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I teach 8th grade US History, and serve as the Head of the Social Studies Department at Matthew Gilbert Middle School in Duval County Public School System located in Jacksonville, Florida. Our fifty member faculty has four Black males, one being myself and another being our principal, and together the faculty serves six hundred students, 95% of which fall within the African American racial category and 99% receive free or reduced lunch. My middle school is part of a cohort of other failing Secondary Schools deemed as “Turn-Around” by our district. This ensemble of schools has received such classification due to insufficiency in meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as mandated by No Child Left Behind and perpetual low-performance on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. Suspiciously, and unfortunately, this collection of schools and its students also shares other commonalities such as restraints due to minimal amounts of economic, social, and political capital. These underlying forces have been left unchallenged.

As of June 2007, the state implemented a system of accountability which identifies low performing schools to provide additional resources to support their academic instruction. These “Turn-Around” schools receive additional professional development for their staff, on-site instructional coaches, and funding to provide tutoring programs, Saturday school, and cover the costs of any additional resources and materials which exceed their annual budget. Most notably within this system of accountability, and the intended focus of this critical practice reflection, there has also been a highly emphasized trend to fill these schools’ administrative positions, particularly principal roles, with African American males. While this practice has not been officially named in the program, the combination of our superintendent claiming we must “create a program to recruit more black males” (Duval County Public School, 2011), along with the

recent explosion of these schools being led by Black men runs directly parallel to the “Turn-Around” system of accountability enacted in 2007. The assumption is when a principal’s ethnicity reflects the ethnicity mainly represented by the students in a school, they then will be able to *single-handedly* impact the school’s culture and thus, increase student achievement.

The notion of recruiting Black males for administrative positions reflects the perception that the dominant group will not adequately represent the interests of the minorities which these schools disproportionately serve (Solomon, 2002). This reasoning constitutes the dismantling of the prevailing social hierarchy within schools and the redistribution of power and privilege by replacing administrative roles which have been historically held by White males with their Black counterparts (Gorski, 2008). Black administrators, because of their unique positioning within the educational paradigm dictated by the dominant group, have the potential to become a catalyst for radical social change. These administrators can shape their role to more directly reflect the emancipatory work needed in their urban schools, communities, and in their student’s lives (Solomon, 2002). Education is intimately linked to liberation, and the freeing of oneself through the educational context can be achieved by creating a unified force composed by the school, community, students, and families who deliberately focus on issues such as power and privilege, self-identity, curriculum, and pedagogy practices (Dantley, 2005). The well-intended initiative to fill our district’s administrative roles with Black males provides valuable insight into why there have only been slight increases in student achievement. Additionally and perhaps of greater importance, is the fact that the impact of these leaders has yet to reverse historical trends pertaining to social justice and its connection to academic achievement as it relates to equal access to resources, racial oppression, employment, and homelessness, in the communities in which their schools serve.

The prevailing setback plaguing the “Turn-Around” system of accountability and its emphasis placed on restructuring of school administration by including Black leaders will not suffice the depths of the issues related to underperforming schools in their entirety. Unfortunately, additional harm is being done by well-intended district officials as a trend of racial harmony has replaced the need for racial justice (Gorski, 2011). This pragmatic shift of determining leaders based upon racial identification and cultural awareness has proven cultural competency is not adequate, and this current trend is working more towards accentuating, not reconstructing, the social and political hierarchy in our society (Gorski, 2008). Currently, these school leaders lack the conceptual knowledge and have an underdeveloped ability to critically examine the structures and policies which manifest inequalities and this has been created by the streamlined, shallow approach in the recruitment of these individuals (Solomon, 2002). The inadequacies of these leaders and their lack of economic, political, and social support on behalf of the district and society have resulted in merely “shaking the patriarchal foundations of the master’s house” (Asher, 2007, p. 66). In order for these “Turn Around” schools and their students to accomplish what their more affluent peers are, there must be less attention given to the underachieving students and their social ills, and more focus placed upon social and economic systems which have been constructed to privilege some and disadvantage others (Gorski, 2008). The “Turn-Around” approach with its overarching theme to reface school leaders is well-intended, but unfortunately its vision is nearsighted and ultimately its impact is minute. Recent student data reflected through “AYP” and the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test have proven these individuals, along with the “Turn-Around” system, are ill equipped to create equality in student achievement because of inadequacies in strategizing ways to resist society’s structural inequalities (Kumashiro, 2000). Instead, the collective efforts of

students, teachers and administrators, community members, district leaders, political officials, and the society at large must work in harmony to achieve equality within academia.

In an ideal world, systems of accountability would be implemented, but the deliberation placed upon how a principal operates would assume greater depths so that ethnicity was not a factor. The alterations which would take place would fall into two distinct categories: school forces and community forces, but at the epicenter of these two elements would reside the principal. In the revamping of this practice, our society will presume greater levels of interconnectedness with humanity's struggle towards social justice in terms of providing all children equal access to our nation's elusive "American Pie", as our actions would elevate from complicity to innate responsibility (Razack, 2007).

First, the element of school forces must be presented with the understanding that its underlying principle is dichotomous; the students must be encouraged and challenged to reach their fullest potential, but their accomplishments serve not only their benefit, as their success and their school's success also enhances the life of their community (Dantley, 2005). As the epicenter of the school, the principal must possess a vision based upon the schoolhouse being inextricably linked to the community, and craft a learning environment insulated from the society's systematic racist, sexist, and classist behaviors (Dantley, 2005). The teachers within the facility must be expected to shape their curriculum into more broad, relevant skill and knowledge based programs addressing the abilities needed to eradicate economic problems, racial and sexual oppression, and ethnic domination (Theoharis, 2007). Students will then become invested in their learning as they are able to understand the linkage between their education and the needs of their community. Students will have the opportunity to hope, to be challenged, and to hold each other accountable for the liberation of their community through first, liberating themselves through education (Dantley, 2005). The principal, when possessing a

sense of moral responsibility and when legitimately prepared, can use his institution as a tool to reconstruct society and free the marginalized from the hegemonic hold which currently restrains all facets of their lives.

Secondly, because of the deeper, more meaningful work executed by the principal through transforming the school, the community will gradually be able work alongside this element to better the lives of students and families. The personality of the community will be altered because of the thorough perspective and applicable skills attained by the students. The community will then become compelled to open its doors to skilled and passionate students to partake in tutoring or intervention programs, housing and economic initiatives, or any other program designed to enhance the community (Dantley, 2005). The soul of the community will be restored to reject the historical and falsely crafted stereotypes which hinder the advancement of the marginalized, and will instead affirm the current reconstruction of Blackness or otherness. The combination of the school and community will eventually begin influencing White, more affluent classes and their assumptions regarding minority students, and their schools and communities will change. The alliance created between the principal and their school with the community has the capacity to influence everyone from policy officials to the dominant groups, and ultimately this deliberate method of challenging and eventually equalizing of who has access to power and resources will create space for equal participation in our democratic society (Solomon, 2002).

Adopting this redesigned policy would come with an array of multifaceted challenges. To begin, the principal would have to muster the will to overcome the resistance found in the forms of unsupportive central office members and peers, bureaucratic pressures, financial costs of striving towards equity, and lack of preparation due to underdeveloped and myopic principal training programs (Theoharis, 2007). This new approach will cause resistance within the school

as the faculty will have to embrace the new realities of their role where they must take responsibility for student achievement, increased rigor and adaptability of curriculum, and most importantly, these individuals will have to challenge their understanding of how knowledge has impacted them so that they can breathe authentic anti-oppressive ideals into their students. Increasing student achievement will require the collective efforts of *all* schools, communities, and society in its greater context; however, those who are not directly linked to the marginalized may create resistance as they have the autonomy to disconnect themselves from the challenges (Solomon, 2002). Furthermore, the education system is designed to equip individuals to enter the economy and participate in our democratic society, but as it currently stands, the voices and involvement of the marginalized have been suppressed and denied through structural inequalities. Essentially, if “Turn-Around” schools and other districts underwent such drastic revamping, it would equate to the discomforting of the status quo as incarceration rates would decline, high school graduation and college acceptance rates would increase, and there would be an increased level of competition in attaining employment. So to implement this broad approach would translate into the literal undermining of our current system, and many would claim it to be radical and far-reaching, but to the marginalized, it would be a warranted revolution.

Clearly, the undercurrent of racism still exists in America and has manifested itself in our education system causing children to suffer from an intellectual death. In order for equality to be attained within academia, there must first be a long and arduous fight for equal access to economic, political, and social capital. The unique positioning of the school must not be overlooked as it can be transformed into a catalyst carrying the potential to address and resolve the complicated issues surrounding academic achievement and creating the analytical perspectives needed to identify and fight the resistance entrenched in society. A principal can be the change agent, but only if they are followed and supported by the masses. An education can

be the means, but only if it is founded upon liberation and humanization. And the future can be the opportunity, but only if we all operate with the understanding that “power concedes nothing without demand”, as prophesied by Frederick Douglass.

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