

## LEGACY, LOYALTY AND LEADERSHIP: CREATING A PIPELINE OF INDIGENOUS BLACK EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

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### Abstract

Educational leadership plays a vital role in improving the academic outcomes of underserved and minority students. The leadership practices of Black educational leaders have contributed to the theorizing of effective, culturally responsive practices to improve student outcomes. This article uses portraiture to look at how one former Black principal leans on his indigenous understanding of his school and community to build a generational legacy of Black educators and educational leaders. Indigenous, in this context, is used to describe this principal's connection to the community from birth to his retirement and beyond. The article ultimately asks, what contribution does being Indigenous to a space and place add to our understanding of educational leadership and the educational leadership of Black administrators?

**Keywords:** Black educational leadership, indigenous educational leadership, portraiture, urban school contexts

The literature on Black administrators is limited (Henderson, 2008; Tillman, 2009), with the literature on Black male administrators being even more scant. Part of the challenge of conducting research on Black male administrators is that they are essentially “an endangered species” (Henderson, 2008, p.1), resulting from the educational epidemic of low achievement and academic failure among young Black males (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Howell, 2010; Noguera, 2003). Yet in order to address the academic disparities of young Black males and other underserved minority students, the leadership practices of successful Black male educational leaders needs to be researched, particularly considering that many of these educational leaders work in urban contexts (Henderson, 2008; Tillman, 2009). Lomotey (1989) found that Black administrators positively influence the academic outcomes of Black students. While focusing on four basic components of educational leadership – developing goals, harnessing the energy of the staff, facilitating communication, and being involved in instructional management – Lomotey documented three additional components that related to Black administrators success. These three components include a “commitment to the education of African-American children, a compassion for and understanding of their students and the communities in which they work, and a confidence in the ability of all African-American children to learn” (Lomotey, 1989, p. 131).

Similar to African American students, Indigenous students both domestic and abroad are also faced with an achievement gap between them and their non-Indigenous counterparts

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(Hohepa, 2013; Hohepa and Robinson, 2008; L. J. Santamaría, A. P. Santamaría, Webber, & Pearson 2014). Indigenous educational leadership is seen as crucial to improving education and educational outcomes for Indigenous students (Hohepa, 2013) and as a response, the development of Indigenous educational leaders has been undertaken in Australia, New Zealand and Canada as well as other domestic and international contexts (Hohepa, 2013; Fitzgerald, 2003; Fitzgerald, 2010; White, 2010). Whether looking at the educational leadership practices of indigenous leaders abroad or of educational leaders of color domestically (L. J. Santamaría et al, 2014), the need for educational leaders to make deeper connections beyond culture and into the funds of knowledge that students gain at home is highlighted (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). By emphasizing the specific knowledge of a community that relates to its functioning, well-being and development, educational leaders have greater access to educating the whole child as they develop connections between the home and the classroom (Moll et al, 1992).

This article attempts to make a connection between the leadership practices of a former Black male administrator (“Mr. Blackshire”) and indigenous educational leadership using the methodology of portraiture. Towards that goal, I asked three questions:

1. What does it mean to be a Black Indigenous leader?
2. How/Why did Mr. Blackshire create a lineage of Black Indigenous leaders at Heights High?
3. What understandings of Black educational leadership can I learn from talking to an elder a.k.a. “the O.G. Pacer”?

Though Mr. Blackshire may not be considered indigenous based on our traditional conception of Indigenous people, he was indigenous to the community/neighborhood and school that he led as an administrator. His capital within the community as well as his intimate knowledge of the people and systems of knowledge (historical and present) unique to the community helped to inspire academic success and create a legacy of Indigenous educators who would return to the community.

### **The Study**

This article is based on a larger qualitative study investigating the leadership and discourse practices of Black male administrators in urban contexts. In this study, three of the administrators were indigenous to the community they worked in, with two of the administrators working at the high school they graduated from. The administrator who is the subject of this article was not part of the larger study, but was consulted because of his mentorship to two of the administrators in the larger study. Mr. Blackshire<sup>2</sup> was the former principal at Heights High, located in an urban community in Northern California. While he is no longer a principal, he is still very active both in the community and working with the school district. As an unofficial mentor, he served in the role of elder, i.e., someone with no formal authority but power of influence through his wisdom, for the community of the Black educators in the school district and beyond (Marshall, 2005). He also works as a substitute administrator, which keeps him in contact with the schools and students in the community. The two administrators in the larger study openly talk about the influence that Mr. Blackshire had on them as students, educators, administrators, and as Black men. They frequently commented on how their approach to

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms were given to all identifiers, including the participants, name of the school and the school’s location.

leadership is heavily influenced by Mr. Blackshire, and that in order to get a more complete understanding of them, Mr. Blackshire should be contacted. Following their advice, I conducted an interview with Mr. Blackshire as well as shadowed him for a day while he substituted at the feeder middle school for Heights High, which ironically was the site of his first principalship.

Portraiture is the methodology chosen for the study. Portraiture, as a qualitative methodology, requires an intimacy between the researcher and the participants, and focuses on the core elements of voice, context, emergent themes, relationships and the aesthetic whole (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). While the portrait may be of the participant, it is not the sole creation of the researcher. Portraits are co-constructed by the participants and the researcher as the researcher listens *for* the story that is being told (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Watson, 2012). This leads to research that focuses on what Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) call, “goodness.” As described by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997):

Portraiture resists this tradition-laden effort to document failure. It is an intentionally generous and eclectic process that begins by searching for what is good and healthy and assumes that the expression of goodness will always be laced with imperfection (p. 9).

The data for this article is based primarily on a 75-minute interview with Mr. Blackshire as well as informal conversations held with the administrators he has mentored and his former students. The transcript was reviewed for emergent themes with an “impressionistic record” written on the subject after the initial pass-through (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997; Lynn, 2006). The “impressionistic record” is a “ruminative, thoughtful piece that identifies emerging hypotheses, suggests interpretations, describes shifts in perspective” and “allow(s) [the researcher] to become increasingly focused and discerning” in the pursuit of developing ideas and phenomenon (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 188). After completing the “impressionistic record,” I then began constructing themes by reviewing the transcript for repetitive refrains, resonate metaphors and themes expressed through cultural and institutional rituals, finally using triangulation from supporting sources to verify themes. These themes highlighted the importance of lineage and legacy in Black educational leadership.

### **From Lineage to Legacy**

*The first time I spoke with Mr. Blackshire on the phone his soft baritone voice along with the straightforwardness of his tone and the lack of “play” in his speech put me on alert, as I knew he wasn't about games. With a deliberate pace as he talked, Mr. Blackshire didn't waste time getting to the point and getting me to the point. This was reinforced on the day that we met. In an attempt to buy a little more time so I could finish doing what I was doing, I texted Mr. Blackshire to see if we could meet a half hour later. His response, “I'm currently en route. I will be there early. Don't make me wait more than 15 minutes.” He was direct and straight to the point, no room for a misunderstanding. I immediately began moving with haste, had to get there before he did because after all I did ask to meet with him.*

*When I pulled up to Panera Bread, I drove past the front hoping to get a glimpse of the man I had already heard so much about. Hoping he hadn't been waiting for too long I quickly parked and jumped out of the car, going over potential excuses for being late in my mind. I didn't see him immediately in the front of the restaurant, so I went inside. As I walked around looking for him, I had no idea what he looked like, but I knew I would know him when I saw him.*

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*Relieved that he wasn't there I sat down outside. It was a beautiful fall day, the weather was still warm and the sun was shining bright. It was the perfect day for eating lunch outside. After a few moments of sitting and watching people walk in and out of Panera and the Panda Express next door, I look up to see a monument of a Black man walking towards me. Tall and slender with a little lean to his right side, Mr. Blackshire was a dark skinned man with salt and pepper hair and a smoothly shaved face. I quickly stood up to shake his hand and was greeted by that soft deep baritone, "Hello, how are you doing?"*

*We decided to head inside and get our lunch before sitting down to eat. I ordered first and then went to find a good table that was clean, had lots of space, and was isolated, or as isolated as was possible considering we were meeting at the peak of rush hour. As we got our food and sat down, I was still in awe of this man who had been described to me as "the Godfather of Heights High." Even though it was my first time meeting him, I already respected him. He was "ole school" Black like my grandfather. The kind of Black that carried a hard and worn exterior that let you know the inside was a treasure chest of wisdom and experience. So now that I had an opportunity to sit and commune with the Godfather himself, I was awestruck. His first words as we started the interview, "I'm the O.G. Pacer," with his baritone seeming to echo off the window next to us.*

### **Lineage as Philosophy**

Considering that Mr. Blackshire was affectionately referred to as the Godfather, I was eager to learn about his educational philosophy. When I asked him, he first paused before saying, "I don't know if I can do that," he then went on to say:

I believe we have to do everything we can to help kids succeed. I believe in putting kids in the least restrictive environment... And we have to help each other as professional educators to change some of the things. And not be afraid to try new and different things.

Though this is Mr. Blackshire's official response to the question, as he continued talking he organically began to reveal more and more about his philosophy, beginning with its core.

Mr. Blackshire is committed to the success of his students. Though retired, in our interview he didn't speak like a man who was out of "the game," but as someone who is still active in producing positive outcomes for students. He is committed to change, and he uses his position as an Indigenous educational leader to inform how he educates while inspiring change. Born and raised in The Ville, an urban community in Northern California, Mr. Blackshire spent all but nine months of his youth in the community. Graduating from Heights High in 1963, he proudly bragged that his mother, at 101 years old, still lives six blocks from the school. While in high school he played basketball, which earned him a scholarship to go to college and after graduating from college in 1968 with a degree in English, he returned home to The Ville and began teaching in the community. In 1971 he returned to Heights High as the vice principal. Of the 84 years that Heights High has been in existence, Mr. Blackshire has been a student, teacher, or administrator for 30 of those years. He is the living embodiment of the school motto "Pacer for life," hence his comment that he is "the O.G. Pacer" and it is this lineage of being a Pacer that speaks directly to the core of his educational philosophy. It's not enough to just teach content, but there is a responsibility to teach lineage, to teach history, to teach a responsibility to one's community.

### **“Pacer for Life”**

In 1971, the students at Heights High walked out in protest that they didn't have any teachers or administrators of color. The principal and one of the vice principals were removed from the school and replaced by another White principal and Mr. Blackshire, who was 25 years old with no experience, no training, or a credential. He had to learn how to do the job himself. In his own words, Mr. Blackshire said:

I became the vice-principal with no experience. No form of training. I didn't have a credential, but they were desperate. They knew that they needed somebody big & black in there that could help control these kids. They didn't think I was that smart though I just happened not to be anyone's fool. And I love kids. And it was my 'hood.

Mr. Blackshire provided three key elements to his success, his intelligence, his love for students, and his loyalty and commitment to his “'hood.” Yet, in addition to providing these three keys, he criticized the outsiders, “they,” as being desperate and ignorant to how to effectively reach and teach students of color. He also critiqued the derogatory and diminutive view that he knew “they” had of him and his community. In his words, he wasn't “anyone's fool” and it wasn't as simple as putting a non-intelligent Big Black man in front of Black children to get them to behave in the way “they” wanted them to. He was going to love those kids and love his 'hood and in the process take ownership over something that he felt was theirs. He was going to give the students what they wanted, more Black teachers and administrators.

### **The Pied Piper**

The legend of the Pied Piper of Hamelin presents an individual who, despite his quirky style of dress, was able to deliver a town from its plague of rats and mice. In addition, the legend also states that this individual was able to make a connection so strong with the youth of the town that he was able to lead them away in the night as their parents were distracted. Despite the legend not portraying the Pied Piper in the best of lights, noting the unusual style of his clothes, disparaging his profession as one not respected by the townspeople, and depicting him as a kidnapper, Mr. Blackshire sees the Pied Piper, and his ilk, in a different light. He describes “pied pipers” as individuals who “make things change, make systems change” and “figure out a way to get you through hurdles.” As he said to me in our interview, “schools need them because our kids are failing and we need to do something different.” Yet, in saying that schools need “pied pipers,” he also acknowledged that their beauty and their value are not always easily recognizable or accepted.

In the legend of the Pied Piper we find an individual, who like Mr. Blackshire noted, is able to problem solve and figure out a way through a hurdle. We also see someone who, maybe because of how he dressed, or because of the job he did, or for any number of other reasons, was different than everyone else, and thus, was taken advantage of and dismissed. Lastly, we see an individual who was able to reach and make a connection with the youth to where the youth willingly followed his lead. Mr. Blackshire saw “brothas” (Black men) as having these same qualities and noted that because they may not have a credential or may not fit the mold of a traditional educator that they are often overlooked for their ability to change systems and connect with students. Yet, he prided himself on providing opportunities for “pied pipers” to work at his



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schools and boasted that when he was principal he had twenty “brothas” on staff with degrees, noting that there are plenty of Black men with degrees who could come do the work that needs to be done.

As he talked about the importance of having “pied pipers” on his staff, I took the opportunity to ask about his two mentees, the current principal (Mr. Henderson) and vice principal (Mr. Martin) of Heights High, who were both students and teachers under his stewardship. Mr. Blackshire was quick to identify both Mr. Henderson and Mr. Martin as pied pipers, but focused in on Mr. Henderson as our conversation proceeded. Throughout his tenure as an administrator, he had a number of former students return as pied pipers to work at the school, but Mr. Henderson was different; he was like a son. Mr. Blackshire made sure both his biological and fictive sons attended Heights High, and his eldest son and Mr. Henderson were best friends growing up. As the friendship grew, Mr. Henderson eventually moved in with Mr. Blackshire when his family fell on difficult times. Mr. Blackshire convinced his son and Mr. Henderson to go to college together on a buddy system. Both applied to the same school, but only Mr. Blackshire’s son was accepted. Mr. Blackshire, receiving the letter first, proceeded to call the school and lobby the admissions director for Mr. Henderson’s acceptance. Denied, Mr. Blackshire hung up the phone and began to cry. As he recounts this story its almost as if the restaurant became empty and all I could hear was the emotion in his voice. Mr. Blackshire said that after the phone call ended “all I could think about was how I was going to tell him he didn't get in. He was going to be crushed.” As Mr. Blackshire prepared to walk out the door, the phone rang; the admissions director changed his mind.

As Mr. Blackshire recounted this moment I saw and felt his vulnerability. For him, it wasn't just about changing systems or finding a way to get Mr. Henderson accepted into school. It was about him caring for Mr. Henderson as if he was his own son to the point that he became vulnerable for him. He became his pied piper, someone who figured out a way to get through the hurdle. As a result, Mr. Henderson is now a pied piper for the current generation and a steward over the legacy he started. When I asked Mr. Blackshire about this, about these men picking up and carrying the torch he simply said, “That's what they suppose to do. That's why I helped him get into school. I knew we needed some help... Somebody got to come back to help us.”

### Conclusion

Black people are not native to the soil on which they now live in the United States. Yet, not being native to the land has not inhibited the organic creation of Black communities, communities such as The Ville, which have produced three, four, and in some cases, five or more generations of Black people and Black families. These communities, despite their relative newness, have developed unique cultures, traditions and knowledge structures that help connect the people and their identities to the place. In the framework that Fitzgerald (2003) presents for indigenous leadership, she identifies the *legitimation of authority from the Indigenous community* and *accountability to the Indigenous community* as two of the primary values of effective leadership. This is what made Mr. Blackshire such a transformational leader. He held capital in the community he was from because he understood the culture, tradition, and knowledge as only someone from The Ville could, and it was this capital that legitimized his authority but also made him accountable to the educational outcomes of the youth who were under his care.

As we continue to challenge traditional educational leadership by theorizing on the leadership of Blacks and other leaders of color, we must ask: What role does being indigenous

play in our initiatives for stronger school-community relations, the achievement of Black and Brown youth, as well as any attempts to recruit a more diversified teacher and administrator pool? Moll et al. (1992) talked about the value of home-based teachers seeing the whole child and looked at strategies for helping teachers gain access to students “funds of knowledge” so that these funds can be more readily used in classroom teaching. However, in Mr. Blackshire we find a possible alternative strategy. What are the possibilities of identifying “pied pipers” who already have access to the “funds of knowledge,” yet only lack the training to be educators and educational leaders? Mr. Blackshire demonstrates that while this strategy may be the least explored, it quite possibly may be the most effective.

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