"We Don't Got Time for Grumbling": Toward an Ethic of Radical Care in Urban School Leadership

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Abstract

Purpose: This article presents a case study of a successful Black male public urban school principal, offering a counterstory to discourses of failure in urban schools. I build on scholars' work in critical caring, the Black principalship, and radical hope to call for an expansion of narrow frameworks of effective school leadership to include an ethic of *radical care* within urban school leadership. **Method:** This study represents a counterstory in the tradition of critical race theory, centering the voice and perspectives of a Black male urban school principal. Using ethnographic research methods, this case study was based on prolonged and embedded engagement in the field including observations, informal and formal interviews, and document review. Data were collected and analyzed over a 2-year period. **Findings:** Five components of effective school leadership emerged from analysis of the data that, taken together, can be described as a *radical care* framework. These components include the folowing: (a) adopting an antiracist, social just stance; (b) cultivating authentic relationships; (c) believing in students' and teachers' capacity for growth and excellence; (d) strategically navigating the sociopolitical and policy climate; and (e) embracing a spirit of radical hope. **Conclusion:** In addition to highlighting the power of counterstories in educational leadership research, this study reinforces the critical need

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for leadership preparation that is grounded in antiracism and social justice, and comprises all aspects of an ethic of radical care. Furthermore, the study points to the need for targeted recruitment of Black and Latinx school leaders, particularly in urban contexts.

Keywords
critical care, Black principals, social justice leadership, antiracist leadership, counterstory

> We don't got time for grumbling or excuse making or pointing fingers . . . we're 400 years behind! Do you know what I'm saying? We're trying to catch up! We gotta have a laser like focus on empowering and improving the conditions of the students and the families that we serve. That's it.
>
> —Principal Byron Johnson

Exploring examples of effective urban school leadership is a critical imperative if we are to disrupt the predictable ways that urban schools fail Black and Latinx students (DeMatthews et al., 2017; Khalifa, 2018). Though research underscores the need for effective leadership in schools, gaps in the knowledge about the dispositions and practices of effective leaders who specifically work in urban school settings with high concentrations of low-income Black and Latinx students persist (Carter et al., 2013; Vasquez Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Effective leadership is especially crucial in underresourced urban schools where factors such as poverty and institutionalized racism systematically limit opportunities for young people of color. Urban school districts with large numbers of Black and Latinx students are more likely to have higher rates of teacher turnover, student mobility, less experienced staff, poor instructional and curricular coherence with standards, among other challenges (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Additionally, urban school districts are more likely to have higher incidents of suspension and expulsion, and the school-to-prison pipeline is a well-documented byproduct of systemic inequities (Dancy, 2014; Genao, 2015; Sealey-Ruiz, 2011).

This article contributes to research that addresses effective urban school leadership and moves away from a dominant narrative of failed schools and leadership. Here, I examine the leadership practices of a Black male principal heading a Bronx, New York public middle school that is deemed "successful" by multiple measures, including standardized test scores and surveys of key stakeholders. I build on scholars' work on critical caring in leadership and call for an expansion of narrow frameworks of effective school leadership to

include an ethic of *radical care* as an essential component of leadership, and examine how it is operationalized in a transformative way.

I first examine the bodies of literature in both caring theory and the Black principalship, making explicit connections between these areas of research and outlining a framework for radical care. Then, I draw on my ethnographic case study of Mr. Byron Johnson,[1] a Black male principal, to highlight how leadership practices grounded in radical care might be considered as a model of successful school leadership. In the tradition of ethnography, I provide thick descriptions of the school and community context as well as examples of Mr. Johnson's leadership. I conclude with a discussion of the potential implications of using a framework of radical care in leadership for preservice and in-service leadership training and development.

Conceptual Framework

The Notion of Caring

Nel Noddings (2005) described caring as a relational dynamic between people, where the carer gives to the cared-for, and the cared-for receives and is open to the caring. Valenzuela (1999) extended caring theory in her description of the schooling experiences of Mexican-American students to distinguish aesthetic from authentic care. Drawing from her ethnographic case study of a Houston, Texas high school, Valenzuela described the school as being subtractive, in that it emphasized an aesthetic form of caring with a hyperfocus on academic achievement and other kinds of performative behaviors related to school outcomes, consequently subtracting the inherent cultural wealth of students. Conversely, Valenzuela argues, authentic care is predicated on reciprocal relationships between schools, and the students, inclusive of their families and communities. It is grounded in affirming the whole student and their inherent knowledge and promise. Valenzuela (1999) asserts that an ethic of authentic care involves "deliberately bringing issues of race, difference, and power into central focus" (p. 109). That is, authentic caring is both fueled and reinforced by an acknowledgement and action around the politics of power and its impact on the schooling of children who have historically been oppressed.

Critical Care and Hope

Other scholars have extended the concept of caring, theorizing that "critical" care should adopt a more equity-focused stance, and specifically draw considerations of race into the act of caring. In Rolón-Dow's (2005) study of

Puerto Rican girls' experiences in a northeastern middle school, she draws from the theoretical traditions of critical race theory and LatCrit to highlight the limitations of caring theories that fail to acknowledge race and racism. She argues for a *critical* caring praxis that both encompasses the tenets of authentic care, but that also "seek[s]to understand the role that race/ethnicity has played in shaping and defining the sociocultural and political conditions of their communities" (p. 104). Moreover, like other critical care scholars, Rolón-Dow advocates for schools to organize in response to systemic and institutional racism in all aspects of their operation.

Likewise, Antrop-Gonzalez and De Jesús (2006) argued that critical caring in schools is enacted through explicit organization of the formal and informal structures of schooling and curricula that are responsive to race/ ethnicity. In their studies of two Latinx-based community schools, they highlight the potential of schools that are organized along the principles of critical care. Extending prior research in this area, Antróp-Gonzalez and De Jesús' framework explicitly embeds high academic expectations along with strong teacher-student interpersonal relationships while also privileging the students' and communities' funds of knowledge, or "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills" (Moll et al., 1992, p. 133), which schools typically do not value. Their research suggests that students in schools whose teachers adopt a critical care approach to schooling, particularly in communities serving historically marginalized youth, have the potential to be more successful.

Relatedly, Curry's (2016) anthropological study of a high school rite of passage program for Latinx students exemplified what she called *authentic cariño* (Spanish for caring), a tripartite concept that incorporates critical caring, as well as familial and intellectual caring. Like scholars before her, Curry's conceptualization of caring adopts a critical stance that is responsive to the historical and sociopolitical factors that affect communities of color. However, she adds to this framework by incorporating a nurturing element that resembles familial relationships, whereby teachers' care about the moral, social, and personal development of their students. Drawing from Antrop-González and DeJesús' (2006) and Rivera-McCutchen's (2012) research, Curry further argues that "intellectual cariño" highlights the importance of rigorous curricula coupled with necessary supports to help students achieve academic success.

A related concept to critical care is Duncan-Anrade's (2009) framework of critical hope, which calls for active engagement with and confrontation of the injustices often faced by marginalized communities of color. He draws distinctions between a critical approach to hope and a "false hope" that is lacking a sustained and honest critique of historical and institutional inequities.

Critical hope, he argues, has three core elements which operate in tandem: material hope, Socratic hope, and audacious hope. Ducan-Andrade suggests that hope is crucial to any form of sustained resistance against inequality, and must be explicitly described as a part of a framework of critical care.

Care in School Leadership

School leadership researchers have highlighted "care" as an important quality, and underscore the importance of cultivating caring relationships and environments (Louis et al., 2016; Marshall et al., 1996). Caring leadership is noted as being especially important in schools with large concentrations of students who have been historically and systematically marginalized (Tichnor-Wagner & Allen, 2016). Similar to teacher research literature, there is an emerging, more nuanced strand of research in leadership that underscores the power of *critical* care (Bass, 2012), particularly among Black educators. Building on womanist forms of caring used by Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) and Price (2009), other scholars in the field of leadership (see Bass, 2012; Wilson, 2016; Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010) highlight examples of practitioners whose leadership is firmly rooted in a tradition of critical care that is connected to the community in ways that extend beyond superficial forms of caring.

Critical care in school leadership is described as going beyond traditional conceptions of care relating to trust and relationship building, and is grounded in confronting and dismantling historically inequitable systems in schooling (Rivera-McCutchen, 2019; Wilson, 2016). For example, Wilson's (2016) in-depth study of an Black woman principal underscores the importance of leadership practices that account for the racialized experiences communities of color face in their schools. The principal described in Wilson's (2016) study embodied a critical caring leadership practice that went beyond establishing trusting and compassionate relationships "to acknowledge power dynamics, commit to advocacy and resistance, and contest the racial and scoioeconomic biases she perceived as jeopardizing the educational success and fair treatment of her students" (p. 572). Critical care in leadership, therefore, is an active stance that is concerned with challenging inequitable educational systems that can potentially harm the students it purports to serve, as well as building strong relationships with parents and children.

Black Leadership and Caring

Similar to critical care, Black leadership is described as being deeply concerned with the emotional and academic success of the child, and by

extension, with the community and, indeed, the race (Dantley, 2009; Price, 2009; Siddle Walker & Archung, 2003). In her comprehensive review of research on the Black principalship, Tillman (2004) highlighted four distinct themes that emerged: "(a) resistance to ideologies and individuals opposed to the education of Black students; (b) the academic and social development of Black students as a priority; (c) the importance of the cultural perspectives of the Black principal; and (d) leadership based on interpersonal caring" (p. 104).

The Black principals featured in Tillman's (2004) review of literature took it on themselves to instill cultural pride in school communities and recognize the importance of providing socioemotional supports to respond to the needs of historically marginalized people, while insisting on academic excellence. Dantley (2009) articulated this balance well:

> [African American] leaders have had to work to achieve the objectives and goals of the school and district. At the same time, they have had to contextualize that work in a commitment to uncovering and transforming perceptions and behaviors of injustice, discrimination, and marginalizations. These school leaders have labored with a higher goal in mind. They have to keep the agenda of ending racial discrimination in the school and community as an ultimate priority. (p. 53)

Foster and Tillman (2009) echo this sentiment, noting that African American school leadership is complex and multilayered, taking into account the historical and community contexts, all while addressing the holistic needs of the student. Moreover, "major and preeminent African American goals of racial uplift, progress, and achievement" are at the core of their leadership work (Foster & Tillman, 2009, p. 2).

Lomotey's (1987, 1993) research on the Black principalship also emphasized these ideas; the Black leaders he studied fundamentally demonstrated a deep commitment to teaching Black children, a profound understanding of the communities they served, and unwavering high expectations for students and staff alike. Lomotey's (1993) research pointed to two identities Black school leaders tended to occupy: the bureaucrat-administrator, with a focus on the technical aspects of administration, and the ethnohumanist, with a focus on the "the individual life chances of their students and with the overall improvement of the status of African-American people" (p. 396). Lomotey noted that these roles are often intertwined, with the leaders moving in and out of each role all the time.

Gooden (2005), drawing on Lomotey's theoretical framework, studied a Black male high school principal with a predominantly low-income Black

student population. In addition to successfully leading the school's day-to-day operations, the principal in Gooden's study also embraced the ethnohumanist role and was deeply committed to the success of the children and, by extension, to the larger community. Furthermore, he sustained strong personal relationships with the students and their families, and showed compassion for the challenges they faced. However, compassion did not supplant his confidence in the students' ability to reach academic success and excellence.

These themes are echoed in Khalifa's (2012) study of a Black male principal leading an urban high school that served primarily Black students who had previously been excluded from or unsuccessful in other school settings. Khalifa attributed the school's success in large part to the principal's deep connections with the community outside of the school. His interest in the students was academic and personal, and all of his work centered on improving the educational experiences of the students.

Radical Care as a Proposed Framework for Leadership

I build on prior caring theorizing and earlier research on Black school leaders, and propose a framework of *radical* care for guiding urban school leadership practice. Similar to Valenzuela's (1999) and others theories of authentic and critical care, along with caring described in the literature on Black school leadership tradition, radical care is informed by the historical and systemic legacy of racism in urban education. Yet an ethic of radical care in school leadership requires an explicit focus on creating equitable and socially just learning environments for students and their communities, combined with a sense of urgency and a spirit of radical hope, a notion inspired by an essay penned by Junot Díaz (2016)[2] in the wake of the 2016 presidential election. In the essay, Díaz (2016, para. 8) calls for *radical* hope, arguing that it

> is not so much something you have but something you practice; it demands flexibility, openness, and . . . "imaginative excellence." Radical hope is our best weapon against despair, even when despair seems justifiable; it makes survival on the end of your world possible.

Embracing a spirit of radical hope is crucial to any form of sustained resistance against inequality, and must be explicity part of a framework of radical care, alongside four other components: adopting an antiracist, social just stance; cultivating authentic relationships; believing in students' and teachers' capacity for growth and excellence; and strategically navigating the sociopolitical and policy climate. Radical care is essential in urban school

leadership because it calls for principals and other school leaders to thoughtfully and persistently challenge existing structures that reproduce inequality while embracing a spirit of radical hope.

Method

This study represents a counterstory in the tradition of critical race theory (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), centering the voice and perspectives of a successful Black male principal, a narrative that is still underrepresented in the research literature. Counterstories are defined as "writing that aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 159). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) have argued that counterstories in education research serve powerful theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical purposes. At its core, counterstorytelling centers voices and perspectives from the margins and provides an opportunity to learn more deeply from often silenced yet essential figures in education (Wilson, 2016). Moreover, counterstories provide a methodological tool for highlighting structural inequality and racism.

Drawing from the tradition of critical ethnographic research (Madison, 2020), this case study privileges the voice and experiences of a Black male principal, and was informed by my embedded and prolonged engagement in the field. An ethnographer "participates in the "daily routines of [a] setting, develops ongoing relations with the people in it, and observes all the while what is going on" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 1), making meaning through the generation of extensive fieldnotes and analytic memos (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The use of case study is appropriate here in that I sought to highlight the day-to-day leadership activities of a Black male principal, where the uniqueness of both the participant and the practices were deserving of focused study (Yin, 2013).

Entering the Field

This study began when I first met the school's principal, Byron Johnson, when he was supervising a leadership intern. In addition to discussing the performance of my student, an intern in his school, our conversation broadened to topics related to equity in education. The school's name, School for Social Justice Middle School (SFSJ), suggested that the educators in the school might be attuned to issues of justice and equity, and my conversation with him seemed to confirm this assumption. I examined the school's standardized test data in English Language Arts and math to ascertain if the

school was "successful" by metrics commonly used for accountability. Although these data do not always paint a complete picture of the success of a school, SFSJ's school environment survey data for students, teachers, and parents suggested that the school was effective on multiple measures. For example, in 2015, SFSJ had the highest improvement on combined standardized math and English Language Arts exams than any other school in New York City. Furthermore, teachers and parents consistently gave the school high marks on the learning environment survey in the areas of academic expectations, communication, safety and respect, and communication. I asked Johnson to participate in an earlier interview study of principals leading Bronx schools with a social justice orientation (Rivera-McCutchen, 2014). He agreed and our research relationship began. The present study grew from that initial conversation in his office, evolving from an exploration of what social justice leaders say about addressing prejudice and inequity, to examining a specific case of one such leader's day-to-day work (Yin, 2013).

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study were drawn from extensive ethnographic field observations collected over a 2-year period, constituting of roughly 200 hours in the field. In addition, I conducted two 60-minute, semistructured formal interviews at the start and midway point during my research, both of which were transcribed. I based the protocol for the first semistructured formal interview on the principal interview instrument that was developed for the International Successful School Principals Project (ISSPP; Jacobson & Day, 2007), and included questions such as the following: What has been your contribution to the success of the school? How do you know? How have you acted to bring about success? (Evidence/concrete examples); How do you know that you are doing a good job?

The ISSPP principal interview protocols were specifically designed to elicit successful principals' articulations of their beliefs about effective practices and dispositions. Since Johnson's school was deemed "successful" on a number of metrics including academic outcomes and growth, as well as school climate, the protocol was a good fit. Second, since the ISSPP protocol has been employed in numerous qualitative studies, both in the United States and internationally for a number of years, I deemed the protocol to be trustworthy for gathering data. The second semistructured formal interview was more open-ended in nature; its purpose was to explore Johnson's personal experiences with his family and schooling, factors that I learned were highly influential in his formation as a school leader.

In addition to the formal interviews, I shadowed Johnson each week, observing him as he went about the daily work of the principalship, walking through and observing classrooms, and leading professional development and staff meetings. While shadowing him, we had numerous informal conversations, which were documented in field notes. I also sat in as Johnson facilitated the school's weekly Friday morning "Community Circles," where all students and staff gathered in the auditorium for events and discussions focused on various themes, and the closing always included public "shout outs" (acknowledgements) and apologies. In addition, I observed his meetings with superiors and district-level personnel.

The NYC Department of Education's (NYCDOE) Institutional Review Board rejected a proposal to include student, parent, and teacher participants in the study. While this represents a limitation, a substantive review of documents, including the NYCDOE School Survey data for SFSJ between 2011 and 2016 mitigated this limitation to a certain extent and were used to triangulate the data. Beginning in 2007, the school survey has been administered to all NYC public school parents and teaching staff, as well as students in Grades 6 to 12. Between 2011 and 2014, the survey was organized around four general areas: academic expectations, communication, engagement, and safety and respect. Beginning in 2015, questions on the survey has been organized around the Framework for Great Schools (n.d.), and focuses on five comprehensive key areas: rigorous instruction, supportive environment, collaborative teachers, effective school leadership, stong family-community ties, and trust. Responses for each survey item, disaggregated by stakeholder group, are reported. Furthermore, comparisons between the school and citywide trends for all K-12 schools and for all middle schools are also reported annually and are publicly available of the NYCDOE's website.

In addition to the surveys, regular "Johnson Bulletins," a memo the principal sent to the staff, also mitigated the limitations of the NYCDOE IRB restrictions on the study. The bulletins provided additional insights about how he communicated his vision for the school to the staff. I also reviewed Johnson's blog posts, letters to the editor and media coverage about him, which were publicly available. All of these documents provided data related to Johnson's leadership in action. The majority of the data that I present in this article are not verbatim quotes; rather, they are drawn from the observational and analytic field notes, and are naturalistic in nature.

The process of data collection and analysis for this study was recursive and iterative (Miles et al., 2013), with the data informing the analysis and the analysis informing ongoing data collection. Throughout the course of my 2 years of research, I took field notes during observations documenting the events and interactions, and regularly wrote analytic memos to begin making

meaning of the data. Although research memos represented an early form of meaning-making, formal coding began after my second year of research. I employed NVivo 11 software to deductively code the interview transcripts, field notes, staff bulletins and e-mails that Johnson wrote, as well as my analytic memos. Initial codes included terms like *collective responsibility*, *pushing the kids*, *developing teachers and self*, and *no excuses*, among others.

The data-driven coding process was iterative. That is, the data were deductively coded and recoded multiple times, with codes emerging first from the data, after which all of the codes were printed, cut, and manually organized and grouped into like-categories. The second coding cycle (Saldaña, 2012) resulted in a subset of codes which, when compared with the literature discussed above, were subsequently arranged into an explanatory schema that informs the basis of this article. The multiple data sources and types, coupled with ongoing analytic memoing and member checks, triangulated the data, adding to the trustworthiness of the study.

Positionality

As a critical ethnographer (Madison, 2020), I am drawn to counternarratives of success to better understand the underlying qualities and characteristics of effective principals leading in urban schools, and to do so in a way that honors the individuals who have opened their leadership practice to scrutiny. I position myself as a researcher who practices culturally relevant and sensitive research, which Tillman (2002) highlights is not about remaining "objective"; rather the goal is to work in union with participants to tell a purposeful story. During the course of my research at the school, I also served as a resource, participating in a career day event, making connections between Johnson and my institution, and coplanning a "Race in Education" conference with him—organized in response to the nonindictment of police officers who killed Michael Brown and Eric Garner. As a coplanner, I also used my professional network to bring in some of the speakers and presenters.

Background

SFSJ is located in the northeast section of the Bronx, in an educational campus that also houses an elementary school and a district-wide school designated for students with severe cognitive and/or emotional disabilities. This public middle school is surrounded on one side by numerous auto body and mechanical repair shops, and on the other by private single and multiple-family homes and a public housing development, where many of the school's students reside. Nearby, a highway and a major road leads to a

wealthy suburb, with high residential taxes and a small, highly successful school district.

SFSJ serves children in Grades 6 to 8, and is designated a zoned school with open admissions. Unlike many other Bronx schools where Latinx students are in the majority, at the time of this study SFSJ's student body comprised 62% Black, 34% Latinx, and 3% White, with 82% of the roughly 250 student population qualifying for free or reduced lunch. While the number fluctuates slightly from year to year depending on student enrollment, at the time of this study, the school was staffed by 18 teachers and 5 paraprofessionals and aides. Like most schools in NYC, Johnson also employed a parent coordinator who served as a liaison between SFSJ and the students' families and caretakers, as well as a social worker, school counselor, and a substance abuse prevention and intervention specialist. The majority of the faculty and staff members were Black and Latinx, closely reflecting the student body demographics.

SFSJ occupies the fourth floor of the building, and a visitor headed to the main office will be greeted by a sign listing the school's values. Hanging nearby is a prominent large white sheet with the words, "We will not be silenced," spray-painted in red and black; this banner was used during an antipolice brutality rally that students, staff and teachers staged under Johnson's leadership. There are two long hallways in the school, and the walls in each corridor are lined with countless large images of influential Black and Latinx figures from all walks of life, ranging from U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor to rap artist Jay-Z. Flags from all over the world, as well as college banners also decorate the walls. A similar aesthetic and message can be found in the principal's office where a mural fills an entire wall, painted in shades of gray and black by a teacher, that depicts Tupac, Nas, KRS-ONE and other notable hip-hop artists, against a backdrop of the NYC skyline. One science teacher's classroom door has a sign posted on the door proclaiming, "To my students, in this class you are scientists. You are explorers! Remember you are respected. You are listened to. I believe in you. I care about you. You will succeed."

Byron Johnson, the founding principal of SFSJ, lived with his grandmother and his two sisters in the East River Projects on the upper east side of Manhattan in the East River Houses, one of New York City's public housing projects. At 7 years old, after the death of his grandmother, he and his sisters began living with their mother on the upper east side of Manhattan. He recalls having a great deal of freedom because his mother worked long hours to provide a stable home for him and his siblings. As a result, he had the time and freedom to explore his new community, and he was exposed to its racial, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. In contrast to his early years living in the

projects, Johnson recalled that this new environment helped him understand that the world was bigger and had more to offer than what he had perceived from his earlier vantage point in the insular projects.

Still his early experiences in public housing and later run-ins with law enforcement as a young Black male informed his relationships and interactions with the SFSJ school, as did his recollection of his lack of engagement in school, from kindergarten through college. His mother, though busy with work, told him that he could be whatever he wanted to be, and he recalled, "I believed it when she said it." That is, although Johnson felt and could understand the potentially limiting effect that the projects and negative interactions with police officers had on him, he attributes his approach to education and leadership to his exposure to a larger world coupled with his mother's dogged belief in his ability to do anything. Not finding a passion in school until he began graduate studies in counselor education led him to envision a school that provided students with an environment they could be passionate about.

Prior to founding the school, Johnson was a math teacher at a large elementary school located in a low-income community with a large African and Latinx immigrant population. During his 5 years at that school, Johnson also worked as a "Crisis Intervention" teacher, a role he likened to a dean of behavior. During his time at the elementary school, Johnson returned to school and earned his master's degree and certification in school counseling. He was subsequently hired to work as a guidance counselor in a small high school located within one of the largest high school campuses in Manhattan that had a reputation for violence.

In 2008, as a fellow in the New Leaders for New Schools alternative leadership credentialing program, Johnson wrote a proposal for a school that reflected his development and experiences as a NYC public school student, and which was rooted in social justice and action, along with cooperative learning. Subsequently, Johnson was offered the opportunity to open the middle school in the fall of 2009. Over the years, SFSJ developed into a school whose students were performing well academically and socioemotionally.

Findings

In the following sections, I use Johnson's leadership practices as an illustration of the radical care framework: (a) adopting an antiracist, social just stance; (b) cultivating authentic relationships; (c) believing in students' and teachers' capacity for growth and excellence; (d) Strategically navigating the socio-political and policy climate; and (e) Embracing a spirit of radical hope. While an antiracist and social justice orientation are at the core of radical care in leadership, the framework should be understood as holistic

and synergistic. I disentangle them for the purpose of clarity and discussion but, in practice, these elements are part of a larger whole and operate in concert with each other.

Adopting an Antiracist, Social Justice Stance

At the core of Johnson's practice of radical care in leadership was an abiding commitment to antiracism and social justice (Agosto & Karanxha, 2012; Dantley & Tillman, 2009; Horsford, 2014; Khalifa et al., 2016; Marshall & Oliva, 2009). As a Black man, Johnson saw himself in his students and he was acutely aware of how structural racism affected him and the community SFSJ served. In our informal interviews and in his talks with his staff that I observed, he frequently and passionately cited the disparity in both resource distribution between schools like SFSJ when compared with private, mostly White schools as a by-product of structural racism. Moreover, Johnson noted that schools in more privileged and White communities organized student learning in ways that encouraged choice and exploration, while low-income schools in communities of color emphasized standardization and testing. In a blog post that he wrote about New York's statewide testing policies in Grades 3 to 8, Johnson called out the impact of the tests particularly in Black and Latinx communities, likening the testing to "modern day slavery." He continued, "[it] is designed to continue the proliferation of inequality in our society. . . . A democracy only works if there are people and systems in place that support our most vulnerable toward upward mobility." Here, Johnson drew parallels between the impact of testing and test prep with other kinds of physical and emotional violence in communities of color. Johnson's primary critique was that the high-stakes testing environment stifled curriculum and limited opportunities for exploration and innovation in schools primarily attended by Black and Latinx students. This was a stance that fueled his work inside and outside the school.

   Johnson's commitment to antiracism and social justice was also evident in actions he took soon after several unarmed men were killed by police officers. Seeing both himself and his students in the deaths of Eric Garner, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, Johnson organized a rally, mobilizing students and staff who wanted to participate in a walkout. Not stopping there, he searched for ways to catalyze structural changes in education and reached out to a broad network of school leaders and began conversations about organizing a full day professional development conference around issues of race and racism in schooling. In December 2014, after the officer who killed Eric Garner in Staten Island was not indicted, he e-mailed the following message to a number of NYC school

leaders and educators calling on them to enact a plan that included the following:

> Ensure that all of our youth as soon as they turn 18 are registered to vote; Analyze current politicians and corporations and determine, who is righteous and for us, and who is against us; Organize communities to demand a school curriculum rooted in the beauty of black and brown history and culture; Provide parenting courses and in home mental health supports to "at-risk" parents and families; Build and strengthen nursery and day care services in the most needy communities to close the language and executive function gap; Determine the short and long term needs of our communities—THINK GLOBALLY; Exercise our second amendment rights. I'm meeting with a group of principals to discuss next steps. I would love for you to join us.

After several meetings, Johnson and other leaders began planning for a Bronx Ed Conference. The conference was held at SFSJ on a district-wide professional development day in January 2016, with staff members from several area schools in attendance. It included a keynote by Dr. Bree Picower who spoke very directly about structural racism in schools, and workshops grounded in social justice and antiracism. All attendees were given black t-shirts, with the words "Bronx Ed Conferene" and "#BlackLivesMatter" written across the front and back.

In fact, discussions about racism and social justice were already prominent at SFSJ prior to the education conference. In addition to being integrated into the curriculum, race and racism were topics frequently covered in the weekly Friday morning Community Circles, attended by all students, teachers, and staff. Furthermore, though a partnership initiated by Johnson with Hip Hop Saves Lives, a nonprofit organization, students addressed police brutality, economic, and food justice, among other topics relevant to their communities, and developed hip hop music videos posted on YouTube to address them. One video, for example, features students going through their daily routines with their hands up to emphasize the normalization of the threat they faced as people of color from police officers, while rapping the lines "we will not be silent, we are unarmed civilians, no need for the violence" (Hip Hop Saves Lives, 2014). In other scenes, the students are seen marching through the streets with signs that say, "Power to the People" and "End Racism," among other phrases.

Theoharis (2008) notes that social justice leadership "forces the concerns and needs of marginalized students to the center of the education mission" (p. 11). Johnson's deep commitment to disrupting the status quo was informed by his antiracist and social justice orientation, and he worked fervently to organize his school to support this vision of schooling.

Indeed, as the remaining sections suggest, Johnson actively cultivated a school environment and community that were explicitly antiracist and focused squarely on social justice.

Cultivating Authentic Relationships

In keeping with the traditions of critical caring (Valenzuela, 1999) and Black principals who came before him (Foster & Tillman, 2009; Lomotey, 1987, 1993), Johnson saw himself as an integral part of the community and views the children as his own. On most mornings when I was at the school, Johnson was stationed at the front entrance to the auditorium, welcoming his students by name, giving them "pounds" and high fives, or affectionately rubbing their heads as they go by him. He checked in with the children as they walked by, asking them, "How's your mom doing?" and inquiring about their siblings or grandparents, as well.

Johnson's connections to students were not limited to those morning exchanges. Throughout the day, he could be found sitting at a desk in the hallway, rather than being holed up in his office. In fact, any visitor familiar with the school knew better than to look for him in his office. If he was not in the hallway, they would likely find his laptop and phone there, suggesting that his absence from that space was temporary. On several occasions, when I stepped off the elevator, Johnson was seated at one of the two small desks located to the right and the left, positioned so that he was visible to students and them to him as they walked by in-between classes. Over the course of my data collection, our formal and informal interviews most often took place at one of those two desks. As students walked by, he would ask, "You good?" and give them a pound. He would cajole them as they lagged between periods. The students laughed with him and the ease of the relationships between Johnson and them was evident. Students were not performing in front of an authoritative stranger; rather they were being themselves, safe in the knowledge that they were cared for unconditionally. Johnson's concern and interest were for the whole individual, and he used his time in the hallways to connect with them, leveraging his interpersonal relationships to help students achieve success.

Beyond academic achievement, Johnson wanted his students to accomplish a holistic form of success. During one informal interview, "I always said when I opened up a school, I was going to hire folks who can support a socio-emotional development piece and make sure that that's explicit as a part of our action for kids." Not surprisingly, he made hiring choices that were atypical of many schools. Rather than employing another administrator at a significant expense, Johnson's school was richly staffed with individuals

who were committed to attending to the socioemotional well-being of the children. SFSJ had a social worker, a school counselor and most recently, a parent coordinator who had a background in community organizing. Coupled with his own background in school counseling, SFSJ was intentionally staffed with individuals who could attend to uplifting the whole child and, in turn, the community.

Likewise, Johnson's relationships with his staff and teachers appeared to be equally authentic and personal. He interacted with teachers and staff easily, and likewise, they with him. During one conversation we were having in the hallway, a staff member came by and asked us if we wanted coffee from the bodega (corner store). I declined, but Johnson accepted, thanking her and, because he did not have cash on him, said, "See if you can get Laura or Linda or somebody. Morris! Morris owes me money. They all owe me money! Thanks for stopping." They both laughed easily as she left to get the coffee. This exchange was typical of the interactions between Johnson and his staff. As with the students, teachers engaged with him on a human level and with mutual respect, and there was no sense that they are performing for him when he walked into classrooms. A number of the staff had been in the school since its inception and more recent additions blended into the community seamlessly. Surveys of teachers conducted annually by the NYCDOE supported my observations, and consistently underscored the strength of the professional relationships between Johnson and the teachers. During the time I was collecting data, for example, teachers consistently agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements included on the survey:

1. School leaders communicate a clear vision for the school
2. The principal encourages open communication on important issues
3. The principal makes clear to the staff his or her expectations for meeting instructional goals
4. The principal is an effective manager who makes the school run smoothly
5. I trust the principal at his word
6. School leaders give me regular and helpful feedback about my teaching

Similarly, teachers consistently indicated that they felt safe and respected.

Most important, Johnson modeled authentic relationship building for his teachers and staff. New community members learned from his example, and veteran SFSJ educators' capacity for building authentic connections with the school community members was further reinforced through his modeling. With Johnson, they participated in the weekly Friday morning

Community Circles, where relationships and connections between staff and students were affirmed, and important issues were explored as an entire school community. He had seen Community Circles implemented in another school, but did not like the way it resembled a traditional school assembly meeting. Instead, Johnson explained, he envisioned something "along the same vein as a Native American pow wow. Like a celebration of our culture and community, and a chance to reinforce our value through videos, shout outs, public apologies and a few words from me." The space was sacred and provided an opportunity for the community to come together as a whole. Johnson told the student body once during an early Friday morning Community Circle, "The teachers push you 'cuz they love you. They'd push you even if there wasn't a [high stakes] test." He often shared that he loved these students as if they were his own biological children, and he treated them accordingly, showering them with fierce love and affection, and expecting greatness in return.

Not surprisingly, the teachers and students' contributions to the Community Circle demonstrated the depths of their authentic relationships. During one Friday morning Community Circle, one student, TeSean, stood up and shared a heartfelt contribution: "I'd like to shout out Ms. Ronalds for being there almost every time we need her." A little later on, another teacher shouted out TeSean, sharing that he had been "having a hard time when he switched classes, but he's focused now and helping others." These Circles served as a way to build community, and to strengthen the relationships.

Believing in Students' and Teachers' Capacity for Growth and Excellence

Crediting his mother for this belief in his own capacity for growth, Johnson actively sought out new knowledge about all things education and jumped at opportunities to push the boundaries of what is possible in public education. He visited public and independent schools, locally and in other states, to find innovative practices that he might adopt at SFSJ. Johnson partnered with the Leader in Me program to become one of the first middle schools to adopt their leadership program, and attended tech-ed conferences to seek out strategies for building students' 21st-century skillset. He was not afraid to experiment with these new ideas, and did not shy away from the potential logistical challenges, such as scheduling, that might arise from innovating. Most important, his belief in the capacity to learn and grow was not limited to himself. Like many of the Black leaders described in the literature (Tillman, 2004), he believed it of his staff, and equally important, he believed it of his students. In pushing his teachers to rise to excellence, he was cultivating a

culture of excellence for SFSJ students, as well. This underlying belief drove his leadership practice.

An energetic user of various social media platforms, Johnson was excited both about the networks he continued to build and the opportunities for personal growth and, by extension, the growth of his school's community. During one of our conversations, he explained his enthusiasm over Twitter to me, growing animated as he shared, "I'm connecting with dudes from like Columbia, South America, and Ohio and here up in Canada and having the same conversation on our education. . . . It's just powerful and the potential is just powerful!" This was just one example of how Johnson explored opportunities to grow and excel as an educator and a leader, as well as how he could transfer these opportunities to his teachers and students. He frequently engaged in conversation with other educators, virtually and face-to-face, who were also interested in exploring problems of practice, such as debating the value of homework, for continuous learning and growth. This was a highly reflective stance and it informed Johnson's daily leadership practice in the school. Indeed, a key feature of his leadership practice involved expecting his faculty to also be reflective and to consider how they might change education for the betterment of all of their students.

Johnson pushed his staff to create learning experiences for students that went beyond the traditional paradigms of education. Given the increased standardization of education and teaching, with the proliferation of accountability mandates that have had a chilling effect on ingenuity and innovation (Baker, 2012), Johnson's message to his teachers pushed back on this trend and aimed to redirect their energies. For example, at the time of this study's inception, New York State teachers' and principals' annual ratings were based heavily on students' performance on highly contested standardized tests. Rather than default to the traditional "drill and kill" paradigm that were part of the practice of many schools serving communities similar to SFSJ, Johnson's emphasis was on encouraging teachers to focus on developing authentic and engaging learning practices that promoted the development of critical thinking skills. In one of his bulletins, he wrote,

> I need for all of us, the entire staff to become visionaries. To become thought leaders and design thinkers regarding the world around us. I need for all of us to reimagine school, community, and society as we see fit. Media and peers have programmed us to focus on what's wrong in society and become stagnated in the what and why of the world. Constantly asking others to give us things. We must mobilize, relentlessly, individually and collectively, toward making sense of and understanding big ideas so that we can create what we need. Our kids and community need it more than ever, and we must lead them.

Recognizing that test preparation would not yield excellent teaching and learning, nor would it create rigorous and high expectations for the students, Johnson eschewed test prep, and messaged the value of reflection and growth in his bulletins.

Johnson was not unconcerned with students progressing from grade to grade; rather, he was more concerned with the individual life chances of their students and with the overall improvement of the status of his Black and Latinx students. Here, his administrator responsibilities were tempered by what Lomotey (1993) described as an "ethnohumanist" role, or the personal connections to the needs of students beyond the bureaucratic demands. Johnson's approach was an embodiment of radical care in that he was less concerned with propping up a testing policy that was actually harmful to students of color; he was fiercely protective of their opportunities to learn authentically.

When, in spring 2014, the NYC Schools Chancellor mandated that elementary and middle schools develop alternative promotional criteria based on student portfolios in response to the growing discontent around the state exams, Johnson seized the opportunity to encourage his staff to teach with a different goal in mind. He wrote in his bulletin, "We now have the freedom to truly meet students where they are and consistently teach and assess the 21st century skills our students will need to be happy and productive global citizens." Rather than being hyperfocused on test performance, Johnson encouraged his staff to take advantage of the new policy and create educational tasks that both addressed individualized student learning needs and provided them with necessary skills for future success. Here, he pushed staff to do right by the children (Khalifa, 2012), creating a caring climate that addressed the students' need to be prepared for the world beyond SFSJ.

Although Johnson's enthusiasm for constant growth and revision of practice seems refreshing in a mandate-driven school era, many of his staff members seemed weary of the frequent changes. In one example, I sat in on a meeting when Johnson proposed a huge overhaul of the school's traditional programming, which included block scheduling for English Language Arts, and integrating substantive literacy components in all other content areas. The social studies teachers and others raised several concerns, including the proposal that they be required to teach literacy. A few mentioned that they kept being asked to change their curriculum, one noting with frustration, "How can I get better if I never get the practice?" Still others noted their concern that the changes would affect their test scores, and consequently, their annual evaluations. In response, Johnson argued, "What I'm hearing is 'the test, the test.' That will keep us bogged down! These are opportunities to be awesome!" Though the teachers seemed reassured that he had a plan for

this major change in the school, the underlying frustration around shifting sands of the school under his leadership persisted.

After the meeting, Johnson reflected on the resistance that surfaced, and decided that he needed to provide substantive and meaningful resources to help teachers make the shift and become exemplary. Like the principal in Khalifa's study (2012), Johnson came to understand that he needed to actively support teachers in order to help the students achieve success. He admitted to me that he was beginning to recognize that encouragement, alone, was insufficient. After speaking with me for some time about why he was not seeing the changes for which he was advocating, Johnson decided that the teachers needed models and resources to make the kinds of shifts in teaching that he was hoping to see. He began providing teachers with tangible materials for them to use. On one visit to the school, I found Johnson sitting at his desk in the hallway with his laptop and numerous books and stacks of stapled packets of various sizes crowding the table, floor, and window sill behind him. An NYCDOE district staffer that was assigned to SFSJ was working alongside him. Johnson explained that they were working to develop curricula for all of the content areas, and they were drawing from multiple resources, including New York State's curricular materials, to provide all of the necessary materials teachers would need to teach their class.

Johnson's support for teachers went beyond the tangible resource provisions, however. A large part of how he supported their growth was through his own transparent reflective processes. Weekly "Johnson Bulletins," and other communications shared with staff typically include examples of how Johnson likes to think through tough ideas. In one bulletin, for instance, he explicitly pushed his staff to be reflective and consistently adopt a growth mind-set, and further listed some strategies he uses to further his thinking. He wrote,

> What I'm strongly encouraging first and foremost is for us to be reflective. Reflect on our daily practice, reflect on our pedagogy, and reflect on our mind-set. Am I a "yes and" person or a "yeah but" person. Have I internalized a growth mind-set? If so, how do I maintain it? If not, how do I get there? Blogging/writing is a great reflective tool and very therapeutic. Staff needs to push each other towards these ideas, so that we can sky rocket toward transforming education as we know it.

Johnson pushed the staff to reflect on the extent to which they were open to possibilities. He also expected his staff to push each other to adopt a growth mind-set and to constantly reflect on their practice. In essence, he expected them to lift each other as they climb.

The push for cultivating a school-wide culture of high expectations was also evident in full staff and smaller team meetings. During one team meeting session, Johnson instructed the teachers to examine each other's lesson plans and discuss a series of reflective questions designed to improve the lesson so that it encouraged deeper thinking and reflection among the students. He asked, "Does the lesson have varied questions/prompts? Is there space for higher order thinking discourse among students? Where is there evidence of student metacognition? Where in the lesson are students formulating questions?" This kind of framing was part of the normal culture in the school and underscored the high expectations for reflective teacher practice; my observations of the meetings suggested that the staff members typically engaged in discussions around the questions with fidelity. Going beyond providing a list of recommended questions for guided discussion, Johnson expected that these questions be answered, and held his staff accountable by requiring that the minutes from these discussions be submitted to him after the meeting or by asking staff members to send him responses to the reflective questions he asked them to consider.

A critical component in his leadership was that he did, in fact, expect his teachers to be reflective, to try to grow as pedagogues. Johnson took a "no excuses" stance when it came to this. In one communication to the staff, he wrote, "Mediocrity is totally unacceptable. You all are too capable for that! Master the Danielson [evaluation] rubric, and leverage your colleagues and your union for support. Build your professional learning network outside of school. Excuses and blame are dead in our school." Although this language is tough, embedded within it was Johnson's belief that everyone, including his teaching staff, had the capacity for growth and greatness. This communication was not intended to be punitive; rather, it was an emphatic declaration that after a year of adjusting to a new teacher evaluation tool, Johnson believed that teachers were ready to be pushed to their growing edge.

Yet Johnson's high expectations for his staff was, at times, met with what he perceived to be an unwillingness to attempt to take risks, and this frustrated Johnson. In one conversation with me, he shared an example of one teacher who complained about not receiving a share of new laptops Johnson had acquired for the school. In recounting his interactions with the teacher, he noted that previously the teacher had shown little initiative around integrating technology in their practice, even after being supported in the area. Johnson explained that whereas he typically prefers a more positive approach to support teacher growth, in this case he was compelled to shut the teacher down with a direct and stern conversation.

Johnson was keenly aware of tension he had to manage between encouraging his staff's growth through self-reflection and self-discovery while also

moving at a slower pace than he was accustomed to, like in the example above. This arose from a sense of urgency Johnson felt around getting it—the teaching and learning—right for his students. It also drove him to put his teachers on notice that after the first year of the new teacher evaluation rubric, he would be a "tougher grader." His motivation was to inspire his teachers to excel in their practice. As he explained in the Johnson Bulletin, "The only way for us to be our best is if I push you to be your best." Johnson's view was that if he did his job well, the staff would lead themselves, and each other, to high standards of practice. This, Johnson believed, would lead to growth and excellence for students, as well.

Strategically Navigating the Sociopolitical and Policy Climate

Having higher expectations for staff and students, and demanding innovation is risky because it represents a challenge to the status quo. Being able to strategically navigate a volatile bureaucratic landscape without losing sight of a vision of schooling that is grounded in antiracism and social justice (Dantley, 2009; Lomotey, 1993) is another essential aspect of radical care. Since Johnson viewed the education landscape as full of possibilities for liberation of marginalized communities, he was less inclined to feel constrained by policy and context than others might. He navigated the political and policy landscape strategically and deftly, while at the same time not sacrificing his ideals. When I asked him how educational policy affects his leadership, Johnson chuckled and responded, "policy doesn't drive my behavior." He further explained, "I follow my experience and my heart and my common sense . . . there have been times where we have bagged some of the policy that's *bestowed* on us to get certain things accomplished." Johnson chuckled, and continued, "We've been creative in stretching the letter of the law. We work more with the spirit of the law than the letter of the law." Rather than comply without question, Johnson's comments suggest that his decision-making around policy implementation was guided first by the well-being of his students.

Another example of Johnson's navigation of the tension between policy demands and socially just practice was when he started to actively engage in public dialogue about the opt-out movement with parents, students, and community members in New York City and across New York State. Although the NYC schools' chancellor had made it clear that parents were to be discouraged from opting out of the high stakes NYS exams for Grades 4 to 8 (deMause, 2016), Johnson felt compelled to help parents and community members make informed decisions about the tests. While he did not expressly tell parents to opt-out at that time, Johnson did actively and creatively resist what he

perceived to be a harmful policy, providing parents with information about the consequences high stakes tests were having on their children and schools. Presenting in forums across New York City and State, Johnson shared data about the impact of high stakes testing, particularly among students of color, students with disabilities, and students who are emergent bilingual. He carefully explained how state-level assessments provided too little information too late to make substantive adjustments in instruction that lead to academic improvement. Moreover, Johnson emphasized how the focus on high-stakes testing led to decrease opportunities for creative endeavors, like the arts and play, particularly in persistently underresourced schools.

Here, Johnson's actions aligned with important leadership principles on the importance of navigating a political and policy landscape nimbly (Lomotey, 1993), while at the same time refusing to sacrifice his ideals. Johnson's emerging resistance and activism aligned with conceptions of critical care in that he aimed to protect his students, and all students, from the harm of misguided and dangerous education policy. Johnson believed that high stakes tests were more harmful than beneficial. This belief disallowed him from silently accepting a flawed accountability policy that harmed his students.

Embracing a Spirit of Radical Hope

Johnson's struggle for social justice and equity is energized and renewed by an urgent and emphatic sense of possibility, or radical hope. His propensity for asking reflective questions led him to explore and hope. He frequently asked, "what if . . . ?" in his talks with staff, his social media interactions, and in conversations with me. This led Johnson to regularly make ambitious statements about his vision of education, for example stating, "I believe we can use education to change the world. I believe we can end poverty, wars, and hate in our lifetime." While this may seem like naïve idealism, he made these kinds of statements frequently and without a hint of wryness or disbelief. Johnson embraced a spirit of radical hope that guarded against the "despair of hopelessness" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 185).

Having a firm vision in "what could be," therefore, drove Johnson to believe that anything was possible; rather than seeing constraints, he was solution-oriented. Where a void existed, Johnson fervently believed that there was a fix waiting to be created if only one dared to dream it possible. He reminded his staff of this frequently, pushing them to see themselves as "design-thinkers." In one of his weekly "Johnson Bulletins" to the staff, he reminded them, "Teachers (all staff) have to be creators as well. We cannot just follow a textbook created by some company that doesn't know us, the

community we serve, or our kids." He encouraged them to "use resources from a variety of sources to design authentic, rigorous, and rich learning experiences." He pushed teachers to be imaginative in their planning, while reminding them to design instructional experiences that were responsive to the community they served. Still a persistent challenge for Johnson was recognizing that others did not always share his sense of urgency, not knowing when to push and when to let it go.

Knowing the students and designing school so that it met their needs was critical in his leadership practice and embodies a spirit of radical hope that spurred Johnson's leadership actions. An example of this was in his implementation of two 60-minute "Genius Hour" blocks each week for students to pursue "passion projects," under the guidance of teachers. He firmly believed that students needed the school to create opportunities for them to explore topics of their choosing. His unrestrained optimism of what *could* be, spurred him to move from idea to reality. Despite the hesitation from some skeptical staff members, SFSJ eventually did radically alter their schedule to integrate the Genius Hour blocks. Not only was this a countercultural shift for a traditional school; it was absolutely unheard of for an urban middle school facing state testing to devote time to topics not covered on the test.

Discussion

In this ethnographic case study of Johnson, a Black male urban school principal, I highlight how his leadership practices, which are grounded in the five components of radical care, might be considered as a model of successful school leadership. While the study is limited in that I focus only on Mr. Johnson here, there are valuable implications that emerge from this case. First, Johnson's counterstory provides a powerful example of the utility of this method in creating space for narratives of success that are often missing or erased. As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) have suggested, counterstories, like Johnson's, offer an alternative to master narratives of effective leadership practices that are divorced from race, racism, and social justice. By privileging Johnson's voice and practices as leader, we are able to reject harmful urban school failure tropes and embrace an alternative truth.

Futhermore, in addition to providing a methodological example of the power of counterstories in educational leadership research through Johnson's narrative and experiences, this study presents a compelling argument for leading with an ethic of radical care, a framework that represents an integration of distinct yet related areas in the research literature:

critical care, Black principalship and radical hope. Johnson's counterstory highlights how adopting an antiracist and socially just stance, cultivating authentic relationships, believing in students' and teachers' capacity for growth and excellence, strategically navigating the sociopolitical and policy climate, and embracing a spirit of radical hope can lead to upliftment and success for historically marginalized students of color. The study provides us with valuable insights regarding the need for principals who embody an ethos of radical care in their leadership practice in high-need urban schools that bear resemblance to SFSJ.

Like the Black principals described in Gooden's (2012) and Khalifa's (2012) research, Johnson's practice underscores the need for strong leadership that is supportive of his or her staff. Moreover, just as students need support to meet challenging standards, leaders must ensure that teachers are also provided with the necessary resources and supports in order to reach rigorous expectations. Johnson modeled this when, during the course of this study, he realized that he needed to correct his approach and provide much more scaffolded support for his teachers in order to meet the expectations he had outlined for them. To be clear, Johnson's practices also highlight the imperative of removing ineffective teachers who are not rising to the high expectations that their students deserve.

Johnson's leadership practice also underscores the notion that policy compliance and adoption must be approached with careful consideration. School leaders must evaluate policy mandates to determine if the unintended consequences might do more harm than good. They must navigate the policy contexts in order to determine how best to comply with the spirit of the law while not putting their school in harm's way (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). As Lomotey (1993) noted, the principal must move fluidly between their roles as bureaucratic administrators and ethnohumanists to make decisions about policy that are what is best for the community they serve. Johnson's example of both administering the state assessments, while also being outspoken about the limits of the tests are an example of him navigating both of these roles. This "double-consciousness" (Dantley, 2009) is a critical skill that school leaders practicing radical care display.

Moreover, this study also underscores the imperative of increasing the ranks of Black and Latinx school leaders in communities with large numbers of students of color. Principals who are members of racialized and historically marginalized groups are likely to have common experiences based on their race and/or ethnicity. These leaders may see themselves in their students and the community, and may be more driven to move the school in a direction that is more committed to building authentic relationships with school community members, in alignment with a radical care framework.

Tillman (2004) and Horsford (2011) have reminded us that Black leaders, in particular, played a critical role in the betterment of the Black community, and their displacement post-Brown had a deleterious effect on those communities. Their limited presence among the ranks of school leaders today is one of the byproducts of Brown, and must be directly addressed (Horsford, 2011, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; López, 2003; Watson, 2013).

Greater efforts to attract, support, and retain principals of color in high-need urban districts is also essential. Yet, regardless of race, research suggests that turnover is a persistent problem in these communities (Béteille et al., 2011). In NYC alone, where a huge reform initiative was undertaken to improve schools, mostly located in Black and Latinx neighborhoods, one report indicates that 60% of the schools have experienced turnover in their leadership since the program's initiation (Zimmerman, 2017). Johnson's counterstory indicates that he had a high level of energy that is hard to match, and further underscores the importance of supporting leaders like him to prevent burn out and turnover. Finally, this research is instructive in that it reinforces the critical need for leadership preparation that is grounded foremost in antiracism and social justice (Gooden & Dantley, 2012; McClellan, 2010), but also explicitly addressing all aspects of a radical care.

Like the critical care in leadership described by Wilson (2016), an ethic of radical care in leadership is exemplified by leaders explicitly acknowledging and addressing the ways in which race and structural racism affects and limits opportunities for Black and Latinx communities. Radical care, like critical care, builds on the legacy of Black school leadership; however, radical care distinguishes itself from critical care in its underlying call for urgency in all dimensions of leadership practices - as illustrated by Johnson's leadership. When Johnson emphatically asserted,

> We don't got time for grumbling or excuse making or pointing fingers . . . we're 400 years behind! Do you know what I'm saying? We're trying to catch up! We gotta have a laser like focus on empowering and improving the conditions of the students and the families that we serve. That's it.

he was articulating the urgency around leading with an ethic of radical care.

Conclusion

Like the Black leaders and other educators who practice critical care described in the research literature, Johnson's leadership practice has an urgency about it that is directly tied to circumstances surrounding schooling

for Black and Latinx youth. Many urban schools are underresourced, as are the communities they serve. While he is clear about the broad reach of systemic racism, he also believes in the power of education to give students access to opportunities that they might not otherwise have. The energy in Johnson's leadership practice is contagious, and this is exactly what is needed to keep the school community energized around the work despite significant challenges, which, at times, seem insurmountable. It is essential, then, that the school leader maintains a level of intense and almost unbelievable optimism if they are to lead.

The field of educational leadership can learn a great deal from Johnson's enactment of an ethic of radical care, particularly as we are firmly entrenched in an national climate that is antipublic education and where inequitable resource distribution has exacerbated opportunity gaps in schools. Schools need leaders who practice radical care to build the internal capacity of the school, while simultaneously rejecting educational policies that are harmful to the most underserved communities. To do this, admission into educational leadership programs must be grounded in a recruitment and selection process that serves to identify candidates who demonstrate some of the same qualities Johnson exhibited in his leadership, working to develop their capacity to lead with an ethic of radical care. Likewise, faculty in educational leadership programs must also commit to enacting radical care in their own teaching practices, serving as examples to their students.

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Notes

1. I use pseudonyms throughout the article.
2. Díaz's history of abuse toward women is reprehensible. I cite him here with a great deal of hesitation solely because his essay introduced me to the concept of radical hope that I draw on for my framework of radical care.

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