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If and to What Extent Spirituality Impacts the Leadership Practices of Four African American Superintendents

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Abstract

Public school superintendents have one of the most challenging, demanding, and visible positions in American society. They provide educational leadership in approximately 15,499 school districts across the United States. Their visibility is marked by the fact that the majority of leadership positions are held by non-minority individuals (American Association of School Administrators, AASA, 1992). The underrepresentation of minorities in public school leadership positions on a national level has been thoroughly documented over the years, and the limited representation of African Americans in top positions of public school administration is glaring (AASA, 1983, 1992; Jones & Montenegro, 1985, 1988; Montenegro, 1993). The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand if and to what extent spirituality impacts the leadership practices of four African American superintendents. The focus of the study was to explore how these administrators living in the South constructed and/or defined leadership; what obstacles or barriers, if any, affected their path to leadership; and if to what extent their spirituality is embedded into their leadership practices. Critical Race Theory (CRT), with its focus on defining, addressing, and exposing educational

problems, was the theoretical framework used to guide this study. The sample consisted of four participants, each serving in the capacity of assistant superintendent or superintendent. Field notes allowed the researcher to observe the superintendents' leadership practices, and how each participant was received by their staff. Interviews provided rich descriptions of how the research participants perceived these leadership practices with an emphasis being on spirituality. Through case study analysis, nine main themes and 20 subthemes were identified. The main themes included: leadership paradigm, influences on leadership, barriers and obstacles, spiritual expression, spirituality versus religiosity, spiritual influences, spirituality and the workplace, spiritual journey, and spiritual influences on leadership practices. Cross-case analysis revealed a small number of subthemes shared across cases.

Keywords: spirituality; superintendents; leadership; religiosity; and school administration.

Background of the Problem

Public school superintendents have one of the most challenging, demanding, and visible positions in American society. They provide educational leadership in approximately 15,499 school districts across the United States. Their visibility is marked by the fact that the majority of leadership positions are held by non-minority individuals (American Association of School Administrators, AASA, 1992). The underrepresentation of minorities in public school leadership positions on a national level has been thoroughly documented over the years, and the limited representation of African Americans in top positions of public school administration is glaring (AASA, 1983, 1992; Jones & Montenegro, 1983, 1985; Montenegro, 1993). Despite long-term understanding of the problem, by some estimates, men are 20 times as likely as women to advance from teaching to the superintendency (Skrla, 1999, p. 3).

The data available on the office of the superintendency in U.S. schools revealed that 3.4% were minority men, 0.4% were minority females and 4.6% were White females (AASA, 1992). Additionally, data from this 1992 study disclosed that for the position of the assistant superintendent, minority men accounted for 8.6% of these positions, and minority women accounted for 3.3%. The total representation of women in assistant superintendent positions was 17.4%. A study conducted by AASA in 2007, suggested that most superintendents continue to be White and male, but the number of female superintendents has grown continually from 6.6% in 1992 to 13.2% in 2000 and to 21.7% in 2007 (AASA, 2007, p. 17).

It is widely believed that a diverse representation is needed in a pluralistic society such as the one that many live in, but perhaps more important

is the need to utilize human resources in order to develop the talents of all those who can make valuable contributions for the greater good of all. It is critically important that children see that African American superintendents exist and that people of color can assume leadership positions.

Until recently, the African American female's treatment in the press has been superficial at best. In terms of books or journals, chapters dedicated to people of color have appeared in the final section or chapter as an afterthought. A perfect example is the book, *The contemporary superintendent: Preparation, practice and development* by Bjork and Kowalski (2005) where the last chapter before the summary is dedicated to minorities in the superintendency. Whether intentional or not, reporting out in this fashion reflects the amalgam of several independent ethnicities (African, Asian, Native and Hispanics) and fails to zero in on the unique qualities that are germane to an ethnic group or race. In fact, the invisible barriers that have restricted the movement of African Americans severely have limited their options and, in effect, placed them in competition with other African Americans for the few available openings. African American women who aspire to the top post reason that it is futile to try for a superintendency because their sphere of employment is severely limited.

In the area of school administration, the superintendency has traditionally been dominated by White males (Jones, 1985). Historically, minorities have been underrepresented in public school leadership positions, especially in the top position, the superintendency. While women, African Americans, and other racial minorities have slowly joined their ranks, it has not been at a level representative of the population or at a level that is proportional to their numbers in the teaching profession. In most U.S. organizations, the representation of culture groups (i.e., minorities in the overall work population, and especially in the most powerful positions) is highly skewed (Cox, 1994). This trend is reflected in public school organizations as well. Not until the last three decades were African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian-Americans appointed to the offices of the superintendency (Jones & Montenegro, 1983).

Considering the already low number of minority teachers, it is obvious that the pool of potential minority public school administrators will be even smaller in the future. Historically, the largest group of African American professionals to provide leadership within the African American community has been educators. They have valued education as a method to achieve individual enrichment as well as social progress (King, 1993).

Statement of the Problem

The ever-increasing demands on school administrators create a work environment that necessitates a leader driven by morals and values. Skills needed to confront these demands are much more subjective than what is being taught in leadership preparation programs (Creighton, 1999). Success in leadership

requires the ability to see and connect to the “big picture.” Klenke (2003) stated that schools need leaders who are willing to investigate the depths of their inner being and contemplate their inner values. School leaders’ motivation must derive from a set of deep personal beliefs, which equip the leader to face the complex issue of school leadership (Creighton, 1999).

Spiritual qualities are commonly overlooked in relation to leadership positions (Thompson, 2004). Preparation programs develop courses that emphasize core areas of leadership such as decision making, teacher evaluations, and other topics that have historically been associated with school leadership. These courses intend to prepare students to be effective leaders when facing difficult situations in schools. However, the reality of school leadership places a person in situations that require more than core knowledge. Every day, school leaders must face the problems of society with dignity and compassion, which cannot be learned through traditional course work.

Methods

Researchers used qualitative methodology (case study/naturalistic inquiries) as the design for this study. According to Glense and Peshkin (1998), case study methodology allows participants to tell their stories through interviews, documents, artifacts, and observations while the job of the researcher is to make sense of these data. The use of case study as a methodology also builds upon the theoretical framework for this study, critical race theory (CRT). Both the methodology and the framework permit the voices of those who have historically been silenced by the dominant society to be heard. This study did not include all African American administrators nor did it attempt to represent the entire range of experience among African American school leaders. Rather, this study sought to provide an in-depth study of patterns and themes experienced by a sample of African American superintendents.

The researchers asked five respected colleagues and mentors to provide the names of African American administrators in K-12 education who they perceived to incorporate a spiritual dimension in their leadership practices. From the list of names that was obtained from colleagues, and the ones that we came up with, we then began an elimination process. We eliminated individuals who had less than five years of administrative experience. We believed that participants with 20 or more years of experience would be able to add a substantial amount of breadth to this research endeavor; therefore, prospective participants were chosen based upon years of experience, position/title, and geographical location. For the purpose of this research endeavor, (four) participants took part in this research interest. A letter was sent to each participant. They each signed and dated the consent statement to verify their participation in the study.

The analysis plan for this study included the following aspects: (a) transcription of interviews, (b) organization of the data; (c) protecting the data; (d)

plan for coding and finding patterns, themes, and categories; (e) examining convergence/divergence; and (f) determining substantive significance. Organization of the data was accomplished through using a “case study” method (i.e., data were organized by viewing each interview as a case study). The plan for coding followed the strategy presented by Merriam (1998). According to Merriam (1998), coding is defined as “assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of data to easily retrieve specific pieces of the data, and the designations can be letters, numbers, phrases, or a combination of these” (p. 164). The plan for finding patterns, themes, and/or categories was to first analyze each individual interview searching for reoccurring themes and patterns. Second, the researchers cross-case analyzed interviews in an effort to develop general themes and/or categories. The questions that guided this study are:

1. Is African American leadership influenced by spirituality? If so, how is it characterized?
2. How do African American superintendents define spirituality?
3. To what degree does spirituality manifest itself in the decision making process for African American superintendents?
4. Is spirituality demonstrated in a leadership context for African American superintendents?

Theoretical Framework

This study was framed by Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT has its roots in critical legal studies (CLS) and is related to LatCrit, Asian critical theory, Tribal critical theory, and critical race feminism (Bernal, Villalpando, Brayboy, & Thompson, 2003). CRT is a theory of race and racism designed to uncover how race and racism operate in the law and in society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, 1997, 1998; Tate, 1997). CRT is also used as a tool to define, expose, and address educational problems. Legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Mari Matsuda, Robert Delgado, Kimberlie Crenshaw, and William Tate (Delgado, 1995) have argued that CLS has done nothing to address two important factors: racial inequality and the role that race and racism play in the legal system of the United States of America. On the other hand, CRT focuses specifically on social inequalities arising from race and racism (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Critical race theorists are committed to social justice as a fundamental principle but by particularly acknowledging the pervasiveness of race and racism in the ongoing experiences of students of color and in the structures and practices of educational institutions. Ladson-Billings (1998) stated, “. . .despite the scientific refutation of race as a legitimate biological concept and attempts to marginalize race in much of the political discourse, race continues to be a powerful social construct and signifier” (p. 8). Therefore, a primary element of the work of educational researchers working with CRT is to discuss and define

race and racism in specific historical and social contexts, recognizing that race is viewed as a “pre-eminently sociohistorical concept” and that racism is more than just deeds of individual prejudice (Omi & Winant, 1986, p. 60). It is seen as a way of life, deeply entrenched in the educational system through historical consciousness and ideological choices about race (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Race may be a social construct, but it has real effects on people, particularly persons of color.

CRT often takes the form of storytelling, in which writers analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race (Delgado, 1995). This means that CRT understands that the social world is not fixed; rather, it is something constructed with words, stories, and silences (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT uses oral histories, biographies, parables, testimonies, and narrative to tell the story as well as to counter those negative and false stories about persons of color. Finally, CRT represents a space of both theoretical and epistemological liberation. It offers an opportunity to challenge the taken-for-granted theories and concepts that govern disciplines and circumscribe thinking about how race continues to play an important role in society.

Participants

Four African American superintendents located in school districts in the Southern United States participated in this study. The study included two African American superintendents, one male and one female, and two African American assistant superintendents, one male and one female. Both of the superintendents are leaders in predominantly Black school districts with high percentages of free and reduced lunches. The two African American assistant superintendents work in more diverse school districts, with one being in a predominantly White school district.

The superintendents range in age from 50-65 years. Two of the superintendents were in their early 50s, and the two assistant superintendents were between the ages of 50-65. All of the leaders held at least a specialist degree, with both superintendents holding doctoral degrees in Educational Leadership. All of the leaders were in their first superintendency, with all having at least four years of experience. The two assistant superintendents were the first African Americans to hold that position in their respective school districts. All of the leaders were married with children at least 17 years of age.

Summary of the Study by Research Questions

The results of this study reflect the lived experiences of four African American administrators and depict the themes involved with the process of reflecting upon their leadership practices as superintendents in a Southern state.

Two of the participants currently serve as assistant superintendents and two are superintendents. Three of the participants serve in urban school districts, while one serves in a rural school district. Each of the four participants shared their narratives with me during face-to-face interviews that were held in the participants' workplaces. Interviews and limited observations of their working environments and day-to-day routines added additional insight into this study.

Question One: African American Leadership Characterized Leadership paradigm.

The researchers sought to answer "How is African American leadership that is influenced by spirituality characterized?" The reason for posing this question was to gain insight into how African American superintendents conceptualized leadership. This research question gave each participant an opportunity to define leadership, discuss their leadership pathways, and reflect on the barriers and obstacles encountered along their leadership journey. Three major themes dominated the discussion on how each participant characterized leadership. The three major themes were leadership paradigm, influences on leadership, and barriers and obstacles. Each participant was unique in how they defined leadership, but one thing that they all had in common was their mention of the word "vision." This term was used to express how important it is to be a long-term planner and to be able to set obtainable goals that may seem out of reach at the time. All of the participants took the traditional route to the superintendency, first starting off as a classroom teacher and working their way through the administrative ranks.

All of the participants, based on their responses about leadership, identified with what Hersey & Blanchard (1970) coined "Situational Leadership." This was a leadership model that did not have a "one size fit all" approach. It in essence, allowed a leader to choose the leadership style of preference based upon the situation. This model's origin was based upon Stogdill's (1948) Ohio Leadership Studies model.

The results from the research indicated various influences on the participants' leadership journey. The commonality between all of the participants was that their inspiration drew from an educator. These influential people ranged from classroom teachers, to coaches, to college professors. They all had their hand in shaping and inspiring the participants in many ways. The participants did reveal through their personal interviews a lack of African American mentors. This supported the research by Yeakey, Johnson, & Adkinson (1986) that there are major disparities in the literature when it comes to the representation of minorities, specifically, African American superintendents. Even though Melanie, Aaron, and Marion had African American influences that inspired their leadership journey, none of the participants mentioned having that same African American influence once they became superintendent. This

supported the research by Yeakey et al. (1986) that there are major disparities in the literature when it comes to the representation of minorities, specifically, African American superintendents. Research on minorities and women in educational administration primarily focused on White female school or district leaders, with little attention has been placed on African American's role in school leadership.

The results of the research did indicate numerous barriers and obstacles the participants experienced on their leadership path. The nucleus of these obstacles mentioned were race related, and all of the findings supported CRT. Melanie did not get discouraged from the racial discrimination she faced as a special education director. Speaking with a parent who referred to Blacks as “niggers” did not discourage her. She became even more motivated to discredit the stigmas of ignorant and incompetent that has long plagued African Americans. She credited a lack of understanding and ignorance for the response. Melanie knew that this type of behavior would surface eventually, especially since she was working in a predominantly White school district, and was the only African American holding a leadership in the district comprised of 15 schools. Gay and Baber (1987) argued that, throughout history, African Americans have experienced a multitude of negative images, stereotypes, laws, and customs imposed on them. They added that “slavery caused cultural imperialism, assimilation, and racism, which were deliberate attempts to convince African Americans there was something innately inferior about their ethnicity, lifestyle, and customs simply because of their Blackness” (p. 36).

There was something unique that surfaced from this research endeavor. The participants who worked in predominantly Black school districts had very little race-related barriers versus the participants who worked in predominantly White school districts. The race-related conversations from the participants that worked mostly in predominantly White school districts spoke of numerous occasions where they perceived race to be the motivating factor behind many of their experiences. It is also worth noting that the participants who worked in predominantly White school districts were not serving in the role as assistant superintendents, and one mentioned that she feels like when she retires, there will not be another African American to fill her role or higher. Even though race was not an issue for the superintendents working in predominantly Black school districts, Aaron, on the other hand, faced a different barrier. He faced opposition from other Blacks because he did not attend a Historically Black College or University. This mentality among the Black community members surprised him, for he thought that they would be supportive of having a Black superintendent head the district.

Question Two: How Do African American Administrators Define Spirituality?

Each of the four participants shared various ways in which they expressed their spirituality. One commonality of their spiritual expression was their prayer life. Two of the participants noted that praying throughout the day was an essential component to their daily survival, while others expressed relying on praying before making tough decisions. Attending church was very important for the participants. They felt like this was their way to reconnect with God by hearing the message by the pastor and singing spiritual hymns. One of the participants concluded that the best way they could express their spirituality was through the way they talked, behaved, and carried themselves. Other forms of spiritual expressions from the participants were meditating, attending Bible studies, and reading spiritually-related literature.

Melanie and Alice made very distinct differences between spirituality and religiosity. They agreed that spirituality is what is on the inside of you, that it is connected to a "higher power." That higher power referred to God. Spretnak (1982) wrote that feminist spirituality has taken form in African American sisterhood and in solidarity based on a vision of personal freedom, self-definition, and common struggle for social and political change. Although the women in this study did not align with Spretnak's views of spirituality, they did correspond with Atlas and Capper's (2003) definition, which noted the existence of a higher power within the person.

Question Three: To What Degree Does Spirituality Manifest Itself in the Decision- Making Process for African American School Administrators?

Spiritual Influence was noted by each participant. Spirituality has taken on various facets as it relates to its role in leadership. Until recently, there has been little reference made to its impact on K-12 education. With the separation of church and state, many educators have steered clear of attempting to incorporate their spiritual practices into their work ethics. All of the participants made a point to mention how they pray before making tough decisions. They believed that it was imperative to seek a higher power before making any decisions, especially decisions that affected the lives of students and staff.

One thing noted from the transcripts was where these leaders received their spiritual influence. Every participant spoke of a matriarch as strongly influencing their spiritual development. This was profound, for all of the participants grew up in a two-parent household, but during the 1950s and 1960s when the participants were growing up, the fathers were busy working and were the primary source of income for their families. This left the woman, usually the mother or grandmother, there to be the spiritual head of the household. This greatly influenced the leaders' decision-making as it relates to making decisions in the workplace. They each had various accounts of how the matriarch influenced

their spirituality, and not all of the influences came from their families. The strong matriarchal figure strongly correlated with Oladele's (1998/1999) article, where he credited his mother as infusing spirituality into him throughout his childhood by providing oral history of his ancestors, through reading and learning, and by attending church regularly.

Many of the participants were hesitant about bringing their spirituality into the workplace. Most of them expressed an understanding of the separation of church and state and were very conscious of not offending any of their staff members. Many of the participants' spiritual expressions were not externally shown but internally expressed. This was usually in the form of prayer and meditation. Each of the participants shared a commitment to their staff if they were ever in need of prayer or just needed to talk about an issue. This is where they felt comfortable about openly talking about God and their spiritual teachings. This form of spiritual expression was not considered to be offensive.

Question Four: How is Spirituality Demonstrated in a Leadership Context for African American School Leaders?

Each participant had a unique path on their spiritual journey. Some were reared through formal spiritual teachings in their homes, while others had community and church members influence their journey. One of the commonalities of all the participants' spiritual journeys was the matriarch figure they received their spiritual guidance from. These individuals planted spiritual seeds into their souls that continued to be watered as they grew older. Attending church and Sunday school regularly was just a couple of ways their spiritual seeds were developed. Surprisingly, none of the participants mentioned their church pastor as having an influence on their spiritual journey. My belief is since they were young growing up in the church, they did not fully understand the pastor's role in their spiritual development. They did mention attending Sunday school, most of which were facilitated by women. This is one way they learned about the bible and various Biblical characters.

Each participant spoke passionately about his or her hardships and absurdities encountered on their leadership journey. Like Stewart (1999), these men and women said they have been able to avoid complete annihilation by assimilating into, adapting to, and transforming their internal and external conditions. For example, participant one talked about her graduate school experience when one faculty member made her do extra assignments, larger caseloads, and did not hold her to the same standards as her White colleagues. She said she survived this environment by holding on to her faith and creating her own reality. This reality, according to Stewart (1999), allows one an identity while also allowing one to make sense of a chaotic situation. The participants all agreed with Stewart's (1999) comments about African American spirituality. Stewart also wrote:

Black spirituality has thus enabled African Americans, as the despised and rejected, as the devalued outcasts of American society, to create a hermeneutics of existence, a soul culture, a living archive of soul force empowering them to interpret, decode, recode, translate, and ritualize social terror, oppression, and adversity into creative and meaningful liturgies of human existence” (p. 17).

Similar to Cone (1975), these men and women used their spirituality to overcome obstacles like racism and other forms of mistreatment such as classism, sexism, unfair educational practices, and discrimination in the workplace. Spirituality for them has brought calmness in the midst of chaos and confusion. Each of the participants was concerned about doing the right thing. This is supported by Dantley (2003a), Gordon (2000), and West (1993) who wrote that African Americans tend to lead from a spiritual dimension. Also, according to Stewart (1997), African Americans see themselves as children of God and that God is merciful and forgiving; therefore, African Americans have been able to use their spirituality to forgive their oppressors.

The men and women of this study said that they believe that doing the right thing is critical to their success as leaders. None of the participants said they believe that the past or current mistreatment of African Americans should be excused or dismissed, but because they subscribe to the teachings of Christ, they said they believe that retaliation or acts of violence against the oppressor are not God’s way of resolving problems. They also said they believe treating people the way they want to be treated or following the golden rule is the best way to lead. Finally, they all said their faith in God and their spirituality allow them to lead through adverse situations and make critical decisions that affect many people.

Implications

Based on the study findings, there are several implications for African American superintendents as they pertain to their leadership practices and spirituality. This research suggests that if African Americans are going to climb the leadership ladder to the superintendency, they must first obtain terminal degrees, specifically, a doctoral degree. They do not have the luxury to forfeit high educational attainment. Generally, African American superintendents are given the opportunity to head school districts that service predominantly Black students who live in lower socioeconomic communities in southern Mississippi. The superintendents must take on these opportunities knowing that they can handle the job. If they can look at these opportunities optimistically instead of as an opportunity to fail, they can create and cultivate successful schools, leading to more opportunities in the future for minority leaders. Advanced graduate education is one component that can aid in preparation for the responsibilities of

the superintendent's role. Also, graduate programs that have high number of African Americans training for advanced K-12 leadership roles should look at ways to incorporate new leadership paradigms into their programs that account for cultural and ethnic leadership styles.

Conclusions

The face of school leadership is changing, resulting in a historical shift in the color and gender of the principalship (Alston, 2000; Brown, 2005). More Black female educators are assuming the role of the principalship, breaking through once impenetrable barriers. Furthermore, while a cultural and gender shift is prevalent in school leadership as it relates to the principalship, a change is not occurring in the geographical placement of African American superintendents.

The results presented in this study provided insight into the leadership practices and experiences of four African American superintendents. The study also served as a platform for the African American leaders to share their stories of spirituality, adversity, path to leadership, and their successes as leaders. Framed by CRT, this study examined the influence of race and equity on leadership opportunities for African American superintendents. Leadership, as defined by this study, is a cross between transformational leadership and servant leadership. The participants said they believe in doing the right thing, which is a tenet of transformational leadership. Transformational leadership also operates on values, honesty, loyalty, fairness, equality, and human rights, whereas servant-leadership is devoted to building the organization rather than acquiring personal wealth and places the organizational needs before personal needs. This type of leader encourages participation at all levels. A servant-leader shares power while working to build other people's self-confidence and self-worth. These leaders truly work from a moral center of justice and equality (Senge, 1990). A servant-leader is committed to the organizational community. Again, the participants in this study exemplify transformation leadership and servant-leadership.

Each participant at some point during his or her leadership journey encountered challenges and controversy, but they were all able to overcome them through perseverance and through spiritual practice. The leaders in this study are truly redefining leadership and are bringing to light the concept of leadership and spirituality that has eluded the educational arena for years. Even though we as researchers would also say that spirituality is not something unique or special to African Americans, like West (1999) and Stewart (1999), it is the researchers' belief that spirituality has prevented African Americans from being completely physically and mentally annihilated. We believe men and women of all ethnic and racial backgrounds have the ability to be spiritual, though not everyone chooses to exercise his or her spirituality in the workplace. For the

most part, spirituality has been associated and confused with religion, and people are somewhat afraid that allowing spirituality to come into the workplace might create a blurred line between the two. All of the participants cared about doing the right thing, and they believed in serving others. Spirituality in this way can be an enhancement to leadership.

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