Racism and Educational (Mis)Leadership in the United States

The purpose of this chapter is to explore some concepts, trends, and projections in education regarding race and educational leadership. Toward this end, I will present information on two aspects of race—phenotype and cultural oppression—paying special attention to the multiple contexts in which these phenomena are manifest in U.S. society. As Fluehr-Lobban (2006) noted:

> Race is now viewed as a social construction that is primarily recognized by physical appearance, or phenotype. In the United States this means that Americans are socialized first to identify a person's race by skin color, and second by hair form, by facial features such as shape of the nose and lips, and eye form, along with other physical features like height. (p. 1)

Race as phenotype has to do with being defined as something by others, based solely on the way that a person looks. In U.S. schools, phenotype drives many of the ostensibly equity-related policy conversations and laws. It also has to do with the sorting and counting of students based on the way they look and via self-identification, rather than based on their academic performance. Phenotype is at the heart of racial quotas and many diversity initiatives. Looking at race this way is important in that it allows a way for us to understand marginalization, access, and opportunity at a systemic level, and in the hands of astute and ethical educational leaders such information can be key to leveraging resources toward greater systemic equity. However, looking at race as phenotype is only part of the story.

It is also important to know that "the idea of race is a human creation" (Hacker, 2003, p. 5). As a human creation, race is

> a culturally constructed phenomenon used for the purpose of domination and oppression. We understand that race is a multi-layered phenomenon that has cultural meaning at international, national and societal levels. Moreover, race

has particular meaning in individual communities, among groups, in each community, and in situ at the school site. (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007, p. 757)

Conceived in this manner, race is used as racism—a tool of oppression that one group (or individual) uses to dominate the other, culturally, economically, politically, and socially. In schools, many researchers have documented the consequences of racist educational practices. They have found an abundance of hidden racist curricula that advantage a White, middle-class perspective and name all others as inferior (Delpit, 1995); racist instructional pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1997); achievement gaps borne of culturally insensitive assessment practices (Darling-Hammond, 1995); inequitable graduation rates and instances of dropout (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007; Pearson & Newcomb, 2000); and many other informal dynamics (Tatum, 1999, 2007), some of which will be explored further in later chapters. However, before we listen to the teachers and administrators of DuBois High School to understand how these concepts play out in their day-to-day work as educators and leaders, it is important to understand the larger societal context in which they work.

RACE IN THE UNITED STATES

The United States is increasingly diverse.

> According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2004) projections for the year 2050, the non-Hispanic, White population of the United States is likely to increase by 7%. This modest increase is in stark contrast to projected increases among people of Hispanic origin (projected to increase by 188%), the Asian population (projected to increase by 213%), and the Black population (projected to increase by 71%). The same study also projects that by 2050, the non-Hispanic, White population will comprise only 50.1% of the country's total population, a sharp decline from the 77.1% of the population who reported their race as White in the 2000 census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). (Young & Brooks, 2008, pp. 1–2)

These projections are even more profound when connected to data from previous census reports. Examining census data from 1970 and 2000, and then comparing these with recent projections from the U.S. Census Bureau, reveals several interesting trends (see Table 1.1).

These trends and projections suggest a phenotypic shift in the composition of the country and underscore the tremendous rate at which the "'look'" of U.S. society is changing. However, as with many such analyses,

Table 1.1. Demographic Trends and Projections in the United States, 1970–2050

	1970	2000	2050
White	83.3	69.1	50.1
Black	10.9	12.3	14.6
Hispanic	4.5	12.5	24.4
Asian	1.1	3.6	8.0
Other	0.2	2.5	2.9

Sources: 1970: Hacker, 2003, p. 21; *2000*: U.S. Census Bureau, 2001; *2050*: See Young & Brooks, 2008.

there are corollary trends such as geographic distribution that also bear greater scrutiny.

While the United States is an increasingly diverse country, this diversity is not spread evenly within its borders. Indeed, while the highest percentage of White people is spread throughout the Midwest and Great Plains states, and the northern areas of the country (Figure 1.1), this is not the case for Black Americans, who are geographically concentrated in the southeastern United States, California, major metropolitan areas, and the eastern seaboard up to Massachusetts (Figure 1.2).

It stands to reason, then, that there are unique regional issues that affect the context of a study of race in general and on Black and White interactions in particular. While I am unable to divulge the exact location of the study because I don't want to compromise the confidentiality of any participants, I will say that this study occurred in the southeastern part of the country. I will provide additional information about the community later in this chapter.

RACE AND EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

Given the trends discussed in the previous section, it is now important to start looking more directly at the demographics of public schools. In the 2007–2008 school year, White students constituted 59% of all students, while Black students represented 15% of the entire student population (Figure 1.3). Black students, being one of the larger minority groups in the population, have, as a group, a very different educational experience from that of their White peers (Delpit, 1995).

There are quite detailed and powerful reports that closely examine the consequences of racism in education for students, in terms of various

Figure 1.1. Regional Distribution of Percentage of White Population in the
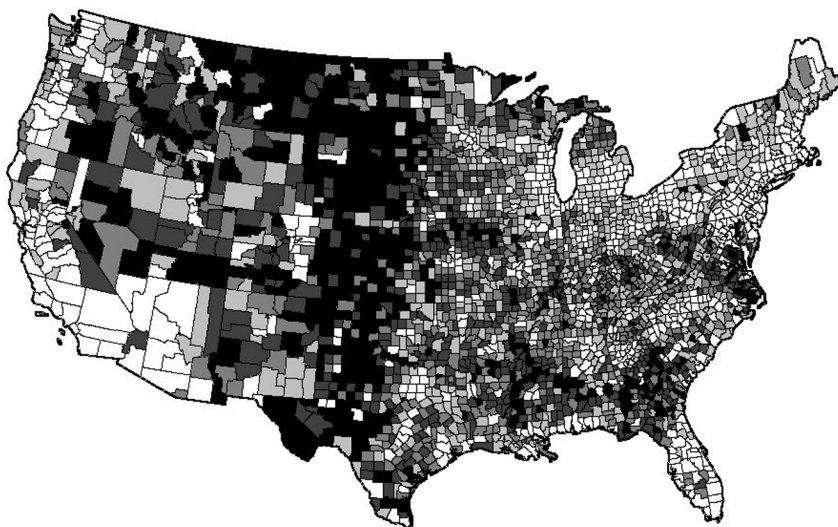   United States, 2000

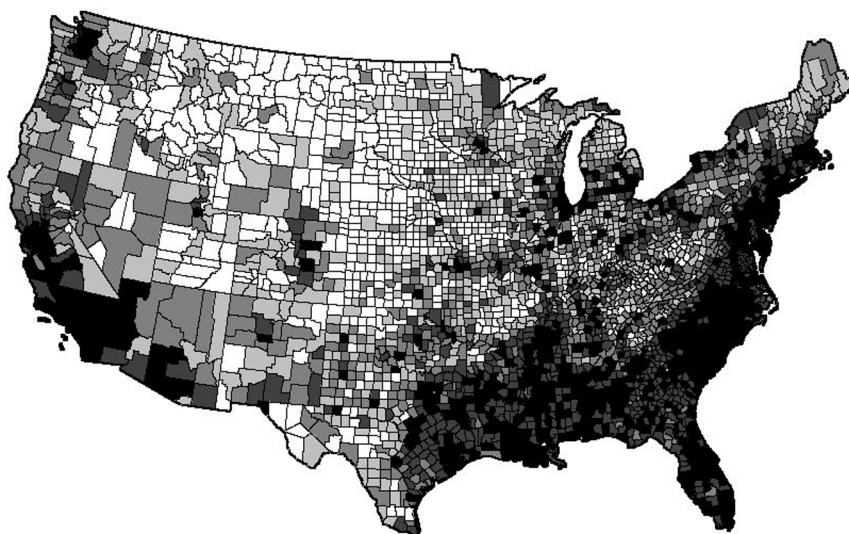Figure 1.2. Regional Distribution by Percentage of Black Population in United
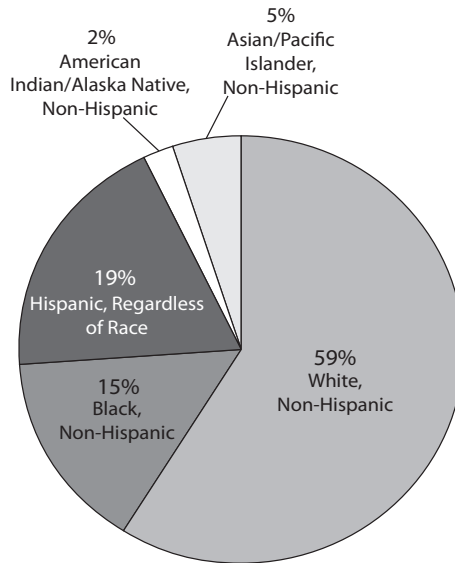   States, 2000

Figure 1.3. Percentage Distribution of Students by Race/Ethnicity for All U.S. Public Schools, 2007–2008

outcomes. For example, a 2004 NCES report shows a gap in terms of many educational outcomes: reading and mathematics achievement, advanced course taking in high school, performance on advanced placement examinations, and performance on college entrance examinations. Moreover, the report provides powerful evidence that this is not only an achievement gap, but an education and opportunity gap as well. Take note of some of these findings:

1. Black students are twice as likely as White students to be retained, suspended, or expelled.
2. Black children have a much higher dropout rate than White students.
3. Black children are nearly half as likely as White students to use a computer at home.
4. Black girls have a much greater chance of being a teen mother than White girls.
5. Black students are twice as likely as White students to not have finished high school.

In addition to a disparity in the numbers of White and Black students, the racial breakdown of the teaching population likewise is profoundly

dominated by the majority race (Figure 1.4). The numbers shrink even further when we scrutinize the percentages of Black and White principals in U.S. public schools (Figure 1.5). Interestingly, the number of Black school principals increases dramatically when we enter the core urban centers of the country (Figure 1.6), schools that also feature the highest concentrations of students of color.

Public schools in the United States, then, show several trends related to the phenotypic composition of the student, teacher, and administrator populations. First, the population of the country and of the schools will grow increasingly diverse over the coming decades. Second, there is some evidence that this diversity will be increasingly widespread and not confined to large urban centers. Third, there is a racial funnel effect in the public schools. That is, the Black student population is quite small at 15%, but the percentage of Black teachers is even lower at 8%. At first glance it seems positive that nationally 11% of principals are Black, but these are concentrated primarily in public schools in the nation's urban centers, which traditionally have the highest administrator turnover rate and face the most significant educational problems (Strizek, Pittsonberger, Riordan, Lyter, & Orlofsky, 2006). Moreover, this means that there is a great possibility that Black students will not have a Black teacher, and

Figure 1.4. Percentage Distribution of Teachers by Race/Ethnicity for all U.S. Public Schools, 2007–2008
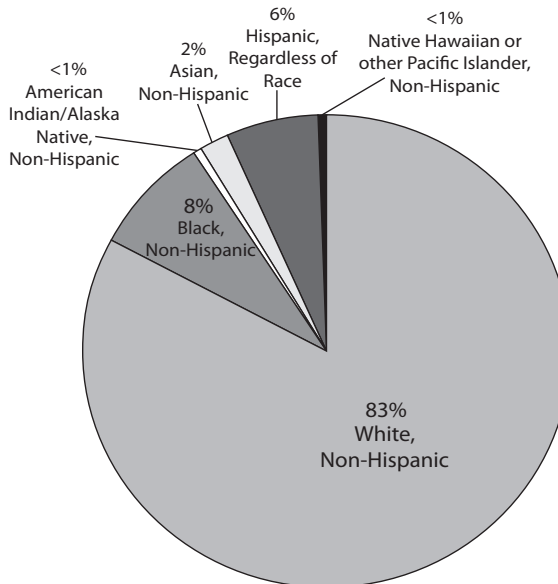
Figure 1.5. Percentage Distribution of All School Principals by Race/Ethnicity, 2003–2004
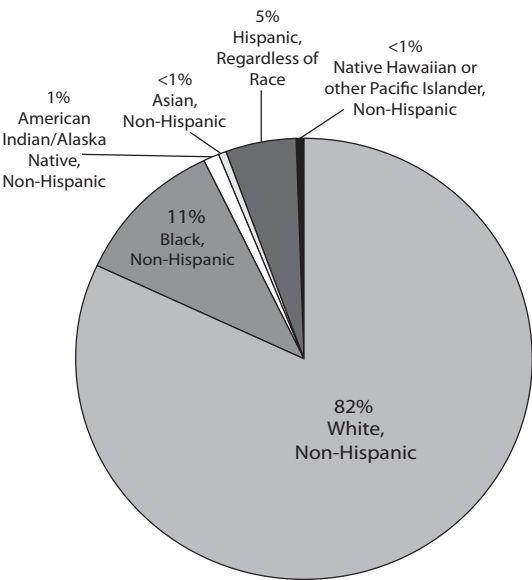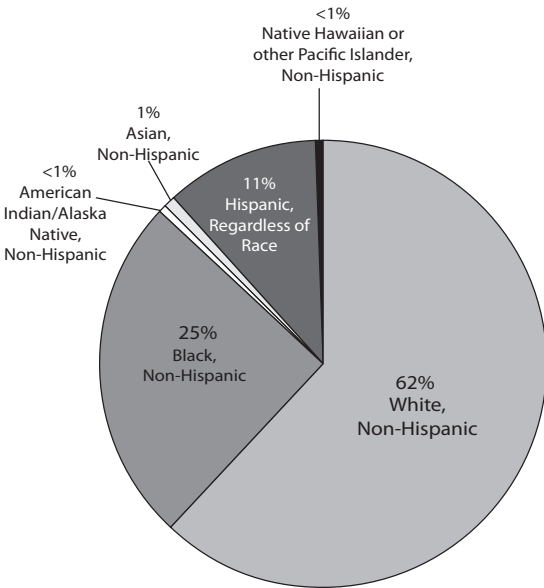
5%
Hispanic,
Regardless of
Race

<1%
Native Hawaiian or
other Pacific Islander,
Non-Hispanic

<1%
Asian,
Non-Hispanic

1%
American
Indian/Alaska
Native,
Non-Hispanic

11%
Black,
Non-Hispanic

82%
White,
Non-Hispanic

Figure 1.6. Percentage Distribution of City Center (Urban) Principals by Race/ Ethnicity, 2003–2004

<1%
Native Hawaiian or
other Pacific Islander,
Non-Hispanic

1%
Asian,
Non-Hispanic

<1%
American
Indian/Alaska
Native,
Non-Hispanic

11%
Hispanic,
Regardless of
Race

25%
Black,
Non-Hispanic

62%
White,
Non-Hispanic

that Black teachers will not work for a Black principal. Fourth, while there are few Black public school principals, these principals generally practice leadership in the most challenging schools, making their tenures shorter and the work more difficult.

MULHOLLAND FALLS AND DUBOIS HIGH SCHOOL: A CONTEXT TO STUDY RACISM AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Mulholland Falls, the pseudonymous city where this study took place, is in the southeastern United States. There were approximately 250,000 people in the city limits. The racial makeup of the city at the time of the study was approximately 57% White, 38% African American, 1% Native American, 2% Asian, 1% Pacific Islander, and 1% other races. Hispanics or Latinos of any race were approximately 6% of the population and non-Hispanic Whites were 55% of the population.

The city saw tremendous growth over the past 30 years, and, indeed, archival data show that the population nearly doubled during that time. Not coincidentally, this growth accompanied the swelling enrollment of the city's two large state universities, one that had transformed itself from a women-only teaching college into a Carnegie-classified, research-intensive institution, and the other a historically Black university that had developed and maintained an excellent academic reputation for nearly a century. "They are good schools," many DuBois High School educators explained. In fact, most educators at DuBois were trained at one of these two schools. Many proudly proclaimed their allegiance whenever the opportunity allowed, and they displayed banners in their classrooms and offices that announced their affiliation. However, educators explained that although scholastic membership was one of the most overt dynamics that affected the city's social and cultural norms, it was only one manifestation of a more pervasive culture of division. As one teacher intimated, "We hang the banners and joke about it, but when you get right down to it, the cultural differences are much greater."

According to educators at DuBois High School, the city is sharply segregated along racial lines, with a distinction drawn between the so-called Black and White cultures. Educators explained that social interaction in the community is almost exclusively race specific. As one assistant principal suggested, "It's really two completely different towns-within-a-town—very little interaction." Black and White educators alike could easily list Black and White neighborhoods, schools, restaurants, cultural events, holidays, prominent community members, and institutions. One White administrator noted, "That's the way it's always been here. The

Black folks do their thing, and the White folks do something else. We go to different football games on Saturdays, and we eat at different restaurants. Of course, we mix to some degree, but I think that the sense of racial separation is much stronger than the sense of solidarity. It's a divided community, and it has been for a long time." Regardless of which group they claimed to be members of, educators were conscious of the way that race, more than any other characteristic, defined the social and cultural norms of the community's people.

Educators described DuBois High School as one of the "Black schools" in town. At the time of the study, the district employed 80 teachers at the school, a principal, three assistant principals, an academic dean, and a dozen educational specialists to serve approximately 1,300 children, grades 9–12. The educational staff was split almost into halves, phenotypically speaking: 37 White, 39 Black. One teacher identified herself as Hispanic, and another teacher self-identified as Arab.

According to educators, DuBois is a school with significant challenges exacerbated by racial dynamics. It serves a poverty-stricken area of the city, and students have fared poorly on standardized examinations for several years. Many of DuBois' students read at an elementary school level and drop out of school before they finish. However, many others stay in despite low achievement. It is common among the school's general education population that a student might be 18 years old and in 9th grade or as old as 22 if diagnosed with a learning disability. As educators explained, "A significant number of students have a bleak academic future," and as another long-serving teacher lamented, "Many students end up in low-wage service jobs, into lives of crime, or in the welfare system." That being said, students and neighborhood families have a sense of pride, and they value the school's academic and athletic traditions, both of which are significant. Over the course of its history, the school has won state championships in nearly every sport, although the banners that hang from the rafters of the gymnasium are now quite faded; the glory years seem long ago.

Academically, DuBois High School is a paradox. Whereas the general education population is low performing, the school houses an international baccalaureate (IB) program that sends students to elite universities on full academic scholarships every year. At DuBois, the IB program is essentially a school within a school. The program has its own operating budget, and teachers in the program answer directly to the IB program coordinator rather than the school's administrators. Additionally, IB teachers have their own lounge, which is the only operational lounge in the school. Furthermore, IB teachers receive a stipend every time their students pass an IB examination, which can amount to several thousand dollars of extra

money for teachers in the program. As a social phenomenon, the IB program is both a uniting and a dividing force.

Like the country, region, state, and community, DuBois High School is divided along racial lines. Of course, these lines are constantly moving and have been evolving for quite a while as people and ideas flow into and out of the community and school. The subsequent chapters represent my initial attempts to understand how racism influenced education in the school, beginning with the concepts of social justice and distributed leadership.