On Becoming and Being Faculty-Leaders in Urban Education and also Being African- American...Seems
Promising

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Abstract

Seven African-American women and men faculty members at a Southeastern urban research university
reflect on their collective experiences of creating an intellectual community and spearheading an urban
teacher education initiative within their School of Education . Employing a qualitative self-study and project
reflection approach, the authors situate themselves within the historical trajectory of the African-American
struggle for education, emphasizing the problems and promises confronting contemporary urban educators.
Highlighting their role in launching the Training and Retaining Urban Student Teachers (T.R.U.S.T.)
Initiative in the Birmingham City Schools, the authors conclude that the future of urban education is
predicated on the capacity of contemporary African-American educators to forge effective alliances first
with one another, and then with other partners in higher education, urban school districts, the local
community, and national educational organizations.

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In the fall 2004 special issue of *Advancing Women in Leadership* , five of our colleagues in the School of
Education (SOE) wrote about the challenges and problems that our institution and SOE have confronted
with regard to mentoring women and people of color in higher education (Patterson, Dahle, Nix, Collins, &
Abbott, 2004). These five women (one of which is a co-author of the present article) described the context
for African-American faculty in bleak terms, noting their sparse numbers and experiences of isolation
within the SOE. Since the time of this publication, the SOE has made some strides to increase the number of
African-American faculty. In fact, in the 2003-04 academic year, for the first time in the SOE's history, a
small yet critical mass of nine African-American faculty members (seven women and two men) were
employed across the SOE's three departments.

In a previous writing collaborative, the African-American women authors represented in the present article
codified our experiences of creating an intellectual community within the context of a predominantly White

urban commuter university and SOE, both of which have had a poor track record for hiring and grooming African-American faculty for tenure and promotion (Coker, Loder, Sims, Collins, Voltz, & Coker, in press). We learned from our experiences that the potential for the creation of viable intellectual communities among African-American women (AAW) in higher education relies, in part, on the presence of a unique set of characteristics that must be inherent or cultivated within AAW faculty. In our case these characteristics encompassed (a) possessing a womanist worldview/identity, (b) having a desire for a culturally affirming and validating professional experience, and (c) striving to achieve professional excellence and serve as a co-mentor to her colleagues (Coker, et al., in press).

We also learned from our previous writing collaborative that very little research exists documenting the underlying processes of establishing collaborations among higher education faculty in general, and AAW (and men) in particular. Too often the uglier "divide and conquer" side of the higher education world dominates and adversely impacts the small and fragmented community of African-American scholars ( Marshall , 2002). Thus far, by identifying shared characteristics and beliefs, we have been successful in taking the first step to create a supportive and thriving intellectual community among the AAW faculty. Our circle of scholars now includes two men, due to the recent hire of a young African-American male faculty member (Michael), and our effort to reach out to another male colleague (Charles), who was for so long the lone African-American faculty member in general, and tenured faculty in particular. Furthermore, our collective interest in urban education, along with recent local, national, and institutional forces that have propelled the development of one of the largest urban teacher education initiatives in the history of our SOE, has also contributed to our coalescing.

In the present article, we build upon what we have learned about being AAW faculty in higher education and take this lesson a step forward by reflecting on our experiences of becoming and being African-American faculty-leaders in the field of urban education. The title of our article is adapted from a statement made by H. Councill Trenhholm, the longtime president of Alabama State Teachers College during the early 20th century. The language captures his frustration concerning the dire state of African-American education in the South during that period: "Being in the field of education and also being a Negro, it seems to me to be tragic" (in Fairclough, 2000, p. 91). Considering the context of the Jim Crow South--with its segregated schools, gross under-funding of Black schools, inadequate teacher training, and open and violent oppression and repression of Black educators who protested these conditions--Trenholm's statement, while sobering, is quite understandable. And given the current national and local dialogue concerning the woes of urban education, the tenor of Trenholm's statement seems prophetic. Recent commentary on the implications of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* Supreme Court decision indicates that there is much unfinished business with respect to providing an equal educational opportunity to African-American children as well as children from all walks of life (Patterson, 2002; Shealey, Lue, Brooks, & McCray, 2005). African-American children continue to attend racially and economically segregated schools and are far less likely to receive a quality education than White middle and upper class children.

Although this special issue focuses on African-American women scholars, we have intentionally chosen to include our African-American men colleagues in this dialogue because history bears out the reality that efforts to mobilize social change in African-American education cannot succeed without collaborations between women and men educators grounded in a mutual respect and appreciation for our common and unique histories, experiences, perspectives, and contributions. In the spirit of Sankofa--a Ghanaian symbol in the Akan language symbolizing an African value system and tradition of understanding and respecting one's past so that one can move forward to the future--we first look back at the experiences of African-American educators in the 19th and early 20th centuries so that we can continue to advance this tradition of educational leadership for social change into the 21st century. In the first section we address historical and contemporary perspectives on African-American educational leadership as a context for situating and understanding our present reality and work as African-American educators. In the second section we provide background and context on the authors, method, and local and institutional settings in which we live

and work. In the third section we examine the problems and promises we encounter as African-American faculty-leaders in urban education. In the fourth and final section we offer concluding thoughts about our perceived roles and expectations as African-American educators in the 21st century.

## Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on African-American Educational Leadership

The lives and work of African-American educators have been historically intertwined with the African-American community. Particularly in the South during the 19th and early 20th centuries, African-American teachers and principals were looked upon to provide leadership in African-American communities; in many respects the practice of teaching and leading was enacted as a form of social activism and religious and spiritual mission (Anderson, 1988; Fairclough, 2001; Franklin, 1990; Fultz, 1995a, 1995b; Perkins, 1989; Siddle Walker, 1996, 2000, 2003; Taylor, 1996). During this time, African-American women teachers in particular developed self-help programs and women's clubs with missions aimed at providing food and clothing to the indigent, child care for poor working mothers, and housing for orphans (Harley, 1982; Neverdon-Morton, 1982; Perkins, 1989; Shaw, 1996). These women also worked to promote positive images of African-American women to counter the prevailing negative stereotypes.

Yet, in spite of this widely documented tradition of leadership among African-American educators there is a scholarly tension concerning whether African-American teachers and principals in the South were actually "activist" in the enactment of their daily work. There is a sentiment among some scholarly ranks that African-American educators are categorically socially and politically conservative. Fairclough (2001) addressed this tension in his in-depth analysis of African-American teachers' involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. He noted that the Civil Rights Movement sometimes prompted harsh criticisms about African-American teachers, principals, and educators in higher education. Historically Black schools and colleges seemed irrelevant or harmful to integration efforts. Leaders of civil rights organizations accused African-American teachers and principals of failing to support the struggle against segregation. Many African-American college presidents were charged with being "uncle toms" for bowing to segregationist politicians' demands to expel activist student leaders. Even on our home ground in Birmingham , Alabama , African-American principals and teachers were criticized during the sixties for not allowing students to participate in protest marches and demonstrations (Eskew, 1997).

In his documentation of the tradition of African-American educational leadership beginning in the late 18th century and extending through to the 1954 *Brown* decision, historian Vincent P. Franklin surmised that contemporary African-American educators have failed to work as a collective to carry the torch of activist leadership into the latter half of the 20th century, citing their shortcomings in confronting the mounting urban public school crisis. He wrote,

Despite increased information and research on urban schools and programs that achieved educational success for African-American students, Black educators and administrators made no collective commitment to educational revitalization within African-American communities. This is unfortunate, for the historical record is clear. Throughout the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries, African-American educators and administrators not only held themselves accountable for what took place within their educational institutions, but they also moved out into the community to provide leadership for organizations and movements aimed at the social, economic, and political advancement of the entire African-American population. These educators knew that their progress and advancement as educators and administrators was tied to the overall progress of African Americans as a group. Given the recent failure of the political establishment to improve significantly the situation for African-American children in urban public schools, it is time that African-American educators and other professionals assume the leadership role in the revitalization campaigns needed to carry Afro-America into the 21st century. (Franklin, 1990, p. 59-60)

A corollary critique to Franklin 's argument is the longstanding scholarly contention that desegregation and

integration policies ushered in by the historic *Brown* decision have done more harm than good for African-American education. By shrinking the pool of African-American teachers and principals, this decree effectively divorced these educators from their strong support and power bases in African-American communities (Coffin, 1972; Foster, 1990, 1993, 1997; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Siddle Walker, 2000; Weinberg, 1977). A more apologetic view is offered by Michael Fultz (1995a, 1995b), a historian who has examined African-American teachers during this same period, who contends that African-American principals and teachers have historically borne unrealistic expectations for changing social conditions that impact the broader African-American community.

Recent scholarship on African-American educators' perspectives about their commitment to African-American education appears to contradict the contention that contemporary African-American educators are less "activist" than their predecessors (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Dixson, 2003; Loder, 2005a; Lomotey, 1989; Morris, 1999; Sims, 2003). This scholarship portrays African-American principals and teachers who are deeply committed to the education of African-American children, and who espouse the belief that it is critical to their success as educators to stay attuned to the concerns, interests, and needs of the African-American community by drawing on its rich heritage of unique pedagogical and leadership styles.

In light of these historical and contemporary perspectives, it seems to us that the potential for today's African-American educators to continue the tradition of activist leadership is predicated on their capacity to forge alliances first and foremost with one another. For our African-American predecessors, the scourges of racism and White oppression posed a clear-cut, immediate, and ominous threat to African-Americans' hopes and dreams for a brighter future in the field of education. Yet, in the absence of an identifiable and common threat within the 21st century context of African-American education, African-American educators may fail to recognize the need to coalesce in order to champion a particular cause. In fact, recent social commentary points to a phenomenon of "diverging generations" in which post-civil rights born African-Americans are attributing their success and failure in attaining the American dream to individual efforts versus collective struggle and social and historical influence (Bositis, 2001; Loder, 2005b). It is ironic to note that although the post-civil rights generation is the first generation to reap the rewards of the hard-fought civil rights campaign, it still confronts persistent institutional and covert racism and sexism, poverty, and inequality (Cose, 1993; Tarpley, 1995; West, 1993).

The mainstream academy, in particular, frequently is a site for covert and institutionalized racism and sexism that diminishes and undermines the collective presence and influence of African-American faculty on education policy and politics. Despite efforts to level the playing field in the academy, African-American men and women continue to be woefully underrepresented in the ranks of the academy. African-American men and African-American women each constitute 2.6% of all higher education faculty across rank (i.e. professor, associate, assistant, instructor, lecturer) making up a total of 5.2% of all faculty (The Chronicle of Higher Education 2004-05 Almanac, 2004). These sparse numbers contribute to African-American faculty members' feelings of intellectual and personal isolation, marginalization, and their concerns about being viewed and treated like tokens (Coker, et al., in press).

It is within this aforementioned context that we reflect on our experiences of becoming faculty-leaders in the field of urban education. As a contribution to the larger discussion on urban education, we present our own voices in dialogue, focusing on our efforts to enhance the quality of urban teacher education in the city of Birmingham . Our capacity to collaborate on this initiative cannot be fully appreciated without some background and context for understanding the reflexivity and flexibility of our method, the diversity of the authors' backgrounds, and the constraints and challenges posed by the local and institutional contexts in which we live and work.

Background and Context

*Method*

In this article we employ a qualitative self-study and project reflection approach in an effort to advance our practice while contributing to the thin literature on contemporary African-American leadership in urban and higher education. In an effort to crystallize our reflections, each author contributed to the first author's query about our previous and current experiences in urban education. The questions she posed required us to reflect on our cumulative experience in and contributions to urban education, our views on the state of urban education at our own institution and within the city of Birmingham , and our assessment of the facilitators and barriers to launching a new urban teacher education initiative in our School of Education . This query was designed to capture how we strategically mobilized our cumulative experiences, knowledge, and skills working in K-12 urban school and higher education settings to co-create a national urban teacher education initiative designed to increase student academic achievement in the Birmingham City Schools (BCS). In addition to this query, our personal interactions and discussions in regular project planning meetings allowed us to interrogate the ways in which we understood and made sense of our professional trajectories and current work on the urban teacher education initiative (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

*Authors*

We believe our own biographies offer a critical context through which to examine this undertaking. We represent a geographically diverse group with colleagues hailing from the Southeast and Northeast. We are also diverse with respect to age and generation, with ages ranging from 30 to 52 years and birth years cutting across opposite divides of the Civil Rights and women's movements. All of the authors have earned doctorates, with diverse training in the fields of psychology and counseling, public policy and educational foundations, educational leadership, special education, and curriculum and instruction. Two of the authors are tenured professors and seven are junior tenure-track faculty. With the exception of one author who has been at the university for 16 years, the authors are relatively new to this university with time of service ranging from one to five years. All of us have previous experiences working in urban schools in various cities ( New York , Philadelphia , Anchorage , Orlando , and Birmingham ) as an intern, teacher, principal, career and college counselor, and professional development consultant. We have transformed these rich experiences into a form of professional capital that empowers us to lead the way in advancing a major urban education initiative in our local and institutional settings.

*Local and Institutional Settings*

Our university is located in Birmingham , Alabama . The city has a population of 74% African-Americans, and has earned historical notoriety as the epicenter of racial turbulence during the Civil Rights Movement. Far removed from the racial make up of city and school district governance 40 years ago, today the mayor, the overwhelming majority of city councilors, and the BCS superintendent are African-American.

Although our university has been designated as a minority-serving institution, few faculty members in the SOE are from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. Both the university and the SOE have demonstrated a weak track record in hiring and grooming African-American faculty for tenure and promotion. Currently, slightly less than 5% of the full-time faculty is African- American ( University of Alabama at Birmingham Office of Equity & Diversity, 2006). This university, like many urban research universities across the nation, has been criticized by some local community members for mining local community resources to advance its wide-ranging research agendas without reciprocally contributing back to these communities. There is a perception among some members of the local African-American community that the university serves its own interests sometimes at the expense of the needs, interests, and well-being of its neighboring business and residential community.

The SOE has had a tenuous and sometimes contentious relationship with the local school district for this

same reason. Local school leadership and teaching staff have felt like university faculty and administration have viewed their schools as revolving doors for research, entering in and moving out as grant funding streams expand or dry up. However, recent and sustained leadership by the current SOE Dean, a senior faculty administrator, and a core of diverse and primarily African-American faculty to establish trust and a positive rapport with local district leadership have so far proved fruitful and promising. These efforts are critical given that the achievement gap between students in Birmingham and students in many surrounding communities conflicts with the level of achievement of other business, social, and artistic sectors of this city. This situation mirrors many U.S. cities and is not specific to Birmingham alone; this gap in achievement levels is a national problem. In Birmingham , it is fueled by several critical pieces of information:

• Virtually all students in the system are children of color;

• Nearly 75% receive free or reduced meal assistance;

• Achievement of students and schools is depressed with very few schools scoring above the national mean (average SAT performance is 36th percentile). Additionally, very poor participation in challenging high school curricula (less than 50% take the ACT and the average score of 18.2 is far below the state average of 20.3);

• 11.5% of high school students failed the Alabama High School Graduation Exam in 2003;

• There is a growing out-migration of families from the city resulting in lower enrollment (4.6% decline in 3 years).

As noted by our colleague, Michele, "Many residents in the Birmingham metropolitan area are not convinced that urban education is 'working' for students and making them competitive in the job market." Her perception is shared by our colleague, Tondra, who grew up in Birmingham and attended the BCS from grades 2 through 12:

Many Black Birmingham residents appear to feel skeptical about the promise of urban education. Even though many of them received a quality education in the BCS, they are disheartened by the negative press about the BCS. Many Black middle class residents have migrated to the suburbs along with their White counterparts in search of better schools and housing. Recent statistics on student and resident out-migration patterns and plunging tax revenues bear out concerns that many residents lack confidence in the BCS.

We recognize that the political climate of high stakes testing and accountability ushered in by the No Child Left Behind Act has spotlighted the minority achievement gap. Consequently, schools of education across the country are being held accountable for their graduates' success in improving the quality of education. All of these factors must be taken into consideration when examining the context for our emerging leadership in urban education at this juncture.

Since 2003, we have been working diligently to launch an integrated and comprehensive urban education agenda within our SOE. A recent outgrowth of our efforts is the Training and Retaining Urban Student Teachers (T.R.U.S.T.) Initiative, a multi-million dollar federally funded urban teacher education training and enhancement program. All of the authors have made a strong commitment to this Initiative and serve such diverse roles as Principal Investigator and Project Director, faculty liaisons, and an advisory board member. The vision of T.R.U.S.T. is to implement a comprehensive, seamless environment for preparing teachers for urban settings. This vision is based on the core belief that the entire community must come together to create the process by which outstanding teachers are prepared and nurtured. Adapted from the popular African proverb, the project motto is "It takes a village to prepare a teacher." The goal of the project is to train teachers who are well-prepared with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to promote high levels of

student academic achievement in urban schools, and who are committed to remaining in those schools.

The engagement of the PK-12 educational community in the development of the T.R.U.S.T. Initiative is noteworthy, as a cross-section of high-level BCS administrators, including the superintendent, along with teachers, principals, and school board members have been actively involved in the discussions leading up to the submission of the federal grant proposal for T.R.U.S.T. as well as throughout the implementation process. In a component of the program focused on the preparation and training of in-service teachers for future jobs in high needs areas in the Birmingham City Schools (Urban Teacher Enhancement Program), BCS administrators and teachers have partnered with SOE faculty liaisons to select prospective teacher candidates and to deliver the curriculum. The genuine spirit of cooperation and engagement among the BCS, SOE, and national partners in this Initiative is arguably unprecedented in the history of the SOE.

## On Becoming and Being Faculty-Leaders in Urban Education: Problems and Promises

As we embark on this groundbreaking urban education initiative, we reflect on the problems and promises that lie ahead for us. One critical concern for us as scholars is the marginalization of urban education--along with the intertwined concepts of race and class--as a serious and legitimate field of study, teaching, and service. The majority of us are junior untenured faculty who are interested in being productive and successful in the academy, which for us encompasses the dual yet often competing objectives of being both scholars and advocates for social justice in the field of urban education. As our colleague, Michael, observed, "Although urban education is perceived by the SOE community as being noble work, it is also a last resort for prospective junior faculty seeking employment." Michele echoed this concern, observing that the context for urban education is perceived by many in the mainstream academy as being "too foreign and perhaps too unpredictable." Consequently, because mainstream faculty often lack "insider knowledge" about urban schools, they preclude that urban education is not a "viable research area." Noting that the urban education research agenda is viewed as being "soft research and not the real thing," our colleague, Angela, shared, "I often feel marginalized if I don't crunch numbers and deal with data instead of real people. I often feel isolated intellectually." And Tondra has observed that not only is urban education marginalized as a research enterprise but also as a teaching focus and a site for teacher training. Acknowledging that many White students and some African-American students with limited exposure to urban schools are reluctant to enroll in courses focused on urban education or to seek field placements in urban schools and communities, she noted:

These students have heard a lot of horror stories about urban schools from the local media, family members, friends, and peers within the teacher education program. So unfortunately they allow their biases and negative perceptions to hinder them from exploring the full and rich range of schooling experiences available to them in the city. I have also found that a few of my colleagues limit their students' field experiences to suburban settings for the same reasons.

We cannot take these concerns lightly given that the institutional incentive structure validates, supports, and promotes research and service agendas that are viewed favorably by and accorded high status within the mainstream academy. We are well aware that most of us are junior and untenured faculty who are trying to succeed in a setting where only a dearth of African-Americans has realized tenure and promotion. Consequently, we must constantly negotiate our commitment to the marginalized field of urban education with our tenuous professional standing.

As faculty-leaders we must also guard against burn-out. As Michael noted, "The problems of urban schools can be overwhelming and encompassing. While we are out trying to 'save the world' we still have obligations to be fulfilled at the university." We are cognizant of the historic mandate that in addition to executing professional duties, African-American educators are expected to solve societal ills that extend beyond the four walls of their schools and academies. Given the sparse numbers of African-Americans in

the academy, it is not lost on us that we must stay focused on our professional obligations to the university. To this end, we have been working together strategically to successfully fulfill our obligations to teach, research, write, and serve the university and community. While we work diligently to implement the mandate of T.R.U.S.T., we also constantly seek and take advantage of opportunities to collaborate with each other on research, publications, and national conference presentations.

In light of these concerns, we are optimistic about our unique generational position as African-American faculty-leaders in the context of contemporary Birmingham . We recognize that we are poised, along with our project partners, to effect positive and significant changes in the BCS, and thereby contribute to the national dialogue on the achievement gap in urban schools. We recognize that establishing a solid professional community among African- American colleagues is the first critical step to becoming faculty-leaders in this arena. Our colleague, Loucrecia, observed that prior to the presence of a critical mass of African-American faculty members committed to spearheading an urban education agenda, "some faculty seemed to dismiss the concept of urban education as someone else's problem." Deborah concurred, pointing out that

[Having a critical mass of African-American faculty] is the first thing you need to build community. It's hard to have a "community" when you are only talking about two or three people, so I think numbers really do help. The collaborative spirit that I sensed among my African-American colleagues is also important.

Our small circle of scholars has actively participated in most of the conversations and formal meetings that gave birth to the T.R.U.S.T. initiative. We were involved with the groundbreaking work of developing a mission statement and nominating a director for this project. Our colleague, Deborah, is the Principal Investigator and Project Director for this initiative. She has been described by her colleagues as a "highly capable, dynamic, intelligent and vibrant leader." She has distinguished herself among her SOE colleagues with her unique background as a former student and teacher in the BCS. As Tondra acknowledged, "She has a foot in both the worlds of the BCS and higher education which makes her especially well-suited to assume the helm of an initiative that crosses these two worlds."

Although we are encouraged by our successful efforts to build an intellectual community of African-American faculty-leaders, we recognize that the long-term and sustained viability of T.R.U.S.T. relies in large part on our success in establishing a broad and diverse institutional commitment to the aims of this Initiative. It is heartening to note that the original core of T.R.U.S.T. faculty liaisons, which once included only one White colleague, now includes two with the anticipation of one more. In addition, one of our Latina faculty colleagues is an active member of the T.R.U.S.T. national advisory board, which is significant given the increasing population of Hispanic students in the BCS.

## Concluding Thoughts

We are cognizant of our position within a longstanding tradition of African-American leadership and activism in the field of urban education. Yet we are deeply concerned by the scholarly contention that contemporary African-American educators have failed to assume the torch and carry on this tradition. This indictment is especially troubling for faculty-leaders whose lives and work are embedded within a city that was the epicenter of the Civil Rights Movement and that also harbors less-than-favorable memories about the role of African-American educators in the civil rights struggle. As contemporary African-American educators we confront a professional context fraught with complexities, one that makes us feel like we are caught between a rock and a hard place with regard to fulfilling competing professional goals and social obligations to the local African-American community (Loder, in press). Rather than to perpetuate the patterns of intellectual and social isolation that too often hinder the success of African-American faculty, we opt to use our position of marginalization to our advantage (Alfred, 2001), carving out a space for ourselves and within a tradition of African-American educational leadership to effect positive change in both urban

and higher education.

Admittedly, we are in the initial phase of implementing T.R.U.S.T. Although "so far, so good," we recognize that we have a long road ahead of us to build "trust" among all the stakeholders. A major challenge for us will be to successfully negotiate our roles and positions within the academy with our perceived roles and positions within the local African-American community. In response, we are working alongside our local school district and national partners to turn around the decidedly negative image of the Birmingham City Schools. But while doing so, we sometimes find ourselves fighting against the tide of distrust and friction that continues to exist between our institution and some rank and file members of the local school district and African-American community. We are cognizant of the wariness that some local African-American citizens and school district officials and staff have about the usefulness and benefit of university research to the local African-American community and schools. This reality challenges us to explore strategies for making our intent and purposes as African-American scholars more transparent and salient to schools and communities, and to work more closely with these entities to co-create mutually rewarding research endeavors.

The tragic context that H. Councill Trenhholm described for African-American educators in the early to mid-20th century does not have to be our legacy in the 21st century. We envision a more promising future for urban education as contemporary African-American educators build internal and external alliances and take advantage of the vastly expanded educational opportunities passed down to us by our predecessors. Through initiatives like T.R.U.S.T. we intend to carry forth the tradition of African-American activist leadership, and hopefully leave behind a legacy of positive social change for urban and higher education in the city of Birmingham and beyond.

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