Chapter 7

Challenges Facing Black American Principals: A Conversation about Coping[1]

NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of the Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

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.
- 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.

[1] This content is available online at <http://cnx.org/content/m13821/1.1/>.

- 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:

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 accountings 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 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).

Morality 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 (Nodding, 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 end 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 Grogon, (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 protégés 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 between 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 times 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