

# **A Vision to Serve: The Experiences of Five African American Urban Teacher Leaders**

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*History denotes a small number of African-Americans have held leadership roles in educational public and private school systems across the country. However, during the last decade black women have pioneered and forged new frontiers as educational as leaders within urban schools. Because of these contributions, more should be known regarding the visions that motivate such women, specifically as it relates to urban leadership and teaching. This phenomenological study examines the visions of African-American women urban teacher leaders who seek administration within urban schools early in their careers and also discovers how others may be so encouraged.*

The removal and decline of African Americans as educational leaders began in early American history. Slaves who were subject to keeping house often could sit near a lesson given to their master's children and, as onlookers, become familiar with the alphabet and the sounding of words. To educate their people, these slaves would use what they learned from their masters and study anything on which they could get their hands. Because they were not thought of as equal, there was no written literature that they could practice, so the Bible was used as a teaching tool. These slaves, both women and men learned and then taught. When slavery was abolished, freed slaves were allowed to set up

their own schools. Teachers were given used supplies and textbooks to teach with and conditions were certainly unequal (Reid-Merritt, 1996).

Following the Emancipation Proclamation, the rush for “Negro” education expanded. In 1867 the federal government assigned over \$5 million to supplement funds for school buildings, teachers, and teachers’ salaries through the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Reid-Merritt, 1996, Woodhouse, 2002). African Americans took the initiative to establish free schools for black youths; black leaders began to found industrial schools and normal training institutes. Merritt (1996) further explains that the federal initiative for African Americans was well under way until the 1876 election compromise of Democratic candidate Samuel Tilden and Republican Rutherford Hayes. The ballots of the election were close. Four states contested the votes, and they were recalled.

After a year of disagreement, the Democratic Party agreed to have Republican candidate Hayes as president in exchange for the end of the Reconstruction. For African Americans, this meant the end of progress. Hayes appointed a Confederate leader to his advisory cabinet and efforts to make African Americans equal citizens were eliminated.

All educational gains and employment opportunities for blacks were eradicated after this election. African Americans that successfully established schools before the election fought to keep them. Because of segregation, blacks did not have the freedom to attend white schools so enrollment in black schools increased. Educators who were fortunate enough to complete college before the civil rights movement often attended historically black institutions. Career options were limited for the graduates; however, because of their nurturing school environments, students were often extremely successful (Reid-Merritt, 1996).

In 1954, *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* declared segregation unconstitutional. While a milestone, the ensuing civil rights movement brought about displacement of several

thousand African American teachers and principals (Fenwick, 2001). These educators had reached significant stature in a time of racial inequity. They had a commitment to their communities, and some of their credentials surpassed those of their white counterparts (Fenwick, 2001). During desegregation and the civil rights movement, African Americans were often dismissed from their posts in formerly segregated schools and replaced by white teachers and principals in the gradually integrating schools (Irvine, 1988).

Because of the historical treatment of blacks in the U.S. educational system, it is still a current concern. Across the nation, there are nearly 12.5 million students in public and private schools who are categorized as receiving Title I funding (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2004, U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Minority groups, specifically African American and Hispanic, are overrepresented in Title I schools (Fenwick, 2001).

In the K-12, Title I, schools 90% or more of the student population are students of color and speak a first language other than English (Fenwick, 2001). According to current research reports, the number of minority school students is increasing (NEA, n.d.). The nation's K-12 students are seeing an ever-increasing mix of races among their peers, yet they are still taught mostly by all-white teachers (Howard, 1999). The NEA (n.d.) further substantiates this claim through the U.S. Department of Commerce report that more than one-third of students in today's public schools are people of color. By the year 2025, at least half will be. Meanwhile, only 13 percent of their teachers are minority. More than 40 percent of schools across America have no teachers of color on staff.

The important issue of narrowing the achievement gap between different ethnic groups has become an important issue in the United States. However, because of the diversity of teaching faculty does not resemble the student population, the issue of narrowing the achievement gap can not be remedied without increasing teachers of color (National Collaborative of Diversity in The Teaching Workforce,

2004). In the 2004 report from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), the data presented about the disparity between students of color and teachers of color was alarming. The shortage of minority teachers, specifically in urban schools, may be attributed in part to some expanded professional opportunities that have opened in the post civil rights era, the horizontal shifting and some declines of minority college enrollment, inadequate pre-collegiate teacher preparation, or certification barriers in the teaching profession (Fenwick, 2001; Gordon, 2000).

According to Northouse (2001), underutilized women and people of color are the untapped value that organizations of all types need to enhance creatively. Women of color, specifically African-American educators, bring a wealth of knowledge and wisdom to urban schools and communities where their effectiveness and expertise is needed. This is especially true of principals who deal with large numbers of students on a daily basis.

At the present time, African American women are earning masters and doctoral degrees at an all time high and surpass the number of African American men earning the same degrees (Rusher, 1996; NCES 2002; 2004)). If more institutions of higher education could develop urban school leadership programs that support women, they would become more diverse, and students could identify with their cultural counterparts. This would in turn provide educated minorities the opportunity to serve in urban communities where they are willing to serve and are needed.

The purpose of this study is to examine the visions of African-American female teachers who hold or seek administration and teaching in urban schools. Over 100 years have passed since noted black educator and school founder, Mary McLeod Bethune, envisioned and founded a school for African American girls. Yet, her ideals still provide an excellent conceptual framework for this study. Grounded in the educational concepts of Bethune, this study asks the

question: What visions motivated these African-American women to pursue urban teaching and school administration?

## **Conceptual Framework**

The women in this study are very similar to Bethune; they are visionaries. They believe that it takes a vision for what they want in predominantly African American schools. They also chose to do their work in urban communities where they feel they can be most effective. This study seeks to understand the vision of these educators by investigating their perceptions with regard to the life personal goals, community involvement, and historical forces which have influenced their career choice. Like Bethune, the five participants, share a common desire to improve their communities, urban areas with high minority populations.

Bethune incorporated three educational concepts, visions which are carried out to this day, “head-heart-hand”. By incorporating the head, used to describe knowledge, Bethune believed that with knowledge, others would be drawn. Once the knowledge was attained, she wished her students to incorporate their heart, “her highest priority,” (Smith, 1995, p. 105). The heart was a means of creating an environment to foster knowledge of Christian principles and Biblical teachings, and helping others. The concept of the hand represented the training of Blacks for jobs in the work force (Reid-Merritt, 1996). This study attempts to identify how the three educational concepts held by Bethune, permeate through the participants’ decisions to teach and lead in urban schools. Figure 1 below illustrates Bethune’s concepts and lead in urban schools.

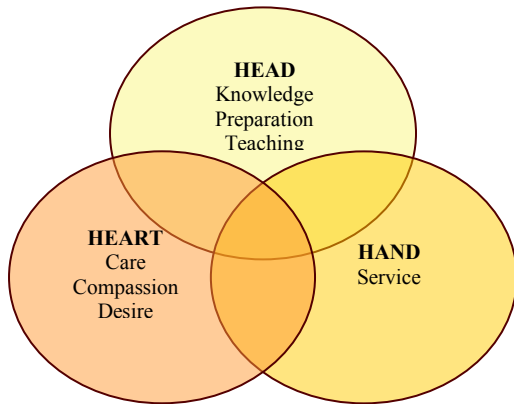
## **Method**

The phenomenological approach to research allows the researcher to utilize the study of direct experience;

these experiences are taken at face value and attempt to understand the meaning of events and reactions to ordinary people in a particular situation (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2002). By seeking to understand why

**FIGURE 1**

Conceptual Framework Diagram: Head, Heart, Hand



a particular group of these African American women choose to pursue teaching and administrative roles in urban schools, the author needed to explore their life experiences to show their emerging leadership. The author chose phenomenology as this study's research approach because it facilitated conducting in-depth interviews with the participants, observing them in their urban classrooms or schools, and uncovering their visions of their present and future contributions to urban schools.

## **Participants**

Potential participants were identified through “snowball sampling,” after speaking with colleagues and other educators about the study’s purpose (Creswell, 2002). The researcher organized an informal luncheon to meet the potential participants. During the luncheon, ten women talked about experiences in education, future career goals, and personal lives. Five women were selected for the study: Donna, Linda, Tanya, Annette and Elle (all pseudonyms). Each aspiring urban administrator taught in urban school districts and has completed a master’s degree. Three are currently pursuing doctoral degrees in school administration.

Each participant was selected for her dedication to teaching urban youths and her desire to lead schools. The researcher’s decision to limit the age and number of years in education was based on recent vacancy announcements and job searches that indicate a minimum of two to five years of educational experience. The women ranged in age from 27 to 33, and all were African American.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data were gathered by conducting in-depth interviews with five participants from various schools and cities in urban locales across a western state. Each participant was interviewed three times for a half hour to two hours each session. The interviews were semi-structured. The first interview focused on commitment to achieving an education, the second interview focused on future career goals, and the final interview focused on why each participant chose to teach and lead in urban schools. All interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed and coded into themes.

In addition to the interviews other data gathering methods were used. The researcher spoke with each participant’s school administrator and colleagues and asked them to describe the participants. The administrator interviews were transcribed but not recorded. The participants were also observed in a working capacity, either teaching, mentoring, or performing some administrative

duty. For Elle, a local magazine featured her as an “Excellent Educator.” The researcher used the article as another data source because her fellow teachers and students were quoted within the text. Twenty-four interview questions were posed to the participants including such questions as the following:

- Why did you decide to become a teacher?
- How do you feel about public education?
- What was your educational experience growing up?
- Why do you think educational administration is something you want to pursue?
- What kind of leader do you want to be?

### **Data Analysis**

Triangulation, member checks, and an in-depth interview review processes were all used to ensure validity (Creswell, 2002; Ary, Jacobs, Raveigh, & Sorenson, 2005). The first source for triangulation was participant interview data. The second source came from informal observations of each participant in the schools, and the third source was from interviews with the participant administrator.

Member checks were established so that each participant could review interview material and verify that what had been transcribed was an accurate depiction of what they stated. To analyze the interviews, data were transcribed and coded into major and minor themes. After coding the interviews based on the major themes of education (head), family (heart), and community (hand), the data were collected and sub-themes emerged (Creswell, 2002).

### **Findings**

Mary McCloud Bethune incorporated three essential educational concepts, three aspects of educational vision which are still practiced today. They are: “head, heart, and hand” (Smith, 1995). The head, was used to convey the



importance of knowledge. Bethune believed that people's innate search for knowledge would draw them into education. She also wished her students to incorporate their heart in teaching; this was "her highest priority," (Smith, 1995). The heart was a means of creating an environment to foster knowledge of Christian principles, Biblical teachings, and reaching out to others. The concept of the hand represented the training of blacks for jobs in the work force (Reid-Merritt, 1996). Patricia Reid Merritt (1996), studied phenomenal African American women. As educational leaders, she found that their personal role model had been Bethune, they noted that Bethune was one of the most influential black women of the twentieth century.

Bethune consistently used these three concepts as a springboard for further educational development until she emerged in higher education. From the concepts of head, heart and hand, the coding of the transcribed interviews for each participant yielded connections with a visionary African American educator who founded these principles more than a century ago. The major themes from the five women participants' focused on education, family, and community. Each sub-theme centered on "Head"-Education; "Heart"-Commitment to family, career, and schools and "Hand"-Desire to give back to the community through working in it.

Each participant indicated the desire and need to thrive as teachers and future leaders in urban schools. Since the collection of data has ended, four of the participants are successful urban school principals in elementary and secondary schools. The remaining participant, Annette, is still committed to teaching in an urban high school.

It is imperative not to create a stereotype that all African American women in pursuit of leadership incorporate the same ideals. Each woman in this study is unique. Study participants should not be viewed as a group, but rather as individuals who happen to be African American women with a common vision. From each woman's vision, they captured Bethune's head, heart, and hand concept collectively.

## **Head: Drawn to Teaching through the Quest for Knowledge**

*Donna: Personal Vignette of a Born Leader. I began teaching as far back as I can remember. I always had a classroom. I was excited when my mother gave me siblings because they made my class come to life. My father, who is a minister, saw that I had great instructional potential so he assigned me to teach Sunday school when I was fifteen.*

*I opened an early childhood learning center with my mother at the age of eighteen. I began to feel very passionate about becoming a teacher. I attended junior college and earned an Associate's degree in Early Childhood and Elementary Education. Then I received my Bachelor's degree in elementary education and began to teach as a fifth grade elementary teacher.*

*As the years went by, I started to see the politics behind school doors. I studied through a master's cohort and received my Master of Education in Administration, Supervision, and Principalship. I was about to become a Principal, but I had to leave after my brother was killed.*

*I am presently teaching at an urban middle school in the East and aiming for an administrative position. I am also working on creating a Freedom School (Charter School) to build the esteem and literacy of inner city children.*

*I have chosen the field of education because it is my passion. I feel that I have the vision and the ability to make changes in the lives of children.*

Donna expressed her passion for schools. She grew up in a suburban neighborhood to a family that had what they needed to maintain an upper middle class lifestyle. Donna did not indicate that she had a direct relationship with urban schools. However, because the area in which she grew up was so close to the inner city, she often witnessed urban life experiences first hand.

*My heart goes out to the urban area. That's where my heart is! That is where I want to be because I see the need; you can do work for that community. It [the work] makes a big difference.*

Donna shares characteristics she feels make good school leaders.

*...Good leaders make plans of improvement, present them, and follow through. As an effective leader, you need to know your material and ...the culture of the school itself. You have to have organizational skills, know how to you pull things together to make them work. You have to have a determined mindset to say, 'This will happen'*

### **Head: Choosing to be a Positive Thinker & Life-Long Learner**

*Linda: Vignette of an Optimistic Leader. I am an African American leader. I am a successful single mom. I have a vision for my life, and I reach back to my community to develop a vision for others. I attended an urban high school that is...historically known for producing the best and brightest African American students. I enjoyed being surrounded by people of color so I pursued my bachelor's degree at a historically Black university. I am embarking upon my 11<sup>th</sup> year in the classroom and have taught all grade and all subjects. I have learned that it is best to have experience to be a successful administrator; I will take an administrative position this coming year.*

*I have often been put in leadership roles throughout my teaching career. My most recent principal forced me to reflect on my career goals. I believe she is the one person who motivated me into going into administration. With [her] help, I was molded into a life-long learner. I am [now] a lead teacher and acting principal.*

Linda knows how an urban school district is run and knows the inequities that children endure within them. She attended school in the same urban district in which she now teaches, and her own children also attend school in the same urban district. Linda takes an optimistic approach and feels the best way to improve urban schools is to “maintain the culture and involve the community.”

She is an advocate for the school district in which she works. Her family has watched the district improve through four generations. Historically changes have taken place in the area and what may have seemed like inequities through the outsiders’ eyes, look more like improvements to Linda.

*...I believe I am a leader and a role model first, because of my commitment to the kids. Because of my commitment to students’ learning, I will go the extra mile and stay late to help.*

### **Heart: Vignette of a Woman Determined to Succeed**

***Tanya: A Subtle Transformer.*** *I grew up in an urban area with two other siblings. I am the middle child out of three girls. Both of my parents are college graduates and instilled the importance of education and higher education within us. At the age of 37 years old, my father passed away, and left my mother a single parent.*

*I attribute all of my success to my mother and father; they instilled many important morals and values in each of us. Religion, education, and family were all stressed as critical components in life. My strength is derived in part from my mother. Watching her successfully cope with the unexpected deaths of my father, my grandmother, and my sister taught me strength and endurance.*

*My grandmother also left within me the importance of history. She, was very knowledgeable about African American history and our family history and would never let*

*us forget where we came from. I allow my sorrow to serve as motivation for me. I strive to be successful in their honor.*

*I graduated with top honors from the all black high school in 1993. I then earned a bachelor's degree in Special Education. I continued on to receive my Master's degree in Education Administration. While obtaining my master's, I worked as a Special Education teacher at two urban schools.*

Tanya, is a soft spoken, charming leader who grew up surrounded by a loving family. She was raised to pursue the highest educational aspirations, and she has been consistently drawn to becoming an urban school leader.

*...If I had a choice to lead in an elite private school or an urban public school, I would definitely go to the public school. I would implement the best possible practices and mold that school around them. I would make learning activities in the public school like those in elite private schools, so the students could get the same opportunities.*

Tanya speaks about her present role as an African American administrator with mostly White colleagues in a predominately minority school district.

*Presently, I am the only African American in an administrative position in this school district and one of only three African Americans out of a school staff of 100. This is in contrast to the student population which is continuously growing and largely African American. In addition to my role as an administrator, I also am a doctoral student. I want to strive toward a position as a superintendent.*

*Being in the position that I am in, demands respect, in part. Although, at times it feels that because of*

*the color of my skin, some teachers look down or do not respect me as they would my Caucasian counterparts. I also strive, in this environment, to be somewhat perfect. I feel like all eyes are on me and that people are want to see me make a mistake or fail...I know that I have to work twice as hard anywhere I go...Consequently, I strive to always do things right.*

### **Heart: An Educator of Compassion and Acceptance**

**Annette: Vignette of a Strong, Inspirational Leader.** *I am the sixth child of seven children. My dad was a very loving father and dedicated husband in spite of the fact that his father was an alcoholic and a woman beater. My mother is not an educator, but she has always been a great teacher. The way she studied and researched helped her make better decisions, and our lives were better.*

*My father always worked two or three jobs to make ends meet, and my mother worked as a maid and a cook. Once my aunt suggested that we should apply for welfare, but my mother believed that God would supply all our needs. She always said that no child of hers would ever be on welfare. She said that welfare was just another form of slavery to keep black people poor and in a position of servitude. She said that we could be whatever we wanted to be. My father's perspective on welfare was that he was going to be a better father than his father was. He said that at no time would his family be living off the government.*

*Sometimes things were rough; we would come home and there was not any electricity. My parents would say that poverty was a generational curse that would be broken with us. When times really got hard, my father got a janitorial job cleaning a seven-story bank tower. We children were his cleaning crew. I was about ten or eleven years old, and we continued to do this until I was about fourteen.*

*My teenage years were very good; I excelled in all subjects, particularly music. My mother realized my*

*potential and worked an extra job so that I could take piano lessons. During these years, I made some decisions. I decided that I would never disappoint my parents. I thought that the best way for me to honor my parents would be to finish school and go to college and get my degree.*

*I am now a college graduate and working on my master's degree in education administration. I am the first to graduate from college in my family.*

Annette has been teaching for six years and believes that it is time to use her leadership outside of the classroom.

*I teach in an urban school. I see great potential in this building; however, funds need to be allocated to meet more of the needs. I don't think our goal should just be to keep up with curriculum across the country; we need to collaborate with the community.*

*...These kids need good administrators who are out "to bat" for them...I want to become an administrator because there has to be leader who will pull the best out of each individual. I often see leaders that are in it for their [own]self-glory. It shouldn't be like that.*

## **Hand: A Vignette of an Educational Worker**

**Elle: The Confident Leader.** *The bike I received as an eight-year old for Christmas was not a form of child entertainment; instead, it became my entrepreneurial asset. Despite the three-mile ride to Grandma's house to work, I looked forward to getting paid \$20 a month to purchase more supplies for my candy business. At that time, candy was in great demand in my neighborhood, and I was glad to provide 'customer satisfaction.'*

*Through the years, I developed a strong sense of independence and need to become self-sufficient in whatever I attempted. While my classmates were enjoying high school life, I worked every weekend from nine o'clock at night until six o'clock the next morning. I gained some valuable life-long skills. Independence, communication skills and an ability to be quick on my feet are merely three characteristics that would shape and mold my personality as well as my destiny.*

Elle was raised in a single parent home with her mother and two sisters and was highly influenced by her mother's strength.

*As a single parent, my mom proved herself to be hard working, determined, and resilient and reminded my sisters and me that "nothing worth having in life comes easy. You must work hard in everything that you do!" Despite the times when food was scarce, showers were cold, and lights were out, I knew that if I continued to have faith and determination, the circumstances would change.*

Elle refused to let circumstances stop her from achieving. She attended urban public schools and experienced unfair circumstances as a student.

*In the urban schools I attended, teachers didn't even encourage students to pursue a high school diploma. They told us to go to voc-tech or get our GED. The highest level of education that they felt we could achieve was an associate's degree at a community college. I attended schools where more emphasis was placed on behavioral [control] ...than academic success.*



It is important for Elle to go back to her urban community to teach and become an administrator to change the inequities she experienced.

*Now I know that I would not want anyone else to experience negativity like that. The school that I teach in now feeds into the same school where I graduated. I am making a difference so that these kids know high school is not the end all.*

By providing examples of leadership and describing both negative and positive ideals of public education, study participants identified their leadership style and what emphases they would stress in their future administrative roles. Table 1 below shows their foci of their leadership work that they intend to pursue as administrators.

## **Discussion**

By seeking to understand the lived experiences of each woman connecting themes to past research and Bethune's theoretical framework emerged. While the literature dealing with aspiring black women leaders in urban schools is growing, there is literature on those who have made it (Mertz, 1994 & 2006). The most influential issue to the women that have made it in urban leadership was their desire and vision for where they wanted to be and take the schools in which they work. It is important to show the bridge that Donna, Linda, Annette, Tanya and Elle share with other urban leaders who were determined to make their dreams and visions for where they see education come true.

Past literature states the notion that African American women have an innate motivation to become what society says they could not (Benjamin, 1997; Reid-Merritt, 1996; Washington, 1995). This researcher has identified five

women who are currently educational leaders and have overcome many obstacles such as age, poverty, and race. Although African American women seeking positions in educational administration are not often written about or asked to share their experiences in a broad audience, the five women in this study did. The lives of five young women that

TABLE 1 *FOCI OF LEADERSHIP WORK - HAND*

Foci of Leadership	Donna	Linda	Tanya	Elle	Annette
Resources & Funding	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Access to Public Info & Technology	✓		✓		
Personal Satisfaction	✓	✓	✓		✓
Visionary Work	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Personal Role Model	✓		✓	✓	
Cultural Diversity	✓	✓	✓		✓
Challenges & Problems	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Revitalization of Public Education	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Equity	✓		✓	✓	
Service Need	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Democratic Management			✓	✓	✓
Discipline		✓	✓		✓

aspire to become leaders are encouraging and insightful. These women have a true understanding of urban education and what it means to be a black female educational leader in

today's society. Donna, Linda, Tanya, Annette, and Elle are from various backgrounds. Yet, they each had life experiences that encouraged them to change and improve the lives of other students and the community.

After having examining the importance of these educators' visions to their careers, this study adds to the literature concerning vision of African American women. It explores how being a visionary helps you reach career goals despite obstacles that may stand in the way. The visions of these five who are urban teachers and leaders helped them reach and continue to strive to new educational and personal levels development.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

While each participant had her own education views and vision, some common themes developed. The participants each noted that teachers were a strong component of quality education and, that without good teachers, the system will fail. Participants also talked about the reasons they would like to pursue administration in urban schools. The most prevalent reason pointed to giving back to the community and seeking a way to restore a broken education system, especially for minorities in urban schools.

There is a strong connection between the life experiences and views of these participants in this millennium time period (of conducting the interviews) and the head-heart-hand concepts posited by Bethune in the early 1900's. Each study participant evidenced connections with the head-heart-hand educational concept initiated by Bethune.

In the findings, the key element from each participant's educational experience and career goals stemmed from the vision they have for urban schools. These women had role models as young people and used these role models as motivators to pursue their personal goals and career goals.

This was one of the primary factors that influenced each woman to continue towards the administration track.

It is our hope that further research will build upon this study and ask additional questions that will lead the research in the direction of the “why” behind the study. More research needs to be conducted on the relationship between the visions and practice of present-day African American female educational leaders and significant historical, educational concepts from Bethune and other black educators who are advocates for the improvement of urban education.

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