Challenges Facing Black American Principals: A Conversation about Coping*

Celina Echols

This work is produced by The Connexions Project and licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License

Abstract

All administrators face challenges in acquiring success. The challenges associated with the principalship of Black principals are often a unique set of challenges associated with race, attitudes, organizational structure, and policies.

The success of educational administrators in United States schools is influenced by many variables, including demographics. Currently, Latino, Asian Americans, American Indians, and African Americans make up more than half of the student populations in California, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, and Texas (U.S. Department of Education, 2004; Gollnick & Chinn, 2005). Whites make up less than one fourth of the student population in the nation’s largest cities; while 84% of teachers are White and 75% are female. In P-12 schools, nationally, 82% of public school principals are White, 11% are Black, 5% are Hispanic, and less than 3% are identified as Asian and Native American (Digest of Education Statistics, 2004).

Here are some basic facts considering the aforementioned data addressing the success of school principals (Ferrandino, 2000; Lewis, 2000; Page & Page, 1991; PR Newswire, 2003).

• There is a growing and tremendous increase in the number of children of color in U.S. public schools.

• Most principals come from the teaching ranks and fewer Blacks are entering the teaching profession.

*Version 1.1: Aug 24, 2006 10:55 am -0500
†http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/
Fewer than 2% of the nation's nearly 3 million public school teachers are Black males, according to 1999-2000 survey results from the U.S. Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics.

Census statistics show that 42% of all Black boys have failed a grade at least once by the time they reach high school. And 60% of Black males who enter high school in 9th grade do not graduate, according to a report by the Schott Foundation for Public Education.

At the same time that the success of principals in U.S. schools is influenced by demographics, there are other socio-economic issues to be considered. For example, by 2020, principals will lead schools where only 49% of the school-aged population will be White, 26% of all children will live in poverty, and 8% will speak a language other than English (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990; U.S. Department of Education, 2003).

Considering these demographic shifts, with fewer minority administrative leaders and more students of color, how are these new 21st century principals going to cope? This chapter seeks to understand the challenges facing P-12 Black principals and other principals of color by asking them what makes them successful. Did they have a mentor? Did they have a mentor who supported them in achieving their administrative career goals? What challenges did they face in achieving their positions? Some other questions that support this study include the following: What are the challenges for the school administrator of the post Civil Rights era, as compared to the administrator of the Jim Crow period? What are some models or practices for effective administrators? What are some things that traditional school cultures assume work for Black administrators but in actuality, do not? How does the Browning of America influence the P-12 administrator?

Although the study reported here obtained responses from primarily active and retired Black American principals, the convenience sampling approach drew from available data that limited the representation of other historically underrepresented principals. The terms “Black” and African American are used interchangeably to reflect the overall acceptance of the terms by people of African origin. The intent of this chapter is to provide traditionally established cultures with a better knowledge and understanding about how they can assist in fostering a nurturing supportive environment in their school districts for the advancement of these historically underrepresented professionals.

Background to These Issues

In 1954, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in Brown that the practice of Separate but Equal schooling was unconstitutional. At that time, African Americans made up the largest visible minority group in the United States. And, for the most part, the Separate but Equal policy was applied primarily to African Americans by the established culture, European Americans. However, it also affected other historically underrepresented minorities living in the United States. The High Court based much of its decision upon the testimony suggesting that desegregation created a blatant inequality in schools and in the distribution of resources. It considered that unfair laws and practices created feeling of inferiority, low-self-esteem, and low academic expectations, among African Americans. These policies also created an attitude of ethnocentrism for many in the established culture; Black Americans were inferior to the established community. At that time and particularly in the South, many Black public schools were managed by Black principals but many governing boards were White, as were the presidencies of many Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Most Black principals had been trained at Black institutions but the curriculum used was often dated and was developed through the principles, theories, and pedagogical styles of the established culture.

During de jure segregation and immediately after the 1954 Brown, Black school principals were honored by the African-American community for meritorious service in education, civic, and religious affairs. To this end, their responsibilities included that of school manager, school supervisor, professional development coordinator, physical plant engineer, and curriculum coordinator, thus, increasing the efficiency of school staff, and enabling student adjustment in a changing community (Edwards, 1999). The segregated Black school was, according to Walker (1996, 2000, & 2003; Irvin & Irvin, 1983) an education institution that addressed the deeper psychological and sociological needs of its students. Irvin & Irvin (1983) characterized this by stating:

http://cnx.org/content/m13821/1.1/
Black schools served as the instruments through which professional educators discharged their responsibility to their community. Black educators labored to help students realize their achievement goals. In their roles both principals and teachers were mere, but profound, extensions of the interests of the Black community. (p. 412)

Although Black schools were indeed commonly lacking in facilities and funding, some evidence suggests that the environment of the segregated school had affective traits, institutional policies, and community support that helped Black children learn in spite of the neglect their schools received from White school boards. Most notably, in one of the earliest accounting by Thomas Sowell (1974) the schools are remembered as having atmospheres where “support, encouragement, and rigid standards” combined to enhance students’ self-worth and increase their aspirations to achieve. In Sowell’s description of six “excellent” Black schools, students recount teachers and principals who would “not let them go wrong”; they described teachers who were well-trained, dedicated, demanding and who took a personal interest in them” even if it meant devoting their own money, or time outside of the school day. Before Brown, all African Americans were victimized by the same legal segregation and discrimination in American society; hence they shared a common bond. According to Hale (2001) it is more difficult for middle-income Blacks in the post-Brown era to recognize this bond. Some middle-class African Americans who took a working class route to the middle class do not have the same sense of interdependence, obligation, and responsibility to the Black masses.

According to Rhymes (2004) in 1954, about 82,000 Black teachers were responsible for teaching 2 million Black children. In the eleven years following Brown, more than 38,000 Black teachers and administrators in 17 Southern states lost their jobs. These mass firings were made easier because during desegregation all-Black schools were usually closed down – making Black educators expendable even when their credentials surpassed their White peers. The National Education Association’s figures from this period show that 85% of minority teachers had college degrees compared with 75% of White teachers. Black children left without the expertise of the more qualified Black teachers and a tremendous psychological and emotional well-being.

In this light, there is a scarcity of research available that considers how these Black administrators coped during the existence of Jim Crow Laws. However, research indicates that a disparity still exists at various levels of the academic ladder when African Americans are compared to their White counterparts.

Adding to the problem is the manner in which principals are prepared for professional educational service. According to Gloom and Korvetz, (2001) historically most principals have served in an assistant principalship or resource teacher position for a number of years before stepping into the principalship. With the appropriate mental disposition, good mentoring, and a solid graduate program, those who serve for a few years in these roles amass many of the skills and much of the knowledge required to succeed in the principalship. However, due to the current shortfalls, there are often assistant principals and resource teachers who move into principalships after serving for relatively short periods of time in preparatory roles. Thus, the coping strategies and leadership skills they possess when assuming the principalship may be underdeveloped.

The first few years of the principalship are critical in influencing administrative leadership practice (Hart, 1991; 1993). During the induction period, principals usually try to exert their leadership function in a way consistent with their own personal values, mentor and protégé experience, and professional training. Simultaneously, they experience pressures from subordinates, superiors, and the community to act in a way consistent with their expectations. An essential key to principal success is the perspective that effectiveness is aligned with transformational leadership.

Transformational leadership is the ability to articulate a vision and inspire futuristic and high cognitive thinking among diverse people for an overall strong school culture. Effective leadership also includes appropriate modeling, intellectual stimulation, evaluation, re-evaluation, and reflection (Leithwood, 1993; Hoyle, English, & Steffy, 1998’ Dembowski & Eksotrom, 1999). Leithwood argues that transformational leadership is essential for effective school change. While the predominant operational mode for the principalship has been that of instructional leadership, Leithwood argues that this model is no longer adequate to respond to the challenges confronting school leaders. Nor are models adequate that do not embrace the elements of care, nurture, and constituent engagement. Effective schools without caring, nurturing, and good principals are misleading; hence the reason that many low socio-economic schools do not work.

Leithwood contends that the instructional leader model is dated. The instructional model reflected a

http://cnx.org/content/m13821/1.1/
principal’s ability to carry out many tasks but it somewhat none essential as it relates to the improvement of student achievement. These instructional duties may include maintenance, finance, human resources, and public relations. In other words, the instructional model embraces the ability to make adjustments within the existing structure thereby restoring balance that is non-transformational and without new learning.

Second order changes, on the other hand, require a form of leadership that is sensitive to organization building. This includes: developing a shared vision; creating productive work cultures; delegating leadership to creating new way of seeing things (Leithwood, 2000). A paramount example of second order changes includes the ability to improve student achievement in an area of accountability. The failure to attend to reform at this level, accounts for much of the failure of reform efforts. Proponents of second order change believe that is not enough to just know what is important; principals must also know what is essential (Waters & Grubb, 2004). The principal’s role in change and improvement efforts has evolved to become that of a "leader of leaders" (Hallinger & Hausman, 1993). "Images of transformational leadership emphasize the capacity of the principal to engage others as leaders rather than the ability of the principal to direct the efforts of parents and staff" (Hallinger & Hausman, 1993).

Moralit y is a component of both first and second order changes. Hoyle et al (1998) believes that principals must be cognizant that ethical and moral issues are the most controversial issues of society. These authors contend that school leaders become representative of that moral order, and advocates of its majoritarian values. Therefore, in order for a school leader to engage in policy and governance issues requires insight into the vision and reality of the administrator’s school’s role. At the same time, these leaders must understand the issues of care, love, and nurture. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) is one of the first to boldly disregard the effective schools rhetoric, interpreting a self-created model through a different lens. Lawrence-Lightfoot and others (Noddin, 1992; Mayeroff, 1971; Beck, 1994) believe that traditional models of effective school leaders fail to consider the ideals of caring and goodness in principal leaders. Lawrence-Lightfoot contends that one can be effective but not necessarily good and caring. It is easy to lose sight of these most important variables, goodness and caring, if one does not have a strong sense of community and belonging among students, parents, teachers, and other school constituents. Constituent efficacy is difficult to establish when principals do not reside in the school vicinity, speak a language other than English, actively interact with parents, students, and other school constituents, or demonstrate a nurturing and loving behavior to those with whom they lead. The cultural match of a principal and school is often obscured if the academic leader has not been properly trained and educated to interact with a culturally diverse consistency at the school practitioner rank. The principal’s abilities to provide a culturally and intellectually stimulating teaching and learning environment can be diminished by his or her own lack of knowledge provided by their administrative credentialing program, negligible staff development, and limited personal experience.

Many studies (Schneider, 1991; Rooney, 2000; Mederios, 2001; Moir & Bloom, 2003) have found that one of the most effective ways to prepare and support principals in their careers is to provide a mentoring program. Daresh (2001) believes mentoring is an ongoing process in which individuals in an organization provide support and guidance to those who can become effective contributors to the goals of the organization. He further contends, “Unlike many other views of mentoring, a mentor does not necessarily have to be an older person who is ready, willing, and able to provide all the answers. Usually mentors have a lot of experience and craft knowledge to share with others. But the notion that good mentoring consists of a sage who directs the work of the less experienced to the point that no one will make any mistakes is not reasonable.”

Many states, aware of the principal and teacher shortage, have created programs that enable aspiring principals, mentor principals, and the recruitment of ethnic minorities (Beebe, Hoffman, Lindley, & Presley, 2002; Erlanson & Zellner, 1997; Garza & Wurzbach, 2002). According to Gardiner, Enomoto and Gregon, (2000) successful school principals are often mentored by professionals who have a vested interest in their well-being. Mentoring is characterized as an active, engaged, and intentional relationship between two individuals (mentor and protégé) based upon mutual understanding to serve primarily the professional needs of the protégé. Quality mentoring relationships can be distinguished by certain ways of relating, by expectations and parameters placed on the relationship that serve to promote the protégé’s professional success and well-being.
At the same time mentoring programs for beginning principals are designed differently than those for veterans within the school system. The earlier assumption implies that several key and essential skills are underdeveloped. Peer-Assisted Leadership (PAL) is an administrative in-service program in San Francisco that is designed for veterans and transferring principals that involves peer coaching strategies which encourage pairs of administrators to work together in order to promote more effective and professional development (Darshe, 2001).

However, King (2005) believes that it is important for historically underrepresented groups to be provided opportunities to participate in mentoring arrangements, and that it is essential that mentoring experiences be culturally relevant. In this light, she shares a professional development ideal created through an organization entitled Commission on Research in Black Education (CORIBE) whereby the ideal, Jenga, has been enlisted among the organization’s tools to hone the leadership of educators. Jenga is an Ethiopian (Amharic) word that refers to a relationship which entails commitment, humility, and love (Herbert, 1999). In addition, Jenga/Jegnonch (plural) are established by special people who have demonstrated determination and courage in the protection of their people, land, culture, and who show diligence and dedication to African American people who produce exceptionally high quality work and dedicate themselves to the defense, nurturing, and development of their young by advancing their people, place, and culture.

The connection of mentoring and self-efficacy for Black principals is also connected with spiritual belonging. Intense religiosity among Black American refers to the great importance of God and religion in their lives, high frequency of church attendance, church membership, and the prevalence of prayer in daily lives (Gallup, 1996; Ploch & Hastings, 1994; Roof & McKinney, 1987). Black religiosity is based upon what Pattillo-McCoy (1998) and Morris (1996) describe as the Black church's ability to have existed as a more encompassing institution when Blacks did not have the ability to participate fully in the economic, social, and political life of the majority society. The church was also the only institution controlled completely by Blacks. The role of the church in predominantly Black social movements, such as the Civil Rights movement, created after school programs to curb youth delinquency, promoted voter participation, and facilitated other civic actions.

From an historical context, when faced with challenges and resulting despair, African Americans have often leaned upon spirituality as a means of optimism and encouragement. Thomas Parham, Assistant Vice Chancellor for Counseling and Health Services and Director of the Counseling Center at the University of California (Irvine) believes one of the most enriching elements respected by many African-Americans is the “notion of spirituality.” Parham (1991) contends that “…what is true is that while you can chain a person’s body, [and] you can shackle their ankles and their arms, it is often times more difficult to shackle the spirit. The belief of deliverance is carried from one generation to another. It is a transcendence of belief with active participation that has evolved through centuries of challenges. Horton and Horton (2001) contend that it is this kind of reckoning that gave slaves the sense of intense belief in a higher power which could emancipate them from slavery. At the same time, it also brought about an ambiguous and precarious freedom. Reconstruction faded into southern segregation policed by organized terrorism. The 21st century evolved with cross-cultural partnerships among labor, a sophisticated cultural renaissance in northern cities, and struggles against Jim Crow among African Americans that would eventually afford Blacks access to public accommodations, including education.

According to the Higher Education Research Institute (2004) the term “spirituality” points to individuals’ interior, subjective life, as contrasted to the objective domain of material events and objects. One’s spirituality is reflected in the values and ideals that he or she holds most dear, including a self-understanding of our purpose presently and in the future, and the legacy left for others to benefit. For the principal, this self-understanding can create a connectedness to other principals, students, other school constituents, and the world. It is within this context, that spirituality is understood as an element of that which is deeply religious. Spirituality relates to the connected interaction of the soul, the spirit, and sacred matters. It is all of these things together that create within spirit filled people, the mindset of solidarity, the willingness of self-sacrifice, and the determination and success within human nature that only occurs with divine guidance.

In higher education, a study of 136 select colleges and universities by the Higher Education Research Institute (2004) indicates faculty believe that factors like religiosity, spirituality, and meditation contribute to
the overall wellbeing of faculty. In the organization culture of academicians, Caldwell (2000) emphasizes that success of African Americans must be culturally authentic. According to Caldwell, success in education must be inclusive of God, spirituality, ancestors, community, ritual study, worship and extended and immediate family as support groups. The historical context of race set the stage for the kinds of challenges to success that Black principals face in the 21st century. Many researchers acknowledge (Dumas, 1980; Scott, 1980, Yeakey et al., 1986; Linden, Wayne, & Stillwell, 1993) that among ethnic minority principals' challenges including the task of demonstrating competency in the aftermath of a history that has often defined them as incompetent by race; guaranteeing that all students perform well, ensuring cultural responsiveness towards all their diverse students, and facilitating a workable means of communicating with parents, caregivers, and other community stakeholders. This is no small task. Increasing diversity among educational professionals and students is one of the most critical adaptive challenges that schools face; especially if one considers that by 2020, students of color will represent nearly half of the elementary and secondary population (Gollnick & Chinn, 2005).

In support of this premise, the author conducted a research study in which the method, findings, and discussion seek to share additional light on how principals of color cope in this millennium. Forty-seven individuals participated in the survey. The data for the study were obtained from a survey instrument sent to African American and other minorities at the P-12 principal level and/or retired career principals. This level of administration, as well as retired professionals who once held these positions, was selected because of the changing demographics that include these personnel though on an infrequent basis.

The questionnaire utilized a convenience sampling methodology that included administrators in the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Ohio. All of the individuals were invited to participate in the survey by way of a letter explaining the purpose of the survey, requesting an interview with them through telephone or in person, or offering the choice of completing the survey by mail. A self-addressed stamped envelope was included with each questionnaire.

In the analysis portion of this study, many of the participants used pronouns when referring to the principals, the established culture, and school districts. In the documented quotes, the uses of proper names are given where appropriate. There is no written interpretation of the oral interview data to strengthen the narrative so the validity of the oral interview data is in no way jeopardized. Lastly, an incorporation of oral interview reportage, for continuity purposes, is given throughout this narrative.

Results and Discussion

The questionnaire was designed to determine what leadership models tended to work effectively for them in their roles as principals, if the principals had a mentor to guide them, and what challenges were associated with the principalship.

Description of the Sample

Thirty-six of the survey participants were female while 11 were male. In addition, half of the survey participants were between the ages of 35-45 years old. The majority of the participants were also African American. Most of the participants (80%) earned their Administrative certification in the southern states of Mississippi or Louisiana. Within this group, most completed their undergraduate degrees at Historically Black Colleges or Universities (HBCU) and most graduate degrees were earned at Predominately White Colleges or Universities (PWCU).

Leadership and the Principalship of Black Americans

Upon analysis of the data, there are some constant themes that are apparent. These consistent responses concern the issues of best practices, race, mentorship, spirituality, and health. The manner in which the training of leaders has undergone transformation is noted by the reflection of a 36-year veteran educator and retired principal living in the Mississippi Delta:

The principal position was the highest position of academic and socio-economic strata respected by most African Americans. The Black principal was more than not, a man. I'm one of those men. He was the authority figure of the community. He was the direct contact between Whites boards and superintendents and members of the Black schools. His home was usually a part of the school grounds and his house utilities were paid for. The principal decided whether or not a female teacher would take maternity leave or not. Salary inequities were as common as corporal punishment and neither was to be questioned. . . . Black
folks, back then, may have looked at the White man and knew that we wanted to hold a high position like him but White folks didn’t really prepare us to become principals. They made offers for us to lead mostly Black schools, like in the Mississippi Delta. But what training? We learned most by practice.

Most of the principals in this study addressed the transformational leadership model as an appropriate model for honing their leadership in an academic setting. This was further affirmed by those principals who contend that transformational leadership is only as successful as the community in which it exists and where school constituents allow the model to be effective. As one seasoned principal added, “Every model needs to be reviewed every now and then because times change and circumstances too.”

Another principal added:

The reason that I like this transformational model… and by the way, I actually learned the most about it in the Louisiana Principal Induction Program is that it teaches you that you’ve got to balance a lot of different roles. I think one of the hardest things that you must do is live and work within contradictions or ambiguities within all the roles and still find balance. I was one of those folks who moved from teaching straight into a principalship in an unacceptable performing school. It is challenging position but I like it. I think it helps that I am single and without my own children.

Lomotey (1989) and Monteiro (1977) argue that the success of Black principals in their communities may rely largely on their interactions with the community. According to Lomotey, Black principals seem to place a higher priority on community involvement in the educational milieu than do their White colleagues. They are more inclined, as a group to involve parents and other community members in school activities and to a degree, in decision making. They view such involvement as fundamental to the overall success of the school and to their individual success. Black principals are often less threatened by a focus on community relations as they tend to relate more closely with the larger community. In Black schools, it is possible that this emphasis onto the larger community may be a key ingredient in bringing about improved academic performance for Black students. Although it may appear that Black principals are able to incorporate this relationship in a way that is elusive to principals of other races, many of the study participants stressed the critical importance of educational leaders having the ability to develop self-esteem, facilitate appropriate moral behavior, and instill academic achievement in students even if their race does not match the race of their students.

When asked the questions: “Do you have a mentor?” “Did that person assist you in professional growth?” “To whom do you turn for advice?” Most survey participants (80%) indicated that they had a mentor who supported them in professional growth and guidance. At the same time, that person was often not the person to whom they turned for advice. The person to whom they sought advice was often referred to as a spouse, significant other, legal advisor, or a member of the clergy. Some of the respondents indicated mistrust in confiding to a principal colleague but felt greater comfort in speaking to someone of color who holds a higher ranking position. This person was frequently referred to as the “daddy.” At the same time, 90% of the survey participants indicated that mentors guided them in achieving the goal of principal but only half indicated that these mentors shared the same racial identity as they themselves. A few (20%) principals indicated they did not have a mentor. They use descriptors such as, “I am ruled by my own drumbeat,” “I ask God to direct my path,” and “No one can let me down but me.”

Most Black female principals suggested that with the dwindling numbers of Black principals, there are even fewer senior level Blacks to mentor up-and-coming Black principals. Many female survey participants suggested that they often suffer gender hostility and other exclusions from women colleagues rather than men. Quite often the hostility and exclusion came from the unexpected: other Blacks colleagues!

Yet, all principals who work in predominantly White school districts responded that there was a concern about not “fitting-in.” A common concern was “being able to find someone who has a connection.” This can be interpreted as finding a White American who is accepted and respected by other European Americans school leaders but who is also able to communicate effectively with historically underrepresented principals. In these circumstances, an ethnic identity model should be considered.

Tatum (1991) supports this assertion with her description of Williams Cross’ Theory of Racial Identity Development. According to this theory, once African Americans exit the immersion/emersion developmental stage “characterized by a strong desire to surround oneself with symbols of one’s racial identity, and actively
seek out opportunities to learn about one’s own history and culture with support of same-race peers, they move into the stage described as “internalization” which is characterized by a sense of security about one’s racial identity. He further noted, “Often the person at these stages is willing to establish meaningful relationship across group boundaries with others, including Whites, who are respectful of these new positions. It is equally critical at this point that support networks exist, comprised of one or possibly several individuals who understand and affirm the ideologies, perspectives and perceptions of success and failure that people of color may encounter Butler (1993).

This condition is significant in educational leadership because African Americans often lack the connections (or social capital) ordinarily developed through ties in established cultures that European Americans have more easily availed themselves. Black Americans may not have the awareness of opportunities that include leadership institutes, mentors, stipends for professional degree programs, travel funds, grant monies, support services, professional/civic memberships, social invitations, co-publication offers, and the communicative skills to know how and what information to give and acquire in various settings. Without these variables, the African American principals may be left with an intense feeling of isolation and loneliness. Attempting to become skilled in obtaining social capital may include the ability to practice “shifting.”

Code-switching or shifting is purposeful changing the manner in which one communicates. According to research by the African American Women’s Voices Project, (Jones & Shorter-Goode, 2003) shifting is a sort of subterfuge that African Americans have long practiced to ensure their survival. It is a common theme that emerged through the conversations with principals. According to a thirty-five year old principal:

Sometimes, when a low-income mother with a bad behavior comes into my office, I put myself into check. I say to myself calm down, smile, offer my hand and offer a seat. I also often change the way I speak. Don’t adhere to the King’s English too much. By all means, don’t be loquacious and you may even want to be complimentary of dress attire. On the other hand, you may want to infuse a lot of the opposites when you are interacting with a majority culture in which many assumptions are made.

Jones and Shorter-Goode (2003) believe that African American women shift more than any other historically suppressed group. This means they hide their true selves to appease White colleagues, Black men, and other segments of the community. Black women shift to accommodate differences in class, gender, and ethnicity. Shifting is evident in one’s usage of Standard English and shifting to Ebonics, non-standard English used primarily by Black Americans. Physically, shifting can take place by minimizing social distance. Shifting can occur by styling natural hair to perms. Shifting exists when changing one’s physical posturing and facial expressions to expressionless and neutral positions. Shifting can also reflect changing how one thinks and communicates. According to one principal:

We don’t have a lot of Hispanic children. My school is Black, Whites, or mixed-kids. What I must do is learn the language of young people. I watch BET. I learn hip-hop and rap. I learn what is popular so that I can often infuse Standard English with non-standard forms of communications. If you can’t communicate with young folks, you will lose them.

A male principal, supports this statement but contends that shifting is not simply and solely race-based. “If you are addressing people who don’t have a lot of exposure and resources, you meet them where they are in order to effectively communicate.”

In order to obtain social capital, historically underrepresented groups must understand, and know how and why, information is constructed. The construction of information creates a paradigm, a set of assumptions, concepts, values, and practices that constitute a way of viewing reality by the community that shares them (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2000). The manner in which individuals construct information is based upon societal monitoring and subsequent associated and acquired knowledge. Paradigms are created from events that occur in the historical and present context. Paradigms are influenced by societal rewards and punishments. Paradigms are also based upon culture, language, thoughts, behaviors, religion, race, ethnicity, gender, and more. Paradigms can be considered as mental frameworks that have unwritten rules but direct actions. When one paradigm loses influence and another takes over, there is a paradigm shift. Knowing in advance how a paradigm shift might occur gives a person an advantage over others.

African Americans and other historically underrepresented principals may enter into leadership positions having had stellar presentations from national and international conferences, but may not be rewarded and

http://cnx.org/content/m13821/1.1/
recognized for these contributions. At the same time, a member of the dominant culture may have fewer or equal publications and presentations, and yet is lauded for his or her contributions. The historically underrepresented member may feel slighted and question equity in a society that espouses democratic principles. However, if this person genuinely understands the manner in which variables such as gender and race have been manipulated in the United States across time, an awareness and understanding exists.

Suppose a newly hired principal of the established culture is invited to attend a church attended by other constituents of the established group. After church, he or she meets the superintendent’s single daughter or son, and is later invited to dinner where other senior level administrators are dining. Discussions emerge and the newly hired principal is invited to join a principal leadership institute. Hence, social class is alive and well. The principal of color observes his or her colleague socially and professionally advancing and is only slightly aware of what social capital is available to the counterpart.

An emerging paradigm shift occurs once ethnic minority principals know the paradigm of the dominant culture. The paradigm reflects the idea that to successfully operate in a world of historical unfairness, they must acquire knowledge about the paradigm of other groups as well as their own. They must find the mechanisms to enter into the frameworks that have unwritten rules but direct action within the more powerful culture. They also need to know and understand the history, beliefs, norms, and values of the dominant culture, so that their value of self worth and esteem is not dictated by individuals who do not share, or at least respect, their paradigm. If the person of color is unable to recognize and understand the paradigms of self and others, the results can create apathy, loss of cultural identity, lack of motivation, career burnout, and the inability to differentiate when actions are racist and when they are not.

Other Challenges of Race, Health, Spirituality and Humor

All of the principals expressed racism as a concern they frequently encountered. Lomotey believes that subordinates may react differently to their supervisor depending upon the supervisor’s race (found in Parkes, 1976). If subordinates act differently to supervisors based upon the supervisor’s race, it could affect the leadership of the supervisor along racial lines, again differentiating the leadership of Black and White teachers. One principal’s sentiments echoed the voice of many survey participants interviewed:

In the South, corporal punishment is an accepted discipline. Quite often it becomes an issue because White parents do not want a Black principal, it doesn’t matter if you are a man or woman, to paddle their child. You can follow all the rules in the handbook but if my White colleague paddles, there are very few objections.

Another issue associated with race evolves around who is appointed to predominately ethnic minority schools with an at-risk population of students. Several principals suggested that when career applications were made to larger White public schools, the applications are not filled by Black principals but rather White principals. They contend that they are “equally as qualified to mentor White students and teachers” as other their White peers. However, because they are Black, there is an unconscious racist perspective that reverse mentoring is not possible. One seasoned administrator posed the difficulty of discerning when many actions are actually issues of race and when they are not. “Sometimes you encounter racial issues so much you wonder if this is racist or if it isn’t. In the Black culture we use a lot of metaphors to better understand what’s going on and sometimes we still don’t get it.”

In order to support this administrator’s dilemma, the sport of golf is used as a racial metaphor. A former university dean described golfing as an engaging sport that creates a dialogue for a multiplicity of topics including race. This sport also offers a metaphor for understanding the culture in which we live. According to Albert Doucette, during golf, a lesser player may be given a Two Gotcha Handicap. At any time during the game, the player could stand behind the better player and in the middle of the person’s shot yell "gotcha." This outburst obviously would interfere with the player’s shot. This first, of two or more “gotchas”, was used very early in the game. The second “gotcha” was used very late or never. Hence, it was the anticipation of its use that ruined the better player’s focus and game success. There is a correlation between golf and actions of racism. People of color meet prejudice early in life. This is their first “gotcha.” They then anticipate the second or subsequent gotchas for the rest of their lives. This anticipation often ruins much of their life because sometimes behaviors of the dominant culture can be perceived as racist when in actuality they are not and at other times actions are certainly acts of blatant racism. Whether mirage or reality, both
situations play with the human psyche and often cause members of historically underrepresented groups to imitate the discriminatory actions of many dominant culture members. Consequently, people of color often begin to target one another with acts of wrongness.

In a stratified and multiethnic society, those at the bottom of the stratification system tend to vie for resources and opportunities by exhibiting the “battle royal” of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man (1952). Ellison illustrates that Blacks, like crabs in a bucket, are often forced to entertain the world whereby one crab attempts to make it to the top toward liberation but does not succeed because it is quickly pulled down by another crab below.

The crabs in a bucket idea can be consciously and unconsciously evoked when there has been one person of color in a work environment and a new person of color arrives. The newcomer’s arrival may create a feeling of competition and back stabbing by the former employee rather than generating a welcoming atmosphere where there is unity in numbers and collaboration. This behavior occurs in far too many cases; Black principals are victims who have been taught to problem solve through coercive tactics rather than mind, intellect, and futuristic ideology.

Many of the participants (52%) mentioned health as a factor in effecting successful principals. The position was consistently described as “highly stressful.” Among the list of health concerns faced by Black principals were high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes. Hence, the survey participants in this study advocate infusing a healthy exercise regimen into the administrative lifestyle. According to principal, Reginald Elzy, a seventeen year educational professional, “I wake up every morning and work-out beginning from 4:45am-5:45am.” Carolyn Roman, twenty-seven year career professional, suggested, “I had a flare-up with high blood pressure and immediately started walking. Thank God I do not have to rely on high blood pressure or behavior altering medications as many of my colleagues do.” The respondent, continued, “Issues of health seem to be really important during career changes.”

Career transition evolved as a variable in conjunction with health. Many principals who were married or in committed relationships, echoed that the transition from one level of administration to a higher level of administration created stress in communications with their spouses, significant others, and/or their children. Spirituality was described as one of the vehicles to facilitate one through this transition. A former principal and now acting superintendent described his career transition like this:

The way I cope is to work in my garden and yard. I am also an avid reader. I think most importantly, is that I have God in my life and I try to work with my wife (a teacher) to bring as little school work as possible home. Home is my own family’s time. By the way, I think women have more problems with bringing the school work to the home environment than men.

Many of the participants noted humor or laughter as a temporary solution to challenges associated with the principalship. One principal living in Mississippi described her ability to cope with difficult challenges in the following manner, “I go into my office and laugh and laugh.” Laughter is now being studied for its therapeutic qualities. Laughter can be medicinal. According to Godfrey (2004) there is growing evidence, both scientific and observational, of a clinical association between humor and health. Numerous studies (Goodgrey, 2004; Dziegielewski, Jacinto, Lauchido, & Legg-Rodriguez, 2004; White & Camarena, 1989) support the benefits of laughter in cardiac rehabilitation, pain perception, discomfort threshold, coping and stress, and immune response. It improves heart functioning, reduces stress levels, has the power to heal relationships, and is great for mental outlook. Because of its many health benefits, laughter can indirectly help manage chronic pain and speed recovery from injury.

Music is another form of coping with challenges provided by survey participants. Again, most of the survey participants listed music as a stress reducer to school related challenges. Research by Glantz (2000) recommends a practical, concise, easy-to-read guide for relieving stress, written specifically for educators. Glantz, in a recent book, suggests the relaxation and energy-enhancing practice with breath-control exercises, an energy-generating form, and concentration (meditation) techniques. An accompanying CD includes 11 relaxation routines set to soothing background music. Educators who were taught these relaxation and energizing techniques reported overall feelings of well-being, increased self-confidence, less frequent headaches or bouts of insomnia, and better personal relationships with spouse, children, school employer and colleagues.

This discussion bears a personal note for the use of humor and music. I have a Ph.D. in Education and
my sister holds an M.D. in Internal Medicine. She is also a wife and mother and I am a newly adoptive single mother, so the quality time shared as sisters is usually when I have returned home from the university and she is driving home from work to pick up her children from school as she navigates rush hour traffic while talking on the cell phone. There are very few days that pass when we do not have a dialogue about the day's experience. These experiences usually entail some forms of discrimination that have taken place at her workplace or mine.

Our dialogue is so entitled because of the perseverance it takes to complete a professional degree program and, in spite of the long hours of clinical practice and research, one still experiences racism. Racism is alive and well, despite our academic advancement and movement within middle-income status. Almost daily, we revisit how we have constructed the paradigm of being Black American professional women. Sometimes our pains and experiences are so deep that at the end of the conversation we try to think of something to make us laugh and usually it is the usage of words like, "That's your cousin, girl." For example, my sister observed a wealthy client (who visited a medical facility) request that their medical service be provided by White only staff. The request was honored. I laughed and exclaimed, "Girl so, they ain't recognizing yo “D” huh?" We both fell into insurmountable laughter.

In turn, I relayed to her how one of my White students asked, "How did you learn to speak like dat?" The student was referring to my usage of Standard English and the ability to code switch. Our laughter reflects our understanding that deep and soul filled laughter is therapeutic and helps to relieve the stress of the day.

When injustices seem too unbearable, one often uses music to illustrate "You gotta hurt before you heal" (Bland, 1989) and I add that hurting and healing takes time. In the Black experience, music and laughter provide opportunities to release, express, and temporarily remedy frustration and stressors. Dialogue, music, and laughter enable people of color to maneuver within the game of politics, for if one does not learn to play the political game he/she will surely be played by politics. It is equally important to know that many things that exist as barriers, must often be left alone if the time for removing these barriers is not right. Quite often, issues should be left alone until the appropriate amount of ammunition for engaging in battle is available to the aggrieved to ensure that he or she has a strong case. For example, if an aggrieved faculty member is filing a grievance against an administrator, the faculty person needs to ensure that necessary documentation has been submitted in a timely manner and in accordance with university policy.

In the hit song "The Gambler," Kenny Rogers has this advice for listeners and I share it as metaphor for African Americans and other historically underrepresented people attempting to thrive in chaotic situations:

You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em, Know when to walk away and know when to run. You never count your money when you're sittin' at the table. There'll be time enough for countin' when the dealin's done.

Summary and Implications

This short chapter has many implications for school districts that are committed to supporting the success and effectiveness of school principals in the 21st century. Although the transformational leadership models embody collaboration and strategic planning for moving from a simple instructional design to incorporating first and second order changes, the facilitative leadership might be more appropriate for principals of color. This model includes the behaviors that embrace the collective ability of the school principals to adapt, solve problems, and improve performance. Facilitative leadership includes behavior that helps the school achieve goals that may be shared, negotiated or complemented (Murphy & Louis, 2001). In addition, resources such as Skills for Successful 21st Century School Leaders (Hoyle, 2005) are recommended for districts seeking to prepare skilled leaders. This resource envelopes practical approaches to establishing relationships with culturally diverse constituencies, formulating policies for bonds, facilitating site-base decision making, gathering and analyzing data, and implementing futuristically focused staff development. In addition, the following ideals are recommended in preparing principals from historically underrepresented groups. The ideals are supported by culturally responsive proverbs.

Knowledge is like a garden. When it is not cultivated it cannot be harvested. -Guinea

http://www.menwholooklikekennyrogers.com/
Perhaps learning academies that promote the richness of the education profession should be introduced as early as the middle school and high school years. The church, as an organization, has long been the icon of social and economic progress for the Black community. In this light, the church as an organization, as well as the school community, should be considered in developing partnerships to hone and develop interest in the profession. Principals in training need to be guided to look at how they problem solve from a personal and cultural perspective. They also need to learn how and why other cultural groups may problem solve differently. This knowledge and understanding about problem solving, better equips the principal for effective organizational leadership and decision making. A Louisiana middle school principal addresses why understanding problem solving within a cultural dynamic is important.

I had a student who had been retained twice. This kid had a big truancy problem. But, he was excellent with anything and everything technologically. He was always helping teachers to fix a problem with computers. One day, the student asked me what I was doing for the Spring Break. I told him I was relaxing and visiting family in Atlanta. He asked me what I do to relax. I responded that I enjoy listening to music. He said, “What kind of music do you like?” I said, “All kinds.” He responded, “I am going to hook you up.”

The following day he returned with a big sloppy grin on his face and placed a backpack in front of me. Music had been (highly likely) improperly downloaded ranging from R&B and old school, to spirituals and gospel. He had attached printed labels and titles of cds. All cds were organized by author. He said, "How did you like it?" I smiled and said, “You did this for me?” He said, “You’re a pretty cool principal. We want to help you too.” I smiled and made sure that I said, “Thanks for helping me to relax.”

Now, I could have inquired how he had acquired all of these cds and called his parents. I did not do this. He offered me a chance to see where his talents lie. I pray that he will finish school and seek a career in computers. I am sure encouraging him. Whether I see my kids in Walmart or church. I make certain that I am encouraging them. A principal’s job is 24-7.

And yet another principal in Mississippi described issues of problem solving like this:

You know, our students overall don’t do well on high stakes test. I believe one problem with their ability to do well on analytical and logical reasoning tests is due to the fact that they solve questions from a Black cultural context.

Another paradox for our children is the cultural dynamic of behavior at home and the school culture that dictates that you act in another way. Take Zero Tolerance. You may have a Zero Tolerance Rule in your district. You can’t fight or you are kicked out of school. Well, here is a kid whose father tells him don’t pick on other kids but if they pick on you, I expect you to kick butt. Don’t be a wuss. So, what message are we, at school and at home, sending the kid? I’ll tell you what we are doing. We are sending that kid mixed messages. The kid doesn’t know what to do. These actions carry over to how we problem solve on higher cognitive and intellectual issues also.

It takes a village. -Sioux and Ibo

Educational managers for school districts may find it necessary to incorporate supportive resource systems that contribute to principals of color participating in professional organizations (i.e. National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP]; American Association of School Administrators [AASA]; Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development, [ASCD]) that include people from culturally diverse backgrounds. At the same time, principals of colors should not be trapped by historic divisions between races and genders and make the decision to interact with groups that solely match their own racial heritage.

No one person’s success is attributed to his or her actions alone. It takes the support from others to be successful. Principals need to acquire the attitude and behavior of "win-win" relationships; that is, relationships that are supportive amongst and between school constituents. These kinds of relationships help to establish networking ties.

Furthermore, school districts should ensure that principals are trained through principal institutes, forums, seminars, and professional development hours. And, these programs should entail mentoring programs specifically designed for historically underrepresented groups.

Though many principals in this chapter choose to operate without the support of a mentor, this is ill-advised. Principals should undergo mentoring and training to ensure the most effective development of
leadership skills. School leaders set the tone of the culture by carefully choosing the people with whom they surround themselves, by communicating a sense of purpose for the organization, and by reinforcing appropriate behavior. The manner in which school leaders interact and participate within the community, greatly influence their success as a leader. When support is lacking for principals of color, their success and effectiveness is greatly impeded.

Blessed are they who are pleased with themselves (South Africa)

Most principals encounter many variables including issues of race and health. They find coping through music, humor, nature, and laughter. School districts should offer retreats that include workshops that focus on music, humor, nature, and laughter. Retreat locations should be carefully selected. School district organizers must not assume that because “political correctness” is the modern coined term that people are not emotionally riveted by retreat locations such as plantation sites. A part of the retreat agenda should acknowledge that most principals of color identify with a cultural heritage that has once been oppressed hence, it is important for that oppression to be acknowledged and then identity where that oppression links to many barriers they may currently encounter.

For example, Black principals need to acquire an understanding of their school cultures by first asking, “What is my purpose within this organization?” Secondly, one must ask, “Is my purpose aligned with the organization’s?” The answers and understanding include knowing how, when and where paradigm construction and shifting becomes necessary. Furthermore, the dynamics of the work environment can create anger among those who believe that they are being disenfranchised and anger can be good if it is empowering. But being labeled as “mad” (rather than angry) or “lacking collegiality” connotes irrational behavior and this, in itself, is not good and reflects TGC. Some situations need to be challenged and some need to be left alone until the time is right for addressing; for to act in haste often makes waste. Black principals often need to take time away from the work situation. This may be particularly difficult for principals working in rural areas in the South where the culture often espouses an extremely strong dawn to dusk work ethic. Often, when principals do not adhere to this ethic, principals may believe that their constituents believe that their time away from the office insinuates idleness. Rather than idleness, more importantly, they should consider times for revival, reflection, and rejuvenation away from the office as “mental health days” (MHD). The paradigm reconstruction of revitalization, reflection, and rejuvenation is healthy rather that the paralyzing construct of idleness.

Principals need to get in touch with themselves and their surroundings. A drive away from the suburbs and inner city, a walk on the beach, meditate, jog in the woods, sit by the water, and talk to wise Big Mamma (she need not have a degree to possess wisdom) or a professional elder “clean” who broke the ice long before your arrival thus making your professional presence possible. School administrators and their principals of color need to understand (in theory and practice) spirituality, support groups, shifting, and paradigm reconstruction, Two Gotcha Handicap, and humor. Black principals in the postmodern era must teach these terms to future educators and principals for they too, must learn to analyze and interpret within their paradigm and the paradigm of others how to know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em, know when to walk away, and know when to run.”

Each one Teach one (Diaspora)

Lastly, the diversity of our schools is upon us. Principals in the new millennium enhance the texture of their leadership success by listening and interacting with faculty and students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Mentors not only experience an honor to serve but mentoring can be a powerful indicator that the school values a mentor’s skills and abilities to lead and share with others (Playko, 1995). In this light, the mentoring can increase the mentor’s self-esteem (Czaja & Owens, 1999). Another intrinsic value of mentoring is the feeling of having a potential impact on the future of educational leadership (Milstein, 1993, Dares & Playko, 1992). Gallmuth and Cohen (1995) noted that mentors and mentees have reported that mentoring is a highly satisfying and rewarding as it fosters a cohesiveness within the organization while encouraging the complete development of each individual by facilitating growth of personal development. The willingness of both people to invest their time, energy, emotions and themselves in an agreement to work together can result in shared personal enhancement, growth, and satisfaction, as well as improved communications.
Mentoring programs that engage both practicing and retired school administrators can be mutually beneficial as a programmatic effort that affirms self-worth and acceptance. Moreover, the diversity of the mentee’s and mentor’s backgrounds and approaches enrich the process of discovery, the ways of thinking about solving problems, and the multiple modes of communicating ideas. Therefore a comfort level with difference, as well as flexibility to learn in various ways, must emanate from the organization of schools.

References


Gardiner, Mary E.; Enomoto, Ernestine; Grogan, Margaret. (2000) Coloring Outside the Lines: Mentoring Women into School Leadership. New York: Stat University of
Harris, S., Crocker, C. (2003). Benefits to mentors: It’s like I have a legacy. Planning and Changing. 34(1-2) 70-83.

http://cnx.org/content/m13821/1.1/
Leithwood, K. (1993). Contributions of transformational leadership to school restructuring. An invited address to the Annual Meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration, Houston, TX.
Lindsay, Beverly (1999). Contributions of transformational leadership to school restructuring. An invited address to the Annual Meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration, Houston, TX.


http://cnx.org/content/m13821/1.1/
Yealey, C., Johnston, G., & Adikinson, J. (1986). In pursuit of equity: A review of research on minorities and women in educational administration. Education Administration Quarterly, 22, 110-149,