

Understanding the “New” Racism through an Urban Charter School

By Beth Hatt-Echeverria & Ji-Yeon Jo

“There is a charming story by Dr. Seuss... In a society of beings called sneetches, there were plain and star-bellied sneetches. The star-bellied sneetches were the ‘best’ and dominated the plain-bellied folks. Recognizing the injustice of the situation, the oppressed sneetches decided to paint stars on their own bellies. Now there was equality! But not for long. The original star-bellied sneetches had their stars painfully removed and claimed, of course, that plain bellies were now marks of superiority. Power structures do not crumble easily.” (Noddings, 1992, p. 32)

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Introduction

Lipsitz (1995) states, “Even though there has always been racism in American history, it has not always been the same racism. Political and cultural struggles over power shape the contours and dimensions of racism in any era” (p. 371). The “contours and

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dimensions of racism” change as if dancing with civil rights to ensure that White privilege remains the lead dancer. As legislation and policies occur to provide opportunities for people of color, Whiteness shifts to make certain White privilege remains dominant. Giroux (1999) claims that the new shape of racism is a White, conservative backlash to racial minority rights and changing demographics of U.S. cities such as increases in the U.S. Latino population. Giroux (1999) states:

As race became paramount in shaping U.S. politics and everyday life from the 1980’s on, racial prejudice in its overt forms was considered a taboo. While the old racism maintained some cachet among the more vulgar, right-wing conservatives, a new racist discourse emerged in the United States. The new racism was coded in the language of ‘welfare reform,’ ‘neighborhood schools,’ ‘toughness on crime,’ and ‘illegitimate births.’ Cleverly designed to mobilize White fears while relieving Whites of any semblance of social responsibility and commitment, the new racism served to rewrite the politics of Whiteness as a ‘besieged’ racial identity. (p. 286)

One of the ways that racism transforms and shifts to maintain White privilege is through the (re)defining of Whiteness as what is “moral” and “normal” in such a way that Whites, especially the upper middle class, benefit.

The purpose of this paper is to deconstruct the new racist discourse within an urban charter school. We especially want to focus upon how the new racist discourse as according above to Giroux (1999) relieves Whites, “of any semblance of social responsibility and commitment.” As multiculturalism and political correctness are being taught and encouraged in our society to work against inequality, they are simultaneously being used by some Whites, particularly the middle and upper classes, to separate themselves from the “bad” Whites, whom are largely framed as the working-class and poor. As a result, a White liberal rhetoric has been developed that talks about “diversity” and “democracy” but does not address power and current racial inequities. Consequently, racism becomes defined as an individual act rather than being attributed to institutional policies and structural issues of privilege in our society. Whites who adopt a pseudo-liberal rhetoric of promoting diversity without pushing for the change of institutional or structural issues then define themselves as “innocent” and absolved of their participation in reproducing racial inequities. For example, often racist attitudes and behaviors get attributed to ignorance, which implies that the people did not really know any better. On the contrary, Whites *do* know about racism in society and are often choosing carelessly to reproduce it rather than work against it (Groves, 2002; Otto, 2002). By claiming ignorance and/or innocence, White ways of being in the world, values, and beliefs are left unquestioned and without critique.

Our data arises from fieldwork we (the authors) conducted at Eagles Landing Charter School as members of separate evaluation teams and during different, but consecutive, years. The purpose of our evaluations was to examine best practices in charter schools within the State. Weaved within and beyond some of the proposed best practices was the “new” racist discourse as described above. As part of the

evaluation, between the two authors, approximately 20 hours of classroom observations were conducted. Twenty students, five parents, and fifteen teachers were interviewed as well. This article is presented through the lenses of the researchers, Beth, a White female, and Ji-Yeon, a Korean female. The idea for this chapter arose when we spoke about our experiences a year after all fieldwork had been completed. We discovered that we both had similar interpretations of the school:

Beth: "It seemed too perfect."

Ji-Yeon: "Teachers, students, and parents raved about how great of a school it was."

Beth: "It was like life in a bubble."

Ji-Yeon: "I almost fell for it."

Beth: "Me too, but then I was approached by some African-American children that said they wanted to be interviewed but that they didn't want me around. When I listened to their tape later on that night, I discovered that the school definitely had some problems with racism."

Ji-Yeon: "That's very interesting, because I did not have much of a chance to informally interact with the kids. My schedule was pretty much set by the school and a school staff member contacted most of the interviewees. When I talked to the students and teachers, nobody talked about racism or racial segregation, but when I saw the school album for the past couple of years, I could clearly see racial groupings in the picture. Most of the kids took pictures with their own racial groups, but not with other racial groups of students."

Beth: "I also started to question the school philosophy and ideology after I observed classrooms and listened to the teachers' and students' interviews. The student focus groups especially provided me honest criticism about their teachers and the school. They were very clear about what they liked and disliked."

The Public Transcript of the School

Eagles Landing Charter School arose from a group of White parents and White educators being frustrated with the local school system. All of the original Board members were parents and teachers connected to one local middle school. A key characteristic of the middle school was that over the past five years it had become more racially integrated. Students of color were beginning to become a majority in the school.

The following statements seemed to be the mantra of the original board members: *Class sizes are too large. Too much violence. Too many drugs. Teachers should be allowed more voice.* These statements are similar to Giroux's (1999) description of the new racism as involving coded language that addresses issues of race indirectly by discussions of "Toughness on Crime," "Welfare Reform," and "Illegitimate Births." When interviewing White students, teachers, and parents, the majority of them mentioned some form of the statements above as an explanation as to why they

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were going to the charter school. Additionally, many of them had left the previously mentioned middle school. On the contrary, many of the African-American students chose to attend the charter school because it was located close to their homes.

An additional code within the new racism mentioned by Giroux (1999) was the idea of “Neighborhood Schools.” Mobilized by their dissatisfaction and fear, these parents and educators took advantage of the new charter school reform implemented within the State to create their own “neighborhood school.” They decided to create a school that would have smaller class sizes, a sense of community, a focus on family values, give teachers more voice, and a strict policy on discipline, which was thought to be the key in discouraging violence and illegal drugs.

The school had a small student body of approximately 150 students (grades 6th thru 10th). It consisted of two buildings: classrooms rented from a YMCA and a renovated, old tuxedo shop two blocks down the road. The buildings were located in a working-class community largely consisting of African-American and Latino families. The YMCA was a large, brick building that contains basketball courts, a swimming pool, an outdoor track, exercise equipment, and racquetball courts. Additionally, after school programs and summer camps were provided for children in the area. An atmosphere revolving around community and family permeated throughout the building. In being members of the school, students were also members of the YMCA and had all the benefits of membership. A typical school day lasted from 8:15am to 3:00pm. The students were sent from class to class based upon teacher designed daily schedules rather than a bell.

When you walked into the main building, the secretary’s desk was immediately to your left and a lobby/waiting area resembling a cozy living room was to your right. Brightly colored student artwork was displayed on the walls and around the furniture in the lobby. Houseplants hung in the windows while the school’s pet iguana sunbathed along the windowsill. It was not uncommon to see students sitting in the lobby singing or playing their guitar while waiting for music class to begin.

The school was based upon the Paideia philosophy and included the following principles:

1. All children can learn.
2. Children all deserve the same quality of schooling, not just the same quantity.
3. The three callings for which schooling should prepare all Americans are to earn a decent livelihood, to be a good citizen of the nation and world, and to make a good life for one’s self.
4. The principal should never be a mere administrator, but always a leading teacher cooperatively engaged with the school’s teaching staff.

The school had two principals, which were referred to as deans. They were not simply administrators but also taught classes themselves. According to staff and students, this created better communication between the teachers and deans by preventing

a strong hierarchical relationship. Additionally, this prevented principals from making decisions when they were not spending time in the classroom and with the kids in the school, which was perceived as a problem with public education. Another perceived positive concerning the deans was their focus on family. The teachers interviewed stated that they appreciated having administrators that allowed them to treasure their families. Finally, many of the teachers appreciated the deans' flexibility in allowing them to be innovative and to learn through trial and error.

Three modes of instruction were used: didactic (i.e., lectures, textbooks, and videos), coaching (i.e., labs, cooperative learning techniques, and project centered learning), and Socratic seminar (i.e., apply learning to own lives and values, etc.). Seminars included community volunteer activities such as working for local non-profit agencies. Although the teachers acknowledged all of the three modes of instruction as necessary for student learning, their emphasis on each mode was different. According to the teachers in Eagles Landing School, student learning was their first priority. They valued students' active learning process and provided a lot of hands on activities to facilitate student learning. The teachers said that they gave students more project-based assignments than work sheets. One student said that his teachers did not just give him a right answer when he asked a question. Instead, his teachers guided him where to find the answer and what to do to find it. The Paideia principles were well understood by Eagles Landing School members and a strong emphasis and sense of pride were placed on the principles. Every teacher we interviewed talked about the Paideia principles and their effectiveness. The students also talked about the principles and were able to identify the key factors and approaches of the principles.

Teachers at Eagles Landing did a multitude of tasks that go beyond a conventional job description for a teacher. One White teacher stated:

Many of the teachers [in Eagles Landing] are not just teachers, because we are so small, a lot of teachers take on extra duties and responsibilities, than in a larger system that we wouldn't have to do. We drive buses, we clean up, and you know, when we were building up this school, a lot of teachers painted, hung doors, and that type of things. I think teaching here can be more stressful than in a larger system, you are pretty much under a microscope.

Having dedicated faculty members provided a sense of pride for the teachers themselves. A first year White teacher commented about the faculty members in the school:

We have faculty members who invest 110% of what they are required to do. I admire them and I think students see that too. They are dedicated faculty and that makes me proud.

Many of the students also claimed that the school was about second chances. One White, male student stated:

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I was at Hillcrest. My grades were goin’ down and I didn’t care. If you didn’t understand somethin’, the teachers would say, ‘Go figure it out yourself.’ They (public school teachers) didn’t really care. I came in here and it’s much more interesting and I understand it more. They (Eagles Landing teachers) help me and stuff. My grades have gone up. It’s helped me out a lot.

Some other student comments included:

This school is about going deeper than spitting out facts and it’s about a second chance . . . ’cause there’s lots of kids here who used to skip a lot of school or get into fights. . . . We had a lot kids coming in at a third or fourth grade reading level but by the end of the year they were up to a seventh or eight grade level.

You get as many second chances until you say you can’t do it. . . . Even after that they still help you.

They try to help you out if you don’t understand something or if you make a bad grade, they’re like, “o.k., how can we improve on this? How can we make you understand it better?” They give you a second chance.

Everybody seemed so happy. We were hearing practically the same narrative over and over, which painted the school as a mini-utopia. The school appeared to have a strong sense of community, to promote caring relationships between students and teachers, and to help students who had previously been performing poorly in the public schools. Then, the bubble burst.

The Hidden Transcript

The hidden transcript provides a snapshot of the lived realities of students of color at Eagles Landing School. While conducting fieldwork, one of the authors was approached by a group of African-American students. The group said they wanted to be interviewed but that they did not want the (White) interviewer to be present. The students took the tape recorder along with a list of questions and went off by themselves. When the author went home that night and listened to what the students had recorded, she heard a story contradictory to what she had been hearing the whole day from White teachers, administrators, and students. The following is a transcript of the interview:

What do you like about Eagles Landing School?¹

I like it ‘cause it’s in the Y and it’s really close to my home.

What I like about the school academically, some of the teachers here try to help you out.

What’s your least favorite part of the school?

Some of the teachers here are really racist. Ms. Kinder doesn’t give anybody a chance. She rushes and is really impatient.

What I don't really like about this school. They are racist. For example, I have on a pair of short shorts—I'm a Black female—they tell me my shorts are too short. Then I see all the little Caucasian girls with their booty shorts on and they don't say anything to them except when I draw it to their attention. Another thing I don't like is that the teachers, they are so whacked.

I agree with Laura and Ardelia, there are some teachers that are racist here.

What do you think about the teachers?

I would like to comment on Mr. Smith. He is very racist. He just has a thing with African-Americans. He tries to exclude us. He says that he expects more from another class than our class.

He says our standards are lower than the other class. Our class is predominantly Black and the other class is predominantly White. So, hint, hint, hint, hint.

What do you think about the school?

Sorry, sorry but I don't like the school. Cause the school sucks. I'm not passing social studies.

Who teaches it?

Tim Smith.

Is that the one everyone says is racist?

He IS racist!

For these Black students, the school was not only a very negative experience but it was directly influencing their school achievement. They were experiencing differential treatment, lower expectations by teachers, and alienation. It was the hidden transcript that encouraged us to ask how the ideals and realities were so different in the school and how the teachers and administration constructed their “innocence” in contributing to the experiences of the Black students. The rest of the paper looks at the different ways and codes of discourse that were used to not only hide but illegitimate counter-narratives such as the Black student voices to the dominant discourse of “equality” and “respect for all.”

The public transcript of the school embraced the notion of “equality for all” and an earnest effort in trying to build school community. However, equality was defined to mean equal access to education with “education” being defined based upon the privileging of White values and norms. We will highlight how this occurred through critiquing the Paideia philosophy of education.

The school worked under the liberal rhetoric of “every child can learn,” which is one of the main principles of Paideia. However, this rhetoric often worked as an excluding policy that eliminated low achieving students based upon the ideology

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that students’ low academic performance is the result of their poor efforts. The school faculty believed every child could learn but when a child performed poorly the blame was placed upon the individual student rather than classroom practices. One teacher stated:

[e]very child is here to learn, and we take that very, very seriously. Students who don’t do their work or perform, students who don’t make the effort, we will put them on a contract. If it [contract] doesn’t motivate them, we expel them, because they are not putting in their efforts. Students who are here are here for learning, and if they are not [learning], there is going to be a consequence.

Through classroom observations, we noticed that the Paideia principle worked only for the students who were engaged and motivated. Teachers held discussions with individual students but students who were less interested in the class project went unnoticed by the teacher. The only way to obtain the teacher’s attention for those less interested in the project was to disturb the classroom (in this case, the kids were receiving attention by receiving a reprimand). One White teacher acknowledged the difficulty of implementing the Paideia principle and stated:

[P]aideia philosophy is difficult, particularly when you are dealing with a lot of students who are not motivated learners. Paideia is easy with good learners. Paideia is exceptionally difficult when you are dealing with underachievers.

Thus, from the observations and teacher interviews, the Paideia principles worked only with a particular group of students (i.e., well motivated students). Simultaneously, it worked against less-motivated students.

The Paideia philosophy is based upon Mortimer Adler’s idea that true democracy requires equal education for all children (Adler, 1982).² Equal education is defined as all children receiving an identical liberal arts curriculum. It is based upon Robert Maynard Hutchison’s quote: “The best education for the best is the best education for all.” This quote encompasses the many assumptions within the Paideia philosophy’s idea of “equality for all.” There are three key assumptions. First, the quote assumes that a liberal arts curriculum is the “best education.” The curriculum of privileged groups is assumed to be the best and what everybody needs. A liberal arts curriculum typically values White ways of being and thinking. Consequently, providing all students a White liberal arts curriculum does not challenge the status quo or address issues of inequity. Secondly, the quote assumes that the privileged in our society *are* the “best” rather than simply being privileged. The status given to privileged groups is implicitly justified and left unquestioned. Finally, it assumes that the privileged do not need to change or take alternative paths but the underprivileged do. Equality is thought to be accomplished by changing the underprivileged to fit the privileged ideal rather than the privileged few needing to sacrifice the privileges they enjoy.

These assumptions grounded the founding of the school, how the school operated, and were used to explain academic failure. For example, academic failure

was explained as students not being willing to conform or not willing to put forth the effort. Never once was the school's philosophy, White liberal education is best for all, questioned by faculty. The following discussion highlights how the liberal rhetoric worked against students of color within the school through examining school discipline policies, a focus on individual achievement, and notions of citizenship.

Discipline

When looking at discipline within the school, there was also a public versus a hidden transcript. When interviewing White students, discipline was perceived as being fairly administered in the school. According to some of the White students interviewed, teachers took the time to find out why students were misbehaving rather than simply dishing out punishments. For example, one student stated, "They can work with people more one on one about their behavior. You're not just one of the crowd." However, if students continually disregarded the rules then there was a zero tolerance attitude and the students were expelled. A group of students claimed when interviewed that almost half of the student population had been expelled at least once. Many White students claimed that one reason discipline was different at Eagles Landing was because most the teachers knew each of the students and attempted to develop good relationships with them. Additionally, the students claimed there were fewer cliques and that they had more friends. One White student stated:

The best thing I like (about school) is that I wake-up every morning and I want to go to school. I have a desire to go to school because I have a good relationship with my teachers here. I have a good relationship with my peers.

The teachers stated that they communicated with each other about how students were doing in their particular classes and about new curricular ideas. They claimed not to feel as isolated as they previously had in public schools. Furthermore, some of the students claimed that their teachers cared about them where at their previous schools they felt the teachers either could care less or simply did not have the time to care. One White student stated:

At my old school, yes, I had teachers who cared but they had so many students they didn't have time to put into caring...But every single teacher here cares. They all care. They come after school to work with you on your homework. They give up their planning periods so they can come to see you in study hall and help you with that really hard math problem...It's like a family...It's reflected in every student because they're succeeding here. It's just amazing to see how much they care. They have a passion for their work. It's not just, "oh god, I have to go teach those rowdy kids again."

However, as depicted through the transcript of the interview with Black students, discipline policies were not perceived as fair to everyone. Some of the Black students felt they were negatively targeted and that many White students were given more leniency. Additionally, rules and guidelines placed White, upper

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middle class culture as superior to others. For example, uniforms were worn by students consisting of khaki or blue slacks with a solid colored dress shirt, which models White, middle class ways of dressing. No brand logos on clothing were allowed, which according to staff prevents any competition between students concerning clothing styles or who has the nicest coats or shoes. The logic for having a dress code is imbedded in the ideology that similarity is inherently “good” and difference is “bad.” The founders of the school seemed to believe competition and problems between groups of students arose from difference itself rather than the attitudes students are taught to have about difference.

Many of the White parents, teachers, and students discussed Eagles Landing’s tough attitude towards discipline as a positive component. The majority of the White parents interviewed had their children switch to the school because they believed public schools did not provide enough discipline and they liked the idea of student uniforms. One parent, Mary, stated that she brought her son to Eagles Landing School because she feared he would become involved with gangs and have easy access to drugs at his previous school. As mentioned previously in the paper, the founding teachers and administrators along with many of the students came from the same neighborhood, which had recently experienced a large influx of students of color into the local middle and high schools. Hence, the Eagles Landing School was formed out of a direct fear of the “Other,” which was coded in saying that schools needed to have stricter discipline policies, smaller class sizes, and school uniforms. These policies were not designed to “control” or discipline White, middle class children, rather they were designed to control students of color or any students that did not value and embody White middle class attitudes and beliefs.

School Failure

As Warren (2001) states, “Whiteness, therefore, has particular strategies that allow it to go under-criticized and unexamined” (p. 101). One way this occurred at Eagles Landing School was to locate the causes of school failure within individual students and to equate claims of racism to “crying wolf.” The following interview conducted with Mr. Smith, who was the White teacher named as “racist” by the Black students and was a founding board member of the school, highlights the dominant discourse and ideology of the school, particularly in relation to perceptions of school failure, racism, and fear of the “other.”

Interviewer: Could you tell me about the community the school is in here?

Mr. Smith: We wanted to be within city limits. Our #1 objective was finding a location that was somewhat central to the city where we could draw from all of the communities. We didn’t want to be like some of the charter schools that are 98% African-American or 98% White. We wanted the school to be a true public school.

Mr. Smith claimed that the school had diversity as one of its key concerns but later

in the interview stated that they wanted to move the school over concern because it was placed within “this particular neighborhood,” which mainly consisted of working-class African-Americans and Latinos. He stated:

Being in this neighborhood concerned me at first because the surrounding area is not the best. A lot of these kids we have, some of them come from really nice neighborhoods and they were leery about sending their kids into this particular neighborhood. Uhm, I think a lot of the teachers and board members were too. . . . We think we’re close to leaving.

Through our interviews we discovered that the diversity of the school was specifically tied to its location. Many of the African-American students stated that they only came to the school because it was close to their homes. Mr. Smith was more concerned about losing the wealthy White students rather than losing the working class African-American students due to moving the location of the school. As the interview continued, it became more apparent that although Mr. Smith claimed diversity was important, he really meant that only the kids that could “fit in” and do well in school were wanted. He stated:

We’ve had several students withdraw because we basically told them ‘Here’s the rules and if you can’t follow them then you need to withdraw.’ . . . Basically, as teachers, we said there is no point for having kids come to school here everyday who are not here to learn. . . . In the public schools, those kids are given free reign. Principals are afraid to touch them. You have parents who see this as public daycare. A lot of times it does get divisive because it’s race. It’s a race issue. And so many of the public school principals don’t want to deal with it.

For a school that claimed “education is the gateway to equality,” it was shocking to hear one of its founding members claim that only students who “want to learn” (i.e., uphold the status quo) should get an education. Additionally, he clearly framed families of color within a deficit framework—*they* were the problem, not the school and its policies. When specifically asked about racial issues in the school, Mr. Smith said:

[sigh] I think race only becomes an issue when—it’s not an issue with kids who are being successful—it’s only an issue for kids who are failing. Kids who from a lack of effort are not being promoted. . . . In America, if you work hard, nine times out of ten, you will succeed. You may get knocked down but if you keep at it you will eventually learn to succeed. You are either going to be a quitter or you’re going to be a success.

By claiming that the failure of students of color was an issue of individual effort rather than being structural or systemic, Mr. Smith absolved himself along with the staff of Eagles Landing School of any responsibility. In essence, he was stating that any claims of racism were false and, instead, excuses for “quitting.” Whiteness within the school was left “under-criticized and unexamined.” In reality, the school was a haven for White students, teachers, and parents that felt threatened by a public

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school system, which was giving more voice to students and parents of color. By hiding behind the myth of meritocracy, the school was able to fail and push out students of color that refused to conform to White ideals.

Citizenship Education

Ong (1996) criticizes that current approaches on understanding citizenship seldom pay attention to “everyday processes” of how people are “made into subjects of a particular nation-state.” She suggests an alternative way of understanding citizenship that she calls “cultural citizenship” and defines it as a “dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power.” People with different racial, ethnic, gender, and class backgrounds are represented differently in institutional and social contexts and receive different benefits from those contexts (Jo, 2003). Thus, normative standards for citizenship that is applicable to everyone are difficult to establish.

Teachers and administrators in Eagles Landing placed high emphasis on citizenship education. One of the teachers discussed citizenship education extensively. She said:

[w]e emphasize citizenship and in our school kids get *graded*[*emphasis added by the author*] for citizenship. And that means they are self-aware and responsible for their actions, respectful towards others and respect-worthy, moral, empathetic, and tolerant citizens. They have opportunities to work independently and also in groups. We encourage them to be active learners....When I do have text or something, I do try to talk about what it is, you do try to sort of really continue on this topic of being a good citizen, whether or not we were meeting certain characteristics or if certain people that we were talking about actually were good citizens.

As the teacher commented, the school gave grades to students for citizenship. The school report card defined the citizenship grade as “a measure of the student’s development as a member of the school community.” The narrative description on a student’s report card showed that teachers considered a student to be a good citizen if the student respected others and controlled his or her side of the conversation during class. Also, a good grade on citizenship was closely related to good scholarship and individual efforts.

The image of the orderly, conforming, hard working, and high achieving individual as a “good citizen,” was constantly reinforced in Eagles Landing School. Teachers often disciplined or reprimanded students for “not being a good citizen” when the students were noisy, not doing their work, or not orderly. In most cases, the notion of “good citizen” was reduced to terms of behavioral modification that students need to follow or often used as a measuring stick of discipline.

The monolithic image of good citizen described above was also reinforced during a Character building class. During a classroom observation, a substitute teacher showed the movie, *Iron Will*, and asked students to think about five points from the movie that were related to character building. The message from the movie

was obvious: The boy who tried the hardest and made tremendous efforts won the race. Although the movie itself had its own merits, the class yet again reinforced the rhetoric, “every one can succeed, if one tries hard enough.”

In Eagles Landing School, this liberal rhetoric of citizenship promoted individual success by setting normative standards of a good citizen—in this case, students who put forth effort and achieved academically, students who conformed to the school standards and rules without questioning, etc. The image of the self-made person who overcomes difficulties by his/her own effort, disguises unequal power structures and inequities within the larger system or society as mere obstacles in our lives that are present in everyone’s life regardless of the race, class, and gender of a person and thus can be overcome by strategic efforts of an individual. By promoting individual effort and will as the main criteria for good citizenship, Eagles Landing school failed to recognize societal inequality and the dialectical relationship between State and individual subjects, that is, the recognition that students are also “being-made” by the school’s own practice and their environment. Thus, what the Eagles Landing School promoted for citizenship was far away from acknowledging the process of cultural citizenship. The right to belong and the right to be different are constantly denied by overemphasizing harmony and conformity under the umbrella of democracy. By promoting liberal notions of citizenship, race, gender and class terms were conspicuously absent from everyday conversations and classroom practices in the school. Thus, “ideological Whitening” (Ong, 1996) worked in subtle ways in the school. Through this process, the students in the Eagles Landing School were made into particular democratic subjects that would continuously promote and sustain White hegemony in American society.

Promises and Challenges

As we discussed in the introduction, our first impression with Eagles Landing School was very positive. Many teachers and some students talked about the community spirit and intimate relationships between teachers and students. Most of the teachers expressed their passion for teaching, and both students and parents acknowledged the dedication of the teachers. As a matter of fact, there were many positive aspects about Eagles Landing School. Students seemed to be comfortable in their environment despite the very limited space of the school. They sat in the hallway during lunch hours and used a parking lot next to the school as their basketball court. In and outside of classes, boys and girls interacted freely and did not form gender segregated peer groups in 6th and 7th grade, but in 8th grade their seating arrangements were very gendered; boys sat with boys and girls sat with girls. Furthermore, the students achieved one of the highest End of Grade (EOG) scores within the county. Finally, in general, members of the school community mostly felt safe and positive about their school. Certainly, there were things that were working in the school.

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The school worked like an atrium. An atrium is a well-planned and controlled space that is designed to preserve an ideal ecological environment. In Eagles Landing School, the ideal environment was perceived as an individual-effort driven learning environment that promoted a middle class, White ideal of democracy and equality that denies the existence of privilege and power. All too often White, liberal discourse focuses upon the individual—that we are self-made individuals in control of our destinies. The existence of social structures is denied in that some groups are privileged while others are oppressed regardless of individual effort or even awareness. The school created an environment that privileged White, wealthy students while simultaneously blaming students of color for their own failure. Of course this does not mean that *all* of the White, wealthy students performed well while *all* of the students of color failed. Privilege and oppression intersect in complicated ways in individual lives which allows for exceptions. However, by not questioning the status quo or acknowledging how privilege operates in society, the social structure of the school ensured that White privilege was upheld.

This study of a charter school in an urban community provides us with an opportunity to rethink how White, liberal rhetoric works to maintain and reinforce White hegemony in subtle and also complex ways within school practices. At Eagles Landing, those practices especially manifested themselves within public vs. hidden transcripts. The public transcript, as with current forms of racism, utilized ideals of democracy, meritocracy, and citizenship to “hide” or silence alternative voices, such as those of the African-American students. A part of this rhetoric claims that inequality and democracy cannot co-exist. Hence, through using the term “democracy,” claims of inequality seem unbelievable or even impossible, particularly to Whites that strongly believe in the ideals of democracy and that the United States represents a democracy. Notions of “meritocracy” are then used to explain any inequalities that do become apparent. The problem is located within the individual rather than a corrupt system. Lack of success becomes associated with a lack of effort rather than acknowledging an educational system that privileges some and oppresses others. Finally, notions of citizenship are used to determine who does or does not “belong.” By narrowly defining citizenship to mean White values, dress, and ways of being, a sense of ownership and belonging is imparted to Whites as opposed to non-Whites.

The principles of Eagle Landing include “all children can learn” and “equity for all,” yet students of color were consistently omitted or rejected in the picture of “all” students. The hidden transcript actually meant: “All children can learn . . . *if they are willing to conform to White, middle class ideals and standards*” and “Equity for all . . . *if White faculty believe the students of color are working hard enough to earn it through trying to be White.*” The school promoted the image of a democratic subject or a good citizen, but in all, it only promoted a particular democratic subject and a particular way of being a good citizen that can reproduce and sustain an ideological hegemony of Whiteness.

The “new” form of racism is powerful and difficult to move against. By making the hidden transcript of Eagles Landing explicit, we have aimed to make it more visible in how the White, liberal discourse of racism moves against and through student bodies within school walls. Teachers, administrators, and researchers need to listen carefully to students of color and their experiences in school. Rather than dismissing their claims, as did many Eagles Landing faculty, we must learn from their experiences and question the practices that perpetuate White hegemony under the ideologies of conformity, democracy, and citizenship.

Note

¹ According to the tape, one student read the questions while those around her answered the questions.

² The Paideia Principle recommends three phases of teacher training about the principles and implementation that totals about thirty hours of training.

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