In this article, Manju Varma-Joshi, Cynthia Baker, and Connie Tanaka examine the impact of racialized name-calling on a group of twenty-six “visible minority” youth from New Brunswick, Canada. Through one-on-one interviews and focus groups, the authors compare views held by visible minority students and their parents to the views of White authority figures regarding the significance of racism and racialized name-calling at school. While White authority figures often view name-calling — even that of a racialized nature — as common adolescent behavior, the visible minority participants equate such name-calling with a serious form of harassment and violence. The authors contend that much of the disparity in these views is the result of White authority figures’ perception of racialized name-calling as isolated incidents rather than part of a continual pattern of harassment encountered by visible minority students. As a result of this disparity, the authors identify three responses to racism that the youth participants typically enact: splintered universe, spiraling resistance, and disengagement. These responses are often destructive to visible minority students and negatively affect their school experiences. The authors recommend increased attention by school authorities to the everyday racist assaults that visible minority students have to endure.

Scenario 1: A playground. Skipping ropes slap the pavement with a rhythmic beat as tiny jumping feet pulse to the sound. Mixed with the skipping sing-song chants are the screams of tag, the counting of hopscotch, and the fleeting whispers of secrets told from cupped hand to awaiting ear. Children of various ages run in a seemingly random pattern creating chaotic fractures in an institution that stresses structure, discipline, and curriculum.
Amidst the jumbled sounds, a small child slowly approaches a teacher. Looking down at his feet, the child quietly says, “Teacher, somebody called me a nigger.” The teacher freezes, the boy’s soft tone seems harsher and louder than the rest of the noise that has fallen into the background. After a moment, the teacher places her hand on the child’s shoulder. “It’s OK,” she says. “Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.”

Scenario 2: A mother enters a school washroom after being called and told that her son refuses to obey his teacher’s request to exit the room. She immediately observes her child crouched in a corner, hiding beneath a sink. “His hands were wrapped around the pipes and he refused to come out,” she remembers. “The kids had been calling him nigger . . . . When he tried to tell the teacher, she said it’s not an issue.”

Scenario 3: A young Black man sits in front of an interviewer. His finger traces an invisible pattern on the table seared into place with his stare. In response to the question, “How does racism make you feel?” he shrugs and says, “It happens all the time. I try not to go places alone, you know, just to be safe. You get used to it. But the names, they hurt the most. They still do.”

Within the field of multicultural and antiracist education, the impact of racism on youth is of particular concern. Numerous studies have recorded the impact of racism on both visible minority children and White children. These studies suggest that children are aware of racial differences, can cite experiences of racism, hold racial preferences, and demonstrate discriminatory beliefs as early as four years old (Aboud, 1999; Cameron & Varma-Joshi, 1997; Henry, Tator, Rees, & Mattis, 2000; Nieto, 1990). Because of the dominant place that education holds in the lives of youth, the school as a racial institution has also fallen under scholarly scrutiny (Berlak, 1999; Cummins, 1996; Dei, 1995; Delpit, 1988; Giroux, 1996). However, most examinations of the impact of racism on youth are situated in highly diverse urban areas where more than one large ethnocultural group resides (e.g., see Ada, 1988; Davidson, 1996; Feuerverger, 1994; Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1992).

The presence of large ethnocultural communities creates a unique environment for visible minorities by providing a certain level of support. This support may include the presence of the ethnocultural community itself as well as auxiliary structures that reinforce the social network. Examples of such structures are the availability of religious venues, culturally specific entertainment (movies, live shows, etc.), community issue forums, and language-specific newspapers. Furthermore, large, diverse locations are also often home to various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government departments focused on diversity issues such as bilingualism, heritage language, and multiculturalism.
Within the multicultural nation of Canada there exist a variety of demographic dichotomies, including French/English, Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal, and visible minority/predominantly White populations. This article is concerned with the last dichotomy. As Baker, Arseneaul, and Gallant (1994) point out, “Most large ethnocultural communities are found in relatively few metropolitan centers. In Canada, they are established in one or two cities of five provinces: Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, and British Columbia” (p. 1065). In other words, most of Canada is still predominantly White, despite the diverse populations of a few cities such as Toronto and Vancouver. New Brunswick, the province that is home to the participants of our study, is one of the least visibly diverse provinces in the country. As a result, it often goes unmentioned among Canadian studies about ethnic and racial diversity.

Despite the limited number of Canadian studies of visible minorities in predominantly White settings, some comparable research has been conducted in other countries, such as Great Britain (Carrington & Short, 1993; Gillborn, 1996; Tomlinson, 1990; Troylna & Hatcher, 1992) and the United States (Lewis, 2001; MacPhee, 1997; Paley, 1979; Ramsey, 1991; Rutledge, 1982; Wills, 1996). Canadian research in this area is still in its infancy.

In Canada, there is little known about the racial experiences of visible minorities and Whites living in predominantly White communities like New Brunswick. Examples of the work that exist are Kakembo’s (1994) work on Nova Scotian Blacks’ success in public education, Spalding’s (1999) study of Black unemployment in New Brunswick, Calliste’s (1994) review of antiracist educational initiatives, and Darisme’s (1996) investigation of the formation of racial gangs in predominantly White locations.

Our research is an effort to contribute to this small body of literature by investigating the possible racist experiences of visible minority youth living in a predominantly White location. Two broad research questions guided our study: What was the nature of racism as experienced by our participants? How did our young participants respond to and cope with the racist experiences?

Three frequent forms of racism surfaced from the data. Name-calling was the most common, physical assault or the threat of assault was second, and unfair treatment was a close third. Of these three manifestations of racism, we were especially intrigued by name-calling because, as we illustrate below, contradictory understandings of racism between visible minorities and White authority figures exist. While the visible minority participants tended to view individual racist incidents as part of the greater experience of racism, White authority figures were inclined to treat each episode as a single problem and thus dealt with it without recognizing the victim’s overall experience with racism. We were startled by the gripping effects of name-calling: for example, some participants recalled attempting to scrub off their skin color, praying to turn white, losing interest in school, and, in extreme cases, contemplating suicide. Consequently, we were compelled to pay particular attention to the form
and impact of name-calling on the individual participants, their families, and their communities.

As a result, this article focuses on the impact of racialized name-calling and our participants’ evolving responses to racism. Our participants regarded name-calling as worse than physical violence because of its ubiquitous nature and because of their perception that authority figures did not understand the pain caused by name-calling. The participants overwhelmingly felt that name-calling was a particularly insidious form of violence, specifically because of its harmless reputation. In fact, the participants’ responses to name-calling, ranging from self-loathing to gang violence to social isolation, demonstrates the severity of racial taunts.

Location

Our quest to explore a road less taken led us to New Brunswick, Canada, a small province on the country’s east coast. We chose New Brunswick for both personal and demographic reasons.

Personally, each of the researchers involved in this project has a research history in the province in the area of antiracist education. We are interested in expanding the body of research that can be used to inform policy relevant to local needs and conditions. Also, as long-term residents of the province, we have seen the evolution of cross-cultural understanding and were intrigued by the racial experiences of our visible minority neighbors.

Demographically, New Brunswick is one of the two least visibly diverse provinces in the country (Statistics Canada, 2003a). The predominantly White population’s experiences with diversity have been influenced by four particular characteristics. First, the province is home to only a small percentage of immigrants. According to the 2001 Census, the total population of New Brunswick numbered 719,710, of whom 24,385 self-classified as immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2003a). Thus, immigrants represent only 3 percent of the province’s population, whereas nationwide they represent 17.7 percent of the approximately 31,000,000 people living in Canada during that same year (Statistics Canada, 2003b). Furthermore, immigrants are scattered mainly throughout the province’s three urban centers of Moncton, Saint John, and Fredericton, thus curtailing the existence of any large ethnocultural groupings (Statistics Canada, 2003a).

A second trait of New Brunswick’s diversity is the small number of visible minorities. In the 2001 Census, 9,425 people described themselves as visible minorities — approximately 1.1 percent of New Brunswick’s population (Statistics Canada, 2003a). In Canada as a whole, 11.2 percent of the population self-identified as a visible minority (Statistics Canada, 2003b).

Third, the major visible minority population in New Brunswick consists of longstanding communities rather than immigrant groups. These include two First Nations3 groups, the Mi’kmaq and the Maliseet, and an indigenous Black community. A recent Census notes that Aboriginals represent 1.4 percent of
the Canadian population, numbering 16,990 in 2000 (Statistics Canada, 2003b). With the exception of St. Mary’s, a Maliseet reserve in Fredericton, the First Nations communities are located in rural areas of the province. Approximately 3,000 members of the indigenous Black community in New Brunswick live primarily in Saint John, and there is also a small community in Fredericton (Spalding, 1999). Many of the indigenous Blacks are descendants of loyalists from the United States during the Revolutionary War, primarily from the state of New York (Spalding, 1999).

Another segment of the minority population includes Blacks who are mainly newcomers from Africa. While some newcomers do have immigrant status, most are in New Brunswick as refugees from war-affected African countries (Varma-Joshi, 2000). Because many are able to speak French, these newcomers have tended to stay in the province while other visible minority immigrants have a higher rate of migration to larger urban locations outside the province (Varma-Joshi, 2003).

The fourth diversity characteristic is probably the most notable: New Brunswick is Canada’s only officially bilingual province. Francophones represent a third of the population (Godlewski, 2001). Thus, mainstream New Brunswickers are divided into two linguistic groups, English and French. However, Moncton is the only one of the three urban centers with a large French-speaking community; approximately 20 percent of its 60,075 residents (Statistics Canada, 2003a) self-identify as Francophones. Most of the remaining French speakers are found in rural communities.

Mainstream Perspectives on Racism

Federal and provincial organizations mandated with encouraging public dialogue on cultural and ethnic diversity have historically faced a wall of denial. This denial takes two forms: the acceptance of racism and a low priority for visible diversity (Varma-Joshi, 2003). The few workshops and conferences that promote ethnic and racial harmony tend to attract the same groups and individuals who are already committed to promoting multiculturalism (Varma-Joshi, 2003). Organizational positions on ethnocultural and racial diversity are diluted within broader policy statements, such as the Equal Opportunity Policy governing employment or the Positive Learning Environment Policy directed at bullying in schools. Moreover, schools have sporadic projects on race and culture. They incorporate a unit on multiculturalism into the social science curriculum, or acknowledge the International Elimination of Racism Day in March, and some recognize Black History month. But these activities are given a low profile, due to the small numbers of visible minority students in the schools, and are dwarfed by attention given to more widespread problems such as learning disabilities or bullying in general. Although many teachers acknowledge that there may be some racism in New Brunswick, they believe it is a minor problem that gets exaggerated by the media (Varma-Joshi, 2000).
Visible Minority Perspectives on Racism

Our interviews with the young participants and their parents echoed sentiments revealed in our previous research regarding the recognition of racism in New Brunswick (Baker, Arseneaul, & Gallant, 1994; Varma-Joshi, 2000). In each study, the visible minority participants repeatedly argued that issues of racism and multiculturalism were not a high priority for the province or local institutions. Our participants felt that “no one cares about the racism that is here,” “people don’t want to admit it exists,” and that “people here don’t understand the value of diversity so they don’t do anything to help it.”

The 115 formal complaints to the New Brunswick Human Rights Commission between April 1, 2000, and March 31, 2001, further testify to minority groups’ experiences with racial and cultural discrimination. Among this total, a breakdown of the complaints indicate that 11 percent (13) concerned race, 2 percent (3) involved the person’s place of origin, 1 percent (2) concerned color, 8 percent (10) were about ancestry, and 1 percent (2) concerned the national origin of the complainant (Human Rights Commission, 2002).

Methodology

As our research objective was to investigate possible racist experiences of visible minority youth living in a predominantly White location, we wanted to ensure that our methodology provided a voice for the participants’ multiple experiences. The study’s qualitative design was based on a constructivist research paradigm in which realities are considered to be “apprehendable in the form of multiple intangible mental constructions” (Lincoln & Guba, 1994, p. 10). The research process was inductive and guided by a relativist ontology (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). In this regard, we recognized that our analysis was emergent and based on the assumption that there is no single objective reality to apprehend. Instead, the relativist paradigm assumes multiple, local, constructed realities. The aim of the inquiry was to understand a phenomenon by reconstructing specific constructions of it (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Thus, in the case of our study, these specific realities include the participants’ interpretations of their experiences of racism and our initial understanding of the phenomenon. We were not looking for the one true construction of the experience of racism in predominantly White areas, but a broader understanding of multiple perspectives that would ring true with our participants.

We gathered data from participant interviews and interpreted them with a hermeneutical methodology (Appleton & King, 1997; Lincoln & Guba, 2000). In the hermeneutic framework, interviews are treated as texts created by participants who were engaged in the particular experience being studied. Interview texts were treated as a whole and then broken into parts. The parts were read and reread as the investigators organized information into categories and sought relational patterns (Carpenter, 1999). Meaning was derived from the hermeneutic circle of interpretation in which the investigators moved
back and forth from an understanding of the parts of the texts based on their overall understanding of the studied phenomenon to a reinterpretation of such comprehension as a result of their interpretations of the texts (Allen & Jensen, 1990). Interpretations were repeatedly shared with participants until both researcher and participant were in agreement.

While other methodologies could have been employed, hermeneutics is part of the constructivist inquiry paradigm, which posits that participants bring a body of prior knowledge to new situations. Understanding participants’ prior knowledge of racism was especially crucial in the particular context of this study. As already noted, the amount of research informing us about the realities of visible minorities living in predominantly White locations is minimal. Consequently, there is little documented evidence available to even suggest how our participants have experienced racism or how they understand their experiences. The hermeneutic methodology provided participants with a vehicle to express their perspectives and allowed the participants’ voices to take center phase. By allowing these voices, we recognized the different viewpoints existing within the group studied (Anderson, 1989; Simon & Dippo, 1986; Thomas, 1993). The methodology also allowed us to situate findings in a specific local context.

Each of the twenty-six participants engaged in a one-on-one interview regarding their experiences with racism. To promote consistency, one member of the research team conducted all of the interviews. Although ten open-ended questions were predetermined by the team, the interviewer remained flexible by allowing the participants the freedom to refer to other facets of their lives. On occasion, the interviewer suggested alternative possibilities regarding participants’ perceived experiences of racism in order to clarify and allow participants to provide further information. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed by the original interviewer.

In keeping with the inductive methodology of the constructivist model, we began data analysis during the period of information collection utilizing Lincoln and Guba’s (2000) steps of unitizing, categorizing, and pattern-seeking. First, we dissected transcribed interviews into thematic blocks of information, which we then categorized into temporary groupings based on emerging themes. We continually compared the information blocks, assigning and reassigning them to the groupings, which were also continually fleshed out and refined. Two of the researchers engaged in this process separately, coming together later to compare and contrast their groupings before reassembling the information into patterns reflecting the participants’ experiences.

To heighten the study’s credibility, we included the members of the affected group in the project’s design and the data analysis. We consulted with a panel of parents whose children were victims of racism to help create the ten interview questions. These victims identified themselves by responding to advertisements placed in multicultural organizations’ and First Nations Band’s offices. These participants, along with other members of the visible minority
community, assisted in the recruitment and selection of participants. A focus group of youth participants and parents critiqued the initial findings. As the analysis of information evolved, we shared deductions with individual respondents and, later, with the original panel of parents. These interactions were also recorded. For reliability, we provided a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) detailing the province’s demographics, social conditions, and communities represented in the research, and adhered to Spradley’s (1980) “verbatim principle” (p. 68) by providing exact participant quotations complete with pauses and other verbal cues.

We sought validity not only through the various consultations, but also through interviews with the youth participants’ parents. The same ten questions were used in the fourteen parental interviews that we conducted. This triangulation of data (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994) helped to reinforce findings and to underline contradictions. Validity was tested using Marshall and Rossman’s (1995) suggestion that researchers attempt to provide alternative explanations for the data. They advise researchers to encourage colleagues to act as the “devil’s advocate” (p. 145) and critically evaluate the findings. We discussed our findings with other researchers informed on the topic in order to attain “consensual validation . . . the agreement among competent others that the description, interpretation, evaluations, and thematics of an educational situation are right” (Eisner, 1991, p. 112).

**Sampling**

We contacted potential participants with the help of various sources, including municipal and provincial multicultural organizations, First Nations Band offices, and participant referrals. A potential participant was described as a visible minority youth between the ages of fifteen and twenty who believed him/herself to be the victim of a racist incident. We employed the snowball sampling technique (Polit & Hungler, 1999) by asking our participants if they were willing to introduce the interviewer to other possible participant candidates. This type of sampling is an effective way to contact members of disempowered groups (Burns & Grove, 2001). Polit and Hungler (1999) also argue that a reference from a friend or acquaintance may allow the new participants to feel greater ease with the interviewer. A greater sense of ease and trust would make it easier for our participants to discuss potentially sensitive and painful experiences with us. Polit and Hungler (1999) also note that a direct referral allows the researcher to specify the desired characteristics of a new participant (such as age or sex). This was an advantage, as our study sought a geographical, age, and gender balance.

There are of course drawbacks to snowballing. One major limitation is the risk of bias, as people will likely refer other people with similar experiences (Burns & Grove, 2001; Polit & Hungler, 1999). The fact that most of our participants fell within two broadly defined ethnocultural groups (First Nations and Black) could be due to the snowball sampling approach. The lack of re-
response from other visible minority groups did intrigue us. We wondered if the absence was due to our sampling technique or if youth from other ethnocultural groups experienced a more covert racism that was harder to identify, did not encounter any overt episodes of racism, or simply did not want to participate in a study on racism. While our sampling technique did not allow us to answer such questions, the gaps do not take away from the understanding we gained from the specific participants in our study.

One other major limitation of this nonprobabilistic sampling technique is that one cannot generalize findings. However, because our study was based on the constructivist approach and utilized the hermeneutic methodology, our aim was not to generalize but to have some understanding of how our particular group of participants constructed racism.

To provide a broad picture, we took care to choose participants from across the province and to balance the number of female and male viewpoints. We attempted to have a mix of immigrants, first-generation Canadians, and members of longstanding communities; however, the final twenty-six participants consisted of only three first-generation Canadians and their immigrant parents, all of whom are Black. The remaining twenty-three participants belonged to either the First Nations tribes of Mi’kmaq and Maliseet or indigenous Black communities (see Table 1).

Participants self-identified their ethnic backgrounds by completing a sociodemographic questionnaire that asked for the participants’ and their parents’ place of birth. The three first-generation youth and their parents self-identified as Black and also referenced their home countries (the West Indies, Zaire, and United States). The remaining Black youth and their parents identified themselves as being part of the New Brunswick indigenous Black community.

The distinction between the immigrant and indigenous Black participants is important to note, as their background cultures and contexts differ considerably. For example, the Indigenous Black community has experienced a long-term, multigenerational phenomenon of being a small visible minority group in a predominantly White area. In contrast, for the immigrant families, the status of visible minority was a relatively new experience. The participants from Zaire and the West Indies had been part of a racial majority in their home country, and the youth from the United States had lived in an area where Blacks made up a much larger proportion of the population.

Findings

Findings from the participants’ interviews are presented in two parts. First we discuss the face of racism as seen by our young victims and their parents. Within this description, two institutional blind eyes emerge from the data. The incongruities that exist between institutional impressions of racism and those of our visible minority participants become quickly apparent. These disagreements take shape mainly in the forms of conflicting judgments regard-
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\(^{a}\) Nova Scotia is a neighboring province of New Brunswick. This province is home to one of the oldest and largest Indigenous Black communities in Canada.

\(^{b}\) A mainly rural area of New Brunswick with a high concentration of Aboriginal communities.
ing the severity of name-calling and appropriate responses to individual racist episodes. These contradictions are themselves built upon another disagreement — the actual presence of racism. While authority figures in and out of schools firmly argued that racism, of any kind, was not a severe problem in New Brunswick (Darisme, 1996; Varma-Joshi, 2000), participants unequivocally identified racism as an enduring element in society. Although various institutions were identified as injurious, participants most commonly identified school as the site for the earliest, most frequent, most devastating, and least addressed racist incidents.

The second part of the findings presents evolving responses and strategies adopted by the young participants. Again, the dichotomous views between the victims and the power holders are evident. For the participants, both parts of the findings give a voice to their experiences in the classroom. For educators, the findings signify a need to explore racism from the point of view of the victims, reexamine definitions of racism, and enhance school policies aimed at addressing hate-motivated behavior. Because the visible minority participants perceived the White authority figures as resistant to recognizing the presence of racism, they relied on their peers of the same race for support and coping strategies. Unfortunately, in many cases, this bonding led to a pattern of violence and self-loathing.

Discovering Racism in Different Places
Our study was originally prompted by a seemingly sudden surge of racial attacks against visible minority youth in New Brunswick. Our use of the word “seemingly” is purposeful. Interviews with the visible minority youth and their parents quickly revealed that, while attention to racist activity was recent, racism itself was not. Unlike the general public whose concern focused on the highly publicized episodes of racial violence, participants spoke of a covert and systemic racist environment that plagued their lives on an almost daily basis. In their view, the recent dramatic events simply revealed a “secret” that the participants already knew — that racism was imbedded in numerous facets of New Brunswick society. One mother underlined this position when she commented, “People sometimes need bad actions like we had lately here in Moncton to see that something wrong is going on, because what just boiled over is not new; it has been going on for ages.” Ironically, research in multiculturalism and racism has inadvertently fed this stereotype by providing a research diet consisting mainly of data from visibly diverse areas. If the goal of multicultural and antiracist education is to promote equality and equity, then all school sites must be investigated, not just those with a lot of brown faces.

At different times during our research on diversity in predominantly White locations, we too witnessed a resistance to acknowledging the presence of racism. For example, a Black immigrant family living in Moncton was awakened in the middle of the night and told that a cross was burning on its front yard.
Although a burning cross is a blatant symbol of racism, police initially labeled the incident as vandalism. Only after various multicultural advocacy groups publicly denounced the decision did the police readdress the episode as a hate crime. Shortly thereafter, a young White man living in the same affluent neighborhood was arrested and found guilty of the crime. Even after the perpetrator made racist remarks in the courtroom, many local citizens still refused to acknowledge the crime as indicative of a larger social problem. The small population of visible minorities diminished the critical impact of their racist experiences. The limited racial diversity naturally translated into fewer racial incidents when compared to larger centers, thus making racism appear as a small or nonexistent problem. However, because of the small numbers and the resulting lack of recognition and support, racism could actually be conceived as a greater problem in predominantly White areas.

Both youth and parent participants noted that their small population exacerbated their racist experiences. First, they argued that any negative action committed by a member of their race became indicative of their entire group. One parent noted, “If a Black male does something wrong, then my son suddenly is [seen as being] the same way. Because there are so few Black people here, the White people don’t see the differences among us.” An immigrant parent argued that her community’s lack of diversity had undermined her children’s appreciation of their culture making them ashamed of their roots:

I’ve always told my children that they come from a good family, an educated mother, an educated father. . . . They are ashamed of their names because people out there tell them that their names are weird. They are great names in my country. . . . My child wanted to change his name, you know, because he was so embarrassed about it. . . . I don’t go anywhere there are functions where I can be seen by his friends or whatever because I’m different. I speak differently, you know, I have an accent. But I told him, look at the way they speak, you know, all the colloquialism, broken grammar. . . . He says, “I know Mom, but that’s just how it is, you know, White people just think this way and I have to live here.” But it’s hard when other people, people who are many more, bigger than we are, so we cannot convince them that we are right.

Understandably, the breakdown of the sense of culture and tradition caused further stress in both parents’ and children’s lives. In their study on resettlement without the support of an ethnocultural community, Baker, Arseneaul, and Gallant (1994) discovered that recent immigrants to New Brunswick experienced a higher rate of mental illness than immigrants entering visibly diverse population areas. Interviews with New Brunswick immigrants left Baker et al. to conclude that the absence of a familiar ethnocultural community significantly increased the levels of mental strain on the newcomer. Although Baker et al. focused on adults, several of her participants were also parents whose children had to deal with issues of acculturation. The family stress, compounded with the stress of dealing with racist experiences, would certainly affect the child.
Racism by Any Other Name

Regardless of their background or geographic location, the young participants collectively underlined name-calling as the most common form of racism. Victims described name-calling as the type of racism that occurred “mostly like all the time... everywhere you go.” This opinion was echoed by their parents, who related numerous accounts of racial slurs against both themselves and their children. Examples given by parents emphasized the constant presence of name-calling, an action that seemed to be part of the everyday language that their children encountered. One parent described how her daughter often had to endure such comments as “Get out of the way you fucking nigger” or “Hey nigger, pass me my book” as part of the school routine. Another parent commented that his son is often called “wagon burner... like it’s some kind of joke. They [the other students] think its funny. I sometimes think the teachers do too.”

Several of our participants identified the verbal abuse as their first memory of a racist attack. Moreover, the initial incidents most commonly occurred in school. Our interview transcripts hold numerous stories of children encountering racism for the first time in school, sometimes on their first day. A Black female described her first encounter with racism:

Kindergarten was my first incident. I remember going to school like at the start of the year and this little boy came up to me and he goes, “Why are you brown? I don’t like your color.” I was right upset and I went home and the next day I told my mom. My mom told me, “If he does that again, punch him in the face.” So I went to school the next day, and he said the same thing, so I got mad and I punched him. And I was punished for the whole day.

Like many other participants, this girl’s new school career coincided with the beginning of experiences of racism. Ultimately, our participants learned to perceive name-calling as a “normal part of going to school, something you learn to put up with.”

Although name-calling eventually became part of the school fabric, the young victims repeatedly described the early racial slurs as shocking, in that the insult was a sudden revelation that they were different. One Mi’kmaq youth explained, “I didn’t really prepare myself for all that [racial taunts], all those people who don’t really like us in the White world.” Another participant told us that name-calling “made me realize like, I’m different, you know, in a bad way.” Because most of our participants lived in ethnically encapsulated neighborhoods where they were part of the majority, many had yet to discover the denigrated social identity that was conferred on their skin color. Moreover, most parents, perhaps with the hope of protecting their children, did not approach the subject of racism with their children until after an incident occurred. Consequently, the children were unprepared for a society that both branded and disparaged their differences. For these young children, schools provided the curriculum for an education on racism.
As the participants grew older, name-calling retained its dubious honor of being the leading form of racial violence. However, name-calling often both initiated and accompanied other brutal behavior. After name-calling, participants identified physical violence or the threat of it as the second most common forms of racism. The participants discussed having to endure physical attacks, humiliation, and intimidation. For example, one female participant recalled receiving a note in class that said, “All niggers must die,” while another discovered the words, “Squaw, you’re next” scrawled on her school locker. Moreover, experiences of such attacks and behavior expanded from involving one or two perpetrators to clashes between racial gangs.

From the participants’ positions, name-calling was a very real and violent form of racism that deserved confrontation, and for many it was also the most frightening. Since name-calling is an easy act to perpetrate, the possibility of encountering racism is random, unpredictable, and frequent. Recalling a recent racial slur, one participant reasoned, “It might happen again and it might not happen again, but, you know, don’t let your guard down completely.” Another pragmatically noted, “There’s like some kids who will say stuff and there’s some that won’t. . . . You have to assume that they will.” Participants spoke of always needing to be prepared for name-calling, yet never really being prepared.

Perception of School Responses

Despite the frequency of name-calling in the school environment, both our youth and parent participants judged White authority figures as failing to take racial slurs seriously. Our participants’ view was that authority figures minimized or ignored the impact of racialized name-calling. One participant recalled a fellow student calling him a nigger in front of the rest of the class: “We were in grade four or something like that and my principal was there. And he heard him call me a nigger and he said nothing, not a word. Nothing.” In another situation, a First Nations child complained to his grade-two teacher about racial slurs, only to be told, “It’s just names; try to pretend like it doesn’t bother you and they will stop.”

Parents had similar stories of dismissive responses. A First Nations mother recalled a principal telling her that “they’re [her children] going to get it all their life; they’re going to have to get used to it. . . . It’s just name-calling.” Another mother was clearly frustrated when she related her experience of dealing with a vice-principal regarding the name-calling that her daughter was enduring:

I remember that incident. I remember going into the school and the vice principal being there and just not, just not being there. You know, he was telling her, well, you know you’re going to run up against this stuff all your life and you should turn your head. . . . They weren’t supportive at all in what she was dealing with. You know, the reason why, behind it and all that. They were just saying this Black fellow went to school here last year and when they would call him names
he would turn his head and walk away. . . . There was no support, absolutely no support for what she was dealing with. . . . There has to be some support there [in school] for when these kids are dealing with this racist activity, because it’s paining them. I could see that girl’s heart being torn out, you know. It was really awful.

In discussions about perceptions of school responses, one common theme was the belief that White authority figures failed to see the significance of how name-calling enhanced racial stereotyping. For example, some First Nations students reported being called a wagon burner or lazy Indian. Several parents lamented the fact that, in their eyes, authority figures seem to reduce racial name-calling to the same category as general name-calling and describe it as something all children do and experience. While we did not interview any of the mentioned authority figures and therefore cannot confirm the parents’ and youths’ beliefs, the tendency to extract race from slurs and minimize it as something all kids do has been noted by antiracist researchers (Dei, 1995; Essed, 1991; Lewis, 2001; Tomlinson, 1990). Most notably, Essed (1991) argues that the deracialization of racial slurs downplays the action as a simple conflict in which both sides participate equally. When victims refuse to turn the other cheek, their reaction is framed as the actual problem, rather than the supposed childish name-calling. Similarly, Lewis’ (2001) study of racism in predominantly White schools documents examples in which school officials deracialize and/or reframe racial slurs. In one example, Lewis relates a Black mother’s experience in reporting an incident of racist name-calling to a principal. The mother describes her frustration with the principal’s inaction, other than pressuring the daughter to confront her tormentor. Lewis notes how the onus of responsibility in dealing with the problem is placed on the young girl’s shoulders, thus making her a victim twice over.

This tendency to discount and deracialize derogatory taunts was also evident on a policy level. While some New Brunswick schools abided by a zero-tolerance to violence policy, many parents argued that the policies did not recognize or include name-calling as a violent act. One mother succinctly underlined this misconception when she recalled phoning a principal after her daughter said that she had been called a racist name at school on several occasions. The principal informed her that he had spoken to the perpetrator and told him to “behave.” When the mother inquired why she had not been informed about the incident, she claims the principal dismissed the name-calling as “not an emergency.” She went on to relate:

So I asked him, “If my daughter had been punched in the nose, would you have called me?” He said, “Of course, we have a zero tolerance policy to violence.” So then I said, “Well, this is like my child has been punched. She experienced violence at school and no one bothered to tell me.” I just didn’t understand the difference and I still don’t.

The lack of concise antiracist policies was also noted in reference to other displays of racial violence. For example, participants spoke of their tormen-
tors arriving at school “wearing swastikas on their jean jackets . . . white laces for White power . . . red laces for Nazi power and other Ku Klux Klan stuff.” Rather than enforce an antiracist policy that included the presence of hate symbols in the school, participants felt that officials chose to ignore them, even when the meaning was obvious. As a First Nations male exclaimed, “You know, pretend they don’t know what they mean. Like you don’t know what a swastika means!” One parent described her disbelief over what she felt was a school board’s decision to overlook racist comments made by a principal to a student, even after the parents lodged a complaint with the school board and provided student witnesses. Several other parents also narrated accounts of failed attempts to have school authority figures recognize the destructive violence of name-calling and other racist activity. Wishing to partner with the school, many of the parents went to great lengths to ensure the safety of their children and to fight racism. Numerous parents recalled attending school meetings and going to the school board. The parents were unanimous in their assertion that their exhaustive efforts had brought few results.

As we discuss later, the youth participants recalled experiencing a sense of shock when they encountered authoritarian dismissal of name-calling and other racist behavior. They felt shocked because their experiences contradicted their assumption that hurtful actions were unacceptable and because of the new recognition of their differences. We will address the profound influence that these early reactions had on the victims’ futures.

To add insult to injury, some of the participants said that they felt that they were frequently given explicit messages that their plight was of their own making. One male student exclaimed, “They [teachers and principal] say, ‘You just want attention, you’re just saying that, you’re using this . . . you’re always using color as an issue.’ I say, ‘No, I do not use color. . . . If you were in my shoes, you be Black for a day and find out what you go through.’” A First Nations female participant recalled a guidance counselor asking her, “What did you do to agitate the kid to call you that name?” Another participant explained, “The teachers, they were always thinking that I had provoked it all. They used to say, ‘You must have done something for him to start going on like that,’ and I would be the one in trouble. They wouldn’t do anything to the kid who was calling me names.”

Parents described experiencing similar attitudes. A single Black mother with two daughters commented, “Everybody [the teachers] was saying it was more of an issue of income area . . . along the lines of poverty, single parenthood, you know. They didn’t look at it [name-calling] for what it was; it was racism.” For the child and parent, this “blame the victim” theme revealed a tacit acceptance of racial violence, leaving them feeling even more disempowered. As in the case of the racist name-calling, the inclusion of race in conflict situations appeared to be problematic. Antiracist and multicultural educators argue that the removal of race from conflicts is indicative of a greater societal push to disregard the impact of racism (Dei, 1995; Lewis,
Constructing alternative rationales that situate the victim as the architect of a problematic circumstance allows institutions such as schools to ignore the salience of race and its overarching presence in society. The educators identified in the participants’ experiences were most probably not racist individuals seeking to satisfy their own prejudicial needs. Rather, their thoughts and actions were based on the color-blind ideology that maintains that all children are seen as colorless. This supposed color-as-a-non-issue screen undermines discussions on racism by questioning its very presence in a given location (Harper, 1997). After all, if racism is not a problem in a particular setting, then some other factor must be involved. Most often, this other factor (e.g., poverty, single parent) is perceived as the victim’s fault, thus making him or her the impetus of the problem. The color-blind approach also criticizes or attacks those who question the validity of such a philosophy by casting critics as those attempting to bring race into the conversation. Critics are seen as individual complainers, not as legitimate victims in a racist environment. Interestingly, similar patterns exist in the denial of other manifestations of prejudice. For example, a recent study of sexual harassment of girls related similar reactions of school officials to harassment that occurred in schools. Those who reacted to the harassment were often punished by authority figures (Berman, McKenna, Traher-Arnold, Taylor, & MacQuarrie, 2000). Victims of school bullying have made similar accusations complaining that only the most overt cases of bullying were recognized (Garbarino, 2000). Smaller daily attacks were regularly dismissed by school authority figures, and those complaining of such attacks were perceived to be petty or a menace (Mansbridge, 2002). In the various forms of harassment, a lack of authority intervention and the silent endorsement of victimization repeatedly disempower victims. But why does this happen?

**Episodic versus Historic Perceptions**

Perception partially accounts for the differing attitudes toward racism and other forms of harassment. Based on participants’ experiences, the conflicting positions toward name-calling were actually symptomatic of a second, more complex dichotomy of understanding between the victims and White authority figures. We termed this clash the episodic versus the historic response to racism.

In relating racist experiences, the young victims and their parents did not perceive each encounter as an “individual act of meanness” (McIntosh, 1990, p. 31), but as an added weight to a lifelong burden, a historic perception of racism. This historic perception occurred on two levels. First, Indigenous Black and First Nations individuals had to deal with their own group’s history with racism as experienced through such events as colonization, slavery, and segregation, and with their personal long-term histories. Consequently, when faced with a racist incident such as name-calling, the young participants responded in a manner that confronted a history of racism, not just that particu-
lar episode. The following account by a Black male demonstrates the nature of a historic response to racism:

I was on the bus and the skinheads always harassed me. And I got sick and tired of it. You know, for him it was just a name but I hear it forever. One thing led to another and I know I shouldn’t have fought back, but you know, you can just take so much. We fought on the bus, we were fighting on the bus. And the bus driver said that I started everything and I wasn’t the one.

As soon as I walked on the bus he said, “Hey Black boy.”
“Who are you calling Black,” I said. “Don’t call me that” and I kept on walking.
“Okay nigger.”
That’s when I started flipping out.

It is important to note that a historic response to racism does not develop instantly. Initial experiences of racism left many of the young participants believing that they were isolated incidents. However, this stance was abandoned as a result of their accumulating experiences with racism, as well as messages provided by parents. Parental messages included: “You have to work harder than White children to make it in this world”; “If there are a hundred White kids and one Black kid, the Black kid will get blamed for something going wrong”; and “Racism is here to stay, so just learn to ignore it.” Personal experience, parental guidance, and group history informed an evolved response that appreciated racism from a long-term, rather than immediate, understanding.

Unfortunately, those who have not experienced a history of racism tend to comprehend a racist episode as a single incident unburdened by previous experiences. This may be the case for the White authority figures to whom our participants referred. The victims lived in a forest of racism, whereas the authority figures saw only the trees, and, therefore, may have perceived the victims as overreacting to the racist incident. This was particularly true in examples of name-calling, where authority figures deemed a victim’s response (usually violent) to racial taunts inappropriate. For example, after attacking a classmate who had made a racial slur, a student recalled his principal telling him that name-calling “didn’t constitute me hitting him because being called a nigger is no different than being called a geek or a nerd.”

The clash between the episodic and the historic understanding of racism inadvertently led to perceived unfair treatment, the third most commonly reported type of racism. Participants’ accounts of unfair treatment followed a typical scenario. A White student exhibited racist behavior toward a visible minority. The visible minority responded from a historic mindset. Authority figures deemed the retaliation more severe than the initial racist act and punished the visible minority. The visible minority perceived this as unjust. Although none of the participants articulated the historic/episodic difference in perception, many did demonstrate the feeling of not being understood. Youth participants expressed frustration with White authority figures...
and their seeming lack of understanding regarding the power of racism. As one participant noted,

He [the principal] just couldn’t get it. He doesn’t understand what it’s like to be, ya know, hated. I mean I can be talking to someone and I’m thinking, like do they think less of me because I’m not White? I’ve had teachers tell me that I’m paranoid and to stop looking for racism every time someone does something to me. But you know what, you try it. You try dealing with racism every day and see if you don’t see it when someone does something against you. I’m not paranoid. I’ve just learned from my experiences. They [Whites] don’t know. They haven’t got those experiences.

For example, in the bus incident described earlier, both the bus driver and the principal felt that the Black student’s reaction was exaggerated, and he was expelled for five days. The White student who instigated the incident with the racial slur experienced no consequences because, in the eyes of the authorities, he had already been punished via the physical attack.

The few examples of educators attempting to deal with racism also reflected an episodic comprehension of racism. Participants complained that, even when a racist incidence elicited a response, it did not sufficiently address the problem. For example, describing a school’s reaction to hate graffiti, a Black female participant noted,

In the school bathrooms, in like big marker, in all the stalls it had all like Nazi signs and like every kind of sign you can imagine. I don’t know like half of them but it was in every stall in the bathroom. And they painted it and they’d go over and do it again . . . and it kept happening after they painted it.

The parents expressed frustration with the fact that the school removed the racist graffiti on the wall but did not deal with the reason the slurs were written in the first place. In another situation, a mother recalled showing a school board member a racist note: “He looked at it briefly, three seconds, and said, ‘Oh, that’s terrible, oh, we’ll deal with this.’ But nothing.” For our participants, the thinking that motivated the hateful words was more important than the particular instances of racism. However, they did not believe that the school authorities felt the same way. Because both sides’ understanding of the particular episode of racism was framed by different prior knowledge, each could not appreciate how the other side constructed its notion of racism.

Evolving Responses to Racism

The dichotomies regarding the appreciation of name-calling and the perception of racism resulted in distinct responses from the student participants. We categorized these responses into three phases: splintered universe, spiraling resistance, and disengagement (see Table 2). Each phase consisted of victims’ reactions, as well as their perception of authority figures’ reactions to racist incidents. These responses appeared to create a cumulative pattern, with each
response building on the pain of the last. However, because our study was not longitudinal, we could not claim that all participants went through each of the identified phases. What we do know is that participants who were at the second phase, spiraling resistance, experienced the first phase, the splintered universe. Furthermore, participants at phase three, the disengagement phase, had also experienced phase one and different levels of phase two. While we did not have any participants who were still at phase one, we cannot say for certain that our participants at phase two would move on to phase three.

**Splintered Universe**

We chose the term *splintered* because it connotes violence, devastation, and pain, words that our participants used to describe their first encounters with racism. For most of our participants, this first phase occurred in the early school years, sometimes on their first day of school. As a Black female participant explained:

Q: Could you describe the first racist incident that you ever went through?

A: It had to be in grade one when I first started school. It must have been just my second day of school and this little boy came up to me and he goes, “You’re brown, you stink.” And I went home crying that day and I told my mom that this little boy said that I stink cause I was Black and after that my mom would make sure that we had our bath every morning to go to school. Every morning to make sure that we didn’t stink.

Most of our participants recalled the shock of the sudden realization that they were different from, and less than, the norm. This sense of shock intensified when their attempts to report these incidents resulted in comments from authority figures such as, “It’s OK; they’re only names.” Their perception that teachers and other authority figures trivialized racial slurs led the participants into a type of moral disorientation. They explained that as children they had been taught that school would help them learn right from wrong. Yet when actions that the young participants knew were wrong appeared to be overlooked, messages regarding schooling became blurred. The school’s role as a moral instructor appeared to be contradicted by the participants’ perceptions that the institution condoned racism.

Shockwaves of a splintering world not only reverberated through school, but within each participant’s sense of self. The moral order that the participants now experienced informed them that White people were superior and that visible minorities were, as one participant noted, “second-class citizens.” The desire to be seen as normal and equal left many children hating their own skin. One participant commented, “I remember going home at night praying to God that I would wake up in the morning and be White like other kids.” Likewise, a Mi’kmaq participant recalled believing that she would have friends if she were White. An immigrant parent described how her Canadian-born six-year-old daughter wanted to shave the dark hair from her arms and legs so
that she could be like the White children. Rather than school providing an opportunity for participants to experience the joys of childhood friendships, racial harassment catapulted many of the victims into a shell of isolation. A parent described how her daughter was “shunned....I fs h ew a si na line, no one stood next to her. They just avoided her. She was alone all year.”

The intense feeling of loneliness married with a focus on self-preservation left many participants disengaged from the school’s learning environment. As the racism intensified and evolved, numerous participants found themselves struggling in school. One male Black student observed, “I was always waiting to be called a name or attacked. I couldn’t study or concentrate on school. I thought everyone hated me, even teachers, ’cause they never did anything. How is a kid supposed to deal with that?” Many attempted to deal with this situation by refusing to attend school. A parent recalled how, after being repeatedly verbally abused on the school bus, her son “never wanted to go on the bus, didn’t go on the bus for a whole year. . . . How is he supposed to get to school? Well, he just didn’t go.”

**Spiraling Resistance**

The lack of redress regarding racial incidents left many of the minority adolescents feeling matters had to be taken into their own hands. This decision was underlined by their historic mindset toward racism which left them believing that very few people from the White population would attempt to tackle racial

### TABLE 2  From Splintered Universe to Disengagement

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<tr>
<th>Participants’ Reactions</th>
<th>Perceived Reaction of Authority Figure</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Splintered Universe</strong></td>
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<td>Shock</td>
<td>Dismissive</td>
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<td>Hurt</td>
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<td>Moral Disorientation</td>
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<td>Specific Retaliation</td>
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<td>Generalized Retaliation</td>
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<td><strong>Disengagement</strong></td>
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<td>Opposition Abandoned</td>
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<td>Distancing of Self</td>
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<td>Equity Expectations Dropped</td>
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**Names Will Never Hurt Me?**

VARMA-JOSHI, BAKER, AND TANAKA
discrimination. Perceived from that particular outlook, participants assumed the responsibility to minimize racist encounters. Participants reported that as they became older they eventually fell into a pattern of spiraling, often violent, resistance. This pattern progressed from specific to preventative and finally to generalized retaliation against racial harassment. Movement from one phase to the other indicated a parallel development of shifting perceptions of racial incidents from episodic to historic. As the number of racist experiences multiplied, many of our participants grew increasingly pessimistic about the prospects for an equitable world. As a result, they became more likely to interpret their experiences through a racialized lens. For example, one Black parent noted, “I’ve always told my children that racism is out there and they have to accept it. Now, I see that they are starting to realize it themselves.” This parental sentiment was echoed by several of our participants. One young male noted, “If there is a roomful of White people and just me and something goes wrong, everyone will automatically blame the Black guy.” Another participant gave an account of losing marks on a test because of racism. She was adamant about the charge of racism, despite the fact that her mark was actually quite high and the teacher in question had never exhibited any other racist behavior. From her experience with perceived unfair treatment, the chance of the teacher being racist was greater than her not supplying a correct answer.

We labeled the first reactive response to racist incidents in this domain “specific retaliation.” In this situation, victims responded to the particular perpetrator of the racist incidents. It was during this phase that victims began to exhibit violent behavior, mainly because it appeared to work. A First Nations female recalled, “When somebody called me a name I started to fight back. You know, maybe give her a shove. Sometimes it worked.” For the first time, participants began to experience a small release from the fear of racism. A Black participant said, “You know, it was like I had control, finally. I wasn’t afraid all the time, like a little kid.”

The success of the specific retaliation advanced the participants to a preventative retaliation strategy. This tactic involved warning possible perpetrators of the violent consequences that would follow a racist attack. For example, one participant warned her classmates: “You call me names and what’s going to happen is I’m going to explode and I’m going to fight. . . . I’ll kick all your asses.” To us she said, “They smartened up!” By this time, participants were beginning to see their world as inherently racist with their only defense involving proactive violent behavior. For some of the participants, this reaction was limited to the threat of violent behavior; other participants, however, moved from threats to actual physical violence.

The preventative period was especially critical, as it was usually around this time that some participants began to join groups that could be perceived as gangs. The close bonds brought on by mutual suffering meant that participants not only retaliated against the racism directed at them, but at their
friends as well. From an outside perspective, this band of collective protection took on the appearance of violent gangs, an image that did little to enhance the participants’ school experiences.

Finally, some of the participants proceeded to a generalized retaliation. At this point, they violently reacted to any suggestion of racism, real or imagined. Victims moved from attacking the attacker to seeking any potential attacker. This helped visible minority youth cast off their identity as victims. For example, participants talked about “beating up anyone who looked at us funny” or purposely seeking out venues that White supremacists were known to frequent. Even when the possibility of prejudice was minimal, participants chose to err on the side of reason — reason formed by a historical construction of racism.

Parents expressed different reactions to their children’s violent behavior. Some were actually role models for such behavior. For example, a First Nations student described his father entering the school and physically threatening a principal who had made racist remarks to his son. Another participant was told by her mother to fight back. Although most parents did not advocate violence as a solution, many felt that their children were left with little choice. One parent noted that “there can’t be any violence in the school and she can’t be running around beating people up. But at the same time, there has to be some support for what these kids are dealing with.” Another parent recognized his child’s violent act as an expression of her own pain. He believed that “she was in so much pain, she beat this girl up after she made a racial slur. And she’s not somebody that, she really isn’t a fighter, you know. She wasn’t at the time anyway.” In retrospect, many of the youth and parent participants acknowledged physical attacks as a bandage approach. They also noted that the violent behavior further solidified the racial stereotypes that branded them as violent, unproductive citizens.

As students’ resistance increasingly spiraled downward to violent behavior, authority figures were perceived as not only indifferent but unfair as well. Participants accused school officials of focusing on the visible minorities’ violent behaviors, rather than on the racist environments that provoked the violence. This claim was mainly based on victims’ frequently being punished for their violent behavior, while the perpetrator of the racist incident often escaped with a less severe punishment. This appeared especially common in the case of name-calling. As explained earlier, this reaction is symptomatic of the episodic construction of racial incidents. The participants’ conceptual framework of a racist incident conflicted with that of the White authority figures. The very real results of this conflict included criminal records, repeated school suspensions, and low academic achievement. One Black male noted that he graduated a year late because he had to “bounce around from every school” to avoid skinheads. A First Nations female commented, “I got thrown out of school five times, like just in one year... Someone would call me a name and I would be the one who would get in trouble for fighting.”
Disengagement

Some of our participants realized that their violent actions were undermining their own lives. Consequently, they retreated from violent retaliation into silent disengagement. From a public perspective, this phase appeared positive, in that displays of violence disappeared and victims seemed to give in to authority’s expectations. However, the damage simply occurred internally. Participants who disengaged tended to realize that their violent behavior was, in the long run, damaging to themselves and did little to stem racist attitudes. One participant conceded, “I just learned [that] no matter how many times I would get all raged up and hurt, somebody would be calling me names again, so it wasn’t working.” Another noted, “I don’t even think about using violence, it’s not even worth it. But in some ways I do feel like using power against people like that, but when you think about it, it’s just not going to do anything for you.”

Rather than fighting for equality, participants began to distance themselves from society altogether. For some, this distancing was based on resignation. One participant reasoned, “Why bother [going out], you know what I mean, if I’m going to get harassed on the street.” However, many others’ recognition of racism caused them to be fearful of society. Numerous participants stated that they were afraid to venture away from their home alone and always traveled in a group. A Black immigrant parent explained, “My daughter is afraid to go out. . . . She wasn’t even able to go to the mall. She said, ‘I’m so scared of people, Mom. I just want to stay home with you. I don’t want to go outside.’” For our participants in this phase, avoiding racist actions was worth living a life devoid of fulfilling opportunities.

During this phase, participants abandoned all hope for an equitable society and instead defined racism as a permanent fixture of society. This sense of hopelessness is clearly present in a Black female’s observation:

I don’t think that, that it’ll [racism] ever go away. I don’t think that there is anything that anyone can do to make it go away. I think it’s always going to be here because basically, people . . . I don’t know, they’re just not getting the right education. . . . I don’t know what it is, but I don’t think it will ever change or go away.

Participants collectively believed that being verbally harassed was “a way of life.” Their skin color signified an inferior identity in a society where, as a First Nations female noted, “White is right. You’re not White; you’re not right.”

Any remaining expectations that authority figures in any social institution would confront racism disappeared. Instead, participants felt that authority figures were completely indifferent to their situations. One Black female lamented, “You know, the teachers knew why I kept getting into fights but they didn’t do anything. They didn’t care. I guess they had too much to do and I’m just another problem.” One parent blamed the school for teaching that racism is acceptable behavior:
Our children leave a racist school and enter a racist society. The police, social workers, their bosses, it doesn’t matter, everyone will treat them like second-class citizens. And do you know where these people learned that? In school. They grow up thinking, “I said racist things in school and no one did anything, so I’ll just keep the same attitude out here.”

Acceptance of racism as an undeviating feature of society did not come without a price. Many participants expressed feelings of low self-esteem, contemplated suicide, and engaged in reckless behavior such as alcohol and drug abuse. One First Nations participant who had undergone years of counseling to deal with racism recollected feelings of worthlessness and self-loathing: “I was a really angry person, I . . . felt bad about myself. . . . Why can’t they see me for who I am inside instead of outside? It [racism] made me feel low on myself. . . . I thought about suicide. . . . I was tired of the harassment.” A Black mother contended that racism had undermined her daughter’s life on varying levels:

My daughter, her self-esteem is under the ground, honestly, to tell you the truth, as a result. If she had had friends, if she had had a real normal life. . . . She went downhill in Junior High, her marks just fell, just wasn’t doing anything. She looks in the mirror; she’s obsessed with perfection or whatever, you know, because she feels she’s worth nothing and unless she’s perfect, she’s not going to come out of the house. She actually asked me to buy skin bleaching cream. I cried.

Participants who did appear to survive their experience often reframed racism as a negative reflection of the White race. For example, one First Nations female stated, “I think people that make fun of us, it’s because they’re not educated and they don’t know they’re ignorant.” Others saw it as the fault of the school. A participant reasoned, “We need to learn about other people, Indian, Chinese, Black, ya know, everyone lives here. If we learn about each others’ histories then it can be like, oh, your people experienced that.” This focus on external factors may have been a response to the blame the victim mentality that our participants had endured. At this point, some participants were able to distance themselves from the pain of racism enough to frame it as a societal flaw rather than something that was their fault.

Implications and Recommendations
Since the experiences related in this article belong to the participants, we thought it suitable to apply their voices to possible solutions as well. Participants were asked what should be done to address the problem of racism in the schools. They proposed several solutions that target either the meaning attributed to name-calling or the historic versus the episodic understanding of racist incidents. Their suggestions not only provide a useful starting point for educators in predominantly White schools who wish to introduce a multicultural and antiracist agenda in their classroom, but they also speak to the need to be-
gin antiracist pedagogy training in teacher-training programs. Although not directly participant-generated, we would like to suggest conducting further research on this topic. More specifically, while our participants provided information that covered a number of years, there is a need for longitudinal data to provide greater understanding of the impact of racism on youth.

Condemn Racist Name-Calling and Threats
First and foremost, participants strongly believed that name-calling must be unequivocally recognized as a violent form of racist behavior. As one participant explained, “I would have been much better off had the teachers reprimanded the students.” Since derogatory taunts were often perceived as the first step toward more brutal racist behavior, dismissal of name-calling inadvertently endorsed the racism, allowing it to take hold of the school environment. Participants also stressed that condemnation of any racist behavior must come immediately. As one parent explained, name-calling must be “nipped right in the bud.” Participants felt that increased attention had to be given to this particular type of attack and stressed that the rejection of name-calling must be articulated in a clear and concise school policy. At best, participants suggested, a dismissive response represents an insensitive indifference to the problem. They emphasized how important it is for teachers to validate children’s distress by “admitting there is racism there.” Several studies on racism support participants’ recommendations, indicating that the stress experienced by victims is heightened when others downplay or doubt the reality of a racist incident (Essed, 1991; Harrell, 2000). At worse, participants argued, minimizing or ignoring racial slurs implies a covert endorsement of racism to young victims. As a young Black woman noted, “I felt like my teachers were saying it was OK to call people names because she never did anything.”

Train Teachers to Recognize Racism
The need to provide all school staff with antiracist training was repeatedly emphasized by both our student and parent participants. Although several participants could identify one teacher who had helped them deal with racism, the majority felt that school authority figures in general needed to confront their own racist views. Several participants provided examples where they felt an educator was publicly expressing racist sentiments, often in a joking manner. One Black student recalled that during a blackout at school the teacher told him to smile so that he could see him. Another student was told by his teacher to move his “Black ass to the classroom.” And yet another student who was selling chocolate chip cookies for a school fundraiser was told by his principal, “Hey . . . it’s you. You’re a chocolate chip, you’re Black, you’re in the cookie.” Participants were adamant that any type of racial comment was unacceptable, especially jibes made in seemingly innocent humor. As one participant argued, “If they [school staff] feel all right making jokes to my face, what are they saying behind my back?”
There was also an overwhelming belief that many of their teachers simply did not know how to handle a racist incident, especially name-calling. In such cases, participants felt the teacher ignored the comment. “Ya know, [they] pretend they didn’t hear anything,” said one student. This lack of knowledge should be of concern to teacher-training programs. Our informal review of teaching programs across Canada indicated that, in most teacher-training programs, courses in multicultural and antiracist education are not compulsory. Consequently, student teachers receive a splattering of diversity-based education in courses where individual professors take the initiative to discuss these issues. Such education often focuses on the need for tolerance and denies students the opportunity to delve into the issues of racism. In this case, a little learning is a dangerous thing. If teachers are expected to respond to racist incidents, they first need to understand various constructions of racism, the implications for society, and strategies to counter racist attitudes. Participants demanded that teachers actively participate in the fight against racism. However, teacher-education programs first need to train student teachers on strategies for such a commitment. One male First Nations student eloquently argued this case:

Some teachers do handle racism. Or they wanted to but they just didn’t know how to do it properly, and then you get these teachers who didn’t really care. I mean, I remember the teacher just walked away. . . . Racism will never go away, it’s like a cigarette, you have to butt it out. You have to put that thing out before it gets you, before it burns too fast.

Value Diversity

Participants wanted teachers to take a proactive stance against racism by modelling a positive and respectful attitude toward racial diversity. They also said they felt valued when teachers adopted classroom strategies to encourage positive attitudes toward cultural diversity, such as encouraging the expression of cultural differences among students, drumming among the Aboriginal students, and using multicultural materials, such as stories about various cultural groups in Canada, in the curriculum. For example, a female participant commented that she was tired of studying about slavery. She wanted to learn about contemporary Black issues or people, rather than “the same old slavery stuff.” This student’s frustrations are similar to those recorded by the Black Learners Advisory Committee (BLAC) of African Canadians in Nova Scotia (Kakembo, 1994). In this study, Black students related being embarrassed by the small amount of Black Studies in their schools. Furthermore, they felt belittled and disempowered by the constant portrayal of Blacks as powerless slaves (Kakembo, 1994). Stories that spoke to the African Canadian contribution to the local area and to Canada as a whole were often blatantly absent from the official curriculum (Woodrow, 1987).

Many participants were critical of the lack of diversity in the curriculum. Participants believed that all students should be educated about the various
cultures that exist in their country. Their suggestions illustrated an understanding of the complexity of culture and history. For example, both Black and First Nations students underscored a need to move away from only mentioning different cultures’ histories and to study their present and future as well. While participants from both groups felt that issues such as slavery and colonization should be given more attention than they currently received, they also argued that teachers should teach about how various cultural groups live today. As one First Nations student noted, “I’m tired of being seen like an artifact. I don’t wear feathers and I don’t live in a teepee.” Participants also emphasized the need to get away from token attention, such as discussing Black achievements only during Black History month. Black participants were especially adamant about the need to understand the diversity behind Black skin. A young Black female immigrant noted, “My family have never been slaves but people see a Black face and that’s what they see. I think it’s so ignorant. I mean, I come from one country in Africa, and there are so many different cultures in one country, never mind a whole continent. I would never think of all Black people being the same.” This distinction was also important to the indigenous Black participants. As members of some of the oldest Black communities in the country, several of the older participants were aware of the lack of distinction made between different groups’ histories. “I’m so tired of hearing about Martin Luther King Jr.,” lamented one Black student. “Yes, he was amazing, and he is a hero, but there are lots of Black Canadian heroes too, so why do we keep learning about what’s happened in another country?”

Participants also voiced a need to see themselves not just in the curriculum but in the teaching force as well. Having someone who understood their experiences with racism was an asset that many of the participants believed would keep them from lashing out. While participants recognized that this might be a challenge in a location where visible minorities are few, they did not feel that this excused the lack of visible minority role models in their school environment. One Black participant insisted, “He [the teacher] doesn’t even have to be Black, just not White.” Certainly, antiracist educators have argued for the same change (Dei, 1995; Sleeter, 1995), especially in predominantly White areas where the need for visible minorities to have their own racial role models is paramount (Kakembo, 1994).

Participants criticized strategies that downplayed their skin color, and they especially despised teachers who adopted a color-blind approach. Said one male participant, “That’s crazy. I mean, how can you not notice that I’m Black! What they [teachers] are really saying is that I don’t want you to accuse me of racism if I treat you differently because I never noticed your skin color.” A female Mi’kmaq student observed, “Teachers say that they don’t want to single us out, treat us different. But I am different. I’ve even heard that Indian people learn different. So if you ignore that, well, you’re being racist.” This observation is compelling, considering that the color-blind approach is a popular reaction from educators unwilling to take on an antiracist curriculum (Banks,
1994; Giroux, 1991; Harper, 1997; Paley, 1979). Nevertheless, simply accusing the individuals identified in the participants’ narratives as racist is similar to perceiving each racist episode as an isolated and singular incident. Instead, educators may be responding with an institutional understanding of discrimination that denies the salience of race. In other words, educators may downplay the existence or significance of harassing behavior by simply dismissing it as typical children’s behavior, rather than an example of overt racism. Operating within a color-blind ideology, the institution of schooling essentially instructs its facilitators to seek alternative scenarios for student actions that are not overtly tied to race. Many of the reported actions by educators consisted of minimizing racial slurs to childish name-calling, relying on social suppositions and stereotypes (e.g., Black men are violent.), and implying that visible minorities are sensitive and eager to cry racism. The predominantly White demographics are especially conducive to this ideology, as it is easy to ignore the non-examples that contradict the color-blind assertion (Harper, 1997).

Rather than downplay the impact of race and color, educators need to be aware of the privileges and power that wrap White skin. Again, this means going back to teacher-training institutions. Without an understanding of privilege and power, White individuals are apt to see racism simply as individual acts of hatred. Consequently, Whites may perceive accusations of a racist environment as attacks on their own personal behavior (McIntosh, 1990). A deeper understanding of racism, power, and privilege would demonstrate the inaccuracy of this perception and demonstrate how one can live in a racist environment, support it unconsciously, but not be a racist individual.

Our Views

As educators of students preparing for social-service professions, we could not agree more with the recommendations outlined by our participants. Furthermore, we contend that educators must learn to recognize the cumulative impact of racism. The analysis revealed that participants often felt unfairly punished for responding to racist taunts or incidents because authority figures ignored the cumulative racism that triggered their reactions. They believed that authority figures should always assess and take into account the impact of racist taunts and previous racist experiences when intervening in conflicts between White and non-White youth.

Failure to train educators and other social-service professionals is an act of violence in itself. This statement is similar to Juanita Epp’s (1996) assertion that complacency against school violence equals complicity in school violence. George Dei (1995) makes analogous accusations when he ponders whether Black dropouts are actually pushed out of school because of the dismissal of racism and the Eurocentric curriculum. Their stance, as well as that of others (Fine, 1991; Giroux, 1996; Noguera, 1995), underscores the dire need to arm educators with a comprehensive antiracist education that in-
cludes teacher-student-parent partnerships, discussions on White privilege, and a critical response to social inequities. Such an education must begin with training teachers, principals, and other school officials to understand and deal with racism themselves before trying to share this knowledge with their students.

Discussions with concerned teachers mirror this call. When our findings from this research have been shared with New Brunswick teachers concerned with multicultural/racial understanding, many echoed the participants’ plea to give name-calling special attention. Teachers mentioned feeling “ineffective,” “unprepared,” and “frightened” when dealing with racist incidents. Many also described name-calling as a particular problem because “no visible marks are left behind.” Failure to respond to name-calling left concerned teachers feeling “like a participant in the racism.” In the end, it appears that names hurt everyone.

Conclusion

Although our study was originally motivated by an apparent eruption of racial violence in a predominantly White location, our interviews with the twenty-six participants and their parents indicated that the racism they experienced was not a new experience, but was constantly bubbling under the surface of seemingly peaceful communities. The interviewees repeatedly noted that the core of the problem with racism was the White populations’ resistance to framing discriminatory actions as hateful. In this regard, the Spirit of Democracy Project, a website administered by a team of professors in the University of New Brunswick’s Faculty of Education, has examined several incidents in New Brunswick that were perceived as hate crimes by the victims. In each case, however, either the police and/or the general public resisted the victim’s assertion that the incident was indeed a hate crime (Spirit of Democracy, 2004).

Reactions to racism demonstrated two devastating contradictions of understanding between the victims of racism and White authority figures. One refers to the power of name-calling. While the White population focused on particular episodes, our participants experienced a constant battering, each episode like a punch in a life-long fight. Participants were wounded by the pain of racial slurs, as well as their perception of authority figures’ response — or lack thereof — to the incidents.

Victims and authority figures also understood the context of racism differently. Our participants spoke of constant confrontations with violence and the devastating effects that the battles had on them. The relentlessness of racism created a sense of continuity in which individual incidents of racism became woven into one framework. In contrast, participants reported that authority figures saw each racist incident as separate. Consequently, the White authority figures framed the participants’ reactions to racism as exaggerated.
As our participants were mainly young people, it was not surprising that school was a key forum for their experiences. Most had entered school eager to learn, but they soon felt fearful and disenfranchised. In some cases, participants either left or were suspended from high school. Many participants experienced racism for the first time within school walls; the three R’s of education (i.e., reading, writing, arithmetic) became secondary to the protection from a more powerful R — racism. Efforts to defend oneself from racism, which were often violent, plunged the victims even further into the chasm of school failure. In the end, the participants’ perception of the school’s response to racism became an exemplar of their understanding of society’s overall dismissal of all but the most overt forms of racism.

Although some participants managed to gain an education, repeated suspensions, poor academic achievement, and a fear of racism resulted in a high dropout rate among our student participants. The domino effect of low educational achievement, minimal employment opportunities, and high poverty augmented the historic burden of racism, leaving many of our participants feeling tired, alone, and afraid. From our point of view, to see participants reach this particular phase was especially disheartening. The interviews with our young victims and their parents left a clear impression of the destructive waste that racism leaves in its wake. We did not just hear accounts of racism; we also heard untold stories of lost opportunities and stifled success. If the school experiences of our participants and of future children are to change, then race needs to be examined in the various facets of schooling. Attention needs to be given not only to media-friendly episodes of racial violence, but also to the everyday racist assaults. Only by critically conceptualizing the space that race and racism take in school can we begin to offer every child an equitable opportunity at academic and lifelong success.

Notes

1. The three scenarios are recreations of accounts given by interview participants and discussions with teachers. The discussions are from a study on teachers’ reactions to racist name-calling.
2. According to the Canadian Employment Equity Act (1986), “visible minorities are persons (other than Aboriginal persons) who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour” (cited in Statistics Canada website, 2003).
3. The Aboriginal communities in Canada fall into one of the three official groups: First Nations, Inuit, and Metis. The participants in this study were all from communities representing First Nations.
4. The “person’s place of origin” refers to comments regarding a general location, such as the Middle East, whereas “national origin” refers to nationality, such as Syrian.
5. We use the phrase “seemingly sudden surge of racial attacks” because this was the inference that was created after several violent altercations between youth were reported and
described as racially motivated by the media in a short period of time. For example, local media sources reported several physical altercations occurring on middle and high school grounds between groups, which the media labeled as “gangs” (Darisme, 1996; Varma-Joshi, 2000).

6. Nova Scotia borders New Brunswick and is also predominantly White.

7. All of these quotes are from teachers’ responses to three different conference presentations where we shared the data from this study.

References


