The Lived Experience of African American Teacher Utilizing Co-Cultural Adaptation at Predominantly White Rural Schools in Central Appalachia

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ABSTRACT

The shortage of African American teachers can be traced back to the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954. While recruitment initiatives have been somewhat productive, studies nonetheless reveal a "revolving door" whereby scores of teachers abandon their jobs before retirement. Attrition is the primary factor impacting retention, according to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. Retaining African American teachers is an essential part of narrowing this chasm.

As an effort to understand the causes of attrition and perseverance among African-American teachers, this study offers several qualitative interviews as part of an inductive, multiple-case study. The findings indicate that White superintendents are consciously or unconsciously supportive of the veils of oppression. Meanwhile, the principals and White faculty in these districts remain purposefully negligent of the needs and issues that African American teachers confront as co-cultural group members at predominantly White school districts.

Primary and secondary schools across the nation are becoming increasingly heterogeneous, yet the teacher population remains homogenous. In fairness, this is not a new issue: At the turn of the century, Whites represented a significant aggregate of the teacher population: 73% in the inner city; 81% in suburban schools; 91% in small towns; and 98% in rural areas. The magnitude of this issue is significant since approximately 33% of schools in the U.S. are located in rural areas, which already struggle with recruiting and retaining teachers, much less African-American ones. In fact, Bireda and Chait (2011) found that over 40% of public schools lack a single African American teacher on staff.

INTRODUCTION

Policymakers and educators alike have spent the last two decades devising initiatives aimed at addressing the shortage of African American teachers in secondary schools. Since the early 1990s, 36 states have adopted policies designed to recruit more African American teachers (Villegas & Davis, 2008). To substantiate these efforts, Villegas and Irvine (2010) identified three major arguments for diversifying the teaching force: (1) African American teachers serve as role models for all students; (2) the potential of African American teachers to improve the academic outcomes and school experiences of students of color; and (3) the workforce rationale.

In light of this reality, the present study aims to provide rural school administrators, policymakers, and researchers with valuable information regarding African American

teacher retention efforts. Specifically, this article offers an inductive, theory-building, and descriptive multi-case study of a predominantly White rural school district in Central Appalachia, with a particular focus on those strategies that the schools/districts use to support co-cultural adaptation. The researcher utilized in-depth interview questions to acquire information regarding co-cultural adjustment, adaptation strategies, and communicative behaviors used at these particular schools to better understand how certain factors affect African-American teacher persistence. Many studies have neglected to examine those communication attributes that appear to be essential for African American teachers' persistence. Additionally, this study focused on how traditionally marginalized individuals utilize specific communication strategies in the dominant societal structure to adapt and persevere. The results reveal African American educators' perceptions about their work environment.

In pursuit of this effort, this study will address the following two research questions:

1. What are African American teachers' perceptions regarding adaptation at predominantly White rural schools in Central Appalachia?
2. What are African American teachers' perceptions of district support systems in regards to adaptation at predominantly White rural schools in Central Appalachia?

To answer these questions, the researcher applied an inductive, theory-building, descriptive, multiple-case study. According to Berg (1998), case study methods involve systematically collecting adequate data about a particular person, social setting, event, or group to permit the investigator to understand how it maneuvers or functions. The researcher determined that this approach was preferable to the survey method, which diminishes subjects or special experiences and responses to numerical data. According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994), this type of study concentrates on the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationships between the researcher and what is being investigated, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry, which are more useful for understanding a nuanced phenomenon like co-cultural perseverance.

METHODS

As said above, this study is a qualitative inquiry intended to explore a phenomenon or experience. Qualitative researchers generally posit that reality is socially constructed and there exists a close connection between the researcher and what is investigated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Unlike quantitative research, the qualitative methodology can focus on circumstances or people to acquire a complete understanding and interpretation of the experiences of individuals in "their natural settings" (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). In said settings, the researcher manufactures a complex, holistic picture by analyzing informants' words and details (Creswell, 1998).

The author chose case methodology because of its ability to capture richer, more detailed information than a quantitative inquiry, and thereby illustrate how a phenomenon operates or functions (Berg, 1998). A multiple case study was adopted in order to explore differences within and between cases (Yin, 2003)—in other words, to discern the commonalities and differences in African American teachers' perspectives. Additionally,

the author pursued a phenomenological approach, which Creswell (1998) defined as the "lived experiences" of several individuals regarding a particular concept or phenomenon. Hatch (2002) found that a phenomenological study gives credibility to individual human experiences, presenting them as significant events that should be open to analysis. Furthermore, according to Groenewald (2004), phenomenology can limit a qualitative researcher's biases.

As the study of human experience (Sokolowski, 2000), phenomenology views society as a place determined by the perceptions of those who live in it. In this vein, this analysis examines the lived experiences of African Americans teachers' own observations regarding co-cultural adaptation. In this way, the study hopes to uncover the factors that allow African Americans to persist in a predominantly White rural public school district. This information may help to identify those policies and practices that help or hinder African American persistence, as well as improve our overall understanding of the process of co-cultural adaptation in predominantly White rural public schools in Central Appalachia.

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Data were collected via in-depth, individual, one-to-two hour recorded interviews with each teacher. Data collections were focused on gathering interviews with the teachers, allowing them to describe their perceptions regarding co-cultural adaptation, development of relationships, support systems used to adapt and persist, strategies used by the school and district to promote African American teacher adjustment, and perceptions of the co-cultural environment. Each interview was transcribed and subsequently sent to the teachers to check for accuracy. Protecting the identity of the teachers was a primary concern. Thus, interview transcripts have been stored in a locked file in the author's office for three years, after which time everything will be destroyed.

ANALYTICAL PROCEDURE

The following steps represent Colaizzi's process for phenomenological data analysis (cited in Sanders, 2003):

1. Each transcription was read and re-read to acquire an overall sense about the entire content.
2. Significant accounts were extracted from each transcript and documented in a separate manuscript, noting their pages and lines numbers.
3. These important statements resulted in meaning.
4. The formulated meanings were arranged into categories and themes.
5. The results of the study were integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study.
6. A description of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon was provided.
7. Finally, validation of the findings was sought from the research participants to compare the researcher's detailed results with their experiences.

The analysis resulted in a carefully formulated meaning creation regarding teachers' perceptions about co-cultural adaptation; the development of relationships with superintendents, principals, and other faculty; the support systems used to adapt and persist; the strategies used by the school and district to promote African American teacher adjustment, and their overall perception of the co-cultural environment.

DATA COLLECTION

This investigation explored the experiences of African American teachers who previously taught in predominantly White rural schools in Central Appalachia. Adopting a multiple-case study, the author utilized extensive interviews to detect how historically marginalized individuals adapt to and persist in a profession dominated by White, middle-class, female teachers.

The participants included three retired teachers and three teachers who chose to pursue another career. The researcher initially emailed 14 Southeast principals of schools in the Eastern Kentucky Coal-Fields (EKCFs) that employed African American teachers, but none responded with a referral. However, utilizing a snowball/convenience sample, the author contacted seven former teachers by phone or email to gauge their interest in the study. All were interested and met the study's criteria (available upon request) for taking part in the study; however, one retired teacher failed to follow through on a scheduled interview and was removed.

The data collection occurred from December 2016 until January 2017. Five individual interviews were conducted on the researcher's main campus; one took place in the participant's home. The researcher transcribed all interviews within a month. The investigator chose not to reveal the participants' names or schools since there are few African American teachers in the EKCFs and thus they could be easily identified. These teachers had similar background experiences that led them to teach in the selected school district. For instance, one teacher began teaching at her school because there was a critical need for a qualified science teacher. Another teacher began teaching because of the shortage of eligible math teachers.

Table 1 provides a high-level overview of the participants' background, as well as establishes the pseudonyms that will be used throughout this article.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Details

Pseudonym	Age Range	Years Teaching	Teaching Level
Ms. Christian	80-90	4	Elementary
Mrs. Pope	60-70	43	Elementary
Mrs. Robinson	60-70	32.5	Elementary
Dr. Letterman	50-60	3	Secondary
Ms. Wynette	50-60	18	Secondary
Mr. Rice	50-60	32	Elementary / Secondary

FINDINGS

The researcher's initial goal for this dissertation was to shed light on the dearth of African American teachers in predominantly White rural school district in Central Appalachia, and to ascertain their strategies for acclimating in said districts. Likewise, the study sought to identify policies and practices used by these districts that support African American teachers' perseverance. Also, the researcher examined the role that professional relationships play in African American teacher persistence—in particular, those positive communication behaviors that lead to improved retention and reduced attrition. Given all this, the topic called for a thorough, in-depth, qualitative investigation.

The researcher asked teachers to describe their relationships with administrators and colleagues, as well the role played by the school and surrounding district in creating a school climate that was welcoming to non-dominant group members. The participants in this study offered various perspectives about their experiences: Half of them identified instances of isolation, alienation, or marginalization at the school level, while the other half reported that they were accustomed to the culture and thus did not identify their experiences as unusual. An analysis of their responses led to nine principal themes: adaptation; employment factors; support systems; communication factors; self-motivation; role and strategies of the school and district; recommendations for the school and district; advice for African American teachers in rural areas, and African American teachers' overall perceptions of their schools. These themes and their components are summarized below:

Adaptation

1. Professional relationships and administrator support help African American teachers adapt to their predominantly White rural school district.
2. African American teachers adapt to a co-cultural school district better if they are enculturated in the Central Appalachian culture.
3. African American teachers who were influenced by a family member or role model who were educators adapt better in a predominantly White rural school.
4. African American teachers adapt better to a co-cultural school environment when they have an equity pedagogy and abide by a mission to help all children learn.
5. African American teachers who display autonomy adapt better in a predominantly White rural school district.

Employment Factors

1. The African American teachers' cultural capital greatly influences their decision to work at a predominantly White rural school.
2. Being intrinsically motivated influences African Americans decision to teach at a predominantly White rural school district.
3. Having a network in place which directly or indirectly connects African American teachers to the superintendent or a prominent member in their community.
4. Being extended a contractual benevolence position.
5. Being hired to create a false appearance of inclusive practices and a diverse school environment.

Support Systems
1. African American teachers seek support from family members or other role models to persevere at their predominantly White rural school district.
2. African American teachers report their support system as "good" when they earn the respect of the superintendent/principal.
3. African American teachers' retention rate increases when they develop a professional relationship with their superintendent, principal(s), and colleagues.
4. African American teachers perceive that the relationships they form with their superintendent, principal(s), and colleagues aid in their retention, especially when they develop mutual appreciation, respect, and sincerity.
5. African American teachers employed at predominantly White rural school districts are encouraged to persevere when they perceive that they are valued and accepted.
6. Retired African American teachers perceived that their principal assisted them in their careers.
7. African American teachers rarely encounter other African American teachers in their school.
8. African American teachers seldom reported having a mentor in their predominantly White rural school district.
9. African American teachers did not recognize a structured support system in their predominantly White rural school district.

Communication Factors
1. Trying to remove cultural differences, African American teachers rely on the assimilationist perspective.
2. Trying to achieve a mutually beneficial collaboration with the dominant culture, African American teachers employ the accommodationist perspective.
3. Distancing themselves from the dominant culture, African American teachers depend on the separationist perspective.
4. Taking into account the needs of oneself and others, African American teachers often utilize assertive communicative practices.
5. Being non-confrontational and putting the needs of others before their own, African American teachers apply the nonassertive communicative practices.
6. When African American teachers are self-promoting and assuming control over the choices of others, they exploit aggressive communicative practices.

Self-motivation
1. African American teachers employed at a predominantly White rural school derive intrinsic rewards from their work that encourage them to adapt and persevere.
2. African American teachers employed at a predominantly White rural school have a positive perception of the profession.
3. African American teachers knew from an early age that they wanted to be a teacher.

Roles and Strategies of the School and District
1. African American teachers did not report any specific strategies that their school districts used to assist them in adapting or persevering.
2. African American teachers who pursued other careers stated that race-based support from the school/district was non-existent.
3. African American teachers who worked until retirement reported that strategies utilized by the school/district to assist African American teachers in adapting and persevering needs improvement.

Recommendations for the School and District
1. African American teachers suggested that school districts could offer more engagement during Black History Month, as well as Black History classes.
2. African American teachers recommended more books in the library about successful African Americans.
3. African American teachers mentioned wanting more recognition and better incentives.
4. African American teachers suggested that their school district reaches out to African American communities for mentors (e.g., pastors, professionals).
5. African American teachers endorsed having a cultural diversity committee.

Advice for Future African American Teachers in Rural Areas
1. African American teachers have to be aware that faculty (and students) come from a variety of backgrounds that may or may not accept African Americans.
2. African American teachers are a role model to all children, but especially African American ones.
3. African American teachers have to persist and do it graciously.
4. African American teachers cannot display anger or aggression.
5. African American teachers have to suppress many feelings and thoughts.

African American Teachers' Overall Perceptions
1. Most African American teachers revealed that they had a pretty good job and got along with everyone.
2. One African American retired teacher reported that she enjoyed their 40-plus years or would not have stayed otherwise.
3. Another African American teacher stated that they enjoyed their experience. For example, Mrs. Robinson stated: "No regrets got to do what I enjoyed doing and gain respect for doing it. I think my mission was a good one and I lived by it."
4. Two African American teachers reported that they were not valued, but tolerated.
5. One African American teachers described that his experience was "one of being a round peg in a square hole, so to speak. My last year if they did not fire me, I would have quit."

These results also level an important implication at administrators in predominantly White rural school districts. Initially, the author contacted 14 administrators in Central Appalachia whose schools employ African American teachers, so as to garner referrals that might illuminate how to recruit and retain African American teachers—but none of them responded. Thus, it remains unclear just how much importance such administrators assign to having a diverse teacher population. However, the respondents did make clear that White superintendents are consciously or unconsciously supportive of the veils of oppression. Meanwhile, the principals and White faculty in these districts remain purposefully negligent of the needs and issues that African American teachers confront as co-cultural group members at predominantly White school districts. Thus, there is a sense that White superintendents, principals, and teachers in predominantly White rural school districts actions are contradicting democracy, acculturation, collaborative activism, inclusivity, and an empowering school culture/social structure. This is despite the plethora of research suggesting that a diverse teaching workforce positively impacts all students.

LIMITATIONS

First, the study was limited by the pool of available participants, restricted as it was to African American teachers in two predominantly White, rural school districts in Central Appalachia. While the participants had a broad range of teaching experience, their admissions cannot, in any case, be generalized to other teachers.

Second, the study would have benefited from newer teacher-participants. The participants for this study were quite old, with an average age of 63; their perspectives are valuable, but they do not necessarily reflect those of younger teachers. For example, how would younger teachers' training and maturity, relative to their older counterparts, influence their ability to adapt and persist at a predominantly White school district? Would their support systems, communication approach(es), or adaptation strategies be similar or different? These questions all need to be addressed in future research. Granted, there is a difficulty in recruiting current African American teachers in predominantly White rural school districts, as they tend to be anxious about qualitative studies due to their fear of being identified. Administrators could be a useful resource in this regard; however, for the present study, none of the ten principals who were contacted referred any current African American teachers. Researchers may need to explore alternative ways of recruiting a mix of teachers, such as through community partners or online venues.

Finally, the study data lacks a point of comparison with other teacher demographics. For instance, the researcher could have elicited the opinions of African American college professors in predominantly White community colleges in Central Appalachia and compared their experiences to those of the current study participants. It would be worthwhile to know whether there are structural advantages to one environment that might carry over to the other.

SUMMARY

According to co-cultural theory, societies feature dominant group members who possess privilege over non-dominant group members. At predominantly White rural schools in Central Appalachia, the privileged group mainly includes White, middle-class,

female teachers. Dominant group members create and propagate communication systems that reflect and support their privileged status, which simultaneously marginalize non-dominant group members. Consequently, the latter individuals strategically adopt certain communication behaviors to successfully navigate the oppressive dominant culture (Orbe & Spellers, 2005).

Communication approaches can be assigned to three categories: nonassertive, assertive, or aggressive. Five of the six participants in this study routinely used more than one such approach. At some point in their career, three of the six utilized a non-assertive approach. A different set of three exhibited an assertive approach during periods of their careers. Only one displayed an aggressive approach to communicating.

Concerning the strategies utilized by district to aid retention, all participants had a somewhat negative opinion. Four of the six reported that their districts made no efforts to promote retention, whereas two indicated that their districts could improve their efforts.

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