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The Invisible Aches of Being a Black Rural Principal in a Predominantly White School

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This autoethnographic study addresses a critical gap in research regarding the experiences of Black principals, particularly those operating outside of urban settings. While there is extensive literature on Black urban principals, their counterparts in rural areas remain strikingly understudied. In response to this absence of scholarship, this autoethnographic research, grounded in W.E.B. DuBois's double consciousness, served two purposes: (a) to understand my experiences as a rural principal in a predominantly White school and (b) to understand how those experiences informed my leadership practices and self-view. Through personal vignettes, I provide a glimpse into and an examination of pivotal moments of how I experienced rural principalship by shedding light on the intersection of race, locale, and leadership. I provide a voice to the lived experiences of rural principalship, which contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of educational leadership. From this (re)examination, I illuminate how those experiences created a template for my work as a principal beyond a rural context.
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***Keywords*: African American/Black principal; rural principal; autoethnography; double consciousness**

The route to the school district administration building was drenched in two-way lanes, trees, and farmlands (pastures, tobacco, and corn mostly) on both sides, signage informing travelers to be aware of deer and farm equipment, and houses that sat in the middle of acres of land that sometimes bordered self-made car mechanic shops. Approximately forty-five miles from the interstate and with frequent moments of sketchy mobile service, I finally entered the township. It mirrored my hometown, often likened to Mayberry, the fictional town in *The Andy Griffith Show*. I made two turns from the main street to get to my destination. While I heavily depended on my car navigation system for directions, I remember no visible signs indicating the board of education building until I had arrived.

I remember entering the district administration building and being directed to head down a long and desolate hallway towards the last room on the right. With each step, my heart raced faster, pounding against my chest as if it were trying to escape my body. I wondered if I had made the right decision; however, it was too late. As I entered the room, I was greeted warmly by the administrative assistant, who informed me that the Superintendent would be with me shortly. Although I am sure my wait lasted less than two minutes, it felt as if thirty minutes had passed before the Superintendent invited me into her office. We conversed; I took copious notes and listened. Towards the end of our conversation, she reemphasized her excitement to have me as one of her principals and looked forward to working with me. However, it was her next two statements that would shed light on my future experiences and tenure in this school district.

She informed me that I was the third Black principal to work in this school district since desegregation, and the first to lead Danemead[1] Middle School is the most predominantly White middle school. She noted that Black, Hispanic, and socio-economically disadvantaged White students tend to academically underperform, particularly in English/Language Arts. Paralyzed with shock and anxiety, I managed a smile and a nod.

In this manuscript, I examine the complex realities of Black rural principals leading predominantly White schools, highlighting the inherent tensions and identity negotiations they navigate. To contextualize the urgency of this exploration, I open with this autobiographical sketch that continues throughout as vignettes, illustrating these leaders' unique experiences. Grounded in W.E.B. DuBois's double consciousness theory, I offer an autoethnographic response to the internal struggle of operating in multiple worlds. This study is set against key sociopolitical contexts from 2015 to 2021 and contributes to broader conversations about Black educational leadership beyond urban settings.

Rejecting the ubiquitous representations of Black principals as barbarians, authoritative, non-instructional leaders (Gooden, 2012) and rural spaces as intellectual desserts and non-progressive (Cervone, 2018; Marietta & Marietta, 2020), I find myself constantly challenging these deficit narratives to demonstrate that rural education is politically and socially complex, a reality that Black rural principals must actively resist

[1] A pseudonym.

(Williams & Grooms, 2015). Using a layered account approach (Ronai, 1995), I integrate autoethnographic reflection- further discussed in the methodology section -with research about Black rural principals, particularly those who lead in predominantly White schools. By telling my story and reflecting on my own experiences, I am using autoethnography to reflect on conversations with myself (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and bring awareness of the degree of influence of rurality and race on my experiences of being a Black principal. Further, this study contributes to the conversation about Black principals beyond the urban context and highlights various factors that converge to inform these principals' experiences.

Administration, Race, and Rurality

Despite the fact that there are more than 9.5 million students attending U.S. rural schools (Showalter et al., 2023), there is limited research in the field (Azano & Biddle, 2019; LaValley, 2018), and researchers may feel forced to justify their scholarly interests in rurality (Agyepong, 2019). This deficiency in research and literature has contributed to a lack of understanding about rural schools generally and rural school leadership specifically, including the unique challenges, which often do not translate into urban and suburban locales or outside the communities in which they operate (Arnold, 2000, 2004; Arnold et al., 2005; DeYoung, 1987; Forner, 2010; Khattri et al., 1997; Lamkin, 2006). As a result, there is a knowledge gap regarding the leadership practices and the daily work expectations of rural principals (Plessis, 2017).

Moreover, this dearth in the scholarship arguably contributes to the minimization and marginalization of the needs and circumstances of rural schools, which have been highlighted due to the coronavirus pandemic (Huck & Zhang, 2021). Additionally, this dearth contributes to practices such as the inequitable distribution of resources, inadequate professional and academic support for rural school leaders (Lavalley, 2018), and the challenges to attract and retain quality administrators, including Black principals (Pijanowski et al., 2009; Preston et al., 2013; Hayes et al., 2021).

There are approximately 91,900 public school principals, with 77% identifying as White and 10% identifying as Black (NCES, 2020), in the United States. While a majority of Black principals lead schools in urbanized areas, 5% lead schools in rural locales

(NCES, 2020). This statistic is significant as the population of rural America is becoming more racially diverse, but remains overwhelmingly White (Showalter et al., 2023). Despite the accumulating evidence to suggest the relevance of understanding the experiences among rural school administrators, the factors and processes that support this dismal number of Blacks leading rural schools remain unclear.

The prevailing link between rural areas and whiteness creates barriers that push Black experiences to the margins within rural settings. Chambers and Crumb (2020) point out that educational narratives systematically ignore rural African American communities, which leads to policies and educational practices that do not meet their specific requirements despite their substantial population numbers. The lack of attention to Black rural experiences continues stereotypes while obstructing the creation of beneficial learning spaces for Black students in these areas.

A Description of the Research Context

To provide a more comprehensive insight into Danemead, I offer this description. Though rural societies are not monolithic (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021), there are more similarities than differences between my hometown and the context in this narrative than I realized. Danemead is nestled in the Southeastern part of the United States. Though many rural communities are witnessing a significant increase in the racial demographics in their population, particularly within the Hispanic community, most rural spaces remain predominantly White (Johnson & Lichter, 2022). Danemead remains majority White. Danemead's population is 86% White, 6% Black, 5% Asian, and 3% Hispanic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). These statistics mirror the student population at Danemead Middle School. Additionally, there were only two Black teachers on the faculty. Among families within the Danemead's town limits, almost 25% live below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Though 85% of the population has attained a high school diploma, only 14% of the population has earned a bachelor's degree or higher.

While driving through this town, an individual can become intoxicated with its rustic yet sophisticated scenery. However, if one were to drive through this town in 2022, this serenity is abruptly interrupted by the lackluster buildings decorated by political messages, such as Stronger Together, Building a Better America, and Make American

Great, Again!, which was more visible, from the 2016 and 2020 presidential races on both sides of the two-lane road. A mixture of a few restaurants, primarily dives, sits on the downtown area's periphery. Other businesses, which White residents own, are peppered throughout the town. At the time of the study, Blacks, Hispanics, or Asians did not possess any position on the city council or the school board. In the past, those candidates did not win a majority of the votes. However, in the 2020 presidential election, a Black woman, who ran for a position on the school board, received more votes than the presidential candidate, Joe Biden. Except for two Black male individuals, police officers and the sheriff's department are majority White. While the population increases, with Hispanic migrants, so do the number of churches and religious denominations. Nonetheless, churches are landmarks throughout the town; primarily, White churches are located within the township, while most Black and Hispanic churches are located outside the township.

Danemead's school system is the second largest employer. In total, there are nine schools. There are five elementary schools, two middle schools, one high school, and one alternative school. The school system is drenched in a history of the "haves" and the "have-nots." It is evident in the student demographics and enrollment, the maintenance of the school buildings, parent and community engagement, interactions with school district administration, etc. Danemead Middle is the "haves" school. It does not lack resources (i.e., financial, social capital), as many of the parents work outside the township in neighboring cities that pay more and are in positions of power (i.e., supervisor roles). While the distinction between the middle schools and among the multiple communities that make up the school district is obvious, there are moments where a mixture of class, race, and intellect come together for a common purpose – sporting events. It is not unusual for the high school football stadium or gymnasium to be filled with spectators from diverse backgrounds cheering on the home team in football or basketball. However, there are distinct lines of "seating arrangements – sitting with your own."

There is a distinct sense of pride among the locals, one that exists in varying degrees and takes on different meanings depending on individual perspectives. This pride is expressed in different ways, often allowing White residents to navigate spaces with a greater sense of freedom. Said differently, this local pride means that while everyone shares a sense of belonging, it often translates into more ease and acceptance for White

residents, allowing them to move through spaces without question or resistance. However, it is also shaped by an imbalance between conservative and liberal beliefs and values. This imbalance, in turn, fuels disparities and marginalization for many of Danemead's residents. It is at the intersection of this culture and my experiences, including my rural identity, that the following sections unfold. However, before I move forward, it is necessary to first define my understanding of rural and briefly describe the South.

Rural: What do I mean?

This study employed Helen Wildy's (2010) conceptualization of rural that was birthed while she was writing about the experiences of new principals. According to Wildy (2010), rural should be thought of as:

> *Place*: not only geography, but also culture. This includes understanding of local traditions, history, links to wider communities, and local politics and social orders…
> *People*: the interaction with adults in a school and its communities…the importance of building relationships with all members of the community…
> *System*: provisions of support within a district may be sparse due to distance among schools, but also between schools and the district office due to funding and lack of human resources, at times…
> *Self*: …the challenges and barriers of developing personal resilience and identity…high expectations of being visible [as a principal] … and dealing with professional, personal, and physical isolation. (pp.vi-vii)

Finally, it is important to remember that rurality is not monolithic. While it is critical to acknowledge general characteristics for the purpose of trustworthiness, we cannot be misguided into thinking that experiences in rural contexts are the same. Rural communities vary significantly in racial composition, economic opportunities, and sociopolitical climates, shaped by historical and regional distinctions (Cervone, 2018; Williams & Grooms, 2015). In some areas, rurality is deeply connected to Black educational leadership, while in others, it remains predominantly White and politically conservative, creating vastly different challenges for Black rural principals (Mette, 2022;

Flowers, 2020). In doing so, we will continue to widen the gap in (mis)understanding rurality.

The South

To better understand my experiences discussed in this study, it is important that I briefly discuss a historical event that forever changed the experiences of Black individuals, particularly Black principals, in the rural South. Arguably, a pivotal moment in American history was the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that declared segregation to be unconstitutional: "The Court struck down the separate but equal law and held that segregation deprived Black students of equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the 14th Amendment of the Constitution of the United States" (Gooden, 2004, p. 230). However, the Court did not set guidelines or put procedures in place to integrate schools, delaying desegregation in some states, such as Virginia. Additionally, the absence of comprehensive frameworks has also coincided with a decline in the representation of Black principals in schools, a trend supported by academic studies (Oakley et al., 2009; Fiel & Zhang, 2019). Desegregation resulted in the closure and consolidation of schools, forcing many Black administrators in predominantly Black schools to lose their jobs to their White colleagues. "In the *post-Brown* era, displacement of African American principals meant they were either demoted or fired" (Tillman, 2004a, p. 110) so that they (Black men and women) would not supervise White teachers. Tillman (2004a) discovered, "While some Black principals retained their positions after the historic *Brown v. Board of Education* 1954 decision, desegregation had a devastating impact on the closed structure of Black education and thus the professional lives of thousands of Black principals" (p. 110).

Although it appeared that Blacks would be *tolerated,* using this word loosely, into a White system, they would not have control or even an equal voice in the system (Walker & Byas, 2003). In other words, though both Blacks and Whites could attend the same schools, no Black principals were permitted to exercise authority in schools where White students attended. Tillman (2004a) stated, "Black principals were often denied the opportunity and authority to act on behalf of Black children in the implementation of desegregation" (p. 103). These changes in duties and responsibilities parted from the historical roles and caused much angst within the Black communities and more deeply

in certain demographics.

Although this ruling affected Blacks, and Whites for that matter, deeply across the nation, none were more severely impacted than Blacks living in the rural South. For the segregated "communities in the rural South, the elimination of the African American school principal also constituted the elimination of the local leader who served as head of school and often as head of the community" (Kafka, 2009, p. 327). However, for those individuals who were not fired but demoted or reassigned, they served as consultants, supervisors, elementary school principals, and administrative assistants (Tillman, 2004b; Walker, 2018). Still, none of these roles possessed the influence, power, and prestige that the principalship had before desegregation. These positions did not provide the visibility or the opportunity to interact with superordinates for career advancement (Adkison, 1981). These demotions and firings were the direct result of racist ideologies. They reflected segregationist beliefs of the South with attitudes of White superiority and the intolerance of Black principals leading students and teachers in integrated schools (Tillman, 2004b). Tillman (2004a) stated, "The racial and cultural mismatch between Black parents and the White principal and majority White teaching staff led to barriers between the school and community" (p. 122), which continues to plague communities in the rural South.

Black principals faced and continue to face challenges directly related to race and skill sets differently than their White peers. These challenges have led to voluntary and involuntary decisions to leave the profession. The *Brown v. Board of Education* decision catalyzed the displacement and eventual shortage of Black educators across the United States. However, this outcome cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the legacy of Jim Crow laws, which legalized racial segregation and prompted the Great Migration of Black Americans from the South during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Walker, 2018). These laws, which remained in effect until 1965 (Highsmith & Erickson, 2015), not only shaped social and educational inequities but also served as the sociopolitical backdrop for Du Bois's articulation of the double consciousness framework. These laws negatively navigated the education and livelihood of Blacks, more so in the South than in any other region in the nation (Tillman, 2004b). Currently, the nation continues to grapple with the lingering effects of the *Brown*

decision. Although efforts to diversify the education workforce began more than 20 years ago, as I mentioned earlier, there has been no significant increase in the number of Black principals.

Double Consciousness Theory

To contextualize and examine my experiences, I used the culturally relevant lens of W.E.B. DuBois's (1918) theory of double consciousness. Inspired by a life experience in the South during Jim Crow, DuBois noticed how Black individuals had to navigate and operate both their Black and American identities. In his description, DuBois illustrates double consciousness as an internal struggle among Blacks as to how they view themselves while also thinking about how "Whites intentionally misrepresent and misperceive Blackness" (Goings et al., 2018, p. 35). He believed that Black people were viewed through a one-sided veil, a lens centered around Whiteness, resulting in isolation, alienation, and marginalization (Lee-Johnson & Henderson, 2019). This framework uniquely complements this examination in two ways: (1) its limited use in the study of Black school leadership in K-12 and a locale outside of urban and suburban school settings and (2) it gives a poignant voice to those who are often marginalized, and in this case triple-marginalized – being Black, a male, and serving as a rural principal in a predominantly White school. The double consciousness theoretical framework afforded me the right to and need to express myself differently, depending upon the setting, including a predominantly White rural school. This affordance is significant as the narrative provided contradicts some of the literature about Blacks and rurality, which often comes from a deficit perspective (Bell, 1990; Cervone, 2018; Lee-Johnson & Henderson, 2019; Marietta & Marietta, 2020).

Autoethnography

A combination of autobiography and ethnography, autoethnography focuses on the author's experiences of personal interactions and the culture in which those interactions occur (Chang, 2008), exploring the link between the individual and society (Noel et al., 2023). Said differently, autoethnography is an analysis (graphy) of the self (auto) to understand a specific culture (ethno) (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The use of

autoethnography to examine my experiences as a Black rural principal of a predominantly White school was intentional. Inspired by Robin M. Boylorn's (2013) extensive research on autoethnography and race, I employ autoethnography because it is "a double storytelling form and moves from self to culture and back again" (p. 174) and often requires the layering of experiences, as I previously mentioned. According to Boylorn (2008), "Layered account methodology allows researchers to write in a stream of consciousness structure which resembles the way we think about and live in the world" (p. 415). Like many autoethnographies, this work is messy and sometimes contradictory (Boylorn, 2008). This double vision, the ability to see your own world and the world around you predominantly occupied by those who suppress you (Walker, 1983), reflects DuBois's (1918) double consciousness. While autoethnography has been used to examine leadership, more often in medical fields and large business organizations (Malakyan, 2014), educational settings are not common contexts (Lee, 2019). Moreover, autoethnography is appropriate and additive to the scholarly community in that much of leadership literature is about what leaders *ought* to (not) do, rather than about what they actually experience and do from their perspectives and interpretations (Deckers, 2020). Autoethnography can be used to highlight multiple concerns, including how culture and cultural practices shape identity, which aligns with the purpose of this research.

The primary purpose of this examination was not intended to affirm "what happened"; rather, it was my sense-making of those experiences (Weick et al., 2005). More specifically, the employment of autoethnography centralized my voice and honored the experiences and interpretations, which are often marginalized (Ellis et al., 2011) and othered (Mobley, 2019) due to race (Black) and cultural context (rural environment). As the autoethnographer, it is important to note that I do not speak on behalf of all Black rural principals, nor do I insinuate that my actions/thoughts/reactions are the best/right response; they are simply responses.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data on which this study is based took multiple forms. The first form was memory, a "building block of autoethnography" (Chang, 2008, p. 71). Memories served as "remembered moments that significantly impacted" my tenure as a rural principal (Ellis

et al., 2011, p. 175). These memorable moments selected and shaped experiences while simultaneously evoking strong emotions, which were frequently captured via journaling, which was the second form of data generation. Frequently used in qualitative research, journaling was employed to capture the ongoing interactions, experiences, and musings, as well as self-growth (Chang, 2008; Phifer, 2002). The time frame of these journals began in 2015 with a personal journal I kept during my time as a rural principal and concluded with my researcher's reflexive journal I kept during my dissertation research, which was a phenomenological study focused on the experiences of 11 Black rural principals leading predominantly White schools (Flowers, 2020). The use of the interviews conducted during my research as a doctoral student served two purposes: (1) to make the link between my narrative and the larger context of the study, and (2) to define the research in relation to others as part of the analysis; both purposes are accomplished by using autoethnography (Hays & Singh, 2023; Anderson, 2006; Custer, 2014). Five composition notebooks, used as journals, were full of direct quotes, expressions, short stories, thoughts, drawings, and perceptions.

The selection process of what to include in this autoethnographic study was complex and time-consuming. However, I selected personal rural principal experiences that aligned with the study's primary purpose, particularly those reflections with value-laden constructs that illustrated, to various degrees, my and others' (i.e., parents, community members, faculty, and dissertation research participants) beliefs and understandings of selected phenomena and how they influenced my leadership practices. While reviewing journal entries and documents, I identified words, phrases, and reflections related to race and racism, such as a drawing of the Confederate flag representing a parent's belt buckle during a conference, and insights on the superintendent's visits, where she repeatedly emphasized the school's progress. It is important to note that while memory served a purpose, it was the continuous re-reading of interview transcripts from my dissertation research, coupled with diary entries, which were recorded regularly, from personal journals, that served as the primary data.

My data analysis similarly combined several strategies. I employed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework to conduct a thematic analysis of the data (Moustakas, 1994). The six phases of analysis included: (1) (re)familiarizing myself with

the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining themes, and (6) writing up. Multiple steps, such as organizing the data, were completed during the phases to assist with the analysis. I then read the data holistically, then selectively, and finally used a detailed reading approach to develop a sense of the overall meaning (van Manen, 2014). The iterative process revealed four primary codes, which were *double consciousness*, *racialized leadership*, *rural visibility*, and *emotional taxation*, to represent key aspects of Black rural principals' experiences. The concept of double consciousness revealed how Black rural principals must engage in internal negotiations to lead successfully while navigating perceptions from both individual and societal racialized viewpoints. Racialized leadership demonstrated how race functioned as a fundamental element in leadership assessment, which subjected Black principals to intensified oversight. Rural visibility represented the unavoidable reality of being “the only one,” where each choice and behavior held significance that extended past its immediate situation. The emotional taxation dimension highlighted how Black principals experience ongoing mental and physical exhaustion from leading in White-dominated environments while managing external demands and maintaining their own psychological health. The codes merged together to create a complex narrative that captured resistance and resilience and highlighted the hidden challenges faced by Black rural leaders while also strengthening the research study's validity and its impact on educational leadership.

Autoethnography, by nature, does not seek generalizability in the traditional, statistical sense but rather aims for *analytical generalizability* (Ellis et al., 2011). This approach allows readers to identify parallels between the researcher’s experiences and their own, fostering resonance and applicability in similar contexts (Tracy, 2010). By engaging deeply with lived experiences, autoethnography enables what Stake (1995) calls *naturalistic generalization*, where insights from a single case contribute to broader understandings of social phenomena. In this study, the experiences of a Black rural principal in a predominantly White school, while deeply personal, may reflect the realities of other educational leaders navigating race, power, and identity in rural settings. As Richardson (2000) argues, the power of autoethnography lies in its ability to evoke shared meaning, allowing readers to see aspects of themselves in the narrative and, in turn, extending its relevance beyond the individual case.

At its core, this study is about my life, an account that carries its own validity, reliability, generalizability, and verisimilitude, all of which are situated in my lived experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). However, I also hope that this examination resonates beyond my personal journey, inspiring other Black principals and individuals of color working in rural educational administrative settings to reflect on their own experiences with race and rurality. By engaging with the portrayals found in literature and media, they may be encouraged to critically examine their responses and perspectives, deepening their understanding of the complexities and contradictions that shape their professional and personal realities.

The Narrator's Connection to Rural

For generations, my family has called a rural town located near the Appalachian Mountains home. I, a Black male, was born, reared, and educated in this predominantly White rural county. For most of my primary school years, I lived in one of the four all-Black communities. Presently, while this community remains predominantly Black, people from other races (i.e., Whites and Hispanics) have moved into the community. Prior to entering third grade, my mother moved to a smaller, rural farming town within the same county. Our new place of residence was a few feet from the residence of my great-grandparents, who raised livestock and farmed acres of land. I remember assisting with tilling the land and chopping wood while listening to the sounds of chickens, cows, and pigs. Across the road from my great-grandparents' house were our neighbors' pasture and peach orchard, a place my great-grandfather "worked" after decades of being retired from the local railroad. It was a neighborhood where everyone knew each other. Not a car drove on the then-dirt road, where the driver, regardless of their race, would usually signal to my great-grandparents if they were visible (i.e., sitting on the porch, under a tree, or working in the garden) with a car horn and a waving of a hand. Perhaps too naïve to understand the lack of resources available, to identify prejudices and racist behaviors, or that I was protected by my family, who accepted this way of living as the norm, I have fond memories growing up in my hometown. In addition to family, I remain in contact with friends and teachers from my hometown, for they are members of my village. Those relationships and the

desire to help others from similar backgrounds served as catalysts in my decision to become a rural educator.

Pivotal Moments

Vignette 1: Speaking as the First Black Principal

As I began my first semester in my new position as principal, the next several months were a blur of meetings. I met with numerous individuals, groups, and community organizations, who were connected, in varying degrees, to the school. While my previous principalship prepared me for a "traditional" demanding summer schedule, this experience was a familiar stranger, and I felt ill-prepared. For instance, a task that was often completed without much preparation was the robocall to the school community. However, this experience was causing me much angst. Although welcome-back letters were mailed, the school's webpage updated, and our marquee branded with important dates, the robocall was my official welcome to the new school year. More importantly, it would be the first time the school community would hear my voice. Coupled with a visual (a picture of me on the school's website and in the weekly local newspaper), a voice (the robocall), and a message (information shared in the letter and on the marquee) I widened the once-ajar door for judgement, an all too familiar consequence for being a Black principal in a predominantly White school (Flowers, 2020; Helms et al., 2010; Lomotey, 2010).

After multiple practice readings, I expected to be ready to record and send the message to over 400 parents. However, what should have been a quick, ten-minute task stretched into nearly an hour. Each time I stumbled over a word, paused at the wrong spot, had the wrong intonation, or slipped into a southern or rural dialect (Parton & Azano, 2022), I restarted the process. After numerous attempts at recording, I finally created a "flawless" message; however, I could not send it. I was paralyzed with the realization that this message could be the beginning or the ending of my career as the principal, more specifically, the first Black principal of this predominantly White rural middle school. My nagging concern was that if I did not replace the communities' apprehension and doubts (these feelings from some of the communities represented at this school, which were shared with me by several of the teachers and parents) with assurance and confidence

in their new leader, this school year would be horrific. With that looming dread, I sent the message – the first of many messages during my tenure as the principal.

Crucial changes informed by society and political agendas make the context of principals' duties and responsibilities more challenging than in the past. Therefore, being a principal is demanding. However, when you racialize the principalship, being a Black principal is even more demanding, and when locale is added, being a Black rural principal of a predominantly White rural school is most demanding (Davis et al. 2017; Flowers, 2020; Fuller & Young, 2022). Often, I reflect on my tenure as a principal, in general, and wonder how I thrived and navigated in various contexts, considering that every exchange, whether verbal, written, or face-to-face, would be relentlessly scrutinized by colleagues, teachers, students, and community members. But there was something unique about my experiences as a rural principal. At first glance, my experiences did not seem to differ from those of my counterparts, in this instance, White rural principals. For example, rural principals tend to experience, to varying degrees, continuous challenges from the lack of resources, such as funding and technology, the unforeseen expectations and responsibilities from the various communities (Arnold et al., 2005; Flowers, 2020; Hansen, 2018; Starr & White, 2008), being professionally and geographically isolated (Casto, 2016, Parson et al., 2016; Hansen, 2018), and leading schools in communities overwhelmed with persistent poverty among children and their families (Schaefer et al., 2016; Farrigan, 2017; Showalter et al., 2017; Walker, 2018). With these challenges in common, what made my tenure as principal more complex than those of other principals in similar situations? Two words: *race* and *rurality*. Both distinctive characteristics operate as tools to measure effectiveness, acceptance, and credibility for me. In fairness, my race has been an ingredient in the recipes for pleasant and unpleasant situations in all teaching and leading assignments across rural, suburban, and urban school districts. However, being a principal has been more intense and exhausting in rural settings. More specifically, from the beginning of my tenure as a Black rural principal, I thought about the role of my race more frequently.

Race matters differently depending on place (Forman et al., 1997; Lensmire, 2017). For instance, while serving as an urban administrator, where more people of color, in general, were visible in roles as educators (e.g., principals, teachers), parents (e.g.,

PTA presidents), or community members (e.g., elected politicians, business owners), my race was intersected with other identities, which strongly influenced how I viewed myself personally and professionally. Said differently, race was not always an isolated social identity. Interestingly in these places, I thought of myself, and was often described as a highly educated (i.e., a graduate of highly revered colleges and universities) Black man, who had served in many roles, including an English teacher, which is a position that is not frequently occupied by Black men, prior to leading schools. However, in this rural, predominantly White space, my self-awareness and self-consciousness, which are nestled in my race, stood at the foreground of conversations, because I believed that this community saw race alone versus race plus other factors.

In the end, I concluded that even if it is not explicitly visible, race is germane to my daily experiences. An example is the angst surrounding the content in and when to send the robocall. I became more consumed with ensuring that the message (e.g., word choice, tone) and the sound of my voice overshadowed my race. I worked hard(er) than usual to customize a message that could not be misinterpreted based on the way I sounded. In reflecting, I must ask if these pressures were based on my experiences, others' (Blacks) experiences in similar contexts, or stories I created as a means of preparing for the worst, not wanting to be caught off-guard, as we say in my hometown.

Vignette 2: Caring and Not Caring Enough; I Cannot Win

I was asked to join a potentially intense parent-teacher conference. Of course, I consented. I was very familiar with the student and their parents. Both were frequent visitors to my office. For this, I prepared to encounter multiple "-isms." More specifically, this set of parents was known for boldly expressing their racist and sexist beliefs. The parent-teacher conference concluded; the parents and child rose to leave. I noticed the confederate flag t-shirt neatly tucked inside his jeans, which provided clear visibility of the confederate belt buckle worn by the father. As they headed towards the door, the father turned around abruptly with one final thought that he delivered passionately. His thoughts were centered around his negative feelings towards me serving as the principal. He shared how his past interactions with Black people and his "upbringing" would not allow him to "respect me." But it was his last few words that have been etched in my memory.

He admitted that he neither trusts nor likes Black people but acknowledged my care for his son, conceding, “I guess I owe you a thanks.” His anguished outburst surprised everyone, including his wife, who apologized, a common practice with her, for her husband’s display of “love and support” for his son. They exited the room. Breaking the silence with her quivering voice, my assistant principal asked if I was okay. I turned to face her and a teacher, both visibly upset; I replied, “Yes, I am fine.” I was stunned – he said thanks!

Conversely, I met with Black parents who accused me of not caring enough for Black students. During our conversations, they implied that their hope and trust that I would do right for the Black students quickly disappeared as they described the situations for their children as “not changing enough” and “not quick enough,” two phrases that I heard from a majority of those parents. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2017) speaks to this tension in his critique of Barack Obama’s presidency, noting how Black leaders often carry the weight of extreme expectations from their own communities while navigating systems resistant to rapid transformation. Similarly, Paul E. Peterson (1981) examined the constraints on Black mayors, highlighting how structural limitations within governance frequently impede the reforms leaders may wish to implement. I found myself in this reality. I wanted to do more, I needed to do more, but I was constantly up against the views of others and the slow-moving train of institutional change. It was a reoccurring battle that I always had to fight internally and externally with a few Black parents in every school I served as principal.

Interactions such as the ones above were few and far between; however, they made a lasting impression on the way I served as a principal. I accepted and endured the reality that not only had I been challenged to balance the demands and expectations of my school community (e.g., superintendent) and the marginalized communities, but I needed to continuously manage the sting of disrespect on the basis of being Black which segregates my experiences from my White peers. While I acknowledge that my White colleagues may also encounter tensions and challenges in diverse spaces, some of which may be racial in nature, the experiences are qualitatively different and shaped by distinct historical and societal contexts. Frequently, I feared that my mistakes and failures would outweigh the school’s successes, and I would be mocked and relentlessly scrutinized by

community members who looked like me, shared experiences based on their race, and expected (un)merited favor, simultaneously, by community members whose racist and historical mindsets clouded their perspective of me as a competent and caring leader – an experience that Black school administrators, both men and women, encounter regularly (Davis et al., 2017; Hayes et al., 2021). Do not misinterpret me, I am not suggesting that to be "rural is to be racist, or that it is an innate feeling" (Cervone, 2018, p. 142), but rather rural societies, specifically those in the South, are often drenched in ideologies, in general, that have been ingrained over the years and become their traditions and truths. Thus, it can simultaneously be difficult to persuade rural communities to change and easier for outsiders (non-rural dwellers) to (mis)interpret rural communities' "resistance" as ignorance.

Discussion and Final Thoughts

As I reflected on my tenure as a rural principal of a predominantly White school, I concluded that the process provided me with meaningful personal and professional growth that I never anticipated. From the first anxiety-filled day of being saturated with the district, school, and community expectations, to the final year of successfully demonstrating how to lead a rural school by galvanizing diverse communities for the sake of children, I felt like I had been thrown into a difficult culture that provided little time, a privilege that often is overlooked, to become acclimated. Despite the initial feeling of the (im)possibility of each expectation, each year became easier to manage and to lead. Fortunately, my initial frustration, occasional self-doubt, and yearning to be perfect morphed into deeper self-awareness and resilience. More importantly, I was reminded of the necessity of failure as a part of growth, of the importance of creating an environment conducive to working and learning and of the power of collaborative leadership, including partnering with myself by valuing my rich lived experiences.

The moments and experiences I have described are defining precisely because they collapse [every day] experiences of race with modes of researching (ourselves) in specific settings and cultures. These moments require analysis and critique to consider the nuances of race/d experiences in rural White spaces and why they are important. *Relevant* and *Reflexive* are two stances from the work of Robin M. Boylorn (2011) on race

and reflexivity that provided me with the position to identify an overall theme that emerged when I organized the highlighted experiences coupled with data related to this analysis and critique employing DuBois' double consciousness. This theme is *invisible ache* – a quiet means of living through any oppressed experience. However, this experience also revealed a deeper reality about Black educational leadership in rural spaces, one that speaks to the broader implications of this work. Black rural communities are not simply waiting for representation; they are waiting for evidence that their educational needs are being met fairly and equitably. They seek leaders who not only occupy positions of authority but also challenge the systemic barriers that have historically limited access and opportunity. In rural environments where political and cultural constraints often dictate the pace of educational change, Black leaders bear the weight of both expectation and resistance. The reality is that Black school leaders must constantly prove themselves, navigating the tension between meeting the needs of marginalized students and operating within predominantly White structures that may resist change (Flowers, 2020). This dual burden reflects the invisible taxation placed on Black rural leaders, a challenge that must be acknowledged in leadership discourse (Watson & Baxley, 2021).

Throughout this manuscript, I shared moments, analyzed through the double consciousness lens, that caused me to process at a slower pace and (over) think situations prior to responding. Often, I was required to negotiate expressing my emotions, such as frustration, shock, or hurt, as I did not want to be perceived as incompetent, angry, or lacking control of my emotions – a result of living in two worlds (DuBois, 1918). For example, when families wore confederate attire (i.e., shirts, belts, hats, and jackets), I had to debate internally and ask the questions: Was this an intentional microassault, a retaliation against the school district's policy of wearing clothing that is considered offensive, or was it their form of displaying patriotism? Regardless, at the time, I believed I could not display my discomfort of being in the same space with White supremacy-oriented paraphernalia. Another example is the extended time and effort it took me to click send on the first schoolwide electronic (i.e., telephone/mobile) message and to be transparent in those messages that followed. In reflection, I realize that my hesitation in sending messages was not just about getting the words right. It was about avoiding the possibility of saying something that could reinforce stereotypes, create tension, or lead to

scrutiny in ways that my White counterparts likely never had to consider. Claude Steele (2010) describes this as stereotype threat, the heightened self-awareness and behavioral adjustment that occurs when one fears confirming negative societal perceptions about their group. In this role, I was not just leading a school; I was constantly managing perceptions of my leadership in ways that went beyond the job description.

These concerns or feelings align with DuBois' explanation of double consciousness. With other Black individuals, I want them to know that despite my education and class differences, which may separate us, I am still Black and not removed from common experiences that are created by others' perceptions. At the same time, when conversing with Whites, especially those who are unfamiliar individuals, I want them to know that I am educated and possibly in the same class as them, but for different reasons. This is not a form of arrogance or an act of "I made it!" but a form of the continuous feeling I have of proving myself, and explaining, through my work, what my race, experiences, and professional and personal qualities mean. These constant internal debates impact/ed me not only psychologically (i.e., feelings of isolation) but physiologically (i.e., gastric distress).

Through this experience, I was also reminded that leadership is not meant to exist in isolation. While I carried much of the responsibility, I could not lead effectively without collaborative structures that supported both my work and the vision for the school. A good leader does not stand alone. The expectation that one person, particularly a [Black] principal in a culturally complex space, can single-handedly transform a school is not just unrealistic, it is unsustainable. My ability to lead effectively depended on a coalition of educators, staff, and community members who were willing to engage in the work alongside me. Building a school culture where all students felt seen required more than my leadership; it required a tribe. My tribe consisted of a Black female and a White male and female. All were products of the Danemead community. Research on leadership in marginalized communities affirms that equitable and sustainable change is rarely the work of a single individual but rather the result of collective efforts and shared responsibility (Martinez & Welton, 2015).

While my previous experiences as an urban principal inspired my leadership approaches as a rural principal, this experience, which included those pivotal moments,

significantly shifted how I led and resulted in a “framework” for rural school leadership. Collectively the two vignettes in this manuscript commemorate important moments in my life as a rural Black principal in a White school setting. The vignettes offer a commentary on the invisible aches that Black rural principals in White educational settings endure; more specifically, the consequences of racism in multiple forms, such as limited social capital and being seen as a space invader on the psyche, how my presence disrupted, both positively and negatively, the community, and the failure to acknowledge the wealth of knowledge and experience I brought to the school.

In summarizing my rural principal experience, I do not label it as positive or negative. Instead, my experiences are results. They are results based on the interactions between Danemead’s culture and mine; more specifically, the beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors of the residents in Danemead and me, the sole Black principal. Utilizing autoethnography was complex as I took diary entries, drawings, and memories to create this narrative. However, I relived, examined, interrogated, deconstructed, and reconstructed those moments to make a deeper meaning of those experiences. The shared vignettes are not meant to define my time, in totality, as a rural principal in a predominantly White school. Rather, they were pivotal moments that caused me to investigate my experiences, in general, as a Black rural principal and how race informed those experiences. By completing this interrogation, I wonder whether my experiences or feelings would have been different if I had a Black mentor with rural principalship experience. Research on the influence of shared race and experience for Black leaders is critical, as they often confront unique barriers in administrative practice (Rudel et al., 2021). These challenges include microaggressions and cultural dissonance within predominantly White environments. Scholarship on Black principals consistently reveals that they face limited mentorship, exclusion from informal networks, heightened performance expectations, constrained decision-making power (Mabokela & Madsen, 2003), and restricted advancement opportunities (Grubbs, 2021; Jackson-Dunn, 2018; Richardson, 2013). However, what remains underexplored is how locale, particularly rural contexts, shapes these barriers**.**

Earlier, I acknowledged that my race was the most distinctive characteristic. Within the fabric of the United States, race has been a defining issue since before its formal

existence. However, race is intertwined in every aspect of Blacks' lives and often operates as the primary factor in determining "access to resources and social advantages" (Bernard & Neblett, 2018, p. 287; Brown et al., 2007); this factor is currently under attack by individuals who believe racism no longer is an American issue. Nonetheless, race informs meaning-making for individuals (Flowers, 2020) and serves as an assessment instrument in multiple ways that include how Blacks view their lived experiences, and how Blacks' lived experiences differ from and align with other ethnicities, such as individuals who identify as White (Young, 2004). My time as a rural Black principal ended after three years. The students, faculty, and community were in a better place academically, professionally, and culturally. Academically, student performance saw measurable improvement, particularly in English/Language Arts, math, and writing. Professionally, faculty and staff received targeted instructional support, which led to improved instructional practices that ensured all students would experience success. Culturally, the school experienced a shift toward a more inclusive and engaged environment. While some faculty and staff transitioned out due to retirement or misalignment with the vision, those who remained were celebrated for their achievements and supported for their innovative approaches. Additionally, parental engagement increased, not only in terms of their involvement in their child's learning process but also through active participation in school decision-making. My decision to leave this position was not easy and was based on the next steps to achieve my professional and personal goals. I honestly enjoyed my time working in Danemead's community. I remain in contact with several individuals, including teachers, principals, students, parents, town council members, and the superintendent, who is now retired. In the end, my experiences as a Black rural principal reminded me of the way race continues to influence how I am seen and interpreted. I am between two worlds – Black and American.

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