

Leadership Experiences of African American Male Secondary Urban Principals: The Impact of Beliefs, Values, and Experiences on School Leadership Practices

Greg Henderson
Winston-Salem State University

This qualitative study examined African American male secondary principals' beliefs, values, and leadership practices that contribute to successful urban schools. Narrative inquiry was used to investigate the factors that influenced the leadership practices—and related education environment success—of six African American male public school principals from six different secondary urban schools in Ohio. Findings related to participant input led to three primary conclusions: (a) effective African American male principals address broad social and systemic issues that affect student education and performance; (b) effective African American male principals employ an integrated leadership style; and (c) effective African American male principals embrace the dualism of bureaucrat-administrator and ethno-humanist roles. These findings highlight several implications for consideration: (a) social and systemic issues severely distract African American male urban school leaders from their educational focus; (b) attention needs to be given to the critical dual role of African American male principals; and (c) focus needs to be directed toward developing and then hiring qualified African American male principals.

Keywords: African American male, principals, urban schools, secondary education

The nation's urban schools are becoming increasingly diverse, a trend that Dantley and Rogers (2005) referred to as the "browning" of the nation's collective student body with a growing proportion of U.S. school children belonging to racial/ethnic minority groups. This trend has resulted in challenges to the status quo involving school leadership, curriculum, and pedagogy (Anyon, 1997; Carlson & Apple, 1998; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Delpit, 1995; Dimitriadis & Carlson, 2003). Williams-Boyd (2002) noted, "Today, educational leaders are challenged to educate a growing and diverse student population; to be responsive to the needs of an expanding underclass; to address the broader needs of students and their families" (p. 4).

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Greg Henderson, Winston-Salem State University, 601 Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive, Anderson Center C018C, Winston-Salem, NC 27110, Email: hendersong@wssu.edu

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

Thus, educational leadership programs must have a paradigm shift in order to navigate the complexities of 21st-century urban schools (English, 2003; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003).

Urban schools, defined as those located in large central cities, are characterized by high rates of poverty, crime, racial diversity, and low-achieving students (Kincheloe, 2010; Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002), as well as disproportionate federal, state, and local funding. Therefore, strong educational leadership that recognizes and seeks to address the challenges unique to urban schools is critical. Educational leadership is ranked as the number one variable associated with effective schools (Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Campbell, 1994; Kirner, Vautour, & Vautour, 1993). The principal, as the instructional leader, establishes the overall climate and influences instructional practices, so much so that the key predictor of a program's success is the principal's attitude toward it (Kirner et al., 1993).

The literature on educational leadership highlights the role of the principal as an individual whose actions can exert a strong influence on student outcomes. Several scholars who have investigated leadership among African American principals have asserted that the theoretical models of educational leadership fail to take contextual and subjective aspects of leadership into account (Brown, 2005; Dillard, 1995; Madsen & Mabokela, 2002). For example, Madsen and Mabokela noted that the study of educational leadership practices of African Americans must encompass "social, racial, and cultural issues that are outside organizational boundaries, but affect leader-member interaction inside the organization" (p. 37). Principal leadership practices that are effective in one context—for instance, in predominantly white middle-class schools—may be far less effective in an alternative context, such as inner-city schools serving minority students and communities. Thus, when analyzing and evaluating the leadership of African American principals, the adoption of a contingency approach that takes racial and cultural similarities and differences between leaders and followers into consideration may generate research findings that have a higher degree of explanatory and predictive power than studies based on the premise that there is a universal model of leadership against which principal effectiveness can be objectively appraised (Brown, 2005; Jones, 2002).

The belief that African American principals exercise educational leadership in the same way as European American principals was first challenged by Lomotey (1987). Based on findings from a heuristic investigation of black principals, Lomotey reported two generalizations: (a) black principals positively affect the academic performance of black students, and (b) "black leaders—black principals in particular—lead differently from their white peers" (p. 173). In subsequent works, Lomotey (1993, 1994) argued that African American principals (at least those who work at schools with predominantly African American student populations) differ from European American principals in their commitment to, assumptions about, and attitudes toward the African American students and communities they serve. More specifically, African American principals have a strong commitment to African American students and a deep understanding that these students can learn. In addition, they place a higher priority on community involvement than their European American peers. Thus, the presence of an African American male principal may play an important role in an urban school accomplishing its goals.

Despite the critical role that African American male principals can play in our nation's urban schools, few studies on educational leadership have focused on the African American male. According to Dillard (1995), the "experiences of African Americans and other people of color have been conspicuously absent in the literature surrounding teaching and the principalship" (p. 539). A decade later, Gooden (2005) noted, "Research in the area of African American secondary principals is scant" (p. 630). More importantly, however, the majority of

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

educational leadership research embodies the premise that principals' race and gender have no impact on how they function as educational leaders or how effective African American principals may be relative to their European American peers.

The underlying questions of whether the leadership approach embraced by African American principals is, in fact, different from that of their European American counterparts and whether cultural/racial issues have an impact on how African American principals perform leadership roles were drivers of this study. More specifically, this study was designed on the basis that the various beliefs, values, and experiences of African American male principals indeed have a significant influence on their leadership practices as school administrators. Thus, this study sought to identify the factors that influence African American male principals' leadership practices and understand which factors have the most impact on the success of the educational environment in urban schools. The study was guided by the following research questions: (a) What are the systemic perceptions and myths that influence an African American male principal? (b) What are some of the belief systems held by African American male principals in school leadership positions that impact the success of the educational environment in urban schools? (c) What are some of the practices exhibited by African American male principals in school leadership positions that foster an effective educational environment in an urban school?

Methods

This study used a qualitative inquiry method, specifically narrative inquiry, to examine the factors that influenced the leadership practices—and related educational environment success—of six African American male principals in the Ohio public school system. Narrative inquiry involves gathering narratives and focusing on examining the meanings that people ascribe to their experiences in an effort to gain insight into the “complexity of human lives” (Josselson, 2006, p. 4). It is used to produce a detailed view of a topic by studying participants in their natural setting, and it has the benefit of emphasizing the researcher's role as an active learner who can tell the story from the participants' point of view rather than as an outside expert who passes judgments on the participants. It is collaboration between researcher and participants (Creswell, 1998).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) noted that narrative inquiry is appropriate for education related studies because educational researchers are interested in lives, values, attitudes, beliefs, social systems, institutions, and structures and in investigating how these components are linked to learning and teaching. Specifically, in this study, narrative inquiry was the most appropriate method for exploring and relating the participants' experiences because it is premised on the belief that “humans are storytelling organisms, who individually and socially, lead storied lives,” and because it is “sociologically concerned with the groups and the formation of community” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 3). In addition, investigating the values, beliefs, and practices of African American male principals via narrative inquiry provided the researcher with an inimitable investigation of the ways participants' viewed their principalship practices by examining their lived experiences.

Narrative inquiry does have some limitations. According to Bell (2002), these limitations include (a) the amount of time needed for in-depth research, and (b) the researcher's imposition of meaning on the participants' narratives. To avoid these potential drawbacks, the researcher allowed each stage of the study to unfold naturally rather than conform to set time constraints. In

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

addition, the researcher sought clarification on narrative meanings, as warranted, and allowed participants to review and confirm findings.

Setting and Participants

The participants of this study consisted of six African American male principals from six different secondary urban schools in a section of the Ohio public school system. This setting was chosen because (a) the largely minority district employed a pool of qualified participants; and (b) the researcher lived and was employed within the district, which made data collection in the form of face-to-face interviews and a focus group more feasible.

Prior to study implementation, the researcher sought Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. Once approval was obtained, participants were chosen through purposive sampling. The researcher identified subjects via professional contacts developed over a 7-year period at professional educational conferences. An initial mailing of 15 letters was sent to professional contacts requesting names and contact information of potential participants that met selection criteria. In an effort to include diverse experiences, the researcher used several criteria. The main criterion was at least 5 years' experience as an urban school principal (not assistant principal); for this study, principals were considered "effective" if their contracts had been renewed for at least 5 years, which in turn indicated that the schools they led were deemed by the state as successful or showing necessary improvement. In addition, the researcher sought participants who had at least 3 years' teaching experience in an urban secondary school, and at least one participant who was retired from or had 20-plus years' experience as a principal in an urban secondary school. After six potential participants were identified, the researcher solicited their participation through a letter, and all six agreed to be part of the study. Table 1 provides a brief overview of the African American male participants who met the study criteria.

Table 1

Demographics of Study Participants as Related to Selection Criteria

Participant	Working Status	Years as a Teacher in an Urban Secondary School	Years as a Principal in an Urban Secondary School
Fred	Current principal	6 years	5 years
Luther	Current principal	8 years	5 years
Marcus	Current principal	8 years	7 years
James	Current principal	5 years	8 years
Keith	Current principal	15 years	15 years
Detrick	Retired principal	5 years	30 years

Data Collection

A sequential set of activities was used for data collection. First, participants were asked to complete an initial biographical survey. Next, individual face-to-face interviews comprised of nine open-ended semi-structured questions were conducted, allowing each participant to establish his own relative importance to the issues addressed through the relation of his personal story of leadership. Finally, a focus group that centered around five additional questions was

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

conducted to allow for elaboration and clarification of topics discussed in the interviews. Table 2 illustrates the specific information gathered at each data collection stage of the study.

Table 2

Specific Information Gathered During Each Data Collection Stage

Stage	Related Questions/Data Collected
1. Demographic survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of education • Teaching/administrative experience • Professional accomplishments • Background information about secondary school where participant was principal, e.g., size, racial/ethnic composition
2. Face-to-face interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there any influences that affect your leadership practice because you are an African American male? • What are some of the myths and misconceptions, if any, about African American male principals? • What do you believe impacts the success of an urban school? • What belief systems do you subscribe to as an African American male principal? • What impact does this have on the success of your building? • What are some of the practices exhibited by an African American male principal that foster an effective educational environment in an urban school? • What are some of the best practices in urban education? • What are some elements of a healthy urban educational environment? • What lessons of leadership (if any) derived from your practice would you recommend to your cohorts in other urban schools?
3. Focus group interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given your beliefs and experiences about urban school leadership, explain what your approach to leadership would be if you were in a suburban or rural school district. • What practices, beliefs, values, etc., prepare you as an African American male to be a successful principal in an urban school? • Why did you become an urban school principal? • What advice would you give an inspiring African American male who wants the challenge of becoming a principal in an urban school? • Now that you've had time to reflect on your interview questions, describe what you believe to be the most important value of an effective urban school. Take it from the perspective of an African American male.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

As part of the data analysis, data were coded and recurrent themes that emerged in the interviews and focus group were identified via triangulation. More specifically, methodological triangulation was used to draw distinctions between within-method and between-method

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

triangulation. Methodological triangulation is the simultaneous or sequential use of at least two research methods and/or types of sources, usually quantitative and qualitative in a study (Jick, 1979). Isolated phenomena were also identified and analyzed. Findings emerged from the individual interviews, focus groups interviews, and field notes, as described in the next section.

The major provision for improving trustworthiness within this study involved ensuring dependability through participant clarification of focus group session transcript and check of individual interview transcripts. Participants who were interviewed were allowed to read a draft transcription of their own interview and revise, correct, or clarify any remarks. In addition, the researcher kept a journal recording his thoughts on the research process, providing continuous reflective and reflexive commentary, to help ensure dependability.

Findings

Findings from the interviews, focus group, and field notes were used to answer the guiding research questions. Findings, sorted by research question focus, are revealed below.

Systemic Perceptions and Myths That Influence an African American Male Principal

Findings related to the focus of the first research question centered around two emergent themes: (a) the practices and abilities of African American male school leaders, and (b) the inherent motivation of African American males to become principals. Additional subthemes also emerged, as described next.

Practices and abilities of African American male principals. As participants discussed perceptions of their abilities and practices, the subtheme of racial interaction emerged, distinguished by the following: (a) racial affinity with students, and (b) the influence of race on interactions with a diverse staff and community.

Racial affinity with students. Participants discussed perceptions of their ability to relate to students based on their race. For example, Fred discussed the prevalence of sending troubled African American male students to schools led by African American males, explaining, “A lot of people...try to give us a lot of students who have behavioral disabilities or students that come from broken homes or no fathers in the home.” Marcus described his sense of responsibility to “undo the damage” for an increasing number of African American males placed in special education classes or who encounter “lowered standards and no expectations.” He explained that the impulse to “slam” an urban student in a special education classroom for the “precocious” nature that is inherent in African American children “takes the fire out” of students and “takes the desire for learning away.” Marcus further explained the additional support that African American male principals provide to urban youth: “You are going from a system where some kids don’t have the supportive system at home, so you have to be all of that.” Fred illustrated the school environment he creates in order to cultivate respect in his African American male students: “This is a man working with a young man to let him become a real man.”

In contrast, Luther and James expressed a sense of cautiousness and heightened awareness of their treatment of African American students because of the perception that African American male administrators are more likely to “take it easy” (Luther) on African American students or be “more lenient” (James) on them. James noted this perception to be more predominant when addressing disciplinary matters. Because of this perception, Luther expressed

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

the importance of having a heightened awareness to ensure equitable treatment of all students, stating, “It just goes back to being consistent and fair.”

Influence of race on interactions with a diverse staff and community. Keith and Detrick described perceptions and myths about African American male principals’ ability to interact with individuals of other ethnic backgrounds, especially whites. For example, Keith related his experience of mistrust from white parents based on the perception that he might behave flirtatiously with their daughters. Detrick also mentioned the perception that African American male principals lack skills to be great leaders, “particularly in mixed staff.” He explained that he counters this perception with fairness and honesty toward everyone.

Fred addressed the importance of maintaining a harmonious environment in a diverse workplace and revealed that he tries to “make an environment where everyone can get along” because he knows “how hostile the environment can become, not just education, but any workplace with African Americans” due to stereotypes and misconceptions.

Inherent motivation of African American males to become a principal. During the discussion of African American males’ motivation to pursue the principalship, participants revealed one salient subtheme: humanistic motivation vs. materialistic and egoistic motivation. Several participants acknowledged that salary and title are incorrectly seen as motivators for those who aspire to be principals. James stated, “You should not go into it for the position.” Similarly, Marcus discussed the need to dispel the myth of materialistic motivation by conveying the real motivation, that “you really actually care for students and that you are here to make them achieve.” James and Detrick concurred and provided a description of a more humanistic motivation. James asserted, “You should go into it with the desire that I am going in to help others.” Detrick described the position as a “reward” without “Bill Gates’ money” or “a Rolls-Royce” and explained that witnessing students overcoming obstacles, graduating, attending college, and “doing better for themselves” is “worth its weight in gold.”

African American Male Principals Belief Systems That Impact the Success of the Educational Environment

Based on findings related to the second research question, participants clearly agreed that commitment and involvement, belief in student capability, and authenticity are critical to successful leadership. This finding is supported by Blasé and Anderson’s (1995) study, in which honesty, mutual respect, fairness, open communication, commitment, and dependability were identified as essential characteristics of effective principal leaders.

Commitment and involvement. The participants’ comments on the theme of commitment and involvement revealed a subtheme of collectivism, as multiple responses underscored the importance of the collaborative involvement of parents, family, staff, and community as well as a collective commitment. Detrick explained that urban schools need “a total commitment of all” and stated that both community and staff involvement were critical to his communication sessions with parents. He further described the necessity of commitment throughout the school to establish a viable educational culture and reiterated that commitment “starts with the students and goes to teachers and . . . the administrator and the custodial staff.”

James also mentioned the importance of the community but pointed out that the involvement must be purposeful and must offer resources or programs that meet the needs of the students. He explained that “checks and balances” are needed to ensure that external programs support the students academically and socially. He reinforced the notion of collective ownership

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

of the educational process, saying, “Everybody has a part of this whole picture of education. It isn’t just one person. So together working with all those parts, together we can be successful.”

Luther spoke of his belief in parental and family involvement as a critical element of a successful urban education environment. While he acknowledged the difficulty of parental involvement due to the predominance of single-parent families, he staunchly supported his conviction that family involvement or parental engagement “is the backbone of successful . . . urban schools” and is extremely important to student achievement.

Belief in student capability. Participants’ discussion of the importance of believing in all students’ ability to learn revealed a subtle subtheme of tension between African American male principals’ belief in students’ value and capability and students’ practice of making excuses based on race or socioeconomic status. Marcus stated, “Everyone is capable of learning” and “every student is educable in something.” James concurred but added the caveat that some students’ learning achievements do not correspond with their ability levels because they make excuses, often relating to racial prejudice, societal or systemic inequities, and family structure: “I believe our kids have excuses whether it is Whites doing this, whether society is doing this to him, whether they came from a single parent home, or anything of that nature happens.” Likewise, Detrick was emphatic that “all youngsters can learn” and reinforced James’ remarks about the influence of students’ mindsets on their educational accomplishments: “If the children come with the attitude that they want to learn, then they will learn.” Referencing James’ belief that students’ excuses impede their learning, Detrick addressed the issue of race directly: “There is nothing about the color of your skin as being a factor.”

Luther stated that he believes that “the majority of kids want to learn” and proposed the communication style and instructional approach that is most compatible with this desire: “They want to be told what to do in a positive way.” Luther also revealed an important perception about students’ inherent value: “I strongly believe that every kid is worthwhile of an education.”

Authenticity. As participants described their beliefs about authenticity, two subthemes emerged as outcomes of administrators’ genuineness: (a) student, parent, and staff motivation; and (b) a sense of trust that enhances relationships within the school and with community stakeholders.

Student, parent, and staff motivation. Keith described the efforts of students, parents, and staff that result from an understanding that the administrator genuinely cares about the success of the students and the school: “I think students and parents, everybody, will walk a mile for you if they think you care.” Similarly, Marcus described the influence of a caring administrator as he revealed, “If they know you care about them, you already pricked their hearts, and once you prick their hearts, you can get them to do anything you want them to.”

A sense of trust that enhances relationships within the school and with community stakeholders. Beyond the extra effort from students, parents, and even staff in response to a caring administrator, Keith described the sense of trust instilled in an urban school community by an administrator who demonstrates genuine concern: “If you care, they will trust you. If they trust you, they will move forward. So I think caring is very important for urban schools.” Luther noted that an administrator’s authenticity engenders respectful interactions and relationships with students: “I think once you get across to them that you do care about their success...there is a mutual respect that is formed and worthwhile relationships are gained through that.”

African American Male Principals' Practices That Foster an Effective Educational Environment

Findings related to the third research question focused closely on the participants' identities and images as African American male educational leaders. Themes of strength, paternalism, and fairness/consistency emerged and provided insight into emotionally intelligent behaviors associated with participants' identities as African American male urban school leaders.

Strength. Marcus posited that a stern demeanor and strong actions are critical to the success of an urban school environment: "We are to be strong in our decisions, strong in what we do and how we respond to situations." He also recommended that African American male principals "go in tough and ease up" because it is very difficult to "clamp down" later. Marcus explained that the image of a strong African American male was part of his upbringing, and that African American students need and deserve this type of leadership. For Marcus, not providing strong leadership behavior and decision-making for students would portray him as "less a man." Fred revealed that part of being strong involves teaching and demanding respect. He stated that he and his staff demand and teach respect for others, as well as self-respect, and that the ability to teach respect involves deference to authority and an inner strength that an African American male administrator could not successfully impart if he did not possess it himself.

Paternalism. Participants also discussed their identity as a role model and father figure. Marcus stated, "I think that one of the things that we bring is a strong father figure. Very few of us are in this field, in these positions, and so we serve as role models." He also described the influence that his father figure role has on his practices: "We have to be in control of the family, so I treat this building, my schools, everywhere I have been, even as a teacher, that it is my domain, I run this and kids respect that." His description of casual, familial endearments that his students bestow upon him underscored the depth of responsibility that an African American male urban school principal has: "Students walk around the halls and call you 'dad,' 'uncle,' and claim you as a family member. You are not related to them, but they know you have expectations for them."

Luther also noted that his practices centered on being a role model and leading by example. He pointed out the importance of "kids of color seeing you in your position not being unprofessional, just maintaining your professionalism at all times. Being that role model that you need to be for them is definitely an effective strategy."

Fairness and consistency. Several participants discussed the importance of fairness and consistency in their leadership practices. For example, Luther described a constant focus on making consistent, fair decisions despite "outside influences," "inside influences," and "political factors." Consistency and fairness seemed especially pertinent to his interactions with the "different personalities" of students, parents, and teachers. Similarly, Fred commented on the importance of being "consistent and fair in your dealings," particularly with parents, who will "respect" consistency and fairness because they "know what to expect." Marcus likewise noted that African American male principals must be consistent and fair but pointed out that they must also recognize and allow for extenuating circumstances and avoid a sweeping approach to all situations: "I think that we look at each situation different and not just one big brush stroke that suits everybody."

Detrick expressed the importance of consistency in behavior, revealing that he routinely stands at the door and greets all of his students in the morning. He pointed out that it is important

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

for them to have someone say good morning to them and “be interested in what they did” by asking questions such as, “Did you get your homework done?”

Discussion

African American male principals are keenly aware of systemic perceptions and myths regarding their own practices and motivation that influence urban educational environments. The interviews and focus group discussion revealed that a large number of African American males, particularly those coming from broken homes and those with behavioral challenges, are placed in schools with African American male principals simply based on the perception that ethnically congruent leadership will best serve them. However, data from the participants suggest that African American male urban school leaders relate to these students not necessarily because they share a common race but because they have a lived experience of the plights and struggles consistent with the students’ upbringing and environment. The study also determined that it is often assumed that African American male principals pursue school leadership positions primarily for financial gain. However, participants’ responses consistently reflected a passion and desire to improve students’ quality of life as the driving force for their career choice.

With respect to belief systems that impact the success of an urban educational environment, participants discussed the importance of beliefs centered on community involvement and commitment, student capability, and the authenticity of their leadership approach. Participants indicated that involvement of staff and parents as well as churches and community organizations offer resources that help to establish a more inclusive school setting, particularly because the entrenchment of urban schools in neighborhoods results in the reflection of the beliefs and values of the entire community. Participants also reiterated the need for a shared commitment by everyone invested in student success, whether they are immediate or extended family members, church leaders, or other community stakeholders. In addition, findings conveyed participants’ views about the importance of believing in student capability and potential. Emphatic responses that all students can learn were consistently found. Finally, participants’ belief systems incorporated caring and genuineness as essential traits to establishing an effective rapport with students. These attributes inspire trust because once stakeholders determine the principal’s authenticity, they become more willing to accept his or her leadership.

Findings related to the practices of African American male urban school leaders emphasized strength, paternalism, and consistency/fairness as important contributors to the success of the urban educational environment. Participants linked these practices to their identities and images, particularly in their descriptions of firm decision-making and mentoring students to develop purposeful and productive relationships. Associated with this practice is the paternalistic mien with which they interact with students and the responsibility they accept as a role model for students. Participants were adamant that leadership practices in an urban environment must incorporate a fair approach to daily decision-making and interactions with all constituents to ensure that all decisions are made in the best interest of the students. Participants described a strong focus on consistency in their practices to maintain a positive school climate by creating a routine that establishes stability and a shared understanding of expectations.

The primary findings based on participants’ responses regarding the influence of systemic perceptions and myths as well as their beliefs and practices that influence the success of their respective urban educational environments led to three main conclusions related to African American male principals in urban education environments. The first conclusion—*effective*

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

urban school leaders address broad social and systemic issues that affect student education and performance—aligns with Dantley and Rogers’ (2005) contention that schools serving urban, Latino, and African American children call for leadership that “not only stresses academic achievement but also does so within the purposeful content of inevitable social change and critical democratic citizenry” (p. 652).

Data from the participants reflected leadership orientations that call for broader, more holistic approaches. Marcus, for example, described being “up against a system that has typically failed black males” and the need to remain “cognizant...in making sure you are trying to do the right things at all times.” Likewise, Fred reflected on the large number of African American male students who, in the absence of fathers in the home, have “behavioral disabilities,” meaning behavior problems, and are sent to schools led by African American males who are then expected to serve as role models.

Detrick and Keith discussed how meeting the broader needs of their students has informed their leadership styles. Detrick explained how he creates a solid infrastructure of support for students by involving his entire staff in developing relationships with students so that they are comfortable approaching staff with issues outside the school that affect their educational performance. Keith described his school’s emphasis on healthy practices, such as providing students with snacks if they have not eaten breakfast, involving the entire school in exercising, and discussing substance abuse assistance. For Keith, “getting the job done” means infusing a holistic approach to his students’ health into his leadership practice.

Marcus and Fred noted the inclusion of concepts such as participation in a democracy and social evolution to their leadership practices. Marcus described his belief that all students have talents and the ability to “be a good citizen and a contributing citizen to this democracy,” and to prepare his students for their responsibilities as citizens, he promotes critical thinking and investigation into his instructional leadership. Fred discussed the need for educational leadership to “stay two steps ahead” of a constantly evolving society and noted, “A lot of times we fall short in this area.” He stressed that teaching practices must evolve with society and that his leadership promotes more proactive approaches on the part of teachers: “Teachers are going to have to . . . meet the needs of the students and reach out to them.”

The second conclusion reached based on participant responses is as follows: *Effective urban school leaders employ an integrated leadership style*. A review of empirical studies by Leithwood, Tomilson, and Genge (1996) on transformational leadership in the public schools concluded “beyond a reasonable doubt” that transformational leadership contributes to “organizational improvement/effectiveness, teachers’ perceptions of student outcomes, and organizational climate and culture” (p. 833).

Responses from the participants reflected elements of transformational leadership, particularly those of enlisting support for a unified organizational mission or vision and nurturing a positive organizational culture. Detrick discussed creating a culture at his school that encourages collective ownership and the school being considered “part of the home.” He explained, “I taught my students that the school was theirs,” and he conveyed a similar message to the staff, announcing, “This is not a place where you work; this is your home away from home.” Luther’s recognition that urban schools exist in communities, not in a vacuum, also reflects the unification and shared vision of the transformational leadership model. According to Luther, a school’s mission should include “bringing in a community, which should include the achievement and values of every student across the stage.” He described an effective school as one in which the mission “is true to where their community is” and “what the community is

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

about.” Marcus also shared the importance of a shared vision that he endeavors to instill in his students: a belief in themselves. He explained the impact that this shared belief has on an urban school’s culture: “If you change that culture by your belief and get to the very heart of them, to me, I believe that is the heart of success of urban schools.”

Data from the participants also supported the need for different leadership behaviors based on “situational parameters” (Chemers, 1993, p. 302). Fred reflected on his efforts to create an “atmosphere of respect for one another” in a diverse work environment, as he acknowledged the potential for hostility in “any workplace with African Americans” influenced by inaccurate and stereotypical presentations by the media. Keith explained that he must frequently adjust to parental dispositions and situations in students’ home lives when interacting with them for disciplinary reasons: “They may be coming to me with ‘my gas is cut off,’ ‘my other son is in juvenile hall,’ ‘and now you call me about this kid. You know I’m at my wits’ end.’” He described his effort to be successful with “making a person come in and leave comfortable” despite receiving upsetting information that could put them on the defensive.

The third conclusion based on participant input is the following: *Effective urban school leaders embrace the dualism of bureaucrat-administrator and ethno-humanist roles.* Though the bureaucrat-administrator role is a given for school leaders and was apparent in participants’ discussions of their administrative practices, a belief in the criticality of the ethno-humanist role was also prevalent. Lomotey (1989) attributed several qualities to an ethno-humanist role: (a) commitment to the education of African American children; (b) compassion for and understanding of African American children and their communities; and (c) confidence in the educability of African American children. Participants’ beliefs, values, and practices illustrated not only typical bureaucrat-administrator tasks but, more noteworthy, ethno-humanist attitudes.

For example, Fred discussed the goal of African American male urban administrators to prepare students for life after high school: “The true role for us is to prepare our future generations to take our place.” He described a “culture of ambition” as an element of a healthy urban educational environment and described ethno-humanist sensibilities when referring to his ability to relate to his students because of his younger age: “Being young and African American, we are not so far away from them. . . . We listen to the same music, we go to the same stores, and we dress the same way.” Detrick reflected ethno-humanist attributes as he explained the comfort his students have in communicating with him because of his approachability: “So they come to me, talk to me, and share things with me.”

Ethno-humanist traits were also revealed in Detrick’s comments about his commitment to his job and the children at his school: “A child is a whole child, and this child is not just yours for one year or two years, but you influence that child and he will carry that for the rest of his life.” Keith described his ethno-humanistic goal of developing students’ self-sufficiency and independence. He noted the tendency of minority students to “want you to give them the answer” and revealed that in response, he empowers students to learn to make their own efforts, telling them, “We are not going to be there to give you the answer. . . . You gotta do it; you gotta try.”

James revealed ethno-humanist facets of his leadership role by discussing his understanding of the community in which most of his students live as well as the predominant single-parent family structure: “I was born in the inner city, so I do relate to that aspect for a single-parent home and the problems their kids are having.” He expressed a particular sensitivity to the academic issues African American urban students might face in preparing for college entrance exams: “Growing up in an urban society, I knew that my parents were not able to help

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

me . . . with any kind of entrance exam. I can relate to where these kids are coming from.” Despite these challenges, he emphatically stated, “I believe all students can learn.”

Limitations

Due to the personal qualities (e.g., gender, race, role) of the participants, some limitations exist in this study. First, all participants were African American males who were principals in urban secondary schools in northeast Ohio. As such, data gleaned have limited applicability. For instance, it is not possible to generalize findings to other areas of Ohio or to other urban areas of the nation. In addition, findings will relate best to urban as opposed to suburban and rural districts and will relate better to African American male principals as opposed to African American female principals. Second, the sample size is small, and as a result, varying viewpoints and other sources of information may not be reflected within the data of the study.

Implications

This study’s implications highlight three areas of consideration: (a) social and systemic issues appear to severely distract African American male urban school leaders from their educational focus; (b) attention needs to be given to the critical dual role of African American male principals, who must both manage schools and serve as role models for African American youth; and (c) focus needs to be directed toward developing and then hiring more African American male principals.

Study participants provided a wealth of data on their experiences helping students overcome social, behavioral, and emotional obstacles that are, essentially, distractions from the educational purpose. The urban educational system has increased its reliance on African American male school leaders to remedy these issues, mainly because of the gender and racial connection they have to troubled African American male students. Thus, African American male urban school leaders would be best served by an increase in staff dedicated to social services, counseling support, behavioral health, and parental outreach, which would then allow them to concentrate more on the primary mission of instructional leadership.

Regardless of the solutions that are implemented to increase opportunities for African American male urban school leaders to focus on academics, the shrinking number of African American males aspiring to the principalship is creating a void that will sharply reduce exposure to strong African American male role models. Study participants suggested that considerable attention be given to recruiting and hiring African American male candidates who are truly qualified to lead urban schools. To increase the number of qualified African American male candidates, districts need to forge stronger partnerships with college and university administrative leadership programs, including those at historically Black learning institutions. A key component for preparing aspiring African American male principals is a thorough immersion in both bureaucrat-administrator and ethno-humanist roles. Preparation should consist of not only traditional training on the role of an instructional leader but also cultivation of the attributes of the ethno-humanist role, including a commitment to the education of all children, compassion for and understanding of a diverse population of students and their communities, and confidence in the educability of all students.

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCES

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