

MY HIDDEN CURRICULUM

A NAVY BRAT'S RHYTHM OF LIFE

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I am the daughter of a Navy veteran, yet I never quite adopted the rigid regimentation of military life. While I understand that time is valuable, I've learned to be forgiving with beginnings and endings; my friends have helped me loosen my requirement for punctuality, teaching me that life often takes you off-course for a reason. I can appreciate the look of a uniform just not on me. I've never been one for the "uniform" of trendy, seasonal looks; instead, my style leans toward the classic, always with a signature hint of something memorable. I don't know if being a Scorpio has anything to do with my resistance to being told what to do, but following orders never comes without an internal struggle. I am not a person who follows a prescribed script but someone who must learn through experience. Balancing this tension between external orders (outside script) and internal autonomy (true authenticity) has been part of my journey, while I also delicately balance "staying in the boat while I rock the boat." I think my hidden curriculum and life rhythm started at seven years old, oceans away from the United States.

I vividly remember flying, what seemed like days, overseas to move to the Philippines because my father received orders to report to the U.S. Naval Base at Subic Bay. With a new baby brother, my mother had to navigate on her own with two small children to another country to reunite with my father. Where did my mother learn the strength to stay so calm while taking a long journey for which she had no manual of directions? Needless to say, we arrived safely and were so glad to see our uniformed man there to welcome us at the end of that long journey.

For two years, I lived a very privileged lifestyle as an officer's child. I vacationed in Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, and Thailand, just to name a few exotic destinations. I was immersed in different cultures and learned more than I ever could by reading a textbook. I was experiencing diversity and inclusivity. These global experiences provided a form of cultural capital that could not be reproduced within a "scripted move" (Golann, 2021). My early exposure to global diversity taught me that interaction and authenticity are found in the transitions between environments, not just within them.

I'm grateful that I was able to experience one of the perks of being a Navy brat. Fast forward two years and my father received orders to report stateside to Naval Base San Diego. I had to leave all of my friends to come back home to the United States. I believe moving at an early age and having to "start all over again" by making new friends, going to a new school, and living in a different community was the beginning of me normalizing, changing, and pivoting quickly. As a child, I got used to starting all over again when we got new orders to move. It became our rhythm of life. Those experiences taught me how to be adaptable, but they also planted the seed of my resistance toward living by a script written by someone else.

I have to laugh and shake my head that my Navy brat rhythm of life showed up in my teaching career. Change is deeply rooted in my DNA. In 12 years of teaching, I taught in four different districts and four different grade levels. The static nature of a single building's culture (or grade level) did not fuel my soul. I instinctively felt the urge to pivot, even when things were going well. During a transition between grade levels and buildings, I became friends with a new

colleague, and early on in our friendship, she mentioned enrolling in a master's program. I already had a Master's in Curriculum and Instruction, but I didn't see any harm in broadening my educational world. Little did we know we were forming our own PLC (professional learning community) power duo committed to evolving every few years.

At that time, *No Child Left Behind* was an industry mantra that I took quite literally; I refused to be left behind while my peers advanced, so I enrolled, with my new friend, to work on a Master's in Educational Administration. I never aspired to be a principal. I had watched my mother's career path as a principal in an urban-suburban district, and I was certain I didn't want to follow exactly in her footsteps. Enrolling in that program wasn't just about a degree; it was about honoring that pivotal pull towards something else. This instinctive desire for change prevented me from becoming static. When I finished the administration degree, the next thing to do was explore the administration pathway and put the new degree to use. Another change was on the horizon. I inadvertently began training as a "tempered radical" (Alston, 2005). While the Navy taught me the art of adaptability, I have reclaimed the agency behind it. I reject the "order" to move or stay still. I embody the discipline to move, the openness to explore, and the spirit to question and reflect.

URBAN OMERTÀS AND UNDERGROUND INTERVIEWS: THE ART OF BREAKING THE SCRIPT

I jokingly refer to my first administration mentor as The Godmother in likeness of The Godfather portrayed in mafioso plots. She was an urban high school principal who had influential power within the district. She gave me a chance at my first administrative position, but soon, I learned she was scripting a future for me as her successor. Even though her endorsement was a high compliment, I wasn't sure I wanted to stay in a high school role since I had only taught elementary students. I also felt conflicted about being the lead character of a dictated script someone else was creating. I knew I wasn't ready to become a principal anytime soon, so I stayed under her tutelage to learn and grow, preparing myself for the next position. I knew I needed to stay prepared for the next move so that my career was defined by my choices, not my circumstances. I considered myself a loyal assistant principal. I made sure I assisted her in the goals and visions she wanted to accomplish to help her continue to shine as a respected leader. Even though I trusted my mentor, after three years I realized that following her "script" for my career would mean the slow death of my adventurous spirit. I also had no clear timeline for her exit, leaving me uncertain of when I would finally be positioned to apply for the principalship.

The Godmother had an unspoken expectation of absolute loyalty. Anyone who worked in the building was expected to protect the school "family" and never signal to the outside world that things weren't perfect. I broke the code of omertà the moment I began the quiet ritual of window-shopping for other roles, searching for anything that sparked my interest. By imagining a life without The Godmother, I was committing professional treason. Curiosity is the ultimate posture for an authentic life, because a single choice can launch you onto an entirely new path. There is never a good time to leave a school when you have made connections with students, teachers, and families, but the process of making future career decisions was instinctual and not based on what others wanted me to do. I created a short wish list of districts that were vastly different from my current, urban district. I started randomly applying to districts and didn't tell my mentor. I kept this secret in a "vault" because I knew that the day she found out I was not 100% on her team she had the influence to change the trajectory of my career. I began to wonder how I could out of the "mafia" with little damage to my professional reputation, what I would say to The Godmother, and

how she would take it. These were the questions that haunted me as I worked alongside her during this process.

One spring afternoon, I received a call that threatened my code of silence. It was one of the districts from my underground wish list.

“This is Mindy from M High School. Is this a good time to talk?”

“Oh! Hi, Mindy. Since this is a good time for you, I can make it a good time for me!”

“I’m calling today because I wanted to offer you the assistant principal position here at M High School...”

With that one call, the countdown to my suburban escape began. I had a choice to make. The delicate challenge was figuring out how to defect from The Godmother’s script without detonating my career. The suburban district leadership chose me over all other applicants. I was someone they wanted on their team to support students who were vastly different from the students I currently served. Time was not on my side, and I made my decision. I decided to live by choice and not be manipulated to live a career that someone else wanted to write for me. I realized that growth often requires discomfort, so I finally ripped off the band-aid and had that conversation, the one I had been losing sleep over for weeks. I approached The Godmother with radical candor (Scott, 2017), knowing that truth is kinder than vague comfort and walked out of her office immediately excommunicated. Just as I had predicted, during my final days, The Godmother’s silent treatment signaled that I no longer existed in her world.

During my transition out of the urban setting into the suburban district, I had to accept that I could never live up to The Godmother’s expectations. Her behavior manifested in unprofessional ways, altering my respect instantly. Her reaction forced me to look at leadership through a lens of emotional intelligence or, more accurately, the lack thereof revealing the weight of her own “unpacked baggage.” Every human, teacher or student, in a school has their own story, and every story we seek to understand is an opportunity to gain empathy beyond our own life experiences. Armed with that empathy, I realized that designing a path different from The Godmother’s script would allow me space to grow authentically into an administrator who could lead without fear of retaliation. This job offer gave me butterflies that weren’t just nerves but indicators of what excited me; they were butterflies of possibilities. This move would take me out of the urban background I had been used to, and the truth is, I might actually like it there. This transition from urban to suburban life was about far more than a new zip code. It was a conscious choice to live by design, refusing to let anyone else write the script for my career.

TEMPERED RADICAL: WAS I A BLACK PANTHER IN ANOTHER LIFETIME?

I felt an immediate spark of “good vibes” from my new principal, who I came to think of as The Convener. The gentle butterflies fluttering in my stomach weren’t just nerves, they were indicators of alignment. I knew that, as a Black woman in leadership, I had to truly know my craft to stay ahead. To prepare for a future as a principal or superintendent, I needed to diversify my profile. I made the choice to leave the urban setting to see what other environments offered, ensuring I could lead anywhere, for any student. Beneath the joy sat a grounded sense of pride. I wasn’t just another candidate; I was selected specifically to support these students. I had been given an assignment.

Starting my career in the suburbs revealed an unexpected alignment: Black and Brown suburban students needed me. As Bettina Love (2019) reminds us, wanting to do more than survive

is an act of resistance. The rebel in me was resisting the scripted career. By choosing my own path, I wasn't just changing districts; I was modeling for my Black and Brown students that they, too, can find confidence in their own humanity. Sometimes, being "the only" provides the space to figure out who you truly are. I needed to hold space for them to model how to successfully navigate their environment with joy while protecting their potential from being derailed by others who saw them as "intimidating" or "problems" rather than as humans still in the learning process. I wanted to model the kind of "Black joy" Bettina Love (2019) describes by being unapologetically confident in being a human, seeing identity not as a barrier, but as a great strength. I knowingly accepted the responsibility to ensure that my Black and Brown students didn't make the careless mistakes that might otherwise amplify the whispers of stereotypes from staff bias. I understood that, being a Black woman in educational leadership, I held two separate identities; my identity creates a unique intersectionality experience.

According to Alston (2005), Black women must navigate the dual pressures of sexism and racism in society. In a "scripted" workplace, an educated Black woman can even be perceived as an existential threat. Not knowing that I was a tempered radical, in training, I found myself questioning the way in which things were traditionally done. My new suburban colleagues were surprised that their traditional ways of doing things were oppressive for all students, not just students of color. As Alston (2005) suggests, a tempered radical might find themselves rocking the boat (educational setting) while staying in the boat. While working in an urban setting, I was constantly on alert to make sure I identified and eliminated barriers for children of color to graduate. When I first entered into the suburban space, I identified a need to revise the grading policy regarding student suspensions. Previously, suspended students were unable to make up missed work, potentially impacting their academic progress. I advocated for a policy change that allowed any student to submit work assigned both before and after their suspension for credit. I didn't realize that speaking up about being the person issuing a "double punishment" was going to cause a major ripple effect within the new setting. This "rocking the boat while staying in the boat" (Alston, 2005) sparked a broader conversation about grading practices, leading to a review and revision of the district-wide grading scale. I found that the suburban space needed my perspective to dismantle traditional barriers that had gone unquestioned previously. I was able to see a systemic problem harming students. Thinking differently from the norm of the status quo led me to question inequitable practices. The move from an urban setting to a suburban setting allowed me to offer a different perspective on how a policy was harming students and to provide an improved system for all students. The benefit of my influence in a suburban space multiplied the impact of protecting more students.

This is one example of how I was learning to lead by modeling a high standard. Leading in this new space felt different. I was a "double jeopardy" leader (Alston, 2005; Curtis, 2017): a Black woman sharing ideas that contradicted the traditional way of doing business. I knew that "rocking the boat" (Alston, 2005) was risky, as these structures were originally built through a white male lens. Curtis (2017) describes the invisibility Black women often face when their expertise is ignored by those who refuse to take guidance from someone who doesn't look like them. However, in this suburban district, I finally felt seen. I saw an opportunity to leverage my identity to empower all students, grow in a community that prioritized listening with curiosity and honoring diverse perspectives.

The Convener led a predominately white staff that was struggling to connect with a diverse student body. I was the missing piece in her vision to help the team see the kaleidoscope of diverse student backgrounds; my cultural capital was coming in clutch. As the first Black female



administrator at the school, I helped bridge the gap between their traditions and the increasingly diverse reality. They didn't know I was also there to grow my perspective. That team was the best administrative team I've ever known, and I believe it was because we were all growing together. Most of all, I'm grateful I took the risk to rebel against the "scripted life" of staying in one safe lane for an entire career. I'm so glad the butterflies led me into my purposeful position.

TURNS OUT, THE GRASS WASN'T GREENER: A BOOMERANG REFLECTION

Fast forward four years: The Convener's promotion to a superintendency broke up the team. On a whim, I applied for a principal position and was surprised to be offered my choice of roles in a neighboring urban-suburban district. I was content as an assistant principal, but I knew that staying comfortable leads to stagnation. When I was offered the principalship, I accepted not out of a long-held ambition but to answer my own internal wondering. Could I lead a building on my own terms?

I truly believe you are placed in situations to learn and grow from them. No one tells you about the weight of the principalship, but I learned that your "why" cannot have ego attached to the mission. I led a high-performing, Hall of Fame, elementary school only to realize that the role would never be fully on my terms. As I was wrestling with the heavy weight of the principalship, a Saturday morning mimosa brunch conversation released the burden and offered a new perspective. Oddly enough, the connections I made in the suburban district redirected my career path when I met my mentee. A former teacher I had supervised, now a principal herself, suggested I meet an aspiring teacher leader to share my perspective of being a Black female administrator who had worked in multiple settings. A new mentee entered my life, and she helped me realize I was climbing the wrong ladder. The unfiltered conversation pointed me back toward the assistant principal role when I was drowning in the "script" of the principalship.

A monthly staff meeting started with a long silent pause with me standing in front of my staff. I was at peace, and it was time. "I have made a decision. I am walking away from the principalship next school year." Tears started welling up in my eyes as I talked to my staff. I knew I had to explain what the tears were about, since they were looking at me in disbelief that I would not be there next school year. "I'm sorry. These tears are not because I'm sad. These tears are because I'm finally able to speak my truth to you." I was finally able to breathe. "A weight has been lifted now that I can release the secret I've been holding onto." I felt lighter as I talked to them about my decision-making process. "I've been having conversations with my family, and I've made a decision that I can't do this anymore. They support my decision. It has nothing to do with you; it's all about me. I just can't do it anymore. This job just doesn't bring me joy."

Faced with the choice of remaining a tempered radical (Alston, 2005) or succumbing to life as an obedient middle manager, I unlocked a calm spirit of clarity. The reality was that I was tired. I was tired of trying to live up to unspoken, uncommunicated expectations of supervisors. I was tired of being seen as a difficult person for always asking questions about decisions that weren't student-centered. I was tired of working in an institution that didn't have systems in place to solve problems. I was tired of trying to figure out the best way to get things done without support. I was tired of coming up with solutions and being told no. I was tired of speaking up to protect my teachers from burnout when my kids needed them at 100%. I was "rocking the boat" and drowning at the same time. I didn't believe in the "why," and I could no longer sell the story to my staff. My family was my lifeline and gave me permission to get out of the boat and do what



made me happy. It took seven years and a conversation with a new mentee to finally realize that I didn't like the role of a principal as much as I loved being an assistant principal. During our conversation, she noticed a lot of advice I was sharing could help lead an elementary building in her district. Her district was my former district.

The butterflies returned when I interviewed for the assistant principal position in my former district. During the interview process, there were three rotations of panels asking questions about curriculum, instructional strategies, discipline philosophy, and leadership style versus managerial decision making. Every rotation, there were 2–3 people with whom I had established relationships in my previous role in the district who were there to greet me with open arms. I had to remind the interview team to stay focused on the questions, and if they wanted to add a couple of extra points on my scoring rubric, I wouldn't mind. Every interview rotation felt like I was having a conversation about education with colleagues who were able to see how I had grown during my absence.

LEGACY BUILDING

I took charge of my career script when I walked away from the principalship. I made a personal decision to reclaim my spirit by refusing to stay in a position that didn't allow me to show up authentically, and I realized I don't want to lead just anywhere. I was fortunate enough to boomerang back “home” as someone who isn't just filling a slot but acting as a multiplier for the entire leadership team. My experience as a former principal allows me to anticipate the principal's needs by showing up as a strategic partner; conversations with the principal can be confidential strategy sessions or a safe space to vent and be vulnerable. My interactions with fellow APs naturally become peer-coaching opportunities and mentoring partnerships. My experience as a former principal has given me the ability to mentor new teachers as whole persons not just as professionals. I can feel the burnout vibe before it affects the building culture, and I quickly dedicate time to intervene with check-ins, encouragement, and support. I am a seasoned thought-partner for instructional coaches, offering advice on navigating the politics of coaching influence and tricky curriculum hurdles. Beyond the daily tasks, I bring a composed perspective on crisis management and a deep understanding that no administrative decision is too difficult when you are student-centered.

My ability to stay calm without a script is an inherited trait. At seven years old, I watched my mother navigate a journey overseas, and decades later, I found my way through a professional struggle where I felt I was drowning in a script. I learned early on that true leadership isn't about following a guide; it's about the internal strength to navigate the unknown. I am a more courageous administrator because I have removed the fear of what lies ahead.

The hidden script of educational leadership is that you become an “at-will” employee once you crossover to an administration role. Many leaders follow a script of playing it safe to survive professionally. In a large district, the traditional path is to move horizontally, changing roles or schools, while staying under the same umbrella. I chose to create my script through strategic diversification as an act of professional self-preservation. After I started my administration journey, my path required navigating The Godmother's influence and figuring out a way to truly own my career script. I felt that I had to leave the district. Diversifying my resume across different systems ensured that my voice was my own. I didn't just leave a district; I got out of the “mafia.”

By collecting the tools of curriculum expertise, the experience of the principalship, and the credentials of the superintendency, I built an adaptive script that allowed for fluidity rather than fear. I leveraged my “cultural capital” to move where I was valued. My journey challenges the status quo by proving that leadership shouldn’t be a climb up a narrow ladder but a pursuit toward authenticity. I often joke that I’m “from the future” because I’ve seen how the story ends when you follow the wrong script. The way forward for others is this: don’t just build a career; build a repertoire that grants you the freedom to stay human. Never let your ego be a part of your “why.” There is no room for ego in the work we do for children; the moment your ego shadow creeps into your presence, reflection is the only way to pivot back to what matters.

Navigating these different roles has transformed my work from a job I do into a calling I live. My rebellion turned my career from a ladder I was climbing into a home I was searching for. Finding my way back “home” was a necessary part of finding myself. Through my experiences in urban and suburban settings, I’ve developed a sharper vision for what schools must offer families and a clearer understanding of how systems can operate.

When asked if I enjoy my work, given how much the role of an administrator demands of me, I resoundingly admit I am glad I chose an impactful career path. I’m also grateful I found a home to help others. Even though I am eligible to retire next year, I am constantly reminded of the authentic impact I create here. So, I’m opting to stay a little while longer. I’m still chasing butterflies, but now I’m purposefully curating a chapter where my experience serves as an investment, like a light left on in the window for those coming home behind me.

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