



# Racism? Administrative and Community Perspectives in Data-Driven Decision Making: Systemic Perspectives Versus Technical-Rational Perspectives

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## Abstract

This case study describes tensions that became apparent between community members and school administrators after a proposal to close a historically African American public high school in a large urban Southwestern city. When members of the city's longstanding African American community responded with outrage, the school district's senior administration backed away from their proposal to close the school, despite making what it felt was a "neutral" and technical-rational decision. However, the local community interpreted this move as the historical continuation of racist behaviors and policies that had been experienced by the community over a period of several decades. Critical race theory (CRT) allows for an analysis regarding the nature of these beliefs about race and indicates the need for school

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administrators to engage the realities of the community members they serve, rather than merely enacting technical-rational administrative behaviors that serve to continue regimes of marginalization and oppression.

### **Keywords**

racism, social, urban, social, culturally relevant pedagogy, subjects, African American students, urban education

The mantra of school reform in the past decade, especially since the advent of NCLB (No Child Left Behind), has been that administrators need to engage in “data-driven decision making.” Data-driven decision making is supposed to support reform efforts (like NCLB) by improving schools, closing the achievement gap, and producing educational equity. Instead, data-driven decision making has supported NCLB in its entrenchment as a neoliberal educational policy that theoretically promotes equity but actually has the opposite effect (e.g., Webb, Briscoe, & Mussman, 2009). Accordingly, in 2009 when school administrators made a decision—informed by data that had been gathered and evaluated—to close a high school, their decision was met with community outrage: Closing the school is “racist!” one parent exclaimed, and other community members responded, “How dare you rob us again?” They were referring to a proposal to close Fredrick Douglass High School (FDHS; a pseudonym)—a “Black” high school in a predominantly Latino school district in Texas. The community’s response demonstrated the need for school administrators to reconsider what counts as data-driven decision making. Administrators were forced to realize that community sensibilities must be part of the data used in their administrative decision making. Despite the fact that FDHS was the worst performing school in the county (and one of the worst in the state) and that it was operating at less than half of the 1,600-student capacity, it still had a greater student–teacher ratio than almost any other high school in the district. And despite the low-performing data, parents and community members still considered the proposed closure of the school as racist and yet another affront against their community. Analysis of board meeting notes, interview data, newspaper articles, and observations of community-based meetings about the school revealed that community members had a different understanding of what factors “count” in the data-driven decision-making process (Seidl, 1991). This understanding led the community to interpret the proposal as part of a broader, sustained policy of

racial suppression of the largely Black East Side of the city. This community narrative reflected an idea embedded in critical race theory (CRT) that views racism as being a pervasive fact of life that goes beyond the actions of individual actors and instead focuses on the systemic nature of racial oppression in American society (Taylor, 2009). In other words, the factors (or data) considered by school administrators and community members in regards to closing the school were very different. This qualitative study investigates the factors that were considered as “data” by school administrations and community members in regards to deciding whether or not FDHS ought to be closed.

San Julio Independent School District’s (SJISD; pseudonym) proposal to close FDHS and the ensuing community response to this administrative decision indicates the multiple ways in which administrative behaviors can be interpreted. When the school board–appointed committee proposed the closure of FDHS, known as the predominantly *Black* school in the predominantly Latino district, there was tremendous public outcry and resistance. Though the district offered ostensibly legitimate (read: administratively technical-rational) reasons for the proposed school closure—such as low standardized test scores, low enrollment, and state-based school ranking as “Academically Unacceptable”—the parents and community members around FDHS (using other data) interpreted the proposed closing as racist. Thus, we specifically ask the following research question:

*Research question 1:* What factors (or data) were considered by community members in their interpretation of administrative behaviors?

Using CRT to help contextualize administrative behaviors; we begin to understand *why* the community members held racialized interpretations of the technical-rational administrative behaviors propagated by the school district.

## **A Show of Force**

In a school that would typically only get a handful of visiting parents during parent–teacher conferences, more than 900 parents and community supporters showed up to protest the closing of the school. The large community rally and ensuing protests helped successfully thwart the school closure; the school board and superintendent decided to keep the school open until further notice and to hear the voices and perspectives of the community. Yet

this case brought to light a host of community-based complaints that reverberated beyond a single school closure. The reasons cited by district administrators for deciding to close FDHS were similar to those typically used by district administrators in similar situations: poor attendance and enrollment, structural (building) decay, poor academic (and perhaps behavioral) performance, and constricted school funding (Lam, 1982; Thomas, 1980; Watkins, 1986). Likewise, convincing community stakeholders of the reasonableness of a decision based on these factors (as other researchers have found) was an altogether different challenge (Lipman, 1998; Weatherley, Narver, & Elmore, 1983). Lipman maintains that local politics always plays a role in how such events are interpreted. In local school communities, parents and community members often interpret school, teacher, and administrator behavior differently from the perspectives of teachers and administrators. The discursive context around the school, as actualized in newspaper reports and transcripts of district meetings, suggested that race and racism imbued the community's dialogue. With this in mind, CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) is utilized as a theoretical lens to highlight a community counternarrative that illustrates how parents, students, alumni, and other community constituents came to understand the actions of the school board members.

## **Racism and Technical-Rationality**

The decision to close a school is often complex and raises difficult questions for all stakeholders. Administrative decision-making processes are bounded by a bureaucratic system that largely understands itself as rational, value neutral, interest free, objective, and reliant only on "hard facts." The only types of facts considered to fulfill those criteria are current facts that have been abstracted into numbers such as test scores, economic data, and enrollment figures. Such facts exemplify Weber's (1992) description of being "bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production" (p. 181) in which the values or personality of a person have little influence on the decisions made, but rather those decisions are determined by the machine-like processes in which the person is enmeshed; Weber refers to these processes as the "iron cage" of technical-rationalism. In the case of FDHS, it would explain why a Black and a Latino administrator would claim that the decision to close the school "had nothing to do with race," or that they "didn't know why the community became so angry." These technical-rational claims were made despite community members' claims of racism that were made bluntly and directly to the principal and superintendent. Critical race scholar, Patricia Williams (1991), characterizes this type of

context as producing “a passive relationship to the document: it is the contract that governs, that ‘does’ everything, that absorbs all responsibility and deflects all other recourse” (p. 224). However, this technical-rational system is neither interest free or value neutral; rather it is the product of historical processes in which the understandings and interests of powerful groups have come to permeate the system, seeming to emanate from both everywhere and nowhere (Foucault, 1980). One such historical process in the United States that has endured for centuries is racism. Although overt systemic racism has been largely outlawed, over the centuries it has become invisibly integrated into many institutional processes and ways of understanding the world (Scheurich & Young, 1997). Depending on one’s positioning, institutionalized racism can be characterized as more or less invisible.

When actions in schools occur, stakeholder’s positioning—their histories, sensibilities, and interests—informs how these actions are interpreted. Indeed, racialized and politicized interpretations of administrative behaviors by community members negatively affect school and community relationships (Larson, 1997). Yet much of the current literature on, for example, administrative behavior or school–community relations, ignores larger community contexts that influence how administrative actions are interpreted and perceived; many emphasize abstracted forms of technical-rational decision-making behaviors that are intransigent of, or transcendent to, local contexts and considerations. In this study, we question what other factors ought to be considered in administrative decision making and how community-based narratives of race and school affect the interpretation of administrative behaviors by community stakeholders. We use CRT as a framework to understand how communities of color might interpret actions differently than school educators and officials. Specifically, we frame this research within CRT because of its recognition that racism and white supremacy are ingrained in American society and that this racism may manifest itself in well-meaning educational policies that claim to be race neutral (Lynn & Parker, 2006). This research is relevant and timely, as it comes when economic inequalities are increasing locally, nationally, and globally (Khalifa, 2011), and state budget deficits are inducing most state legislatures to drastically cut public school budgets. Reduced budgets, coupled with NCLB’s mandate to close down “failing schools,” have induced many school districts to drastically cut the number of schools that they operate. Yet this research is also relevant because it serves to disrupt the ubiquitous postracial and ahistorical postures that many school leaders exude in their daily practice (Larson, 1997; Solomon, 2002), a posture that acts to perpetuate institutionalized racism. In this regard, Blair (2008) distinguishes institutional racism from intentional individualized racism:

We are not talking about individual racism as the overwhelming reason for the negative effect of the education system on so many Black children and young people. This is about systems—government institutions, school institutions, cultural institutions within which we work and with which we collude. What we are in fact talking about is “Institutional Racism.” (p. 251)

The notion that racism is going to, by default, be present in schools *unless otherwise challenged* allows us to see this research and administrative action in a different light. Many administrators—and in this study they were all people of color—did not perceive how they may be reproducing and confirming oppressive systems and practices that have always been in place. For this reason, we give considerable attention to parental perceptions and historical sensibilities in this study.

## **Parental Perceptions and Positionality Toward Schools**

Parental perceptions of the closure of FDHS are likely informed by both class and race. In understanding how class influences parental perceptions, we draw from Lareau’s (2000) ethnographic work. Educational sociologist Annette Lareau’s ethnography describes how working-class parents at two elementary schools tended to view teachers and the school; these parents viewed schools as authority institutions and acted deferentially toward what might be described as teacher “expertise.” However, Lareau noted that these working-class parents also viewed school and home as separate spheres and at times acted mistrustfully toward schools. Though it is not helpful to describe parental groups as opposing binaries, it is worth noting that middle-class parents in her study differed from the working-class parents. The middle-class parents were much more likely to be involved in schools, to play an active role in education and instruction, and to hold positive views of school as compared to working-class parents.

A number of studies demonstrate that the politicization of race in schools may also inform how parents view school. A study by Larson (1997) found that Black American community members politicized race in schools by publically and assiduously protesting the removal of seven Black youth from school. During the school’s annual talent show, these youth had protested against American military activity in the first Persian Gulf War. After the youths were suspended for “unauthorized” acts, the Black community rallied for their inclusion, despite the seemingly “logical” and predictably “bureaucratic” actions taken by school administrators. This difference in the interpretation

of students' actions and of the appropriate response was an indication of just how far apart the perceptions of the community members and school administrators were. Larson notes,

The principal's interpretation of this protest is illustrative of our most vivid archetype of impersonal, neutral, bureaucratic administrators who step back and stand outside of the situation, separate themselves from their own feelings about the situation, separate the facts from the values of the situation, and adjudicate objective, neutral decisions grounded in laws and policies of their institutions. (p. 323)

This positionality, what we refer to in this article as a "technical-rational" administrative response, is exactly what the principals should *not* have done in this circumstance, according to Larson. Rather, Larson advocates that principals should have understood and embraced the larger political, racial, and historical sensibilities that exist in the surrounding community as well as the protean school demographics. Perhaps even more important, they should have understood and dealt with the implications of their own technical-rational biases and racialized fears as they approached this racially explosive problem at their school.

## **History, American Racism, and Parental Perceptions**

America's legacy of racial oppression, and the discursive and institutional practices that were born of this legacy, influences the views of both the oppressors and the oppressed. The oppressors are prone to elevating their perceptions and understandings of the world above others; this practice is often referred to as ethnocentrism (Spring, 2004). Such a viewpoint provided the oppressors a justification for their oppression and in some cases fosters behaviors and attitudes that led to genocide. These behaviors and attitudes serve to mask injustices while providing oppressors a form of privilege that benefits them in multiple ways. Centuries of officially sanctioned racial violence, intimidation, and marginalization have contributed to the perceptions that imbue mistrust in America's vanquished communities. In schools, this means that Black and Latino parents, many of whom have a distant and even estranged relationship with schools (Diamond & Gomez, 2004; Lareau & Horvat, 1999), may see schools as being a part of an "official" institutional structure that has oppressed them for centuries. In essence, such marginalized parents interpret schools in light of their own collective experiences. Marginalized parents' experiences with schools often negatively influence

their posture toward, and perceptions of, schools. This is supported by Valenzuela's work in which she argues that the aesthetic technical discourse on education by school officials contradicts those of communities of color, whose perceptions of education are based on authentic expressive discourse. Here technical discourse refers to the school's tendency in highly emphasizing the quantifiable in making decisions rather than the *aesthetic* (Noddings, cited in Valenzuela, 1999), which values relationships. Thus, schools fail to legitimize the cultures, perceptions, and sensibilities of these communities and are therefore perceived by parents of color to be promoting a *subtractive* (Valenzuela, 1999) form of schooling. In addition, racial disparities in school discipline and a widely recognized academic achievement gap provided examples that may contribute to parents' critical views of school. Lareau and Horvat linked Black parents' critical views toward schools directly with the history of racial oppression and discrimination, which has fueled mistrust and confrontation. When viewed through the lens of CRT, the beliefs of these parents offer a nuanced understanding of the complexities of racial oppression and discrimination.

Schools in segregated Black communities have always been pivotal to the well-being of community members (e.g., Siddle Walker, 1993). Based on such cultural traditions, schools often represent the sole possibility of hope for marginalized groups; therefore, they also deeply value having schools in their communities. This latter stance is consistent with Diamond and Gomez's (2004) interpretation of the Black working-class parents whose nonsupportive orientations can be seen as "reform-based orientations toward education rather than confrontational perspectives" (p. 416). In their view, working-class Black parents used their "reform-based" behaviors—which were ostensibly confrontational—to force teachers and administrators to better educate their children. These studies are relevant for our current study because a number of parents and community members at FDHS expressed similar hostility and outrage and incisively accused the district and its administrators of being racist for proposing to close a school in their community.

CRT provides a framework that allows us to understand administrative behaviors and the community's interpretation of those behaviors within the context of race. Critical race theorists, who operate from a premise that racism is normalized in American society, could help us understand the larger systems of oppression that might have led the FDHS parents to react in ways that they did. Moreover, CRT—unlike traditional leadership theories—also offers methodological and interpretive lenses that would elevate and give credence to the voices of the Black parents and community members who so virulently protested the closing of a school that they feel was their own.



## CRT

The overall purpose of CRT is to expose the mechanisms of oppression of people of color and to produce knowledge and ways of understanding the world that counter hegemonic norms and lead to greater equity for racialized groups. CRT grew out of the critical legal studies (CLS) movement of the 1970s and emerged as a specific critique of racism in law and society during the early- to mid-1980s. Legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Mari Matsuda, Richard Delgado, Angela Harris, and Kimberle Crenshaw produced some of the earliest CRT scholarship.

However, in the mid-1990s another group of scholars took up the mantle of CRT and began to shape CRT in new ways that utilized themes from legal studies to analyze issues of race, power, and privilege in the U.S. educational system. Scholars such as Ladson-Billings (1998), Tate (1997), and Solorzano (1997) pioneered the use of CRT in analyzing these constructs as they studied the realities of both educational policy and practice (Dixson, 2006). In an attempt to provide historical context for the development of CRT in education, Lynn and Parker (2006) have asserted that these scholars (and the legal scholars who preceded them) have contributed to the establishment of several key features of CRT that address their ideas about the basic nature of race in education:

1. Racism is pervasive in the United States and represents “a normal fact of daily life in U.S. society” (Taylor, 2009, p. 5); the ideology and assumptions of white supremacy are ingrained in the political, legal, and educational structures in ways that make them almost unrecognizable (Delgado, 1995, as cited in Taylor, 2009). This structure of White supremacy continues to have a profound effect on the world and represents an “all-encompassing and omnipresent” (p. 4) system of privilege, power, and opportunities that is often invisible to its own beneficiaries (Taylor, 2009). This subtle and pervasive structure of White supremacy has become known as institutionalized racism.
2. Oppositional scholarship is seen as a desirable outcome of CRT research and teaching. CRT challenges traditional notions of scholarly objectivity by promoting a radical scholarship that goes beyond the experience of Whites as the normative standard and instead grounds its conceptual framework in the distinctive historical context that places an emphasis on the experiences of people of color (Taylor, 1998). CRT scholars often use “nontraditional” methods of

research such as narrative and storytelling as a means to challenge existing social constructions of race (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

3. CRT critiques liberalism as a supporting ideology for a just and equal society. CRT offers a sustained critique of liberalism and the belief that traditional government institutions can create an equitable and just society. CRT advocates are skeptical that the current paradigms utilized by government institutions can be catalysts for social change given the emphasis on incrementalism that is ingrained in these institutions (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT adherents also reject the idea that government institutions such as courts and schools have the ability to function as “neutral” entities in a society where constructs like race, class, gender, and sexual orientation remain powerful paradigms for oppression (Marx, 2008).
4. CRT analyzes the role of capitalism in motivating the reproduction of racialized groups as well as the oppression of such groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

CRT literature examines schooling by questioning educational policies, processes, and narratives and their impact on K-12 classrooms and the larger society. CRT offers a means to explore the experiences of communities of color and their relationship to schooling and educational policy outcomes. These communities in turn have used their own knowledge to construct understandings that offer a powerful critique of racism in education while also putting forth some ideas about how to address race and racism in educational policy. In general, CRT theory calls attention to racist public policies and practices that not only marginalize local communities of color but also address the ways in which local and national educational policies influence teaching and learning in America’s diverse classrooms. They ask important questions such as “How does racism shape and influence how school districts interact with minority youth and communities?” and “How can a critical interrogation and understanding of race and racism transform the schools in our communities?” Hence, the use of CRT as a lens for analyzing inequalities in school district policies provides information about the best way to move forward in order to transform schools in minority communities into places where students of color might thrive. To this end, one of the foci of CRT has been the use of counternarratives to contest the hegemony of the dominant narratives that have come to define the experience of students of color in the U.S. educational system (e.g., Delgado, 1989; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

## Counternarrative and Voice in the FDHS Community

The traditional narrative regarding parents of color (particularly Latino and Black parents) is that they have little concern for the education of their children. Unfortunately, such deficit perspectives delegitimize these parental voices. These parents (and their children) are often characterized as deficient (Valencia & Black, 2002) and are frequently accused of being culturally deprived (Moynihan, 1965), anti-intellectual (McWhorter, 2000), and lacking proper goals, motivation, and values (Hernandez, 1970; Sowell, 1981). Furthermore, when people of color do make progress toward equity, they are positioned as passive recipients of others' benevolence rather than as active agents working to achieve equity. These narratives have been prevalent in the scholarly literature on education for nearly a century and have been part of the popular imagination in what became the United States for more than five centuries (Spring, 2004).

The stories of parental resistance to the closure of FDHS represents a strong counternarrative to the deficit perspective that sees parents of color as uninterested in education and lacking the agency to challenge a local system of dominance based largely on race and class. Here, CRT becomes a particularly useful tool because it allows use of the “counternarrative” or “counter-storytelling” when presenting community perceptions. These methodological tools allowed the FDHS community participants in this study to present *their* truths about how *they* thwarted the closure of *their* school. Despite the administrators' claims and racially agnostic posture, CRT allowed the researchers to elevate and equalize, if not centralize, the claims and perceptions—the stories—of the community.

### Context

FDHS is a public high school located in a large Southwestern city (population 1,144,646). Given the high number of students of color, it is considered a “majority minority” school. Although the number of Black and Latino students are roughly equal, the school is regarded as the *Black High School* because it has a larger number of African American students than any other in the city. In addition, it served as the school for African Americans during historic times of legally sanctioned segregation in the city. As the only public high school serving the eastside of the city, FDHS is known as “The Pride” of the community. Throughout the years, this part of town has been

characterized by underdevelopment and underinvestment. So in addition to feelings of neglect, many of the largely Black residents expressed their beliefs that the “Eastside”—and by extension FDSH students—has been subjected to racial discrimination.

Interviews with the city council woman who represented the Eastside provided evidence that supports these feelings. Council woman Smith shared that despite her best efforts, the city council voted to turn a historic convent located in the community into a “halfway house” for those getting out of prison. She was referring to a transitional housing residence that would have housed recently released convicts into a residential neighborhood. In her view, and the view of her constituents, there were a number of other projects in the neighborhood that reflected discrimination and racism. For example, although a previous councilperson approved the installation of fuel tanks adjacent to the high school, the community now regarded this as a racist act, in which the Black residents were specifically targeted in a case of environmental racism. There was also a litany of everyday offenses, such as the community’s insufficient trash removal, the existence of numerous vacant lots, and numerous packs of stray animals. It is worth noting that whereas community members often referenced race as a factor explaining why their community was neglected, school administrators rarely evidenced these issues and often pleaded ignorance to their existence. All of these factors evoked feelings of neglect, mistreatment, and racial marginalization among residents of the FDHS community. Several participants expressed these feelings during their interviews. For example, the city council woman repeatedly made it clear that “the area has been underserved and folks feel marginalized.” Similarly, the parent advocate, Betsy, described how the Eastside has been “continually neglected”:

Continually you see all the development monies being placed, you know, Northside (i.e., middle and upper income areas) and maybe some with the car plant for the Southside and what not, but continually you can just look at our infrastructure. Just drive over here and drive somewhere else and you see what you see. And so we’re tired of, you know, the continual, you know, neglect and racism, redlining, you know, whatever you want to call over all these years.

Another illustration of challenges facing the community involves the injuries and deaths of a number of FDHS students and the arrest of a FDHS student on murder charges during the year of this study. Although the student who was arrested had grades that were above average and her teachers

glorified her academic performance, she was tragically convicted of stabbing her boyfriend to death.

## **Method**

### *Research Design: Critical Race Methodology (CRM)*

By using what Solorzano and Yosso term as a Critical Race Methodology, we are able to focus “on the racialized, gendered, and class experiences of people of color.” (p. 24). We also use aspects of phenomenological case study, as described in the coming section. CRM primarily uses “storytelling” (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) as a method of collecting and analyzing data. This methodological approach also centers race and racism in the research process as it challenges traditional research processes; this is done by highlighting the experiences of people of color (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). This methodology recognizes the experiences of people of color as legitimate, despite the fact that others—in this case school and district administrators—may describe these same experiences differently. This methodology allows us as researchers to focus on the counternarratives told by the community-based participants. If we were to exclusively accept the interpretation of the school and district administrators in this study, we would further legitimize the creation and maintenance of a master narrative (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) and the way that top-down/administrator–parent relationships often occur. Master narratives are the stories developed by those in power and that tend to legitimate their position of power. By elevating and vocalizing the stories of marginalized populations, we seek to counter and prevent a normalization of the dominant, hegemonic, and purported neutral depiction of events. In other words, although administrators in the district claimed that their actions were neutral and were only based on objective school data, allowing community members to tell their story challenged the race neutrality and technical-rational behaviors performed by administrators. Our CRM incorporates aspects of a phenomenological case study as described below.

We chose this phenomenological case study approach because we hoped to describe the lived experiences and stories of the participants concerning a certain phenomenon (Creswell, 2003; Moustakas, 1994), in this case, FDHS’s closure. This methodology also enabled us to accomplish one of the methodological aims of CRT—storytelling and establishing the voice of racially oppressed and marginalized persons as a counternarrative (Bell, 1999; Delgado, 1989; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

The data were collected during the 2009-2010 academic school year. The first author visited the school on several occasions, once attending a “Friends of Frederick Douglass High School” support breakfast, in order to get a better understanding of the research context. While in these contexts, the first author casually spoke with a number of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and local faculty members about the event. Several newspaper articles covering the debate were reviewed. We read all of the transcripts of meetings and newspaper articles surrounding the school closure. In addition, data were collected from state reports regarding the school and the district. Finally, in-depth interviews were conducted with selected participants.

Participants agreed to participate in in-depth interviews in which they were asked to “describe what happened with the proposed closure of (FDHS).” Semistructured interviews were used to provide the participants with sufficient flexibility to express divergent interests and perceptions of the proposed closure. Semistructured interviewing proved to be a crucial methodological approach that allowed the participants to tell their story. After community members’ consistent references to broader issues of racism and discrimination, we encouraged respondents to engage in storytelling about not only the proposed closure of FDHS but also about their broader understandings of what the *community* around FDHS had systemically endured. By interviewing leaders and representatives from all stakeholder groups involved in this process, we hoped to describe “what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience” (Patton, 1990, p. 71). From these data, the purpose was to explain the essence of what and how the different participants’ experiences of the attempted closure of FDHS (Creswell, 2007) varied according to their positioning.

### *Participants*

Five participants were purposefully selected during the course of this study. They were chosen because they were engaged in the discussion and debate regarding the closure of FDHS and were considered leaders or representatives of the various stakeholder groups. The participants included: the superintendent, the principal, the neighborhood city council representative, an involved parent, and a former student:

*Superintendent Garcia.* Dr. Garcia is Latino and has been superintendent of the district for the past 5 years—he has also served as superintendent for a number of other majority-Latino districts across the state. Dr. Garcia assumed leadership of the district at a time of low enrollment and complex financial issues. He expressed that he has been routinely blamed for the poor

performance of a number of schools, though many campuses had even worse performance before he assumed the superintendency. He primarily referenced economic reasons that justified closing FDHS. When asked, "Do you think it would be wise to close down FDHS?" Dr. Garcia replied, "From an economic standpoint, absolutely." At the time of this study it was reported in the local newspaper that he was the finalist for a superintendent opening for another district in the state.

*Council Woman Smith.* Ms. Smith had been a city council woman for nearly 2 years at the time of this study. As an African American woman, she represented the "East Side" of the city where the largest concentration of African Americans resided. Throughout the phone conversations and interviews, she expressed her frustration at the systemic discrimination and marginalization of the city's Black residents. "You can drive, just drive around the neighborhood and you can see there has been a lack of investment in that part of the city." In addition, Council woman Smith was a vocal voice at the community dialogues around the proposed closure in which she expressed her opposition. She has challenged other Blacks throughout the city to relocate to the "East Side" to do their part at reinvesting in the Black part of town.

*Parent activist Betsy.* Betsy lives in the neighborhood of FDHS; her children attended FDHS, and she was instrumental in starting the "Committee to Save Fredrick Douglass." Betsy and a couple of other African American parents and community members were instrumental in mobilizing parents to resist the closure. After living in other parts of the city, she relocated to the East Side to support the neighborhood and the local schools. Largely because of her efforts, more than 900 community members and FDHS parents showed up to protest the school closure. After her leadership activities to keep FDHS open, she announced her candidacy to occupy a school board seat for the district. One striking aspect of her interview was her repeated expressions of exhaustion: "I'm so tired." This was perhaps because her advocacy activities were not part of her professional duties but were offered pro bono for the benefit of the community.

*FDHS Principal James.* The FDHS principal, an African American, was new to the community and the school. He had been in the position for less than a few weeks when the community erupted into protest over the proposed closure. He had been an assistant principal at other local schools in nearby districts, but this was his first time as a principal. We found it strange that such an inexperienced principal would be assigned to such a troubled school community. He was careful not to express his strong conviction for or against the closure. If he had done so, he would run the risk of alienating either the administration or the community. This was especially important given that he

had not yet had a chance to establish his reputation with either group. Within a year of the community resistance previously discussed, a follow-up interview was conducted and the principal described the strategies he used to exponentially increase both attendance and academic achievement rates. He repeatedly referenced his refusal to be distracted from the two charges he was given by Dr. Garcia: "to bring up the scores and increase enrollment." At the time of this study, he was beginning his second year as principal.

*FDHS former student, Derrick, and Sarah, aid to the Council Woman Smith.* Derrick was a recent graduate of FDHS who, at the time of this study, was serving in the military. He played a vocal role in the protests. His narrative combined elements of the technical-rational approach as well as the more systemic outlook voiced by other community members. He was also ambivalent in his attitude toward the school staff, administrators, and parents. Sometimes, he seemed to blame FDHS's staff and administrators for having failed the students for decades, "It's been 20 years we have been in this state [under-achieving]." At other times, Derrick seemed to hold the district's elementary and middle schools responsible, "I am not going to blame it on [FDHS], the students come deficient . . . from middle schools and elementary schools." He was ambivalent in his attitude toward the community members and opposed blaming the parents for FDHS's low academic performance. However, at times Derrick was also critical of parents and community members for not doing enough to help FDHS students succeed. Sarah, a Latina, who was also his girlfriend, agreed with much of what Derrick said. She was from the city but had attended schools in a more affluent area.

### *Power Relationships Among Participants*

Participants did not share power equally. Their positioning differed due to formal relations of power (based on explicit and codified policy statements) and informal relations of power (primarily race and gender). However, no single participant was in a position of absolute power. The person positioned most highly in the power relations of the participants was Superintendent Garcia, although he was vulnerable to the School District Board and was dependent on the good will of the community. However, one member of the community would have little impact on Superintendent Garcia; it was only by banding together in a large group that they could make an impact on him. Principal James's relationships of power were most complex in that his formal hierarchical relationship with Superintendent Garcia meant that he was directly answerable to the superintendent. On the other hand, in order to be effective as a principal, he needed to create ties with the community, or at the



very least, avoid alienating them. Finally, while community members were not directly answerable to either the principal or the superintendent, at the same time as single community members, former student Brian, parent activist Betsy, and even council woman Smith had little to no power to influence either the superintendent or the principal. They were only able to influence their actions by banding together. Finally, based on centuries of oppression of women, the two women community members were disadvantaged further when seeking to influence the actions of the district board. Finally, the informal relationships of race/ethnic power positioned the African Americans, the principal, and all of the community members, less powerfully than the Latino superintendent.

### *Researcher Positionality*

Although all of the coauthors played a significant role in this study, the first author located, contacted, interviewed, and performed follow-up member checking with all participants. In qualitative research, it is this contact with the participants that often encourages a deep reflection of researcher positionality (Milner, 2007). In the case of the first author, his race, experiences with and perceptions of urban education, and his university's relationship with the superintendent and school district highlighted in this study all likely played a role on how he viewed and approached the research site. Since he (first author) was a former teacher and administrator in a large school district, he had a great level of comfort while performing research in this study. However, his urban experiences occurred in a system in which budgetary issues and school closures, drop-out rates, teacher turnover, staff and student attendance rates, low morale, neighborhood blight, and embattled school politics were long-running problematics in his school district. These experiences seemed to evoke some amount of suspicion for the lead author as he interviewed, for example, the administrators in the study. And conversely, because of his witnessing poor Black Detroiters who were often marginalized by their school systems, he felt more solidarity, attachment, and identification with the positionality of the parents in this study (Sugrue, 1998). For this reason, and in attempts to address these ostensible biases, he reinterviewed each administrator a number of times and performed member checking with all participants. He also responded to the questions and critiques of his coauthors who did not share his unique positionalities. And at several points throughout the study, the first author would have conversations with coauthors about his thoughts of interviews or aspects of the study. Even though the first author initiated writing and designing the study, constant and

mutual discourse allowed for the final manuscript to be coarticulated. Such discourses provided, we believe, a process through which authors' positionalities and personal biases were constantly challenged and articulated.

### *Analysis*

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were read several times to identify major themes, but minor themes also emerged. As we examined the data, we encountered common themes that revolved around race, racism, and marginalization. For example, we knew from the interviews that conversations around "race" and "racism" were prominent in community members' perceptions and voices, but a closer analysis of data also revealed that other participants actively *avoided* exactly that topic. We also looked for the type of data that were used in assessing the closure of FDHS. As is called for in a CRM phenomenological case study, we began to draw connections among these emergent themes—master narratives and counternarratives of race and racism—with established writings and bodies of knowledge. In the newspaper articles, newscasts, discussions among administrators, dialogue in the dominant community, and even conversations in the local academic communities, the discourse was about how FDHS was a failing school. But in the marginalized community in which FDHS was located, beliefs about FDHS and its handling by the district were quite different and clearly reflected a racialized discourse.

### **Findings**

From a technical-rational, data-driven decision-making perspective, FDHS was the ideal school for districts to close. School administrators only considered numerical data: Test scores and graduation rates were low, behavioral problems and suspensions were common, student attendance was poor, and student enrollment was such that the school operated at roughly half of the intended capacity. This meant that the school operated millions of dollars in the red. Despite this, FDHS still received more district and school resources when compared to other schools in the district. The school board and superintendent appointed a Facilities Advisory Committee (FAC) to craft a financial plan that included proposed school closures. Because the only contributing factors were economics and numerical data, it was obvious that FDHS would be considered for closure. Yet FDHS community members and parents were not convinced by the board's explanation for closure.

When the FAC proposed the closure of FDHS, the community response and their claims of racism caught many by surprise. The community erupted in anger and organized a protest movement that would successfully thwart the school's closure. The Black (and one Latina) community members often forcefully maintained that race and racism played a central role in the decision. In many urban American contexts, Latinos are minorities, but in San Julio they comprise more than two thirds of the city population and outnumber both Blacks and Whites. The Black–Latino bond in the fight for social justice is complex in this particular urban context; however, it did not prevent some Blacks from charging racism against the predominantly Latino school board, the city council, and the Latino mayor. Overall, the findings could be classified into two types of narratives: those told by the school administrators, and those told by community members. The administrators' narratives reflected a narrowly focused master narrative of technical-rationality; they considered only quantitative factors that fit the worldview of administrators whose ideas and actions reflected the status quo of a large bureaucratic school district. However, the community member's counternarratives reflected a broader systemic perspective, incorporating historical, sociological, and cultural factors.

### *Administrative Behaviors: Seeking Safety in “Color Blind” Technical-Rationality*

The FDHS school and district administrators assumed a posture of neutrality that did not seem to address the concerns of the community. Expressions of community outrage only caused them to rely even more on the technical-rational, data-driven behaviors. By only focusing on quantifiable factors and district/current policies, administrators ignored the social context and history of the school and failed to acknowledge the relevant social and political perceptions of the community. In addition to remaining neutral, FDHS administrators instituted a bureaucratic measure by appointing a committee that would “decide” how the ongoing district budget deficit would be addressed:

The membership of the, we call it the *Facilities Advisory Committee*, made up of community members. Each board member chose 5 members to represent their district and then I believe that gave administration, they gave us about 5 or 6 seats to fill. So, you know, the representation, the intention was to have equal representation from all

over the district. And actually to be honest with you, my, my appointees were critics. You know, I reached out to them and see be a part of the solution because you're obviously very involved so you know that's, that's what, that's how it was made up. (Superintendent)

This passage indicates that within the district, decision making was based on bureaucratic technical-rationality. Administrators presumed that they were acting in a value-neutral and objective manner that was not influenced in racial, political, and socially biased ways (Larson, 1997; López, 2003), but this decision-making process served to only further marginalize the voices of the local community. One might ask: How could the administrators ignore race when the community was so vocal about their accusations of racism? By even asking this question, we assume that bureaucratic leadership functions in ways that do not serve the dominant view held by those in power. In an attempt to avoid a conversation for which they had no safe answers, the educational administrators always made their way back to the quantified, abstracted data that suggested that FDHS should be closed:

Ok, we're gonna use just the demographics alone, ok. That they're less than 800 kids at this high school, you know. We have a, what is it, we pointed out that one of our elementary has more students than that. So just from a cost perspective. (Superintendent)

The superintendent of the district would most often avoid the question of race altogether, but in other cases, when the demographics of race suited his position, he would paradoxically offer racialized tidbits to dispel narratives of race:

Again, unfortunately, Fredrick Douglass High School, which by the way, now is about 50% Hispanic, ok, was the low hanging fruit. (Superintendent)

The explanations given, including the FAC plans and decisions based on "data," provided the administrators with comfort and allowed them the space they needed to avoid responding directly to the question of race. Evidence of this can be found in the above statement where the superintendent actually indicated that race was explicitly *not* an issue in the decision to close the school. He mentioned that FDHS was "about 50% Hispanic" in what appeared to be an attempt to discredit the nearly all-Black protest sentiment against the school's closing. In summary, the superintendent was denying that race was

a factor, while simultaneously referencing race to rationalize his point of view. This type of rationalization reflects Weber's (1992) assessment of technical-rational bureaucracies and the necessity for them protect their own interests. When pressed about accusations of systematic and community-wide marginalization of the city's East Side, the superintendent again referenced the bureaucratic method of an unmade "decision" and the variety of plans being considered:

Politically, you know the board just didn't want to do it based on that meeting and so you know they made a decision not to close any of the high schools. By the way, there was never really a decision. Remember that was one of three plans. (Superintendent)

Whereas the superintendent relied on quantifiable data to support the closure of FDHS, the principal of FDHS claimed ignorance. The principal was exposed to racialized discourses in newspapers, public and private school meetings, the school office, and individual conversations with parents. Yet he maintained he did not know why the committee had suggested closing the high school and was unaware of any racialized discourse surrounding the proposed closure. Instead, he found safety in the technical administrative response. He reiterated the steps used to include the community in the decision-making process:

Well, to be honest, for this being the start of my second year I truly don't know the reasons or rationale for why the closure proposal even came on the table. What I understood was, is that it wasn't the district who was proposing the closure, it was a community committee. It was a committee that was put together to go out and do a study and then, and then introduce this, their results to the school board and to the district. And so that's, that's just me coming in and you know being the principal and then 2 weeks later you have a community meeting, 3 weeks later you have a community meeting. (Principal, FDHS)

In this interview response, the FDHS principal distanced himself from anything that would have compromised his administrative identity and bureaucratic comfort. From the perspective of CRT, this adoption of a race-neutral stance conflicts with the reality of race in decision making related to urban educational policy decisions. This denial adds legitimacy to a master narrative that seeks to minimize the existence of race while lending support to a racialized status quo.

In recognizing community voices, the administrative voice could have been rendered less powerful in the contentious dialogue between school and community. Historically however, these dialogues have always been controlled by administrators. This administrative neutrality—which avoided community claims of racism—marginalized the voices and concerns of local community members. Concerning the concept of “neutrality, democracy, objectivity, and equality,” López (2003) states, “White Americans continue to believe in these ideals, because a racial reality is, perhaps, too difficult to digest” (p. 85). Yet postracial, technical-rational administrative behaviors were enacted in the move to close FDHS despite the fact that the superintendent was Latino and the principal was African American. This is another reminder that even minoritized school leaders can knowingly or unknowingly enact, reproduce, and reinforce systems of racial marginalization.

*Avoiding race.*

“This plan is racist!” (Parent quoted in the newspaper)

The findings of this study suggest that school administrators and district officials made a conscious effort to avoid speaking about race. To recognize community sentiments, in their minds, was to admit that the process was impartial. But since they could not say this, they merely did not respond to claims of racism. It was sometimes difficult to determine whether they actually believed in a meritocratic postracial ideal or whether they avoided the topic as a tactical move. When community voices suggested racism, school administrators refocused the conversation on measurable goals of the school or district; however, for the community it was only about race. When repeatedly asked about the role of racism in the proposal to close FDHS, the superintendent spoke of race in a way that decentered it as a cause for the proposed closing:

That’s what I’m trying to do. And guess what, you’re fighting me for it. So I’m telling the LULAC’s guys, I am doing this for Hispanics. Ah but Miss So-and-So’s a Latina and they’re trying to . . . this is a white superintendent. I don’t care about that. Look how the kids are performing. So, ya’ll go and do your political thing. Ya’ll fight the political battle. I’m gonna do what’s best for kids. And so, that’s why I don’t want to really go over there and communicate that I am making certain decisions based on race. (Superintendent)

All of the community-based participants suggested that the area around the school was somehow strongly connected to the administrative behaviors within the school. In fact, by evidencing “proof” such as menial employment opportunities, slow trash removal, underinvestment in the East Side infrastructure, toxic waste facilities, and a domicile used for transitioning ex-offenders, the community members challenged and restructured the technical-rational discourses offered by administrators. In their explanation of why FDHS was closed, *city officials* and *school administrators* were described with a single voice:

But, continually you see all the development monies being placed you know Northside, North East and maybe some with the manufacturing plant for the Southside and what not but continually you can just look at our infrastructure. Just drive over here and drive somewhere else and see what you see. And so we’re tired of you know the continual you know neglect and racism, redlining, you know whatever you want to call over all the years. And so people are going to say, “You’re going to take something from us again. You’re going to try to take our school.” (Parent advocate)

### *Community-Based Perceptions of “School”*

Unlike the school and district administrators, many of the Black community members seemed to understand and interpret the proposed closure of FDHS in light of all of the other perceived racist policies, that is, economic underdevelopment, marginalization of voice, and disregard for interests/views—that they as a community had continuously endured.

It will kill us economically. Who would buy a home in a neighborhood or area where there’s no school? Who would put a business where there are no homes? (A local religious leader on the East Side local newspaper)

This statement is indicative of the fact that parents and community members at FDHH did not limit their interpretation of administrative behaviors to schools or even to education. Rather they viewed the decisions that administrators made regarding school and education as having much broader implications than merely affecting an individual school. For them, the actions taken

by school administrators represented the latest representation of an entire historical regime of racial marginalization or, essentially, a continuation of what the “City” leaders have always done in their communities. During her interview, Betsy, the local parent advocate, commented, “We believe that if the schools are closed, then our neighborhoods will die.” At some events, when parents and community members stood up to speak, it was hard to distinguish whether they were speaking about FDHS or the community in which it was located. Yet the district’s administrators never addressed this confluence of school and community interests.

In his study of school–community conflict, Larson (1997) found that the “administrators’ unwillingness to acknowledge the concerns of the African American community posed a dilemma for the Black community” (p. 334). Should they challenge the system in the face of stereotypically angry Black parents or should they be supportive of school personnel who would make decisions about their children? Parents in the FDHS East Side community chose protest. Thus, the parents, community members, politicians, school board members, and administrators all expressed a historically linked understanding of schooling, but the administrators persisted in their emphasis of school facts. Despite the fact that school administrators tried to focus the dialogue on school achievement, attendance, and finance, the community members routinely pointed to community-based factors much broader than the school:

Don’t close any schools—you will be killing and closing our community. (A community member during a town hall meeting)

Again, the school community related the potential of school closings back to actions and sensibilities linked to the larger history of San Julio’s Black community. CRT scholars (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) argue that these remarks from the community center elevate the voices of marginalized Black parents. So when one of the parent-leaders exclaimed: “You just want to shut down the East Side,” it not only demonstrated parents’ linkages between school and community but also their willingness to directly challenge the district’s public discourse related to the potential closings. In effect, they forced the administrative discourse to engage a community discourse, and they were ultimately successful. This is an indication that community members disregarded the technical-rational reasons for closing the schools—in much the same way that administrators disregarded racialized explanations of the proposed school closure.



### *School Administration in Broader Racialized Contexts*

These findings suggest that school administrators divorced their actions from considerations outside of their immediate school environments, yet our findings suggest that school administrative behaviors should actually should be enacted and performed while considering the sociohistorical contexts of their community members. After being challenged by a graduate student in his class to move on from discussions of race and talk about more “important stuff,” López (2003) bemoaned the lack of discourse on the complexities of race in educational leadership programs. He writes:

The “important stuff” in educational leadership is not about creating schools that work for all children but rest in the more technical matters of school finance, organizational theory, leadership theory, and other staple topics. . . . Unfortunately, these beliefs are informed by the very structure of our leadership preparation programs. (p. 70)

Findings in this study suggest that community members interpreted behaviors in very racialized ways. Although the administrators claimed to rely on data-driven decisions, their decisions seemed to have completely underestimated or miscalculated the explosive racialized community responses that followed. The findings support Larson’s view that school administrators often ignore community-based voices and instead reinforce oppressive or marginalizing practices that are present in both schools and society. They performed leadership in a way that was virtually inconsiderate of any of the political ramifications that might follow the closing of a community school, particularly in a racialized or politicized community. This would make sense, as scholarship suggests that school administrators exhibit *safe*, *official*, or *predictable* leadership behaviors in contexts or situations that are contentious or unfamiliar (Larson, 1997). It seems apparent that the administrators interviewed in SJISD were not trained to incorporate community-based perspectives into their leadership practices. Time and again, East Side residents mentioned the issue of race and its constant recurrence in their local history. This indicates that the community members had an expanded view of the role of school administrators that traversed both physical boundary (i.e., the school wall) and time (historical racist practices in the area). This belief is illustrated in the following two comments:

Well, there was a range of emotions, mostly anger but you know, like, you know how dare you rob us again. Here were are, the East side has been continually neglected. (Parent advocate)

But I think that, to me it looks like there's not been the right resources put in to FDHS. They've done things with the boundaries. They've done things that impact the enrollment at FDHS. So, some of this to me looks intentionally, so. (Parent advocate)

When community members complained of neglect, marginalization, and discrimination, they implied or stated that it was a result of the concentration of Black residents. Ironically, the FDHS principal avoided conversations around the most politically charged claim from community members—race.

### *Summation of Findings*

An analysis of the interview data, print media, school records, and transcribed district-held meetings about closing FDHS led to three major findings. The first major finding suggests that urban Black parents defined school differently than the school officials; indeed for them, it was perceived more broadly than a mere building. For these parents and community members, both the reality of school and the ideal of what school represents are reflective of their entire neighborhood community. This reflection is not only geographical but also encompasses the historical lens of marginalization and racism. This social construction of school led them to consider a different set of factors when they assessed situations related to FDHS. Thus, when school officials threatened to close *their* school, they interpreted this as an affront to their entire community. They complained that closing the school would “kill us economically” and that it would “destroy the entire East Side.” Despite the administrators’ practice of narrowly viewing schools as isolated buildings to be efficiently managed, parents and community members claimed power by defining what “school” meant for their community. Ironically, as many urban principals complain about a dearth of parental involvement, the parents and community members in this case used their collective voices to become involved by reshaping a dialogue and advocating for something about which they felt strongly.

The second major finding illustrates the tendency of urban school administrators to hide behind technical-rational administrative reasoning, as described by Williams (1991). When the FAC was appointed to determine which schools would be closed, they based their decision on calculable prescribed indicators such as drop-out rate, standardized test scores, enrollment rate, and iniquitous cost of running a low-enrollment school. However, this approach ostensibly divorced consideration of the central role of race or any other social, political, or historical factors that might have been considered as part of the decision-making process. It is these community perceptions that

shaped the ontologies of the community members who viewed race as central to the attempted closing of FBHS. For example, when directly told about the community members' accusations of racism, the school principal constantly deflected the questions saying that he could not "speak on that" or that his only job "was to improve scores and increase enrollment" or to simply "graduate kids." This administrative disposition was oblivious to the claims and sensibilities of FDHS community members. This avoidance of race and refusal to address the concerns of community members only seemed to further enrage community members and to spur their claims of racism. The principal could not understand that their accusations of racism were not directed at him per se but rather at the racialized context that they had always encountered in the context of life on the East Side. This is what drove the community and motivated them so intensely. In reality, for parents it was not at all about a school closure—it was about continued mistreatment and racism.

The race-conscious perceptions of the community members and their tendency to interpret administrative behaviors as racist was the third and, perhaps the most crucial, finding. This finding is especially important because it disallows administrators from merely focusing on technical-rational factors. Instead, it forces them to engage racialized community-based voices and to consider an array of historical and cultural issues. In our study, this is not something with which the administrators felt comfortable. By utilizing CRT as a conceptual lens and incorporating elements of a CRM, we placed the perceptions and stories of community members at the core of our analysis. We also found that community stakeholders will interpret school behaviors—and in this case, administrative behaviors—on the basis of their own collective experiences. This third finding suggests that, although community members valued education, they viewed school administrators, especially district administrators, as "officials" and thus regarded them as marginalized communities have *always* viewed "officials." If attentive to their local contexts, local school administrators might begin to consider how their administrative actions might be interpreted—even resisted—by their stakeholder populations. At the same time, schools were also symbolic of cultural cohesiveness and hope. The finding here indicates that administrative behaviors are viewed through racialized lenses and suggests that urban school administrators must consider the communities and local socialized realities in which they sit.

## Conclusions

FDHS is representative of the enduring conflict between school and marginalized communities in so many ways. School administrators and the community

members they serve often perceive the world and events very differently. This study demonstrated these conflicting perspectives and places an onus of engagement on school administrators since they have traditionally had more power in defining and controlling dialogue in school–community relationship. For example, the administrators mocked the East Side community members by saying, “and at the last parent–teacher’s conference, no one showed up!” This could be understood as a suggestion that if the parents were truly committed to education and their children, they will come to our parent–teacher conferences. But this, again, indicates the administrators believe themselves to have sole ownership of what it means to be an involved parent. Any alternative ways of engaging schools—such as the culturally nuanced ways described by Siddle Walker (1993) in her research of historic Black communities—was not at all considered.

Ultimately, a critical question became, “Whose voice was important and whose voice would be privileged in the conflict between the community and the school district.” To us, the question was not whether or not the community members’ voices were closer to the truth but that they were not responded to or seriously considered in any meaningful public way. Entrapped in their own historical obliviousness and privilege, administrators could see no truth but their own and were dismissive of all other suggestions. When the community members expressed their claims at community forums, the administrators simply listened but did not respond to the claims. Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of their lack of response is that it was highly symptomatic of the institutionalized racism that plagues U.S. schools. The lack of response did not at all seem intentionally racist. Rather, because the communities concerns failed to fit into an abstracted, quantified, technical-rational framework, these responses were not incorporated into the decision-making process of the district officials. Instead, the district continued to press a narrative of dispassionate neutrality. Thus, without conscious racist intentions the institutional processes carried out by these administrators would have ignored the perspectives of FDHS’s Black/Latino community if this community had not staged vigorous protest. By taking a radical stance that opposed the district’s plan, the FDHS Black/Latino community’s actions offered a critique of liberalism that challenged the allegedly race-neutral policies offered by the district. This leads us to wonder about all of the other communities of color, across the state and the country, that do not have the same mobilizing powers as found in San Julio.

This research calls urban educational administrators, as well as those by whom they are trained, to consider how poor, minoritized urban community members will interpret their administrative actions. Giving strong consideration to the voices of marginalized groups is important, not only because their

voices may indeed be very powerful and subversive but also because as educators we *say* that we are committed to equity, equal representation, and social justice. This study indicates that as educators and politicians design and implement policy, they must be aware of the fact that the policies and processes of institutions like schools have emerged from White middle- and upper-class perspectives and, thus, should be scrutinized in ways in which they might embody institutionalized racism. Administrators, including racial minorities, must critique their own practice so that they do not inadvertently push for dominant discourses and practices that reinforce racism. They must likewise be aware of the histories, perceptions, and sensibilities—indeed, the voices—of the persons they serve. To ignore community voices is to marginalize and delegitimize them. Moreover, to only promote the administration’s voice, particularly at a time of conflict or misunderstanding, is to ignore any legitimate gripes that the community has regarding racism or other injustices. This essentially reproduces and reifies systems of oppression that exist.

In some regard, it is unimportant if the community members of FDHS were correct in their perceptions and allegations of racism. What is important however—and what the meta-story of this research seems to indicate—might be realized in the following two questions: How can school leaders actually lead while considering and responding to stakeholder voices? And how can school leaders learn to be not only racially and culturally sensitive but also historically sensitive to the very real lived histories that community members layer on their perceptions of administrative behaviors (whether they feel these histories are accurate or not)?

### *Implications for Urban School Leadership Preparation*

This research has deep implications for how school administrators must approach contentious issues in urban, poor, marginalized communities. Regarding wealthier districts, Lareau’s (2001) work illustrates that wealthier families and communities have a level of cultural and social capital that facilitates community interest in school decision making. But these salient mechanisms only partially exist in working-class communities. Other scholars show that the problem may also lie in how communities view schools and their places therein (Arriaza, 2004; Siddle Walker, 1993). Moreover, assumptions cannot be made about collaborations across minority communities. In predominantly Black communities, Latino, Arab, Hmong, and other minorities may still feel marginalized despite the district administration’s own (predominant) status as a racial minority. This is true because as Solorzano and Yosso (2002) have pointed out, racial and cultural minorities often hold and sustain “majoritarian” views of other racial minorities.

Minority group members, in other words, may be perceived as (and can actually be) oppressive, dismissive, or racist when they occupy leadership positions. This has far-reaching implications for how professors in educational leadership training programs frame discussions about race, inclusion, equity, access, and social justice. Therefore, it is important to understand that “personalized” racism is only one type of racism and that its macro-level effects are often minimal in today’s society. In this regard, we are forced to look at macro-level *systems* and *behaviors* associated with White supremacy and racism—as opposed to looking merely at individuals—despite the race of the individual perpetrating the offense. This type of understanding is reflective of the perspective offered by CRT and, therefore, represents a theoretical lens that offers potential urban educational leaders a powerful theoretical tool for understanding the racialized contexts of educational policy and practice. It is of paramount importance that urban leadership preparation programs prepare principals to deal with these racialized contexts.

We know from Larson’s research that obstinately emphasizing only an administrative view will not work to address the concerns of diverse communities. But Larson (1997) also demonstrated that when confronted with perplexing or incomprehensible circumstances, principals tend to seek the safety of seemingly neutral, technical-rational administrative behaviors. We now know that this neutrality is often detrimental to their leadership practice. In leadership preparation programs there must be specific consideration of both the historical and current racialized contexts of local school communities and the dwindling resources in public education. Therefore, principals must be trained to communicate in a way that recognizes and respects all stakeholder interests. As Yosso (2006) notes, “Anzaldua urges the generation of theories based upon those whose knowledge is traditionally excluded from and silenced by academic research” (p. 181). We would add that school administrators likewise need to attend to the knowledge and voices of communities of color who have traditionally been excluded from administrative decision making. This is not easy to do, but when stakeholder concerns are at the center of the dialogue, then more trust and a greater rapport can be accomplished. In conclusion, preparation programs must therefore train leaders to avoid neutralistic approaches that emphasize a belief that quantitative measures represent inherently objective and value-free methods for analyzing educational policy and practice. Alternatively, preparation programs should emphasize the need of educational leaders learning about the importance of embracing the histories and narratives of stakeholders in their school communities in ways that reflect the continued influence of race on urban educational policy.

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