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To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2016.1190365

Published online: 15 Jul 2016.

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Racism is in our schools—sometimes screaming and sometimes silent. (Brooks, p. 89)

Discussions of a postracial climate abound in US culture (D’Souza, 1996), yet, Jeffrey S. Brooks’ analysis of “racism and educational (mis)leadership” in an urban high school details the enduring salience of race and racism in the daily practices of schools. As Brooks’ title suggests, the focus of his analytic gaze is educational leaders, who he believes are instrumental to actualizing the learning potential within a given school. Brooks presents findings from a 2-year ethnographic study in a school site in the Southeastern United States in which the “sense of racial separation is much stronger than the sense of solidarity” (p. 13) as an illustrative case for considering racism in educational leadership. The field of educational leadership is a key site for such analysis, given its “long history of advancing racist research ideologies via a ‘conspiracy of silence’ [Blount, 1998]” and by “failing to take account of issues of difference in general, and issues of race in particular” (p. 122). Most of us, Brooks writes, sustain racism either by “commission or omission” (p. 1). He insists that “all scholars and practitioners are ethically responsible” for interrupting schooling practices that ignore race or treat them as race-neutral (p. 120). Envisioning leadership as a set of practices, rather than appointed roles, Brooks traces daily practices in a school context characterized by sharp racial divides suggesting how a conceptual framework of ‘distributed leadership for social justice’ might broaden educators’ sense of the sites, strategies, and actors available to interrupt such divisions. Brooks’ candid and accessible book offers a useful contribution to scholarship interrogating racial dynamics in educational processes by mobilizing a strong theoretical and empirical base focused on leadership while minimizing scholarly terminology to engage a wide audience of readers and practitioners.

A professor of Educational Administration at Monash University in Australia, Brooks is also the author of the Dark Side of School Reform: Teaching in the Space Between Reality and Utopia (2006), as well as the co-editor of such collections as Educational Leadership for Ethics and Social Justice (2014), Antiracist School Leadership (2013), and What Every Principal Needs to Know to Create Equitable and Excellent Schools (2012). Using the same data set on which the current book is based, Brooks and co-authors have also explored how leadership practices in the setting shaped “second-generation” segregation for Teachers College Record (2013).
Brooks animates his analysis of the school dynamics at DuBois High through a conception of leadership that intertwines theoretical concepts of social justice drawn from foundations scholarship with the concept of “distributed leadership” drawn from James Spillane (2006). In Spillane’s vision, distributed leadership is a set of practices enacted fluidly among people, situations, and sites throughout a given organization. Key to this framing is envisioning leadership as a dynamic, shifting, contextual, and theoretically-imbued practice, rather than an instrumental endeavor bestowed through a job title or role. Such leadership practices involve interactions among context-specific norms that govern school sites and formal/informal leaders and followers who variously initiate or follow a given practice. Brooks considers the model’s dynamic and ‘ambiguous’ character productive for pursuing social justice ends. The model assumes varied actors can practice leadership through seizing opportunities as they emerge to foster connections among ideas and people, raise awareness of oppression, and support teachers’ work as ‘transformational public intellectuals’.

Brooks’ emphasis on critique and transformation reflects his critical framing. He opens the text with a preface by Lisa Delpit, citing Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and Gloria-Ladson Billings, among other key social justice visionaries, and concludes with a transcript from a conversation with Bill Ayres analyzing the myth of a postracial society. Contextualizing his case study between Delpit and Ayers’ reflections on current racial issues highlights the broader cultural traffic that flows across school boundaries to shape racial dynamics. Although Brooks’ analytic insights transcend his research context, DuBois High is a productive site for tracing racial divides. The school enrolls primarily Black students and employs approximately equal numbers of Black and White professionals who live primarily separate lives after work hours. Racial tensions and silences abound in this context, as do moments of critical work in the service of equity and justice. Schools are essential arenas to interrogate racial dynamics, as Delpit expresses forcefully: “We, as a country, desperately need to look at ourselves and use all of our collective energy to unravel belief systems that belittle any of our citizens” (p. xiii). In this spirit, Brooks draws from Freire (1989) and Giroux (1988) to underscore the importance of envisioning educators as transformative intellectuals—as thinking, acting, reflective beings—who have the power to analyze, interpret and transform their worlds to challenge inequities and foster students’ critical and reflective development (p. 22).

Although Brooks’ theoretical allegiances are visible throughout the text, he contains the details of that positioning primarily to Part I and Chapter 7, presenting compelling interview and observational data in Part II, considering new directions for leadership in Part III, and covering his methodology only briefly in an Appendix. Brooks turns to several anthropological concepts to nourish his analysis, using, first, the concept of moiety to chart and analyze the development of the separate Black and White subcultures he sees at work in DuBois High and, second, Edward Hall’s work on culture to detail how racism functions as a silent and daily language in the school. In Chapter II, he presents compelling case interviews with a White teacher, Black leaders’ experiences and reflections, and an analysis of the school’s international baccalaureate program. The effect of these representational choices is a text in which theory is put to work in the service of the ethnographic data (Wolcott, 2002), showing, rather than only telling, how race is enacted at DuBois High, which leaves the reader with a cumulative sense of the complexity of schooling dynamics in this context that resists offering “simple answers to complicated questions” (p. 88).

Late in the text, Chapter 8, Brooks summarizes four themes of (mis)leadership in the dynamics at DuBois High demonstrated in Part II, fueled in part by race relations, and important for consid-
ering how individual investments intrude on accomplishing goals that serve the collective good. The themes—incompetence, indifference/apathy, avoidance, and unethical behavior—surface in daily practices Brooks witnessed that interfere with fully actualizing the visionary leadership for social justice he also saw stirring in the school. Examples of common (mis)leadership include educators’ lack of curricular and policy knowledge, arbitrary shifts in teaching assignments, indifference to activities outside of school hours, avoiding and delegating key leadership responsibilities, instances of sexual harassment, and a culture of lying all shaped by racial grouping, mistrust, favoritism, and reticence to speak out about common school patterns. A powerful chapter at the heart of the book demonstrates this (mis)leadership through a narrative integrating four interviews with one White teacher (Chapter 4). Packed with troubling racist data, the narrative presents the teacher’s channeling of deficit discourse, cultural stereotypes, indifference, and the lack of administrative support and culturally relevant pedagogy shaping his teaching practice, and, significantly, its banal and pervasive discursive character. Their candid exchanges might be tied to Brooks’ immersion in the site, as well as the teacher’s assumption he and Brooks shared common allegiances on the basis of their whiteness (Blee, 2000; Gallagher, 2000).

Brooks’ text directly confronts what some school leaders avoid entirely: the central role race plays in educational practices and processes. As one study participant expressed, the racial practices at DuBois are

all mixed up with issues of class, of economic, of society as a whole but the people who need an enlightened perspective simply don’t have one. We ought to be having a schoolwide dialogue about issues of race at DuBois, but I can’t raise them because I’m White and other people can’t raise them because they’re Black. (p. 83)

Broader cultural discourses, setting complexities, silences, omissions, and daily practices, perpetuate—but also provide opportunities to interrupt—racial dynamics in schools. Although race relations are as varied as the settings and communities in which they occur, the patterns Brooks traces provide productive examples for others to apply in their own settings and underscore the possibility of, and the need for, human beings to analyze and remake their worlds (Freire, 1989; Giroux, 1988).

Brooks’ theoretically-grounded analysis and accessible representational style is thus exceptionally well-suited for teaching endeavors in Educational Leadership programs focusing on principalship, leadership theory, ethics, policy issues, as well as courses for teacher educators who would benefit from concrete examples rather than idealistic portraits of the workings of schools. Brooks’ expansive conceptualizing of leadership offers educators grappling with the enormity of cultural racism in their contexts of their potential and obligation to seek diffuse spaces of transformational possibility and to work collaboratively to analyze and transform their worlds in context-specific ways. Coupled with supplemental readings in critical race theory or educational anthropology, Brooks’ text would also enhance courses in foundations or qualitative methodology that serve educational administrators. Given the important first step of critical reflection to Brooks’ vision of leadership, educators might consider using the text in a book group or professional development workshop to analyze racial dynamics in their contexts. Chapters 4 and 5 of the book, which present and then analyze the constitutive racist elements of one White teacher’s philosophies and practices, could serve as a case study in such a professional or curricular context.
With these chapters as backdrops, leaders can consider how to recognize and interrupt similar philosophies in their own schooling sites and how to cultivate critical reflective practice and talent within staff of such conflicting educational beliefs. Brooks highlights as touchstones for reflection varied roles educators might enact to “engage and ignore” issues of race, such as apathy, ally, advocacy, activism, and antiracism (p. 120). Chapter 9 sums up key arguments in the book that could foster discussion regarding White privilege, constructions of race, and anti-racist leadership practices: that racism shapes leadership practice; that conceptions and enactments of race are dynamic, contested, and contextual; that racial expressions occur simultaneously at multiple levels—historical, social, institutional; and that educators are always engaging with racial issues, whether indirectly or directly. Although these patterns are familiar to critical race scholars, Brooks describes racial analysis as “woefully incomplete” and undertheorized in leadership studies (p. 122). Finally, Brooks insists that in particular the White male leaders and faculty members who prepare administrators and the researchers who produce educational scholarship must critically examine their own practices and “actively seek to unlearn our miseducation about race, leadership, and the relationship between them” (p. 123). Such critical consciousness remains imperative for research and reform that enact social justice.

REFERENCES


