

# RACISM IN THE SCHOOLS

*a response utilizing laboratory training*

Both before and since the Kerner Report a variety of efforts to root out racism in schools have been suggested. Hire more black teachers! Change the curriculum! Change the textbooks! Add black history courses! Community control! And so the list goes. Many of these changes have been implemented and with some success.

Training has also been suggested, especially as a means of sensitizing teachers to the needs of minority group children. Much of the emphasis has been on urban schools with heavy concentrations of minority group children. Little attention, however, has been given to suburban school districts and yet, the need, it can be argued, is equally as great.\* This article reports on an experiment in laboratory training with a focus on racism which was conducted in a suburban school system.

## BACKGROUND

Lawrence Township, New Jersey, is in the process of significant change. It has 20,000 residents with a public school enrollment of 3,700. Blacks comprise 12 percent of the population. It is somewhat above the average wealth of most New Jersey School Districts with a per pupil assessment in excess of \$39,000.

The community enjoys an enviable reputation in the Delaware Valley for having one of the more forward-looking school systems. Relatively little overt racial friction, vandalism or disruption had been publicized.

However, in the spring of 1968, a group of black parents came to the Lawrence Board of Education and presented 28 allegations of discrimination which had occurred in the high school. The school board listened and suggested that the

superintendent look into them. His findings were few. One surprising characteristic, however, was that school personnel were hesitant to discuss race relations openly, or objectively.

The Board of Education formed a 12-member Human Relations Committee, which included six black and six white residents, charged with reviewing incidents of a racial nature and bringing these concerns to the Board of Education.

The Human Relations Committee met for four months and recommended that in-service training focusing on racism be provided for all professional personnel in the school. The New Jersey Community Action Training Institute (CATI) of Trenton was one of the agencies contacted. After investigation, it was agreed that residential laboratory training would be desirable and that CATI would conduct the program.

A steering committee was formed including administrators, department chairmen, board members, teachers and interested residents.

CATI representatives and the steering committee agreed that four laboratories would be held and that board members and parents, in addition to school faculty, would be invited. Attendance would be on a "first-come, first-served" basis. Since it involved meeting on Saturday and Sunday as well as during teaching days, no school personnel would be "pressed" to attend.

The program began on Wednesday evening and ran through Sunday afternoon. This meant, in effect, that the school system "gave up" two days of class time (Thursday and Friday) while the participants "gave up" two days of free time (Saturday and Sunday).\*\*

Priority was given to board members, administrators, department chairmen, teachers, and interested parents who had worked closely with the schools on a P.T.A. or advisory committee basis.

\*\*This also meant that the school system had to pay substitutes to cover the classes of the teacher-participants.

GLENN M. PARKER  
*Director*  
*New Jersey Community*  
*Action Institute*  
*Trenton, New Jersey*

and

WILLIAM O'CONNOR  
*Superintendent of Schools*  
*Seneca Falls, New York*  
*formerly Superintendent of Schools*  
*Lawrence Township, New Jersey*

\*See e.g., Thomas Cottle, "Strategy for Change," *Saturday Review*, Sep. 20, 1969, for a report on another program in a suburban district. On the general subject of training and systems for change in schools, see two books edited by Goodwin Watson: *Concepts for Social Change and Change in School Systems*, National Training Laboratories, National Education Assn., 1967.

Sessions were limited to approximately thirty participants.

While this was CATI's first school system project, the Institute had been conducting laboratory training as part of its total effort. Racism is also very much a part of its work since both the staff and board is multi-ethnic with backgrounds in civil rights and community work. The staff assigned to the Lawrence project was ethnically mixed with varying degrees of educational background and work experience. They were chosen not only for training competence, but for their ability to relate to a diverse participant group.

### NEEDS ASSESSMENT

In preparation for the program, an extensive needs assessment process was conducted by the Institute staff with the assistance of a consultant. The consultant was thoroughly grounded in laboratory training. He also provided entry credentials as an "educator."

The assessment process included visits to each school to get a reading on the "climate" of the system. The central purpose of the visits, however, was to conduct both group and individual interviews with potential participants, explaining the program and asking the participants to discuss areas of concern or needed skill improvement to which the training might be addressed.

By far, the major concern expressed at these meetings was race and race relations. That concern was expressed in a variety of ways:

- is separatism necessary in the search for a black identity?
- what daily things in the life of a black child enhance his self-esteem?
- why have the parents of the black children turned us off?
- how do you deal with black boys if there are no black male teachers in the school?

Other needs were also cited:

- how can we succeed with problem pupils - black or white - if their parents don't care about them?

- how can we achieve more parental involvement and support in the schools?

### GOALS

The staff believed firmly that the participants tended to view the problems on an intellectual rather than a feeling level. Thus, sources of problems were seen as "out there" - the black child, parents, textbooks, society. Accordingly, it was determined that the goals of the program would be to help the participants:

1. become more aware of their own behavior and its impact on others.
2. understand the dynamics of group action; their role and the role of others in a group.
3. learn how to learn from their own experience.
4. increase their interpersonal skills - relating to other individuals and working with others in groups.

The more specific goals related to racism were:

1. become more aware of their own racist attitudes.
2. understand the impact of their racist attitudes on others.
3. change their attitudes toward blacks and other minority groups.
4. increase their interpersonal skills in relating to blacks and other minority groups.

### ORIENTATION

Prior to each laboratory, an orientation session for the participants was held. The staff briefly outlined the program, logistics and scheduling details. Participants were given an opportunity to ask questions. It was generally agreed that the orientation was poor. Further discussion of the orientation follows later.

### TRAINING SITE

The program was held in a residential retreat setting. A motel at the New Jersey shore offering off-season low rates was used. Since it was off-season, there were minimal distractions.

### OPENING SESSION

After dinner on Wednesday evening, the group met for orientation. The staff was introduced and the program outlined. It was explained that for most of the weekend the training would take place in three small groups (T-Groups), but that at various times, including the final session, they would meet as a total group to share learnings and receive input from the staff.

Either verbally or in writing, or both, participants then discussed why they came and set individual goals for the weekend. The opening session concluded with a "warm-up" exercise called the social barometer. The barometer is a scale on the wall beginning with "-100" at one end through "+100" at the other end. Several participants are asked to stand at "0" and then move to points on the scale which reflect their feelings about certain issues or concepts. The issues are called out by the other members of the group. After about three minutes, several other participants take their place until everyone has been involved. The exercise provided useful data for analysis in the T-groups, not only on attitudes toward a variety of issues but also on feelings toward taking a "public" position on controversial and personal areas. For example, a young black participant with an Afro hair style was questioned as to why she did not take more positive (i.e., militant) positions on black power, black teacher organizations, etc. The resulting discussion produced useful learning on perceptions and stereotyping.

### T-GROUPS

The basic learning vehicle was the T-group. The groups generally included about ten people. Some attempt was made to mix the groups according to race, sex, age and classification (teacher, board member, etc.).\*\*\* Two trainers

---

\*\*\*The importance of mixing became clear during the second seminar when the only black person in one of the groups was the trainer. He was, as a result, forced at various points to move into the role of a participant.

were assigned to each group.

It is impossible to describe what happened in the T-groups since each group had a life of its own. The groups generally began either by picking up data from the opening session or by creating a new agenda based on more immediate concerns of the participants. Since race is a very sensitive subject, the first day usually moved very slowly with a strong tendency toward discussing problems from the "there-and-then" world. This provided an opportunity for the trainers to make norm-setting interventions on such things as "here-and-now" focus, criteria for useful feedback, etc.

It should be noted that the process of learning how to learn was perhaps more difficult for a school system. Many participants consider themselves experts on learning theory and, more importantly, are conditioned to a "teacher-tell" style of learning. Some firmly believe that one learns about racism from a lecture on racism.

Accordingly, trainer interventions were more frequent than is usual in T-Groups and often there was a need for focused exercises to move the group toward the objectives.

In general, after the first day, the T-Groups became an extremely intense experience. The norms had been set and the trust level increased to the point where risk-taking was possible. Learning was, nevertheless, difficult since racial attitudes and racist behaviors are deep-rooted and resistant to change. Additionally, for many participants, association with black people had been sporadic and sometimes virtually non-existent. Therefore, hearing that a particular attitude or behavior was perceived as racist was often painful.

No attempt was made to assure similarity among the three groups. The trainers were given a free hand to determine the operation of their groups, although there were meetings of the staff during the day to compare notes and give assistance where needed. These meetings were also used to discuss the timing and content of total group sessions. The

total group sessions were not pre-scheduled, rather they were set by the staff as the need was determined.

### **THEORY AND GROUP PROBLEM-SOLVING SESSIONS**

At several points during the weekend, the total group was reconvened. The purpose of the sessions varied according to the needs of the group. They were often scheduled after lunch or dinner to lighten the tension of the T-Groups. In addition to providing a needed safety valve for the T-Groups, these sessions were used to share learnings or bring problems to the attention of the total group for analysis. It was often an opportunity for the staff to make theory or informational inputs on group behavior or the psychology of racism.

In one session, a problem generated in one group was role played by several participants and analyzed by the group. In another session, after a good deal of problem analysis, the group was given a problem-solving exercise which focused on racism in the school.

### **OTHER ACTIVITIES**

Other activities were of an informal nature. Films, such as the NET special "Where is Prejudice," were shown and discussed. The staff was available in the evenings to discuss broader questions such as black student demands for separate facilities and programs, recent episodes of violence in cities and on campuses. Discussions were held on laboratory training. Some individual consultation also took place in the evening.

Perhaps most important were the informal contacts among the participants. These discussions ranged from a follow-up on issues raised in the T-Groups to a sharing of learnings among participants from different T-Groups as well as how the learnings could be applied "back home."

### **MATERIALS**

Each participant was given a kit of reading materials for study following the

weekend. The kit included various pieces on racism and education, such as Kozol's, "Death at An Early Age," a long review of "Pygmalion in the Classroom" by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobsen from *Psychology Today* and "The Student as Nigger" by Gerald Farber. The latter article, which contains a good deal of profane language, was removed after opponents of the program used it as a basis for attacking the training.

The materials were not used during the training. However, they provided a good starting point for many participants who wanted to re-educate themselves immediately upon their return.

### **EVALUATION**

The problems of evaluating training are legion and have been well documented. Although considerable attention has been given to evaluation design, it remains somewhat primitive. The problem is magnified when laboratory training is being evaluated.

The basic evaluation instrument in this program was a written reaction form completed by the participants following the training. Additional data was collected by the trainers who made visits to the schools following each seminar to observe classes and talk with participants.

About two to three weeks following each seminar a meeting was held with the participants. At the meeting there was an informal discussion of "happenings" since the training. It was believed that the reaction form should not be completed at the end of the weekend, as is usually the case, but rather after participants had some time to test their learnings in the real world. This, it is assumed, increased the validity of the results.

The evaluation instrument included eight open-ended questions:

1. What is the singular most important result of participating in the program? (either positive or negative)

2. In specific terms, how has the program effected your performance in the classroom?
3. In specific terms, how has the program effected the relationship you maintain with your co-workers and supervisors?
4. Has there been any difference in the way you view your students or the way they view you?
5. What effect has the program had on the non-participants?
6. Do you feel that participation in the program should be mandatory? If yes, please explain.
7. Can you offer suggestions for improving the program? (consider the entire process from preliminary orientation to follow-up)
8. What positive and/or negative feelings do you have specifically in regard to the residence aspect of the program?

## RESULTS

There were 97 participants in the program. All but five reacted favorably. The main objections were concerned with the confrontation techniques which they saw as harsh and unnecessary and the use of profane language which they claimed was excessive. A summary of responses to the eight questions on the evaluation instrument follows:

1. *Most important result:* Although it is difficult to summarize responses to this question since they were so personalized, a majority of the participants saw the most important result of the program to be a greater awareness of their behavior and attitudes and its impact on others.
  - It has made me more aware of or sensitive to others' feelings and how I may affect them without meaning to.
  - Understanding one's own behavior and the way people react to it will bring people closer together. One learns that it is never too late to learn, create and to change attitudes.

The next most frequent response dealt

with a change in the way they relate to others.

- an increase in the whole viewing of my motives and an improvement in the way I relate to my students and co-workers.
- a change in how I respond. Instead of telling I listen, accept their response, give choices, etc.
- I feel a greater eagerness to meet my students and co-workers. I am enjoying both more and am able to hold more meaningful conversations with them. I found that the students and I have more to talk about, laugh about and cooperate about.

A few participants specifically pointed to a change in their attitudes toward minority groups.

- I realized that I really did have many prejudices that I did not realize I had. I also feel I am more concerned about people as individuals, than as just belonging to a group.

### 2. *Impact on classroom performance:*

For the classroom teachers, there was an almost universal increase in concern for the student - his feelings and reactions and, in general, a more participatory attitude. A few specifically mentioned an increased concern and competency in the area of race.

- there is a very great sense of freedom but responsible behavior. I am not in charge of the children, they are in charge of themselves. I work in small group instruction. Also, I've been striving for this kind of reaction from children for seven years - the experience I encountered at the training institute showed me why it hadn't happened yet - I didn't let it happen - and now it is - thank you!
- I have made a more concerted effort to seek text books depicting black students and black figures in positions of authority.
- I feel I can answer questions that students have about black-white relationships more adequately than before the conference.

An administrator put it this way:

- I'm not in the classroom but it has given me a much greater commitment to aiding the cause of human understanding between the races. I see it now as a more urgent, personal matter and something that I cannot postpone any longer. . . . this year I have done more than talk about recruiting Negro teachers - I'm doing it.

A parent participant saw the impact on the school through his children:

- as a parent, it has had a most significant effect on my children. They are happier, have much more trust in their teachers and are developing a greater sense of wanting to learn rather than "having to" learn.

3. *Relationships with co-workers and supervisors:* The response was uneven. About one-half felt their relationships had improved significantly while the remainder felt relations had deteriorated. It seems clear the response varied from school to school. For example, one participant reported:

- the general atmosphere is warmer - less competitive - less pressure. There's a definite improvement in my relationship with the principal. We are both more positive in our approach and more receptive to suggestion.

While another wrote:

- I wonder if the program hasn't done more harm than good. There are definite cleavages, mistrust and suspicion.

The split, for the most part, developed between those who attended the program and those who did not. The following response is illustrative:

- I don't feel as 'accepted' by others on the staff as I was before I went away. Those who are against the seminars consider me on the "other side." Those of us who went away have become closer.

4. *Perceptions of students:* Almost without exception, participants saw a positive change in the way they viewed their students and in some cases were able to detect a change in their students' view of them.

- I view them more as individuals rather than as a group.
- I benefited from the description in our group of how a black child feels in a very white situation. I think I have a slightly better view now of this feeling.

- a number of parents remarked to me at the end of the first week after the seminar that their children had remarked "Gee Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ really likes me."

5. *Effect on nonparticipants:* The non-participants fell into three categories - some were curious, some felt

“left out,” and some were openly hostile to the program and the participants. The response of nonparticipants was conditioned by:

- a. the inability of the participants to adequately explain what happened
  - b. the rumor mill which told of wild episodes during the training
  - c. the close relationships which developed among those who attended and
  - d. the wholesale attack on the program by some personnel and a segment of the larger community.
6. *Should the program be mandatory?* More than 70 percent of the participants felt the program should not be mandatory. Those who believed participation should be mandatory saw the purpose so vital that all school personnel should be required to attend.

7. *Needed improvements in the program:* The most frequently mentioned changes suggested were better orientation, follow-up sessions and an increased focus on the problems of re-entry.

About 30 percent of the participants made specific reference to the inadequacy of the orientation prior to the weekend. Almost as many participants expressed a desire for follow-up sessions. These sessions would deal with both re-entry problems and discussions of how learnings were applied. A number of participants felt that the problems of re-entry were not adequately handled. They experienced great difficulty in making the transition from the laboratory world to their home and work.

8. *Residential setting:* Without exception, participants felt that holding the program in residence at a site removed from Lawrence Township was beneficial and for most, “indispensable.”

## COMMUNITY RESPONSE

Following the second of the four seminars, the program became a community public issue. The effects spilled over into the adjacent communities of Princeton and Trenton, which were considering similar programs.

There had been little advance publicity about the program. Thus, when rumors about the program began circulating and splits developed among the faculty, the larger community became involved. The attacks came primarily from people outside the school system, although a sizable number of non-participants within the system formed part of the opposition.

Much debate took place in the local newspapers. Two full-page features, several news stories and about 20 letters to the editor were generated.

Two public board meetings – the first attended by about 400 people and a second which drew nearly 650 – were devoted to the program. The seminars were also discussed at other board meetings and were cited in a dispute involving the resignation of the high school principal.

The nature of the opposition was varied and, therefore, not easy to summarize or explain.

Within the school system, opposition centered:

- in the junior and senior schools. Several participants in the first seminar who returned dissatisfied with the training were from these schools and presumably discussed it with their colleagues.
- on attendance, which was voluntary, but some felt that they were being intimidated into participating either by their colleagues or by the training staff.

Outside the system, the attack focused on:

- the evils of sensitivity training in general. There were some standard right-wing attacks on the training as “brain-washing,” “a communist tool” and “Hitler-inspired.”
- the credentials of the trainers. As one of the letters to the editor of a local paper stated: “The persons assigned to conduct the training sessions are not seriously qualified to do so. They possess

no professional credentials as educators, social psychiatrists or psychologists. Yet, they have been given authority to administer a curious and highly-experimental exercise in group therapy, which involves all those fields of special competence.”\*\*\*\*

- the materials distributed to the participants. Specifically, the article, “The Student as Nigger” which contains what to some was “offensive” language and yet is an extremely useful piece on the student in American education. The article was removed after a board meeting when it was used by opponents to attack the training program. Removal of the article had no effect on the training.

In spite of the opposition, an overwhelming majority (at least 95%) of the participants remained firm in their support of the training. The school board and top administrators – many of whom had been participants – also continued to back the seminars.

An adequate assessment of the impact on the community has yet to be done. Some say there was a total polarization of the school system and the community at the end of the school year. Others say the division has been overemphasized due to the widespread publicity. Still others say the reaction has been salutary for both the school system and the community.

It does seem clear that the racial problems, both within the schools and in the township, surfaced as a result of the seminars. While some see this as creating divisiveness, exploding the myth that “there is no race problem in Lawrence” can only be judged useful.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR LABORATORY TRAINING IN SCHOOLS

1. *Community education:* There is no doubt that the effectiveness of this program was severely limited by the widespread opposition to the program in the community. Prior to the program, a series of community meetings must be planned to include an explanation of the program and, where appropriate, demonstrations of the training methodology. A written explanation of laboratory train-

\*\*\*\*Trenton Times, Apr. 29, 1969

ing should also be distributed. The public needs to understand the goals of the program and its ultimate value to the school system.

2. *Orientation:* A similar imperative applies to the potential participants. Each person should be given literature describing laboratory training as well as an outline of the goals and format of their program. The written material needs to be supplemented by meetings to further describe the program and training methodology. Attendance should, of course, be voluntary. But more important, no one should be tricked into coming or participate under false pretenses.

3. *Re-entry:* The standard laboratory training residential program requires that at least one session at the conclusion of the program be devoted to problems of re-entry into the home and work environment. The sensitive nature of racism training makes this mandatory.

4. *Follow-up:* In this program, insufficient funds prevented an extension follow-up to the weekend. Participants need an opportunity to test their learnings and then return to a laboratory for discussion and feedback. This was especially true in this program where the focus was ex-

tremely sensitive and resulted in considerable controversy. The re-entry and follow-up sessions are obviously intimately related and need to be designed to connect for the benefit of the participants and the school system.

5. *Trainers:* The question of credentials is extremely important in American education. The holding of an academic degree is somehow a presumption of effective performance. While participants never questioned the credentials of the trainers, non-participants in the school system and community residents raised the issue repeatedly. Since CATI is community and not university-based and none of the trainers have NTL or other similar affiliations (although the staff was trained by an NTL Associate), this became a point of attack for opponents. The Training Institute and the school administration resisted all efforts to bend on this issue. They maintained that the training should be judged on the basis of its results and not the degrees of the trainers.

## LLBA LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE BEHAVIOR ABSTRACTS

A multidisciplinary quarterly providing access to the current U. S. and foreign literature in

### LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE BEHAVIOR

More than 1000 abstracts per issue from 900 journals in 25 languages and 25 disciplines

Philosophy of Language  
Linguistics (General)  
Descriptive Linguistics  
Semiotics  
Rhetoric and Stylistics  
Sociology of Language  
Applied Linguistics  
  
Psychology (General)  
Psycholinguistics  
Neurology and Genetics  
Psychology of Perception  
Psychology of Learning  
Developmental Psychology

Personality and Social Psychology  
Psychopathology  
Mathematical Psychology and Psychometrics  
Educational Psychology  
Special Education

Psychoacoustics  
Hearing Physiology  
Hearing Pathology  
Phonetics  
Speech Physiology  
Speech Pathology  
Communication Sciences

Subscriptions: \$45.00 for institutions; \$15.00 for individuals

### LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE BEHAVIOR ABSTRACTS

The University of Michigan  
256 City Center Building  
220 East Huron Street Ann Arbor, Michigan 48108

## CONCLUSION

The Kerner Commission report identified racism as a pervasive and debilitating force in our society. In this project, a small suburban school district, in conjunction with a community-based training institute, undertook an experimental program to deal with the issue.

The results have important implications for both trainers and educators, as well as for others involved in social change. It is clear, that in spite of the obstacles encountered, change is possible — the response of the participants supports this. However, it is also clear that laboratory training in schools is approaching sex education, community control and busing as a major controversial issue. Therefore, planners must be prepared not only to design a comprehensive effort but also to negotiate with a variety of opponents.