

Reflective Practice on Leadership Committed to Social Justice: Counter Story of an African American Superintendent

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The central assumption of this paper is that the use of autoethnography is the best approach to obtain a deeper understanding of the political context, organizational culture, and complex dynamics of a person's lived experience in a leadership position. The central narrative follows the accounts documented through systematic journaling, and explicated following a first person narrative. This counter story should be viewed as a knowledge bank and source of legitimate information to understanding nuanced cultural meanings, and the identification of social justice and equity issues.

In August, 2005, I received a letter from a retired African American principal in the school district I worked as Superintendent. She lived in the community and was very upset because she had driven by a school and there, on the fence, were figures of children; these figures were alternated on the fence and made from metal. She described the figures as looking stereotypically like a pickaninny caricature.

Pickaninny is a potentially offensive, derogatory term, which refers to children of Black African decent or a racial caricature thereof. She was most offended by the braids sticking up in the air and demanded that the figures be removed immediately. I contacted the principal and learned that a White parent in the school had created a variety of metal sculpture pieces as cutout figures to be wired to the fence as artwork. There was no specific district policy regarding school site decisions to add artwork.

The retired principal formally requested their removal on the grounds that they were racially, stereotypically negative representations. This request resulted in citywide community discussions and board members began to take positions.

The situation described above demonstrates the intersection of race, power, gender and networking relationships within the context of an urban community's school district. The central narrative follows the accounts documented through systematic journaling and explicated following a first person story. Through the application of some tools that critical race theory offers, the analysis of the text surfaces complex issues tied deeply to the temporal and context determined nature of the self.

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This inquiry indeed places the self within the position of a female, African American superintendent. The central assumption of this paper is that the use of autoethnography is the best approach to obtain a deeper understanding of the political context, organizational culture, and complex dynamics of the dimensions of the superintendency as lived experience. According to Reed-Danahay (2009) the term autoethnography can vary depending upon the emphasis placed on auto (self), ethno (the cultural link), and graphy (the application of a research process).

Put another way, in comparison to the participant-observer researcher associated with conventional ethnographic research – where the researcher is expected to keep his or her distance from the experiences (or events) under review - the observer in an autoethnography is a central participant to the act of sense-making, interpretation, and final analysis (Wall, 2006). The participant and the observer is the researcher at the same time. Anderson (2006) succinctly captures these distinctions in describing analytic autoethnography as: “Ethnographic work in which the researcher is a full member in the research group or setting, visible as such a member in the researcher’s published texts, and committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena.” (p. 375)

I kept a field notes journal, excerpts of which are provided below. I also reviewed documents from community meeting notes, newspaper articles, board meeting notes and superintendent’s weekly communication to the board to verify sequence of events.

The Story and its Meanings

August 30

I drove by the school to look at the figures and I do think that the figures are questionable. I would not call the figures pickaninny caricatures but I can see how they do closely resemble the caricatures. I had my teenage daughter in the car and asked her what she thought of the figures. She said “nothing.” I then asked her if the figure in the braids looked like a pickaninny to her and she asked, “What is that?” As an African American I see why the retired principal is upset because I am from a generation that remembers seeing “cartoons” and even movies that showed a Black child with braids sticking up, big lips, big eyes, with a stupid grin on her face.

September 6

Just got off the phone with Diane, the retired principal and she is mad. I did not agree to her request to immediately take the figures down. I told her I would need to meet with the principal and the PTA group to discuss their removal. She called me “coward” and said “what good was it to have an African American superintendent who wouldn’t stand up for her people.” Boy, do her comments hurt; she and I have a friendship that goes back years. Diane finally agreed to let me work it through a process, but she really thinks I have the authority to just take them down. I do have the authority but I feel strongly that I need to work with the principal and PTA to understand Diane’s objections.

I feel like two people at this moment. One is the superintendent following process to ensure community decisions are addressed respectfully, and the other is as an African American who shares the pain of another African American hurt by the figures being allowed to stay up.

September 12

The assistant superintendent and I met with the school principal and three members of the South Side Elementary School #10 PTA. The purpose of the meeting was to try to share the perspective

of Diane, the retired principal, and discuss issues. I ended this meeting by sharing my story regarding driving by with my daughter. I told the group in the meeting that I could see the issue Diane was raising but my daughter couldn't. I think I ended up giving them an out because one of the parents immediately said "so these elementary kids don't see what you see either?" I left the meeting saying to myself, "they don't get it." They dismissed my (our) pain and choose to focus on artistic freedom.

October 16

Board members responses are:

- Alice and Betty informed me that they think the figures are artwork and don't see the issue of the pickaninny racist stereotypical caricatures as a reason to take the figures down.
- Carl and Daniel have each expressed that we (the Board and Superintendent) not get involved and let the school site decide.

The principal and I have agreed; the decision is they will be removed. I know that the White people in the community at-large and at the school still don't get that it is not about artistic freedom. For African Americans it is about slavery and all the similar negative messages. It is about being disrespected. I am struggling to keep my Superintendent hat on at the same time I live in my African American skin.

Discussion

Throughout the story above, I kept traveling from and to my multiplicity of "selves" – mother, researcher, superintendent - but always going back to the one that seemed to have anchored everything –my African American self. I found that my identity as an African American was feeling the pain of my own memories of negative stereotypes and at the same time in my role as superintendent I needed to open myself to listen and understand a view that did not see the caricature as negative or demeaning." The self that is the superintendent had the challenge to express my voice as an African American Superintendent. I held a position of power as Superintendent, but even so, I felt the unfolding dynamics could dismiss my voice as an African American.

As Superintendent I was caught between the continued push by the European American community members to make the figures about artistic freedom while the African American community continued to push that the figures were about the historical misrepresentation of African American people as "pickaninnies." I was unable to get my Board to understand the perspectives of the African American community. Indeed most of the Board thought the argument for artistic freedom should be valued over not currently valued "historically based feelings." The political divide in the community upset the Board and that is why some opted for the Board not to get involved in the decision to keep or remove the caricatures.

Du Bois provided in 1903 a construct about the impact of racism: "double consciousness" experienced by African Americans. The author describes how an African American, "ever feels his two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (Du Bois, 1969, p. 45). This "two-ness" description relates to the selves I struggle to integrate – the African American and the Superintendent as I lived the experience of being pulled between my two selves as roles and identities into the community's dispute.

In the journal entries shared in this paper, the individualistic framing of the issues by the White community -in terms of the caricatures representing individual artistic freedom - could have dominated the decision making process. It was evident to me that the African American perspective regarding the need for the removal of the caricatures, as raised by Diane, the retired principal, would potentially have not been heard without my intervention. This is at the core of my dilemma: maintaining my Superintendent hat on, and living in my African American skin.

Conclusion

I identified the need to accommodate counter story cultural perspectives in both the research paradigm and the social and educational context of a school district. The argument conveyed by authors such as Baszile,(2008), Ladson-Billings, (1998) Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995), Delgado (1990), and Solórzano & Yosso (2002) strongly suggest that the voice of people of color in the form of counter stories, indeed can be used to debunk the dominant narratives and to point to divergent experiences.

I thus raised the question of what is left out due to the absence of voices of color and counter stories from discourses of leadership in schools, and the district office. I want to call the attention to using counter story as a means to identify social justice and equity issues. I also want to suggest that these counter stories must not be viewed as just personal, but rather as a knowledge bank and source of legitimate information to understanding nuanced cultural meanings, and the identification of issues of social justice.

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