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Black Women Administrators in Historically Black Institutions: Social Justice Project Rooted in Community

Gaetane Jean-Marie, Ph.D.

Black women are subjected to both racism and sexism; those who achieve privileged status are also the targets of classism. Frazier (1957), in addressing issues of the Black bourgeoisie, said “the frustration of the majority of the women . . . is probably due to the idle or ineffectual lives which they lead” (p. 222). These negative judgments are based on the *gaze*, in other words, who these women “look like” from the outside. We hear a different story when listening to the *voices* of Black women educators working for social change.

The consequence of desegregation has been “Black flight,” the geographic dispersal of Black professionals, and the breaking of their social ties with the Black working poor and underclass living in deteriorating neighborhoods. Yet, some Black professionals continue to create community in face-to-face relationships with the dispossessed in churches and schools. For example, in whatever conditions African American students come to HBCUs to obtain a higher education, they come across professionals from administration, faculty, and staff committed to their success. The mission of these institutions is to prepare African American students academically, socially, culturally and spiritually as they are nurtured to become active citizens in the Black community as well as the larger society.

Many Southern Black women leaders view their vocations as service to God and to community. These women are both actively involved in policy decision-making that affects the academic curriculum, and are committed to providing a moral and social curriculum to ensure their students’ success. According to Bakhtin (1981), they exercise responsible-ability as “village elders.” They become organic intellectuals of and for the community (Gramsci, as cited in Forgacs, 2000).

About the Author

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Purpose of the Study

Since the 1970s, the number of women in higher education administration has increased. Research provides the historical and contemporary perspectives of women in administration (e.g., Klenke, 1996; Ndiffer & Bashaw, 2001; Quinn, Davies, & Lubelska, 1995). During the past 20 years, research has focused on African American women in majority White institutions (Benjamin, 1997; Harvey, 1999; James & Farmer, 1993). Studies generalize the experiences of women and as a result overlook the increasing number of women of color entering administration. The literature does not reflect the work of African American women administrators in HBCUs.

The purpose of this paper is to present the perspectives of six African American women who were executive-level administrators in the southeastern United States. These stories of university-level women administrators can contribute to the understanding of cultural frameworks and the pedagogies of African Americans.

Conceptual Frameworks of Leadership

Scholars offer multiple definitions of leadership. Gardner (1991) defined leadership as “the process of persuasion or example by which an individual induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and followers” (p. 1). Similarly, Nanus (1992) reported that leaders attract and energize the voluntary commitment of followers, and transform organizations into new entities with greater potential for survival, growth and excellence (p. 10). These two definitions present traditional views that

emphasize a hierarchical approach to leadership. The leader's role is to persuade, guide, and gather support from followers who are expected to carry out what the leader communicates. This generalized definition of leadership is gender-biased and reflects the male characteristics of leading.

These African-American women administrators practiced leadership that was closely aligned to Foster's (1986) critical perspectives of leadership. These African American women administrators were distinguished by their commitment to improve social conditions, empower others and support democratic participation through their roles.

Foster: Critical Perspectives of Leadership

Traditional theories on leadership place emphasis on the technical aspect of leading. However, Foster (1986) proposed that an "administrator's work involves the establishment of community and culture within an organization and the development of an organization's self reflective ability to analyze its purpose and goals" (p. 10). Critical perspectives of leadership entail:

. . . the ability of humans to relate deeply to each other in the search for a more perfect union. Leadership is a consensual task, a sharing of ideas and a sharing of responsibilities, where a "leader" is a leader for the moment only, where the leadership exerted must be validated by the consent of followers, and where leadership lies in the struggles of a community to find meaning for itself. (Foster, 1986, p. 61)

Foster (1986, 1989) advocated a leadership that promotes democratic process and calls for political activism that leads to social justice. As a result, this practice of leading is critical, transformative, educative, and ethical. These elements deserve further analysis to identify the important work involved in a critical perspective of leadership.

Critical Leadership

Critical leaders examine previous conditions of social life and subject them to critique (Foster, 1989) in order to change existing conditions that contribute to their domination. There is no complacency with existing practices because critical reflection and reevaluation are always at work. "In being critical, then, leadership is oriented not just toward the development of more perfect organizational structures, but toward a reconceptualization of life practices where common ideals for freedom and democracy stand important" (p. 52).

Transformative Leadership

Transformative leadership is about social change. Transformation is a process and occurs over time. The transformation is not only in structures but also with leaders as well as participants. A willingness to examine one's life and ideas to develop a critical framework for leadership is the aim of this leadership model. The civil rights movement was transformative in the efforts to gain rights for people of color during the 1960s.

Educative and Ethical Leadership

The other two components of critical leadership are education and ethics. According to Foster (1989), a leader can present both an analysis and a vision, and can devote time to organizational history, purpose, and responsibilities. Effective leadership involves working as a community and being willing to listen and reciprocate leadership responsibilities. Leadership and organizational change move in a direction of shared vision and practices.

Leadership as ethical practice involves moral relationships and is intended to elevate people to new levels of morality (Foster, 1989), including maintenance of democratic values within a community. The role of a leader is to create other leaders. Participants can assume leadership roles, and leaders can become followers when the situation calls for communal exchange.

The leaders in this study relied on transformation for social change. They did so through inclusion of other voices in decision-making, connection to communities, and awareness of inequalities in educational and leadership practices; thus, they committed themselves to making those kinds of differences. Leadership theory to date has not been developed from Black women's experiences. The discussion that follows focuses on the ways in which African American women define themselves.

Black Women's Self-Definitions

During the fight for civil rights, Black women questioned the sexism in institutionalized systems. Disenchantment with the White-dominated feminist movement and Black male scholars exclusive concern with racial issues (Schiller, 2000) heightened Black women's interest in liberation. Finding no place in the existing movement and wanting to respond to the racism of White feminist and sexism of Black men, Black women formed separate "Black feminist" groups (hooks, 1981). They sought to create new

knowledge about African American women to “formulate and rearticulate the distinctive, self-defined standpoint of African American women” (Collins, 1996, p. 225). They also sought to change the one-dimensional perspective on women’s reality (hooks, 2000).

As African American women continue to make gains in educational attainment and inroads into professions and occupations previously dominated by Euro-American women (Mullings, 1997), they will likely impact the representation of African American women at all echelons:

As more Black women earn advanced degrees, the range of Black feminist scholarship is expanding. Increasing numbers of African American women scholars are explicitly choosing to ground their work in Black women’s experiences, and by doing so, many implicitly adhere to an Afrocentric feminist epistemology. (Collins, 1996, p. 239)

Through these efforts, African American women position themselves to engage in critical analysis by articulating their “voices to express a collective, self-defined Black woman’s standpoint” (Collins, 2000, p. 99). Voice defines who they are, interprets what their experiences are, and analyzes their coping mechanisms for survival. Consequently, African American women develop a double consciousness (Collins, 2000) that empowers them to move in and out of diverse spaces.

Developing an Afrocentric Epistemology

To understand how Black women’s consciousness evolved, an understanding of Afrocentric epistemology (Collins, 2000) is vital. First, the Afrocentric concept, whose prominence and clarification was brought by Molefi Kete Asante, is “the belief in the centrality of Africans in post-modern history (Sanders, 1995, p. 9). It is an excavation of the “African past in an effort to free African Americans from an oppressive Eurocentric consciousness and to create for them a new, African-centered way of thinking and acting” (p. 10). Second, epistemology constitutes an overarching theory of knowledge that investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or why we believe what we believe to be true (Collins, 2000, p. 252).

Black women’s Afrocentric epistemology is the significance and richness of African roots that inform what they believe to be true about themselves and their experiences. In a society that often devalues heritage, Black women draw from common experiences that historically connect them to the fundamental elements of an Afrocentric standpoint. Because Blacks share a common experience of oppression resulting from

colonialism, slavery, apartheid, imperialism, and other systems of racial domination (Collins, 1996), these shared conditions cultivate Afrocentric values within Black communities throughout the world. As a result, they seep into the family structure, religious institutions, and community. The collective history of people of African descent from Africa, Caribbean, South and North America constitutes an Afrocentric consciousness that permeates through the framework of a distinctive Afrocentric epistemology (p. 228).

Similarly, women share a history of patriarchal oppression. The persistence of sexism contributes to the exploitation of women. Furthermore, the degree of exploitation is related to social class, race, religion, sexual orientation, and ethnicity (Collins, 1996). Women have a body of knowledge that corresponds with feminist consciousness and epistemology. Because Black women have access to both the Afrocentric and the feminist standpoints, an alternative epistemology is used to rearticulate a Black woman's standpoint that reflects elements of both traditions (Collins, 2000). Black women's epistemology represents a specialized knowledge that provides opportunity to express Black feminist and womanist concerns.

The experiences of African-American women scholars illustrate how individuals who wish to rearticulate a Black woman's standpoint through Black feminist thought can be suppressed by prevailing knowledge validation processes. (Collins, 2000, p. 254)

African American women's epistemology deconstructs dominant ideologies that justify, support, and rationalize the interests of those in power (Mullings, 1997). African Americans, through music, arts, academia, and other mainstreams, tell their stories about why things are the way they are and create alternative and oppositional views of the world (Collins, 2000).

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Following is a brief discussion of the role of historically Black colleges and universities. According to Roebuck and Murty (1993), HBCUs are Black academic institutions established prior to 1964 whose principal mission was, and still is, the education of Black Americans. Since their inception in 1854 (Garibaldi, 1984), the interest was to provide

1. education for newly freed slaves that was rich in Black history and tradition;
2. educational experiences that are consistent with the experiences and values of many Black families; and
3. service to the Black community and the country by aiding in the development of leadership, racial pride and return service to the community. (Sims, 1994)

In addition, HBCUs continue to serve as educational citadels and cultural repositories for the Black community and as centers for social and political development of students, faculty, and communities, regions, and states in which they are located (Sims, 1994, p. 9).

There are 109 HBCUs in the United States; 21 are Land-Grant institutions (Roebuck & Murty, 1993). Although HBCUs were established to serve the educational needs of Black Americans, they serve students from a wide range of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. HBCUs have both racially diverse student enrollments and a racially diverse faculty and administration. With respect to their enrollment and staff, HBCUs are more racially desegregated than historically White institutions (Roebuck & Murty, 1993).

Methodology

Narrative research was (Casey, 1993, 1995-96; Reissman, 1993) the methodology used for studying the life stories of African American women. This method provides the means to record and interpret (Reissman, 1993) the voices of women (Benjamin, 1997; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Gilligan, 1982; Gluck & Pataia, 1992; Reinharz, 1992). The participants' backgrounds, education, experiences, church, and family, that informed their identities were highlighted.

Cooper (1995) asserted that stories speak of the power of narrative in human lives. She maintained that "stories can be retold, reframed, reinterpreted and because they are fluid, open for retelling and ultimately reliving, they are the repositories of hope" (p. 121). The stories of the women participants' interpretations of leadership practices, revealed how they were experts and authors of their own lives. The narratives of the African American women administrators explore the thematic issues of communal values, spiritual/religious discourse in historical Black campuses and their interpretation of the world.

Participants

Six African American women administrators were interviewed for this study. Pseudonyms identified participants to minimize disclosure of information about individual lives. The participants were Deans Frazier and Smith and Drs. Giddens, Johnson, Allen, and Owens. All except Dean Smith taught in public schools prior to experiences in higher education. Dean Smith's background was in the field of nursing. Four of the women's educational experiences were at both historically Black and at White institutions; Dr. Giddens attended only historically Black institutions, and Dr. Owens obtained her degrees from historically White institutions. These administrators have served in the capacity of vice presidents of academic affairs, deans of schools of education and nursing, executive director of a leadership institute, and faculty and former department chair at six historically Black colleges.

Interview Questions: Open-Ended and Semi-Structured

In the interviews, participants were asked an opening question: "Tell me your life story by reflecting on your personal life in relationship to your professional experiences." The ensuing story, or "main narrative," was not interrupted by further questions but was encouraged by means of nonverbal and paralinguistic expressions of interest and attention (Rosenthal, 1993). In the second part of the interview, the "period of questioning" initiated more elaborate narrations on topics and biographical events previously mentioned.

The interviews were one to two hours each; on occasion I returned at a later date to continue the interviews. Each participant, prior to the start of the interviews, signed a consent form that explained the purpose of the research, outlined the conditions of participation, and gave the option to withdraw from the study.

Backgrounds of African American Women Participants

Because every text has a context (Casey, 1993), the historical backgrounds of the women's narratives are essential to understanding their self-definitions. The African American women participants grew up during a period in history in which the social and political climates were in upheaval. For some, "separate but equal" still applied, others were experiencing the unsettling changes in the early years of desegregation.

The expectations of families and members of the African American community for Black young adults to attend college and further their

education weighed heavily on these women's shoulders. The Black community depended on their success. One participant summarized her college experience:

I felt like I was carrying the weight of my race on my back. I constantly felt that I had to do well because if I didn't, I would be letting my people down. It is a big burden to carry.

African American women being first in their families to obtain a higher education and represent the African American community are indicative of what was to alter the economical, intellectual, and social capital of African Americans.

As texts were compared, the similarities of the women's experiences revealed the events of American society for Blacks at that time. The discrimination experienced by these women was present in their pursuit of terminal degrees, in the teaching profession, and in administrative roles. Some encountered racists and sexists within historically White and Black institutions in both White men, White women, and Black men. According to Moses (1997),

African American women not only attended universities which are often not only non-supportive but at times outright hostile; they also worked within these environments facing similar conditions. . . . Black women faculty members and administrators face numerous barriers to their growth and success in academe. The leadership, advocacy, and career satisfaction Black women administrators strive for are affected in subtle ways by a sometimes chilly and unwelcoming environment. (p. 24)

Some women confronted the double jeopardy of race and gender. Racism and sexism may be so fused in a given situation that it is difficult to tell which is which (Moses, 1997). Experiences such as these were common for both African American men and women.

The discriminations experienced by the participants were not random acts but were common to both their educational and professional experiences. Despite these encounters, women "stood their grounds" in order to "break down the walls" of repressive structures.

Analysis

How do these African American women link their work as educational leaders to the mission of developing the educational and social functions of the Black community?

Children of the Community: The Students We Serve

Of central concern to the women in this study were the students they met daily. Collectively, these women viewed students as the children of the community. Of all the issues raised in their narratives, they have a particular concern regarding the overall development of students. Dr. Giddens talked about those struggles:

And since I've come here, it has always been a *struggle* to develop students, because of the students that we serve and the environment—lack of equipment, lack of resources, trying to work with faculty members who don't care [and] students [who] don't have initiative and drive. That has been a *struggle* to truly do that. It has been a *struggle* for me to even remain at (HBCU), knowing the potential that I have, but I stay there for the students. You see, I could go some other place but, *I truly love* the students there. And the *struggles*—my *struggles* have been personal.

I look back at a lot, and I am learning to negotiate with the world that we have now, but, like I said, I don't forget. I can't forget what we grew up with and what I have seen in my life and know to be real. So I can't forget that, but my kids don't know that so they can't relate to it. So in a way it is good but . . . the only reason I would go to a White school [is] so I could help Blacks understand where they came from.

According to Dean Frazier:

My students at this university are students I know that *most other universities would not touch*. Not because they don't have the ability, because they do and you have to reach inside and pull that ability out. But because [college personnel] have such high standards, they feel like "Well, *we just don't have to bother with that student*." But that's the kind of student that we have here. We have all kinds of students here. We also have students that have had all kinds of experiences, and I believe that there is an opportunity to give credit for a lot of experiences.

The participants voiced concern about the lack of preparation students received prior to coming to colleges. They emphasized that historically

Black campuses are aware of their students' lack of academic preparedness and seek to provide resources to help them. A number of African American students are first generation college students and may require additional support to flourish in the academic setting. Dean Frazier asserted that, "somebody [has] to help polish them a little bit, refine them some and that's the role I think I've played in my first 20 years as a professional in higher education." The pay and prestige for bringing marginalized students to a level of success can never be compensated in monetary terms. But, the reward is seeing students become academically, intellectually, and socially prepared when they graduate from the institutions.

HBCUs and Community Building

Preparing students in historically Black institutions for a better future is connected to community building. Many African American parents whose educational attainments have been from historically Black institutions often encourage their children to follow a similar path. The belief may be that transitioning to the Black college experience is not as difficult as acclimating to historically White institutions. hooks' (1989) account of leaving home to traverse the unfamiliar worlds of [White] colleges is similar to sentiments of many students of color.

To a southern Black girl from a working-class background who had never been on a city bus, who had never stepped on an escalator, who had never traveled by plane, leaving the comfortable confines of a small town Kentucky life to attend Stanford University was just not frightening, it was utterly painful. (p. 74)

Historically Black institutions are a replica of the Black community's concept of "village—raising." According to Sims (1994),

they continue to serve as educational citadels and cultural repositories for the Black community, as well as centers for social and political development of students, faculty and communities, regions and states in which they are located. (p. 9)

And Dean Frazier recommended:

Send them to an HBCU where people will take time to *cultivate* them, *mold* them and be a good level of *comfort* for them and then send them out and they are prepared with *confidence* to go out in the world and make contributions. [emphasis added]

The people she referred to who will “cultivate,” “mold,” “comfort,” and “[build]” “confidence” are not only performing their designated roles as teachers and administrators but also are nurturers to the “children” [*the students*]. Each of the school personnel plays an integral part in the village—rearing of African American students. The “village” concept is crucial to the development of students who attend Dean Frazier’s institution. In recognition that many students come from “impoverished homes and backgrounds,” she stated:

We felt it was our responsibility to bring these students and *help them with language*, help them *with basic academic skills*. But equally important is to help them *understand the culture* and *how the culture was changing* because culture is dynamic.

Developing students cannot be accomplished without the contribution of the “we” and “our” of everyone included in the task. The “village” calls forth all who have a specific role to play in the development of each student. Dean Frazier asserted,

Bring them into that village called [HBCU] and work with them! Also prepare them to do as the eagle does the little eaglets: make you secure and warm in that environment but at some time let you know you got to go back into the larger culture. It prepares you for that larger culture by giving you good skills and then giving you a piece of confidence that says, “You can go out, you can survive.”

Dean Frazier did not view her profession as mere work but rather as means of providing a purpose for the Black community. She displayed compassion for her students that went beyond the call of duty of an administrator. Her effort has had significance for her. The mother-tongue she used—“Cultivate,” “mold,” “comfort,” “secure,” “warm,” “prepare”—were descriptors of a nurturing person interested in the development of [Black] students. She reported building confidence into students entering the work world and compelling them to contribute to their communities. She was continuing the African American interpretive tradition of her predecessors.

Frazier’s ethic of care spoke to the nature of her spiritual life. Raised in the Methodist church, her father a minister, she brought those elements of her religious and spiritual life into her work. As she reflected on her life, she shared a most remarkable aspect:

My spiritual connection gives me some stability. And every day of my life I think about what that is. And recently I thought for example with my parents, there is a spiritual piece there to them that moved me to the point where I am now even though they're deceased. There is still that spiritual connection with them that we don't quite understand. But I think that influence is there to guide us along the way.

These profound moments of reflection helped her understand that educating students was not the only focus for her. "We need to help young people understand that you ought to be accountable to someone as a spiritual person." That is the stability she had and wanted to provide to students. It was also necessary for the extension and preservation of the community.

Her foundation of community promoted the deep symbolism that community building held for Dean Frazier. One of her first childhood memories was of her father "hewing" out a southern city. Just as her father carved a city to erect a community, she carried that tradition into her work of preparing future generations to build on to what had been started.

The Role of Black Churches in Community Building

Institutional location in the Black community has historical significance since Blacks were not allowed admission into historically White institutions. So, too, do Black churches set in the heart of Black communities serve an integral role for Blacks. Both symbolize a sense of hope, aspiration and refuge for the Black community. They have been pivotal in revolutionary movements in the social and economic development of Blacks. An understanding and valuing of the African American culture allows administrative staffs, faculty, nonacademic personnel, and governing boards to accomplish initiatives and goals.

Dean Frazier expressed the importance of the Black church:

And what I suspect that I had coming out of the Black church—that children don't have now—is an opportunity for *speaking*, for *making presentations*, for *learning how to present ideas and activities* that we probably don't have at this time. And that is the missing part, I think, for young children who are developing in the African American community. They don't have as much support in the Black school; but more importantly, I don't think some churches do as much as we did in the past to help children develop and grow. So a major influence, obviously, in addition to my parents in my home, was that community church.

The Black church was a central figure in the lives of many Black people during tumultuous periods in history. Church was the opportunity for large masses of people to congregate, not only for religious and spiritual purposes, but also for social activities, community building, and intellectual exchange. A deterioration of the Black church's influence in the lives of African Americans is associated with the changing times after desegregation. A number of Black families have moved away from "Black" neighborhoods because of upward social mobility.

African American women, whose foundations are strongly tied to religious traditions, link the declining presence of the Black church in the lives of African Americans to implications. The opportunity to pass on the "culture," "traditions," "heritage," "legacy," and "intellectual capital" of the Black race is threatened because of the disconnection between church and community. Church is likely to be the only institution where large masses of African Americans from different socioeconomic backgrounds congregate. The church may provide models of successful Blacks for children.

In universities and in churches, the Black community is extended so that successful African Americans can give back to 'whence' they have come. Dean Frazier emphasized the need to reach out to members of the Black community:

We have to go back into the communities and work with others and try to make a difference in what they do. I think again the keys to whether or not you are successful somehow someone has to mentor you and instill in you that you can be successful and give you that confidence. . . . Youngsters need models and mentors to help them to be successful. They need to see that person who looks like them being successful.

"African American women have been involved not only in work outside the home but also in transformative work," individual and collective action to improve social conditions throughout their history (Mullings, 1997).

This analysis revealed that administrators, as critical investigators, explore the circumstances of the conditions of students who enroll in their institutions. Concerned with change and creating opportunities for all students, they critically assess the limits society imposes on groups and the paths to remove those limits (Foster, 1966). They bring these concerns to their institutions, raise the consciousness of the school community, and implement structures to improve educational opportunity.

Leading as “Servants of the People”

Dr. Allen and Dean Smith were proponents of servant leadership and directed comments to that area. The metaphor of “servants of the people,” a term coined by Dr. Allen (1998) in her book on servant leadership, characterizes the role of an administrator. During the interview she said, servant leadership:

... comes right out of biblical teaching ... the church was a very strong influence in people’s lives for the most part and this servanthood and the idea of service to others. You could trace it to the Judea Christian teachings.

According to Dr. Allen, it has historical significance in the African American community. She asserted:

It was people in the minority communities of color who have always been of service in their communities and so for us, servant leadership is not something that is new. It’s been around a long time. It is something that we have been doing, giving a helping hand, helping one another. You know because the wider society has always been discriminatory toward us.

We have been our own support, community builders, helping one another and providing that kind of leadership. ... But for me, it was just something that explained both how Blacks and African Americans in the 60’s during a very difficult time in the nation’s history were able to survive so much cruelty and to rally people to risk so much because servant leaders are also risk-takers as well.

Dean Smith articulated her perspective on servant leadership:

A leader is a servant. ... If I cannot serve my students or serve this university or serve a community, then what good is it? Then what have I done? If I’m serving myself, if I’m trying to make myself look good, that’s going to fall apart. But if I’m trying to take somebody else somewhere, it’s going to be there, it’s going to be and it’s going to continue to grow. So that’s what I think a leader is. I think you have to, you also have to teach people to lead, but you have to teach people to lead by example. I believe you should always be developing somebody to take your place.

A leader demonstrates a selfless desire to both serve and prepare others, and creates an organizational system that is committed to developing and sharing relationships that drive visions. This commitment to serve is not

confined to her role as administrator but is equally vital to the community. Dean Smith described her grade school teachers who made sacrifices to provide students educational opportunities despite limited resources. The teachers were servant leaders:

We went to a three room school house with teachers who had nothing but our future at point. I mean everything they did was in the vein of telling us we have to make it. You cannot live the way we have lived and these are the things you have to do to make it. We didn't want anything that we didn't have in that school. Although we were not given anything from the school system, they improvised; they took old books that the school system gave us and taught us like you would never believe.

Dean Smith carried this tradition of preparing future generations to her postsecondary profession. She acknowledged the tireless efforts of her former teachers and she continued the tradition by providing students in the nursing program with a quality education.

Leading as a Ministerial Duty: Accepting the Call to do God's Work

Although all made reference to God, Dr. Johnson focused on God talk. Another aspect in these women's narratives was God-talk. According to Williams (1993), Black women often use religion to cope with and transform the negative character of social processes in the African American and Anglo-American community (p. 33). Dr. Johnson reflected on her educational and professional experiences that involved many struggles. Although experiencing traumatic events, she sought understanding by connecting those experiences to her "calling" or "purpose." She recalled a situation in which she realized God had not given her a sign that it was time to move forward:

Because I said, I am not going through all these changes, but God did not want me to leave the university. He had me there for a reason . . . why do I have stay in this wilderness so long. Oh, I was going through. The children of Israel stayed in the wilderness for forty-years; am I going to be here for forty years? . . . I shall never forget it. And that is when it was revealed to me why I was there.

The close connection she had with God developed over time and allowed her to acknowledge the presence and work of God in her life. As she encountered different situations, she was adept at interpreting those

situations in the context of her personal relationship with God. When hired at her institution, she credited God for her appointment:

From the very first day, I just knew this was the place for me and I know that God sent me there. There is no question because I had been praying. I said, "God, wherever you want me to go, that's where I will go."

Dr. Johnson drew strength from her faith to get through difficult moments in troubling times. She said, "So when things happen that are ugly, I know it's only the enemy because I know that God sent me to this place because He has a job for me to do here." This can be identified as a "womanist" thought (Williams, 1993). Dr. Johnson was "not just merely [having] conversations with God or seeking divine intervention, but [her] stories tell of [her] absolute dependence upon God generated by faith-consciousness incorporating survival intelligence and visionary capacity" (p. 159). Not only did she seek wisdom to understand the problems she would encounter, but through spiritual intervention, has helped many of her students through difficult situations. She described an interaction with a student at a public institution:

And I heard her [the student] say something about praying. I said, "That was the only opening I need because at a state school you had to be very careful and I never would say anything about God or Jesus to those students unless they said something to me.

And she said, "I prayed." I said, "Oh, I heard you say you prayed. Are you a Christian?" She said, "Yes." I said, "Well then, since you are a Christian, I can talk to you differently. I have some other things I can tell you. And I started telling her about the situation and counseling her and giving her spiritual counseling."

Dr. Johnson frequently encountered incidents in which she could assist students through prayer, especially in her position as vice president of academic affairs at a private college. She stated, "So when students come in here with all their issues, I have prayed with students right here and have sensed the surge of the Holy Spirit, right in this office."

For many African American administrators, faith is a focal point of their personal and professional lives, and everything they do is interpreted and defined from their spiritual connection to a higher force. Working at religious institutions that embrace the practice of their faith provides an environment for individuals to live out their convictions.

Leading in the Classroom: I'm Going Back Down the Hill

Broadening this concept of God-talk (Williams, 1993), Dr. Giddens talked about her past leadership experiences. In sharing her story, she told of her unrelenting dependence on God for guidance during her years:

I wasn't the right kind of administrator, because I was very vocal and when it came to my faculty I was very *outspoken*. When it came to my students, I was very, very *passionate*. And I would just think, and know you were supposed to think about what you're going to say. But oh, if you bothered my students or if you messed with my faculty, I just forgot about this thing called diplomacy. I would pray to God, "God please help me hold my tongue or teach me to be different. I need to learn tact." [emphasis added]

Disapproving of how administration conducted the "business as usual" she felt compelled to

. . . go back down the hill. I'm leaving this white house up here and I'm going back down the hill so I can do what I want to do and I can be effective. . . . So I said, I'm getting out of this mess. Anybody else wants to come up here and be crazy if they can. I don't care . . . I'm not happy here. I don't like administration. I'm not able to do some things I want to do. I want to go back to the classroom so that I can do what I need to do for my students. I need to go where I know I can make a difference.

Her rhetoric on the "white house" implied how some faculty perceive the friction between administration and faculty. For example, administrators were critiqued for setting themselves apart from the members in the university community. There was very little collaboration between administration, faculty, students and staff. Her experiences led her to conclude that academics were not always a priority: "We were down on list number 8." Consequently, she had to "defend and fight for faculty." It became too exhausting to be in a constant battle with other administrators whose agenda differed; she decided at that point, it was time for her to leave her position.

Dr. Giddens saw the classroom as the venue where she could have an effect on students. As she said, not everyone who is given leadership responsibilities finds it to be a rewarding experience; fortunately, she was able to return to where she was most needed and could make a difference. Dr. Giddens said: "God told me that when you get to a place that you don't enjoy coming to work; it is time to leave. I knew then it was time for me to go."

Desegregation Damage

Dr. Giddens offered a special perspective on the damage caused by desegregation practices. In addition to disliking administration, her reason for returning to the classroom as a biology professor was connected to what she saw as the damage caused by desegregation. Desegregation unquestionably was a detriment to Black people. She contended that many in the African American community suffered even greater because of desegregation:

For me, the reason I'm so *compassionate* and *committed* to my students and people may look at me when I say it, but I do say it, integration was not the best thing for my race. I grew up segregated, in a segregated schools, but with that segregation, I had the best teachers. Teachers who *knew how to talk* [emphasis added], who knew how to teach with what they had and they taught you. You learned. They didn't skip over this and skip over that. We had second hand materials, but we were taught well and I remember that. I didn't take education for granted or didn't have this instant gratification.

She noted that a quality education was paramount to the success of Blacks. "To know how to talk" which translates to formal English means acquiring proper education as the entryway to upward mobility. Black teachers, during her educational experience, understood the significance of providing formal education to Black children. Knowing how to read and write meant increased opportunities to further one's status in American society. Desegregation, according to Dr. Giddens' perspective, placed African Americans at a disadvantage. The necessity to provide high-quality education to Blacks was threatened. The quality of education deteriorated for Blacks because their interests were not a priority for many White teachers who taught in the Black community. Dr. Giddens commented:

We get the teachers now who don't know how to teach the students and the teachers now are afraid to teach the Black students. So they have developed things. *They're trying to still tell us that we are not intelligent and we cannot learn so they have developed these easy ways out. Like I hate this thing called Ebonics. They are going to tell my race of children that they can't learn their own English language but you can get a foreigner to come and they learn our English language.* The White students can learn the English language, but all we can do, we can speak is street talk and do *Ebonics*. I hate that. Then we bought into that and then we can't teach our children because we don't have the same books

and we don't have this that the Whites have. Yes we can! [emphasis added]

Dr. Gidden compared her educational experience to that of her younger brother, whose educational experience was described as going in a downward slope. "Integration was not the best thing for my people."

Whites' assumptions about Black students' intellectual competence resulted in many being placed in lower level classes, thus actually causing them to drop out of school or to graduate without receiving a good education. Dr. Giddens witnessed these incidents not only in her years of teaching in public schools but also during her younger sibling's educational experiences. Her concerns, which also were her fears about the continual deterioration of Blacks, carried over to her son's schooling years. She became involved in his experiences to ensure he would have a different outcome.

Dr. Giddens is committed to changing the conditions of students who come to her classroom. Dr. Giddens and Dean Frazier suggested encouraging more African Americans to pursue the field of teaching. African Americans can retain the culture of their communities and provide quality education for all children.

Leading as the Collective Mission

Dr. Owens emphasized leadership as a collective mission. The purposes and goals are rooted in the shared efforts of community members. Dr. Owens spoke directly to that:

I don't even think of myself as a leader. I oftentimes describe myself as the grunt worker. I just try to find out what kind of things need to be done to support the other people in these positions that being the assistant dean, the assistant and associate vice chancellor. I see my role primarily as support.

Her style of leadership emphasized shared inquiry as an important activity in problem identification and resolution. Members of communities engage in common efforts to create professional knowledge and grow together for the purpose of establishing a set of goals.

Breaking away from old assumptions and developing new behaviors for the construction of meaning is essential (Foster, 1986). Because everyone can perform an act of leadership, participants are able to assess their contribution or lack thereof that impedes the growth of their institution's community. The climate of the community is one that

surrounds itself with a sense of purpose and ethics by building trust among administrators, faculty, staff, and students. When Dr. Owens brought her community together, her function was to facilitate discussions so that others collaborate, construct meaning, and move in the agreed upon direction. What she observed about her collective nature of leading was:

A whole lot of discussion will turn around and once it is turned around nobody remembers how they got where they are and I've had people observe me and they say that it is very smooth the way you do it. You redirect them. They don't know that they have changed directions; they think it is their idea.

Another important element of "acts of leadership" is the continuous effort by the person who does have the formal title of leader to work against the notion of having power over others. Instead, the leader is to cultivate a leadership that is aligned with "the reciprocal processes" proposed by Foster (1986). Self-reflecting on what she does as a leader, Dr. Owens said:

Some people if you look from below, you look up and see a person in a higher position. And you think, "Oh, they are way up there by themselves." They are unreachable but what you find is the higher you go the more people you need.

And so, it is constant bridge building activity as you move through these positions and as you move through your career. *Building bridges with people in the community. Building bridges with people in the work place. Building bridges with people in the family.* And you have to oftentimes work harder to prove that you don't think that you are above the other people. [emphasis added]

"Other People's Children": Who's Teaching Them Their African and African American History?

The women in this study shared similar concern about the "cultural decay [that] results in the erosion of a nurturing system for children" (West, 1994). Dean Frazier asserted.

I think when I look at teacher education now having been in teacher education thirty plus years, I'm really concerned that perhaps, African Americans in particular are losing the vision that we have to prepare our students to be teachers. Because if we don't prepare African American students to be teachers, who's going to pass on the culture? And I think that's a real void there. And I don't think we are thinking about that. I

cannot pass on the White culture. I don't know White culture. But I can pass on Black culture. But if we aren't careful and if we allow all of our children to be taught by other who will pass on the culture?

A growing concern for many African Americans pertains to the education of their children—the mismatch between the background and expectations of educators and those of students. Delpit's (1995) work in *Other People's Children* offered a critique of the cultural conflict between White teachers—Black students and pedagogy. Although she provided transformative approaches to minimize the disenfranchisement of students of diverse backgrounds, few are hopeful these approaches will impact change. An escalated concern is that many African American teachers are leaving the profession and few are entering the field.

The transmission of cultural values, morals, and ethics of the African American community is occurring less frequently because of the declining presence of people of color entering the teaching profession. Who is committed to teaching African Americans their history? Schools are places where children receive affirmation of who they are and learn values, beliefs, and morals as part of their development. For Dr. Giddens, teaching was more than the fundamentals of reading, writing, and math; this is where one's culture is enriched. The declining presence of Black teachers in public schools increases historically Black institutions' responsibilities to fill that void.

“This is Where I'm Supposed to Be: Journeying Back to the Historically Black Colleges and Universities”

In their dedication to changing social conditions of the Black community, these women administrators echoed their reasons for remaining at historically Black institutions and/or transferring from one institution to the other. They did not take for granted what their purposes were in the capacities they have served in their professions. Their *raison d'être* for journeying to historically Black institutions follow. Dean Frazier concluded:

My choice is to be here. And I think that's the difference. Where do I choose to work? I have the options to work at either place but I choose to work here with African Americans who in many instances have not had the opportunities for academic excellence and they want the opportunity. They want to be successful. And so that's why I am here.

Dean Smith commented:

I've come back to the place where I started so I can give something back. And although, I tried not to come back, you know I told you when I walked off the steps in '79 and something said, this is where you're supposed to be, I tried my best not to come back but I did.

Dr. Giddens described herself as remaining at a historically Black college because "those are my roots" and all her degrees have been from HBCUs. She added, "My terminal degree is as good as the ones from the White schools." She said, "I might need to go to some predominantly White school so that I can get my hands on the Black students that are there so that they could have a Black experience." Dr. Owens, the only administrator whose educational experience were from historically White institutions, made the decision to work at historically Black institutions:

When I graduated I got offered jobs to teach in [suburban city], New Jersey which at the time not many of us were there. And I remember my mother saying, "You are going to take the job in [suburban city], aren't you? It's going to be easier—you know this." I said, "I'm not." I'm going to take the job in [urban city] because that's where the children need me. And if I were not any good, they wouldn't have asked me to come to [suburban school]. So when I left undergraduate school, I knew and felt that I had a commitment to work with people who needed help.

Discussion and Conclusion

The accounts of these six women provided a glimpse of the critical social practices of African American women administrators in historically Black institutions. These administrators' leadership practices served to transform existing conditions and empower those they serve. They facilitated democratic participation. They communicated to institutional members that change can be made by an "us" mentality. The organizational structures they created were critical, transformative, educative and ethical (Foster, 1986). Although there were struggles, the work they performed has implications that go beyond institutional purposes.

These six leaders represent a social justice project rooted in community. Their political engagement and efforts to transform educational conditions for African American students reflect (a) Gramsci's (as cited in Forgacs, 2000) organic intellectual concerned with ideologies and activities in developing specific groups or communities; (b) hooks' (1999) assertion for Black women to have an intellectual presence in academia; and (c) West's (1991) insurgency model for Black intellectual

activity that challenges Blacks to be organically linked with Afro-American cultural life.

The women's decisions to remain at historically Black institutions were not only politically motivated but were also socially germane to their life's purpose. As one administrator said,

And the reason I encourage African American children to start at HBCUs is because I think *we* can bring them in here, give them the skills, dispositions and preparation for professions and develop and competence and confidence in them. Then when they leave here they can go out and challenge the Harvards, the Stanfords, or the Oxfords. Sometimes they can do it in other situations but I just believe the one thing *we* can do for the majority of African Americans is to instill in them a degree of confidence so that they can go out and challenge the society and make obviously great contributions.

These women described their social responsibility to develop African American students to become successful members of the Black community as well as the larger community. Their purposes were in accord with the interpretive tradition of historically Black institutions that are tied to community development. Historically Black institutions were established to serve the educational needs of Black Americans who were denied admission to White institutions; the goals of these institutions have expanded beyond their initial intent.

The religious/spiritual faith of these six women has guided them to lead, educate themselves and others, and to change repressive conditions. As Collins (1998) wrote, "justice constitutes an article of faith expressed through deep feelings that move people to action" (p. 248). For these administrators, their concern with justice, infused with spirituality, moved them to build communities of socially responsible students. Additionally, these women's narratives reveal how their professional work intersected with their spirituality and the "uplift of the race."

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