

## Resilience and the African American Superintendent

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### Abstract

We sought to explore the extent to which race might influence how African American superintendents cope with the stressors of their leadership roles and the presence of support while in such positions. In order to test this question, we recruited African American superintendents across the United States. We specifically measured their ability to cope with stressors and maintain resilience in leadership. African American superintendents indicated that they primarily utilized problem-based coping to navigate role stress and that they perceived themselves as successfully bouncing back from that stress. We offer a brief set of recommendations based upon these results to foster further coping and resilience among this remarkable group of leaders.

### Key Words

stress, resilience, coping, African American, superintendent, leadership

African American superintendents often lead large urban school districts faced with numerous structural as well as systemic challenges. These challenges regularly include fiscal underfunding, lack of technology, antiquated classroom affordances, sparse extracurricular and co-curricular experiences, and teachers who lack adequate certification. As result of these complex challenges, large urban school districts experience poor academic achievement and attendance among African American students and other students of color.

In the current political climate (Baker, 2018), African American superintendents may be required to ward off racially hostile environments to promote the psychological safety of their students. With each passing day, African American superintendents must foster the creation and maintenance of emotionally and physically conducive learning environments. In other words, African American superintendents must remain resilient in the face of challenge and model this resilience to the various stakeholders whom they serve.

Although debate continues regarding its definition (Southwick, Bonanno, Masten, Panter-Brick, & Yehuda, 2014), resilience is considered to be the ability to bounce back from adversity (Carver, 1998; Smith et al., 2008). Implicit in the behavior of a resilient superintendent is a strengths-based approach toward leadership in times of difficulty (Saleebey, 1996).

It is conceivable that the current political climate has exacerbated fear and tension among children of color in classrooms across the United States (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019), a situation potentially worsened by the ubiquity of social media and its ability to

manipulate public sentiment (e.g., Stella, Ferrara, & De Domenico, 2018).

The main threat to resilience is the impact of stress on an individual's coping mechanisms. Lazarus (1990) observed that stress is grounded in a transactional relationship between an individual and their environment. An individual's perception of an event influences how they process an event that appears harmful or threatening (Lazarus, 1990).

Individuals tend to respond to perceived stressors with a range of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies with varied success (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980; Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). Problem-focused coping aims "at managing or altering the problem that is causing stress, whereas emotion-focused coping strategies are directed at regulating an individual's emotional response to a problem" (McMillian & Morris, 2012, p. 645). Whereas problem-focused coping occurs when an individual "perceives that (s)he can change the situation...emotion-focused coping strategies are used when an individual perceives that nothing can be done to change potentially harmful or threatening situations" (McMillian & Morris, 2012, p. 645).

The effectiveness of the individual's coping strategies may be strongly influenced by the presence or absence of community and friends (Daly, Jennings, Beckett & Leashore, 1995). According to Cohen and Willis (1985), social support "'buffers' persons from the potentially pathogenic influence of stressful event" (Cohen & Willis, 1985, p. 310).

What matters is that the individual is able to muster some mix of problem-focused and/or emotion-focused coping mechanisms that allow them to remain resilient in the presence of stress. In the absence of such mechanisms, the individual might resort to

maladaptive attempts to cope (e.g., drinking, smoking, engaging in otherwise unhealthy behaviors) that ultimately serve to cause greater harm to the self.

Hacker (1992) further observed that “African Americans experience pressures that can be explained by the stigmas of race or racial origin and that are unlike those encountered by other groups that have immigrated to America” (p. 242). Leading a school district can be challenging work, especially within a political climate that is fueled by a national debate around accountability-driven assessment.

African American superintendents today must cope with the additional stressors of leading school districts in a political climate of presidentially sanctioned bigotry (Graham, Greene, Murphy, & Richards, 2019).

What support factors might contribute to the resilience necessary for leading while Black? In order to test this question, we recruited current and retired African American superintendents throughout the United States. We specifically investigated their ability to cope with the stressors and maintain resilience in leadership. We also asked them to share ways they had sought to navigate the stress of their leadership roles.

## **Method**

### **Subjects**

Participants were current and recently retired public school superintendents recruited via email during 2017-2018 winter season. The sample was comprised of 21 subjects from a recruited total of 363. The genders were balanced within the sample (11 males, 10 females). The typical subject was 50.52 years old (SD = 6.86, range: 38-64 years) and has

been in the superintendency for 8.33 years (SD = 6.24, range: 0-23). All participants were treated in accord with the ethical guidelines of the American Educational Research Association (2011).

### **Materials**

Coping was evaluated via self-report with the Brief COPE Inventory (BCI; Carver, 1997), a 28-item instrument designed to assess the extent to which an individual utilizes a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with stress. The BCI is based on the full-length version of the COPE Inventory (Carver, 1989), which demonstrated acceptable test-retest reliability (.45-.92).

To better understand the relative coping skills endorsed among African American public school superintendents, the 14 scales of the BCI were grouped by rational choice into three general scales: (a) problem-focused coping, (b) emotion-focused coping, and (c) maladaptive coping.

Problem-focused coping is typified by an intentional approach to stress that involves activities such as changing goals, positively reinterpreting dilemmas, and planning. As the term implies, emotion-focused coping is characterized by behaviors such as seeking social support and venting emotions.

Problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping are adaptive response sets. Alternatively, maladaptive coping may involve denial of the situation, self-blame, and substance use. Scores for these three summative scales were derived with a simple summation of their respective scales, and then divided by the number of scales inherent to each overall scale to normalize the new scores relative to one another.

The Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith, Dalen, Wiggins, Tooley, Christopher, & Bernard, 2018) was used to measure via self-report the ability of an individual to recover from stress. A 6-item instrument, the BRS demonstrated strong test-retest reliability (.80-.91).

Subjects were also asked to respond to an open-ended question (“As an African American superintendent, how do you navigate leading your school district during the current political climate?”). This question was intended to provide subjects to an opportunity to share what they thought to be salient to their leadership.

### Procedure

Subjects were African American public school superintendents recruited via email during 2017-2018 winter season from the 2016 national list of African American superintendents curated by the National Alliance of Black School Educators ([www.nabse.org](http://www.nabse.org)).

Upon clicking on the link in the recruitment email, subjects were taken to an online survey hosted by Qualtrics ([www.qualtrics.com](http://www.qualtrics.com)) that presented a statement of informed consent and then requested completion of the Brief COPE Inventory (BCI; Carver, 1997), Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith, Dalen, Wiggins, Tooley, Christopher, & Bernard, 2018), and an open-ended question regarding leading as an African American superintendent.

### Results

The current study was intended to explore perceptions of coping and resilience among African American public school superintendents. Although the sample proved quite small ( $n = 21$ ), the superintendents who participated were geographically representative of those school districts in the United States with the highest prevalence of African American students.

At the time of data collection, there were only 363 African American superintendents leading among more than 13,000 public school districts. The majority of these superintendents served in larger urban districts.

It reasonably could be assumed that, as the chief executive officer of their district, the typical superintendent might not have been able to justify setting aside 30 minutes from their day to respond to a survey. The empirical reality is that the data in the present study are likely the best currently available. Nonetheless, the analysis was necessarily limited to a nonstatistical exploratory consideration.

Cognizant of this inferential limitation, the data were interrogated to shed light on the current reported state of coping and resilience among African American public school superintendents in a geographically diverse sample (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Geographic distribution of subjects.

Data were collected from two instruments. The Brief COPE Inventory (BCI; Carver, 1997) is a measure designed to assess how individuals perceive their utilization of a range of coping mechanisms to cope with stress. It requires respondents to indicate their level of agreement across 28 items ranging from a score of 1 (“I haven’t been doing this at all”) to a score of 4 (“I’ve been doing this a lot”), with a lower overall score suggesting the manifestation of more robust coping mechanisms. In response to the BCI (see Figure 2), the preponderance of mean responses among African American public school superintendents ranked below the midpoint on a majority of items (19 versus 9) of the BCI, suggesting a tendency to enact a variety of coping mechanisms.

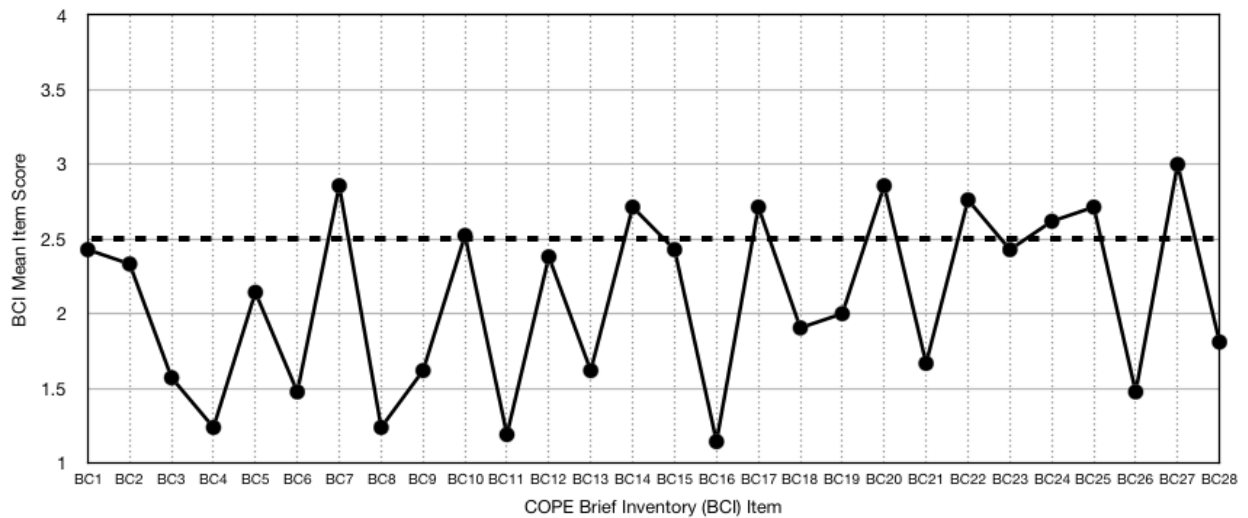


Figure 2. Mean response scores to BCI items.

African American public school superintendents indicated that they primarily utilized problem-based approaches ( $M_{PROB} = 2.61, SD = .71$ ) to cope with stress. Emotion-focused coping was reported as a close secondary response set ( $M_{EMOT} = 2.18, SD = .52$ ) toward coping. Maladaptive coping was utilized as the least common ( $M_{MAL} = 1.54, SD = .44$ ) approach toward coping with stress (see Figure 3).

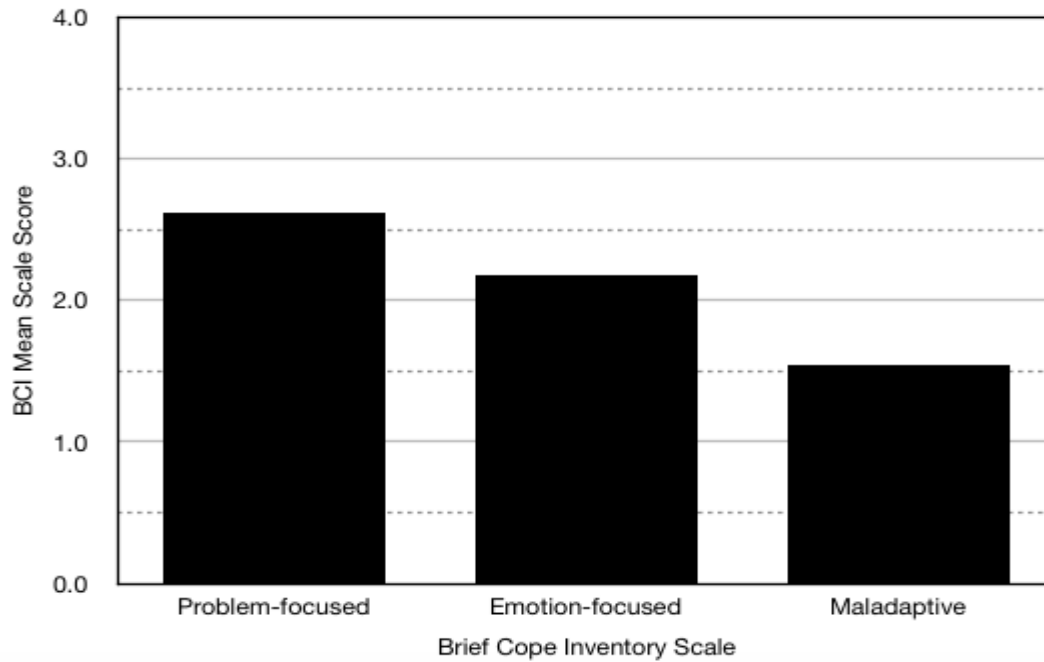


Figure 3. Mean response scores to BCI scale items.

The Brief Resilience Scale (BRS; Smith, Dalen, Wiggins, Tooley, Christopher, & Bernard, 2018) similarly was designed assess how well individuals perceive their ability to recover from stress. It asks respondents to endorse their level of agreement across six items ranging from a score of 1 (“strongly disagree”) to 5 (“strongly agree”). Higher item scores indicate more successful resilience. In response to the BRS, the average response score across all items clustered tightly around 4, suggesting that African American public school superintendents perceived themselves as successfully bouncing back from the stress of leadership (see Figure 4).

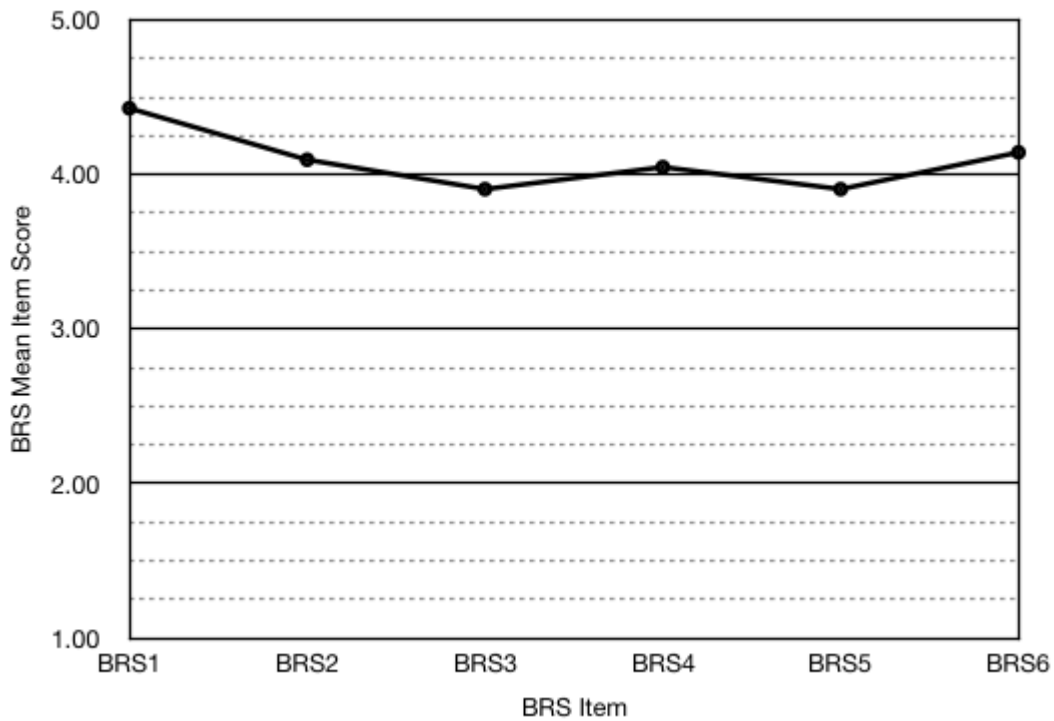


Figure 4. Mean response scores to BRS items.





## Discussion

African American superintendents often lead complex school districts that present a range of leadership challenges. In addition to addressing the academic needs of their increasingly diverse students, African American superintendents must address community needs, practical concerns, and local politics. African American superintendents resultantly can find themselves searching for additional resources to compensate for systemic issues related to economic pressure, time constraints, and cultural and class differences (Henderson 2004). As people of color, African American superintendents additionally might find themselves pressured by the communities of color they serve to demonstrate the expected academic progress of their students. The result could be a heightened level of stress greater than that experienced by their White peers in leadership.

The small but geographically representative sample of the present study provides some insight into the matter. Overall, African American public school superintendents indicated that they primarily utilized problem-based approaches to cope with stress, with emotion-focused coping was reported as a close secondary response set toward coping.

However, it is noteworthy to consider that neither of these trends rose to the level of what might be considered highly effective coping. Instead, we interpret the results to suggest that the typical African American superintendent in the study was able to muster psychological and social resources necessary to remain successful in the position. As one subject shared, “I understand that navigating the political landscape is a function of the position. It is a component of the job that cannot be avoided.”

Maladaptive coping was utilized much less frequently than were the more adaptive strategies, with the report on average that using self-denial was a fairly normative response. Overall, the rather narrow variance on average between problem-focused, emotion-focused, and maladaptive coping strategies begs the question as to the toll the stress of leadership took on the African American superintendents in the present study.

Nonetheless, the African American superintendents indicated that they had remained resilient in the face of role stress. Especially noteworthy was the shared sentiment that it was important to remain focused on the work amidst the challenges of politics. Indeed, the majority of the African American superintendents in the present study most certainly led in highly politicized communities, where the scarcity of resources in interaction with issues of race create tensions among stakeholders. This reality appears concordant with the concept of resilience. As Smith et al. (2008) stated, “while resilience has been defined as resistance to illness, adaptation, and thriving, the ability to bounce back or recover from stress is closest to its original meaning” (p. 194).

Taken as a whole, the responses from the African American superintendents suggest that their coping mechanisms were sufficient, but perhaps not much more so, to foster the resilience necessary for their posts. It is thus problematic that there has been so little ostensible interest among educational researchers and policy leaders to better understand the experiences of this important group of leaders and how to recruit, hire, and retain them for the betterment of students and communities.

Tillman and Cochran (2000) reported that schools and departments of education continue to perpetuate the dominance of White men and generally fail to provide adequate support for diversity in professional preparation programs. They further posited that the relevant coursework is typically taught from a White and male perspective. Issues of gender, race, and ethnicity consequently create “silent preparation programs” (Tillman & Cochran, 2000, p. 55). Such challenges ultimately have a direct effect on the performance and tenure of these leaders. Therefore, it is critical that graduate training programs preparing educators for leadership positions balance theory with a diverse range of practical experiences so that they are prepared for the realities of the position (Brown, 2005). For example, affording care toward selecting the right mentors might promote more women to consider the superintendency.

Future research should recognize that the typical experience of White superintendents might not adequately translate to their African American counterparts. The United States is becoming an increasingly diverse nation. Yet, instead of demonstrating an ethos of a melting pot, it appears that bigotry is on the rise (Anti-Defamation League, 2019). School districts, school boards, and legislators would be wise to take seriously the lack of diversity among available educational leaders.

Establishing incentives, and the resources to support them, for the identification, recruitment, and mentorship of African American superintendents must become a priority if the nation is to equitably educate all of its children.

As the district goes, so goes the city,  
and the nation.

### **Author Biographies**

Bernadeia Johnson is an assistant professor of educational leadership at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She is a former superintendent to Minneapolis Public Schools and beforehand a deputy superintendent of the Memphis City Schools. Prior to entering education, she was a financial analyst for US Bank. Johnson currently teaches and conducts research dedicated to understanding the lived experiences of African American school and district leaders. She serves on local and national boards to promote education as a public good. E-mail: [bernadeia.johnson@mnsu.edu](mailto:bernadeia.johnson@mnsu.edu)

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