"The principal is hopeless. She needs a good boot in the rear end": Cultural diversity and conflicting school agendas.

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Abstract

When the goals of education are usurped by other agendas, education takes a back seat. In the present study, the school principal's desire to present her school as efficient and herself as a competent principal led to oppression of teachers and parents in an effort to put a lid on dissent. As a consequence, the Aboriginal students were alienated from the school and became antagonistic towards the teachers. The study focused particularly on one of the teachers (who was also the deputy principal) who was keen to implement effective schooling for the Indigenous students in his class. His efforts were frustrated by the principal who ignored his, and other teachers', requests for cultural relevance and more appropriate relations with parents.

The study is placed in a critical perspective. Institutional agendas are examined in the context of differential power relations and social distance between teachers and students. The rationalisation of actions by the school is evaluated in the light of diverse reports from teachers, parents, support staff and students.

Introduction

One of the many purposes of schooling is to introduce the young to the discourses of the society in which they live (Vick, 2001). It would be wrong, however, to assume that these discourses necessarily reflect the dominant culture of the society. The notion of what constitutes a society’s culture is clearly contestable, not only from a consideration of the values and practices of Anglo-Australians, but also due to the existence in Australia of minorities whose social and cultural practices are a part of the "Australian culture". While it is appropriate for schools to adopt generally accepted social practices and attitudes of the dominant group as the foundation of the curriculum, to exclude the expressions of minority groups from consideration places their beliefs and continuity at risk. Yet this is what happens in most schools — even those with a majority of, and in some cases exclusively, Indigenous students, where language, cultural beliefs and practices and significant relationships are ignored.

Although it is essential for schools to ensure that all students become skilled in English and learn to participate in the mainstream culture of Australia, goals that are clearly apparent in the recent Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs taskforce report (2000), it is also necessary for them to cater for more local needs of students from different ethnic and racial backgrounds. By failing to do so, schools send a message to members of such minorities that they are of lesser value than members of the dominant groups in society. This is of particular relevance to Indigenous people whose sense of belonging in Australian society is severely tested by widespread racism and ignorance on the part of other groups.

Race is a socially constructed concept and its meaning tends to be fluid, depending upon the social context in which it is being used (Cashmore, 1992). The ways in which individuals and groups use and respond to the concept will depend upon the context in which they use the term and their specific beliefs and perceptions. In the present research, the racial location of Indigenous students was a matter of self-identification and community identification. This is consistent with current definitions of racial and ethnic identity in Australia today, where self-nomination and nomination by members of the group to which one is claiming membership are two of the key defining characteristics of identification. The third element is membership by descent (Heitmeyer, 2001; Isajiw, 1974).
As with race, racism also is a fluid concept that is dependent upon the context in which it is claimed. Definitions of the term can sometimes lack sufficient scope, thereby excluding what might be regarded as valid cases of racism. Banton (Cashmore, 1992, p. 278), for example, defined the term as follows:

the attribution of social significance (meaning) to particular patterns of phenotypical and/or genetic difference which, along with the characteristic of additional deterministic ascription or real or supposed other characteristics to a group constituted by descent, is the defining feature of racism.

Banton also noted that these characteristics must be negatively evaluated and/or be used to justify unequal treatment for the target group. In the present study, however, while there were instances of these practices, it was the absence of unequal treatment that was one of the foundations of racism in the school. The defining characteristic of racism in this study was the failure to acknowledge that Indigenous students have special needs that cannot be met using the processes appropriate to the general population. This failure resulted in alienation of Indigenous students and their families from school as well as claims that the school was racist.

Gillborn (1995, p. 36) regarded racism "as a dynamic and complex facet of school life (in which routine institutional procedures and teacher expectations may be deeply implicated)." In the present study, such complexity was apparent, with the practices of the school substantiating a claim of racism. Connolly’s (1996, p. 174) understanding of racism is pertinent here:

Rather than seeing racism as a static, fixed and relatively coherent set of beliefs that uniformly influences the way that individuals think and behave regardless of context, … [recent] work has demonstrated just how contradictory racist beliefs and practices are and how they are located within quite specific contexts and sets of social relations.

Connolly’s approach is relevant to the present study because contextual factors are seen to be vital in explanations of events. It is expected that inconsistencies, contradictions and uncertainties obscure both the existence of racism and the good intentions of teachers who are striving to provide an education that combats racism. Of course, this makes the task of identifying racist practices more difficult because they are often camouflaged in the language of good intentions and equitable practices.

Hollinsworth (1998) adopted a very direct approach to racism, locating it within power relations. He stated that

Racism is about power; the ability to construct others as different in order to exclude or ignore or exploit them." (p.279)

In order to combat racism, we have to deconstruct "the ideological and material power inherent in racist discourse, structures and practices" (Hollinsworth, p. 279). In Australian schools, the potential to construct others, especially Indigenous people, is ever present. In the education system, Indigenous people have little opportunity to counter the constructions made of them by school personnel. In fact, the strategies they employ to resist the exclusion that Hollinsworth identified may only contribute to reinforce those constructions.

In this study, which was conducted in a metropolitan school in the southern suburbs of Perth, the complexity of practices employed to exclude Indigenous students and their families will be explored and the attribution of racism examined. The research was a part of
a project to identify the characteristics of schools that were effective with Indigenous students and a team of researchers from Edith Cowan University conducted research at Sleeper Creek School, one of the schools in the project.

In common with many schools in Australia, Sleeper Creek Primary School demonstrated elements of institutional racism (Cashmore, 1992): for a school with over 20% of its students Indigenous, there were no Indigenous teachers (although there Indigenous support personnel, known as Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers - AIEOs); and there was no Indigenous representation on the school council (there was an Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Committee). Even so, the school cannot be constructed as totally racist: the ASSPA funds (provided by the Federal government) were used to fund a homework centre for the students so they could study on the school grounds after school. Also, the curriculum included Aboriginal Studies, so the students could feel a sense of belonging.

The stories that emerged from interviews with the administrators and teachers of Sleeper Creek Primary School were often contradictory and fluid. It appeared, at times, that different messages were constructed for different audiences, so that superficially it appeared that the school was progressing well in its efforts to cater for Indigenous students; at other times it was quite obvious that the school was very much at odds with the community. One of the difficulties in analysing the situation at the school was the discourse of inclusion and support. However, an analysis of the discourse revealed quite clearly the underlying themes of dysfunction and difficulty. These themes are evident in the principal’s description of the school’s practices:

_Elena: I just see that we’ve had it for all our students to try to know as much as we can about their background whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. I think we have really good consistent managing behaviour programs where the children know that its there for all kids. I think we sort problems out with parents earlier rather than later and that’s for Aboriginal and non Aboriginal kids. I think the parents really have very similar aspirations for their children’s learning to any other parent, the Aboriginal parents want their kids to come to school and they want their kids to learn and that is common ground for us and so I think there is a match between what we’re trying to achieve and what they want for their kids as well and I think that’s really important. I really value open communications directly with the parents rather than going through a conduit, I think that really, really helps with their classroom teachers being approachable at any time, with the deputies being approachable at any time, just making it as smooth and easy as we possible can for the kids._

The themes that emerge from such statements are that there were considered to be no differences between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous students; that the programs that catered for them should be the same throughout the school; that discipline is central to the effective management of students; and that the school was open to communication between teachers, parents and students. Consistent with the views of Connolly (19996), these statements stand in contradiction to what actually took place in the school.

For the majority of Indigenous students there was little that reflected their home lives and the values and practices that would make them feel a sense of belonging to the school. The AIEOs, the permanent Indigenous adult presence in the school, were not in a position to
exercise influence over the school's practices as a result of their socialisation into the prevailing deficit ethos in the school (Partington, Godfrey, Harslett, Harrison, & Richer, 1998). Rather than being advocates for the students, either educationally or socially, they subscribed to the view that the students' home lives were largely responsible for their poor experiences at school. Furthermore, during the time we were conducting research at the school the AIEOs were rendered impotent by the principal who forbade them from visiting parents at home. This seems to have been consistent with the principal's views on home-school communication. Her reference, in the statements above, to "communications directly with the parents rather than going through a conduit", appear to refer to the use of the AIEOs to visit families. By not making the use of the AIEOs in this way, she effectively cut off communication with many families, since they would have chosen not to visit the schools themselves. The action also was consistent with the principal's stated belief that the Indigenous parents were no different from other parent of children in the school, so no special provision should be made for them.

**Complexity of the Situation**

Within five minutes of arriving at Sleeper Creek School to carry out an introductory survey of students' perceptions of their schooling, our research team experienced the racism that would characterise the school's leadership. Three members of our research team — including an Indigenous researcher — introduced ourselves to the principal and informed her of the purpose of our visit and the nature of our research. Her immediate response — loudly and in front of many of the school staff — was to proclaim that the Aboriginal students in the school were no different from the non-Aboriginal students, and "we treat them all the same". This belief had been entrenched at the beginning of the year when the principal and two deputy principals were all newly appointed to the school. As the research continued, it became clear that this was not an isolated opinion on the part of the principal and there were reports from other teachers on her implementation of strategies that supported this belief. Although at first it appeared that the factors that contributed to the school failing to meet the needs of the Indigenous students were simple — a case of institutional and possibly personal racism — they were really quite complex.

In the first place, the school had a reputation as a difficult school, due to the low socioeconomic status of the district in which it was located and the high proportion of Indigenous students. Both student and teacher turnover were high: approximately 30% of students — Indigenous and non-Indigenous — transferred each year while teacher turnover was at least as high. The frequent changes of staff and students meant that good relations with the community failed to develop and there were frequent clashes between angry parents and school administration. The response of the principal was to "keep the lid on" the problems that were experienced in order to avoid attracting attention to the school and possibly her management of it. This entailed avoiding the development of potentially hazardous situations.

Secondly, the principal was certainly not one dimensional in her approach to Indigenous issues. She demonstrated a very good knowledge of relationships within the Indigenous community and was able to speak at length on the issues involved in the care of children by different relatives and the causes of possible dissension. She was well versed in the work of the AIEOs and supported bringing Indigenous speakers into the school as models that the Indigenous students could look up to and emulate. Despite this, in her interactions with Indigenous parents and with teachers, she responded in ways that clearly disadvantaged the Indigenous parents and students.

Thirdly, perceptions of parents and students to other teachers were not flattering and there was a diversity of opinions about their effectiveness and relationships. Whether these...
teachers could be labelled as racist on the basis of these evaluations is an issue that is discussed later in this paper. The attribution of racism is dependent upon the existence of the range of factors identified in the discussion above.

**Differential Treatment of Indigenous Parents**

During our study of the school, one Indigenous family became upset at the treatment of their child at school. The father visited the school and became very irate, shouting and threatening the deputy principal. As a consequence of this visit, the principal decided that it was too dangerous for the AIEOs to do home visits in case they were exposed to violence. Home visits were banned. This severely restricted lines of communication between the school and the homes of Indigenous students, exacerbating the poor relations that already existed.

By constructing the Indigenous parents as dangerous, the principal was excluding them from the normal intercourse of the school. Not only was this contrary to her claim of "open communication directly with parents", it also contributed to anger among the parents as a result of their frustration at not being able to achieve suitable outcomes during visits to the school. They felt that their children were not being treated fairly at school and remonstrated with the teachers. The burden of this fell on the deputy principal, Stephen Blair, who reported that all Indigenous parents were referred to him when they visited the school, unlike non-Indigenous parents, who were seen by the principal.

The response of the Indigenous parents to the school’s exclusionary practices was to expect the worst when they had to visit the school. Both mothers and fathers became agitated when attending the school to question the school’s treatment of their children and this simply fed the school's resolve to minimise contact with such "violent" people.

Similarly, we were prevented from conducting interviews with parents of two girls who were feuding. The principal said that "She couldn't support it as a school project because of the danger of going out." However, the project research assistant was able to make alternative arrangements to interview the parents. In the limited number of interviews that were conducted with parents, the low opinion held of the school and the teachers was apparent:

*I: How do you feel when you go there, Davina?*

*Davina: I don't go to the school no more.*

*I: How did she make you feel when you used to go there? Did you get intimidated or ...?*

*Davina: Not by her, no way. I was going to flatten her a couple of times, she’s an idiot.*

*I: Is that her approach, the way she speaks to you?*

*Davina The way she says, oh, she puts all the blame on to the kids. Those kids get blamed ... Cindy and Heather just get blamed for everything. They couldn't breathe unless they got ... If they breathe wrong they got into trouble... The principal is hopeless. She needs a good boot in the rear end.*
The Teachers

Two of the parents interviewed held a similar view of Stephen Blair, one of the deputy principals who, despite his sympathies, was implicated in the school's treatment of Indigenous students because of his role in discipline and the fact that he was given the responsibility for meeting Indigenous parents when they came to school. One parent stated "That other teacher, what's his name, the man teacher, he's a idiot". Stephen, however, was strongly supportive of an Indigenous ethos in the school, as is outlined below.

A few teachers in the school indicated to the researchers that they were supportive of an Indigenous ethos and curriculum. These teachers favoured a range of practices that would acknowledge the Aboriginality of students. These practices included one teacher's desire to incorporate a knowledge of the influence of Aboriginal English in the classroom. This teacher, Rose Leonard, had studied tertiary courses on the relevance of Aboriginal English to schooling. Stephen Blair, who had taught in remote Indigenous schools, favoured a range of practices that would enhance Indigenous parental support for the school, including home visits to see parents; establishing good relationships with students through sharing backgrounds; and making special efforts to help Indigenous students with their work. Another teacher, Terry Howarth, who also had taught in remote schools, was very involved in engaging students in sporting activities during recess and lunchtime. These practices were consistent with perceptions in the literature of strategies for establishing suitable environments for the conduct of teaching. (Christie, Harris, & McClay, 1987; Harris & Malin, 1994; Partington & McCudden, 1992). Terry Haworth stated,

I would suggest that the key to even starting is the relationship with the child and therefore the child's life as well, the parents, etc., the community etc. If you don't have that relationship there, if you simply walk in to the classroom and present material, I really don't think you are even going to start to achieve anything. If you have the relationship with the child then the child is prepared to listen to you.

Not all the kids that I play [basketball] with are obviously Aboriginal kids but quite a number, I would suggest over half of my class, are out there generally at some stage or another. I've built up quite a relationship with my kids on that basis. Then of course in class it's just a day to day relationship thing. It's hard to put into words. How do you build a relationship or friendship up? It's hard to put into words.

All the teachers who were supportive of special provision for Indigenous students justified their belief on the grounds of cultural appropriateness. However, even more important than this is the effect of the strategies on including and empowering the students in school. By ignoring the Indigenous students' unique location in the social world of the school, teachers run the risk of alienating them. The inclusive processes justified on the grounds of cultural relevance may be just as important because of the contribution they make to a sense of ownership of the school and the curriculum.

The teachers were limited in the extent to which they could implement their preferred strategies. The principal appeared to be opposed to making special provision for Indigenous students and was critical of teachers' efforts to do so. She condemned Mr Howarth as a poor teacher and took steps to limit the influence of other teachers in this direction. When Rose Leonard introduced Aboriginal English into the classroom, she was reprimanded by the principal.
The Principal doesn't respect that Nyoongar people have a culture, she doesn't accept that Aboriginal English is a thing, its just badly written [Standard Australian English]. She knows why they do it but doesn't think — she basically thinks what most people think that its not a thing, its just bad English that kids who are behaving in an Aboriginal way are just behaving badly, there's no respect for the way that they're brought up. Because there are so many crossovers into poverty and all of that stuff, that's the way its considered.

There is an extensive body of knowledge of the extent of Aboriginal English in the lives of Indigenous students (Malcolm, 1998; Malcolm, 1995) and to dismiss this as bad English is a demonstration of ignorance at best and in the context of the school, likely to be racist. Rather than utilising the power of the institution to exclude Indigenous students, the focus was on denying them access to literacies that would support their schooling.

Consequences for Teachers and Students

The person upon whom most of the negative consequences of the principal's perceptions of the Indigenous parents fell was the deputy principal, Stephen Blair. Appointed to the school in the second year of our research, in our first interview with him he expressed a desire to conduct home visits to get to know the parents of his Indigenous students.

To my mind, with Aboriginal students and Aboriginal parents, that is the way to do it. You have to go out and take the initiative. I think they tend to regard the school as a white fella place, and in that respect, they don't come in unless they have to or unless they know that they're welcome. And the only way to make people feel welcome is to go and say, hey, why don't you come around to my place sometime, sort of thing. And if you need to, come round I'm interested.

This perspective, once again, is very consistent with sound practice in Indigenous education and there is a strong body of literature to support the initiative in schools. (Christie et al., 1987; Groome & Hamilton, 1995; Harris & Malin, 1994; Harslett, Harrison, Godfrey, Partington, & Richer, 1999; Heslop, 1998; Partington, Kickett-Tucker, & Mack, 1999)

The deteriorating relationships between parents and school led parents to expect the worst of the school, and the teachers to expect the worst of the parents. On several occasions, Stephen was confronted by parents who were agitated by the treatment they, or their children, received at the hands of teachers. His intentions for good relationships with the community, expressed early in the year, deteriorated as the year progressed. When it was reported to him by another teacher that a parent, exasperated at the treatment of her child by a teacher, visited the school and confronted the teacher, Stephen took charge of the situation and confronted the parent in an aggressive manner:

Then the deputy principal, the male, walked in the door. And he walked in the door and he just slammed the door behind him. And he said, "Don't you dare come in here and harass my teachers". I turned around and said, "Don't you dare slam the door on me". And he walked in and course he slammed the door I said, "Do you think I'm frightened of you, I'm not frightened of you"...
Stephen’s report on the incident was similar but he viewed it from a different perspective—regarding it as an attack on another teacher by an aggressive parent. Instead of adopting a conciliatory approach due to the possibility of fault on both sides, Stephen viewed the incident only from the institutional perspective. This may have been an indication of his frustration with the lack of progress in school–community relations:

Stephen: It's terribly frustrating. Also the client group is pretty hard to deal with in some respects. Some of them have few negotiating skills, some of them have few anger management skills, some of them are very good but some of them aren't. It's unfortunate that the ones that don't have any of those skills come up and cause a ruckus and run amok. Some days you get up and you think "More of the same sort of thing". I mean it seems to me to be such a problem that there doesn't seem to be anything that you can do about it.

Unlike the principal, Stephen was aware of the diversity among the Indigenous community and was not willing to make universal judgments on the basis of the actions of a few. The principal, however, interpreted the problem as a generic one applying to all Aboriginal parents. This belief is consistent with Hollinsworth’s view on the application of power, and it also is consistent with Banton’s definition of racism. Rather than seeing the events as an opportunity to review school practices and beliefs regarding Indigenous people, the school—or perhaps, more correctly, the principal—chose to blame all members of the group of Aboriginal parents in the school for the problems that occurred. This construction of Aboriginal people, as problems, is similar to Gilborn’s observation that

Accusations of racism . . . were not reflected back onto a critical examination of teachers-student interactions, but rather interpreted as a sign of the students’ ‘hostility’. (Gillborn, 1995).

The hostility in the present case was attributed to parents who were declared to be unsafe to interact with. The isolation of the school from the students’ parents resulted in a loss of communication with subsequent deterioration of relations. Even the school’s Indigenous parent committee, the Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness Committee (ASSPA), was dysfunctional. According to interviews with a parent and Rose Leonard, the teacher, the ASSPA Committee was comprised of the non-Indigenous partners of Indigenous parents. The Indigenous parents only attended when decisions were being made to select homework coordinators, a paid job within the school. On those occasions the Indigenous parents stacked the meetings to get one of their number elected. The rest of the year the non-Indigenous parent conducted the ASSPA Committee. It was explained to me that the Indigenous parents chose not to attend because they were uncomfortable with the manner in which the meetings were conducted. On one occasion, the research team was not permitted into the school because of anticipated strife within the ASSPA Committee. Such divisions within the community were not conducive to the sound representation of Indigenous parents in the school, but perhaps this was symptomatic of the problems existing throughout the school in relation to Indigenous affairs.

Other Possible Attributions of Racism

From the evidence, it would seem that the principal demonstrated racist tendencies. She used her power to exclude one group—Indigenous parents—from the normal operations of her office; she cut off communication with them and she refused to acknowledge the different needs of Indigenous students, claiming they were no different from non-Indigenous students. Could the same be said of other teachers in the school? In particular, parents had
harsh things to say about Stephen Blair, the deputy principal, whose contacts with parents were marked by hostility. We can question whether these interactions were indicative of racism.

In the first place, perceptions of students in Mr. Blair’s class provides an insight into his interactions with them. Students had little to comment on school as such, agreeing that they liked coming to school, even if it was only to see their friends. However, they expressed strong views on teacher preferences, tending to like teachers who were pleasant and dislike teachers who shouted. There were other criteria for success too:

I: So which teachers do you like?

Maxine: I like Mr Boston, our relief teacher, because he doesn't give out lectures but he just tells us.

Bev: He doesn't bust himself.

Maxine: He lets us go out for sport as long as we do our work.

I: What do you mean he doesn't bust himself?

Bev: He doesn't shout at us.

Maxine: Or yell too much.

Bev: He talks to us.

... 

Maxine: I like Mr Blair, he's alright and Miss Johnson is good.

Bev: Oh yes, he's alright, but I don't like Miss Johnson.

Maxine: I don't really like Miss Johnson either cause she shouts at you.

Bev: She sits you next to boys. Boys you don't even like.

These two Indigenous students were typical in their perceptions of Mr Blair. However, there were dissenting voices, especially towards the end of the year when Mr Blair came in for criticism from students. His unwitting remarks to students regarding his valuations of their suburb, their behaviour and their future prospects did not go down well with the students. He was prone to lecture to them and these lectures were a cause of discomfort. Dianne reported that she did not like Mr. Blair’s classroom management or his statements to the class when they misbehaved:

I: What does Mr Blair do if you’re naughty?

Dianne: Probably give you checks and sometimes he sends us straight to the office or shout at us all the time. And he compares ... cause his wife is having a baby and he says, “I'll tell you what, my baby won't be like yous”.
I: You don't like that?

Dianne: No.

I: What does he mean "my baby won't be like yous"?

Dianne: He wants his baby to be perfect and that. But nobody's perfect.

This interview was conducted shortly after Dianne had been in severe trouble with Mr. Blair for swearing and this possibly enhanced her negative opinion of him. To be acceptable to students, it is clear that teachers must treat the students with respect (Malin, 1994). Shouting and casting aspersions at elements of the students’ lives that they have no control over is unacceptable. It is not sufficient that it be unacceptable for it to be racist. Mr Blair was not directing his statements solely at Indigenous students but at the students in general, in the mistaken attempt to encourage them to work harder and get out of what, to him, was an undesirable social location. He informed me of his views of the students' social location:

I'm going home, and I get home, soon after my wife will be there and I'll take the dog for a walk and I'll have a meal and go to bed. Both my brothers and my sister and my father and mother have got the same sort of family. And yet there are others who never have it and never know how to have it. And for some of these kids that's the problem. Coming to school cold, coming to school unfed. I mean how do you try and get a kid to learn when they're cold or they can't concentrate because they're undernourished? How do you do it?

Unfortunately, the students gained an awareness of his views during the lectures he gave them. The students, at the age of 11 or 12, may not have been in a position to reflect on the merits of their neighbourhood compared with other locations but clearly comprehended the negativism in his statements. Even so, because he didn’t direct his remarks specifically at Indigenous students, Mr Blair was not being racist. This was clearly borne out during an interview with one of the students who compared his treatment of Indigenous students with that of other teachers:

Bev: I don't like Miss Quill. She gets on my nerves. She's always on you for something that [she says] you do. If someone throws a ball on the roof, she blames us. She jumps to conclusions. I don’t like it. She gets on better with the Wadjilla (non-Indigenous) kids. She talks to them like they're her sisters and brothers. She talks to us really differently….

I: How do you get on with other teachers?

Bev: Ms Johnson sometimes has pets. The student councillors. They think they can put something over us. Can boss us around. They get in first. If you want to do something for the teacher they are there first….

I: What sort of students do teachers like most?

Bev: Students who dress and act intelligent. That’s what teachers like most and if they're not like that they don’t
recognise them as much as the other students. Ms Johnson gives jobs to them all the time. Mr. Blair puts us [Indigenous students] in the picture. He is good with all students who don’t get enough attention like Noelene and Elizabeth, Geraldine. He picks up bad things the student councillors do, not like Ms Johnson or Miss Quill. As soon as we do something wrong they jump on us.

Perhaps it would be more appropriate to see the statements he made regarding the students’ social location as an indication of class domination. Despite such a strong accolade for the performance of Mr. Blair, however, the students tended to be fickle in their preferences for teachers. Altercations with a teacher might result in a student expressing dislike for that teacher shortly after stating a preference for him or her. There was evidence, too, of students changing their minds when confronted with other students’ evaluations of teachers; in the interview with Bev and Maxine (above), Maxine changed her mind on Miss Johnson when she found Bev didn’t like her.

Only one student indicated that she had low regard for the school. In an informal interview, Dianne reported to the principal author that the school had no chance of settling a long running dispute between her and Geraldine.

I ask Dianne about the fight with Geraldine. She tells me it started out of school, then came into school and now it is out of school again. There were now people fighting about it outside school. The school was trying to settle the issue but people from other towns were now involved. The school really hadn’t settled the matter between her and Geraldine. The trouble is out of school.

The dispute had originated some time before the research commenced and continued to fester, involving the families of both students and leading to dissension at school and in the community. Despite her claims to good knowledge of the Indigenous community, the principal was unaware of the extent and complexity of the dispute.

Conclusion

There were practices employed at Sleeper Creek school that were in keeping with Hollinsworth’s definition of racism as a consequence of the application of power to exclude members of specific groups identified on the basis of their racial or ethnic characteristics. These practices lead to the oppression of Indigenous students. In contrast to the treatment of non-Indigenous students and their families, Indigenous students were excluded from the “normal” practices of the school: parents were excluded from interactions with teachers; children were denied a voice in their treatment; the home language of the children was not allowed to be acknowledged in the classroom, and so on. Also, special consideration for Indigenous student on the basis of their unique location in society was excluded. While this denial of voice and restrictions to interactions was not exclusive to Indigenous students, (many mainstream students undergo denials and restrictions specific to their contexts), for Indigenous students the oppression was more acute and directed more specifically at them on the basis of their Aboriginality.

The principal was the instigator of the actions that led to this exclusion. In a perhaps misguided attempt to equalise conditions for Indigenous students, she removed a range of special considerations for them from the curriculum. Even worse, her differential treatment of parents alienated them from the school and inhibited effective communication. This only
exacerbated the relations between the school and the Indigenous community and led to severe altercations that might have been avoided if communication had been more open and relations more congenial. By using her relatively powerful position, the principal was able to structure the relations with parents in such a way that they were isolated. The fact that this did not work only led to further alienation, as the parents, frustrated with the poor interaction with the school, resorted to shouting and threats of violence to get across the message, that they were dissatisfied with the performance of the school.

For teachers, the result of the principal’s actions was that those with good intentions were prohibited from demonstrating effective strategies that would have improved schooling for Indigenous students. The group with the least resources to promote a good education for their children were rendered even more powerless through the actions of the principal.

On a superficial visit, the school might appear to be providing adequately for all the students within its walls. Only to an insider would the appearance be overshadowed by the reality of racism. Certainly, Indigenous parents perceived the school to disadvantage their children and unfortunately they came to perceive that the teachers, generally, were ill-disposed towards them and their students. The net result was that the greater power of the school, and especially the principal, was used to construct social situations has resulted in Indigenous parents and their children being alienated and denied a voice within the school.

References


