



# Still Crazy after All These Years:

## RACE IN THE CHICAGO SCHOOL SYSTEM

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I've been hanging around this campus since the early seventies when it was Chicago Circle. I'm impressed with what UIC has become. Some years ago, I was living in metropolitan Newark, running a youth program. I was running it with the assistance of Bank Street College of Education because I didn't know how to teach in that context, and Bank Street knows how to teach. When I returned to Chicago, it was depressing that there was not a Bank Street here. There was not a school of education that understood its primary work as being in the streets, so to speak, in the classrooms of the city. In the interim, UIC has grown into a Bank Street-like institution, committed to understanding and improving the day-to-day quality of life in Chicago schools. So I have a lot of respect for what UIC is evolving into.

I am going to talk about the eight-hundred-pound gorilla of race. I'm talking about it because I suspect the inability to talk about race at the school level can be a significant impediment to change, or at least a significant predictor of which schools have the capacity to change. Racial reticence is not only a thing in itself, it is a proxy for other things. Schools that cannot talk openly about race often cannot talk about a whole lot of other things, either. If schools can move to a point where race is not such a scary, sensitive topic, we have reason to hope that they will find themselves in a space where lots of things can be broached more readily.

A couple of caveats: It has been some time now since I have lived in Chicago, and it may be that such knowledge as I have is historical. I would like to think that what I'm going to say is no longer true. I suspect it still is, though. Race behavior is a sticky behavior. The ways in which race is embedded in Chicago schools have probably not changed very much in the last decade. I expect the main themes I touch on to be familiar to most of you who are working in the schools now, and if I'm wrong I will be happy to be told so. I should say, too, that when I was in Chicago, the schools I knew best were bottom-quartile schools according to test scores. So all my thinking reflects the social patterns in the toughest schools.



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There is currently a good deal of discussion among social scientists about this notion of color blindness and the increasingly prominent role it has come to play in American racial discourse.<sup>1</sup> One form of the argument is that color blindness is an ideology that functions as the new, acceptable face of racism. People arguing “I am color blind” are, in effect, reinforcing the racial status quo. You cannot change racial inequality if you pretend that race isn’t there. If you go into schools and ask about racial relations you can get an almost offended response: “Well, of course we get along. Of course it’s not an issue. We are color blind. We don’t see race. We don’t see ethnicity. We only see children and all children are the same to us.” Then you look at how the teachers sit at lunch and how teachers deal with their own issues and how information flows. All that is racialized. But they’re going to sit there and tell you they are color blind. What gets lost behind the posture of color blindness? What’s lost is that it gives the educator the advantage of not having to think about how negative outcomes are distributed. If, in fact, we all tell ourselves that in each individual encounter we interact without reference to color, then the fact that there are no black boys in the honors track cannot be put into the conversation, because it has nothing to do with their blackness but only with their characteristics and capabilities as individuals. We treat everybody the same, after all. Color blindness precludes a discussion of the distribution of the goodies, the distribution of privilege by race.

That alone should be enough to make us uneasy, but even more broadly, it allows people to deny the baggage that I think we all bring to the table. For white people that baggage often takes the form of the fear of being accused of being a racist, of being accused of being insensitive, of being incapable of relating to *these* kids, which then leads people to proactively proclaim their lack of racial bias, which can become a problem in its own right. Trying to avoid the label can, for example, lead some teachers to hold back from saying things they otherwise would have said for fear of misinterpretation. It is almost necessarily the case that some of what gets suppressed needs to be a part of the school’s conversation about itself, so that what we get is a kind of dumbing down of the conversation. Discussion stays at the level of the bland, the safe, and that probably means at the level of the useless. In a variation on that theme, I have watched a number of young white teachers go out into the world, young teachers who didn’t want to be thought of as racists and who therefore were determined to be “nice” to kids, so nice they let kids eat them up. The irony is that kids can interpret “niceness” in many ways, including as a sign of disrespect for their abilities. While we’re cataloging the forms of white racial baggage, we can be confident that it sometimes takes the form of a kind of weariness with the presumptions of black people and brown people, a problem to which we will return.

For black or brown people, racial baggage often takes the form of fear of reinforcing stereotypes. It often takes the

form of a reluctance to be too closely associated with the more disreputable members of the group, and sometimes it takes the form of (surprise, surprise) weariness with the presumptions of white people and, perhaps especially so, weariness with the presumptions of white people who are always claiming innocence of being white. There is also the baggage of having to prove one’s racial loyalties. I am interested, as a social indicator, in the degree to which people of color manipulate one another by accusing one another of having betrayed the race. That says something about how confident people are in their racial identity. Presumably, those kinds of accusations—“Uncle Tom!” “Aunt Thomasina!” “Sellout!” “Brown on the outside, white on the inside”—are most powerful when there is some kind of underlying insecurity about one’s relationship to the group.

What does whiteness mean to black and brown people in schools? To a degree, it means a certain kind of arrogance, a certain kind of privilege, which need not be related directly to skin color. Being associated with elite white institutions is enough. If you’re black or Latino, but from Northwestern University or the University of Chicago, you should not be surprised if school people receive you as if you were white, at least at first. You go in with “Northwestern” plastered across your forehead, and you have to go through the process of establishing your bona fides. You have to separate yourself symbolically from the institutions of racial privilege; you have to signify, “I just work there.” At Northwestern, we used to have an internship program for African-American Studies majors, which required them to work in black institutions in Chicago. Part of the value of it was they got there and black people treated them like they were white, and they had to learn to fight through that, had to work through this label in order to be effective. In their classes, kids were hearing in myriad ways, “Don’t let these white people push their definitions on you.” In effect, they also needed to learn not to accept the definitions that black people tried to push on them. (Over time, of course, the kids would become too popular and by the time you sent the second or third wave to a particular organization, they would be welcomed too warmly.)

Naturally, factions, which typically are the real governing structure in demoralized schools, are racialized. Ordinarily every school has a narrative about power in that school. How do things happen in that school? Who really has influence? These narratives, too, are ordinarily racialized. That is, the belief is that the principal will only let certain kinds of teachers have certain kinds of positions or only certain kinds of teachers have certain kinds of access. When new programs come into a demoralized school they can be racialized. When the Comer project (i.e. the School Development Process) came into Chicago schools, it was essentially seen as a black program. The program’s founder, Dr. Comer, is a kindly, intelligent, black, Yale professor. The folks pushing the program

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, David Wellman’s classic, *Portraits of White Racism* (1977); or more recently, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism without Racists* (2003); Amanda Lewis’s *Race in the Schoolyard* (2003); or Mica Pollock’s *Colormute* (2004).

in Chicago, going school to school, were almost all black and so schools had the impression that it was a black program. Well, half the program facilitators were white for the first wave of schools, and some schools that got a white facilitator were upset. “We bought into this under the presumption that it was a black program and here you’re sending us some white person.”

A part of the untold story of external partners in Chicago is the way that the most successful of them help schools learn to work through race. Ordinarily, if expertise comes into a demoralized school in the wrong racial form, the school may not be able to make use of it. Expertise just gets rejected. A learning process may be necessary to get schools to the point where they can accept expertise irrespective of how it is packaged racially. Being a facilitator in almost any school change program in a bottom-tier school in Chicago can be an emotional hell. When you add constant racial attacks, for which people are typically unprepared, the job can be all but impossible. Whatever they do when they train you to be a project facilitator, they probably don’t teach you to deal with racial conflict. Some folks work through it and some folks don’t.

In the Comer case, there were two young women facilitators whose experience typified for me some of the dilemmas faced by white facilitators in nonwhite schools. In terms of the quality of their work as professionals, their commitment to children and parents, I couldn’t say there was a dime’s worth of difference. But their presentational styles were different in ways which played into the school’s racial imagery. One woman was flat-out shy, not outgoing, was not effusive, did not necessarily take the lead in creating certain kinds of interactions. If you created them she’d respond very effectively as a professional. She would work 24 hours a day to get the job done. In this context, though, shyness is likely to be read as racial hostility, as standoffishness. If you’re one of the few white folks in a building and you seem to hold back, your holding back can become a statement about your racial identity. And that’s how it was read in this case.

The other facilitator, working in one of the South Side schools, caught the devil from everyone. The parents led the charge. Usually the teachers lead this charge, but it was the parents in this school. You would see them standing in the halls, all indignant, fists on hips, talking about “the White Girl this” and “the White Girl that.” If she were nearby they would whisper about “the White Girl” just loudly enough for her to hear it. They would walk down the hall and look her right in the face and not say anything. Walk away if she walked up to them. In the face of all this, she did not wither. She called a meeting of parents at which she said something like, “I understand some of you are upset because I’m white.” The parents fell all over themselves denying it. “You’re white? We didn’t even notice.” None of us want our smaller selves called out in public, and the parents knew that according

to their own best values their behavior was small and petty. They were making judgments without giving the person a chance and poor people know, better than most of us, how destructive that is. Still, had they not been confronted, they would have probably kept on until they made it impossible for “the White Girl” to do her job. In this case, the facilitator said something like, “There’s not much I can do about me being white. I’m not here to be white, I’m here to work with your children. I want six months. I want people to just let me do my job and if, at the end of six months, you are not satisfied with what I have done on behalf of your children, I will leave. You will not have to run me out of here.” A year later, she was arguably the single most socially central person in the building. She had the deepest relationships across the constituency groups, and when she had to leave because of funding her leaving was a crisis. It was traumatic for almost everybody in the building, but especially so for the parents, who had come to think of her as their special advocate. We can be sure that there are other people with just as much talent as she, just as much dedication, who don’t have the confidence of the second facilitator. They allow racial definitions to be imposed on them rather than imposing themselves on the definitions.

That vignette illustrates something that one could say at several points in this discussion: Race is influential but

*Race is influential but not determinative.*

*It slows the process down, it frustrates and complicates, but it does not have to dictate unless we somehow allow it to.*

not determinative. It slows the process down, it frustrates and complicates, but it does not have to dictate unless we somehow allow it to. The vignette also raises a strategic question: How should the Outsider play the role? The implication here is that there may be advantages to playing it aggressively. Silence on race, diffidence, is likely to be read as negative. People of color know perfectly well why white people don’t like to talk about race. The Outsider who puts race on the table openly may put people off balance for a bit. More by showing a willingness to talk about race, the Outsider makes it seem as if he or she has nothing to hide. He or she may gain some credibility, or at least get credit for having a little nerve. Finally, the vignette demonstrates something about what facilitation (by whatever name) does at its very best. We tend to think of facilitation as a kind of technical support, a way to make sure that things actually get implemented in a useful way. It can be that, but it can also be a way to re-moralize schools, to push them in the direction of the professional and humane values

to which they are supposed to subscribe. Putting race back in its proper place is a part of that larger process.

One of the most obvious roles that race still plays in schools is as a signifier of intelligence. Ron Ferguson has done a very useful review of the literature on what we know about the relationships among race, expectations and performance.<sup>2</sup> After all this time, this is not a particularly strong body of research, especially not by the high standards that Ferguson invokes. If one has to make a call with the literature we have, then race, ethnicity, and class all affect teacher perception and all affect teacher behavior. One of the more convincing lines of research on how it affects teacher behavior deals with teacher persistence. When a child is trying to figure something out, how long will the teacher wait? When a child doesn't figure something out, how many alternative explanations will a teacher offer? All of this

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seems to be significantly affected by these social cues. Literally and figuratively, majority group children are going to get more chances.

I have recently had a particularly appalling demonstration of the power of race as signifier of intelligence. I am a member of a group of researchers who try to stay in touch with a number of cities around the country that are trying to implement some form or another of progressive mathematics, inquiry-based mathematics. It's interesting that across the country there's no clear pattern to the way that form of instruction gets racially coded. There are some places where this would look like the white, elite, upper-class program. This is the way those kids do math, everybody else gets drill and kill. And then there are other places, depending on the politics of the system and how the program is introduced and by whom, where this becomes the black and Latino math program. This is math for *those* kids. In one of the latter cities, one where implementation has been strong, they have had several years of

rising test scores among black and Latino students. The strongest improvement, not surprisingly, has been among black and Latino boys—the previous low-achievers. Scores went up on the state test—which was not particularly friendly to progressive math—as well as the SAT, with rising numbers of students taking the SAT. Chemistry and physics teachers were happy because they were getting more kids who could apply the math they had learned. The best of all worlds, right? ... Don't be naïve. When *those* kids start demanding entry into higher-level math courses, the courses which are almost always the preserve of a white or white-and-Asian elite, the system reacts. Principals balked at creating additional upper-level courses; they couldn't believe that so many students were qualified. Parents of the kinds of kids who had done well in traditional math courses began questioning the whole progressive math program. The new courses must have been watered down if all these kids got through. The mere fact that black and Latino students are doing well at something is taken to imply a lack of rigor in the something that they are doing. Their success damns the program. The fact that the principals and parents felt comfortable publicly voicing their doubts about the ability of the kids says something about how deeply entrenched is this notion that some kids are supposed to fail. (In another version of the same phenomenon, college students, including African-American college students, assume in advance of any experience that courses in African-American Studies will be less rigorous than others.)

When I first started studying Chicago schools, which goes back to the late 1960s, I was caught off guard by the way teachers would make disparaging comments about a child in front of a child. It was even more surprising that some nonwhite teachers would do it. This is pure speculation, but I suspect that some nonwhite teachers, reacting to the frustration of their position and perhaps reacting to some level of embarrassment over being identified with those kids and parents can be even harsher than others in their statements about the kids and their potential, or lack of it. They can be even harsher, even sharper than their white colleagues, and I think in part they're not worried about the accusation of racism or the like. Their color gives them a license to be negative without being in fear of that being misinterpreted. At the opposite end of the spectrum would be a group of teachers of color who feel a deep sense of common fate with their children, and who stay in tough schools precisely for that reason.

Whether it comes from a white or black teacher, I'm struggling to find the term for deeply negative, if not stereotypical, comments about kids and their potential. In a technical sense, it's not racism, because they are not saying the race to which these kids belong cannot learn. It is framed as, "These kids in this school, these kids in this neighborhood, cannot do it." The negative judgment is particularized in this way. It just happens to be that most of the

<sup>2</sup> Ferguson (2003).



kids being talked about are nonwhite, a point which, in our rigidly color blind cultures, never gets raised. Presumably, the effects of teachers believing that children are going to fail because of their background are just as pernicious as the effects of them believing children are going to fail because of the inherent inferiority of their group. But by particularizing it in the way that they do, teachers render presentable thoughts that would be unacceptable in their naked form.

Issues of discipline and pedagogy are among the most common day-to-day battles between teachers of different racial backgrounds. When I was doing research in one of the West Side high schools, boys wearing hats in the hall became a battleground between those boys and black teachers. Black teachers would go from one end of the building to the other, “Boy, you take that hat off your head inside this building. What kind of man are you?” And white teachers reacted like, “What is the big issue? We’re caught between the Gangster Disciples and the Vice Lords. Kids wearing hats just doesn’t measure up. We have other things to worry about.” But I think it’s partly a matter of the backgrounds from which people are coming. That generation of African-American teachers—this was in the 1970s—was very much affected by Southern childrearing practices: strict lines of authority, a communal sense of responsibility for children. You have the right to chastise everybody’s child the same way you chastise your own. My guess is that for that generation of black teachers, something was slipping away, black civil society as they knew it was eroding, a change most dramatically symbolized by this new generation of uncontrollable youth. Hats in the hallway came to symbolize the more general disrespect for the old rules and old culture. They were fighting for more than those hats. It was as if, having lost so many battles, they were saying, “This is one we can win. Here we draw the line.”

The differences in disciplinary styles between the white and black teachers often leads white teachers to say that black teachers are too rigid, too authoritarian, too quick to go to corporal punishment and yell at kids. Black teachers retort that white teachers let these kids get away with anything, and the reason they let them get away with anything is that they don’t care about them. If they cared about these kids, they would make them act just like they make their own kids act. They wouldn’t take this nonsense. Black teachers will say that you go in a classroom with some of these white teachers and kids are bouncing off the walls and the teacher is trying to be Miss Progressive and Miss Nice.

A footnote: There’s another issue which I think is embedded in this discussion, and it has to do with how race and class shape people’s perception of freedom. A powerful group ethic can grow out of experiences of imperialism and economic marginalization. It is, as James McPherson puts it, the ethic that

says that until all of us are free, none of us is free.<sup>3</sup> For people coming out of certain kinds of ethnic or impoverished communities, individual freedom is not the point; it’s the freedom of the group that matters. Individuals have to be disciplined in order for the group to be free. The scant resources that are available need to be devoted to collective needs and collective priorities. Coming from a different kind of tradition, freedom means the freedom of the individual to choose. In *Raisin in the Sun*, think of Beneatha for whom education means learning to express yourself, and her mother, who can’t even figure what that means or why someone would want to do it; she lives for her family. We can go back to the arguments in the 1960s, inside the civil rights movement, between blacks and whites about what is appropriate behavior and a lot of it—the “Freedom High” fights—seem to come to rest on similarly different conceptions of the nature of freedom.<sup>4</sup>

I want to go back for a second to this notion of “whiteness.” It is a longstanding staple of black humor that whiteness comes in degrees, that some people have more of it than others. There are jokes about “extra-white white people,” about people who were “unreasonably white” and the like. Among black educators, one often heard that kind of remark made about the Coalition for Essential Schools in its early years. At one time, one heard it about the Gates Foundation, although more recently people seem to be willing to give them some credit, albeit grudgingly, for having learned better behavior. And what did they mean when they say that Gates was “white”? Well, they meant that Gates was arrogant in the way it operated, coming into cities with a whole lot of money and a half of an idea. Now, the half an idea they had was small schools, which happens to be one of the better ideas on the table right now. Nevertheless, when you push that idea with no knowledge of what’s happening in the local system, no knowledge of its capacity for implementation, when you push for small schools without thinking about who will staff them or what they will teach, without consideration of their impact on other schools, the results can get ugly. Whether justly or not, Gates was initially perceived by black educators as saying, “Make schools small and the world will get better,” and refusing to listen to practitioners who were trying to say it’s more complicated than that. In this contest, whiteness comes to mean sheer disregard for the thinking of others. It refers to a kind of preciousness about one’s own ideas, the kind of overweening self-confidence that is conferred only by general obtuseness or an Ivy League degree. In historical terms, it’s the basic colonialist belief that there is only one right model and your particular history and culture don’t matter. Lisa Delpit argues that one of the consequences of that position is that whatever particular kind of knowledge nonwhite professionals may have—based on their knowledge of culture, based on the knowledge of a particular locality—gets devalued by the universalist model.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> McPherson (1992).

<sup>4</sup> Carson (1981).

<sup>5</sup> Delpit (1995).

It is very much, both symbolically and empirically, an Ivy League kind of attitude. A lot of the folks who are accused of being too white do come from elite backgrounds. People probably need to unlearn being from Elite U. There's a contradiction in the whole idea of elite education and working in impoverished settings. Your education beats you over the head with the idea that you're getting the best education that you can get. Then they say, "Now go out and work with other people and listen to them." That's a contradiction because you've been socialized to only listen to people who have elite backgrounds. Other folk, with other ideas and other ways of expressing those ideas, are automatically devalued, so that in order to actually make that elite education worth anything, you have to undo a part of it.

Last summer I was interviewing James Lytle, the superintendent of Trenton, New Jersey schools, who is white. We were talking about all of the school reform programs that have come through New Jersey. Because of a ruling by the state supreme court, urban districts in New Jersey have substantial amounts of state money, much of which has gone into comprehensive school reform programs. Name a program and it's been to New Jersey. In part, I was interested in how, from a superintendent's viewpoint, the experience of working with outsider programs differed across programs. We did talk about that but he stressed that in many respects working with one reformer is pretty much the same as working with another: Nearly all of them are disdainful in their attitudes toward local educators. Reformers come to town, start implementing their programs and they don't ask a single person in the Trenton system, "What's been going on around here?" They do not have enough respect for the system's professionals to think that they might have something to contribute over and above the model design. Lytle has accused program developers of taking the McDonald's approach, with all the significant thinking and planning done at corporate headquarters while the franchisees are expected to just follow the policies. That is a good analogy but the racial analogy fits as well. Reformers take the role of the colonists from the mother country, treating the people with whom they are working as if they were peasants or niggers, explaining all failures and difficulties in terms of the limitations of the local people. "Our program would work if only these people didn't resist so much."

No doubt, there are times and situations in which teachers of color exaggerate how much relevant knowledge they actually have. We should assume that every group that claims professional privilege is lying to some degree or another, and so when teachers claim a class privilege on the basis of specialized insight, we have to ask whether in that particular situation there is some truth in that or whether it's purely self-serving. "Because we're from these communities we have special insights." Of course, the idea of "from" and of "community" are very complicated constructs.

I belong to that generation of black Americans that came out of college in the late 1960s convinced that merely replacing white faces in the school system with black faces was reform in and of itself. That was probably my earliest model of school reform. That was how you did it—you just put faces of color in those positions. Well, forty years later, it turns out to be just a hair more complicated than that. We were making assumptions about the nature of racial community that didn't take into account the full complexity of the situation.

Inner-city parents and nonwhite professionals in inner-city schools are different, I think, in the way in which they process some issues of race. Parents may be more up front with their racial feelings, more on the surface. "I'm immediately distrustful of you because you're not of the race that I am, and I think your race looks down on mine." I don't think they are as invested in that as they seem, and it's easier to work parents through that. One of the things I got out of the Comer experience was that when you go into demoralized schools as an outsider, everybody hates you. But when you start working at it, some groups give that position up more readily than others. I think parents have turned out to be the easiest to move beyond their surface racial hostilities. Parents may be the first to put the hands on the hips when a racial situation arises, but they may also be the first to let it go. For parents, I think racializing the world is an act of self-protection. It's a way of saying, "I can trust here, but I dare not trust there." For educators, it is that, but there's also an element of staking a claim of professional privilege, which complicates the matter. It is at once an act of self-protection and an act of self-aggrandizement, which may make it harder for people to give it up. In addition, for educators there is the problem that when the race of the people occupying positions of authority is the same as the race of the people who have traditionally been identified with the process of oppression, in some ways, experientially the process of oppression is being replicated yet again. Even if intentions are good, even if people have a real contribution to make, it feels like yesterday, so sometimes people are going to react as if it were yesterday.

Children—I'm thinking really about junior high—talk about race all the time. They talk as if it is important to them but much of that talk strikes me as specious. That, however, is not to say that children won't use race when it's available as a tool. Once, I was on my way to an after-school tutoring program in Evanston. As I'm walking up, two boys, both black, both boys who knew me, have gotten into a fight. I'm twice the size of the two of them together but I can't pull them apart. I finally manage to get a grip on them and one of the boys is so mad he yells, "Get your white hands off me!" Now, I'll tell you what—I have been called a few things in life but I wasn't prepared for that. I think what it tells you is he had learned there were some teachers he could back

off by saying that. Someplace he learned that there was a tactical advantage, there was leverage, in reminding white teachers that they were white. So when he's mad and I'm holding him and he's looking for a weapon to use against me, even though it's entirely inappropriate in the situation, that's the weapon that comes to his frustrated mind. Smart kids figure out that the adults are not comfortable talking about race and they figure out ways to use that. So kids will play race, but I don't have any sense that they're deeply invested in it. Even more rapidly than their parents, they will give it up once they see what is behind the racial screen. At that age, the real question is: Who's on my side and who's not? That's really what they're trying to figure out, and race is one of the things they have to explore to do that.

There is a whole set of questions that might be posed about race and external partners, university partners included. For these purposes, consider universities that work in schools as external partners. Nearly all external partners in Chicago have to be purposefully integrated. You cannot maintain a presence in certain public schools unless you take some steps in the direction of diversifying your public face. My sense is that the people in charge of these processes typically really do believe that they are

*Part of what this implies for those of us who study reform is that a standard question for us should be*

*“How are patterns of vulnerability being changed by this reform?”*

sharing power and authority with nonwhites, and the people with whom they think they are sharing power and authority do not necessarily feel shared with. When I was here I would have said there was no organization, no external partner in this city in which there was not an internal dialogue among the black and Latino members of that organization. The internal racial critique among them always spoke to the theme, “These organizations are not as liberal as they think they are,” and “We’re here but we’re not on the inside. The fact that we’re here doesn’t actually mean that we have authority here.” At the extreme, there’s a critique that says these places really are plantations. People of color are just faces in places. Now there has to be a counterdialogue among white staff members of the same organizations about how they see race. I don’t have the same level of access to that experience, but my guess is that the counterdialogue would be something like, “I wish my nonwhite colleagues didn’t invoke race so much or see race everywhere.”

Let me make a final point. I think one of the most important research themes of the nineties is that social trust is a

powerful predictor of the capacity for change in urban schools. I’m thinking particularly of Bryk and Schneider.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the Consortium on Chicago School Research has been pulling together an impressive body of evidence on the schools least likely to change. If you ask which schools in Chicago over a 15-year period have proven most recalcitrant, the answer would be that they are extremely low income, often associated with housing projects, and have heavy concentrations of African-Americans. Even when you control for all that other stuff that we think predicts school improvement, the schools with social trust are the ones where after 15 years we are most likely to find any improvement. There is another literature, a much older literature, mostly in political science or sociology, which says that African-Americans, other things equal, are among the groups least likely to trust others. These findings have been consistent over several decades.

It would be interesting to think about how these studies fit together. There is a discussion in Bryk and Schneider about how to create trust in a school culture that is distrustful. This is one of the key questions for all of us now, given what we have learned about how much trust matters. Part of their argument is that the way you increase trust is to reduce vulnerability, because when people feel vulnerable they tend to be distrustful. So that when teachers, for example, feel that principal power is arbitrary and capricious and is unrelated to professional issues, those teachers don’t trust. They don’t trust the principal or other teachers, because being in that vulnerable position makes people circle up all their little resources. They’re looking over their shoulder all the time. Sociologically, we should regard the capacity to trust itself as a marker of social privilege—it is easiest to do from a relatively protected status. My sense is that some of the most successful external partners have reduced vulnerability of staff because they become staff advocates, buffers between them and the powers that be. In schools with authoritarian principals, the principal can’t bully the external partners the way he or she bullies teachers or parents. Part of what this implies for those of us who study reform is that a standard question for us should be, “How are patterns of vulnerability being changed by this reform?” That is a question we have simply not been paying enough attention to.

There is a broader question we can ask about this relationship between race, distrust, and vulnerability. Maybe a more heuristic way to think about race would be to treat it as a proxy for vulnerability. Maybe what lies behind the data on the most recalcitrant schools is that these schools are serving neighborhoods which represent extremes of vulnerability on several different dimensions of their lives. Even as compared to other ghetto schools, there is such pervasive and overwhelming vulnerability that it is particularly difficult for any reform to take root.

<sup>6</sup> Bryk and Schneider (2002).

Wherever I am, I always will be a Chicago partisan. I would like to think that Chicago's distinctive civic culture may give it something of an advantage in addressing some of the issues we have touched on. I was in New England recently and somebody asked me, "Well, what's the consensus in Chicago about Chicago school reform. What do people see are the main lessons?" I had to explain that "consensus" has a special meaning in Chicago. "Consensus" here means that I will beat you upside the head until you stop arguing with me. When you stop arguing, we have consensus. Chicago does have a distinctively conflictual sort of civic culture, one in which a level of conflict that would destroy relationships elsewhere comes to be thought of as normal. Perhaps one of the consequences of the long and deep community organizing tradition in Chicago—a combative, conflictual tradition—is this notion that you're going to be fighting this group tomorrow, and the day after, that group and you are going to beat on *this* group. That tradition of a somewhat more open level of conflict I think actually gives this city more hope than most. I suspect that a reform culture in which community groups and educational professionals and constituency groups are all present is more likely to generate an honest and open discussion about some of the issues that I'm talking about than the kind of culture that I see elsewhere.

One thing one does see almost everywhere is race working itself in more or less the same ways. It doesn't matter that much where you are or what the racial groups involved are. With some tweaks here and there, I could give a version of this speech about Franco-Algerian children in Paris or Roma children in Hungary. Wherever one happens to be, the racial situation still seems, as the man said:

*Still Crazy*

*Still Crazy*

*Still Crazy after all these years...*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Simon (1975).