

Teacher Leadership: Contending with Adversity

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A life history of a male immigrant racial-minority teacher reveals not only how he makes sense of his own life but also how structural factors have shaped that life. I describe the work of such a “teacher leader”—a teacher whose relationships with students and colleagues extend beyond conventional classroom practice. I also show how his own experiences and intentions on the one hand, and administrative and collegial expectations on the other, shape the roles he plays in the implementation of equity goals.

L'histoire de la vie d'un enseignant immigrant faisant partie d'une minorité raciale révèle non seulement comment il donne un sens à sa vie, mais aussi comment les facteurs structurels ont façonné sa vie. L'auteure décrit dans cet article le travail d'un tel “leader éducateur”—un enseignant dont les relations avec ses élèves et ses collègues ne se confine pas aux pratiques pédagogiques habituelles. L'auteure explique en outre comment, d'une part, les expériences et les intentions de cet enseignant et, d'autre part, les attentes de la part de l'administration et des collègues ont une incidence sur les rôles qu'il joue dans la mise en place d'objectifs en matière d'équité.

One remedy proposed for the difficulties that North American schools experience in responding to a multiracial, multiethnic, and multilingual student population (Carlson, 1992; Lewis, 1992) is the exercise of leadership by teachers. They are encouraged not only to recognize the broader social implications of their work and assume positions of deliberate “moral purpose” (Fullan, 1993, pp. 8–18; Hargreaves, 1994b), but also to enhance classroom instruction by cultivating greater understanding of their students' families, communities, and cultures (Banks, 1993; Olson & Mullen, 1990; Sleeter & Grant, 1987). They are expected to research their own teaching, develop curriculum, and assume an active role in determining school policies and programs (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1992; Lieberman, 1988a, 1988b; Little, 1993; Thiessen, 1992). In these prescriptive works, teacher leadership is interpreted as meaning not just the capacity for teachers to do this work themselves but also to inspire others to emulate them—thus improving education for an increasingly diverse student population.

Some observers contend that teacher leadership would be fostered by recruiting particular kinds of individuals into the profession (Fullan, 1993, p. 10). In Ontario, for example, the provincial government in 1993 attempted to increase the number of racial minority and immigrant educators. The logic of such action reflected a common assumption that such teachers have a positive impact on school equity efforts. But because minority teachers work in an overwhelmingly

White, Anglo-European teaching profession (Reynolds, 1990), it is important to understand not only the classroom and organizational roles they are required to play, but also the sensitivities and skills they bring to those roles.

In such contexts, life-history methods may be illuminating. Life histories of teachers chronicle individuals' personal victories, struggles, and development. They show how individuals act within, respond to, and represent the social contexts of their times and places, and they reveal connections between particular lives, past and present, and their practice both inside and beyond their classrooms (Goodson, 1992). Life histories of immigrant and minority teachers acknowledge some of the variations in lived experiences in schools and other settings and reveal aspects of personal development and work that may otherwise be overlooked when an individual's culture, school experiences, and status are taken for granted.

I first met Edgar Culver,¹ an immigrant from the Caribbean, an Indian-Asian man of Hindu ancestry, and a self-ascribed "Black man" who teaches English as a Second Language (ESL) in an elementary school in a southern Ontario city, through a teachers' professional-development project. He was one of the handful of people of colour in the project. Although all of the involved teachers were interested in collaborative work, Edgar was one of the few who seemed able to demonstrate publicly a vision of his work as socially transformative. On the basis of these initial impressions, I asked him to participate in a broader life-history study in which I participated between 1992 and 1994, that focussed on understanding the influence of race and ethnicity on teachers' professional identities.²

Written transcriptions of my taped interviews with Edgar (lasting approximately 12 hours) constitute the primary text for this life history. I also spent time in Edgar's classroom and school, observed his work with other teachers, attended a reading of his creative writing, and read various academic, creative, and journalistic pieces he had written. These observations provided grist for our discussions and helped me to understand the relationships between various aspects of Edgar's personal and professional life. In the interviews I attempted to elicit information about Edgar's childhood and experiences in school, his decision to become a teacher, his training and career history, his transition from the Caribbean to Canada, and the chronology and nature of his personal and professional life. These interviews may also be interpreted as Edgar's attempt to make sense of his own experience by constructing a thematically coherent narrative (Mishler, 1986). During one interview he said, "I'm seeing a lot of commonalities and a lot of similarities. I haven't changed that much." Throughout our interviews, Edgar demonstrated an awareness of the social and economic forces at work in his life and in the lives of other teachers and students.

Although Edgar's narrative provides the basis for this life history, I do not underestimate my role as "co-creator." The interview text is as much the result of my questions as of Edgar's own reflections. Our discussions prompted me to compare his experiences and perspective with those of other teachers in

the life-history project, and to examine his condition in relation to other studies on teacher leadership, the organizational context of teachers' work, and the experiences of cultural and racial minority teachers (Casey, 1993, pp. 107–153; Foster, 1992, 1994; Henry, 1992; Little, 1990; Ortiz, 1982; Wasley, 1991). My analysis reflected research on how schools structure social differences for children according to race and class (Young, 1987). Thus the interrogation process made it possible to situate Edgar's life in a wider social context (Harper, 1992, p. 142; Yin, 1984, p. 23).

TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

Edgar's attempts to "straddle cultures" and to incorporate multiple identities are recurring themes in his life history. He was born in the early 1940s in a rural area of a Caribbean country,³ into a family of East Indian descent. In our first interview, he described his early discomfort with aspects of his native culture: "I had a very rich upbringing as a child in terms of culture. I came from a Hindu background and I began to question some of the beliefs that I found in Hinduism in terms of the treatment of women and the old question about the caste system, and I began to question my own religion." As an adolescent, he came in contact with an alternative world view:

I was a young person, a teenager. One day I was coming out of the forest, and there were these White [Presbyterian] missionaries [from Canada] and they were forming a circle and they were playing the accordion and their religious music. . . . The music was beautiful . . . and I jumped into the middle of the ring and I started to dance. They were very polite and very embarrassed. . . . At the end of the meeting they gave me some peppermint candies and some books to read.

Although the books the missionaries gave Edgar to read were "challenging because of the difficulty of the theological terms," the Bible stories were "beautiful." Attracted by books and music, Edgar began attending services and meetings. Given the racial and ethnic stratification of his country, it is easy to understand why, for Edgar's family, his involvement with the missionaries was a shock and betrayal. But he discovered a passion, emotional, aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual, that became a "missionary spirit. I bought into that missionary work and became very active. I was good at it." As a Presbyterian Sunday-school teacher and lay minister, "I followed my mind. . . . I was getting the experience of working with a different racial group and understanding how they operated. There was the cultural input, and I straddled both cultures." The tension between Edgar and his family made him feel as if "part of my heart [was] in my own culture and I gave away half to the missionaries."

When Edgar completed secondary school in the early 1960s, the Presbyterians offered him a scholarship to theological school. But theological training

represented an “alien culture. . . . [It represented] refusing my culture, my way of life, my home, my thought patterns, the way I think about other people, the whole question of power and control, that was the big fear. . . . I was afraid I would become something else.” He chose a teaching career instead, reasoning that teaching was spiritual work and missionary work was “literacy work as much as it was religion; it went hand in hand.” And teaching was one of the few professional training options available within Edgar’s native country: “I wanted to stay in the country. . . . I wanted to stay and help.”

In teachers’ college, Edgar chose both familiar and challenging subjects: literature, which he loved—and he discovered in himself “an intense love for reading, a new appetite for reading because I was exposed to a sea of books”—and mathematics, a subject in which he had not previously been successful. Because the college was located in a city, Edgar’s new friends were urban sophisticates, “people whose parents were doctors or lawyers or teachers or middle-class people, not all poor like me.” Like the missionaries, these new contacts introduced him to a new experience, “a language of culture, a social language. I was hobnobbing with rich people, upper class, middle class. It gave me more scope. It made me appreciate good food and good company, it brought me away from my working-class roots.”

When he finished teachers’ college, Edgar chose to go back to the countryside, to a sugar plantation where there lived several thousand people whose ancestors, like his, originally had been brought from India to the Caribbean by the British. Here he met another teacher who had grown up on the plantation, and they married; their affiliation helped enhance his credibility and made him feel more rooted in the community. Teaching on the plantation was an opportunity to “learn again about my own culture, my own religion. The Christians took me away and gave me some nice Anglo-Saxon European culture and I questioned some of the assumptions they had.” Edgar visited his students’ homes, a practice that allowed him to re-acquaint himself with his own culture and develop an understanding of his students’ lives:

[I] sat with little Johnny and little Mary⁴ and talked to the parents, took a little food or whatever. . . . I was thinking that to know the child is to teach the child, even at that time, and I wanted to know what kind of home background my children come from, the family’s status, how many children, the kind of language spoken, the books in the home. I was looking for these things, and I was trying to build a relationship with the parents.

While on the plantation, Edgar began organizing sports activities across the region. Other educators tapped him for special roles: “I showed leadership qualities, they saw me and they thought I was a very active person in the profession.” He was elected to an official position in the national teachers’ union and sent to a training course that linked him with unionists from other occupations. These experiences afforded him a

broad vision of the world. . . . I got a lot of political consciousness, it informed me and sensitized me to the working conditions [of other occupations], so much so that sometimes in my history lesson I'd say [to my students], "How can we get out of this rut? We work like dogs all the time and these White folks from the north come and put you to work." . . . I was a radical teacher.

After five years of teaching on the plantation, education officials encouraged Edgar to consider further training. He was more than a little interested: "I [had] tasted it in teachers' college, and I found out that knowledge is power and strength." He and his wife emigrated to Canada, where he attended an agricultural school in Ontario with the expectation of returning to the Caribbean to teach farming techniques. His wife suffered a series of difficult pregnancies; her need for medical attention and the eventual births of their sons were some of the factors that kept them in Canada rather than returning home. When Edgar discovered that opportunities for small-scale farming in Ontario were practically nil, he returned to teaching. Like others who had taught in their native countries before arriving in Canada, he was required to take an education course to qualify for an Ontario teaching certificate. He also attended additional university courses "because I thought that if I want to learn this culture and I want to teach in this culture, I'd better learn the history and the literature."

After this "retraining" period and an accompanying series of low-paying jobs, Edgar obtained a teaching position in an elementary school near Toronto. He has taught in several different schools over the past 20 years, often as the only racial minority teacher on staff. He became an ESL teacher 10 years ago in response to the growing influx of non-English-speaking immigrant students in his school board. During several leaves, he studied linguistics, philosophy, gender issues, and multicultural education, and obtained a master's degree. His circle of professional colleagues now includes academics as well as other teachers. Over the years, he has developed a reputation, both regionally and farther afield, for helping teachers understand language and literacy issues as they are linked to the education of immigrant students. He also is active in Caribbean-Canadian community affairs. He describes his life in Canada as teaching, playing a major role in his sons' upbringing, and "reading and writing and researching. . . . So my children saw me talk and fight and teach and do all these things together."

His descriptions of Canada are often bleak, but although he returns to the Caribbean every summer to visit his family and work with other teachers, he is unwilling to leave Canada entirely.

This is a culture that's very harsh, very individualistic, it has no community. I fear for my sons [because of] the vulgar materialism that this culture has to offer. . . . Our children have no clue about life, they don't see life around them, life in the manifestation of animals, the garden. Here it's all inanimate, glitzy, material things, they don't have a personal experience with life. . . . [But] I have a family here, and I'm now reading

Voltaire's Bastards. That's the point I'm making. I cannot go back and live [in the Caribbean] forever and ever; I need to be able to read *Voltaire's Bastards* [and talk to people about what I'm reading].

His struggle simultaneously to contend with his native history, language, and culture, and to incorporate aspects of European and North American culture figures prominently in Edgar's recounting of his life. He has experienced feelings of "difference" from early adolescence: in questioning his own family's beliefs and practices, as a Presbyterian lay minister and a well-educated lower-class villager in his native country, and now as a "Black man"⁵ in Canadian schools and society. Edgar's identity as "other" engenders feelings not only of alienation and displacement, but also strength and even joy (Simon, 1987).

A BROAD CONCEPTION OF TEACHING

A growing body of scholarship describes how teachers' culture, class, race, and gender influence their occupational choices, actions, and opportunities (Acker, 1996; Casey, 1993; Foster, 1991, 1992, 1994; Henry, 1992; Reynolds, 1990; Robertson, 1992). Cultural, social, and economic forces affect an individual's choice of a teaching career and the value of teaching relative to other occupational choices (Louis, 1990; Reynolds, 1990). Edgar's story personalizes these phenomena: teaching represented a less stressful occupational choice than the ministry, but a choice sufficiently compatible in terms of personal aims and activities. Teacher training was locally available whereas other professional training was not. And teaching was considered an appropriate occupation for a young man whose family expected him to embark on a professional career.

Edgar's linkage of teaching to a broad sense of social purpose is consistent with other reports by Canadian teachers who attended schools or taught in Caribbean countries: there, as another teacher in the life-history project said, educated people typically were expected "to make a contribution to your community. Because you're being given training that many other people don't have. . . . Professionals have a responsibility to make a contribution to their society" (cited in Bascia, 1996). Henry (1992) has described how Caribbean-Canadian women teachers take responsibility for their students' moral and social as well as academic development both inside and outside the classroom. In our interviews, Edgar described how his first teaching position allowed him to "become one of the community. We could talk and I could see [parents as well as students] in the full light of their culture and I continued my work in terms of helping them deal with problems. I was not only a teacher, I was counsellor, I was advisor, giving advice on different things."

An associated theme in Edgar's teaching is a conception of students not as generic individuals but as members of particular families, communities, and

cultures. When his students leave their regular classrooms for his ESL room for one class period every other day, their histories, emotions, and understandings provide the grist for classroom work. Edgar's early experiences made him sensitive to ethnic and racial stratification. He is aware that immigrant children's "sometimes wrenching and painful cultural, social, and linguistic adjustments" derive not only from the transitional experiences of immigration *per se*, but because they face a persistent delegitimization of their values, perspectives, and ways of speaking at school and in Canadian society at large (Corrigan, 1987). Awareness of his students' circumstances drives Edgar's actions on their behalf: he will try, for example, to release a student from a punishment he believes was issued without sufficient knowledge or empathy. This "spill-over" from the typical student-teacher relationship into a broader advocacy role parallels reports of other teachers in the life-history study: "[checking] to see how my students are doing in their other classes," serving as intermediaries between minority students and other teachers, tutoring outside of school time, and working to help families negotiate an unfamiliar social service system (Bascia, 1996).

Edgar has worked with other teachers since his first days of union activism:

That's what I'm doing now, you see. This morning I went to visit a school and while I was driving I was thinking about this and I said, "You did the same thing when you were [first teaching in the Caribbean]!" . . . I've never left the classroom but I've been out doing other kinds of work the whole time.

Although conventional wisdom among North American educators has it that teachers who leave the classroom to work with adults are less than fully committed to children (Fay, 1992; Little, 1988, 1990), Edgar understands his ongoing work with other teachers—within his own school during an occasional "prep" period, and in other schools through his other professional-development work—as an extended form of advocacy for children. He describes a professional-development session in which he was involved earlier in the day of one of our interviews:

I was talking today with secondary school teachers . . . about some of the gaps which occur for newcomers, especially when the high school has its own agenda, when the curriculum prescribed by the [school] board or the [provincial] Ministry [of Education] is out of line with what the immigrant children bring from the old country: their experiences, their religion, their culture, their food, their knowledge, their geography, their history. So we're talking about literature, not only literature from the English-speaking world as such but literature that talks about promoting international understanding, literature that can humanize the classroom, literature that will pull kids together instead of separating them into different camps or different racial groups, we talked about that.

Reflecting on his first five years of teaching, Edgar says, "My God! Those were my best years in teaching. I understood how powerful the role of a teacher

can be. I really understood how people can hold you in awe. How people can respect you and seek your opinion. It provided me with a lot of leadership-skills practice; I mean I acquired these skills on the job.” In Canada, on the other hand, he perceives his condition as “second class, as not having a credible voice” as a “Black man” and an immigrant.

I get intellectually arrogant sometimes when people do not give credit to teachers, especially administrators who [treat us like] workers in the field, that we are in a classroom and we are locked away and they do not give us any credit for experience. . . . I’ve been lucky because I have managed to liberate myself from [a perspective limited to the classroom by] going out and getting new information from the university, from professors, from researchers like yourself, I have developed a kind of strategy whereby I can work in the classroom and out of the classroom and it’s my hope that down the line we have more teachers who will be able to move back and forth, so we can command more respect. . . . It’s a feeling of confidence. I can be confident among educators at any level.

Teaching is simultaneously a vehicle for Edgar’s talents and a means for enacting his sense of purpose in the world; it gives his life its shape. “I go home at night and driving in the car, in the shower, everywhere I am, I’m thinking about students in my class, how can I meet their needs, what can I teach them, how can I get them to write, and that never goes away.” Another time he said, “I love teaching. I wake up in the morning and I teach. It rejuvenates me.” Teaching is central in his life, not just in the sense of the power of his moral purpose but in terms of the variety of activities and relationships it entails. Edgar’s descriptions of his motives and activities stand in sharp contrast to scholarly conceptions of teaching as technical activity, as content-focussed, as classroom-specific, and as not allowing for a satisfying career (Huberman, 1993; Lortie, 1975). Teaching — as community leadership, as involving an understanding of the whole child, and as engagement with other educators — persists as a significant element of Edgar’s professional identity. Thus does Edgar confirm the existence of teachers who embody a conception of teaching as logically and morally coherent: “teacher leadership” is not merely the stuff of reformers’ hopes and dreams (Fullan, 1993; Hargreaves, 1994b).

CONSTRAINTS

In his role as mentor to other teachers, Edgar capitalizes on both his insider and outsider identities, as fellow teacher and expert. He shares materials, techniques, and ideas, demonstrating his expertise while taking care to portray himself as an equal, a colleague, another teacher. It is a testimony to his success that he is often invited into teachers’ classrooms to demonstrate teaching strategies. Describing his work with one teacher, he said,

I want him to relax and enjoy his profession, enjoy working with children. So it's empowering the individual as a teacher, talking, lunching together, coffee, that helps break the ice and then he feels less threatened by me. I'm not an official consultant for the Ministry [of Education], I'm not a bureaucrat, I am a professional just like [him]. [I talk] about all the experiences and all the knowledge that I've picked up with my direct contact with kids . . . that's what makes me credible. And also the readings that I do that pertain to my philosophy, my practice.

What he hopes to impart to other teachers is "a new and whole way of seeing things" (Gehrke, 1988)—the capacity to perceive students as full human beings and to construct effective and meaningful classroom practice.

Although in our interviews Edgar identified consistencies between his early experiences and his current teaching-related activities, he also spoke passionately about the challenges he faces in negotiating a meaningful professional identity. Like other teachers engaged in leadership, he struggles with administrative restrictions on his extra-classroom roles and activities. He is also aware of how professional norms limit teachers' advocacy on behalf of students and colleagues. His own experiences, compounded by his education, make him aware of the ways race and gender shape teachers' roles and relationships. But rather than paralyzing him, his awareness of these structural constraints impels his leadership work.

Administrative restrictions. In many educational settings, teaching is nearly exclusively conceived as time spent in a classroom with students. Teachers' learning, planning, and curriculum development occur outside regular school hours, at lunchtime, after school, during evenings, and on weekends. Edgar challenges these restrictions whenever he can. Although much of his professional-development activities occur after school hours, he occasionally works in other teachers' classrooms in his own school during his "prep" or "spare" periods—a radical step in a school context with few formal opportunities or precedents for teachers' collaborative work. In his discussions with teachers in other schools, Edgar prefers classroom work to after-school meetings. When he seeks his own principal's approval to travel to another school during the school day, however, he often finds his request denied; at other times, he must compensate for his time away from his own school by performing such additional tasks as yard supervision. Such restrictions are typical for teachers whose leadership extends beyond conventional job categories, norms, and schedules (Wasley, 1991). Edgar believes administrators place a higher premium on stability than on educational improvement. He also believes his superiors do not recognize his professional-development project's legitimacy because it is not sponsored by his own district; they seem mystified that he would choose to work on a project that will not advance his career within the district structure. Edgar reported that when his principal discovered his visits to other teachers' classrooms, she expressed surprise and asked other teachers whether he had "barged in" or had been invited. In Edgar's

estimation, these constraints also reflect the inability of his White superiors to recognize and respect the expertise and authority of a “Black man”—what might a minority teacher have that might be of value to other educators? This perceived absence of recognition and respect has been echoed by other minority teachers, including those in the life-history project, who believe they have been discouraged in their attempts to assume broader organizational roles (Foster, 1991, 1992; Moses, 1989; Ortiz, 1982).

Norms of autonomy and the limits of advocacy work. Some analysts have described how, in many school settings, the absence of opportunities for collegial work inhibits teachers’ ability to work effectively on behalf of their students (Hargreaves, 1994a, pp. 212–240; Little, 1982; McLaughlin, 1993). Edgar’s description of his school illustrates this tendency: although his colleagues are “friendly,” he is dismayed by the “superficiality” of their interactions. He believes his commitment to immigrant students is not shared by his school staff, and despite his work in other teachers’ classrooms, he believes he has little power to alter this lack of understanding. In schools in which there is little precedent for joint work, teachers put themselves at social and political risk when they attempt to transcend the norms of autonomy (Little, 1992). Edgar’s advocacy activities in his own school are limited to what he can do directly challenging a colleague or administrator. He seeks intellectual and moral sustenance outside his own school; beyond his academic contacts, he meets regularly with a group of teachers and other educators with whom he discusses literature, classroom issues, and “guerilla tactics”—how to survive and support unpopular issues in traditional school environments.

Race, class, gender, and other distinguishing features. Edgar is one of only two teachers of colour on his school staff. His sense of “difference” is consistent with that of other minority teachers whose life experiences, conceptions of teaching, different teaching assignments, and professional opportunities differ from those of their White colleagues (Casey, 1993, pp. 107–153; Foster, 1994). Beyond the philosophical isolation he feels for himself, Edgar describes his professional identity in schools, like his larger social identity in Canada, as significantly influenced by others’ perception of his difference from the norm (Hogan, 1982; Ng, 1987; Simon, 1987; Yancey, Ericksen, & Juliani, 1976). In Edgar’s experience, when educators “see a Black man, that’s not their idea of what a teacher is.”

Nearly all teachers in the life-history study filled special advocacy roles for minority students. As did Edgar, these teachers adopted these roles as the result of developing an empathy for students experiencing cultural and linguistic difficulties and discrimination, and being channelled into teaching assignments with minority students by virtue of their own minority status (Bascia, 1996). Other researchers have demonstrated that teachers identified with presumably less-able or desirable students receive less administrative support, have less influence on

school policies, and have less credibility and status among colleagues (Ball, 1987; Finley, 1984; Siskin, 1994). Edgar has applied unsuccessfully for administrative positions; he believes that the very behaviours that signal to administrators that a teacher is “leadership material”—speaking one’s mind, seeking opportunities for professional development and advancement—are perceived less favourably if exhibited by minority teachers because “[White administrators] don’t like an uppity Black man telling them what to do.”

Based on his experiences and his academic studies, Edgar sees parallels in the power relationships he has observed between Anglo-Canadians and more recent racial minority immigrants, between men and women, and between administrators and teachers. “Teachers are the niggers of the system,” he says. Speaking informally, he tries to impart this perspective on power relationships to his colleagues:

I started talking to them about women’s work, drawing the comparison between women’s work in the kitchen and the home and women’s work in the primary classroom. And I was saying, “Who can do it better than you can, who takes care of the children at home, who washes the dishes, who cooks, who makes up the bed, who does the preparation . . . and you came into this classroom and you set up the kids and you clean their noses and you organize them and you put out the paints and you pour the water.” And I went on and on and they listened and some of them got angry. . . . I was trying to motivate them to understand how much of their lives they put into teaching every day like I do, they talk around all day with children on their hands and thinking about educating children, [and administrators] don’t walk around with children on their hands.

For Edgar, the teachers’ anger represented the emergence of a “critical consciousness,” a watershed in their increased capacity to negotiate the education system. Although the low status of teaching in Canadian schools disturbs him, being able to recognize that status fuels his determination to challenge systemic inequities. There were times, he reports, when frustration and alienation made him to want to leave teaching, or to leave Canada entirely, but each year he re-committed himself to staying. As he sees it, there is important work to be done. If this is what teaching entails, then on most days he is willing to persist.

RETHINKING TEACHER LEADERSHIP

Edgar Culver exemplifies reformers’ notions of teacher leadership. An interest in improving the educational experiences of immigrant and minority children drives his activities both within and beyond the classroom. His interactions with and on behalf of his students are based on personal knowledge of, and involvement with, their families and communities. He continues to improve his own practice, and he looks for opportunities to mentor and assist other teachers. His academic and practical interests include not only the technical aspects of instruction but also the social and political contexts of teaching, and he brings the wealth of his conceptual understanding to bear upon his professional activities.

Life histories describe the interplay between individual actions and the structural factors that shape both what is desirable and what is possible. Edgar's life history helps us understand how his talents, training, and early teaching experiences contributed to making him the capable and committed teacher he is. But teachers' practices are also shaped by the opportunities available to them in the contexts in which they live and work. Edgar's interests in advocating for his students, and in helping other teachers work for social change, are affected by the social and organizational expectations for Canadian teachers in general and for minority teachers in particular. Edgar's frustrations also suggest that teachers may not have equal access to the same opportunities. Race, gender, or any of the other categories that differentiate teachers socially from one another, can produce systematic patterns of organizational advantage and disadvantage: differentiated access to knowledge, different decision-making authority, and different legitimacy and status (Ball, 1987, pp. 166–211; Bascia, 1996; Finley, 1984; Robertson, 1992; Siskin, 1994, pp. 113–149; Talbert with Ennis, 1990).

Edgar's story illuminates some of the paradoxes of teacher leadership in general. Teachers who elect to carry out teacher-leadership activities are not necessarily popular, especially when they champion issues that are contentious, potentially threatening, or not generally perceived as significant. The people with the experiential base and the conviction to engage in teacher leadership may not be able to bring about technical improvements or cultural changes in their organizations. These realities suggest that providing support for teacher leadership may indeed be a matter of establishing networks and systems outside of school settings (Lichtenstein, McLaughlin, & Knudsen, 1992; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Little, 1992, 1993). But although support groups and professional-development activities are crucial to sustaining teacher leaders as individuals, it is difficult to imagine how these extra-school communities and activities could bring about such educational change as the achievement of equity goals, which require the organizational response of whole schools.

Edgar's experiences, in short, illustrate the difficulty of conceiving of policies or programs that might encourage leadership by minority and other lower-status teachers. The diversity of teachers' skills and interests and the inequalities inherent in teachers' negotiation of professional roles and relationships suggest that employment-equity policies in and of themselves are unlikely to transform schools and other social institutions dominated by Anglo-European mainstream norms, values, and procedures. At the same time, this particular life history demonstrates the wealth of experience and the degree of commitment that teachers bring to bear upon their work, even and especially in settings that challenge their conceptions of teaching.

NOTES

¹ This is a pseudonym. The teacher's real first name is Anglicized, though his real surname is Indian-Asian.

- ² Financial support for the life-history study “Racial/Ethnocultural Minority Teachers: Identities and Careers” was provided by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The larger study involved 11 teachers and half a dozen researchers; each researcher worked exclusively with one or two teachers.
- ³ At Edgar’s request, the country is not specified.
- ⁴ These are the names (perhaps Anglicized for my benefit) that Edgar used in the interviews.
- ⁵ Although we did not specifically discuss why Edgar, a person of East Indian ancestry, identified himself as a “Black man”—a term commonly used to refer to people of African origin—I believe he used the term deliberately when he wished to describe perceptions of him by Anglo-Canadians as generic minority outsider, and to identify with other minority immigrant people.

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