

**What Does Racism Have
to Do with Leadership?
Countering the Idea
of Color-Blind Leadership:
A Reflection on Race
and the Growing Pressures
of the Urban Principalship**

By Mark A. Gooden

Much of the history and study of leadership in general has omitted “other” perspectives in the literature. The same is true in educational leadership in general, and the principalship in particular. Consider that Tillman (2004b) points out that the top four journals in educational administration did not have a special issue commemorating or even acknowledging the 50th anniversary of the *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) decision, as did other journals like *Education and Urban Society* and the *Journal of Negro Education*. This is emblematic of a long history of placing the study of Black¹ issues and Black principals on the margins in educational administration (Tillman, 2004b). While finishing this article, I had two separate discussions with two African-American scholars about how precarious it was that two recently released books in the field of educational

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administration were both sadly without any contributions from African-American scholars, thus continuing a trend of omitting their perspectives. Indeed much of the literature developed in educational leadership in the last century essentially came about without the voices or perspectives of African Americans (Dantley, 1990, 2002; Matthews & Crow, 2010; Tillman, 2004b) and this continues to be an issue. This absence mirrored the deprivations African Americans were experiencing in the broader society thus making accounts of African-American historians necessary.

Certainly the discourse of the history of African Americans and their struggle to achieve equity in education has been enhanced by the work of noted scholars (Anderson, 1988; Gooden, 2004; Siddle-Walker, 1996). However, this story is not complete without a discussion of the lives of African-American leaders, especially principals (Alston, 2005; Brown, 2005; Gooden 2005; Siddle-Walker 2003; Tillman, 2004b, 2006). It is also important that these histories are reported from perspectives of African-American scholars who do not present them from a deficit perspective.

While the work described above has started to add more to the discourse on African-American school leaders, past and present, there is still a modicum of literature about these leaders and how they do their work in urban, suburban, and rural school contexts. Most African-American principals work in urban settings and while the general population is less familiar with the limited literature on these leaders, more people are familiar with how these leaders are depicted in pop culture. The fact that the broader society has drawn these inimical conclusions about African-American principals based on limited exposure is problematic for two reasons. First, the depictions of Black principals in pop culture are influential but not usually based on research. When there is research it tends to be deficit-based. This is analogous to the dominant population having no or limited relationships with African-American men but feeling like they know African-American men because of how they are depicted in the media and movies. In light of this fact and the growing influence and ease of accessibility of multiple forms of media, specifically video and television, I offer this account as a need to explore the problematic construction of the role of the African-American principal. Tillman (2007) has accurately noted that when African-American leaders are presented in movies, they are often presented in un-negotiated space that defines them as ineffective or uncaring. Tillman has also found a deficit perspective and while I agree with her assessment, I am adding to this discourse by suggesting that because of the paucity of the literature on African-Americans principals and the incomplete and inadequate portrayals in the media, these principals have been at times narrowly defined as hero educators who are called to do the highly improbable while making it look routine.

The purpose of this article is to disrupt the broader societal narrative of effective African-American principals of urban schools as portrayed in movies and media. I am using critical race theory (CRT) as an analytical framework and relying on its themes to construct a counternarrative that challenges general societal assumptions about African Americans in general and urban African-American principals

specifically. Below I briefly describe its hallmark themes. Next, I summarize and then examine two films about African-American principals, *Lean on Me* (1989) and *Heart of Stone* (2009), using CRT. In the last part of the article, I present some recommendations for practice. While my objective is not to directly oppose the literature that is present on African-American leadership, I do intend to start a line of inquiry that will expand the ideas and/or issues that may inadvertently support the idea of the hero leader. I conclude with a call for more research into this important area.

Critical Race Theory Epistemology

In this article, I draw upon a CRT epistemology. CRT is a growing body of legal scholarship which “challenges the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally, in American society as a whole” (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995, p. xiii). Critical race theorists examine ways that racism and White privilege operate together to dominate institutions and systems (Bell, 1992a, 1992b; Crenshaw et al., 1995). They reject the prevailing notion that scholarship about race in America should or could be neutral and objective.

Delgado and Stefancic (2001) point out that a hallmark theme of CRT is that racism is ordinary instead of aberrational and deeply ingrained in U.S. society. They argue that the system of White supremacy serves important purposes, both psychic and material. Moreover, the subtle characteristic of being ordinary makes White racism harder to detect and therefore more difficult to address in society. Thus, concepts of colorblindness or formal definitions of equality, which insist on treating all people equal, take precedence over interrogations of White privilege or conversations about equalizing outcomes. Moreover, these concepts make it really difficult to legally remedy any wrongdoing based on race, except the most blatant racist acts, which are increasingly becoming more rare. Additionally, some CRT scholars find liberalism as inadequate for dealing with America’s racial problems because many liberals believe in colorblindness and neutral principles of constitutional law. In general, CRT scholars posit that concepts of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness and meritocracy must be challenged.

Related to racism being ordinary is the principle of interest convergence, which holds that civil rights advances in history for Blacks happened only when those interests converged with the interests of elite Whites and changing economic conditions. Derrick Bell (1980, 2004), regarded as the intellectual father of CRT, cogently argues this point in several seminal works using the *Brown v Board of Education* (1954) case as his most convincing example. He asks simply why the Supreme Court suddenly sided with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in this landmark decision in 1954 after years of fighting to desegregate schools. Bell’s answer to his query and riveting conclusion is that domestic and world considerations drove the decision instead of moral qualms over Black peoples’ experiences. Legal historian Mary Dudziak confirmed Bell’s conclusion

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in her extensive historical research on Central Intelligence Agency files (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Delgado, 2002).

A second hallmark of CRT is Revisionist History or the counterstory or counternarrative. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) explain “revisionist history reexamines America’s historical record, replacing comforting majoritarian interpretations of events with ones that square more accurately with minorities’ experiences” (p. 20). This process intentionally gives voice to those people of color who have been omitted from the broader or mainstream narrative. CRT scholars recognize the experiences of marginalized people with the inclusion of counternarratives. CRT scholars also recognize that there is a dominant and traditional narrative and that Whiteness is constructed as property (Harris, 1995).

Critical race theory’s use has expanded beyond law, and it is now employed by scholars in social sciences including education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Lopez, 2003; Parker & Lynn, 2002). CRT is an appropriate epistemology from which to interrogate these issues. Epistemology refers generally to the nature and production of knowledge, and it enables a scholar to consider his or her worldview or belief system (Lincoln & Guba, 1998). CRT as an epistemology offers a framework through which to examine and challenge the pervasive societal narrative African-American principals of urban schools. Below I apply it to analyze two movies based on the lived experiences of two such leaders presented in film.

Lean on Me

Joe Clark was principal of Eastside High School in Paterson, New Jersey, from 1983-1990. He gained national attention as a no-nonsense principal especially after the release of the film, *Lean on Me* (Avildsen, 1989). He also published a book on his life that was also released in 1989 and entitled *Laying Down the Law: Joe Clark’s Strategy for Saving Our Schools*. In 1990, after the release of the movie and publication of the book, Clark resigned as principal and became a motivational speaker. According to his web site, Clark has carried his message to several leading corporations, conservative groups, and over 25 major universities. In the film, Clark is portrayed as a tough school chief and this was a well-received model of African-American school leadership at that time, at least it seemed, by the dominant culture. Below I offer evidence of his popularity during that era. Clark is now over 70 years of age and has not served as a principal in 20 years but his message and style of leading endures. In fact, in 2010, Clark presented his message of leadership at the University of Tennessee where his son also serves as the coach of the track team.

Jagodzinski (2003) noted that Clark had begun to gain ground as a loud and controversial voice of African-American principals by the time *Lean on Me* was released. Clark had appeared on the cover of *Time* and made national television appearances on *60 Minutes*, *Donahue*, CNN’s *Crossfire*, and *A Current Affair*. Why did Joe Clark become so popular so fast? I contend that Clark was sought after by mainstream media because his “success” needed to be displayed, and it was really confirming some

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assumptions about the role and responsibility of the African-American principal, like the dominant culture's axiomatic view that their responsibility as leaders in education is to keep African-American children in line. This fact, along with his extreme personality, is likely related to his gaining popularity that started 20 years ago. Tillman (2007) pointed out in her review of five films with African-American principals that all had the same necessary, role-defining task of "keeping students (usually African-American and misfit Whites) in line, ruling the school with a firm hand and establishing that their word is law" (p. 361).

Clark's model of leadership, though largely celebrated but also criticized in pop culture in the 1990s, continues to have an effect on how people think African-American principals lead or should lead in urban schools. Consider that in the movie Clark's job is to turn around the ailing, failing Eastside High, presumably by laying down the law. People who know little about Joe Clark's leadership believe he is successful at this task, mostly because the students were "put into order" and the "school was saved." However, Clark is not seen in the movie or presented in his book as collaborating with teachers on academics or serving to make the school a caring, welcoming place that supports democratic values. In addition to his tough stance, he adopts a very narrow view of academics and achievement to a focus on "passing the test," and not much more. This has been criticized for decades as a problematic measure of success for schools. Moreover, all of his work seems to have been carried out in an authoritarian, heavy-handed, autocratic style. In fact, when asked about how he was portrayed in the movie, Clark reportedly said "Morgan Freeman underplayed me."

In Clark's book, he actually shares more details on this autocratic approach to leadership. Clark is a leader who prefers to run the school on his own terms, and he believes this is best accomplished by keeping important details like his leadership philosophy from his teachers, thus indicating trust issues. For example, when the superintendent, Dr. Frank Napier, comments that no one except him knows Clark's plan, he remarks, "Their ignorance is part of the plan" (Clark, 1989, p. 45). Such an approach caused Eastside's 250 teachers to be suspicious of his motives and consistently off center—a descriptor Clark would undoubtedly support. Many teachers were resistant to his strict rules and dress codes, but in Clark's mind this was all part of bringing order to the school under his own terms. To show his support of teachers, Clark claimed he visited 200 of the 250 teachers early in his first year. To show his support of students, he fired a non-tenured teacher (presumably in front of the class) who could not define alacrity, one of her vocabulary words, after he asked her in front of the class. Clark concluded she was not fit to teach at Eastside. Still, teachers supported Clark, according to him, because they believed his strict discipline had made Eastside a better and safer place to work. Indeed, school violence had been reduced, and there was order in the school. However, Jagodzinski (2003) points out an interesting attribute of Clark's. Throughout the book, he casts himself as a larger than life individual, almost evangelical in some cases. For instance, he describes the conditions at Eastside before he started as principal as B.C. (before

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Clark). Given Clark's conservative political and religious affiliation, I am sure this reference to himself as a messiah is not lost on him. Moreover, when arguing with a parent who charged that her son was wrongly suspended, Clark dismisses her by asserting that God put him in charge and did not say he had to be nice. He also delights in the fact that his movement about the school, supposedly once measured at 22 miles one day, elevated him to an almost ubiquitous presence, which is what he promised his teachers he would be shortly after he arrived. Clearly, to fulfill the necessary demands of an urban principalship, and engage in these other activities means Clark, though controversial in his methods, goes beyond the call of duty.

There are serious inequities in urban education (Kozol, 1991) that have been historic (Anderson, 1998; Siddle Walker, 1996; Tillman, 2004a, 2004b) and today still result in funding differences (Aleman, 2007), differences in teacher quality, recruitment, and physical structure of the facilities (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004). These are problems of America that could be broadly and sincerely addressed as a country, and despite government-based reforms like No Child Left Behind, have endured. Rather than address the under-education that students received in some urban schools, which is where many African-American children attend, local solutions include responses by school boards like calling in strict disciplinarian principals with "get-tough" leadership practices that call for them to single-handedly reform the schools. To be sure, the Obama administration's initiative to improve schools continues much of this thinking and lays work at the feet of the turnaround principals. Principals are second only to teachers in effecting school change (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). However, how much of this work should not be borne solely by these individuals without addressing the severity of racism of an Eastside situation. CRT reminds us that racism is endemic in America and we must not view these realities in race-neutral terms, or our good intentions can be quickly lost. We may fail to see the racism here because it seems "ordinary" in mainstream narrative. Consider this fact: a school that is mostly populated by Black and Latino Americans is expected to fail. If this is not the case, then why is there no outrage when we see so many urban schools failing? Moreover, current federal responses to these failings are to find and hire turnaround principals and shut down failing schools. Though there is more funding available that pinpoints addressing school leadership, in some ways this trend continues the line of reasoning of the "one-principal" solution.

To say racism plays a part in these schools failing is a controversial stance and one that would directly challenge a mainstream neutral narrative. Moreover, any proposed race-based solutions may invoke "strict scrutiny" and find the federal courts resistant (Daniel & Gooden, 2010). However, it would be racism in one or more of its more subtle forms either institutional or societal. Rather than explore and confront racism on a micro-level, the easier solution for the school board (and America) is to hire Joe Clark to tackle this problem. Consequently, some in America embrace him and amplifies his story because, after all, he represents a solution to the problem of "those underachieving Black students with parents who refuse to

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participate in their children's educational lives." He even uses this language. While Clark discusses race, it is usually in myopic phrases and approaches.

Clark's personal encounters with race find him often placing blame at the feet of the raced person in some way. For example, he has a conversation with a Black student who accuses a White, 30-year veteran teacher of being a racist when she calls him a boy. Clark disciplines the student, a class clown who apparently hangs around drug addicts. The end result of the conversation is that Clark (1989) says the real racist is a Black dope addict "because his actions are destructive to a particular race. His own! The Black dope addicts are destroying themselves and bringing shame, degradation, and ill-will upon their people" (p. 89). Clark consistently reduces race matters down to the individual's responsibility. For Clark, the dope addict is responsible for his downfall and an embarrassment to Black people. He is the opposite of someone like Clark, who would be "a credit to his race" because he has worked hard to achieve the American Dream and represent his people well. Because the student "behaves" after this encounter, Clark regards it as a victory with no real need to interrogate race further or reflect on what might be an issue with his deficit-based solution.

Joe Clark cleans up the Eastside School and consequently is invited to testify at a Senate committee before then Secretary of State William Bennett, and Joe remarks that he admired the secretary as he reminds him of himself (Clark, 1989). Joe is also invited to a post to work for the Reagan administration, but he turns it down because the move was not going to be good for his family. Why would the conservative White President and his Secretary of Education take such interest in a Black principal of Black students in Paterson, New Jersey?

The answer is clarified in the second hallmark theme of CRT, which is interest convergence. The interest of the very conservative White House and mainstream America is to contain Black children and their problems to the "East sides" of America, make them believe there is hope in American education. On one hand, elite Whites also have an interest in avoiding the guilt associated with such an inequitable system, and they have a need to show America that there is a fix for the intractable urban school problem. This fix does not include such unpopular acts as interrogating race or challenging the longstanding principles of meritocracy or neutrality. On the other hand, the Black students, parents, and their community have an interest in having a school in which the children can learn, safe from unwanted distractions. Moreover, the Eastside parents possess an interest in having their children attend a school that affords them equal educational opportunities, including postsecondary opportunities and college options that they likely hope will lead to better educational outcomes.

The interests of elite Whites and working class and poor Blacks and Latinos converge in the common solution of Joe Clark. As inferred above, there are problems with this approach. First, Clark's presence, style, and conservative philosophy obliterate the need to ask or even provide urban schools with resources that address the financial, instructional (teacher quality), and physical inequities. This principal

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who seemingly leads in solitude requiring little input from within or outside the school is said to take a “go it alone” approach. Indeed, Clark’s “go it alone” style at the time made it hard for Black principals of urban schools to complain about their current situation of their under-resourced schools or even get more federal or state assistance to resolve it. Another set of enduring issues relative to Clark is his broad appearance in the media, his movie, and his philosophical alignment with mainstream culture’s eagerness to reduce this “minority educational problem” to a one-principal solution. These realities have all come together to hold up his leadership style as a viable model to the dominant culture, despite other principals’ warning that there are many other effective (and more caring) ways to do this job.

In the beginning of his tenure as principal and throughout most of the movie, Clark insists and acts as if he is the “Head Nigger in Charge” (HNIC). Accordingly, he is not interested in input from the other educators in the school. He rejects any suggestions his first day at Eastside saying to the teachers if they could have changed the situation for the better, he would not be there. The use of the term HNIC further problematizes the image of the Black leader who must restore order in the school at all costs. In a patent act of exerting his authority, Clark rounds up 300 so-called trouble-making students and suspends them. This performance plays into the mainstream view of the “get-tough” leader who can make urban schools safe by removing those problem kids who hamper the education of others. Clark makes no efforts to consider the procedural or substantive due process rights of the students, if indeed he believes they are entitled to such. Ultimately, this view is knotty because it implies that issues in urban schools can be fixed if only those schools can find really good principals like Joe Clark who can get rid of the “bad kids.” The problem with this enduring notion, unfortunately, is that the “bad kids” end up mostly being the Black kids and misfit White students, as noted earlier. This is part of the dominant narrative that operates under the assumption that Black children are not interested in learning.

CRT speaks out against this commonly held assumption and encourages the exploration of this reality from another perspective. Consider that CRT has the potential to give voice to those like the African-American students who are typically not heard from in these exchanges. The counternarratives of the African-American students who were suspended might include questions of why Black boys are suspended at higher rates for the same infractions as their White counterparts (Skiba & Knesting, 2001; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Beachum, Dentith, McCray, and Boyle (2008) have warned that principals who made discipline decisions without regard to such racial realities, particularly the counternarratives of these students, will unconsciously work to promote the same negative outcomes. Alternatively, an African-American principal who examines how race permeates his or her work in urban schools will likely find unspoken assumptions operating at the disadvantage of African-American children.

Heart of Stone

This perception of the Black principal has changed little, and in many ways the perception remains largely intact in the media. Consider *Heart of Stone* (Kruant, 2009), a recent documentary about Ronald Stone, who was also a principal of an urban school in New Jersey. Stone starts his six-year tenure as principal by being met by a massive brawl in his school during his first month on the job. Stone, a former athlete and gang member, is admittedly more settled than “Crazy Joe,” and he is a principal who seems to really care for the students at his school, Weequahic High School in Newark. However, though he obviously has good rapport with students, the film does little to show his skills as a principal when working with teachers on student learning and does more to focus on the narrow perspective of his role to restore order in his predominantly Black high school. Developing teachers and effectively managing the organization and the instructional program might be tasks he engages in on a regular basis but none of this work is shown in the film. From the filmmaker’s perspective, Stone’s main objectives in the film are to stave off gang violence and boost student morale. Is the view of the filmmaker to depict Stone as a principal who mostly maintains order? Exploring this question requires that I establish more context. Weequahic High School is known for fostering more Ph.D.s than any other American high school from the 1930s to the 1950s, and the surrounding neighborhood is described as a Camelot where Blacks and Jews once attended the school together and got along well during this same time period.

The film chronicles the work of principal Stone and the Weequahic High School Alumni Association, which is mostly composed of Jewish graduates and some African Americans, including Stone. Stone enlists this group to help him turn the school into a better, safer environment, and in some ways return it to its grandeur. The neighborhood has undergone a series of major economic, political, and social changes as a result of race riots and Whites moving out. Throughout the film, there is this underlying theme that the current students (mostly Blacks and Latinos) have ruined the school, and that Principal Stone can and should fix it. In helping Stone, the alumni donates over a \$100,000 in scholarship money for students and also assists in exposing the students to the advantage of international trips. They also set aside time so they can tutor the students at the school.

The storyline is a familiar one and includes a need to fix the urban school and to expose and conquer the enemy. More often than not, this enemy of public education is personified in the Black. For Joe Clark, it was the angry Black mother who was against his “get-tough” approach to education. It was also the school board. For Stone, it turned out to be gang members and other students and the violence perpetuated by them, which ran counter to their education and his need to run the school safely, efficiently, and effectively. While *Heart of Stone* contains a redeeming element for Crips leader Rayvon Lisbon and local Bloods leaders Sharif Patterson and Ricky, these students are initially portrayed as enemies of Stone’s mission to make the school safe and ultimately a place where students can come to learn.

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Much of the story involves Stone working with these three young men. Sharif at times is seen as talking to his fellow gang members about the fact that they can and should take advantage of their education. His influence as a leader is apparent in the documentary. He is able to easily use his influence for good or bad. We eventually see a turnaround, as there is a heavy focus on him and his life, including a brief interview with his mother and an appearance by his brother, who is also a gang member. Rayvon, who is the Crips' leader, is very different from Sharif in that he is considerably smaller in stature and more reserved in his presentation style. Rayvon is a young African-American man who seems to have a quiet and focused approach to life, with a deeply introspective demeanor. Rayvon has a foster family and no real or strong connection to his biological relatives. He has seen a cousin die 'in the streets' and joined a gang likely for the need to have allies. He is visibly nervous about his future and initially has lots of questions about his educational opportunities and whether pursuing an education can truly improve his situation. He respects Stone's opinion, and we see several conversations where the latter mentors Rayvon. Lastly, there is also Ricky, who is a Blood who wears red every day. He is aligned closely with Sharif, has no relationship with his mother and had a relationship with his father who is now deceased. He lives with his grandmother and aunt.

There is the impending threat that these young men who are leaders in their gangs and the schools could really wreak havoc in the school. A police officer has been killed on the steps of Weequahic High School, likely before Stone's arrival. Still, Stone engages these young men, members of rival gangs, in conversations about his aim to keep the school safe by turning it into a zone where there is no violence, especially between rival gang members. Stone ultimately brokers a deal to keep the violence out of the building by having them agree to a compromise. These students in many ways become advocates and proselytes of his message to improve the school. These students also respect "Stoney" because they have concluded that he cares for them, though he is tough and serious about school. He works hard for them, and he takes risks for them such as coming to their corners to follow up when they fail to come to school. Stone also makes available conflict resolution training, and he listens to the students. He also has compassion for their situation, much like what we see in the literature of caring African-American principals (Gooden, 2005; Tillman, 2004b).

Stone is very different from Clark in that he seems to regard the students as human beings who are faced with tough and real barriers to attaining an education. He also seems to have positive suppositions about the students. For example, it is noted by the students that Stone could call the police gang unit at any time to have them thrown out of school and charged for affiliation, but he takes a different route, which includes providing them with options to take part of their education. He understands the need to keep them in school. One teacher explains that Weequahic High School is not violent like other area schools and notes it has never been shut down like other schools because of riots. She attributes this to Stone and his effective leadership.

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Stone works extremely hard to do all that is practicable to be the best principal he can. At least in the case of these three young men, he shows his care for his students. Stone works hard to support Rayvon, Sharif, and Ricky and has confidence in their abilities despite their home life issues. For instance, he builds rapport beyond school walls by visiting these students and even eats meals with them and their families. This is a very deliberate and compassionate way to address the violence issue in his school. However, in taking such a high degree of dedication, it is apparent that Stone is trying to overcome the effects of institutional and societal racism. There is institutional and societal racism because the urban school is structured to serve students in a traditional way with limited exceptions of their personal life circumstances and few or no considerations of how invisible racism plays a part. Stone recognizes and resists this somewhat, by saying, "it's hard to focus on geometry when you are scared and worried about a disheveled home life or your personal safety." Though he never labels race as a factor, Stone is also working to combat the societal racism that took away a large part of the income base of the Newark neighborhood. The city has been rocked by race riots complete with residents being displaced, businesses being lost, and buildings being destroyed. Over time, these factors have left Paterson, New Jersey, as the 12th most dangerous city in America. This caused most working-class and business-owning Whites to move away, taking their income with them, thus accelerating the decline of the neighborhoods and the city, and the rise of crime. Though the city has returned in some aspects, the irreparable damage done to school and community has lingering effects, much like the core of many urban centers.

While the alumni association helps out, one comment made by Richie Roberts, an alumnus who is portrayed by Russell Crowe in the movie *American Gangster*, is that we put more money into the wars than education. Though Roberts's comment is offered in support and seems reasonable, it is not quite accurate. The reality is we put more than enough money and resources in suburban schools or those mostly attended by large White majorities. In contrast, urban and rural schools suffer (Aleman, 2007; Kozol, 1991). To be clear, Weequahic High School students will be expected to compete in a national and global economy against students from suburban schools that have not only been insulated from the riots but have been built since they ended, meaning they are newer and safer and not in inner-city Newark. Because CRT reminds us that racism in our society is so endemic, we can very well fail to see these barefaced inequities if we do not interrogate race in its multiple forms.

Roberts's comment is interesting in and of itself, but the space where he makes it also reveals something about race. He shares his thoughts at a party of participants who are playing poker. They are all White Weequahic alumni and discussing their past glory years at the school. Throughout the movie we are told that during the earlier years, Jews and Blacks got along well as they attended Weequahic High School. However, interestingly enough, no African Americans are at this

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party, and none are discussed in this setting. The attendees also talk about how the neighborhood used to be prior to the riots. I think even though these individuals may be well meaning alumni and have put money back into the school and have attended some football games, it is apparent that they essentially have moved out of the neighborhood. They have an interest in the school returning to its glory days, but they seem to minimize the major economic, social, and political changes that have taken place in the school and neighborhood. Frankly, they are able to make criticisms from a safe vantage point where they are insulated from the conditions of the neighborhood now surrounding Weequahic High School.

There is an example of interest convergence taking place at Weequahic High School in Newark. For one, the White members of the alumni association would like to see the school succeed because they have an interest in avoiding their guilt. They acknowledge societal racism plays a part in what has happened to the school and the neighborhood surrounding the school. For instance, one White member is quoted as saying “these kids don’t have the thousands of dollars that suburban schools have” (Kruvant, 2009). They seem to love the school, and contributing and raising money for scholarships and donating time present acceptable ways to “give back.” However, as needed as such efforts are, no members make the ultimate sacrifice of moving back to the neighborhood to help provide some economic stability. To just give money minimizes or masks the need for political power and broader economic stability and social capital that can benefit the students at Weequahic. Would this be an option? What about using their influence to lobby for the school politically?

On the other hand, the poor and working class Blacks and Latinos of the community have a vested interest, like Stone, in seeing the quality of the education improve at Weequahic. The Whites in the alumni association with choice to send their children to better, safer schools have an interest that converges with the Blacks who do not, frankly, have much choice. While I respect their liberal efforts and commend them for what they have done, they are then more than happy to support Principal Stone’s efforts *because* he represents a solution to the urban school problem, much like Joe Clark. Moreover, I am left wondering how this approach by the liberal alumni is not a colorblind, neutral approach. Additionally, it operates within our acceptable way of assisting urban schools and it fails to disrupt or challenge the dominant view that these schools are saddled with societal and institutional inequities that cannot simply be solved by limiting our discourse to the African American principal and his efforts.

While Stone’s style is just one of several attributes that distinguish him from Clark, there is still a dominant or traditional narrative controlling Stone’s story. While he appears to be a well-meaning individual in every sense, he is upheld as the “Black principal solution” that must do the impossible with so little. His narrative does not revise or challenge the dominant history and narrative that have in part created by the Joe Clarks of the world. That is, we can solve this problem by just bringing in the right principal and we have done it before. The challenge with Clark’s and Stone’s respective stories is that the marginalized voices are suppressed.

CRT calls for a need for marginalized people to tell their story when it comes to race. CRT scholars support revisionist history, which reexamines America's historical record, replacing comforting majoritarian interpretations of events with ones that are more consistent with minorities' experiences. A majoritarian interpretation might be that Joe Clark fixed Eastside just like Stone will fix Weequahic. This is at best an incomplete narrative. The more consistent experience for the Black and Latino students in both cases will reveal that many of the opportunities for those students, while they may have improved under the regime of a dedicated principal, are substantially less than optimal when compared to the opportunities made available to their White counterparts in suburban schools. Moreover, their volatile and inequitable educational situations will be subject to vary with the quality of the principal, even if he is likely to become successful in such dauntingly difficult environments. That is a counternarrative that needs to be told.

Recommendations for Practice

Taylor (2000) notes that discussions about race in education really situate it as an independent variable. This observation suggests that we should analyze and consider how race relates to other variables and educational outcomes. Taking these steps can expand educational research and address the accusation that it restates the obvious. What should we be doing to address the social construct of race? Earlier, I noted that Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) have urged us to theorize race and while there is evidence that educational researchers may be moving toward this realization, practicing leaders will want to know what they should do in the meantime to keep race on the table. Moreover, principals are in the precarious position of needing to be critical of the current system but needing to experience some level of success within it.

Practitioners should first develop a working understanding of individual, institutional, and societal racism. Understanding these terms and distinctions between them will help leaders, aspiring leaders, and those who train them address White privilege and subtle systems embedded within education that work on multiple levels to advantage Whites and subordinate Blacks and those from other racial minority groups. Additionally, principals, regardless of their race, looking to explore race and racism should seriously consider completing a racial autobiography, which can help them understand their racial identity. This is an activity I have done, and I ask my principalship students to complete. This process really helps individuals explore their own beliefs about race, as well as offer more insight into their development (and mine) as an anti-racist leader. Models that can offer guidance in exploring the personal stages within the autobiography include Cross's (1991) model for African-American identity development and Helms's (1990) model of White identity development.

Once leaders have learned more about themselves, they may then elect to conduct an equity audit of their school with their faculty and staff to examine and address inequities in their schools based on race, disability, socioeconomic status,

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or other factors (Skrlla et al., 2004). Leaders should expect to find achievement gaps by race, higher referrals of Black and Latino males to special education, and more inexperienced teachers being assigned to the students who are having the most trouble academically. Those leaders should then use frameworks that explore race and inequities to start to focus on these issues within their buildings. While principals may decide to call in experts at some point, much of the initial work can be (and probably should be) done in teams led by teachers who are committed to tackling these issues. Though there are others, the *Courageous Conversations About Race* book can help practicing leaders learn with their teachers and staff as they work to examine and address tough issues around race (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

Conclusion

Starratt (1991) expands the discussion of building an ethical school and how leaders should have an ethic of critique, justice, and care. While he understands and supports an ethic of critique in which leaders become aware of inequitable social and political arrangements of power and privilege that are legitimized by an assumed rationality, law or custom, he calls on leaders to also adopt an ethic of justice, though flawed, to address governing of self and of the broader community. Additionally, Starratt (1991) finds that beyond the ethic of justice there needs to be an ethic of care to deal with the “underside” of administration which includes “those motives that involve racial, sexual, ethnic, and age stereotypes that block the possibility of honest communication”(p. 196). Starratt’s popular model of ethical leadership can offer guidance to the practicing leader as she endeavors to address these tough issues because it is the ethical thing to do to build an ethical school. Principals interested in addressing inequities in school might start with an ethic of critique will reflect on these key questions as they do their work: Who controls? Who legitimates?, and Who defines? That ethic of justice should cause leaders to ask, “How shall we govern ourselves?” This ethic involves doing work in schools in a democratic manner. Finally, leaders must be willing to do their work with an ethic of care and consider the question of, “What do our relationships ask of us?”

While much of this article has employed CRT under the ethic of critique, I have attempted to push the thinking about the Black principal working in urban schools and challenges he or she faces when considering how to govern schools fairly under an ethic of justice. For instance, having an awareness that there are systems in place that often support the dominant narrative, sometimes in very subtle ways, will hopefully cause the principal to see the need for a collaborative, more inclusive structure of running the school instead of a leader in solitude who dominates. Moreover, the ethic of care will urge these principals to reconsider and recast the adversarial relationships that have been created with African-American children. An ethic of care should also compel district leaders and teachers to patiently support Black principals as they seek alternatives to suspensions. Working in this way can enable leaders to build better relationships with African-American students and make schools more welcoming for all students.

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Despite the very difficult conditions Joe Clark insisted on using an individualistic and domineering approach to leadership, which included a strategy to bear the burden and responsibilities of turning around Eastside. Clark was a principal who had been lifted up by the Reagan administration as the quintessential school leader who had made urban schools work by his own might, despite other factors like societal racism. William Bennett, Secretary of Education under Reagan, was a personal supporter of Clark and his methods and even visited Eastside during Clark's tenure. Implicit in Clark's endorsement and popularity was the belief that other Black principals of urban schools should just lead the same way as Clark, presumably using the same strategies, particularly with little or no resources. Too often African-American principals of urban schools are forced into proving they can and must get the same results as all other schools under very difficult circumstances. This view, which is consistent with the dominant culture's view, is problematic.

Ron Stone may not necessarily have been a principal who leads in solitude, but he was cast in this same mold, a fact that perhaps may have been beyond his control. Stone has, to some extent, been forced like many urban principals to accept this part of the job. That is, as principal of Weequahic, he will be held accountable and his effectiveness measured by his standardized test scores. As an urban principal, he lived with some of the same scarce resource challenges. While he called upon the alumni association to make up for the shortcomings, this still could not solve the expansive inequities that persist due to racism or that fact that achievement test scores become proxies for the quality of education. Beachum et al. (2008), in their study of an urban middle school, present the difficulties that urban principals face when so much of their work is based on this metric. In discussing the order in the school that included walking silently and in line from class to class, they remind us that the paradoxes of creating a safe and orderly environment in urban schools (expected) can also be oppressive, militaristic, and akin to a prison (Noguera, 2003).

Such policies and practices must be examined from a critical race perspective. Additionally, performing urban principalships well in a race-neutral fashion with lackluster resources has the effect of closing the door to exploring the need to address the gross financial and resource inequities which are symptomatic of invisible racism happening. Both Clark and Stone are African-American principals working in tough, urban schools and to be fair, they are in a job that requires performance with limited "excuses." While they take on the jobs with a great deal of zeal and with few complaints, it is conceivable that these principalships demand much more than a principalship at a suburban school where the leader does not have to contend with so many inequities, other challenges, and the expectation that they will turn these schools around. The result is simply an urban principalship is more stressful. That is the point of the analysis above using CRT. These jobs place these leaders in direct battle with at least three forms of racism found in school settings. They are also balancing competing interests and struggling to construct a new narrative of American education by trying to serve as the "principal solution" to the urban education problem.

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The major challenge is the stress. The reality is these leaders are working so hard in these types of positions as urban principals to save the school because they are passionate about it and seem to care for the students. However, what is left out of this discourse is they end up losing themselves in the process. For example, Joe Clark had open-heart surgery in 1989 at the end of his tenure as principal and according to his publicist, “he’s been run down” (Joseph, 1989, p. 27), presumably from the job and the accompanying pressures. Ron Stone, who also had this same level of dedication, unfortunately had a fatal heart attack at 57 at the start of his sixth year as principal of Weequahic.

Are African-American principals doomed to be overwhelmed by the enormity of the job of leading urban schools? Are they so dedicated to their mission that they fail to see their own peril coming around the corner? Bell reminds us of the permanence of racism (1992) and CRT provides a framework to analyze race in connection with many aspects of our lives, including school leadership. There are African-American leaders who are conscious of who they are, consequently making them better able to serve as advocates for children like those at Eastside and Weequahic. While these Black principals know that serving these students is an important part of their mission, they also know how to advocate, recognize, and address race-based inequities. These leaders start with an ethic of critique to point out who controls and who legitimates knowledge and ways of learning, but they acknowledge these fact and offer an approach that appreciates culturally what African-American students bring to the school. These African-American principals also call upon an ethic of justice to challenge how they govern their schools with their staffs. They resist unilateral leadership. Lastly, these leaders know they must have confidence in their students and consider developing more productive relationships with African-American children. There must also be compassion, which becomes apparent through the ethic of care. The time has surely come to impress upon more African-American principals to do this lest we risk losing more dedicated educators who burn out fighting racism in a race-neutral, colorblind way.

Note

¹ The terms African American and Black will be used interchangeably throughout this article.

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