

African American Leaders' Perceptions of Intergroup Conflict

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Educational organizations that reflect a diversity of class, gender, socioeconomic status, and nationality establish a complex set of interactions that have implications for how groups are formed. This article examines how African American principals perceive intergroup conflict and acknowledges their leadership concerns in working with European American participants in desegregated suburban schools. Findings from this study revealed these “color-conscious” leaders were cultural integrators and consensus builders who had acquired an understanding of diversity of groups and were able to establish leader–member trust. Whether due to their ethnic backgrounds or leadership capabilities, these African American principals often struggled with how to respond to the needs of both minority and majority groups in dealing with intergroup conflict.

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Leaders of color who interact with multiple groups must deal with a followership that may not be supportive (Chemers, 1993). Research reveals that followers' perceptions of a leader of color are often checked against prototypes. That is, leaders of color undergo scrutiny to determine their capabilities and professional contributions. Consequently, there are concerns about how minorities in majority organizations are promoted to leadership positions. Cox (1994) contended that in organizations, properties of intergroup conflict will influence how the leader and majority and minority members will perceive and respond to each other. Therefore, this article examines how African American school leaders (assistant principals) in suburban desegregated schools perceive and negotiate sources of intergroup conflict with their European American school participants. The researchers specifically seek to (a) understand how African American assistant principals perceive intergroup conflict as it affects their ability to lead and (b) acknowledge the challenges that African American school administrators face in leading a predominantly European American group of school participants.

Theoretical Framework

Intergroup Relations in Organizations

According to Alderfer and Smith (1982), many organizations are comprised of two types of groups: identity groups and organization groups. An identity group is one whose members share common biological characteristics; participate in equivalent historical experiences, at times subjected to certain social forces; and hold similar worldviews (Alderfer & Smith, 1982; Nkomo & Cox, 1996). When people enter organizations, they bring with them their identity groups, which are based on variables such as ethnicity, sex, age, and family background. An organization group is one in which members share common organizational positions, participate in common work experiences, and have similar organizational views (Alderfer & Smith, 1982; Nkomo & Cox, 1996). An important factor in understanding intergroup relations in organizations is that membership in identity groups is not independent from membership in organizational groups. Thus, certain organizational groups tend to be filled by members of particular identity groups.

Intergroup theory contains a complex set of interactions for understanding the effects of diversity of identities in the workplace. Identity group and organizational membership are seen as highly related in their effects on social relations in organizations (Nkomo & Cox, 1996). When

people of different subgroups interact with each other, there is increased potential for intergroup conflict (Ayman, 1993). Such conflict is often viewed as negative because it requires majority workers to adjust their patterns of interaction with minority counterparts. The leader strongly influences relations among groups, establishes the emotional climate of the workplace, determines how roles are structured, and plays a pivotal role in how intergroup conflict is addressed within the organization (Alderfer, 1977).

Intergroup theory, leadership, and diversity are three areas that are invariably connected. Mainstream leadership theories view leadership as intrapersonal (personality characteristics) and interpersonal (exchange between leaders and followers) but rarely intergroup. When intergroup interactions are implied, the focus is on the organizational group rather than on identity groups. Thus, in traditional hierarchical organizations composed of homogeneous groups, a leader may effectively lead a group because the values, needs, and expectations of the followers are similar. Therefore, if leaders do not recognize the legitimacy of social identity groups, they will not effectively deal with issues of gender, race, and other demographic dimensions.

In contrast, diversity leadership perspectives look beyond leaders and followers and organizational identities to social, racial, and cultural issues that are outside organizational boundaries, but affect leader-member interactions inside the organization (Chen & Van Velsor, 1996). Thus, intergroup theory in leadership research may provide a better understanding of the dynamics of diversity leadership. Diversity issues highlight the complexities of subconscious or unconscious psychological forces that affect people's perceptions of leaders of color (Chen & Van Velsor, 1996). Consequently, the result of misconceptions of majority followers is that leaders of color face an uphill climb in leading an organization. The issue becomes more complex due to the interdependence of leader and follower when the leader is a person of color.

Sources of Intergroup Conflict

Research on intergroup theory in organizations has identified a number of characteristics that create opposing interests among groups. These sources of intergroup conflict are not dependent on particular groups or the specific setting where the relationships occur (Alderfer & Smith, 1982). The analysis of intergroup relations is in part the study of power relations and the analysis of conflict among groups. Unequal power in intergroup relationships occurs when individuals who share a common condition induced

by actions of a high-power group form an association as a way to improve their status (Alderfer, 1977). Relations among groups may determine the effectiveness of a group in achieving its objectives (Alderfer, 1977).

In the context of intergroup conflict, there are conditions that influence how the leader and majority and minority groups will react to each other (Cox, 1994). A leadership model that recognizes the effects of power differences, inequality, and conflict that originates from both identity and organizational groups will assist leaders in negotiating, creating consensus, and building alliances among groups (Chen & Van Velsor, 1996). Various researchers have identified multiple sources of conflict and refer to how one condition of discord seems to affect another (Alderfer, Alderfer, Tucker, & Tucker, 1980; Alderfer & Smith, 1982; Cox, 1994). These properties include incompatible goals, competition for resources, cultural differences, power differences, conformity versus identity, group boundaries, affective patterns, cognitive formations, and leadership behavior. These properties are often the cause of tensions between organizational and identity groups. (See Figure 1 for definitions of intergroup properties.)

In educational settings, intergroup theory applies to school participants because of the nature of the organizational context among groups. Because schools reflect the diversity, class, gender, socioeconomic status, and nationality of their students, it results in a complex set of interactions for how groups are formed. Much is written on how majority schools maintain a strong organizational culture through the process of selecting teachers. In schools, a dominant culture exists that imposes beliefs about appropriate ways of educating children. According to Lewis (2001), the fostering of a "color-blind" ideology allows most teachers to see themselves as racially neutral and deserving of their own success and not responsible for the exclusion of others. Consequently, an organizational culture exists that is maintained but is not reflective of its diverse student body. Thus, the theoretical framework of intergroup theory is useful in understanding sources of conflict that occur in suburban desegregated schools due to issues of diversity and the leader's ability to establish an inclusive school culture.

Methodology

Data Collection

This qualitative study used intensive open-ended and follow-up interviews for data collection. Due to the related experiences of these participants, it resulted in a single case analysis. For this study, a case study is defined as a single entity, a unit of similar participants within the bounded

Competing Goals: Differences among majority and nonmajority workers result in competing goals that are influenced by norms, goal priorities, and work styles among and between these groups (Cox, 1994).

Competition for Resources: Allocation of resources that are influenced by embedded organizational issues such as acknowledgment of group identities in regulating jobs, training priorities, and expansion of resources (Cox, 1994).

Cultural Differences: Cultural differences between group members of different groups occur due to misunderstanding and misperceptions (Cox, 1994).

Power Differences: Majority groups hold advantages over minority groups in the power structure of the organization. Intergroup hostility between groups results in a disagreement over the redistribution of power. Minority group density in organizations poses a threat to the existing power structure and provides an opportunity for those who are powerless. The types of resources that can be obtained and used differ among groups (Alderfer & Smith, 1982; Cox, 1994).

Conformity versus Identity Affirmation: The tension between majority and minority group members over the preservation of minority group identity (Cox, 1994).

Group Boundaries: Both physical and psychological group boundaries determine group membership. Transactions among groups are regulated by variations in the permeability of the boundaries (Alderfer & Smith, 1982).

Affective Patterns: The severity of intergroup conflict relates to the polarized feelings among the groups. Group members split their feelings so that positive feelings are associated with their group and negative feelings are associated with other groups (Alderfer & Smith, 1982).

Cognitive Formations: Due to group boundaries, power differences, and affective patterns, group members develop their own language, influence members' perceptions of subjective and objective criteria of other groups and work efforts, and transmit propositions about other groups in relation to their own group members (Alderfer & Smith, 1982).

Leadership Behavior: The group leader reflects the boundaries of groups and how they will interact. Members of a similar group reflect power differences, affective patterns, and cognitive formations of their group in relation to the other group. The role of the leader in a network of intergroup relations determines the intensification of intergroup conflict (Alderfer, 1977; Alderfer & Smith, 1982).

Figure 1. Properties of Intergroup Conflict

context of suburban desegregated schools (Merriam, 1988). Several African American leaders in suburban schools were contacted regarding their willingness to participate in this study. It is important to note that the representation of African Americans and other ethnic minorities in leadership positions was very low, and in some districts there were no minorities at all. Thus, the sample consists of 4 African American assistant principals from suburban school districts who were interviewed on two separate occasions. The primary objective of these interviews was to understand

African American school leaders' responses to intergroup conflict that occurred as a result of cultural incongruities between them and their European American counterparts in these contexts.

Data Analysis

We used a qualitative thematic strategy of data analysis to organize and categorize the data. This inquiry process led to a single-case level of analysis in which the findings were aggregated to incorporate a thematic approach. This process allowed important themes and categories to emerge inductively from the data across cases. The findings from the assistant principals' interviews were clustered by key themes across schools and single cases. The researchers used the prior-research-driven approach to identify themes and coding process (Boyatzis, 1998). To establish the reliability of these assistant principals' perceptions of intergroup conflict, the data were analyzed using what Conrad (1982) called a *constant comparative method*. This coding process was constructed by comparing the assistant principals' perceptions with sources of intergroup conflict to determine how these principals managed their schools. The findings from this study closely followed the themes identified in sources of conflict between identity and organizational groups. (See Figure 1 for intergroup properties and Figure 2 for themes that emerged from the analysis of intergroup properties from this study.)

As a way to bring about a collective interpretation in the data analysis, the researchers perceived it was important for readers to understand the complexities in collecting and analyzing cross-cultural research. Stanfield (1993) argued that there are ethical considerations in researching people of color and their contexts. Because of cultural and class and gender differences, the collection and analysis of data require a special sensitivity about these discrepancies. Furthermore, researchers in mainstream disciplines rarely reflect on how their racial identities influence their interpretations of data (Stanfield, 1993). Cross-cultural interpretations of data must be sensitive to issues of race because this may prohibit an appropriate interpretation of the findings.

The interpretation of the data was a joint effort between a European American and a colleague of color to ensure a sound cross-cultural analysis. Developing more inclusive ways to analyze data entails that minority group members have insights about and interpretations of their experiences that are likely different than European American scholars (Andersen, 1993). This combined analysis was to ensure the validity and reliability of this qualitative study. In this cross-cultural analysis, each researcher

Incompatible Goals: Differences among majority and nonmajority workers result in competing goals that are influenced by norms, goal priorities, and work styles among and between these groups (Cox, 1994).

Group Boundaries and Cultural Differences: Cultural differences between group members of different groups occur due to misunderstandings and misperceptions that are related to the different worldviews of culture groups (Cox, 1994). Group boundaries are both the physical and psychological determinants of group boundaries used to determine group membership. Transactions among groups are regulated by variations in the permeability of the boundaries (Alderfer & Smith, 1982).

Power Differences: Majority groups hold advantages over minority groups in the power structure of the organization. The organization's culture that is shaped by societal culture and the organization's power holders determines the norms and values that define the power relations among groups in the organization (Ragins, 1995). Intergroup hostility between groups results in disagreement over the redistribution of power. Minority group density in organizations poses a threat to the existing power structure and provides an opportunity for those who are powerless. The types of resources that can be obtained and used differ among groups (Alderfer & Smith, 1982; Cox, 1994).

Leadership Behavior: The group leader and other group representatives reflect the boundaries of groups and how they will interact. Members of a similar group reflect power differences, affective patterns, and cognitive formations of their group in relation to the other group. The role of the leader in a network of intergroup relations determines the intensification of intergroup conflict (Alderfer, 1977; Alderfer et al., 1980; Alderfer & Smith, 1982).

Figure 2. Emergent Themes of Intergroup Conflict

analyzed and coded the data separately to protect its trustworthiness. To establish reliable and trustworthy interpretation of the findings, the researchers engaged in discussions about the coding differences in the cross-cultural interpretations of these participants' experiences (Merriam, 1988). Furthermore, there was a consistency of judgment among the researchers to determine code development and its application to data analysis (Boyatzis, 1998).

Data Sources

Districts and schools. This study took place in suburban districts that were participating in the city's metropolitan desegregation plan. The schools for this study were situated in multiple districts that were extensions of the more affluent metropolitan region. These districts were identified as having the most desirable elementary and secondary schools in the area. Although these districts were recognized for their academic quality and abundant resources, the neighboring inner-city schools did not share

similar expectations. Consequently, inner-city students, the majority of whom were African American, participated in the voluntary desegregation program. An overwhelming number of the students and teachers in these suburban and desegregated schools were European American, with a growing number of students of color and even fewer teachers and administrators of color. Discussions with school administrators from districts participating in the voluntary desegregation plan indicated that they attempted to hire teachers of color without much success.

The schools that participated in this research project were in suburban school districts. These schools accepted approximately 15% of the African American students from the court-mandated desegregation program. The proportion of teachers of color in these districts was less than 4%.

Assistant principals. In the initial design of the study, the researchers planned to include principals and assistant principals in the interviews. However, there were no principals of color in the participating school districts. Thus, we interviewed all of the African American assistant principals from these suburban schools districts. Out of the 4 African American assistant principals, there were 3 men and 1 woman. Three of the participants were at the high school level, and the fourth (a man) was based at an elementary school. All of the participants had approximately 3 years of experience as assistant principals in their schools.

To gain a clearer understanding of these assistant principals' leadership, specifically, how they managed issues of diversity in the workplace, it is important to understand how their cultural backgrounds informed their leadership practices. Many of these participants had similar experiences while attending integrated schools at both the public school and university level. Due to their upbringing, education, and general life experiences, these African American leaders all seemed to develop an empathetic orientation in meeting the needs of all their school participants. This awareness, mixed with their own experiences and understanding, resulted in these school administrators developing a sense of tolerance in the area of human relations. They were able to understand the dilemmas that both people of color and European Americans face in dealing with cultural differences among groups and their role in minimizing these dissimilarities.

Roger Winter¹ grew up in an urban neighborhood and attended an integrated school until the fifth grade. He shared that in elementary school he was academically successful because the competition in his classes kept him focused on his studies. On completion of his elementary

¹The names of the assistant principals used in this article are fictitious.

schooling, he was bused to a predominantly homogeneous European American school. During his years in high school, he experienced positive interactions and friendships with European American students. On graduation, he pursued his baccalaureate studies at a predominantly European American university. He studied journalism in college and became a sports writer for a local paper after graduation. After several years, he became "tired of this position." In his quest to "give back and work with African American children," Mr. Winter explored the possibility of coaching or substitute teaching. However, he was unable to secure a position in these areas. A personnel director recruited Mr. Winter to teach in a suburban school district. After teaching high school English for approximately 6 years, he was invited to apply for an administrator position in which he would be responsible for student management. Although he has played an important role to assist African American students navigate the maze of desegregated schooling, Mr. Winter expressed concerns about his own future in the district, especially opportunities for promotion.

Ralph Green was the only elementary assistant principal participating in this study. He received his elementary and high school education from mostly European American schools. After completing high school, Mr. Green joined the military, remaining there for 4 years. After his military experience, he attended a historically African American institution, where he received his teacher preparation training. Mr. Green began his teaching career in his current suburban school district. He taught in the district for 12 years before he was invited to apply for an assistant principal position at another school within the district. Mr. Green's scope of responsibilities includes student discipline, staff development, and community outreach. Like the other participants, he hopes to be an elementary principal in the near future.

Another participant, David Main, attended one of the most recognized preparatory high schools in the city. After completing high school, he attended a predominantly European American university at which he acquired his teacher preparation training. After his graduation from the university, Mr. Main applied for a teaching position at several suburban districts. He eventually took a position with one of the most prestigious suburban districts. After 2 years of teaching, he completed his master's degree in school administration. Although Mr. Main characterized himself as an excellent teacher, his ultimate goal was to be a school administrator. Therefore, after 3 years of teaching, he made the decision to leave the classroom. He interviewed in another suburban district for an assistant principal position at the high school level. Mr. Main was offered the position, which he has held for 2 years. He believes the principal at his high school has become his mentor.

The female assistant principal, Maxine Boyd, grew up in the rural south and attended mostly segregated schools. Ms. Boyd explained that she never had a White teacher until she entered college. She believes that African American teachers were important for her success and attributes their support to her aspiration to be a teacher. She attended a historically African American college in which she received her baccalaureate degree in teaching. After college graduation, she taught for 2 years in a rural community but soon became weary of teaching in a poverty-stricken area. She followed her family members to this city as part of the northern "Black migration." She obtained a teaching position within the city's schools and ascended through the ranks to eventually become an administrator. When the city implemented a policy that all administrators had to reside within the city limits (where she did not live), Ms. Boyd took a position in the suburban schools after 25 years of working in urban schools. She accepted a high school assistant principal position with a highly recognized suburban district. At the time of this study, Ms. Boyd had been in this position for 3 years. She noted that in her current administrative position, she spent most of her time with the "deseg" children who transferred to her district from city schools. Ms. Boyd struggled with how other administrators perceived her. She believed that there was an expectation that she was responsible for the African American students in her school. Although she enjoyed her role in the school, she often became tired of the stereotypes that confronted her on a daily basis. Of all of the participants, she noted the strains of feeling "out of place," yet needing to be there for the African American students.

Findings

An analysis of the assistant principals' perceptions and its relation to their leadership revealed four themes that were recognized as properties of intergroup conflict. These thematic interpretations included (a) incompatible goals among the assistant principals in leading the various school constituents; (b) problems of group boundaries and cultural differences in how they were perceived and their experiences with European American teachers' cultural differences; (c) power differences and how it influenced their interactions with teachers, parents, and other school administrators; and (d) the development of a color-conscious leadership in working with European American and African American teachers. (See Figures 1 and 2 for descriptions of intergroup conflict and themes.)

Incompatible Goals

In dealing with issues of diversity, various groups within a given organization may develop incompatible goals, which result in intergroup tensions. The data analysis revealed these school administrators struggled in their leadership with how to respond to incompatible goals between themselves and European American school participants. It was apparent that these school administrators were unable to shift the mind set of their school participants to accept issues of diversity in these schools. The incompatibility of goals and subsequent tensions for these school leaders emanated in the following areas: (a) the lack of commitment by their school participants to recruit teachers of color; (b) the lack of focus on the importance of diversity for both the African American and European American students; (c) their place as role models for both African American and European American students; and (d) the need for the assistant principals to prove their own worth within their schools.

The African American school leaders noted incompatible goals in their schools' lack of commitment to hire teachers of color. They eloquently expressed the importance that teachers of color played in the lives of all the students. Yet they met with resistance in their efforts to move their schools in this direction. These school administrators stated that their district often told them that they could not find "qualified minority" candidates. The male participants at both the elementary and secondary level noted that there was no district commitment at all to recruit teachers of color. Most agreed that none of their districts had identified specific strategies especially for minority teacher recruitment. It appeared that if people of color did apply, they were always met with a degree of hesitancy. The participants also noted that their districts were unclear on how to recruit for teachers of color, yet made little effort to assess the strategies they were using. This meant that personnel directors only went to teacher education programs at predominantly White universities and did not consider recruiting at historically African American institutions.

Of all the participants, Mr. Green was the most vocal in his attempts to get his district to recruit teachers of color. Mr. Green stated that when positions were advertised, he often identified several "qualified candidates" of color. However, he believed that his district put them through such intense scrutiny that they lost many candidates. Thus, he often was disappointed when he would review how many teachers of color were hired given the large numbers of available teaching positions. As he stated,

We approached our district with a list of minority newspapers, black colleges and of all the black fraternal organizations to recruit. Well, this

year I made phone calls to minority candidates from the HBCUs. Of the eight who applied, only one was hired. Why weren't the others hired? I mean they [principals in other schools] made the minority applicants go four or five times for interviews before they were hired. It's discriminatory. They have not made a commitment to hiring Black, minority people. They don't like to hear it, but I'll tell them that. I am constantly reminding them of that. I think if they had a choice, they wouldn't hire them at all.

The female African American assistant principal, Ms. Boyd, had a different perspective on her district's hiring practices for teachers of color. She believed that her district's commitment to hire teachers of color was in part due to the "vocal" African American parents who lived in the district. She believed it was an "appeasement" factor, in which administrators provided "lip service" but never changed their personnel practices. When the district did hire teachers of color, she believed they were hired only to teach "safe subjects" such as music and vocational classes. She also noted that her district was hesitant to hire teachers from the city schools because they "brought too much baggage" with them. As she noted,

This is a community where the minority population is growing. This is a community that is vocal. I have seen appeasement. I have seen minorities hired in areas that are nonthreatening such as the fine arts, vocational classes, or in one instance, we have one at the lower level in foreign language. Of course, none of them at the high school level. They feel that a Black coming in from the city brings certain baggage. This is just my perception, no one has verbalized this. They feel that Blacks from the city talk a certain way that wouldn't be acceptable with kids here. The community is very involved and there is a lot of pressure on who is hired and who is not. I have seen Black teachers come and go here.

Another area of incompatibility was in their schools' and districts' commitment to issues of diversity, their lack of understanding African American students' needs, and the compelling need to hire "role models" for these students. All of the participants believed that they always had to make issues of diversity and the focus on African American students a priority. All of the male African American participants stated the importance of having "Black males" at the school to assist in promoting positive images for their male African American students. However, for Mr. Main at the high school level, he was more frustrated because he believed his

presence as the "school's Black male" often jeopardized his relations with these students. Although he was able to negotiate effectively with the other African American students, he felt the distinct risk of alienating the other school participants. However, like the other participants, he felt a strong sense of conscience in needing to reach out and help the students of color, as this quote notes:

Most of the African American students here are in the basic level courses. They are perceived to be the behavioral problems of the school. They are looked at as the kids who are not willing to deal with assimilation, that is the perception. I am talking in generalities. The problem is at the high school level there is not much I can do at this point. I have been asked, being in suburban districts for the past five years, to save Black boys. I think what happens is people see me work with black boys who are on the right track and I am able to influence where those kids are going.

Although Ms. Boyd noted the importance of "role models" as well, she also was concerned about the lack of student activities for the African American students to promote a sense of cultural identity. She believed that not only are role models important, but that African American students need additional support through school activities and special historical events. When it comes to Black History Month, she was the only person who willingly accepted this responsibility. As she noted,

There is a lack of role models here. Role models stimulate self-esteem. Self-esteem enhances learning. It is not that a Black teacher or a White teacher can teach better. It is that a child sees someone who looks like them. They have a club [for African American students] here that brings in programs throughout the year. I am the only one who does things for the Black students here. During Black History Month, if I did not do anything, no one would. No one here knows what to do for the Black students here.

Another area of incompatibility for these African American leaders was their own feelings of self-conflict. In dealing with multiple cultural identities, these participants struggled with the complexity of race and its implications on their ability to lead. They often noted that their legitimacy was questioned concerning whether they were going to be loyal to school participants' collective interests or promote an ambivalent relationship with the African American students. Although they attempted to project an image highly consistent with their European American participants,

they also were conflicted over how to respond to and be perceived by African American students.

Most of the participants felt that their color and its meaning became problematic in being promoted to principal. The African American leaders were cognizant of the fact that they had to avoid compromising themselves, yet had to negotiate the organizational ladder of being promoted. Mr. Green and Mr. Winter noted that their districts were not willing to promote "Blacks" into principalship. They believed that majority school participants (although unacknowledged) viewed them as cultural brokers who bridged the gap between the African American students and the district. These African American principals were valued for their ability to sensitize their European American colleagues about racial matters. Therefore, because of their importance in enlightening school participants on these issues and because there were too few African Americans in these positions, they became at risk for being promoted. In essence, they felt that just coming in and working hard and waiting to be promoted was not enough. They constantly had to fight stereotypes about their professional abilities. As noted,

The superintendent brought in all these people, White females, whom he hired. Even though you know you are well regarded by teachers and parents, you can't get hired. And when you go to these district meetings, I am always wondering if I measure up. Do I measure up? So there's always this measuring your self against those yard sticks. Because you're always assuming that others are measuring you with that stick too. We go to these meetings and there are thousands of school administrators and only five Blacks. It just makes me wonder.

As cultural brokers, in working with both students of color and European American students, they wanted to be perceived as administrators who were more central to the mission of the school. Yet, they found themselves having to balance the intergroup conflict that occurred with the within group and between group processes in how they handled discipline with both the European American and African American students. Mr. Main stated that he was caught up in how he disciplined the students at his high school. On the one hand, his European American students perceived him as a "token" who was not fair in his discipline practices. Yet, the African American students thought he was harder on them. As he noted,

I view myself as an advocate for Black students. I have to be. I also view my self as a role model for (European American) students who may be fearful in dealing with Black males. No other school administrator needs to view themselves in that way. I think those are two spe-

cial things I need to keep in mind. I need to be an advocate for Black students and if I don't do it, nobody else will. But I also need to be fair to all my students here.

Cultural Differences and Group Boundaries

Cultural differences that occur in the workplace may result in tensions among groups. Due to cultural differences, group boundaries are manifested where the majority group makes decisions on what is acceptable and establishes the norms and expectations. Findings from this study revealed that due to cultural differences, there were conflicts between the African American school administrators and European American school participants. These cultural differences were manifested in two ways. They became apparent in how (a) various school constituents perceived these leaders and (b) the assistant principals interacted with teachers about their instructional practices and the expectations and stereotypes they held about African American students.

All of the participants expressed "image management" concerns. Chemers and Murphy (1995) noted that when persons of color enter a leadership position in a mostly homogenous organization, they often face misperceptions by followers who question their effectiveness as leaders. Because followers' perceptions are susceptible to bias and distortion, it becomes important to recognize that trust and competency will influence the leader's ability to get followers to reach goal attainment. Thus, these assistant principals felt that due to negative perceptions held by their European American colleagues, they often spent much time and energy having to socially construct their roles to focus on one-on-one leader-member relationships of trust and reciprocity.

In some ways, Mr. Green at the elementary school noted his image management concerns more than his secondary counterparts. He spent a disproportionate amount of time explaining his leadership decisions to his European American colleagues. As he lamented,

There was a conception when I was hired that they had to hire someone Black. There's no doubt in my mind that the committee held stereotypes about me. In terms of parents, I had no problems, because they knew I was serious. But the staff, I had conflict. They were pretty arrogant about me being in here.

The other participants noted similar reactions by their school participants. However, they noted the amount of time they had to spend in

developing an inclusive relationship. This meant being open-minded in their personal and work-related actions to reduce the anxiety and uncertainty among school participants. In being inclusive, they believed they gained the respect of staff, which then allowed them to address cultural differences. In many ways, these participants felt they were often misperceived and encapsulated in certain roles. Ms. Boyd in particular noted her struggles in working with school participants. As she explained,

Demanding respect for my position, having to prove myself that I am capable of this job is always in my mind. Having to work and at the same time watch out of the corner of my eye so that they will not sabotage my efforts. Or set me up for failure. I am making sure that I am not labeled as a disciplinarian, because a Black administrator can be labeled as a disciplinarian. That means you don't have any smarts, just know how to make kids behave. It is not a complimentary position.

These participants noted that part of their leadership role was to work with European American teachers about their own cultural differences with the African American students. These leaders of color cited the important role they played in "turning around" teachers about their pedagogical practices and instructional decisions. Again at the elementary level, these discussions with European American teachers were always at the forefront of Mr. Green's leadership. He noted that he often assisted European American teachers with how to interact with African American parents and encouraged them to have high expectations for students of color. He would not let these teachers operate on a deficit model in working with the students of color. As he noted,

We would at times have African American kids who came in from the city, who were at times dirty. Teachers tended to push them away. And the kids can read it, and I hate teachers for that. So, therefore, for these children it is how they are perceived or viewed. These teachers have a lot to learn coming in here from their White middle class homes and cultural expectations. They are teaching in the unknown with those kids from different backgrounds. They just haven't learned how to bring those kids to where they should be. In other words, they pity them, you know poor little guy. This is what I work with.

The other participants at the high school level focused more on how cultural differences manifested themselves in how children of color were tracked into their high school programs. These participants noted that European American teachers perceived African American students as

inferior because of their language. As a result, the students were disproportionately placed in the lower, nonacademic tracks. As Mr. Winter noted,

We use a test in the eighth grade. The African American students are placed in certain tracks. More than likely those kids remain in those tracks. It is only if parents challenge the tracking does something get done. The majority of White students go into the upper tracks and our minority students are at the lower tracks. When they (African American students) come to us they are in the basics track. Only 7% are in the upper tracks.

Ms. Boyd also noted the intergroup conflict of getting European American participants to change their cultural beliefs about African Americans. She believed these teachers' "color blindness" resulted in them not addressing the racial realities that surrounded them. She asserted that the European American teachers' stereotypes about African Americans were so embedded that it would be difficult to change these beliefs, as she noted:

You have people here who know nothing of the African American culture. Nor do they wish to learn. And you still have people there who will always say I am not reflecting on where they come from. I always say they have a South African mentality. You will always have them thinking that Blacks are inferior. They can be really smart Black children, but they are still Black so therefore, they are inferior.

Power Differences

Power differences between majority and minority members of an organization are the most problematic intergroup conflict conditions. Individuals with power define the organization's culture, determine which groups get power, and define the very nature of power. However, for leaders of color in managerial positions, they often reported having less job discretion and reported feeling less accepted than White managers (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990). Ethnic differences between leader and followers may result in exchanges that may be detrimental to the organization's goals (Chemers & Murphy, 1995).

All of the participants noted that due to their positions of authority, they often grappled with how participants responded to their leadership. Due to these power struggles, each participant noted how certain school groups challenged his or her leadership. The power differences were manifested

in two ways: (a) European American teachers' dismissal of the administrators' authority to change their instructional practices for students of color and (b) European American teachers' and other administrators' misconceptions of the assistant principals as "tokens" with little real power.

At the elementary level, Mr. Green noted that his power differences were more pronounced in his dealings with the European American teachers. He believed his role as instructional leader was to make teachers who were not culturally responsive to students of color aware of their pedagogical practices and expectations. He noted that many times he often had to address discipline inequities to ensure that African American students were treated fairly. In interacting with teachers, he noted that they resented his authority and often dismissed his suggestions. He believed that teachers were even more resentful when he played an advocate role for the students of color as he noted:

It took a while to turn it around here. As an administrator it was very difficult [for European American teachers] to accept taking directions or be supervised by a Black person. The truth is the teachers and I had a lot of problems. Whenever any thing happened, they looked at the Black child and not the White child. We would have staff meetings and I would try to get these teachers to change. So there was this big difference here. But I think it took a person who wasn't afraid to confront those issues. By being Black, I certainly had my share with those incidents and needed to communicate that to staff.

At the secondary level, teachers perceived these leaders as "tokens" with little authority. Participants cited conflicting demands of dealing with faculty who saw them only in a certain role and based their perceptions on their own stereotypes. Like Mr. Green, they noted their struggles with teachers, but often felt powerless in getting teachers to change. As Mr. Main noted,

By the third year, the staff finally warmed up to me. In dealing with the faculty, I have had positive ones. I have had some negative ones as well. The unfortunate thing there is not much I can do to change the [European American] teachers' minds.

Two of the secondary participants noted their power struggles of dealing with their administrative peers. They found that often their leadership was questioned when they went beyond their expertise on racial matters. Although in a power position, they were concerned that much of their energies were being spent having to validate their place and competency

in these schools. Given their leadership role, they often faced situations where their authority was questioned because of their color. In most cases, these principals struggled with power differences because of always being questioned about who they are and what they represent. As noted by Mr. Winter,

I knew our principal didn't truly respect me for who I was. I think he was happy that I was there. I cut down on the confusion and keep the Black students in line. But I don't think he respected me. I think after they watched me for a while they respected me. That doesn't mean that we're going over to each other's houses to eat. They have had little exposure to people like me. They don't know how to act and the condescending statements like, "You're very articulate."

Leadership Behavior

Leadership and the influence it has on how organizational and identity groups interact is critical to understanding intergroup conflict. Culturally based stereotypes and expectations of majority followers may influence how they interact with minorities in leadership positions. Therefore, the problem leaders of color have is that they may have values, attitudes, traits, and behaviors that are contrary to traditional beliefs held by the majority group (Chemers & Murphy, 1995). These principals used their leadership as a way to confront intergroup conflicts between themselves and other school participants. This could be understood by (a) their ability to develop a color-conscious leadership style that recognized cultural differences among school participants and (b) their willingness to address racial undertones.

These African American administrators used a "color-conscious" leadership style that recognized cultural differences among various school participants. The assistant principals demonstrated this leadership style when addressing racial issues to ensure that all school participants were treated equitably. Findings from this study suggested these African American leaders were not "color-blind" (see Lewis, 2001) because their race determined how they would lead and be perceived by their diverse group of followers.

These principals used a color-conscious leadership style. Therefore, they were able to address intercultural contact among groups and understood how to navigate between the two cultures without losing their identity. These leaders developed an intercultural relationship with both the identity and dominant group that produced an adaptation of their

leadership to respond all the school participants' needs. These African American leaders were able to rotate among the cultural identities of the school participants. Thus they had an understanding of within-group as well as between-group processes.

All of the participants noted that in leading their school participants, it became apparent that they had to incorporate the connections and interrelations among the various groups. Therefore with each group of school participants, whether it was teachers, parents, or students, these administrators soon developed a "color-conscious" leadership style. These participants stated that parts of their roles were to understand the meaning and implications of being an outsider, yet behaviorally they had to be flexible to lead their traditional organizations. Developing a color-conscious ability was important for them to remain in these settings. As noted,

Everything that occurs at this school is racial. It's simply situational. But if you deal with it as racial you need to point out things. Those kinds of things have to happen. As a leader, I learned all of the fears and concerns that teachers have about these kids and how that affects my decisions. Don't have people wondering what you are saying and speak like an intellect. That is the language they understand here. In this environment, you have to be a leader who can interact with all the differences.

Each assistant principal, in different ways, described the significance of his or her relationship with European American and African American students. These principals expressed that although their exchanges and responses varied as they interacted with various group-level cultures, they were all equally important. For the European American students, it was more about dispelling stereotypes in their interactions with this group. In leading a homogeneous school, many noted the need to assert their authority so they would be perceived as competent.

Because of their group-level racial understandings, they believed their leadership with African American students took on another level of interaction. In leading African American students, these administrators noted that they wore many hats for these students. Their leadership focused on being "mom," strengthening these students' identity, and serving as a racial advocate. Although in many ways these participants addressed their concerns of needing to be fair in their leadership practices, they felt the tensions of having to balance how other school participants perceived them. They were strong in their commitment and were willing to make additional efforts for students. As Ms. Boyd explained,

Being a Black administrator in an all White environment with a few Black kids. It's like being a mom where you don't have a role. Sometimes my Black kids will come in and I will tell them which hat am I wearing? I tell them they have to wear a belt and they can't wear their pants like that. Then one will come in and they are crying, I say do I need my "girlfriend hat" on today?

Due to their color-conscious leadership, these principals made concerted efforts to hold teachers accountable for the "deseg" students at their schools. In particular, these participants noted the conflicting relationships they had when they interacted with teachers about the students of color. These relationships were strained by how these leaders pushed a leadership style that forced teachers to examine their own "color-blind" approaches with students. In general the participants noted that they often pressed the European American teachers to hold high expectations and to treat the African American students fairly. As noted,

I think leadership to [European American] teachers is dependent on how they deal with children and the expectations they hold for them. If you have a sense of equity in the classroom, then everyone should be responsible. Teachers' body language tells a lot to the students here. And if there is a situation, I will not hesitate to bring it to the teachers' attention. I have high standards and am pretty vocal about things.

Conclusion

This study examined the important role leaders of color play in leading and managing sources of conflict that occur in suburban desegregated schools. This study revealed there were multiple sources of intergroup conflict that influenced their leadership decisions. For this study, there were incompatible goals among the school groups that resulted in-group boundaries and cultural differences among the school participants. Due to these group boundaries, the assistant principals struggled with power differences and what that meant in leading and facilitating intercultural contact among identity and organizational groups.

For organizations to be effective, all leaders must understand how organizational groups and identity groups relate to each other. The African American administrators in this study had an understanding of how to address the two-way nature of intercultural contact among groups and understood how to rotate back and forth among the identity groups of their school participants. Leaders of color face multiple

challenges in how majority followers will respond to their authority. They have to understand the cultural variations among groups of followers and how that will influence their effectiveness.

Further research needs to be conducted to examine how principals of color negotiate boundaries of race in suburban contexts. Much could be learned about their color-conscious approach to ensure equitable practices for all schoolchildren. Few studies have examined leaders of color in suburban contexts; therefore, the emergence of leadership influence structures on intergroup conflict among minority and majority school participants and the role of race and ethnicity in this process needs additional investigation.

Clearly, the research presented would cause one to carefully examine the assumption that leaders of color play an important role in creating an inclusive school for all students. By promoting a "color-conscious" leadership in these contexts, these African American administrators may provide insights on what skills are needed to understand within-group as well as between-group processes. As noted in the findings, these leaders were able to rotate among the cultural identities and incorporate the connections and interrelationships among the groups.

Although this was an exploratory study, findings from this research might have implications for preparing principals in how to respond to intergroup conflict. According to Chen and Van Velsor (1996) bicultural identity of people of color is often an undervalued strength within the organization. Having a bicultural identity may enable leaders to move back and forth between cultural expectations and norms of two or more cultures. Therefore, leaders become cultural integrators and facilitators in creating common ground among groups.

Emerging literature on global leadership implies that leaders can no longer focus on task and organizational goals only (Chen & Van Velsor, 1996). In motivating a diverse group of followers, leaders must create a one-on-one leader-member relationship where they must create and facilitate new meaning out of diverse viewpoints. Therefore, we need to identify leaders who can tolerate ambiguity among the group identities, develop inclusive skills, develop cultural sensitivity, and have a global mind-set.

Given that our schools are demographically changing, findings from this study about these African American leaders who had a "color-conscious" leadership that allowed them to move back and forth between groups are timely. These leaders appeared to have a broad view so they were able to handle intergroup tensions and facilitate new boundaries in finding common ground among the participants. Thus, they were behaviorally flexible to enhance these school participants' awareness about responding to the African American students.

Although these principals often struggled with their followers' image management, they were able to develop an open-minded learning orientation despite these perceptions. Findings revealed that these administrators were able to move from their own cultural group to work with these school participants. Consequently, their followers benefited, as these administrators were responsible for dispelling stereotypes and proved they were competent leaders. As African American leaders, they developed the capacity to be open-minded, continuous learners, relationship builders, and people developers.

These "color-conscious" leaders were cultural integrators and consensus builders who had acquired a great deal of understanding about diversity of groups and were able to establish leader-member trust. Whether due to their ethnic backgrounds or leadership capabilities, these skills are critical in leading heterogeneous groups in responding to the needs of all students.

The findings suggest that principals in suburban or desegregated contexts play an important role in responding to intergroup conflict that occurs between students of color and European American school participants. Principals must examine their leadership in how they respond to issues of diversity and react to intergroup conflicts. Leadership in managing issues of diversity requires that the principals create trust, establish teams that dispel stereotypical roles for students of color, and promote dialogue on pedagogical differences in responding to the learning needs of students of color.

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