

# Morale Malaise in Professional Practice: The Potential Effect of Employment Discrimination in New Jersey Public Schools

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“... yet she wish'd that heaven had made her such a man: she thank'd me and bade me, if I had a friend that lov'd her, I should but teach him how to tell my story, and that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake: she lov'd me for the dangers I have pass'd and I lov'd her that she did pity them.”

- *Othello*, Act I, Scene III

Shakespeare explains how Othello won the fair Desdemona when the odds seemed to inure against it: she was the fair and beautiful daughter of a Venetian senator, and he was a black man. His color in that society and at that time was enough to render him of no value, certainly not for the likes of Venetian royalty. He transcended this limitation in that society, however, because of his military prowess. The delineation to Desdemona of his exploits as a general was akin to an interview for the position of her lover. Notwithstanding his physical shortcomings (according to that society) he captured her affections. It is not so easy, however, for modern day African-American educators to woo school districts, their Desdemona, toward affection. More succinctly stated, African-American educators in New Jersey school districts where Caucasians control the school board find their exemplary credentials impotent to cascade them to higher, more important positions in the public schools.

Many school districts have written policies indicating that it is a district devoted to affirmative action and will not discriminate on the basis of a myriad of categories. They righteously proclaim that such discrimination is a violation of federal law<sup>1</sup> and state law<sup>2</sup>. The same districts, however, when confronted with a comparison of the candidates, choose the local favorite (who is usually not a person of color) as opposed to the person of color with more experience, greater educational credentials and other qualities superior to the chosen candidate. The effect of such a slight on the psyche of the unfavored one may extend beyond the internal feelings of the unsuccessful candidate. It may, even subconsciously, affect his or her professional performance and on-site relationships.

## The Failure to Promote

The refusal to promote someone with superior credentials, knowledge and/or seniority is akin to a demotion. Although the bypassed candidate

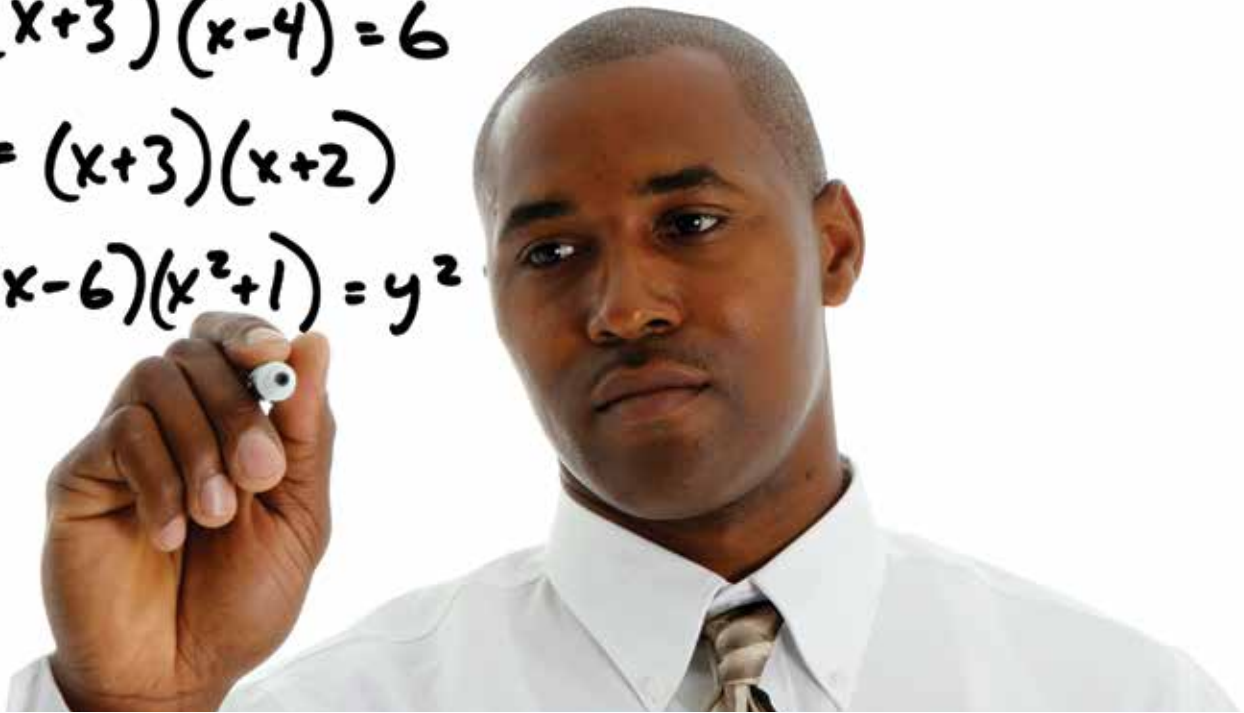
retains his or her job title and status, there is a loss to the bypassed candidate's reputation and/or strength to influence operations in the organization. In fact, to anyone who is familiar with the situation, such a bypass is a clear “slap in the face”<sup>3</sup>. When the bypassed candidate complains to the employer, he or she is usually referred to the organization's grievance procedure. Suspicious of a procedure set up and controlled by the employer, the grievant will usually opt for a judicial determination of his or her claim. The courts, however, have become more likely to defer to the organization's grievance procedure and to consider them relevant in determinations of liability. Even though grievance procedures were not important in legal doctrine when the personnel profession first promoted them, their significance as evidence of fair treatment has increasingly become an accepted part of the legal arsenal in discrimination lawsuits, and courts are far more likely today than they were in the past to find organizations with EEO

$$\log_3(x+2) + \log_3(x-6) = 4$$

$$(x+3)(x-4) = 6$$

$$2^2 = (x+3)(x+2)$$

$$(x-6)(x^2+1) = y^2$$



grievance procedures not liable for discrimination<sup>4</sup>. The failure to achieve a just conclusion to a grievance based on discrimination, therefore, may generate in the dissatisfied employee, a level of stress that may manifest itself in unanticipated actions.

Race discrimination has been recognized as a factor that may contribute to employee stress, leading to an unproductive or unhealthy method of resolving that stress. This proposition is grounded in General Strain theory that essentially contends that "all manner of positive stimuli" create expected goals, and the failure to achieve such ambitions results in various forms of strain and in responses such as anger, frustration and despondency.<sup>6</sup> It would be easy to conclude that "expected goals" are restricted to the acquisition of monetary gain such as was proposed by early strain theorists.<sup>7, 8, 9</sup>

Agnew (1992), however, opines that the expected goals can expand across a variety of aspirations, and that strain can result from:

1. The actual or anticipated failure to achieve positively valued goals;

2. The actual or anticipated removal of positively valued stimuli;
3. The actual or anticipated presence of negative stimuli.<sup>10</sup>

In essence, the presence of stress on the job, of which real and/or perceived racial discrimination is one, has been shown to be the possible forerunner of psychological strain and has been shown to be inversely related to job performance.<sup>11</sup>

### **"Invisibility" and the Superior Candidate**

The refusal to recognize the accomplishments of clearly superior candidates is a scourge that can manifest a debilitating effect, not only on the mental health of the candidate<sup>12</sup>, but on his or her physical well-being. The denial of opportunities in the face of substantially superior credentials engenders in the minority candidate a reaffirmation of the proposition of second-class status and marginalization in pursuit of advancement.<sup>13</sup> The effect of entrenched racism can even have an effect on the professional's everyday life.<sup>14</sup>

When ascertaining the genesis of

the possibility of low morale in the minority education professional, one need only recognize that racism and marginalization are not phenomena presented to and recognized by the minority for the first time in his or her professional experience: the minority has experienced this phenomenon in many other forums, but especially as students themselves. Ogbu (1988) asserts that minority students, especially African-Americans, have had access primarily to inferior education. They have experienced job ceilings and other caste-barriers that have prevented them from maximizing their efforts in school in terms of future social and economic rewards. They have, generally speaking, responded to these barriers with "mental withdrawal," failing to persevere in their schoolwork.<sup>15</sup>

Even when in the profession of teaching, the issue of race can have an effect on the performance of professionals of any race. To investigate the issue of problems anticipated by teachers of newly integrated schools as compared to those actually encountered, an open-ended questionnaire was circulated to teachers completing their first year

of teaching in a newly integrated system. The Caucasian teachers were teaching in a formerly all African-American school and the African-American teachers were teaching in a formerly all Caucasian school. Ninety-eight teachers responded to the questionnaire. Sixty-three teachers anticipated problems and 35 did not. Forty-one had problems and 57 did not.<sup>16</sup>

This is some indication that the issue of race breeds concerns that may or may not be actualized. The anticipation of issues can cause a reaction that may engender a response. The fact that the anticipation of the issue came to pass where the issue itself did not actualize does not eliminate the professional's possible inappropriate preparation and response. This response could be deliberate or it could be subconscious. Moreover, the anticipation of issues could actually create issues. W.I. Thomas, widely regarded as the dean of American sociologists, promulgated the self-fulfilling prophecy, which holds, "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."<sup>17</sup>

This proposition was recognized by Williams (1976) and extended to theorize that "if teachers prophesy that students will do well (or poorly) in school they will, in fact, do well (or poorly) as a result."<sup>18</sup> The study generated by this proposition sought to ascertain the role of the self-fulfilling prophecies in the explanation of social class differences in school achievement. Although this study dealt primarily with the expectation that teachers had of their students' achievement based on certain characteristics such as the student's gender, color, race, clothing, dialect, mannerisms, etc., and the conclusion was that the teacher's prophecies of their students appeared to have minor effects on their academic performance, an additional conclusion was apparent. The data from the study suggested that teachers bring their evaluation of student performance into line with their own expectation for the performance. Moreover, they adjust these evaluations to how well students conform to behavior norms in the classroom. An extension of this finding is therefore manifest: a teacher will bring his or her

evaluation of the treatment he or she will receive from superiors because of subjective qualities of their own (i.e. race) into line with their expectation of the treatment, and they will adjust this evaluation to conform to their belief.

## Conclusion

The research seems to indicate that if a professional believes that he or she will be treated a certain way because of some physical characteristic that they have, then (no matter if they are treated that way or not) they will formulate reactions and responses to their perception of the treatment they believe they will receive. If a professional develops defense mechanisms to offset their belief that race will undermine their upward mobility, they may react in ways that are antithetical to positive professional pursuits.

The way to offset this unfortunate human disposition is to, of course, eliminate favoritism, racism and other biases. It also requires that the leader hire and promote based on merit.

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