

# ***HOLDING SCHOOL LEADERS TO HIGHER EXPECTATIONS Embodying the “Transformative” in Educational Leadership***

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Despite the fact that the concept of transformative leadership has garnered wider attention in recent years, its definition and application have remained elusive for many school leaders. For instance, Daniel was invited to speak at a regional leadership conference with more than 800 school administrators in attendance. During the session, many attendees disclosed their lack of awareness regarding the state standard that explicitly notes the importance of equity, inclusivity, and cultural responsiveness in leadership practices. Their lack of awareness caught the state educational officials in the room by surprise, given local school districts' purported use of these standards to annually assess these leaders' effectiveness. Since many of the school leaders in the room seemed to lack firsthand understanding of their expected responsibilities, it is difficult if not impossible to re-envision leadership in ways that are meaningfully transformative.

Additionally, our observations as faculty members in university-based educational leadership programs have shown us how many aspiring school leaders have a vague understanding of the concept of transformative leadership, despite the intended focus on that topic throughout their coursework. We also find resistance to honest discussions about race through the denial of its salience. Instead, aspiring school leaders emphasize K–12 students' deficits through the lens of “social class” and “home culture,” while uncritically assuming that educators and educational institutions represent de facto acceptable color-blind norms. Further, we notice too many aspiring school leaders who see themselves at odds with community leaders and social movements calling for a just education.

This lack of readiness to work toward equity and social justice has real consequences for the lives of students. Many school leaders

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are insufficiently prepared to work in highly racialized contexts at a time when states are passing a “mandatory retention” policy to force third-graders whose reading abilities fall below standard to repeat the school year (Starr, 2019). Not only does such a policy fail to recognize the need to increase support for these students, but research has also shown that those who are retained in school at an earlier age have a greater chance of dropping out by the time they are in high school (Hughes, West, Kim, & Bauer, 2018). Indeed, such policies and practices are significant risk factors in the school-to-prison pipeline, in which the accountability falls on schools that push students out, as opposed to the conventional understanding of student-centered accountability for dropping out (Warren & Goodman, 2018). This is a formula for disaster, as our country is asking many underprepared school leaders to engage with educational policies that continue to be punitive, not evidence-based, and likely to disproportionately impact students of color.

Our observations are indicative of the work that lies ahead for university faculty in leadership programs, as well as for aspiring school leaders to further contemplate what it means to be truly transformative. At the conclusion of this special issue, we seek to further advance the conversation surrounding how school leaders can fully understand and integrate “transformative” in their leadership practices. What should we expect of school leaders as they embark on linking their practices to school and social transformation? How can we build upon this special issue and continue to capture these tangible actions to understand their effects in the school community?

We raise these reflective questions because ambiguity about what it means to be a transformative leader can oversimplify the equity and social justice work that lies in front of them. Over the years, we have come across well-intentioned school leaders who considered themselves to be transformative because they had achieved the outcomes of higher test scores, increased graduation rates, and safer

schools. However, many have prioritized these outcomes without truly considering the importance of establishing a culture that actively engages students in transformative ways.

As many school leaders continue to emphasize standards and compliance models of education, these mindsets and expectations do little to influence school curriculum and instruction in ways that make education inspiring and purposeful to address the material realities of children and families. This outcome-driven stance prevents school leaders from creating opportunities for students to see themselves as transformative leaders of their communities through education. For these reasons, many school leaders rely solely on educational outcomes as indicators of transformation in their community, without deeper exploration of the complex cultural work that is required to actualize social transformation.

In this special issue, we aspire to provide more than just a glimpse of hope by offering concrete strategies and lessons from local communities to operationalize the transformative into action. This special issue clarifies the higher purposes for school leadership, wherein we find that leaders are capable of developing expectations for themselves and working with others to cultivate an organizational culture that embodies and operationalizes the core tenets of transformative leadership. That is, leaders with great visions are not people who can solely critique the system, but they are capacity-builders and adaptive to bringing people together to form networks and coalitions to seek real solutions. They are often not visibly at the forefront of social movements, but they are the catalysts, strategists, and innovators of change.

The articles in this special issue articulate the importance of recognizing the social context of children and families to build trust with community partners. These contexts include race, class, gender, immigration, and other politically constructed experiences that influence the materiality of young people, as well as how they learn, think about their future, and

produce knowledge. School leaders cannot fully understand such contexts without taking time to contemplate their own identities, social positions in society, beliefs, and purposes for leadership. That is, how a leader knows about a school, a community, and its diverse populations shapes the person's expectations and interactions with the individuals in that community (Merton, 1995; Steele, 2011). In order for school leaders to transform a school community, they must themselves be open to the transformation of decentering their perceptual filters and the development of equitable relationships with the students and families around them (see Shields, 2004).

It is from this inner place of reflection, contemplation, and reciprocal transformation that leaders are able to garner clearer understandings of their expectations for themselves and the students (see Khalifa, 2018). Milner (2010) emphasizes the urgent need for educators to acquire skills and strategies to engage with problems associated with denying the reality of race, cultural conflict, meritocracy, deficit conceptions, and negative expectations of children. The school leaders in this special issue engage with these problems of practice and demonstrate isolated examples of transformative leadership. There is a pressing need for a critical mass of school leaders who are explicitly engaging in this work and actively mentoring, building coalitions across communities, and supporting others to foster capacity for sustainable change. We argue that school leaders must become the experts of these skill sets and create conditions for their teachers and staff to fully respond to dynamics that negate both students' experiences and school culture. We call on school leaders to reconceptualize their roles as leaders in the larger communities, so they can educate and organize the younger generation to collectively respond to the injustices they face (Porfilio & Ford, 2015).

Finally, we must include systems of higher education in the work of transformative leadership. In many ways, universities are already at the forefront of discovery and innovation; however, we also know that college students

and faculty of color are not immune to the persistence of racism and other forms of injustice, which requires transformative leadership to reimagine higher education to become more just and inclusive. In this special issue, we made an effort to highlight the significance of student advising as a leadership imperative, and we hope that transforming such practice can contribute to larger solutions to repudiate the ongoing negative racial climate on many university campuses.

We acknowledge that these stories of transformative leaders are not representative of the entire range of race, class, and gender struggles that school administrators and instructional leaders have experienced. More examples from leaders at all levels of education are necessary to illuminate successes, challenges, and contradictions, especially in such areas: decolonial education, homegrown educational leadership of color, LGBTQ leadership, special and gifted education, grassroots community organizing and organizations, and university deans and presidents, among others. We believe that the literature and educational activists can immensely benefit from a wider range of perspectives from people who are working at the forefront of educational and social transformation.

Delivering a truly transformative education requires leaders to operate beyond the catch phrase of transformative leadership. It requires the passion and the ability to create synergy and shared expectations between school, families, and communities as the core feature of school culture to ignite equity. According to Shields (2010), this pursuit of equity must be consequential to students' lives, where they can experience the power of education and their own roles and responsibilities in social transformation. Noguera (2017) emphasizes that social justice is about "making a real commitment to addressing [structural] disadvantages and a real commitment to expanding opportunities. That commitment is more than words. It shows up in concrete strategies that lead to a change in circumstances, to lead to expanded opportunities for children and for

families” (Association of California School Administrators, February 22, 2017, 9 minutes and 30 seconds).

Building on this vantage point, we emphasize that changing the material circumstance of children and families must accompany efforts to equalize the historical power relations that have negated individuals and communities as the Other (Allen & Liou, 2018). When social justice is a goal of school leaders, the real commitment must come from within, and this undertaking must be intentional in ways that develops a humanity-based approach to actively support teaching and learning and to remove obstacles and structural impediments to reshape and transform society (Wright, Arnold, & Khalifa, 2018).

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