Building Community in an Urban School District: A Case Study of African American Educational Leadership

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Abstract

This case study contributes to a small but growing literature on African American educational leadership. Previous studies have shown that, building on a history of segregated schools for Black students staffed by Black teachers in which strong school-family-community relations were essential for the survival of their schools, Black principals understand the predominantly disadvantaged African American students and families they serve and communicate well with them. The danger of this analysis in the present context of urban diversity is that it leaves open the question of whether Black educational leaders understand and communicate well with other ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic groups. The present study shows how an African American principal, building on a practice of school and community leadership in separate Black education that involved extensive engagement with White school district officials and other individuals and groups, was able to facilitate communication between disadvantaged Black families and middle-class White teachers and school district officials, with the result that all stakeholders worked together effectively to develop policies and programs that improved student behavior and academic achievement.

Key Words: alternative education, at-risk students, Blacks and education, parent involvement, community-school collaboration, minority principals, school discipline

Introduction

John Dewey believed that "There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication" (1916/1944, p. 4). According to Dewey, humans "live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common" (p. 4). Even as urban school districts strive to accommodate increasingly diverse linguistic populations, they still have difficulty serving different ethnic and socioeconomic groups. When looked at from a Deweyan perspective, research on student and parent involvement in education indicates that urban schools are not public institutions which poor African American families and middle-class White families possess in common. Not only are middle-class White families more involved in schools than disadvantaged African American families, they are also involved in different ways. Building stronger school communities in urban districts has been shown to have positive impacts on student behavior and academic achievement (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). But if Dewey is correct and schools come to be possessed in common through communication, an important measure of educational leadership is the ability of urban principals to facilitate communication between ethnic and socioeconomic groups who are involved in schools to different extents and in different ways.

This case study contributes to a small but growing literature on African American educational leadership. Previous studies have shown that Black principals, building on a history of segregated schools for Black students staffed by Black teachers in which strong school-family-community relations were essential for the survival of their schools, understand the predominantly disadvantaged African American students and families they serve and communicate well with them (Bryant, 1998; Carr, 1997; Case, 1997; Loder, 2005; Lomotey, 1987, 1989, 1990; McGee Banks, 2001; Morris, 1999, 2004; Pollard, 1997; Pollard & Ajirotutu, 2000; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). The danger of this analysis in the present context of urban diversity is that it leaves open the question of whether African American educational leaders understand and communicate well with other ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic groups. From a critical race perspective, researchers must guard against "interrogating" and "exposing" racism in the area of Black leadership generally, only to leave it unquestioned and undisturbed in the area of Black leadership in diverse school communities (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Lopez, 2003). The present study shows how a Black principal, building on a practice of school and community leadership in separate Black education that involved extensive engagement with White school district officials and other individuals and groups, was able to facilitate

communication between disadvantaged Black families and middle-class White teachers and school district officials with the result that all stakeholders worked together effectively and developed policies and programs that improved student behavior and academic achievement.

Background

Barriers to communication across ethnic and socioeconomic lines are being erected in an atmosphere of mutual defensiveness and distrust between increasing numbers of White middle-class teachers and increasing numbers of disadvantaged African American students and parents in urban school districts (Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Miretzky, 2004; Weininger & Lareau, 2003). Many Black parents believe that teachers blame them for their children's discipline problems and poor academic performance, and that their children's failure in school reflects badly on them as African Americans (Calabrese, 1990; Cook & Fine, 1995; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Fine, 1995; Moles, 1993). At the same time, White teachers fear that parents hold them responsible for their students' failure, and that their inability to discipline and motivate disadvantaged Black students may reflect a deep-seated and unconscious racism (Arnett Ferguson, 2000; Gentry & Peale, 1994; Hale-Benson, 1989; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Vavrus & Cole, 2002; Watts & Erevelles, 2004). Furthermore, research has shown that urban schools could do more to create opportunities for extended, meaningful, and positive communications between disadvantaged parents and teachers (Calabrese, 1990; Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Fields-Smith, 2005; Overstreet, Devine, Bevans, & Efreom, 2005; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). The only opportunities generally available now are short parent-teacher conferences and special meetings set up when a child is having academic problems, neither of which seemed designed to encourage teachers and parents to work through existing barriers to meaningful communication (Bloom, 2003; Weininger & Lareau, 2003).

An opportunity to overcome ethnic and socioeconomic barriers occurred in Cincinnati in the early 1990s when dramatic increases in student suspension rates led to a city-wide focus on discipline in the public schools. Cincinnati Public Schools' (CPS) student suspensions increased from 9,591 in 1990 to 20,600 in 1992 (Erkins, 2002), and expulsions involved students being removed from school for up to 80 days at a time (Brown, 2004). In addition, a broad-based community review sponsored by the CPS Office of Student Discipline found discipline problems to be a major contributor to the district's poor student attendance record and high dropout rate (Brown, 1992). The response

in the city to this perceived crisis in student discipline was overwhelmingly negative: an "inventory" of the school district conducted by local business leaders was highly critical of CPS disciplinary policies and programs (Brown, 2004); a Mayor's Summit on Education, Discipline, and Truancy strongly recommended that the district find ways other than suspension and expulsion to address the needs of disruptive students; an external assessment by Junious Williams found student suspensions and expulsions to be too high (Bradley, 1994); and the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers adopted a policy of zero tolerance of student misconduct – infractions not handled properly were to be reported to the union representative for follow-up with the principal. Nor did the criticism end here. The issue of student discipline was complicated by the fact that in Cincinnati, as in other urban districts, African American students were being suspended and expelled at higher rates than White students (Brown, 1992; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002) and thus the response to the crisis in the city's Black community was doubly critical: In 1991, NAACP lawyers convinced a federal court judge that the CPS was not in compliance with the terms of a school desegregation agreement, in part because its efforts to ensure race-neutral disciplinary practices were insufficient (Brown, 2004); and, in 1993, a local congress of inner-city ministers successfully campaigned against a proposed school tax levy to protest the district's continuing high rates of suspension and expulsion among African American students (Bradley).

During this period, the lead author of the present article was the Cincinnati Public Schools' deputy superintendent. His responsibilities included district internal compliance officer for the school desegregation agreement, director of the office of student discipline, and principal of an alternative school for at-risk elementary students. In reflecting on his years of service at the district level and trying to give voice to what he experienced, this author came to see that the challenge he faced at the time was to bring school board members, teachers, parents, and community members together and encourage them to develop a consensus on new student disciplinary policies and programs. He was particularly concerned with facilitating dialogue between the federation of teachers and the congress of inner-city ministers and between parent groups and the school board. The aim of these dialogues was to reveal differences in approach to student discipline, assess strengths and weaknesses of each approach, canvass alternatives, and then work together to build consensus on new disciplinary policies and programs which would have the support of all groups. This effort was successful. Agreement was reached first on the need for a new alternative school for chronically disruptive elementary and middle school students which would be free to develop discipline policies and programs appropriate for the students and families it served (Brown, 2004). Agreement was then reached

on a new district-wide code of behavior which provided a general framework within which individual schools could develop policies and programs appropriate for their school communities. In addition, schools with high suspension and expulsion rates received support from the office of student discipline to establish alternative learning centers based on the alternative school model. Within two years of implementing these steps, suspensions and expulsions had been reduced, especially among African American students, and the school district was found to be in compliance with the school desegregation agreement (Brown & Beckett, 2006; Erkins, 2002).

The purpose of this case study is to show how an urban school district was able to overcome barriers to communication across ethnic and socioeconomic lines and build community on the issue of student behavior and academic achievement. The story is told from the perspective of a key participant and relies on his observation notes and journals, informal interviews with other key participants, minutes from meetings, school and school district records, contemporary newspaper reports, and a University of Cincinnati doctoral dissertation. The case study uses analytical tools developed by critical race theorists and recent findings by historians of separate Black education to improve our current understanding of African American school leadership. Finally, the study hopes to encourage students of urban education to further investigate the roles school and district leaders – regardless of their ethnic, socioeconomic, or cultural background – can play in facilitating communication and building community in urban schools.

Review of Relevant Literature

Student Involvement in Education

Disadvantaged African American students are less involved than middle-class White students in the full range of educational opportunities offered by public schools. Not only do they spend less time at school, being suspended, expelled, and dropping out at higher rates than middle-class White students (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2004; Skiba et al., 2002; Vavrus & Cole, 2002), they are also disproportionately under-represented in high ability classroom groups and in school gifted and advanced placement programs (Morris, 2002; Saddler, 2005). Furthermore, as critical race theorists point out, disadvantaged Black students are disproportionately over-represented in poorly funded urban schools which offer a narrower range of curricular and extra-curricular options and are able to attract and retain fewer teachers qualified in the subject areas they teach (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Different levels of student involvement are also indicated by gaps in academic achievement in most subject areas

and in rates of punishment in all categories of disruptive behavior. The most recent evidence on student achievement suggests that over the past 30 years African American students have closed the gap with White students but still have not achieved parity, while the gaps between poor and middle-class students remain as large as they were 30 years ago (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). Similarly, evidence accumulated over the past 25 years shows that minority – especially Black and Latino students – and low socioeconomic status (SES) students continue to be punished more often and more severely than other students (Skiba et al.).

Severely disadvantaged students clearly face the most intractable barriers to school involvement. Anyon (1997) describes students at "Marcy" Elementary whose "desperate lives" make them "restless and confrontational" (p. 23) and teachers who no longer seem able to separate discipline from abuse. We are told that Marcy serves some of the most distressed families in one of New Jersey's most distressed cities, and it is not clear to the researcher whether anything short of rebuilding the community as a whole could be of much help to them. But even less disadvantaged students resist efforts by teachers to involve them in classroom activities and try to disrupt the work of those students who do want to participate. The issue here is complex, involving both ethnicity and SES, and these factors can work together or independently. Generally, however, many disadvantaged Black students perceive urban schools to represent the interests of a larger, White middle-class group which seeks to destroy the local group with which they identify. Fine (1995) makes this point explicit with reference to class when she says that "public schools in low-income neighborhoods often represent themselves as the means for low-income students to 'escape' their local communities – sometimes a way to save 'those students' from 'those parents'" (p. 86). Fordham (1996) makes the point with reference to ethnicity when she describes Black students' resistance to anything they perceive to threaten their group, including the apparent desire of some Black students to leave it. Even when disadvantaged Black students are involved in their schools they are often involved in different ways than middle-class White students. Fordham describes a kind of grudging acceptance of those students (especially girls) who work hard and who believe they are acquiring knowledge and skills that will benefit their families in the future, and she notes that an exception is clearly made for many athletes (especially boys) who make all students proud to attend the school. When there is no perceived benefit, however, resistance is the norm.

In schools where students and teachers see themselves as members of the same community working together toward a common goal, student discipline and academic achievement improve. It is no surprise that some of the most successful schools today are located in predominantly White middle-class suburbs

and staffed by predominantly White middle-class teachers. It is also true that some of the nation's most successful schools in the past were located in poor African American neighborhoods and staffed by poorly paid Black teachers (Siddle Walker, 1996). Separate Black education continues today in independent Black schools and African-centered schools in public school districts, but for every school that manages to overcome the remaining barrier between middle-class teachers and disadvantaged students (Morris, 2004), there seems to be another school where socioeconomic barriers alone prove to be insurmountable (Rist, 1973/2002). The vast majority of disadvantaged Black students, however, attend schools largely staffed by middle-class White teachers (Cooper & Jordan, 2003; Pollard, 1997). The challenge faced by principals in these schools is to increase student involvement by building a school community which students and teachers possess in common. Principals have always played a role in facilitating communication and mediating disputes between teachers and students. As we have seen, however, when they are required to build bridges across ethnic and socioeconomic lines, the task can be particularly daunting.

Parent Involvement in Education

The gaps between ethnic and socioeconomic groups in levels of parent involvement in education are both similar to and different from the gaps in student involvement. The most recent evidence shows that fewer parents with high school education or less and fewer parents living below the poverty line attend school meetings, events, and student conferences and are less likely to act as volunteers, serve on school committees, and participate in school fundraising than parents with a college education and parents living above the poverty level (Vaden-Kiernan, McManus, & Chapman, 2005). Black, non-Hispanic parents, on the other hand, though they also attend school events, act as volunteers, and participate in fundraising at lower levels than non-Hispanic White parents, attend school meetings at the same levels and student conferences at slightly higher levels than White, non-Hispanic parents (Vaden-Kiernan et al.). This pattern of parent involvement has been roughly constant over the past 30 years. Moles (1993) reviewed large-scale surveys conducted in the 1970s and 1980s showing that levels of parental involvement depended on education and SES but not on minority status. Though parents with less than high school education had less than half the levels of school contact when compared with parents who had college degrees, and parents with very low incomes ($7,500 or less) were three times as likely to have low levels of contact with schools when compared with high-income parents (over $50,000), "no differences were observed between white, black, and Hispanic parents in level of involvement, suggesting that factors associated with poverty and limited education exert

more influence in school contacts than minority status" (Moles, p. 27). Hess and Leal (2001) offer a possible explanation for this phenomenon. Using data from the 1990 U.S. census organized by school district and a Council of Urban Boards of Education survey, they compared school district median income and percentage of African American student enrollment with opportunities districts provided for parents to have input regarding issues such as budgeting, collective bargaining, curriculum review, policy formation, principal selection, school closing, and superintendent selection. As expected, opportunities for involvement were greater in districts with higher median incomes. Interestingly, however, opportunities for involvement were also greater in districts with higher percentages of African American student enrollment: "the positive effect of the positive African American student enrollment variable suggests that decades of activism may have helped institutionalize a relatively high level of access" (Hess & Leal, pp. 483-484).

In seeking explanations for the gaps between ethnic and socioeconomic groups in levels of parent involvement in education, researchers take one of two general approaches. First, some researchers point to the fact that many disadvantaged parents want to be more involved in their children's schooling but are prevented from doing so. As well as restricted opportunities for interaction with teachers due to work, childcare responsibilities, transportation, and so on, there are psychological and cultural barriers disadvantaged parents face when communicating with teachers and school officials (Moles, 1993). These barriers include differences in educational level and SES, and also: dialect or language differences; fear and distrust of schools based on their own experience; feeling threatened by the authority of teachers (who have responsibility for a whole class); anxiety and defensiveness resulting from being contacted by schools only when their children get into trouble; and what disadvantaged parents perceive to be teachers' and school officials' racism, paternalism, and lower expectations for their children (Moles). But it is also true that many disadvantaged parents resist teachers' and school officials' efforts to get them involved, believing such involvement to be inappropriate. Crozier (2000) and Cullingford and Morrison (1999) have shown that in England different levels and kinds of parent involvement in education reflect different roles schools play in the lives of many working-class and middle-class families. Lareau (1987, 2000) came to a similar conclusion based on case studies of two elementary schools in the United States. She found that working-class parents at "Colton" attended parent-teacher conferences and school open houses and volunteered less often than professional middle-class parents at "Prescott." But the significance of these studies lies in the detailed portraits they allow Lareau to draw of the decidedly different roles school plays in the lives of families of different

socioeconomic status. For Colton parents, school is like work: it is something to leave behind at the end of the day. "Life," in contrast, involves evening and weekend socializing, mainly with relatives who live in the same neighborhood. School is also something to leave behind after graduation: "An insistence on high school graduation and a tentative interest in having their children attend college was typical of Colton mothers' and fathers' educational aspirations for their children" (Lareau, 2000, p. 100). For Prescott parents, on the other hand, school is an important part of family life. Not only are they more involved at school during the day, they monitor and reinforce their children's school work and read more often with them at home, and they socialize more with other Prescott parents. Furthermore, "Prescott parents insisted that their children acquire college degrees, and many were tentatively in favor of post-graduate work" (2000, p. 102). Given the different roles education plays in the lives of Prescott and Colton families, it is only to be expected that interactions between Prescott parents and teachers were "more frequent, more centered around academic matters, and much less formal" (1987, p. 78) than interactions between Colton parents and teachers.

African American parents may not be significantly less involved in their children's schools than White parents (Moles, 1993; Vaden-Kiernan et al., 2005), but recent studies indicate they are often involved in different ways. According to these studies many middle-class Black parents are active in: maneuvering and customizing their children's educational experiences in predominantly White schools (Lareau & Horvat, 1999); choosing and supporting magnet schools for their children (Diamond & Gomez, 2004); and in organizing their communities to take control of separate Black schools (Byndloss, 2001). At the same time, however, many disadvantaged Black parents are non-choosers whose children go to neighborhood schools (Diamond & Gomez) and who are not just less involved in their children's education but feel a "wholesale suspicion, distrust, and hostility" for the teachers (Lareau & Horvat, p. 44). What is significant about these findings in the present context is that in none of the schools studied – whether predominantly White or Black, neighborhood or magnet – did Black families and White families possess the school in common. The research is dominated by critical race theory's notion of interest convergence (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Lopez, 2003). Decades of activism are perceived to have resulted in middle-class Black parents using school and school district resources to improve educational outcomes for Black children, and White middle-class teachers, principals, and school district officials welcoming this opportunity to improve overall student achievement while allowing access to power without truly sharing it. If urban principals have a role to play in facilitating communication between teachers and students across ethnic and socioeconomic lines,

they must also act to facilitate communication between parents and teachers and school officials who seem prone to interpret the behavior of the "other" as promoting self-interest only.

African American Educational Leadership

Understanding the limitations of current research on the roles African American educational leaders play in increasingly diverse urban school districts requires some historical contextualization. In this section it is argued that researchers have failed to emphasize one of the most important roles Black principals have played in desegregated schools, because the literature has not recognized the vital importance of that role during Reconstruction and throughout segregation. We have long known what separate Black schools lacked when compared with White schools, but recent research is helping us understand what they possessed. We knew, for example, that throughout slavery most masters prevented slaves from acquiring literacy (Nolen, 2001) and that toward the end of slavery Southern states passed a series of laws making it a crime to educate slaves (Spring, 2001). We are now learning that a significant number of slaves were autodidacts, that some slaves established clandestine schools (Nolen), and that by the time of Emancipation between 7-10% of Blacks were literate (Fairclough, 2001; Spring).

Similarly, we learned in school that after the Civil War the Freedmen's Bureau, in cooperation with Northern philanthropic societies, was active in establishing schools for Blacks in the South. We now know that many of the celebrated "New England missionaries" were educated Northern Blacks (Butchart, 1990), that as early as 1867 over half of the teachers in freedmen schools were Black (Nolen, 2001), and that it was the former slaves themselves who took the initiative in establishing these schools (Spring, 2001). This was a community-wide crusade for education that was so successful that by the early 1870s a higher percentage of Southern Black children were enrolled in school than Southern White children (Spring). Historians are beginning to realize, as Butchart says, "that the freedmen were central actors in securing their own schooling, not merely passive recipients of northern benevolence" (p. 82). Again, we have known that after the collapse of Reconstruction and throughout segregation Black schools lacked financial and material resources. According to Spring, Black schools were consistently funded at one quarter the level of White schools and Black teachers and principals were paid about one quarter the salary of their White counterparts. We are now learning that throughout this period Black communities fought to gain control of their schools and used this freedom to hire principals who they charged with the task of developing quality academic programs and hiring exemplary teachers (Fairclough, 2001), and that with the

collapse of Reconstruction blocking opportunities in other professions, principals were able to attract large numbers of educated Blacks to serve as teachers (Nolen). By 1910, over half of all Black college graduates were teachers, and a 1940 U.S. Census survey of Black professionals counted 1,000 lawyers, 3,500 medical doctors, 17,000 ministers, and 63,000 teachers (Fairclough). The success of these efforts leads Spring to conclude that, "Despite school segregation and harassment from the white population, the African American population of the United States made one of the greatest educational advances in the history of education after emancipation" (p. 219).

The roles played by Black principals in segregated schools and communities were crucial. Within the school, "Operating with almost complete autonomy and armed with his educational commitment and training, the principal was able to implement a school program in keeping with his philosophy…. (T)he principal held the authority to hire teachers in line with his vision and fire those who did not conform" (Siddle Walker, 2000, p. 275). Within the community, the roles of principals included: motivating parents to provide resources for schools; being active in church; and because they were usually the most educated person in the community, many having masters degrees (Siddle Walker, 2000), acting as financial advisors and marital counselors and providing leadership for local initiatives such as credit unions (Siddle Walker, 2000). Black principals were called "professor" or "'fessor," Blacks using the term with respect, even reverence, Whites to avoid saying "Mr." (Siddle Walker, 2003, p. 60). But Black principals had one more important role to play in the period leading up to desegregation. Principals were often the only Black leaders to have regular contact with the White power structure (Siddle Walker, 2000), working with school district and state education officials and representatives from Northern philanthropic societies. Given the inherent inequality in these relationships, principals had to rely on supplication and persuasion, often in the face of petty racism (Fairclough, 2001). District superintendents and school board members used them as "chauffeurs, gardeners, and repair men, and sometimes treated their wives as washerwomen" (Fairclough, p. 15). Principals could only envy the relative independence of ministers and other professionals, who beginning in the 1930s, initiated a new form of engagement with the White power structure which featured negotiation and the application of pressure (Fairclough). Though many Blacks at the time came to question the leadership role of principals (Fairclough; Franklin, 1990), historians are more positive. They point out that ministers and lawyers were mostly products of successful Black schools; that state education officials and Northern philanthropic representatives, however paternalistic, were "by and large, sincere advocates of black education" (Fairclough, p. 58); and that Black schools were

protected and nurtured by generations of principals who, by insisting on the "sanctity of knowledge" and the "innate humanity of black children," were performing "political work of the most far-reaching kind" (Fairclough, p. 67).

The immediate effects of desegregation in the 1960s and 1970s included the closing of Black schools, the firing of thousands of Black teachers, and the demotion of almost all Black principals (Siddle Walker, 2003). Principals were only reappointed to positions of leadership in large numbers in the late 1970s and 1980s, mostly in predominantly Black schools (Franklin, 1990). Research on contemporary Black principals effectively begins with Lomotey's (1987, 1989, 1990) case studies of 3 successful African American principals in predominantly Black elementary schools in California in the early 1980s. For Lomotey, "Each principal appears to demonstrate a commitment to the education of African-American children, a compassion for, and understanding of, their students and of the communities in which they work, and a confidence in the ability of African-American children to learn" (1989, p. 132). More recent research has developed these themes: Reitzug and Patterson (1998) found in one principal "a form of caring that empowered students by assisting them in identifying alternative ways of proceeding as they addressed the situations that confronted them" (p. 165; see also Case, 1997); Morris (1999, 2004) and Pollard (1997) studied principals who lead by setting high standards for themselves and expecting teachers and students to follow; McGee Banks (2001) reports that African American principals generally involve parents and community members more in the activities of their schools than White principals (see also Lomotey, 1987); and Sanders and Harvey (2002) examine the leadership role of principals in developing collaborative partnerships with community organizations. But the history of the Black principalship indicates that this story is incomplete. Principals during segregation were recruited by Black communities to develop strong academic programs and hire qualified teachers, only to find themselves devoting much of their time to representing the interests of their school and community in contacts with White officials. Similarly, principals who were reappointed by urban districts in the 1980s to turn around predominantly Black schools found that to accomplish that goal they had to rebuild school communities by improving communication between disadvantaged Black parents and predominantly White middle-class teachers, school district officials, and school board members.

Building Community in Cincinnati

The present qualitative study employed multiple methods of data collection, relying primarily on document analysis and informal interviews with

key participants (Brewer & Hunter, 1989). Documents analyzed included: the lead author's observation notes and journals; minutes of committee meetings; school, district, and school board records (Brown, 1992); a doctoral dissertation (Erkins, 2002); an external evaluation report; and contemporary newspaper articles. Data were analyzed to determine patterns of action that advanced the design, development, and implementation of an alternative school for at-risk elementary and middle school students and a district-wide code of student behavior. The study, which is guided by Dewey's (1916/1944) notion of community, focuses on actions that facilitated communication and mediated disagreements between different groups. Preliminary analysis of the data identified four groups (a parent association, board of education, teachers' union, and an influential group of inner-city ministers) and four events (a meeting between teachers and ministers, two board of education meetings, and an incident in the downtown business area) that were crucial in advancing development of the school and the code of behavior.

In reflecting on the results of this preliminary analysis, the lead author became increasingly aware that the patterns of action he identified as being most significant were not addressed in the relevant research literature on African American educational leadership. It was true that part of his involvement in the development process was to understand and communicate with the predominantly disadvantaged Black families he served (Franklin, 1990; Lomotey, 1989) and to represent their interests and concerns to predominantly middle-class White school district officials (Fairclough, 2001). But critical race theory helped give voice to a second, more important aspect of his experience. In all four events that were crucial in advancing the development process, his primary role had been to facilitate communication and mediate disagreements between groups. The lead author's experience was conditioned by two relevant facts. First, he was a product of a disadvantaged African American family, a native of Cincinnati who was raised by his grandmother and was the first member of his family to graduate from high school. Second, as a youth and young adult he had considerable contact with the city's White community, having been a Black student at a predominantly White high school in the 1950s and at a predominantly White university in the 1960s, and a teacher and principal in the 1970s and 1980s in city schools which served many White families (Brown & Beckett, in press). The lead author saw himself both as a member of the city's African American community, working to improve educational opportunities for Black students, and as a member of the larger community, using his ability to facilitate communication across socioeconomic and ethnic lines to improve educational opportunities for all students.

An Alternative School for At-Risk Elementary Students

Project Succeed Academy (PSA) has been described in detail elsewhere (Brown, 2004; Brown & Beckett, in press). A brief overview of the school relevant to the topic of principal leadership will be given here. PSA began in 1994 as a summer reading program for 200 chronically disruptive K-8 students who were at risk of academic failure and dropping out of school, and was expanded to include 300 students in 1995. In 1996, the program was developed into a year-round school housed in a separate building with its own principal and teaching staff. The general aim of PSA was to break the causal connections between academic failure, disengagement, restlessness, and disruptive behavior (Arnold et al., 1999; Fleming, Barner, Hudson, & Rosignon-Carmouche, 2000; Lane et al., 2002) with intensive individual and small-group instruction intended to improve students' academic and social skills. The school, which enrolled 300 students in 1996-97 and 400 students in 1997-98, achieved its aims: daily student attendance was unusually high when compared with other alternative schools for at-risk students (96% in 1996-97; 93% in 1997-98); parent involvement was also high (89% in 1996-97; 93% in 1997-98); and, most importantly, the promotion rate of PSA "graduates" when they returned to their regular schools averaged 89% during the first two years of full implementation. Furthermore, PSA was developed in conjunction with a new district-wide code of behavior, and together they helped reduce district non-mandatory suspensions by an average of 17% and district expulsions by an average of 11.5% in each of the first two years of full implementation. After suffering several rounds of budget cuts, Project Succeed Academy, as of 2006, includes two programs housed in regular schools and led by an executive director.

Project Succeed's goals were, at first, limited to assessing at-risk students' academic skills and, recognizing the connection between poor academic skills and behavior problems, implementing programs that would improve both skills and behavior. The concern was not just that academic difficulties caused "disengagement, increased frustration and lower self-esteem, which then causes a child to act out" (Arnold et al., 1999, p. 591), but also that behavior problems arising elsewhere resulted in "noncompliance, elevated activity levels, and poor attention, which limit children's academic development" (Arnold et al., p. 591). The issue for Project Succeed was whether a summer reading program, however successful, was a sufficient response to the problems faced by at-risk elementary and middle school students in the district (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003; Kim, 2004). It quickly became apparent to the lead author that only a more "holistic" approach could address the needs of PSA students (Comer, 1997), and that his main role in developing this approach would be to facilitate meaningful communication and mediate disputes between PSA teachers and

parents. Some students enrolled in the summer programs, like the students at "Marcy" Elementary, were restless and confrontational, bringing with them to school problems that overwhelmed them at home (Anyon, 1997). Encouraged by the lead author to reach out to the students' families, Project Succeed teachers found that their first task was to work with support staff to connect parents with social service agencies and to advocate on their behalf (Fine, 1993). Most PSA students were clearly capable of succeeding in school but had developed a resistance to school work and a desire to disrupt the work of others (Fordham, 1996; Ogbu, 1974). The lead author was aware that parents wanted their children to take advantage of the opportunities the school provided, but the students believed (in an embryonic way) that the same society that disadvantaged their parents was trying to disadvantage them and force them to "act White" (Ogbu, 2003). As parents became more involved in the day-to-day activities of Project Succeed, the lead author helped them understand that the message their children were bringing from home was not the message the parents intended, and, working with teachers, he helped them see that beneath a surface of student failure, disengagement, and disruption lay a deeper desire to help themselves and their families succeed. The most significant lesson the students learned came from seeing their teachers and parents work together in a spirit of cooperation and with a common purpose. Morris (2004) tells the story of a kindergartner who felt protective towards her mother because she had a "disability problem." When teachers found "something for her mother to do" in the classroom and she showed she could do it well, her daughter felt pride in her mother's accomplishment. Similarly, when PSA parents became involved in the activities of the school, students began to see their parents – and themselves – less "at-risk" and more "at-promise" (Swadener & Lubeck, 1995).

Project Succeed, unlike other alternative schools for at-risk students, was not a warehouse for disruptive students who had been banished from regular schools and which included minimal parent involvement (Dunbar, 1999), nor was it a school in which parent involvement was limited to attending meetings, conferences, and family therapy sessions (Aeby, Manning, Thyer, & Carpenter-Aeby, 1999). The lead author knew that the families he served wanted to be more involved in the school but were reluctant to take the initiative (Chavkin & Williams, 1993; Dauber & Epstein, 1993; Overstreet, Devine, Bevans, & Efreom, 2005). He actively encouraged them to participate in all aspects of the school's activities and to form a parents' association to organize their work and make it more effective. The contributions of the PSA Parents' Association were numerous (Brown, 2004), but in the school's transition from summer reading program to full-year alternative school its role was crucial. The success of a full-year PSA would depend, in part, on a low student-teacher ratio and small

class sizes (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2001; Dunbar, 2001). Small class sizes, in turn, depended on obtaining a school board commitment for additional funding at a time of financial restraint and budget cutbacks. The lead author encouraged the Parents' Association to become active in gaining the necessary financial support, and he lobbied the Cincinnati Board of Education to hold a public forum on the proposal. So many parents volunteered to speak in support of Project Succeed that the venue for the forum had to be changed three times. In the end, over 400 parents and 100 community members turned out to argue from personal experience that a year-round school based on the Project Succeed model was needed. Equally important, the majority-White school board showed its commitment to minority education by instructing staff to accommodate the parents and community members, listening to as many testimonials as time permitted, and by approving the proposal and providing most of the funding needed to support it.

A District-Wide Code of Behavior

Cincinnati's District-Wide Code of Behavior has been described in detail elsewhere (Brown & Beckett, 2006). The code addressed a need for consistent discipline policies across the district by listing student behaviors leading to suspension and behaviors leading to mandatory suspension with recommendation for expulsion. The code also addressed a need for flexibility within the district by listing options from which local school discipline committees could choose in developing pre-suspension programs designed to encourage students to learn self-discipline. The District-Wide Code of Behavior is still in existence as of January 2006. It has been modified over the years to reflect changes in the structure of K-8 schools in the district, to respond better to an increase in gang violence since the plan's inception, and to respond to changes in state and federal laws. Reflecting on his work in the area of student discipline, the lead author came to see that his role as facilitator and mediator, however important in his work at Project Succeed, was crucial to the success of the new discipline policies. Unlike principals during segregation who spoke for their communities (Fairclough, 2001; Siddle Walker, 2003), the lead author's role would be one of creating contexts, like the school board forum described above, in which parents and community members would speak for themselves. As director of the CPS Office of Student Discipline, he formed an advisory board and several teams which required consensual decision making, compelling participants to explore territory beyond their obvious differences.

Cincinnati Public Schools' Office of Student Discipline was created by the board of education in 1991 to address the problem of soaring suspension rates.

The first step the lead author took on assuming the directorship was to form a Discipline Advisory Board (DAB). The DAB was a broad-based coalition of concerned individuals that included representatives from the business community, universities, health care professions, mental health agencies, community activist groups, the school administrators' association, and parent groups. Most importantly, the DAB included representatives from the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, which had adopted a policy of zero tolerance for disruptive behavior which threatened to further increase already high levels of student suspension and expulsion, and the local chapter of the Baptist Ministers' Conference, a group of inner-city ministers which had campaigned successfully against a school tax levy in protest against the disproportionately high rates of suspension and expulsion of African American students (Bradley, 1994). The mandate of the DAB was to examine a range of approaches to discipline and to advise the board of education on their appropriateness. The DAB surveyed staff, teachers, and parents within the district to determine prevailing opinions on student discipline, in general, and on the need for a new district-wide code of behavior, in particular. The DAB also reviewed the research literature on best practices in the area of student discipline and examined other school districts' policies and programs, especially those that dealt with chronically disruptive students. The DAB found that different groups had significantly different views that could only be resolved if the district adopted a collaborative approach to the problem of student discipline. The board recommended a developmental process that included focus group research and guided mediation.

As a result of the DAB's initial findings, the lead author formed several teams to address the conflicts among groups, including a team to develop the concept of an alternative school for at-risk students. He recruited representatives from different stakeholder groups – principals, teachers, parents, business persons, union officials, ministers, doctors and health care workers, attorneys, government officials, and university faculty – and ensured that each team included a broad a range of interest and opinion. The team formed to develop the alternative school concept was particularly diverse, including a high school dropout and a doctor of philosophy, a welfare recipient and a millionaire, a manual laborer and a medical doctor, a corporate executive and a head of a government agency, a church conference chair and a community activist, as well as school administrators, teachers, and parents. The lead author made it clear in facilitating these teams that on the issue of student discipline, the voices of all participants counted. He said that disagreement was welcome, as long as team members agreed to work through their differences toward a consensus on recommendations to improve discipline. Remarkably, team members quickly developed a sense of shared authority and shared responsibility (Miretzky,

2004). Tension and conflict, apparent in the teams' first meetings, were replaced by a sense of common purpose and a spirit of cohesiveness. It was at this point in the process that the lead author requested a meeting with the executive councils of the Baptist Ministers' Conference and the Federation of Teachers, with the intention of mediating the differences between the two groups. As a result of the meeting, the ministers and teachers agreed to work more in harmony with each another (Clark, 1993). The value of this cooperation became clear in the final stages of the process, when the two groups formed an alliance and together advocated on behalf of Project Succeed and the code of behavior before the board of education (Clark, 1995).

The substantive differences between groups on the issue of student discipline were clarified in a debate over conflict resolution. A social service agency, with the support of some community groups, had convinced the board of education to pilot conflict resolution, a set of mediating principles that helped students negotiate conflict to zero. These were proven strategies in middle-class schools where parents taught the same principles to their children at home. For many inner-city children, however, the strategies were alienating, because at home children were taught: "when you're struck, strike back or I'll strike you" (Lareau, 1996). The result was that, in most Cincinnati schools, student suspensions due to fighting continued at the same high levels and the principles of conflict resolution were assessed as ineffective by district staff. For the lead author, the essence of the situation was that the district was paying a lot of money for a program that was not working. This money was needed to support programs like Project Succeed. At a regular school board meeting to decide if conflict resolution should be adopted on a permanent basis, the lead author presented data from an early assessment of Project Succeed summer programs to show its superior potential for improving student discipline in the district (Brown, 2004). The lead author also arranged for Project Succeed parents to speak at the meeting, and board members later told him informally that it was the parents' input which decided the issue. Parent testimonials in support of the school's health and wellness programs, which included Bushido martial arts instruction and the Star curriculum of violence prevention and conflict resolution through role playing and training in decision making (Brown, 2004), convinced the board to leave discipline program choices up to individual schools and to reallocate conflict resolution funds to the Office of Student Discipline (OSD). These decisions allowed the lead author to promote the success of Project Succeed programs to district schools and to support alternative learning centers for suspended students based on the Project Succeed model. At the same time, conflict resolution was adopted as a program the OSD would also support should a school disciplinary committee request it,

and the net result was that individual schools were in a better position to implement discipline programs they believed would be most effective with their particular student populations.

Still unresolved in the development process was the issue of external funding for discipline initiatives, especially the year-round Project Succeed Academy and the alternative learning centers in regular schools. An incident occurred in the spring of 1995 which gave the lead author an opportunity to facilitate communication more broadly between the city's disadvantaged African American community and its middle-class White community. On April 25, 1995, during school hours, a police officer was monitoring a disorderly group of high school-age youth who had gathered in Cincinnati's downtown shopping and business area. When asked by the officer to leave, the young people refused, and when one young man was told he was under arrest for disorderly conduct he resisted being handcuffed. The incident quickly escalated: The police officer applied a chemical irritant to subdue the young man; the young man's friends appeared ready to intervene; more police officers arrived on the scene; and violence broke out between the youth and the police. After a videotape of the incident was shown on the local evening news, Cincinnati's city manager requested an investigation into the circumstances surrounding the incident ("Beating by police," 1995).

Some of the young men involved in this incident were Cincinnati Public Schools' students. The next day and for several weeks after the incident, the lead author and Office of Student Discipline case managers swept the streets of the downtown area encouraging young people not to obstruct doorways to businesses and to be courteous to citizens. Their daily presence was noted and gratefully appreciated by members of the downtown business community, and this response was the start of a dialogue on the initiatives the OSD was taking and how the business community might become involved. Over the next year, downtown business people joined the OSD Discipline Advisory Board and the teams formed to develop the OSD's various initiatives. They also provided material and financial resources in support of the Project Succeed program, and guaranteed most of the external funding the school board needed before it would approve the year-round school and the alternative learning centers (Brown, 2004).

The lead author, in facilitating the involvement of the downtown business community, was bringing them into extended and purposeful contact with disadvantaged Black parents, some for the first time. They learned that below the hooliganism they had witnessed there was a serious claim by truant students to a masculine social space their schools denied them (Fordham, 2001). Black parents learned that behind the racism and classism they had perceived

in downtown business people there was a genuine concern that too little was being done to bridge the gaps between the city's two oldest communities. Like Northern philanthropists in the 19th Century, they were only waiting for the Black community to take the initiative and suggest ways they could help.

Conclusion

The lead author's primary role in the process of designing, developing, and implementing an alternative school for at-risk elementary and middle school students was similar to a role played by Black principals in separate Black schools during segregation (Fairclough, 2001; Siddle Walker, 2000, 2003). This is the same role that has been emphasized in research on Black principals in predominantly Black schools today (Lomotey, 1989; Morris, 1999). Creating a summer reading program which reached out to parents and guardians, assisting in establishing a parents' association to coordinate their activities, and encouraging the association to get involved in an initiative for a year-round school – all of this called for a commitment to Black education, an understanding of disruptive Black students, and an ability to communicate with Black parents. But the lead author also played a second role at the school, and this role was crucial in the development process for a new district-wide code of behavior. This second role, though also analogous to a role played by Black principals during segregation, is not one that is emphasized in research on Black educational leaders today. Involving parents at the school and teachers and staff in parents' homes; creating a disciplinary advisory board that included disadvantaged parents and wealthy business people and developing project teams which involved representatives from a teachers' union and a Baptist Ministers' Conference, each of which required consensual decision-making; and lobbying a school board to listen to parents and encouraging parents to give testimonials to the board – all of this involved facilitating meaningful communication and mediating disagreements between a city's Black and White communities.

In coming to this understanding of the role he played in the reform of an urban school district's student discipline policies and programs, the lead author was aware of the importance of critical race theory's notion of interest convergence. An alternative school for chronically disruptive students, for example, would clearly benefit the vast majority of teachers who work in regular schools. Equally, a summer reading program had showed parents and a ministers' group that an alternative school, though it involved "labeling and subsequent isolation of their children from mainstream educational opportunities" (Dunbar, 1999, p. 3), was also likely to fulfill the original promise of schools for this population and return students to regular schools better able to

succeed (Carpenter-Aeby & Aeby, 2001). The notion of interest convergence seemed necessary to explain what brought different groups together and the general outcomes of their work, but it did not seem sufficient to account for what actually occurred in the development process nor was it true to the lead author's experience or the experiences of key participants he interviewed. In the case of the meeting between the executive councils of the teachers' federation and the Baptist Ministers' Conference and the two groups' subsequent alliance, what was remarkable was how much *more* energy and creativity went into the development process *after* it became clear that self-interest would be satisfied. Again and again in the development process, the lead author saw individuals and groups move beyond self-interest. The experience suggested a late-20th Century equivalent to the 19th Century crusade for Black education, one in which self-interest is a given and what is remarkable is a common belief in the sanctity of knowledge and the innate humanity of all children.

The limitations of the present study are obvious. Any case study faces the problem of generalizability, and the present study might be seen to be unique both in terms of its historical context and its key participants. Given these limitations, the present study may seem to offer little guidance to future students of urban education or school community development. But for Dewey, the notions of community and communication are related to his notion of democracy. Just as industrialization, immigration, and urbanization characterized the Progressive Era in which Dewey came to maturity, challenging its urban school systems as well as its urban governments, in our own era, characterized by post-industrialization, immigration, and suburbanization, the basic challenges remain the same. For urban school districts, one of the most important challenges is to identify educators who can effectively lead increasingly diverse school communities. The problem is that leaders must add to their prior commitment to their own group a new responsibility to facilitate communication between groups. Although this may require new skills, especially linguistic skills, the present study would indicate that a more important requirement is the ability to live in a contemporary equivalent of the duality characteristic of African American experience, that is, to hold without debilitating conflict multiple identities and multiple responsibilities (Fordham, 1996). But if the present study is any guide, the solution to this problem is clear: Urban school districts need only identify as future leaders educators whose first commitment is to the importance of knowledge and to providing all children with the opportunity to learn.

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