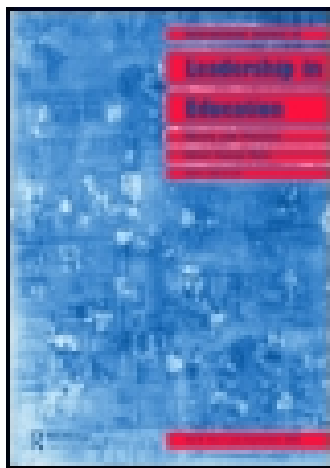


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Enacting critical care and transformative leadership in schools highly impacted by poverty: an African-American principal's counter narrative

CAMILLE M. WILSON

Critical notions of care and transformative educational leadership are much aligned, yet they are rarely simultaneously addressed in research. This article highlights the benefits of transformative educational leadership that enacts critical care. Critical care involves embracing and exhibiting values, dispositions and behaviours related to empathy, compassion, advocacy, systemic critique, perseverance and calculated risk-taking for the sake of justly serving students and improving schools. Data discussed stem from the in-depth interviews of an African-American principal who implemented such practices and consequently helped boost the academic performance of a school highly impacted by poverty. The principal's accounts of her practice comprise a counter narrative reflective of critical race methodology. Findings from the study speak to the importance of educators better understanding the reality of poverty given racialized conditions and other oppressive contexts so they can better prepare marginalized youth to achieve and succeed.

Introduction

The USA does not likely come to mind when most educators around the world think of poverty given the nation's overall wealth. Nevertheless, over 16 million US children experience poverty, including a disproportionate amount of African-Americans (National Poverty Center, <http://www.npc.umich.edu/poverty/>). African-American children living in poverty constitute one of the most marginalized and vulnerable populations in the USA. These youth are likely to be in what Darling-Hammond (2010) calls 'apartheid' schools that are inherently inequitable. Consequently, many are left underprepared to succeed in a competitive, globalizing world. They are not only educationally underserved, they are also affected by the intersecting impact of poverty and societal racism (Children's Defense Fund's [CDF], 2007; Milner, 2013; Noguera, 2011). The overall neglect of African-American youth experiencing poverty at societal and institutional levels points to the importance of understanding how the neglect of marginalized students manifests and matters within

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public education; and, how transformative educational leaders can help reverse it.

In this article, I highlight the benefits of serving schools highly impacted by poverty through enacting transformative educational leadership rooted in critical care. Critical care goes beyond theories pertaining to building nurturing and trusting relationships (Noddings, 1992) to also consider power dynamics and redress inequities (Antrop-González, 2006; Cooper, 2009a; Shields, 2003). My discussion is informed by relevant literature and narrative data stemming from in-depth interviews with an African-American principal who is a self-described and proven transformative leader. The principal reflects on her efforts to combat inequity and boost the student achievement of a low-performing school. The school was highly impacted by poverty and its educators served nearly all African-American students. The principal's accounts of her philosophies and practice suggest she was successful in large part because she enacted critical care. In doing so, she demonstrated empathy, compassion, advocacy, systemic critique, perseverance and calculated risk-taking when working with students, teachers, community members and district authorities.

The principal offered keen insight into the strengths, needs and challenges of students experiencing poverty as well as a sharp critique of the ways that the US educational policies and practices perpetuate students' oppression. In line with critical race methodology, the principal's data yielded a counter narrative that pertains to the intersecting contexts of race and class and highlights the value of experiential knowledge and structural analysis (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Stovall, 2006). Findings from this study imply the importance of caring educators of any ethnicity or nationality better understanding the reality of poverty in racialized and other oppressive contexts so they can better prepare the most marginalized youth to achieve and succeed. The study also points to the need for increased district support for transformative educators.

Poverty and the (Mis)education of African-American youth: 'Who really cares?'

The extent to which poor, African-Americans are educationally cared for in the USA could be easily questioned given the inequities and educational struggles they systemically face. Of the children experiencing poverty in the USA, approximately 30% are African-American, though African-Americans constitute only 12% of the total USA population (US Census Bureau, n.d.). Moreover, African-American children most often experience significant educational challenges that influence their lower than average achievement rates and are severely disenfranchised within public education as a whole (CDF, 2007; Horsford, 2011; Milner, 2013; Noguera, 2011).

The CDF (2007), an independent children's advocacy organization based in Washington, DC, reported that African-American or 'black'¹ school students are more likely than any other ethnic group to be placed

in special education programmes designed to serve children deemed to have mental or emotional disabilities. They are ‘almost twice as likely as white children to be retained in a grade’, and their suspension rate is three times higher than white students (p. 13). In contrast, ‘Black public school students are least likely [out of the various racial and ethnic groups in the US] to be in programs for the gifted and talented ...’ (p. 28). When it comes to standardized test assessment, Harvard University researchers reported that as few as 11% of African-American students are proficient in math and 13% proficient in reading compared to approximately 40% of white students in those subjects (Peterson, Woessman, Hanushek & Lastra-Anadón, 2011).²

Research has further shown that African-American children often enter schools having to confront educators’ low expectations of their intelligence, academic potential and learning capabilities along with educators’ deficit-based ideas about African-American culture and their biases about those living in poverty (Delpit, 2006; Howard, 2008; Wilson, Douglas, & Nganga, 2013). Moreover, African-American students usually possess cultural and social capital reflective of African-American culture, experiential knowledge and survival skills (Delpit, 2006; Khalifa, 2010; Noguera, 2003). Such qualities greatly differ from the White, middle-class norms that govern the US educational system and thus are devalued. This devaluing can create estranged and ineffective teacher–student relationships that further threaten the success of youth, leaving many African-American students feeling disillusioned, disempowered and/or uncared for (Howard, 2008; Vaught & Castagno, 2008).

The intrinsic links between socio-economic status, race and educational attainment in the US harshly positions many African-American students experiencing poverty to confront numerous structural barriers to attaining educational success (Milner, 2013; Noguera, 2011). This reality points to the need for educational leaders, researchers and reformers to devise and implement systemic, equity-oriented educational solutions; yet, that need has been unmet. Over 60 years ago, the US Supreme Court ruled in its *Brown vs. the Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas* decision to require the mandatory racial desegregation of the US schools for the sake of increasing equity and positive educational outcomes for children of colour. Today, however, the US public schools are still unequal and segregation endures (Horsford, 2011).

In an article that evokes an allegory used in the writing of acclaimed critical race scholar Derrick Bell, Howard (2008) asked:

(H)ow would educational researchers and scholars react if a particular group of students no longer existed? What if there were a group of students whose educational prospects and life chances seemed in such dire straits that their viability as a group was in serious question? ... Would we seek new paradigms that might provide the needed insight into helping improve the schooling experiences and ultimately the quality of life of this group? Or would the disenfranchisement of this group be greeted with a loud silence that would seem to convey a general lack of concern about their education and life prospects? (pp. 955–956)

Readers of these questions may instinctively suggest that educators and reformers would rally to help address the needs of a group of youth whose

lives were threatened by educational inequity. Howard, however, argues that such attention and care have not been shown when these questions apply to the real educational state of African-Americans. He further marshals data from his case study of African-American males in secondary schools to discuss their awareness of the biases and stereotypes that shape many educators' opinions of them.

When discussing the disenfranchisement of many African-American students, Howard (2008) asked: 'Who really cares?' Indeed, considering the role of care is needed to re-evaluate how educators can take transformative steps to offer African-American and other marginalized students greater educational access and opportunities.

A call for critical care and transformative leadership

One may assume that caring is a basic, altruistic prerequisite for being a good educator, but caring for marginalized youth in the critical way needed is a socially complex and politically conscientious process that not all educators undertake. The literature on caring in education is largely informed by feminist notions of the ethic of care that seminal scholars like Noddings (1984, 2002) and Gilligan (1982) have helped shape. This type of care involves feelings, actions and desires for kindness and reciprocity, whereby educators demonstrate receptivity, relatedness and responsiveness towards students (Beard, 2012; Noddings, 2002). It also means challenging students and offering them 'rigor, strict accountability, and support' (Beard, 2012, pp. 67–68).

Overall, traditional caring theories typically frame caring as an individual act. These theories aptly recognize that educators should be motivated by a desire to take corrective actions when addressing unjust incidents and practices, but such correction is usually conceptualized at the micro relational level that accounts for general conflict and discrepancies involving any educator and any student. Educators are encouraged to be sensitive and empathetic to students' social realities in general (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2002). However, providing care that is responsive to the structural inequalities students face, such as counteracting the ways students are harmed by poverty or institutional racism, is underemphasized (Cooper, 2009a).

To the contrary, critical scholars have emphasized that authentic educational care is not just related to a social or individualized practice; rather, it is a culturally relevant action that has political ramifications (Antrop-González, 2006; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Cooper, 2009a; Siddle Walker & Snarey, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999; Wilson et al., 2013). These scholars, including those drawing upon Black feminist and womanist notions of educational care (e.g. Bass, 2012; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Cooper, 2009a; Thompson, 1998), have further explained that caring can be an act of resistance that challenges marginalization and systemic educational neglect. Hence, caring involves educators being racially conscious when needed, and taking risks to advocate and seek social justice for diverse students. It also requires an emotional investment in

marginalized students' well-being (Bass, 2012; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Cooper, 2009a; Thompson, 1998; Wilson et al., 2013). In all, the latter conceptualizations of care are critical because they encompass acts of individual relational care but also urge one to be mindful of the macro-level injustices that fuel systemic oppression. Such oppression contributes to the marginalization that affects many students' lives and treatment within schools. Critical notions of care are not colourblind like many traditional caring theories; rather, they directly speak to educators being responsive to the needs of racially minoritized students (Cooper, 2009a; Thompson, 1998). This is essential when addressing the needs of schools highly impacted by poverty in the US since the majority of the US children living in poverty come from racially minoritized backgrounds (National Poverty Center, n.d.).

Leading with critical care

Similar to acts of what I call here and elsewhere 'critical care', (Wilson et al., 2013), transformative educational leadership is a political process that requires educators to understand that schools should be sites of resistance where they work to redress inequities (Cooper, 2009b; Dantley, 2005; Murtadha & Watts, 2005; Shields, 2012). Transformative leaders assert their authority not to dominate but, as Quantz, Rogers, and Dantley (1991) stated, to 'transform present social relations' (p. 103). Such leaders also strive to guide staff and students in deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge that values diverse and critical perspectives; develop inclusive and affirming learning communities for marginalized students; and, serve the public good (Cooper, 2009b; Dantley, 2005; Murtadha & Watts, 2005; Shields, 2012). In all, a transformative educational leader works to align the organizational culture, practices, partnerships and policies of a school and its educators with these social justice-oriented goals.

Like critical care, transformative leadership can involve a great deal of risk-taking and willingness to explicitly discuss and confront racism, classism and other forms of oppression and bias. Indeed, educators who are motivated to undertake transformative leadership tend to deeply care about students and justice. For instance, Shields (2003) points to care as being part of transformative leadership in general and links care to racial contexts, broader issues of diversity and globalizing dynamics in education. Tillman (2004), in her comprehensive review of research on African-American principals, emphasizes how 'transformational' African-American principals commonly demonstrated 'interpersonal caring' or an 'ethic of care' along with political resistance against injustice (p. 124).³ Similarly, colleagues and I extensively reviewed and analysed historical and empirical literature regarding the transformative leadership of African-American educators serving predominantly (if not all) African-American student populations from the eighteenth century to contemporary times (Wilson et al., 2013). The review revealed that leaders' transformative practice was anchored in a genuine concern for youth, beliefs about African-American children being good natured, worthy of

educators' strong efforts and capable of vast learning. Moreover, leaders were willing to advocate for students in the face of injustice given their socio-emotional investment in their success. These were all traits aligned with possessing and demonstrating critical care; hence, colleagues and I suggested that enacting critical care can help educators of any gender, ethnicity or nationality exude transformative leadership (Wilson et al., 2013).

In this article, I am more explicitly asserting the interconnections between critical care and transformative leadership. Overall, critical conceptions of care and transformative leadership philosophies are much aligned but often discussed separately, only linked conceptually, and/or their linkage is briefly acknowledged. One, however, frequently inspires or encompasses the other. Critical care—which entails one's empathy, compassion, advocacy, systemic critique, perseverance and calculated risk-taking—often (though not always) begets transformative leadership. I argue, however, that transformative leadership given its aim to spark systemic equity-oriented change is always sparked by one's critical care. More empirical studies that offer explicit attention to the relationship between critical care and leadership are needed, especially those that examine transformative educational leaders who serve marginalized communities.

Methodology

The remainder of this paper will draw from narrative data from Principal Alana Simms,⁴ a self-identified transformative educational leader. Simms has spent a substantial part of her educational career serving schools that serve African-American youth experiencing poverty. Her analysis of education pertains to how the intersection of poverty and racial contexts, along with constraining educational policies, perpetuate educational neglect.

Principal Simms' data emerge from a counter storytelling process. According to critical race methodology, counter storytelling can illuminate valuable experiential knowledge that challenges dominant racial ideologies and myths to expose inequities (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Critical race methodologists have further explained that counter stories—also called counter narratives—can extend theory by integrating race and class analyses into examinations of educational practice (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Stovall, 2006). Counter stories help readers critique unfair practices and pinpoint 'transformative' possibilities from the standpoint of traditionally silenced voices (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Insights from counter storytelling

Counter stories or 'counter narratives' usually emanate from qualitative studies. Data from Principal Simms', a woman raised in poverty herself, derive from a qualitative interview study guided by the following research questions: (1) How have transformative leaders in urban schools highly

impacted by poverty implemented successful turnaround strategies; (2) How do they perceive poverty contexts as impacting their leadership efforts; and, (3) How do they conceptualize transformative leadership?

Principal Simms was purposely sampled given her self-identification as a transformative leader and her publicly documented record of helping to raise student test scores each of the six years that she led Horizons Elementary School. Standardized test scores are just one of several important indicators of school success, as is high attendance, low suspension rates, and engaged families and community partners. Nevertheless, North Carolina's state and district policies specifically emphasize the necessity of principals maintaining or raising test-based, student achievement outcomes, and doing so is linked to principal evaluation, retention and in some cases, federal funding incentives.⁵ Furthermore, because predominantly African-American schools are most typically identified as low performing rather than recognized for high academic growth and achievement (Tillman, 2004; Wilson et al., 2013), Horizons Elementary School stood out as a success case. Its success signalled the potential significance of Principal Simms' story.

Horizons is located in a predominantly African-American, inner city, low-income neighbourhood in the central part of the US state of North Carolina. I collected approximately 10 hours of narrative data from seven, in-depth, in-person interviews with the administrator. During the interviews, Simms reflected on her leadership and professional trajectory, especially her efforts to turnaround the low achievement rates of the school from 2006 to 2012. Interviews were conversational and semi-open ended. I also spent a few hours observing Simms and reviewing school records, district documents and newspapers articles about Horizons. Observational and document information provided background context, while the interview narratives served as primary data.

Iterative analytical methods were used to code and eventually identify themes from Principal Simm's data (Becker, 1996; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). This involved reviewing audio files of interviews, transcripts and notes multiple times. I assigned descriptive codes like 'poverty', 'teacher hiring' and 'professional development' based on Simms' direct language, assigned analytic codes like 'resistance', and then pinpointed themes such as 'challenging bias' and 'systemic critique'. Basic coding was initially done by hand and MS Word tools were used to more systemically find, cluster and sort data, count recurrences of codes and themes, and notate analytical comments. I also sought clarification and confirmation from Principal Simms during data analysis to ensure I correctly accounted for the influence of such issues like her spiritual faith. These analytical methods constitute approaches used in qualitative research to help ensure valid analysis; consequently, they helped me assess the salience of my conceptual framework and consider outlier issues and alternative explanations (Becker, 1996; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010).

Simms' reflections on the influence of her leadership complement research that suggests the powerful influence one educational leader can have (see Bass, 2012; Beard, 2012; Gardiner, Howard, Tenuto, & Muzaliwa, 2013; Gooden, 2005; Khalifa, 2012; Riddle & Cleaver, 2013).

The discussions of her philosophies and transformative practice also indicated her deep belief in and enactment of critical care.

I offer Simm's story to contribute to theory building and help construct knowledge 'specifically for the purpose of addressing and ameliorating conditions of oppression, poverty, or deprivation' (as cited in Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36), which aligns with the function of counter narratives. By highlighting her story as a counter narrative, I further heed the call from other researchers for 'further storytelling in educational leadership' that provokes the '(re)imagining of educational leadership in counter-hegemonic ways' (Riddle & Cleaver, 2013, p. 376).

A profile of a transformative leader: Principal Alana Simms

Principal Alana Simms led Horizons Elementary School for six years. When she became principal the school was one of the lowest performing schools in her medium-sized, urban school district. Its test scores rose each year under her leadership, including double digit percentage growth during the final three years of her tenure. By 2012, the school was among the district's most academically improved schools. As Principal Simms explained, however, it was still a school for which many had low expectations because of its inner city location and its student population that consisted of 98% African-American youth experiencing poverty. Furthermore, the school's surrounding neighbourhood had higher unemployment, crime and home vacancy rates than many of its bordering communities.

Simms explained that Horizons was a school where few new or continuing principals wanted to be placed; yet, one she specifically requested to serve much to the surprise of district officials. Simms explained: 'With Horizons being in a high prostitution zone and its high crime, no one wanted the position when I interviewed. I asked for Horizons. They [district interviewers] said, 'Are you sure'? I said, 'Yes''. Thus, Simms began her leadership career with the intention to serve in challenging school contexts impacted by poverty. She possessed ideological and political clarity about the type of population she wanted to assist and what conditions she wanted to confront (Bartolomé & Trueba, 2000; Wilson et al., 2013). Moreover, in considering the study's first research question, data collectively showed that Simms' core school turnaround practices pertained to: understanding the contexts of childhood poverty, challenging teachers' biases about students, confronting poverty contexts with compassion and systemic critique, affirming her commitment to transformative leadership, standing her ground amidst professional criticism and keeping her spiritual faith. Her attention to student learning, achievement and the demonstration of critical care was intertwined in these practices.

Understanding the contexts of childhood poverty

Along with almost every Horizon Elementary School student coming from a low-income family, Principal Simms estimated that: 80% of the students

had a parent who was or had been incarcerated; approximately 40% had experienced documented physical and/or sexual abuse; most came from families highly affected by violent crime; and, many students lived in foster care or with a non-parent guardian. She noted that students, overall, dealt with a great deal of 'grief and trauma' that also affected her due to the close ties she had with students and their families. Principal Simms even proclaimed, 'I can't go to another funeral ... I am burnt out', referring to her common attendance at the funerals of her students' family members, including those who have been killed. Though taxing at times, Principal Simms still stressed that she views the 'social part of her job' as essential and she shared her perspectives about the poverty contexts impacting Horizons, thereby offering data that addressed the study's second research question.

Given the needs of her students, Principal Simms told stories of spending time in classrooms rubbing lotion on kids, lacing up a student's new tennis shoes that she purchased; helping coordinate assistance for parents who could not afford to buy new glasses for their child; collaborating with a social worker to help a family manage a child's severe medical needs; or, consulting the school counsellor about how to best support a child preparing for a parent to be released from prison.

One of the most striking accounts of leadership, care and intervention Principal Simms described related to one of her students who lived in a house infested with bed bugs. She explained that this student lived in a filthy home that even the government's Department of Child Services (DCS) social worker avoided visiting, where 'you can smell the stench from outside', and a rancid bathtub laid inside—making it clear that it had not been used for a very long time. Simms voiced frustration about the lack of intervention from DCS workers because the child did not show signs of being abused; yet, she stated that he had 'come to school covered in bed bug bites wearing the same clothes for three weeks' despite her staff sending the student home with days' worth of newly bought clothes and underwear. She then discussed her decision to visit the home herself with her school social worker and described numerous calls she made to DCS, the school district and other agencies trying to convince officials to more drastically intervene, exclaiming, 'he [the student] has suffered for too long'! It is these types of socio-economic contexts to which Simms emphasized that she and her staff must be sensitive. Simms also stressed the importance of maintaining high academic expectations and squarely linked this to teachers' practice and her responsibility to maintain a positive school culture. This all suggests that her leadership approach involved building relationships with her students, having empathy for their lives and needs and having a willingness to advocate for their welfare in and out of school—dispositions all associated with enacting critical care (Bass, 2012; Cooper, 2009a; Siddle Walker & Snarey, 2004; Tillman, 2004).

Challenging bias and getting the right teachers 'on the bus'

Simms' explained that her sensitivity and empathy towards her students shaped her strategies for improving her school's organizational culture. The principal emphasized in each of her interviews her work to 'transform the culture' of Horizons Elementary School, especially when she first arrived. Her reculturing process began with teacher assessment, development and in some cases, teacher removal—a process the principal referred to as 'getting the right people on the bus'. She said when she started her Horizons principalship the school was staffed with a combination of uncommitted, ineffective teachers and teachers who wanted to make a positive difference but who 'made excuses' for their students' low performance because of their dire family and socio-economic circumstances. Hence, Principal Simms said: 'I had to get my teachers to stop pitying the students and raise their expectations of them'. She also began with having 'data conversations', emphasizing collaboration and building 'teacher leadership capacity'. Simms stated:

Kids need the adults. So many of them don't have hope. We still had teachers telling kids 'Just get out of my face. If you want to put a coat over your head in the corner, just do that'.

Simms explained how she and the faculty had 'hard conversations which produced a mass exodus, which was great' because it allowed her to hire high-quality teachers. Such conversations pertained to teachers' performance, her expectations of them, her reform goals and the need for teachers to overcome racial and class bias. At times, these conversations occurred during individual consultations when the principal cited a teacher's specific actions or communication to discuss and evaluate her/his practice, such as an overly harsh tone of voice or a deficit-based comment made about a student or her/his living circumstances. Other times such conversations occurred during staff meetings and professional development sessions that Simms designed to supplement or extend district professional development related to diversity and equity issues. During these sessions, Simms said she reiterated her caring philosophies, suggested instructional and relational strategies, led reflective activities based on research-based articles and praised teachers making marked improvements with student performance and engagement. Simms explained that ultimately many of the teachers who resigned as a result of her approach were white, while all of the new teachers she hired were African-American.

Overall, the principal repeatedly stressed her 'zero-tolerance' for uncaring teachers and those with deficit-based views of students regardless if they were middle class, white teachers with class and/or racial bias or middle class, African-American teachers with class bias. Simms proclaimed, 'Even black teachers can come to schools with these type of misperceptions about the kids ... Children don't ask to be born into this [poverty]!'

When asked what she thought the most prevailing myths about Horizons students were, Principal Simms quickly and concisely responded

that: (1) ‘That parents don’t care and are not involved. They care and they’re passionate! Nine times out of 10 they’re working and can’t be at school’; (2) ‘We should have low expectations for their learning and achievement’; (3) ‘They (students) don’t understand anything but the language of fussing so let’s (the teachers) just go ahead and fuss at them’; (4) ‘These families just care about material things like clothes and shoes’; and, (5) ‘These kids are all two grades behind’.

Contrary to deficit-based judgements, Simms fervently stressed the importance of teachers, along with education reformers and the public overall, understanding that:

These children want what other children want, good cereal in the morning not always Kix [a plain, often lower priced cereal that comes in bulk]; Nikes, not shoes from Maxway [a high discount chain store usually located in low-income neighborhoods]; a cell phone and computers at home versus having to always go to a library. They don’t just want the bare minimum ... There’s a sense of pride in everyone who comes through the door [of Horizons]. We must treat them like a Neiman Marcus [an upscale department store] customer not a customer at Kmart or the Dollar Store.

She added, ‘We need to treat parents like humans, and their children’, and, ‘We gotta build them up not tear down their self-esteem’. These sentiments and approaches evoke theories related to critical care that call for the humanizing and compassionate treatment of marginalized youth and families (Beauboeuf-LaFontant, 2002).

Simms’ commitment to valuing African-American children experiencing poverty—just as she said she values children from wealthy, highly resourced families—informs her philosophy about holding teachers to high standards. At the same time, Simms expressed an understanding that teachers also need to feel affirmed and supported in their growth. She explained her emphasis on collaboration, letting her staff know they are appreciated, being a role model for them in terms of: ‘letting them know I am willing to roll up my sleeves and do anything and everything that is needed to help the students. That approach totally turned [Horizons] school around’.

Principal Simms asserted that other facets of her instructional leadership involved heavily investing in professional development, implementing grades K-2 and 3-5 teaming strategies and developing a more inclusive leadership team with greater teacher and parental representation. Simms also highlighted the importance of building relationships with teachers, from occasionally bringing in her ‘famous barbecue sandwiches’ for her staff, to joining in on a lesson and helping students get excited about class activities. Principal Simms added, ‘It starts with me. Once teachers see that human side of me, they get on board’.

In line with enacting critical care, Simms’ student advocacy stance is evident in her described approach to improving both the culture of Horizons Elementary School and teachers’ practice. She led the school with a holistic concern for students’ welfare that went far beyond achievement scores to tend to students’ basic needs and self-esteem, as well as the dignity of their families. She further indicated that her sometimes firm position with teachers was coupled with a concern for their morale and efforts

to be an instructional and caregiving role model. These practices have been determined to be effective in research on other leaders who have helped boost the achievement of African-American students (Bass, 2012; Beard, 2012; Foster, 2005; Gooden, 2005). Simms data further suggest she is unafraid to disrupt white racial privilege and/or class bias from any racial group towards African-American students and families experiencing poverty.

Confronting poverty contexts with compassion and systemic critique

In addition to Principal Simms professing to lead a school highly impacted by poverty with individual compassion, advocacy and high expectations of her teachers, she also leveraged systemic critique. Principal Simms asserted that students' life challenges were only exacerbated by the racial segregation and isolation they experienced in the school district. Simms asserted, 'These kids don't have the chance to be exposed to other people's world ... This all adds to a lack of hope and it's so sad. The kids' world is the school'.

In referring to Horizon Elementary School's surrounding community, Simms said, 'It's not reality' given that it is predominantly African-American and poor with many community members rarely venturing to other parts of the city. She linked the community's isolation to the students' lack of exposure to cultural diversity. Though Simms described a plethora of positive things that occurred at Horizons, such as students' upward achievement and a vast increase in partnerships with local companies and community organizations, she explained that two of her students' biggest needs were having their self-esteem nurtured and increasing their cultural and global awareness. Her response indicated the type of 'glocal perspective' that integrates attention to both local needs and globalization realities (Brooks & Normore, 2010). For instance, Simms spoke of many students reacting with surprise during a conversation about US President Barack Obama having an African-born father. She said, 'Many of our kids didn't even know that Africa wasn't in the US ... They need to know the world is larger than Horizons'.

Simms was clear in recognizing that Horizons students' global awareness and comprehension gaps went beyond curricular needs. She noted how the district's segregation of several all African-American, poverty impacted schools prevented students from learning with and from the culturally and linguistically diverse students present in the district. Principal Simms contended, 'How the district draws the lines for the school attendance zones does the kids a disservice'.

The principal asserted, 'It [district zoning] keeps segregation' vs. dispersing the kids across the district' because, 'the only way to ensure the continued success of many schools is that you [the district] keep students with a history of low academic performance and low test scores contained'. Moreover, Simms suggested that maintaining racial and class segregation enabled the district to better pinpoint growth and then report that growth to the State. She relayed that 'The only growth [the district]

got last year was from low-performing schools'. Hence, she believed that maintaining school segregation along racial and economic lines served the district's political interest at the costs of students' integration and cross-cultural learning.

Simms further linked the containment strategies of segregation that aim to oppress marginalized groups to the suppression of the achievement and testing success of African-American students living in poverty.⁶ While presuming the district's stance, Simms asserted:

'I [the district] think you [urban, predominantly African-American/black schools] are okay as long as you stay in your place.' The teachers felt they [the white district authorities] were going to be upset hearing that none of the third-graders failed. It's like, 'We [the district] want you to grow but not beyond the [White] majority.' They don't want us to surpass the white schools and they definitely don't want us in the 95 percentile of high achieving schools. We're met with suspicion when we do well. Their attitude is, 'As long as you can stay in your place it's okay because you're not like us, you can't perform like us because you are not on our level.' That's the mentality of the district.

This type of critique amounted to Principal Simms doubting whether district officials truly wanted schools highly impacted by poverty to excel. Simms contended that for some district officials education is 'literally a business'. While referring to district officials and policy-makers, she questioned, 'Are you really doing what's best for the kids?' Thus, in essence, she questioned district officials' level of care.

Altogether, Simms mounted an argument for those concerned with providing educational equity and excellence to African-American youth experiencing poverty to recognize the systemic bias and neglect that hinders these youth, be it in classrooms with biased teachers or through harmful educational policies. Furthermore, she indicated that such neglect contributes to students like those at Horizons Elementary School being 'left behind' on a global scale. The principal stated: 'The district wants to boast about great gains but those gains only come from the high poverty schools,' and 'students in these schools are hidden away'. She further asserted, 'The U.S. boasts about its wealth, and to boast about that you have to hide the face of poverty' ... 'Everybody is drawn to the American pie ... But the seeds of the pie come from poverty, and we're hiding it'. She therefore disclosed perspectives linked to micro-, meso- and macro-level dynamics that relate to student's individual lives, their learning, school improvements needed and societal injustice. Such multiple level analysis can vitally inform leaders' demonstration of critical care. These analytical viewpoints help fulfil the purpose of counter narratives. As Stovall (2006) explains, 'Through counter story [counter narrative] we are able to discover the relationships between nuanced experience, individual responses and macro-policy', (p. 253)—Simms' remarks affirm the complexity and importance of such relationships.

Committing to transformative leadership

Overall, Simms' data revealed an alignment between her philosophies of educational care and critique with her beliefs about transformative

leadership, thereby addressing the study's third research question. The principal suggested that her core traits as a transformative leader are: promoting 'trust and honest dialogue—everyone has to feel safe; being open to new ideas; being honest with feedback; and, being willing to be a change agent'. She added, 'I have to make a difference where I am and then spread it out'. In addition, Principal Simms shared:

To me, transformative leadership means I put my needs to the side, change my school culture, increase my knowing of my teachers—knowing of who they are as people— and understanding how that affects how they teach. We started the year and I modeled being very transparent about who I am as a person ...

The transparency that Principal Simms referred to is partly linked to her being open about coming from a poverty-affected background that is not unlike her students. Simms referred to growing up in poverty and being affected by family members' physical abuse and alcoholism. She declared, 'I used to be one of those kids'. She recounted memories like a time when a family member punished her by pouring hot skillet grease on her foot. She also emphasized how educational opportunity and caring teachers—African-American and white—helped sustain her and inspired her to make a 'promise to myself that there's something better for me'.

When asked, if and how her childhood informs her leadership. Principal Simms asserted:

My background makes all the difference in the world! I've walked in their (the students) shoes! I've done better and my life has improved. I have hope, so I share my story ... And families are so much more comfortable with me once they've heard my story.

All told, Simms made it evident that her personal empathy, coupled with over 20 years of professional experience, informs how she shows care and constructs her transformative leadership role. She has moved from a teacher's assistant to a school administrator during her career, teaching and leading in both highly resourced, predominantly white schools and under-resourced, African-American schools. Hence, Principal Simms has gained a special purview of poverty, race and the educational pipeline.

Principal Simms' discussion of her philosophies and practice revealed that she is a critically self-reflective leader who is conscientious about the societal and educational inequities affecting African-American students experiencing poverty. During her tenure at Horizons Elementary School, she was intent on bringing about student progress by tending to their instructional, relational, cultural, community-based and survival needs as transformative African-American leaders have historically done (Alston, 2005; Dantley, 2005; Franklin, 1990; Murtadha & Watts, 2005; Wilson et al., 2013).

Standing ground amidst criticism and keeping faith

While Principal Simms explained that she has accrued respect and a positive reputation among most students, teachers, parents and

community members for her leadership efforts, she also acknowledged her critics. Simms said she has been criticized before by a few educators, including her former district supervisor, for spending too much time off the school site. Simms explained that she spent such time making home visits, visiting hospitalized staff and, shopping for food, clothes and basic supplies for students [some of which stocked the school community pantry she established at Horizons, and others were directly sent home to students with dire need]. She discussed being reprimanded by her former district supervisor for these types of activities and said she did not apologize. Instead, she appealed to her supervisor and stressed that Horizons lacked a social worker for several months during the school year in question.

Simms also said she preferred to complete some community-based tasks herself vs. delegating them to a staff member and contended that such efforts should be a routine part of leadership. She maintained, 'I'm offended that I'm expected to put the social part of the job on the backburner', referring to her offsite, community-based work. Simms indicated that she took professional risks at times to continue such activities. Other researchers have related this type of risk-taking to the resistance of educators involved in 'community leadership' (Alston, 2005; Miller, Brown, & Hopson, 2011) and/or 'community-based advocacy' (Khalifa, 2012, p. 453).

After leading Horizons Elementary School for six years and working in her previous school district for 22 years, Simms left to accept an administrative post in another region of the US. At the time, she said she hoped the move would lead to more personal and professional growth opportunities. She further explained that she left in the midst of experiencing continued conflict with her district supervisor who seemed personally sympathetic to her goals yet obligated to adhere to district-wide expectations. Simms explained that she relied on her spiritual faith to get through this tough time and referred to her faith influencing her overall leadership. She stated:

My faith is who I am and it influenced every decision I made. One of the reasons I took my job to heart was because there were needs that had to be met for children who were needy. Making decisions to buy clothes, purchase food for families, take parents to doctor appointments, help parents get heaters, lights, etc. was ministry for me. During my final days at that school, I was told to just focus on the academics and leave the social needs alone. It was at that point I knew my assignment was up.

Like prior research on African-American transformative leaders, data point to Simms considering her leadership practice and critical care as spiritual work (Alston, 2005; Dantley, 2005; Wilson et al., 2013; Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009). The moral imperative she felt to 'minister' to the needs of students fuelled her perseverance until she felt stifled by the system. She characterized the school district she moved to as more progressive and reiterated her dedication to helping transform schools highly impacted by poverty.

Discussion

Like traditional caring theories, Simms' account of her practice relates to having empathy, showing compassion and striving to build trust (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2002). Data, however, also suggest that she went beyond those deeds to acknowledge power dynamics, commit to advocacy and resistance, and contest the racial and socio-economic biases she perceived as jeopardizing the educational success and fair treatment of her students. Her counter narrative signals that she explicitly enacted critical care as part of her transformative leadership. Doing so helped bring about double digit growth in a once severely low-performing school. Her leadership goals were also inextricably tied to empathy and the experiential knowledge she has from once being 'one of those kids'. Indeed, having a similar background as the students one serves can be wonderful for fueling an educators' empathy (Tillman, 2004); yet, it is not a prerequisite for being a successful leader in high-poverty contexts. Possessing strength-based views of students and a willingness to seek common ground to build relationships, however, is needed (Dantley, 2005; Franklin, 1990; Murtadha & Watts, 2005; Wilson et al., 2013), and that is a large lesson from this study.

Simms stressed strength-based ideologies of students and she conveyed awareness that offering thoughtful teacher development is essential to principals being effective instructional leaders (Gooden, 2005). She also communicated awareness that teachers' perceptions and ideologies about their students—for better or worse—translate into how they regard and teach them (Cooper, 2003; Howard, 2008; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). This finding aligns with the standard practices of other transformative African-American leaders serving predominantly African-American student populations (Wilson et al., 2013). Like past proven leaders, Principal Simms also maintained a holistic view of student achievement that expanded beyond a narrow focus on testing and she advocated for students' welfare in the face of systemic injustice (Wilson et al., 2013).

Indeed, Simms was willing to take risks to serve African-American students experiencing poverty in ways she felt were best, even when her community-based strategies were not condoned by district authorities. Her risk-taking was a form of advocacy, resistance and a type of 'cultural communion' that can prompt school community members to support leaders as they strive towards reform (Wilson et al., 2013, p. 122).

Khalifa (2012), for example, conducted a two-year ethnographic study of an effective, community-oriented principal who served an urban high school and improved students' academic outcomes. Based on his finding, he suggested that community-based activities are essential to leaders' efforts to build trust and rapport. Khalifa rationalized:

... scholars often situate school leadership behaviors exclusively within a school context. Yet, I would argue that visiting a church, fighting for the rights of marginalised and abused children in the community, leading a rally against racism in schools, or going to homes on personal visits all contribute to student success in school and therefore *are* leadership behaviors ... (461)

Similarly, Principal Simms viewed completing such tasks as vital to being transformative and a moral obligation reflective of her faith. Other leaders who may broadly conceptualize transformative leadership as a moral imperative rather than spiritual practice can prove professionally effective as well (Gardiner et al., 2013).

Through standing her ground about the importance of her community-based activities, Simms challenged the system that employed her. Such risk points to the importance of an educational leader assessing when it is necessary to compromise and go along with undesirable expectations or mandates to maintain her/his job and when standing one's ground despite possible reprimand or termination is needed to maintain her/his integrity. Calculated risk-taking is therefore imperative. Altogether, data from Principal Simms help show the interconnected and multidimensional nature of transformative educational leadership and critical caring processes. The study signals that the two concepts and their resulting ideologies and practices go hand-in-hand particularly when they are linked by one's courage and moral resolve to risk disrupting set norms.

Of course, leaders like Simms can pay emotional, financial and/or professional costs for their risk-taking. They can be penalized for exuding the same type of bold risk-taking that effectively improved their school's academic record. Redressing inequity sometimes involves pushing ideological, curricular, organizational and/or political boundaries that district officials may prefer to keep intact. Yet, as a national report on principal leadership stated, 'there are virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around without intervention by a powerful leader' (National Association of Secondary School Principals & National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2013, p. 3). The report went on to recommend that district-level administrators offer principals a blend of guidance and autonomy. I assert that without that proper blend transformative leaders who critically care about students and, at times, challenge the status quo to foster students' growth might exit their position, districts and/or the profession.⁷

Exiting her leadership position at Horizons Elementary School proved to be Principal Simms' preferred response to her perceived lack of district backing. Her story aligns with Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis (2010) conclusion that it is impractical and debilitating for leaders charged with turning around challenged schools to lead without adequate trust, independence and district encouragement.

No doubt retaining transformative leaders also relates to sustaining school progress and nurturing children whose sense of being cared for by stable figures in their life can only help their academic performance. Leadership retention is even more complicated when issues of race, poverty, segregation and shifting school and district status are considered. Additional studies that explore these contexts and retention matters are greatly needed.

Today, Principal Simms remains a transformative leader in a diverse public school district. Though she faced a plethora of challenges at Horizons and prior district conflict, she has maintained her commitment to enacting critical care for the sake of social justice. Her story has been

offered to inform and at best inspire educators of all backgrounds to engage in such efforts.

Conclusion

The counter narrative of the US Principal Alana Simms pertains to many complex contexts and structural inequities that affect students and schools highly impacted by poverty. Data offer insight from her perspective and experience as an influential, transformative educational leader who enacted critical care to redress such inequities. Her counter narrative is in sync with critical race methodology in that it draws from experiential knowledge, asserts a structural critique of race and class inequity and highlights strength-based perceptions of students of colour (Stovall, 2006). Consequently, it counters master scripts that lack structural analyses, rest on deficit-based characterizations of such students and doubt their chances for success (Howard, 2008; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Widespread social and political reform is needed in many areas to reverse the educational neglect that students experiencing poverty face, including those like the African-American youth that Simms served. Simms' counter narrative provides an example of how educational leaders can do their part to make change. Simms indicated that her approach to transformative leadership involved enacting critical care that encompassed empathy, compassion, advocacy, systemic critique, perseverance and risk-taking for the sake of advancing student learning and social justice. Her counter narrative evokes the language of critique and possibility that critical care and transformative leadership warrant (Cooper, 2009a, 2009b; Quantz et al., 1991; Shields, 2012), and it signals her commitment to staying the course of educational reform.

Findings from this study indicate the value of explicitly infusing theories of critical care into transformative leadership frameworks and practice. Additional research in this area is warranted along with the continued recognition that transformative educational leadership is political, cultural, emotional and strategic work that is individually undertaken yet in need of systemic support.

Notes

1. The terms African-American and black are used interchangeably in this paper.
2. These results are based on data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the Program for International Student Assessment.
3. Tillman's use of 'transformational' aligns with what I and Shields (2003, 2012), describe as 'transformative.'
4. The names of the principal and school in this article are pseudonyms.
5. Such emphasis and incentives are partly linked to a US federal funding programme called Race to the Top, of which North Carolina was one of only 12 US states to benefit from starting in 2010. See <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/rttt/>. Additional information on North Carolina principal evaluation can be found at <http://www.ncpapa.org/forms/evaluation%20instrument.pdf>.
6. For more discussion of politics of containment theories in education, please see Ruffin-Adams and Wilson (2011). Advocacy-based partnerships, special education, & African American families: Resisting the politics of containment. In S. Auerbach (Ed.), *School leadership for*

authentic family and community partnerships: Research perspectives for transforming practice (pp. 78–97). New York, NY: Routledge.

7. Researchers have examined the exiting trends of social justice oriented teachers who felt unsupported in their schools. There may be some parallel or very similar exiting pressures that principals experience. See Quartz et al. (2008).

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