

## Educational Salvation: Integrating Critical Spirituality in Educational Leadership

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*Improving education for students in K-12 urban settings remains a slow-paced and difficult task, with many successes in student learning being episodic at best. The disconnect between government mandates to improve schools and persistent societal issues of poverty and inequity act to increase stress on teachers and educational leaders working in urban schools. Drawing upon the strengths of the African-American community and its collective historical experiences, this study explores creative ways to integrate spirituality in the education of students in urban schools. The authors begin by addressing the contextual and structural issues facing urban schools. They then explain the benefits of integrating the four elements of critical spirituality—critical self-reflection; deconstructive interpretation; performative creativity; and, transformative action—in educational leadership to enhance their work in urban communities.*

**T**he challenges facing educators and policymakers working to improve outcomes for students—particularly low-income students of color in urban schools—are complex and multifaceted. While the need for change is widely accepted, how we move forward with reforms that will lead to sustainable, systemic improvement is a contentious question for stakeholders across the educational and political spectrum. Within these debates, the urgency of the issues facing education is increasingly intertwined with the long-term health and vitality of American society and economic prosperity. While many reformers are calling for disruptive change to upset the status quo, others are calling for a refocusing on the foundational elements of education's purpose. As Diane Ravitch (2010), argues:

It is time, I think for those who want to improve our schools to focus on the essentials of education. We must make sure that our schools have a strong, coherent, explicit curriculum that is grounded in the liberal arts and sciences, with plenty of opportunity for children to engage in activities and projects that make learning lively. We must ensure that students gain the knowledge they need to understand political debates, scientific phenomena, and the world they live in. We must be sure that they are prepared for the responsibilities of democratic citizenship in a complex society. We must take care that our teachers are well educated, not just well trained. (p. 24)

The need to improve educational opportunities is greater for urban students of color who continually perform at a much lower level of academic achievement than their wealthier suburban peers. Education reform in urban schools remains a slow-paced and difficult task with many successes in student learning being episodic at best. The challenges of meeting federal and state mandates are compounded by intractable social issues placing increased stress on teachers and educational leaders working in these settings (Obiakor & Beachum, 2005; Theoharis, 2009). For urban students, specifically African-American students, a solution may be to look to their community and their collective historical experiences to begin to ameliorate some of the pressing educational issues. This has the potential to foster creative ways to integrate spirituality, religion, and religious institutions in the education of students in traditionally underserved urban schools (McCray, Grant-Overton, & Beachum, 2010). In this article we address the contextual and structural issues facing urban schools, and argue that the practice of critical spirituality may be an effective means to address such issues (Dantley, 2009, 2010). Special emphasis is placed on educational leadership and ways in which leaders utilize spirituality to inform and enhance their work in urban communities and leverage political, social, and cultural capital to improve educational outcomes. We readily admit that the implementation of spirituality as a tool for school leaders is a somewhat arduous task. Nevertheless, we proffer in this article that critical spirituality is something that can be cultivated and nourished.

### Demographic Change and Urban Schools

The future of K-12 education in urban America is being shaped by dramatic increases in the numbers of students of color (Hodgkinson, 2002; Villegas

& Lucas, 2002). According to Villegas and Lucas (2002), "While children of color constituted about one-third of the student population in 1995, they are expected to become the numerical majority by 2035. This change will render the expression 'minority students' statistically inaccurate" (p. 3). In fact, our schools are at the front lines of larger demographic shifts in American society. According to Hodgkinson (1998), "the youngest children in America are the most diverse. While 26% of all Americans are nonwhite, among school-aged children, that figure is 37%. And if you look at preschool kids younger than 5, it's 38%. So what we've got coming up is the most diverse population we've ever seen" (p. 5). Students of color will soon make up the majority of K-12 school enrollment in states such as California, Hawaii, Mississippi, New Mexico, Texas, and the District of Columbia (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998).

These changes must be embraced by educational leaders in order to revise outdated practices, correct ineffective policies, and create better systems of schooling that equalize opportunities for educational excellence and equity for all students. That said, changing demographics with regard to the student population can present problems for a largely homogeneous cadre of teachers and administrators (Madsen & Mabokela, 2005; Obiakor, 2001; Singleton & Linton, 2006). These educators deal with context-specific, complex situations that are rife with issues of diversity, professional ethics, and moral dilemmas as major topic or subtle subtext. Therefore, more nuanced ways of dealing with diverse populations, mediating issues between individuals who have vastly different approaches toward educational success, and ensuring an equitable educational environment, are critical components of 21st-century schools.

### **Academic Challenges Facing Students of Color**

Students of color in American schools currently face numerous challenges. Some of these challenges include an academic achievement gap relative to their white peers (Lynch, 2006; Martinez & Woods, 2007), lingering prejudicial practices (Beachum, 2010; Perry, 2003; Pitre, Jackson, & Charles, 2010), high dropout rates (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010), low academic expectations (Kunjufu, 2002), higher rates of suspension and expulsion (Peterson, 2003; Skiba & Peterson, 1999), and overrepresentation in special education (Obiakor, 2007, 2008). There is an abundance of evidence in the literature that high rates of poverty among urban youth of color correlate closely to lower academic outcomes, poor health outcomes, fewer economic opportunities, and higher rates of incarceration. These outcomes, moreover, affect not

only poor and minority children and their families, but the broader American society through lower tax revenues, greater reliance on public assistance, and incarceration costs (McKinsey & Company, 2009). *Closing the Graduation Gap* (2009) asserted:

As this report and other research have shown, two very different worlds exist within American public schooling. In one, earning a diploma is the norm, something expected of every student; in the other, it is not. The stakes attached to graduating have never been higher. This applies equally to the individual dropouts facing diminished prospects for advancement and to the nation whose prosperity and place in the world in the years to come depends on the next generation's ability to rise to the challenges that await. (Swanson, 2009, p. 30)

For young men of color, the situation is even bleaker. As stated in *The Educational Crisis Facing Young Men* (2010), "even within the limited framework of official data definitions the educational crisis facing young African-American, Hispanic, Native American and, among Asian-Americans, particularly Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander men, is formidable at the K-12 level" (College Board, 2010, p. 22). For African-American males, moreover, disparities in the enforcement of disciplinary policies are particularly troubling as the *Schott Foundation for Public Education* report (2010) concluded:

To add insult to injury, Black Male students are punished more severely for similar infractions than their White peers. They are not given the same opportunities to participate in classes with enriched educational offerings. They are more frequently inappropriately removed from the general education classroom due to misclassifications by the Special Education policies and practices of schools and districts. By Grade 8, relatively few are proficient in reading and, finally, as a consequence of these deficiencies in educational practice, less than half graduate with their cohort. (p. 37)

Together these reports indicate that there are systemic difficulties deeply ingrained into the structures of schools and the psyches of educators. Many students of color are put at an educational disadvantage because of negative stereotypes, misperceptions, and automatic assumptions of academic/intellectual inferiority (Beachum & McCray, 2008, 2011; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004;

Perry, 2003; Theoharis, 2009). Of course, students too are responsible for their education (or lack thereof), but a large share of the responsibility for equitable and adequate education rests on adults who initiate and implement educational policies in haphazard ways. For instance, although No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has become well entrenched in our schools, scholars have consistently found that NCLB has led to low morale among educators and their students (Beachum & McCray, 2011; Neil, 2003; Noguera, 2004). Complicating matters even more is the reality that the teaching and leadership core of K-12 schools look very different from the rapidly changing student body.

### **The Teaching and Leadership Challenges of the 21st Century**

At the present time in the United States, the majority of K-12 teachers and school leaders do not reflect the changing demographics of our society. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010), white females make up 74.3% of all preschool and kindergarten teachers, while African Americans represent less than 10% of all teachers (Mizialko, 2005). Of course, this is not to say that White teachers cannot educate students of color. Kunjufu (2002) noted that teachers of color too can underserve and underteach students of color when they do not have high expectations for these students. Thus, it is not so much about having the right skin color as it is about having the right perspective, pedagogical skills, and support mechanisms in place. This is critically important because the attitudes of teachers can impact teacher expectations, student treatment, and student learning (Irvine, 1990; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1969; Rist, 1970). Research suggests that teachers who share experiences with or understand the backgrounds of students of color, value their communities, recognize these students' talents, and hold them to high standards tend to be successful with these students (Beachum & McCray, 2011; Delpit, 1995; Ginwright, 2004; Kailin, 2002). Conversely, teachers at the other end of the spectrum reinforce negative stereotypes, ignore students' particular knowledge, and ultimately do not really believe that students of color can be successful or as successful as their white counterparts (Kunjufu, 2002; Perry, 2003; Tatum, 1997). According to Villegas and Lucas (2002):

Teachers looking through the deficit lens believe that the dominant culture is inherently superior to the cultures of marginalized groups in society. Within this framework, such perceived superiority makes the cultural norms of the dominant group the legitimate standard for

the United States and its institutions. Cultures that are different from the dominant norm are believed to be inferior...Such perceptions inevitably lead teachers to emphasize what students who are poor and of color cannot do rather than what they already do well. (p. 37)

Unfortunately, such a view is at the heart of the educational problem facing many urban students of color in the United States.

In terms of K-12 school leadership, the vast majority of leadership positions are held by white males (Tillman, 2004) and the original theoretical foundations of the field are largely based in scientific management, positivism, and empiricism. Educational leadership has traditionally looked to business and industry for leadership and managerial models. This meant that schools mirrored factories in terms of organizational structure, task standardization, division of labor, primacy of logic, and emphasis on quantitative data (Cunningham & Cordeiro, 2006; Hoy & Miskel, 1991). Such a leadership orientation in schools tends to promote control, prediction, and subordination (Giroux, 1997). Describing educational leadership's roots and many of its current emphases, Dantley (2002) explained:

It has borrowed idioms and syntax from economics and the business world all in an effort to legitimate itself as a valid field. Inherent in such a theoretical heritage are also the concomitant ideological persuasions and embedded predispositions that inform the discourses from which educational leadership has borrowed. The penchant for rationality, order, and empiricism that inspires these positivist abstractions is hardly crafted in a frictionless social or ideological environment, although their maxims would lead one to believe that they have been birthed from an ahistorical and apolitical context. (p. 336)

Thus, the danger of overreliance on such ideological leanings is that it moves school leaders into believing that effective leadership is characterized by total neutrality, color-blindness, and staunch individualism (Beachum & McCray, 2010).

Neutrality assumes that educational policies are fair to all students because they apply equally. As we look closer at policies such as zero tolerance in schools, however, we find that they can be disproportionately applied to students of color (McCray & Beachum, 2006). Disciplinary tactics like suspension and expulsion can be neutral in their conception and race-specific in

their application (Skiba & Peterson, 1999; Verdugo, 2002). Zamudio, Russell, Rios, and Bridgeman (2011) even indicated that “those making the policies understand, but never explicitly acknowledge, the negative impact those policies will have on specific social groups” (p. 42). Professed colorblindness, moreover, can become an excuse to not have to deal with difficult issues regarding race or ethnicity. Zamudio et al. (2011) stated, “It [colorblindness] fails to consider the extent that society is racialized both interpersonally and institutionally” (p. 22). This is the same for leaders who assume that racism is either a thing of the past or that it is limited to interpersonal interactions and/or misunderstandings (Bergerson, 2003; Tatum, 1997). They do not fully recognize or acknowledge the way that social history, past practice, geographic isolation, and current educational practices are linked in ways that privilege certain groups and disadvantage others (i.e., students of color). The overemphasis on individualism obscures a leader’s recognition of community assets (especially in economically disadvantaged areas).

Such beliefs foster a worldview based on meritocracy where success is built upon a great deal of individual effort that leads to personal success. “Those deemed meritorious are promised access to the higher-status positions, while those found lacking in merit are told they must be content with the lower-status positions since that is all they have earned” (Villegas & Lucas, 2002, p. 30). This assumes that merit is measured objectively, which does not always happen. Individual effort always happens within the realities of a particular community context. A student who has a stable home, adequate financial resources, and dedicated caregivers can become academically successful and come to believe that it was done exclusively by her or his individual effort. Similarly, educators who have successfully navigated the educational system can become resistant to the idea that academic failure can have other causes besides lack of individual effort. In discussing prospective teachers, Villegas and Lucas (2002) provide keen insight:

Because the educational system has worked for them, they are not apt to question school practices, nor are they likely to doubt the criteria of merit applied in schools. Questioning the neutrality of the school system, which is the foundation for the meritocratic vision of society, forces them to question the reasons for their own academic success and the legitimacy of the social rewards that success promises to bring them. (p. 31)

Our discussion here leads us to also understand that schools do not operate in isolation apart from the communities in which they reside (Beachum & McCray, 2010). Therefore, it is important to recognize the relationship between schools and their respective communities. Specifically, we will examine the historical spiritual force, especially in the African-American community, and how this has been a catalyst for social change.

### Schools, Society, and Spirituality

Schools are in many cases a reflection of the communities in which they reside. Thus, when external forces impact these communities, schools too are impacted. For Chapman (2009), “Many people do not always connect social issues to education; however, these issues greatly affect the ways in which densely populated metropolitan areas serve the educational needs of children and families living in these spaces” (p. 21). Unfortunately, many urban schools are plagued by poverty, high crime rates, student and teacher apathy, ineffective administration, high dropout rates, and low academic achievement (Obiakor & Beachum, 2005; Kailin, 2002; Morris, 2009). “Urban schools tend to be located in urban environments, reflective of and responsive to the greater society, bureaucratic and hierarchical by nature, and complicated by issues of class and race/ethnicity” (Obiakor & Beachum, 2005, p. 10). Similarly, Yeo and Kanpol (1999) noted:

These schools almost universally include bankrupt districts, burgeoning populations of minorities and immigrants, classrooms empty of materials but packed with children, pandemic drug and alcohol abuse, gang violence, nonexistent resources, crumbling physical plants, all situated in impoverished communities malignant with anger and frustration. (p. 4)

A recent example of this is the situation the Detroit Public Schools are facing. The city of Detroit has decided to close almost half of its public schools in an effort to save revenue. It is projected that the educational impact of the city’s decision will be classrooms of at least 60 students (Chambers, 2011). Like many urban areas, Detroit public schools overwhelmingly serve low-income, minority students so the impact of such a change will have a significant effect on an already underserved community. Unfortunately, the function and formation of geographically isolated racial and ethnic enclaves in urban areas

are less happenstance and more deliberate.

### **African Americans and the Cultivation of Spirituality in the Inner City**

The recent manifestations of diverse and economically disadvantaged inner-city areas of the United States were a product of various historical and political developments. One of the first and most important was a massive movement of African Americans from the largely agricultural South to the industrial North known as the Great Migration. Unfortunately, life in the North did not prove to be all that was promised for many migrants. Whereas the South engaged in active forms of overt discrimination (e.g., laws that created separate facilities, etc.), the North implemented a more covert form of discrimination that kept people of color isolated in certain areas of cities. Rothstein (1996) agreed, “wherever they went however, they found the pernicious segregation system. This affected where they went to school, where they worked, and the type of employment they were able to obtain” (p. 163).

An example was given by Lipsitz (2002) who observed, “By channeling loans away from older inner-city neighborhoods and toward white home buyers moving into segregated suburbs, the FHA and private lenders after World War II aided and abetted segregation in U.S. residential neighborhoods” (p. 64). Similarly, Zamudio et al. (2011) noted, “When housing prices doubled in the 1970s, home owners saw equity increase exponentially. At the same time, people of color were locked out of the suburban market by ongoing racial practices in the [housing] industry” (p. 28). In other words, unstated discriminatory practices kept people of color in certain areas and at the same time Whites slowly began moving away from urban communities as more people of color arrived. “The minority enclaves of the inner city, ghetto, and barrio are part of modern U.S. society. They are maintained by a set of institutions, attitudes, and practices that are deeply embedded in the structure of U.S. life” (Zamudio et al., 2011, p. 3).

For many African Americans, these aforementioned conditions increased their sense of spirituality in the United States. West (2008) proffered that such spirituality is undergirded by a sense of “tragicomic hope”—an outlook that tomorrow will be a better day than yesterday and today. This notion combines both tragedy and hope. In the words of West (2004):

This kind of tragicomic hope is dangerous—and potentially subversive—because it can never be extinguished. Like laughter, dance, and music,

it is a form of elemental freedom that cannot be eliminated or snuffed out by any elite power. Instead, it is inexorably resilient and inescapably seductive—even contagious. It is wedded to a long and rich tradition of humanist pursuits of wisdom, justice, and freedom. (p. 217)

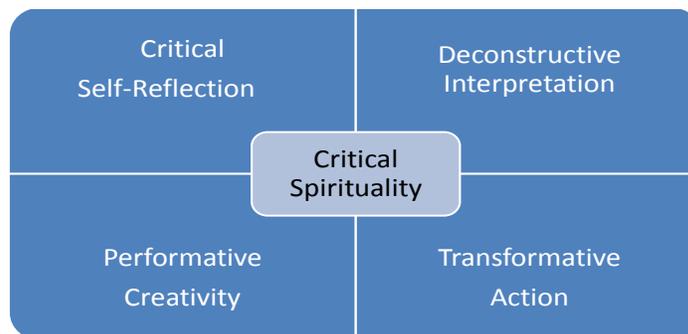
While African Americans, for instance, endured the harshness of slavery and segregation, they always maintained a sense of a better tomorrow that was based largely in their faith and sense of spirit. Spirituality was critical in order to survive slavery and the aforementioned Jim Crow conditions in the South as well as the North. Dantley (2005) defined spirituality as “that influential part of human kind that allows us to make meaning of our lives, it is what compels us to make human connections, and it provides for us our sense of ontology and teleology, our sense of being and purpose for being” (p. 501). Emmons (1999) described it as “a search for meaning, for unity, for connectedness, for transcendence, for the highest human potential” (p. 92). For many Africans across the diaspora (in the United States and across the globe), the spirit and the body are one and are not divorced from one another (Akbar, 2002; Myers, 1988).

These tendencies to combine the body and spirit, emphasize community over the individual, and place primacy on internal knowledge are hallmarks of the historic African-American experience. These emphases are philosophical/ideological pillars that have supported and sustained a people in the midst of a long struggle against overt and covert racism, assumptions of inferiority, and attacks on African aesthetics and humanity (Dyson, 2004; McCray, 2008; McCray, Grant-Overton, & Beachum, 2010; West, 2008). Thus, African-American leaders have a long history of acknowledging and utilizing the spirit as they engaged in the struggle for physical and psychological freedom (Dantley, 2009). This is a crucial lesson for school leaders: “principals who are transformative leaders are those who allow their spiritual selves to assist them in the execution of their leadership responsibilities” (Dantley, 2010, p. 215). Educational leaders who subscribe to the notion of spirituality as part of their leadership style make conscious efforts to find ways to bring teachers to a pedagogical space where they inspire achievement. This, then, raises the central question of this study—how can critical spirituality inform the practices of educational leaders serving students in urban schools?

### Critical Spirituality and School Leadership

Critical spirituality combines aspects of African-American spirituality and critical theory. Critical theory, developed at Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory (Giroux, 1997; Starratt, 1991), “celebrates the practice of individuals questioning, or seriously interrogating, the tacit assumptions and asymmetrical relations of power that undergird many of the institutions and discursive practices in a capitalist-driven society” (Dantley, 2009, p. 44). When seen in practice, some aspects of critical spirituality are tantamount to culturally responsive teaching/culturally relevant pedagogy. Cultural competency entails educators taking into account their students’ cultural reference point and utilizing such reference points to empower students culturally, politically, academically, as well as emotionally (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Thus, critical spirituality is somewhat similar but starts internally and then expands into an organization renewal process. It encompasses four specific elements (see Figure 1): a.) critical self-reflection; b.) deconstructive interpretation; c.) performative creativity; and, d.) transformative action. In addition, critical spirituality illuminates the best of African-American spirituality. In addition to these four tenets of critical spirituality is the embedded notion of tragicomic hope. While engaging in critical self-reflection, deconstructive interpretation, performance creativity, and transformative action, school leaders and educators in urban schools must believe that tomorrow will be a better day than yesterday. Such faith gave many African Americans the hope needed to carry them through the harsh conditions of slavery and Jim Crow.

Figure 1: The Four Elements of Critical Spirituality



The true measure for many frameworks dealing with urban educational issues is their practical value. Critical spirituality combines crucial aspects of academic insight and practical application as well as individual and group transformation. Critical self-reflection and deconstructive interpretation both force the educational leader to look inward to ask deeper questions about themselves, their beliefs, and to assess their spiritual reserves. Then, performative creativity and transformative action project the leader's inward quest for improvement onto the school organization in an effort to alter the status quo and bring about a positive change. This process combines the best of theory and practice, rhetoric and reality, and the head and the heart.

### **Critical Self-Reflection**

Critical self-reflection can be described as, "the process whereby practicing and prospective educational leaders come to an understanding of themselves. This involves the educational leader coming to grips with his or her sacred, genuine, or unvarnished self" (Dantley, 2010, p. 216). This is an introspective process by which the educational leader engages in self-interrogation. This process is one that guides the educational leader down the road of liberation for the self and then others. Commenting on this liberation, Milner (2006) wrote, "Completeness for the oppressed begins with liberation. Until liberation is achieved, individuals are fragmented in search of clarity, understanding, and emancipation. This liberation is not outside of us or created or accomplished through some external force. Rather, it begins with a change in thinking" (p. 85). Therefore, the change we want to accomplish must first be formulated in the mind. And once leaders can reflect deeply on their own beliefs, assumptions, biases, stereotypes, and feelings then they can view themselves and their constituents with greater clarity. Milner once again provided keen insight when he posed the following self-reflective questions for educators: 1.) Why do I believe what I believe? 2.) How do my thoughts and beliefs influence my curriculum and teaching [managing and disciplining] students of color? and, 3.) What do I need to change in order to better meet the needs of all my students [or staff] (p. 84)? Our interpretation of critical self-reflection is informed by Quinn and Snyder's (1999) notion of advanced change theory. This organizational change approach is unique because it begins with the leader making internal changes first and then making external changes in the organization. Therefore, we see critical self-reflection also involving the following:

1. Placing the common good ahead of self-interest.
2. Constant examination of one's own internal sources of resistance, thereby limiting self-deception (convincing one's self of the futility of one's efforts) and personal hypocrisy.
3. By liberating one's self, the leader then gains insight into increased understanding of systemic inequity, enlightenment regarding political realities, and/or vision about direction and strategy (Quinn & Snyder, 1999).

Critical self-reflection also gives the leader the ability to engage in the next element of critical spirituality—deconstructive interpretation.

### **Deconstructive Interpretation**

Deconstructive interpretation is the way that leaders “apply a critical theoretical perspective to the ways in which they have been socialized as well as to the ways the socialization process operates through major institutions of the American society” (Dantley, 2009, p. 51). We also maintain that they then apply this theoretical critical frame to their educational contexts. They begin to “deconstruct established attitudes, values, and actions that foster inequity” (Beauchum, Obiakor, & McCray, 2007, p. 271). This deconstruction means breaking down processes, ideals, concepts, statements, philosophies, proclamations, etc., to expose the realities behind them. Philosopher Jacques Derrida described deconstruction as a process of de-centering. Essentially, Western thought is primarily based on the idea of a fixed center—a truth, ideal, fixed point, or essence that is usually and universally accepted. For Powell (1997):

The problem with centers, for Derrida, is that they attempt to exclude. In doing so they ignore, repress or marginalize others (which become the Other). In male-dominated societies, man is central (and woman is the marginalized Other, repressed, ignored, and pushed to the margins). (p. 23)

Deconstruction makes a person aware of the central positioning of certain terms and then seeks to subvert the central term, temporarily granting power to the marginalized term. Ultimately, the goal is equal power relations between the two or the free play of binary opposites. Deconstructive interpretation can be guided by critical questions such as: Who benefits from these arrange-

ments? Which group dominates this social arrangement? Who defines the way things are structured here? Who defines what is valued and disvalued in this situation? (Starratt, 1991, p. 189). Similarly, Gillborn (2005) posed a set of questions as related to public policy:

First, the question of priorities: who or what is driving educational policy? Second, the question of beneficiaries: who wins and who loses as a result of education policy priorities? And finally, the question of outcomes: what are the effects of policy? (p. 492)

These questions help to unmask who is in control, which agenda is being served, and who ultimately benefits from the status quo. This entails the leader using an acute form of critique to unearth the root problems facing students of color. According to Ryan (2006):

Being critical means becoming more skeptical about established truths. Being critical requires skills that allow one to discern the basis of claims, the assumptions underlying assertions, and the interests that motivate people to promote certain positions. Critical skills allow people to recognize unstated, implicit, and subtle points of view and the often invisible or taken-for-granted conditions that provide the basis for these stances. (p. 114)

Therefore, deconstructive interpretation has educational leaders applying critical frames of reference to their organizations as well as posing tough questions. In order to get at the root of many problems, one must ask the right and often difficult questions. By answering these questions and uncovering truths, the leader positions the school for appropriate action. While this step emphasizes deconstruction, the next two encourage reconstruction (Starratt, 1991). Critical spirituality is a process for breaking down issues and problems and rebuilding better institutional structures as well as organizational cultures. Next is another tenet of critical spirituality that informs the educative process—performative creativity.

### **Performative Creativity**

This element of critical spirituality emphasizes the “development of pedagogical and leadership practices that move the school and the learning community

from maintaining the status quo to envisioning a more democratic culture and a space where the legitimization of voices of difference can take place” (Dantley, 2010, p. 217). While schools are places where academic literacy and numeracy are taught, values are molded, and testing for assessment all happen, performative creativity also envisions schools as sites of social change. Far too often, schools become places that foster, maintain, and replicate social inequity (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Simply put, “Students of color are allowed to enter the classroom but never on an equal footing. When they walk in, they are subject to the same racial stereotypes that exist in the larger society” (Zamudio et al., 2011, p. 18).

Performative creativity seeks to address this problem by encouraging the educational leader to promote progressive curricular innovations, encourage active classroom engagement, and radically restructure the school-community relationship to enhance student learning. To do this sometimes makes the leader seem like a rebel or intense advocate. This may be true in order to counter the overly prescriptive environment in which many urban educators find themselves. These challenges are daunting to say the least in many urban communities. And we certainly do not intend to portray such work as simple. Nevertheless, there is work to be done, especially in urban schools. School leaders and educators who have chosen to teach urban youth have to engage in such creativity to reach students who bring certain creativity with them as well. Pink (2006) agrees as he maintained that the world is in a state of socioeconomic flux.

For nearly a century, Western society in general, and American society in particular, has been dominated by a form of thinking and an approach to life that is narrowly reductive and deeply analytical. Ours has been the age of the “knowledge worker,” the well-educated manipulator of information and deployer of expertise. But that is changing. (p. 2)

Pink goes on to state that this change encourages the need for more conceptual, purpose-driven, and creative thinking. He proposed six “senses” that would shape our work and lives in the 21st century; they are design, story, symphony, empathy, play, and meaning. These are very different from the kinds of 20th-century skills that were highly valued such as linear thinking, empiricism, sequence, and profit-driven performance. Schools largely supported these emphases and structured their curriculums and procedures accordingly. Thus, this “new mind” in schools would encourage creativity and innovation, democratic

processes, high relationship to student experiences, global awareness and connectedness, and acceptance of difference. Wagner (2008) stated the problem as follows:

In today's highly competitive global "knowledge economy," all students need new skills for college, careers, and citizenship. The failure to give all students these new skills leaves today's youth—and our country—at an alarming competitive disadvantage. Schools haven't changed; the world has. And our schools are not failing. Rather, they are obsolete—even the ones that score the best on standardized tests. This is a very different problem requiring an altogether different solution. (p. xxi)

Whether we define the problem as outdated thinking or benign neglect, it poses a significant problem for students of color. Performative creativity also entails hope. This hope drives the educational leader to keep up the struggle against numerous challenges. We would add that these leaders need energy, enthusiasm, and hope (Fullan, 2004) to deal with the day-to-day issues and at the same time imagine and create new educational realities. Dantley (2003) stated,

Performative creativity can be manifested as school leaders sacrifice the comforts of their own ego protection in order to initiate projects to ensure cultural diversity in the curricula, new ways to consider classroom practices, and the efficacy of aligning intellectual pursuits with social and political enterprises. (p. 19)

The final element of critical spirituality is transformative action.

### **Transformative Action**

Transformative action is how leaders "walk the talk" of social change in their schools and communities. It is here where school leaders take "transformative action to manage the many ways in which communities foster undemocratic practices and injustice and literally causes those issues to become matters of academic inquiry and exploration" (Dantley, 2010, p. 217). It entails dialogue, modeling, and community engagement. Open and sincere dialogue is a way to create a language to address the challenges facing students of color and urban schools. It is important for school leaders to value the voices of everyone in

the organization. “The administration and faculty together set the standards that the teachers work to achieve. Through their collaboration, they experience the freedom, ownership, and accountability they need to accomplish the job” (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 227). This requires the leader to make space even for dissent and disagreement. Fullan (2004) reminds us that skeptics can be valuable in the organization because they remind us of things we may have overlooked. Skeptics and cynics are different in that cynics tend to be negative and undermine the organization’s mission. Modeling is of extreme importance because as a leader, people are not only listening to what a leader says, but watching what they do. “Modeling ideal practices can have a significant impact on students, teachers, and parents” (Ryan, 2006, p. 110). Beachum and McCray (2011) concurred, “modeling is a crucial aspect of caring. From modeling, youth see caring in action, which makes it easier to imitate” (p. 60).

In the case of urban schooling, the school leader has the potential to be a stabilizing positive role model in the lives of students who may very well be surrounded by many negative influences. Lastly, community engagement suggests the school leader forge meaningful connections with the community. “Critically spiritual leaders gather parents, other teachers, members of the community, and students together to discuss how the school can be an active partner with others in the community to see equity and fairness shaping the lives of those inside as well as outside of the school” (Dantley, 2010, pp. 217-218). According to Swaminathan (2005), “schools can never divorce themselves from the communities where they exist” (p. 195). Educational leaders should create opportunities for educational debate, guest speakers, host community events, and build coalitions with other local organizations. According to Singleton and Linton (2006), “the administration leads the effort to reach out to all parents and members of the community.” They elaborate stating that when such outreach is effective:

Parents and other community members do not feel disfranchised nor do they feel intimidated due to their own personal educational attainment, English language skills, racial description, economic status, dress, or perceptions of school derived from their own personal experiences. Families know that their voice matters in school affairs (p. 227).

Thus, critical spirituality is comprised of the four aforementioned elements and is explained here as a means to address some of the challenges facing urban schools.

### Conclusion

In this article we have examined the many issues facing urban schools and students of color. These issues include, a steady increase of students of color in U.S. schools (especially in urban areas), academic challenges (low standardized test scores, high dropout rates, low GPAs, etc.), the predominance of white teachers and administrators (more importantly, low expectations from educators), structural inequities (inadequate funding, irrelevant curriculum, ineffective teaching practices), and the difficulties brought to schools in a difficult urban context (crime, poverty, drugs, etc.). Successful school change takes time, commitment, and collaboration. It usually means fighting against internal (hypocrisy and self-doubt) and external resistance (cynics and outdated policies/practices) and staying true to what is best for students sometimes at the cost of personal comfort, job stability, and/or sanity (Theoharis, 2009). When critical spirituality is embraced by school leaders it has the potential to impact students, teachers, and the leader her-/himself. Critical self-reflection forces school leaders to look within to see what they really believe about their leadership abilities, their faith in teachers, and their expectations for students. At this point, the leader begins the process of internal change by reading new leadership literature, attending professional conferences on equity/social justice in schools, taking a class at the local university on new leadership paradigms, or attending a professional development seminar on race/class/gender issues in schools. These are all practical steps for leaders. The intent would be that through self-analysis they begin to gain clarity as to how to make external changes in their schools. It is at this point deconstructive interpretation happens. Enhanced internal state of mind results in external progressive practice (Quinn & Snyder, 1999). Now the school leader takes the bold step of asking broader educational questions. Why are so many African-American males in special education in my building? To what extent do my teachers have conscious or unconscious biases against our student population? Why are female students not participating or feeling supported in science classes? Why are my assistant principals suspending so many students of color? Are some of our policies like zero tolerance race-neutral as written, but race-specific as they impact certain students (McCray & Beachum, 2006)? Who makes up the majority of our gifted and talented programs, and why? School leaders start to deconstruct established norms and realities thereby exposing biases, true agendas, and political maneuvering (sometimes at great cost).

As this occurs, it is important to keep the core value of what is best for students at the forefront. Performative creativity then allows the leader to promote and support new curricular innovations, seek new funding sources, and take risks on new programming (e.g., a course on hip-hop history or media literacy). The leader becomes aware that in order to best serve students, it is not enough to remain stagnant, one must take sometimes unconventional or unexpected steps to enhance student learning. For instance, an urban school might partner with a suburban school (student exchange, community improvement project, teaching lessons via technology). Or this same urban school might decide to extend the school day and provide incentives for its teachers to work with students after school. As this takes place, leaders must remember that they are sustained by the pillars of energy, enthusiasm, and hope (Fullan, 2004). Finally, transformative action entails open dialogue, modeling, and community engagement. At this juncture, the leader can do things like bring in speakers to facilitate cross-cultural conversations or provide an anonymous suggestion box. They could also attend student meetings to give voice directly to student concerns while building relationships. Relationships should not be understated. “Relationships make up the basic fabric of human life and must not be pushed to the periphery of educational considerations” (Shields, 2004, p. 116). This goes for not only students, but teachers and parents as well. The allowance of diverse voices becomes a means for building these relationships. At the same time, modeling must be second nature for leaders. This means that they must live by the language they espouse. Therefore, people will want to see equitable treatment, the inclusion of different voices, and leaders’ presence at meetings. With regard to community engagement, school leaders must intentionally reach out to parents and community partners. Beachum & McCray (2012) have encouraged practical suggestions such as school-community committees, after-school mentoring clubs, community nights, and collaborative community service events to bring school and community interests together.

In sum, the issue facing urban schools and the students who attend these schools are numerous. They pose significant challenges for urban school leaders in public and private educational settings. What is obvious is that “more of the same” is not sufficient. This new educational era calls for new thinking, perspectives, and practices (Beachum & McCray, 2010). Critical spirituality is an example of how school leaders might envision this new direction. Our interpretation of critical spirituality expands its applicability and theoretical usefulness. We feel that it is pragmatic enough for use by practitioners, theoretical enough to withstand advanced intellectual analysis by scholars, and dynamic

enough to encourage prospective leaders to lead in new and socially just ways. Commenting on leadership, Bolman and Deal (2001) stated:

Two misleading images currently dominate organizational thinking about leadership: one the heroic champion with extraordinary stature and vision, the other the “policy wonk,” the skilled analyst who solves pressing problems with information, programs, and policies. Both these images emphasize the hands and heads of leaders, neglecting deeper and more enduring elements of courage, spirit, and hope. (p. 11)

We agree, and strongly encourage leaders who emphasize the head and the hands not to forget the heart. Educational salvation is not about saving souls, but it is about saving the heart and soul of education—the students.

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