children in

their classes. Thus, the teachers were using the child's facility in
standard English as a de facto measure of intelligence.

The conduct of ESL classrooms can provide children with an impoverished
linguistic environment rather than an enriched one
At School B, the Kindergarten teacher had asked me to observe Samuel, a
Chinese boy whom she considered intelligent but who did not speak
readily. In one such observation in the classroom (13/5/94), Samuel
was immersed in a rich linguistic environment as he interacted with the
teacher, the Kindergarten aides and other children. He demonstrated
his understanding of the teacher's instructions as he immediately and
accurately completed the tasks required. He also worked with other
children. In all these interactions, Samuel spoke only when directly
asked a question but he listened to a wide variety of language types
(instructions from teacher; descriptions of the children's drawing
activities; co-operative sharing of puzzle completion; and so on).
Samuel was then withdrawn with seven other children for ESL

instruction. The ESL teacher was midway through a reconstruction of
Hattie and the Fox with the group. Each child had a collection of
stencilled sheets in which the parts of the body had been removed for
the children to complete; the final sheet was given to the children in
this lesson. As soon as he received the sheet, Samuel reached for a
pencil and started to fill in the missing words until he was instructed
to "Wait for the other children." The teacher directed the entire
session with minimal linguistic instructions: "What part is next?";
"Watch the board"; and, "Colour the fox." All children had to
simultaneously name the part of the fox's body, watch the teacher write
the word on the board and then copy it onto their sheets. In this
situation, Samuel was completing tasks well below his capability at a
pace that was far too slow for him. Throughout the entire session,
Samuel was not required to speak a single word nor was he immersed in a
rich linguistic environmentóand yet it was his oral language abilities
that concerned his Kindergarten teacher.

This example demonstrates the mismatch that can occur between an NESB
child's intellectual needs and the compensatory language program that
s/he is given. The problem is exacerbated when the ESL teacher has not
been adequately trained to fulfil the role.

Children from particular ethnic groups are treated homogeneously
At School B, the Grade 1 classroom featured a number of children from
Papua/New Guinea. I was asked to observe Tobias because the teacher
was concerned about his learning problemsóhe was inclined toward
disruptive behaviour. My observations confirmed that he was able to
complete the tasks required of him but he very quickly lost interest.
When I discussed my initial observations of Tobias with the teacher,
she indicated to me that she had been surprised at his lack of ability
because he had attended the same school in Papua/New Guinea as James, a

particularly bright child in the class. Level of abilityóand thus,
intelligenceówas being equated with the schooling a child had received.
 Would such assumptions be made about white children?

Compliance is highly regarded in NESB children
A common element in all the classrooms was that children who were
compliant were regarded as more capable than their not-so-compliant
peers. Invariably, compliant children such as Samuel at School B
(mentioned above) and Leah, Abdullah and David at School A, were
described to me as the brighter children in the class. Children who
were behaviourally problematic were invariably described in terms of
their deficits rather than any strengths they may exhibit. Even when a
child's intellectual abilities were acknowledged by the teacher, they
were not always appropriately encouraged as in the following example.

At School B, the teacher was discussing with her Grade 1 class which
day of the week it was. She held up flashcards and the children were
asked to read the day. When she held up "Thursday", she drew attention
to the "ur" sound and asked which other day also included the "ur"
sound. After a few attempts, the answer of Saturday was given. As the
teacher resumed "testing" the days of the week, James, a boy from
Papua/New Guinea, said, "Turtle has the 'ur' sound, too." The teacher
nodded at the child and continued with the days of the week when James
again "interrupted" with, "And dinosaur. That ends with 'ur'." The
teacher looked at him and with ill-humour, said, "Yes, but dinosaur
doesn't make the 'ur' sound, does it?" before continuing with the
lesson. What interpretations can be made of this exchange? We could
assume that this is a teacher who does not welcome interruptions that
take the class "off-task" and this is certainly the explanation given
after the lesson. I commented to the teacher that James was a bright
boy to which she responded, "John is too smart. He gets us off task all

the time." However, on a number of other occasions, I observed the
teacher capitalising on those "off-task" teaching moments when the
observation was made by an Anglo-Saxon girl. Clearly this is a
situation that needs to be observed further before a conclusion can be
legitimately reached but it is interesting, nevertheless.

Conclusions
In the classrooms observed in this study, high proportions of NESB
children are not having their intellectual gifts recognised and
nurtured, largely as a result of covert racismóthat is, assumptions and
interactions in which children are characterised as deficit languiage
learners rather than those with intellectual strengths in a variety of
forms. In fact, the term NESB itself is a symptom of such deficit
modelling. Thus, racist behaviours extend beyond the commonly
acknowledged cultural bias in standardised testing procedures (Howitt &
Owusu-Bempah, 1994) to the more insidious and subtle classroom
interactions between teachers and students.

The current study has revealed some patterns that need to challenged if a more equitable education system is to be attained. To begin with, teachers need to acknowledge the ways in which racist and cultural stereotyping impacts on their classroom behaviours. They must also recognise that underachievement of many NESB students is often a reflection of the failure of educational policies and practices and not primarily the fault of the students. Apple (1993) has argued that the shift in educational discourse to the rightóevident in the demands for voucher systems, development of key competencies, and so onóhas marginalised "disadvantaged" students and placed the blame for educational failure on the victim. Finally, teachers need to be encouraged to reflect on their classroom practice in such a way that the differences between what they say and do become more readily apparent. It is the contention of this author that the adoption of a framework such as Gardner's MI may assist in this process. Given the preliminary nature of the analysis of these data, however,the conclusions need to be verified or refuted through more extensive data collection in the future.

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