'What you see is [not always] what you get!' Dispelling race and gender leadership assumptions

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Race and gender affect the way in which African-American female principals perceive and enact their roles in predominantly African-American urban schools. Using empirical data drawn from a larger qualitative study, this article examines and challenges racial and gendered assumptions about African-American leadership, and specifically American female leadership. This article suggests that the complex intersection between race, gender, and professional socialization may shape African-American leaders' perception of and orientation toward predominantly African-American schools and communities in some unanticipated ways.

Keywords: gender in educational leadership; African-American leadership; African-American education

Geraldine, a 1970s satire character created and portrayed by Flip Wilson, made famous the catch phrase 'what you see is what you get' (McDermott, n.d.). As an African-American[1] comedian, Wilson's popularity was widespread. He even hosted a lucrative, syndicated television variety show. During the 1970s, many fighting for African-American civil rights were outraged by Wilson's usage of stereotypes about African-Americans in his comedy. Geraldine's controversial character depicted a number of stereotypes about African-American women that could be perceived as negative. Even with all of the controversy, Wilson maintained that he never intended to demean African-American women (Gardner, n.d.).

The phrase, 'what you see is what you get,' may hint at some of the broader racial and gendered assumptions that continue to exist today. A contemporary example of this ongoing debate is the 2008 Democratic nomination process. With a viable African-American candidate and a viable female candidate, the political discourse surrounding this election is filled with race- and gender-based notions of leadership of and for particular segments of the electorate. While these complex debates exist, there certainly are no simple answers. Does Senator Obama automatically represent the African-American constituency based on his same-race affiliation? Are female voters obligated to Senator Clinton based on her gender?

The complexities of race-based and gender-based assumptions permeate other leadership arenas outside of politics, including school leadership. In fact, it is not uncommon for educators, community members, and others to posit that a predominantly African-American school needs an African-American principal or that a predominantly Hispanic school needs a Hispanic principal.

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Indeed, the literature suggests that same-race affiliation between teachers, administrators, and African-American students serves a critical function in their schooling and education (Lomotey 1993; M. Foster 1997; Fultz 2004). Research shows that African-American educators often act as role models, advocates, and in supportive roles for African-American students (Ladson-Billings 1994; Delpit 1995; Tillman 2004). Further, studies reveal that African-American educators exhibit a sensitivity and consciousness of the challenges facing African-American students (L. Foster 2005; Gooden 2005). Just as important, Dantley (2005) suggests that African-American educators contribute to the professional learning community of other educators by bringing race into the educational discourse of schools.

Similarly, other literature (Case 1997; Loder 2005) indicates that African-American female principals tend to hold additional maternal-like qualities within their leadership, which may also be important for African-American communities and schools. Gender adds another layer of complexity for African-American female principals who lead urban, predominantly African-American schools. In addition to racialized role expectations, they also experience gendered role expectations, including the notions of caring, concern, and 'othermothering' (Case 1997; Loder 2005). Further, while African-American women principals may be viewed as racial 'insiders,' many may view them as 'outsiders' in terms of their gender and leadership abilities (Coleman 2003; Rusch 2004). According to Rusch, women administrators experience 'glass ceilings, exclusion from district power networks and gender-based role expectations' (2004, 15). In their commitment to African-American children, African-American female principals may confront racism and sexism from their White and African-American constituents, as well as complex and intersecting racialized and gendered role expectations above and beyond those expected of other administrators.

While these studies illustrate the supportive qualities of African-American female leaders, we find it necessary to consider the variety of other attributes that these leaders may bring and the possible effects they may have specifically on African-American schools and communities. The aim of this article is two-fold. First, we discuss the complex nature of the diverse experiences that African-American leaders bring to their leadership assignments. Next, we examine two assumptions grounded in the research on African-American leadership, and use an empirical example to provide an alternate approach to the two assumptions. It is important to note that we operate from an insider perspective on several fronts. Both authors are African-American females who have worked in low-performing, predominantly African-American schools. Based on some of our experiences, we concur with many of the positive attributes used to describe African-American educational leadership. At the same time, we both are aware of anecdotal experiences that do not support the literature. Based on our perspectives, the central focus of this article is to (re)iterate that leaders, in this case African-American females, need to be placed in leadership assignments based on their experiences and abilities, and not based on 'what you see,' race, and gender.

Varied social identities: it is [not always] what you see!

Social identity can be characterized as the way in which a person and/or group is socially defined and positioned in society. The characteristics of a particular category, such as race, gender, or age, identify people as members of the group, presumably 'with collective definitions and understandings' (Verkuyten 2005, 44). Further, as people identify with a particular group, they tend to '[perceive] the fate of the group(s) as [their] own' (Ashforth and Mael 1989, 21). Based on these definitions, it would seem that African-American principals assigned to predominantly African-American schools have a greater connection with the students and communities they serve. To this end, racial and ethnic identity could have

a significant influence on how to support African-American students' academic, social, and emotional needs.

At the same time, Ashforth and Mael (1989) remind us that African-American or African-American identity connotes a myriad of historic and fluid meanings initially shaped by hegemonic structures and forces for social, economic, and political advantage. While history and research illustrate the value of African-American leadership for African-American schools and students (for an extensive literature review, see Tillman 2004), it may be presumptuous to conclude that there are always mutual understandings and shared expectations between African-American educators and the African-American communities that they serve. In fact, by virtue of their upbringing and/or professional status and socialization, African-American principals may self-identify in stark contrast to poor African-Americans in poor communities, with implications for their capacity to lead urban schools.

Brunsma and Rockquemore (2004) posit that as the Civil Rights Movement gave rise to economic advancement, political and social power, and opportunity to define themselves, a more fluid African-American identity emerged. As such, assumptions about a common, monolithic experience, common structural location, and common cultural space no longer held true. In other words, African-American people define themselves in a variety of ways, which more often include representations of their class, gender, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation. Moreover, Verkuyten (2005) suggests that social identities depend upon the specific context, both the local immediate context and the broader historical, economic, and political context. Therefore, social identity is based on numerous, individual contextual markers of a particular time, environment, and experience.

For African-Americans, the differences in experiences, socialization, job opportunities, recent family legacy, etc., perhaps more than in earlier periods, signify vast variations in what can be considered the 'African-American identity.' The impact of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) on the professional lives of African-American educators has been well-documented (M. Foster 1997; Morris 1999; Walker and Archung 2003; Fultz 2004; Tillman 2004; Karpinski 2006.). One critical result from *Brown* was the loss of African-American teachers and principals. The loss of African-American educators translated to lost advocates and cultural symbols within the school system and the African-American community (Tillman 2004). Perhaps less examined is the effect on the relationship between African-American educators and the African-American community (Morris 1999). Desegregation brought about a physical and psychological disconnection between African-American schools, educators, and the African-American community. Further, as post-*Brown* 'integration' ensued, schools began to disenfranchise, ignore, overdiscipline, resegregate, and undereducate African-American children. Distrust grew between African-American parents and schools in general, including African-American educators (Loder 2005). Moreover, some post-*Brown* African-American principals may not represent the activist stance of many of the African-American pre-Civil Rights era educators (M. Foster 1990). These many circumstances require us to consider the salience of varied social identities for all leaders, but in this case, African-American leaders, as we aim to better understand the needs of African-American students, schools, and communities.

In this article, we examine two assumptions based on commonly held ideas about same-race affiliated and gender-specific leadership using the background and context of one African-American female principal, Ms. Johnson.[2] These assumptions emanate from the literature on identity but more specifically from the literature on African-American leadership. The story of Ms. Johnson, a real-life principal, provides some basis for this examination and considers the salience of some taken-for-granted assumptions in predictions about racialized and gendered leadership. Ms. Johnson's story emanates from a

larger multi-case study that examined the self-perceived challenges of African-American principals who lead predominantly African-American, low-performing high schools. The data are based on interviews and observations and are used to construct Ms. Johnson's story of leadership in an urban high school.

Ms. Johnson's background and context

Raised in a middle-class family and home in Mississippi, Ms. Johnson recalled that her early educational experiences included attending African-American schools and a historically Black college. She also recalled interacting with a significant number of African-American role models. After majoring in education, Ms. Johnson began her teaching career in an African-American middle school, then later a White elementary school. As one of a few African-Americans in the White school, she remembered 'a lot of prejudices' but that she liked her students and they seemed to like her. She also recalled being considered a strong and desirable teacher for both African-American and White parents, as well as her colleagues, as some requested their own children to be in Ms. Johnson's classroom.

In the mid-1980s, Ms. Johnson moved to a Midwestern school district to work at a predominantly White, working class high school. It was there that a White male mentor provided her the opportunity to take on a leadership role serving at-risk students. Soon after, she became the assistant principal of this school. While she believes that her leadership opportunities emerged from others' confidence in her abilities, Ms. Johnson considered her ascension to educational administration as a spiritual calling. She said, 'As the Lord would have it, that is where I've ended up, in administration.'

After several years as an assistant principal, Ms. Johnson was promoted to principal of Ben Franklin Academy (BFA). At the time of data collection, Ms. Johnson was 60 years old and in her sixth and final year as principal of BFA. BFA housed approximately 750 students in grades 6–12. In 2006, African-American students made up almost 96% of the school population, which was up from 65% just 10 years earlier. Approximately 89% of BFA's students received free or reduced lunch. Students with special needs comprised 21.1% of the student body. Ms. Johnson reported that BFA had recently been classified by the state as a school 'in need of improvement' for student performance in reading and attendance.

The assumptions

Next, we posit two assumptions grounded in African-American educational leadership literature. Following each assumption, we use examples of Ms. Johnson's experience to examine these assumptions. As we tell Ms. Johnson's story, we allow for a more authentic interpretation of the reality that represents this principal's experiences as we try to under-stand, and have others understand, her words, actions, and responses to her community. Also, using a culturally sensitive perspective, this examination carefully attends to some assumptions about same-race affiliation, gender, and class. Finally, we offer interpretations that legitimate her unique context, experiences, and perspectives.

Assumption 1: African-American leaders have values and attitudes that differ from those of the White leaders. Further, African-American leaders tend to identify/empathize with African-American students. Race can trump other dimensions of sociopolitical identity.

Unlike any other, the former 'all-Black' schools in pre-Brown America embodied the essence of racial identity, common social space, and collective understandings between

educators and the community. Walker and Archung (2003) suggest that African-American educators in segregated schools of the South operationalized interpersonal caring and institutional caring in their commitment and support of the education of African-American children. Interpersonal caring refers to teachers' and principals' concerns for students' personal lives and for 'the myriad roles he or she assumed to help alleviate educational inequities' for African-American students (Walker and Archung 2003, 33). Institutional caring refers to the system in the school whereby school leaders identified the academic, social, and psychological needs of students and, through school policy, arranged for those needs to be met. Tillman found that pre-Brown principals held as key priorities the need to 'uplift of the race' and 'resistance to ideologies and individuals opposed to the education of Blacks' (2004, 131).

Similarly, Brunsma and Rockquemore (2004) note that African-American identity historically signified a collective struggle and common experience which included restricted opportunities and economic disadvantage. They also argue that most African-Americans likely occupied common cultural space, sharing similar values, norms, and expectations. Finally, in a segregated society, African-Americans occupied common space, relying on each other for support in navigating an institutional system that subjugated them in all facets of social, political, and economic life.

Comparatively, research on contemporary African-American principals shows that they often act in ways that aid African-American students' navigation through the hierarchical social system. Dantley's (2005) notion of the 'sacred self' contends that African-American leaders tend to pay attention to the positive attributes of African-Americans while refuting the negative images and constant oppression. Also, Lomotey (1993) posits that African-American principals enact various identities with their African-American students. He termed the 'ethno-humanist' role to reflect the cultural affinity that African-American principals have with African-American students to illustrate their commitment to and confidence in their students. Further, Tillman found that African-American principals 'implemented alternative forms of decision-making that not only would benefit students but would also offer alternative definitions of organizational effectiveness in schools' (2004, 129). Both historical and contemporary literature seems to reflect the notion that African-American principals do indeed share common understandings with the African-American community. Further, literature suggests that they enact their leadership in ways aimed at supporting African-American students and challenging the system's treatment of these students.

A view of Ms. Johnson

From the larger study, we learned that Ms. Johnson's professional indoctrination began in a predominantly White working-class neighborhood. In many ways, this experience shaped her perspectives about schools and leadership. For example, Ms. Johnson adopted a more traditional perspective about parental involvement as outlined by Lopez, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha (2001). They described traditional parent involvement as increasing participation in parent advisory groups or committees and drawing parents into working with their children on academic tasks at home. Lopez, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha state, 'Schools tend to define parent involvement as either a way of supporting student academic achievement, or in terms of participation at formal school-initiated functions' (2001, 256).

Ms. Johnson recounted that there was stronger parental involvement at the White schools where she worked. Specifically, she stated:

> I've always been on the south side [the area with White, working-class families] and I see the difference. Strong parent involvement! … When I was at [Southside Middle School], it was just packed with parents always. But still, more than here. Over here [BFA], if we have a program, we get parents to come in, not as many as it should be, but we get it. If we have parent–teacher conferences, PTO meetings, we don't get parents.

Ms. Johnson went on to describe many of her failed efforts to generate what she valued as good parent involvement.

> We have done some of everything to try to get parents to come; having drawings and things of that nature … If we have a program where their kids are involved or something of this nature, they will come. Not all, but more than normal.

While many of the BFA parents did not display traditional roles of involvement, it is clear that Ms. Johnson values traditional involvement based on her past experiences in White working-class schools. She sees this lack of parental participation as a 'problem.'

Ms. Johnson determined that this lack of traditional parental involvement spoke to the value that the African-American parents placed on education. She said, 'Black parents don't come [*sic*] talk to you at all. [It] seems education is not valued.' She further went on to describe African-American parents using a deficit thinking approach (Valencia 1997). Ms. Johnson accounted the lack of academic success to the students' parents. She said:

> Many Black parents are young, drop-outs, economically deprived … Many of my students are economically deprived and so that makes a big difference. And this is not the way I feel the parents want to be, but their situation is such that that is the way it is. And so the value is not there.

Further, Ms. Johnson compared dealing with the parents of her students to the White working-class parents. Not only did she hold a similar view about parental involvement, she also saw her parents as confrontational. Ms. Johnson found that the African-American parents at her school also tended to have a lack of respect for African-American school officials. She said of her parents, 'People who come here tend to think that they can talk to you any way … that is not everybody, but in many cases with the kids that we have.'

While Ms. Johnson's position was that many African-American parents have little respect for teachers and administrators, during an observation of the school, the first author observed a confrontational exchange between a parent and Ms. Johnson. The parent did not have a scheduled appointment, but had requested to see Ms. Johnson. In an uninviting manner, Ms. Johnson said to the parent, 'You wanted to see me?' The parent responded, 'Yes, I talked to you last week about my daughter's problem with those girls.' In a very condescending tone, Ms. Johnson assured the parent that she had not talked with her the previous week. She suggested that she must have spoken to the child's grade-level administrator. The parent, who had been very friendly and talkative with the first author, became defensive in her interactions with Ms. Johnson. Instead of following through with this parent, who had become agitated with her, Ms. Johnson referred her to the safety assistant to resolve her concerns. Although this was an isolated incident during a brief observation, it provided insights into why some parents may be hostile in their interactions with Ms. Johnson and her staff.

Displaying little empathy about the low academic performance on state assessments, Ms. Johnson declared that the students are far behind in academic performance. To improve BFA's academic performance, she strongly believed that tutoring should be mandatory for

low-performing students. In Ms. Johnson's assessment, one crucial reason for the school's low achievement is because of low parental support and participation. Recognizing that it could be unsafe for many of the students to receive the extra help from the staff without mandatory support from the district, she found it difficult for her and the staff to offer the needed support to students who needed it. She said:

> If there are specific kids that we can identify that need extra tutoring, then we want it such that it would be mandatory that they remain at school. They [parents] don't want them to remain at school. Some of the parents especially in the winter time [when] it is dark, they don't want them walking, it is so much crime.

While Ms. Johnson expressed that she understood the parents' dilemma based on the criminal element in the community, she did not feel it was her responsibility to make adjustments for the parents' safety concern. Specifically, she said:

> Actually, I understand that because after school, the bus lets them off at their nearest elementary school … But at the same time, we can't give them all of what they need to give them that extra [help] that they need and they are not remaining and then they are not getting it at home … We can't take them out of class and get that extra [help]. We need to give them that extra [help] after school.

The notion of making after-school tutoring mandatory coincides with the traditional parental involvement valued by educators. Lopez, Scribner, and Mahitivanichcha inform us:

> Intervention programs most often give parents specific guidelines, materials, and/or training to carry out school-like activities in the home. Such efforts are believed to strengthen home–school ties by transmitting the culture of schooling through families. (2001, 256)

While acknowledging the danger, Ms. Johnson strongly believed that enforcing a 'culture of schooling' by holding mandatory tutoring had greater significant implications than the safety of BFA students.

Further, Ms. Johnson did not display faith in her school's ability to raise its academic performance. She explained that having 'these types of students' with the expectation of being a high achieving school is an unrealistic expectation. In her words:

> In all actuality, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that we will never be a high achieving school. We get the kids who are already at the bottom. And you expect to bring them up to 95% [attendance], but it is not going to happen. And I am a positive person, but I am also realistic.

Ms. Johnson compared her experience of teaching and being an assistant principal in a predominantly White, working-class area to her current experience as a principal at a predominantly African-American school. She noted that White students in her former schools were more focused on academics than the African-American students at BFA. Even though she held a more positive assessment of the White, working-class students, Ms. Johnson felt that BFA students were capable of learning. She said, 'I tend to feel that every student in my building can be successful. I believe that as I always tell them that if they can learn these songs, they can learn their lesson.'

Another factor related to the 'kinds of students' at BFA's Academy was the prevalent discipline challenges presented by Ms. Johnson's predominantly African-American student population. Specifically she said:

> Another problem is that we have so many discipline issues. That creates a problem within itself because now you can't teach when kids disrupt class … You can't tell me if you give me the same kind of kids with fewer discipline problems than I have in the building, then those kids will do as well. But you put a group of kids in a classroom and the teachers got to teach and you got that disruption, you are defeating the purpose.

Ms. Johnson's discipline challenges were particularly disturbing to her since she indicated having much success with student discipline in prior assignments.

In sum, literature suggests that segregated, pre-*Brown*, African-American schools may have produced African-American educators with increased caring disposition toward African-American students (Walker and Archung 2003; Tillman 2004). This increased caring could be a result of the shared oppressive experiences of African-Americans (Brunsma and Rockquemore 2004). Further, some literature suggests that African-American principals enact leadership in ways that demonstrate increased support for African-American students (Lomotey 1993; Tillman 2004; Dantley 2005). To the contrary, Ms. Johnson's view illustrated divergence from the literature. Even though Ms. Johnson lived through the *Brown* experience, her professional work experience in predominantly White, working-class schools seemed to produce a different response to the predominantly African-American school where she was principal. She expressed a lack of understanding for the challenges related to leading a predominantly African-American School. She also demonstrated a lack of confidence in her school's ability to improve, while expressing much frustration about elevated discipline problems.

Assumption 2: African-American female leaders are caregivers or 'othermothers.' This role contributes to their nurturing leadership style.

African-American women serving in educational leadership roles is nothing new (Walker and Archung 2003; Alston 2005; Murtadha and Watts 2005). Murtadha and Watts (2005) provide a poignant illustration of historic African-American educational leadership, including the critical roles played by African-American women such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Anna Julia Cooper, and Septima Clark, in the institution building of African-American education. Today, African-American women outnumber African-American males in educational attainment and these numbers will only continue to grow (National Center for Education Statistics 2004). At the same time, African-American women continue to serve as the heads of households in African-American communities. Perhaps different from their White counterparts, the education and the emerging professionalism of African-American women may be attributed to the multiple identities, 'leadership' roles, and hardship many faced in their families and in the African-American community (Alston 2005; Loder 2005; Gregory 2006).

Like their White counterparts, gender role expectations pervade as African-American women advance in educational leadership. The expectation placed on these women requires that they exhibit 'traditional' leadership skills typical of men, as well as 'cultural' traits of women, such as nurturing, caring, and even silence (Skrla 2000). Loder (2005) argues that some women's leadership orientation has been shaped by motherhood and values associated with nurturing and caretaking. Traditionally, such maternal and paternal approaches to leadership have been accepted and expected in predominantly African-American urban schools and communities. However, Payne warned that these types of leadership styles placed students and staff in position to 'see the harsher side of autocracy far more than the softer side' (Payne, in Loder 2005, 304).

A view of Ms. Johnson

Ms. Johnson described her ability to connect with her students and families as a teacher in positive terms. She explained:

> I liked my students. They seemed to like me. I guess they did because my reputation then was every parent wanted their students to be in my class including the superintendent, including the teachers. I always went above the call of duty to try to do innovative kinds of things and hands-on activities for my students even then and that was years ago.

While Ms. Johnson reported a caring disposition toward students as a classroom teacher, as a principal, the first author observed Ms. Johnson sternly reprimanding her student body. Discipline seemed to be a focus from her opening announcement. Ms. Johnson came over the loudspeaker in an extremely stern tone. She reminded the students that they would be put out of the building if they acted inappropriately. She said that recent behavior had been 'down right embarrassing!' She harshly ended the announcement with 'adults will run this building, not the students!'

While few of Ms. Johnson's comments make reference to gender, when asked to discuss other challenging roles and responsibilities, she expounded upon her interaction with African-American male students. She believed that African-American males responded better to her African-American male assistant than to her, stating, 'Black boys don't respond to Black females like they do Black males.' One reason for this perception stemmed from her belief that 'Black boys don't respect their moms.' While her comments reflect stereotypical statements made about young African-American males, we know little of Ms. Johnson's actual experience with African-American male students in this school, though she had little interaction with African-American male students in previous professional roles. It does not appear that Ms. Johnson understood her role with African-American male students due to the paternalistic features she believed that African-American male adults could provide.

In summary, African-American female educational leaders have historically faced multiple racial and gendered challenges (Murtadha and Watts 2005). They have increased expectations to be nurturing and caring within their leadership practice (Skrla 2000; Loder 2005). Again, Ms. Johnson's view contradicted research. While she espoused a caring, nurturing disposition for her African-American students, she was observed firmly reprimanding her student body. Ms. Johnson also took a particularly critical approach in her dealings with African-American male students due to her perceived disrespect they exhibit toward their mothers and female educators.

Discussion

These two stereotypical assumptions are challenged by examples from one African-American female principal. Ms. Johnson illustrates how 'what you see is [not always] what you get.' Leading in urban school environments requires leaders to understand the conditions that affect the school and students without becoming overwhelmed by them (M. Foster 1990). Further, leaders of predominantly African-American schools must recognize the myriad of causes for school problems and situate them in the historical, social, political, and economic circumstances that caused, and perpetuated, them (Bloom and Erlandson 2003). Ms. Johnson's perceptions of her role, her school, and students reflect dimensions of her personal identity, including her race and gender, and her professional role identities, which include experiences in both White and African-American school contexts.

As previously stated, the literature suggests that same-race affiliation between African-American leaders, teachers, and students creates a positive academic and social environment. In fact, Dantley (2005) argues that being an African-American principal in an African-American school provides a service to the African-American community, even if the actions and decisions toward or in response to African-American constituents do not reflect notions of African-American spirituality, connection, and identity. Finally, several studies on African-American female leaders support the notion that they believe, as do others, that their maternal instincts of caring and concern drive their leadership orientation (Case 1997; Loder 2005).

Ms. Johnson reminds us that identity is not fixed and that it is fluid and context-specific. That is, in some contexts, certain social identity becomes relevant, while others recede to the background (Verkuyten 2005). Ms. Johnson's social identity appears to be framed in part by her professional socialization in mostly White school contexts. These experiences may have enabled her to make quite simplistic comparisons between her White and African-American students without articulating an understanding or sensitivity to the broader structural and institutional circumstances that exacerbated the differences she observed. Her professional 'upbringing' may not have afforded her the critical understandings she needed to make sense of what she faced in the predominantly African-American school. To illustrate, Ms. Johnson seemed aggravated with the lack of parental support for after-school tutoring. Even though she expressed some concern about the potential community danger for students who stay after school, she still believed after-school tutoring should be mandated by the district.

While Ms. Johnson expressed disbelief in certain situations she faced in her school, she also communicated a sense of confusion in her leadership role. She blamed both parents sand students as the reason for the school's underperformance, with little reflection of the institutional, organizational, or structural barriers that may have contributed to these problems. Her 'realistic' comments about BFA's future prospects as a high-performing school reflected a sense of resignation likely shaped by her day-to-day reality. Also important is that it did not appear that Ms. Johnson viewed herself as either part of the problem or the solution in addressing the challenges in her school. The daunting social experiences and life circumstances of many urban youth may well become psychologically draining for any school leader, including African-American school leaders. Further, given the circumstances she faced, Ms. Johnson lacked adequate mentoring and support for her leadership of this urban high school. Such support may have enabled her to locate the school's problems as part of broader societal structures and prevented the perpetuation of broader stereotypical notions of African-American students and families to explain the school's lack of academic progress (Allen, Jacobson, and Lomotey 1995; Bloom and Erlandson 2003). Without social and professional support, it seems reasonable, though troublesome, that she experienced and articulated a sense of hopelessness for her school and students.

Finally, the literature (Case 1997; Loder 2005) describes the notion that African-American women leaders feel accepted and/or see themselves as caregivers or 'othermothers.' The reality is that such 'caring' will be enacted in a variety of ways. Similarly, without knowing the specific challenges she faced, it appeared as though Ms. Johnson removed herself, and women, from meaningful relationships with and supportive influence on African-American male students. Nonetheless, Ms. Johnson exemplified a nurturing orientation by recognizing the crucial connection and value that African-American adult males could and should exhibit with African-American male youth.

An example of Ms. Johnson's 'caring' is illustrated when she chastized her students and their behavior over the public announcement system, which at first glance seemed 'over the top' and disrespectful to students and teachers. However, using a culturally sensitive perspective, we did not equate her words and actions as exhibiting lack of care for her

students. Anyon (1997) uses the term 'social distancing' to describe the treatment by an African-American school leader and African-American teachers of their African-American students in an urban school. She found that the African-American administration did not support reforms that would empower African-American students; rather they 'abused' African-American students using physical means, verbal degradation, and put-downs. Anyon argues that these African-American teachers and principal aimed to separate themselves from aspects of their racial group traits they did not like or affiliate with. Evans (2007) describes African-American female leaders who admonished their African-American students and families for lacking 'middle-class values,' but still 'protected' African-American students from what they deemed to be unfair treatment from White teachers. These studies show school leaders who moved between identities based on the ways in which 'being Black' was defined, and by whom. In fact, the fluidity of their African-American identity shaped their leadership orientation toward their students and schools (Verkuyten 2005).

Implications for practice

African-American principals account for approximately 10–12% of the principal population in the USA (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). Moreover, many African-American principals work in some of the most challenging, often low-performing, and under-funded schools filled with students of color (Bloom and Erlandson 2003; Brown 2005; Murtadha and Watts 2005). African-American female leaders have long been part of the African-American education tradition, despite the myriad of racial and gender barriers presented to them. A growing scholarship illustrates ways in which African-American women experience racism and sexism in their preparation programs, as well as in their roles as educational leaders (Skrla 2000; Bloom and Erlandson 2003; Alston 2005; Loder 2005). In the midst of such challenges, and as Ms. Johnson illustrates, it may be presumptuous to operationalize notions of same-race affiliation or gendered notions of leadership in the selection and placement of school leaders in challenging urban school environments.

Leadership of urban schools requires 'a tripartite advocacy that includes input and support from parents, teachers, and principals in planned and deliberate ways within the unique historical and cultural context in which education is honored and esteemed within the African-American community' (L. Foster 2005, 693). Further, Dantley (2005) suggests that African-American leaders must help urban schools craft an agenda, one that helps students, faculty, and staff 'unpack' racism, sexism, classism, and elitism. Urban school leaders need mentors who can help them craft this agenda, develop a resistance to racial and socioeconomic stereotypes, and address and remove structural barriers that may impede African-American academic success (Bloom and Erlandson 2003). Finally, African-American educators, as all educators, must show mutual respect and understanding of the social and cultural lives and realities of African-American communities (Morris 1999).

Notes

1. The terms African-American and Black are used interchangeably.
2. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participant and school.

Notes on contributors

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