

# ***TRANSFORMING EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR Reenvisioning Teacher Leadership for Educational Justice***

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Drawing on the theories of critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), transformative leadership (Shields, 2018), and critical teacher leadership (Bradley-Levine, 2018), this qualitative study explored the teacher leadership perspectives, manifestations, and experiences of nine high school teachers committed to social justice in one large urban school district in California. Through the use of questionnaires, one-on-one interviews, teacher journaling, and document collection, these equity-oriented teachers reported to work to increase the learning opportunities of their students of color through challenging schooling stratification systems and organizing student organizations focused on student identity, community engagement, and educational justice. The findings also pointed to the challenges facing these teachers' leadership efforts including high workloads and a perceived disconnected leadership at the district and state level. The study calls for a need to reimagine traditional narratives of teacher leadership to ones that are focused on equity and that challenge the social reproduction that occurs in schools.

## ***INTRODUCTION***

The research area of teacher leadership has grown in the last couple of decades, with increased attention to some of its potential benefits, including positive working environments, higher teacher retention, and increased student learning (Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Common perceptions of teacher leadership,

sometimes defined as “teachers who maintain K–12 classroom-based teaching responsibilities while also taking on leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom” (Wenner & Campbell, 2017, p. 7), have largely focused on instructional leadership or teachers' abilities to carry out school operations (York-Bass & Duke, 2004). However, these traditional narratives have largely failed to explore the inter-

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connections of teacher leadership and issues of race and justice (Bradley-Levine, 2018; Shields, 2018).

Racism continues to play a significant role in the perpetuation of inequity in U.S. society and educational system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). For students of color, U.S. schools and curriculum have largely served as mechanisms of colonialism, control, and social reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Goodwin, 2010). According to a Department of Education Office of Civil Rights' (2016) report titled "Key Data Highlights on Equity and Opportunity Gaps in Our Nation's Public Schools" surveying all public high schools in the country (2016), students of color continue to receive an inferior education than of White, middle or upper class students, often tracked into non-college-going pathways and more likely to be taught by inexperienced, unqualified teachers. Many students of color also experience educational injustice at the hands of their teachers, with teacher deficit expectations and practices negatively impacting their learning opportunities and life outcomes (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2011). However, research has also demonstrated that teachers have the potential to work with students and communities of color to mitigate and challenge oppressive structures that threaten students' academic and life outcomes (Oakes & Lipton, 2003; Stanton-Salazar, 2011), viewing education as a vehicle for social justice and freedom (Freire, 2005).

Given the centrality of race in U.S. schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), a different type of educational leader, one who holds high expectations of all students, challenges the status quo, and works with stakeholders to challenge racial, gender, and other oppressions, is required (Duncan-Andrade, 2005; Nieto, 2005; Shields, 2018; Stanton-Salazar, 2011). Teacher leaders that demonstrate what Shields (2018) refers to as *transformative leadership* practices, or justice-oriented leadership approaches that prepare students to be critical thinkers and collectively aim to dismantle oppressive schooling practices and hierarchical conceptions of knowledge, prioritize advoca-

cacy for students as one of their key teaching practices. To this end, transformative leadership takes into account the material realities, disparities, and unfulfilled promises of the world in which our students live, and of working to ensure more equitable, inclusive, and socially just opportunities for all" (Shields, 2018, p. 5). Teachers can also act as critical teacher leaders, demonstrating leadership grounded in social justice and manifested through instruction, ethics, and collaboration (Bradley-Levine, 2018).

While some have attempted to expand to the notion of teacher leadership to include teachers' abilities to work with communities to impact policy that benefits students and their communities (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2014; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), these initiatives or studies have often stopped short of addressing the social reproduction of schooling (Bowles & Gintis, 2011). Most literature on teacher effectiveness or leadership fail to address the systematic racism of schools or the ways that schooling and teaching practices continue to engage in colonizing practices that oppress students of color and others at the margins (Goodwin, 2012). This study, then, hopes to expand the conversation on teacher leadership and focus on the leadership expectancies, practices, and factors of teacher leaders working primarily with students of color and committed to advocating for their academic and life success. By studying the perceptions, practices, and experiences of teachers who engage in transformative leadership practices (Shields, 2018) with students of color, we can both begin to redefine teacher leadership in the context of students' lives and experiences, as well as determine ways that schools and teacher education programs can foster and support their efforts in and outside of the classroom. Utilizing the theories of critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), transformative leadership (Shields, 2018), and critical teacher leadership (Bradley-Levine, 2018), as analytical lenses, this study will address the following research questions:

1. How do teachers committed to social justice perceive leadership in and outside of the classroom?
2. How are the leadership practices of teachers committed to social justice leadership manifested, in and outside of the classroom?
3. What are some of the factors impacting their leadership efforts with students?

### ***LITERATURE REVIEW***

The bulk of the literature on school leadership has focused on traditional top-down leadership models, emphasizing the role of school boards, superintendents, and school administrators, rather than highlighting teachers' potential for leadership and decision-making (Lambert, Collay, Dietz, Kent, & Richert, 2007; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). Studies focusing on teacher leadership have also tended to adhere to traditional narratives of instructional leadership or ability to mentor novice teachers (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), with little or no discussion of the schooling realities impacting the lives of students of color (Shields, 2018). This review of the literature, then, aims to examine both common conceptions of teacher leadership, as well as the ways that it has been reenvisioned and reframed as a means to incorporate advocacy and challenge social injustice.

### ***TRADITIONAL NARRATIVES ON TEACHER LEADERSHIP***

Traditional perspectives on general school leadership have centered on leaders' traits, approaches, or desired outcomes (Shields, 2018). As a result, most literature on school leadership is dedicated to issues such as determining leaders' authenticity and ability to build trust with others, and whether leaders adhere to a hierarchical or distributed model of decision-making. Specific to teacher leadership, over 20 years of literature has yet to yield an agreed-upon definition or a set of specific

practices, although the majority of definitions tend to center on instructional leadership (Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). While some have generally defined teacher leadership as holding responsibilities outside of the classroom (Wenner & Campbell, 2017), others have included a more specific focus on community, and framed teacher leadership as actions that "transform teaching and learning in a school, that ties school and community together on behalf of learning, and that advances social sustainability and quality of life for a community" (Crowther, Kaagen, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002 as cited in York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

The discussion of teacher leadership has also varied from a focus on school operations to instruction to teachers' ability to mobilize others for school improvement (Silva, Gimbert & Nolan, 2006; York-Bass & Duke 2004). Leadership practices have included teachers' activities in informing and implementing school policies, such as those regarding students' attendance, behaviors, and programs (York-Bass & Duke, 2004). While studies have shown that teachers seek to be included in schoolwide decisions regarding policy implementation, teachers' responsibilities are often limited to curricular decisions and classroom management, and not on the larger structures and systems that impact students (Ugurlu, 2013).

Along with impacting and executing school operations, teacher leadership is often associated with instructional expertise, with a common leadership practice being taking on various out-of-the-classroom roles to support less experienced novice teachers (York-Bass & Duke, 2004). Examples include teachers acting as master teachers for teacher candidates earning their credential, instructional coaches for novice teachers at their schools, or developing and carrying out professional development activities for their colleagues. These relationships tend to heavily center on curriculum development, classroom management, and improving the effectiveness of instructional strategies in order to increase student learning outcomes. Indeed, most organi-

zations that concentrate on developing teacher leadership emphasize the importance of high-quality instruction and ability to improve the practice of others at their school site, either through mentorship or professional development (Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at American Institutes for Research, 2017). While there has been an increased focus on teacher leadership, the important role that teachers' instructional expertise plays has simultaneously been challenged by educational reform movements that increasingly emphasize high-stakes testing and teacher-proof curriculum (Shields, 2018).

In addition to instructional leadership, teachers take on various out-of-the-classroom responsibilities and engage in shared-decision making with their administrators. These practices often include participating on committees that inform school policies, running student programs, and leading initiatives at their schools. Such teacher participation in daily decisions has been linked to teacher and student performance, as well as teacher accountability and overall retention (Rojas, 2014; Wilson, 2016). Studies have also shown that different school structures yield different opportunities for teacher leaders. For example, teachers working in small schools with fewer students often hold noninstructional responsibilities and engage in shared decision-making, rather than top-down hierarchical school models of leadership (Nieto, 2005; Wallach, Lambert, Copland, & Lowry, 2005). Still, despite the prevalence of taking on additional noninstructional responsibilities, some teachers hesitate to identify themselves as school leaders, and instead continue to perceive curriculum and instruction as central to their teacher identities and roles (Wilson, 2016).

### ***TEACHER LEADERSHIP FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE***

Despite recent educational reforms and initiatives that seek to measure and reward teacher leaders, teacher leadership is rarely framed through the lenses of social justice and activ-

ism (Bradley-Levine, 2018; Wenner & Campbell, 2017; York-Bass & Duke, 2004). Too often, the linkage of teacher leadership to issues of advocacy fail to challenge the structural oppression that students of color face in society and in their schools (Bradley-Levine, 2018). Critical race theory (CRT) exposes the continuing underlying connections between racism and schooling, emphasizing the importance of educators challenging dominant ideologies and having a strong commitment to social justice (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). However, organizations like the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders at American Institutes for Research (2017) fail to mention or address race or racism in their discussion of teacher leadership, instead only alluding to phrases or terms such as "advocacy for important causes that impact schools and communities," "diverse opinions," "diverse viewpoints," or "diverse culture" (p. 39). Similarly, another leading organization in teacher development, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2014) attempts to address teachers' abilities to shape educational policy at the local, state, and national levels but does not address or consider the way that social inequality impacts students of color, teachers, and schools.

Despite the failure of organizations and the literature in linking teacher leadership and social justice, in practice, many teachers act as leaders and advocates for their students every single day. Teachers committed to social justice reenvision teaching and learning by centering students' experiences and identities in their curriculum and practices, as well as actively work to challenge school and district rules they feel are discriminatory against students (Nieto, 2005; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). A study by Catone et al. (2017) on various teacher organizations focused on racial equity found that teachers were engaged in a variety of activities aimed at raising an understanding of oppression and in working to transforming the educational system to benefit communities of color. These practices included collective efforts to raise consciousness in the community, organiz-

ing and providing workshops and/or conferences focused on issues of justice, running for elected positions, taking part in union leadership, and efforts to change policy at the local, state, and national levels. In collaboration with parents and community organizations, social justice teachers were able to use their expertise in teaching and learning to influence and inform educational reform movements in ways that positively impacted communities and students of color, in the process developing their own agency in the educational system (Catone et al., 2017). Other social justice teacher leadership practices include acting as advocates for all students (York-Barr & Duke, 2004), working to counterstratify unjust schooling policies (Stanton-Salazar, 2011), and engaging in actions outside of the classroom that aim to empower communities that have been marginalized (Picower, 2012).

Additionally, teachers have fought to increase the quality of education and life outcomes of students through collective bargaining. More recently, some of nation's largest teachers' unions have gone on strike and made major gains in their fights to challenge the privatization of schooling, the underfunding of education, large classroom sizes, low teacher salaries, among other issues that disproportionately impact students and communities of color and the teachers who work with them (Sawchuk, 2018). Despite the fact that the school choice reform movement and rise of charter schools across the country has negatively impacted the financial and political impact of unions (Brouillette, Williams, & Mackinac, 1999), teachers' unions continue to have a key role in teacher leadership at the local, state, and national levels.

### ***CRT, TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP, AND CRITICAL TEACHER LEADERSHIP***

CRT purports that class and gender cannot account for the inequality that exists in U.S. schools, and that race plays a central role in

what types of knowledge is validated (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Within this racialized system, schools continue to focus on Eurocentric norms and values that fail to address the realities and experiences of students of color. The centrality of race is one of the key tenets of CRT, with others including the necessity of: (1) challenging dominant deficit frameworks and ideology; (2) demonstrating a commitment to social justice; (3) validating the importance of students' experiential learning in the classroom; and (4) including an interdisciplinary approach that addresses gender, class, and other forms of oppression (Solorzano & Bernal, 2001). Through a CRT lens, teachers can work with students to directly challenge the racism that students experience in and outside of schools and reimagine the classroom as a space for liberation.

Along these lines, Bradley-Levine's (2018) theory of *critical teacher leadership*, poses that educators can "teach and lead for social justice" in ways that highlight advocacy both in and outside of the classroom. According to Bradley-Levine (2018), critical teacher leaders' advocacy for students who have been marginalized by schooling and society is manifested through critical pedagogy and school leadership practices. Some of these leadership practices include being knowledgeable of and committed to dismantling oppressive schooling conditions, as well as developing student groups or organizations focused on equity and student empowerment (Bradley-Levine, 2018).

Furthermore, critical teacher leaders can manifest their advocacy for their students in three different ways: (1) instruction and pedagogy; (2) collaborative leadership within the school; and (3) ethical leadership in the community. First, through critical pedagogy, critical teacher leaders create learning environments with students that examine various forms of oppression along racial, gender, and other identities, and work with students to transform these systems (Bradley-Levine, 2018). In these efforts, teachers can implement curricular and instructional practices that focus

on the knowledge and experiences of students and work to raise students' critical consciousness and agency in dismantling and transforming oppressive systems (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). At the same time, teachers can reflect on their own roles, identities, and positions of power in the classroom and challenge hierarchical models of teaching and learning (Bradley-Levine, 2018).

Second, critical teacher leaders can work with other stakeholders at their schools to implement policies that benefit students' learning and challenge others to hold high expectations of all students' potentials (Bradley-Levine, 2018). They codevelop initiatives or policies with students, community members, and other teachers in order to increase the educational opportunities of all students. Lastly, critical teacher leaders recognize the undemocratic processes that exist in their students' lives and move toward transforming those conditions, encompassing a strong ethic of care when working with their students (Bradley-Levine, 2018).

Focused on specific leadership practices for social justice and building on Freire's (1970) notion of teaching as a liberatory praxis, Shields (2011; 2018) explores leadership practices that aim to empower students and address the ways that race, gender, class, ability, and other factors impact their learning experiences. Shields' (2011, 2018) *transformative leadership model* poses that educators should act as advocates for students in order to transform schools, emphasizing the importance of equity-centered leadership practices that center relationship building, morality, and justice. According to the framework, leaders follow eight central tenets that include: (1) working for deep and equitable change; (2) challenging dominant knowledge frameworks that reproduce inequity; (3) addressing inequitable power structures; (4) emphasizing both the individual and collective good; (5) focusing on emancipation, democracy, and social justice; (6) emphasizing interconnectedness; (7) balancing critique with promise; and (8) exhibiting moral courage. In their efforts to disrupt

and transform a system that has historically failed students of color and others, teachers can enact leadership practices that are grounded in advocacy and activism and envision a different way of teaching and learning (Shields, 2018).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This qualitative study drew data from a larger one examining the dispositions, expectations, and pedagogical practices of high school teachers working effectively with majority students of color in a large urban school district in Southern California. To participate, teachers were initially recommended by either a principal and/or counselor at their school, based on the following criteria: (1) Working primarily with students of color; (2) Known for having positive and caring relationships with students; and (3) Holding high expectations for all students. The teachers were then further screened to determine whether they exhibited dispositions and practices of transformative leadership and critical teacher leadership (Bradley-Levine, 2018; Shields, 2018). Some of these practices included emphasizing equity and social justice, engaging in activism, and advocating for all students. Teachers who did not meet the criteria of demonstrating teacher leadership practices that were aligned to advocating for educational equity were excluded from the study.

The data collection consisted of one academic year. In the end, a total of nine high school teachers (Adam, Salvador, Gloria, Alejandro, Amy, Lisa, Alice, Patrick, and Alma) were selected for this study, all teaching in schools with over 90% of the student population being students of color. Though, statistically, teachers working in communities of color often leave within the first year (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), the teachers who participated in this study ranged from 7 to 15 years in teaching experience. All participating teachers engaged in a variety of leadership practices such as sponsoring student

TABLE 1  
Participating Teacher-Leaders Information

<i>Teacher</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Ethnicity/ RACE</i>	<i>Years Teaching</i>	<i>Content Area</i>	<i>School Types</i>
Adam	M	Mexican American/White	8	English	Comprehensive
Salvador	M	Chicano	15	History	Comprehensive
Gloria	M	Latina	9	History	Comprehensive
Alejandro	M	Latino	15	English	Comprehensive
Amy	F	Korean American	9	English	Comprehensive
Lisa	F	Did not state	10	English	Small school
Lori	F	Filipino American	7	English	Small school (magnet)
Patrick	M	White	15	History	Comprehensive
Alma	F	Chicana	13	English	Small school

clubs and organizations, taking on roles like department chairs or master teachers, making schoolwide course and scheduling decisions, and organizing programs at their school sites. In addition, they actively worked to dismantle schooling injustices through implementing curriculum centered on their students' lived experiences and developing critical consciousness. Several of them taught ethnic studies and most focused on the stories and experiences of people of color in their curriculum. Table 1 outlines some of the teachers' demographic information.

Data collection for each teacher consisted of: (1) General demographics questionnaire; (2) One-on-one semistructured interview; (3) Three different journal entries pertaining to their beliefs and practices as teachers; and (4) Document collection (course syllabi, photographs of classroom, lists of teaching activities outside the classroom, flyers with school activities, etc.). All of the data was analyzed for codes, patterns, and themes (Saldaña, 2011) using both hand-coding techniques and the N.Vivo qualitative software program. The theoretical frameworks of CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001), critical teacher leadership (Bradley-Levine, 2018) and transformative leadership (Shields, 2018) were drawn upon as tools to analyze the themes across teachers' leadership

practices. Triangulation was performed by comparing various sources of data as well as by engaging in both member checking and peer review (Shenton, 2004).

## **FINDINGS**

Using CRT (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Bernal, 2001), transformative leadership (Shields, 2018) and critical teacher leadership (Bradley-Levine, 2018) as theoretical lenses, this qualitative study examined how teachers committed to social justice both perceived and manifested leadership in and outside of their classrooms. The data showed that teachers' perspectives on leadership varied in terms of what leadership levels (school site, district, state, or national) they perceived to have the most influence on the lives of their students. Still, all of the teachers in the study demonstrated a strong commitment to advocating for educational and racial equity at their schools, actively countering stratification structures limiting their students' academic opportunities and participating in student-centered political organizations. In their efforts, the teachers also faced hardships and challenges to their work with students. The findings are presented below.

### **TEACHERS' VARYING PERSPECTIVES ON LEADERSHIP**

One of the findings in the study showed that teachers' beliefs varied on how leadership at different levels impacted the lives of their students, who were predominantly students of color. While several teachers advocated for local decision-making bodies, believing issues of inequity were most efficiently fought at the local level, others advocated for a more systemic approach to leadership change, emphasizing change at the national and policy levels. Lisa, a high school English teacher in her 10th year and a union representative teaching in a school that was majority Latina/o and Black, advocated for the importance of teacher leadership and local control of decision-making for students. Previously, Lisa had taken part in a teacher leader fellowship that was aimed at increasing teacher representation and leadership in educational policy at the national level, but through experience she had come to believe that grassroots teacher leadership and organizing offered the most possibilities of changing students' educational conditions. Lisa, shared,

I once did a fellowship for teachers.... It helped to connect teachers with policy so that they can both be a voice and bridge for policy of the department and bring teacher and student voice into it as well. After, teachers come back to really share that knowledge about policy as well. So, we are kind of like a bridge, I think in a lot of ways. It was really interesting to learn about things from that lens. I have always felt that if you get high enough then you can change things at a systems level. Then I was like "Oh no, the real change happens on the ground floor with support from the top down."

Despite her initial interest in taking part in national educational leadership, Lisa now perceived that "real change," change resulting in educational equity and societal transformation, took place at the classroom and school level and in collaboration with community. In Lisa's

model of leadership, local stakeholders were essential leaders, with the district, state, and national educational leaders serving as support systems, rather than top-down governing entities. At her own school site, Lisa disrupted traditional models of leadership and engaged in various transformative practices, such as organizing school programs to increase equity of resources among students and having a key role in making schoolwide decisions. In doing so, she also largely redefined her teacher responsibilities as extending beyond instruction and curriculum. She also centered race in her curriculum and had students read a variety of literature focused on people of color fighting injustice, such as Malcolm X, Cesar Chavez, and Sojourner Truth.

Other teachers in the study emphasized the importance of taking on a more systemic approach to leadership when addressing the problems facing schools. When sharing his perspectives on his motivations for working with youth of color in equity-centered ways, Salvador, a Chicano in his 15th year teaching in the predominantly Latina/o community where he grew up, shared,

I always tell people that I got into teaching not necessarily because I felt like "Wow, I'm going to love developing lessons and that I fell in love with pedagogical theories." I came to it more as kind of part of that desire to ... I need to go where I see that the problem is. For me, educational and social injustice was a big thing.... That's why I started teaching because it was just my desperation of wanting to do something. I was still very young when I started teaching, 23 years old, and had not thought "Okay. You can go into social policy to address more of the systematic side of things ... I saw [teaching] as the quickest way of doing it." Of course, now I understand that there's a systematic thing and the problem is a lot bigger than just me and the classroom. That even though I can affect change with my students, it's a big beast. It is very, very hard to change.

Like Lisa, Salvador was driven by an ethic to challenge the status quo of schooling that had

failed so many students, a commitment that he perceived had evolved as a result of taking courses like Chicano Studies and being a part of student organizations focused on justice for people of color during his undergraduate studies. In an effort to “do something,” Salvador initially felt that working directly with students and communities of color was the primary way to impact change. Over time, however, Salvador’s beliefs shifted to also recognizing the necessity of addressing policies and systems affecting students on a larger scale. He believed that without change at the top, his efforts with students would be severely handicapped. One of the key changes that Salvador advocated for was increased funding for public schools.

### ***TEACHERS’ MANIFESTATIONS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES***

Despite varying perspectives on what leadership level most impacted students’ of color educational opportunities, the findings suggest that all nine teachers in the study were nonetheless actively countering dominant hierarchical leadership models at their school sites. The teachers engaged in transformative leadership practices by taking on various roles and responsibilities in order to challenge existing school policies, procedures, and processes they perceived as problematic for students of color. Teachers manifested these leadership practices by: (1) challenging stratification structures at their schools; and (2) leading organizations that challenged injustice and focused on students of color.

#### ***Leading to Transform Schooling Stratification Structures***

Teachers in this study worked to disrupt existing school stratification systems they believed threatened students’ access to the knowledge and resources required for academic success and socially reproduced educa-

tional inequity, such as academic tracking. As a response to their students’ lack of educational opportunities, who were largely students of color, several of the teachers stepped into leadership roles to advocate for redesigning school structures that promoted high expectations for all students, not just the most high achieving. For example, when faced with a declining budget and the potential loss of a college counselor at her high school, Lisa played a key role in designing a new system for students to receive college admission information. She shared,

The second year we weren’t going to have any funding for a college counselor. I’m the senior teacher. I’ve always, throughout my career, have done additional college work, whether it’s during my break time ... or on the off-track season to help kids with college applications.... So, there was going to be this gap. Our principal talked about doing a senior seminar where we would take a group of kids and really make it a seminar. I kind of ran with that idea and created a course proposal for students within that to make it a Peer College Leaders class.... But they also have the job of disseminating that [information] to the rest of the school. We did it last year. This year it’s been really ... it was something I created but it’s definitely been supported by the school leadership and by the rest of the school staff too in order to be able to make that happen.... So really making college visible.

With the support of her administrator and school staff, Lisa became the lead in a program aimed at ensuring that all students received the key college-going information and resources they needed for higher education. In the process, Lisa taught herself about college requirements and financial aid processes, and then trained a group of student leaders to disseminate the information to the remainder of the Senior class. In doing so, Lisa engaged in collaborative leadership with her students and developed their agency in leading others. In addition, Lisa pushed past her principal’s initial idea of having one course focused on

college and challenged traditional hierarchical knowledge frameworks that often focus on the highest performing students.

Like Lisa, Gloria, a Latina History teacher in her ninth year and department chair, took on an active role in redesigning systems in place in order to address low funding and lack of resources inhibiting her students. As a consequence of budgetary cuts and declining student enrollment, Gloria's campus, which housed two autonomous small schools, was facing teacher layoffs and a reduction in students' support staff and college-going resources, prompting her school to make a difficult decision as to how to move forward. Rather than defaulting to a district or principal decision, however, the teachers in Gloria's small school organized and made a difficult decision to merge with the other existing school on their campus, thus alleviating some of the budgetary issues by converging some of the campuswide resources. During this transition, however, Gloria and her colleagues used the opportunity to envision a "new" school theme and mission in order to prioritize student success and access to higher education. Gloria shared,

So, it was actually decided just last year that we would become one school and we consolidated as one school now.... We are one school and the question was, "So if we are becoming one school, are we still going to embrace math and science or are we going to change our theme?" So, it was decided by the faculty and with some of the input of students as well. There was a survey.... This is our first year of embracing a college preparatory theme. Every kid is going to go to college and so forth ... I think this year is a good pilot year to figure out how it is working for us.

Enacting a shared-decision approach, Gloria was able to reimagine her school's mission to hold high college-going expectations of every student, aiming to positively impact and support all students' educational and life opportunities. In doing so, the teacher leaders also included student voice in the decision and

acted as bridges between administration and students.

### ***Leading Student Organizations Focused on Community and Social Justice***

The critical teacher leaders in the study also engaged in critical pedagogical practices that included facilitating equity-centered school programs focused on students' of color identities and experiences. For example, Alejandro, a Latino English teacher in his 15th year of teaching, led the Puente Program at his school, a program focused on increasing Latina/o students' awareness of their own history, as well as their college-going attainment rates. He took on the Puente coordinator role (in addition to teaching full time) as a response to perceiving that the existing coordinator at his school was not providing students with the opportunities they deserved. Alejandro shared,

Then the other teacher was not very ... he had given up. He felt let down.... So, a lot of things were not happening. There were no field trips happening. Nothing.... So then, it was either we do it ourselves or it doesn't happen. So, that's when I took on the responsibility of doing that. We do parent meetings a couple times a year and they would be specifically just about the Puente program, it might be about [college requirements] or why reading is important, stuff like that. We do parent workshops. The Puente Program would help me find professionals, maybe it was like ... that focus was law so, we'd get a bunch of lawyers from the area, like 4 or 6 lawyers from the area. They would talk to the students.

As part of the program, Alejandro facilitated parent workshops in Spanish that focused on literacy and college information in order to build school-parent partnerships, as well as organized out-of-the-classroom experiences for his Latina/o students. He emphasized the importance of bridging schooling with the community, centering parents and community members in students' educational processes.

Other teachers also reported leading programs focused on student equity and empowerment. In his efforts to challenge unjust policies, Salvador sponsored a student political organization that challenged the overpolicing of students of color in the district and worked alongside a student-driven community organization to end the administering of truancy tickets that had disproportionately affected his students and school. Other examples gathered from the document collection included Adam (a Mexican American and White English teacher in his eighth year of teaching) sponsoring a poetry group that highlighted students' of color voices and showcased their work in coffee shops in the local neighborhood. Amy (a Korean American English teacher in her ninth year of teaching) cosponsored a young women's group that aimed to increase the leadership and empowerment of Latinas at her high school. In this group, she invited guest speakers, such as Latina women and other women of color in the community, to discuss their various professions with students. The group was also led by her Latina students, who engaged in dialogue circles where they shared challenges and successes with one another, often providing advice to one another. Through reflective practices centered on students' identities, critical consciousness, agency, and teacher-student relationships, these teachers were able to collectively redefine schooling with their students to include a liberatory framework (Freire, 1970) and work to improve the conditions of communities of color (Shields, 2018).

### ***FACTORS IMPACTING TEACHERS' LEADERSHIP EFFORTS***

Despite the fact that the teachers in this study had all taught for seven or more years, surpassing national trends (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), they still faced various challenges threatening their leadership efforts and overall sustainability in the profession. When reflecting on the structures that

supported or challenged their leadership practices at the school, various themes arose, including: (1) the importance of working with like-minded committed individuals; (2) the challenge of balancing high workloads; and (3) a disconnected and unsupportive leadership at the district/state level.

The teachers in the study noted the importance of building community with other committed educators as essential to their growth and leadership efforts. When reflecting on important elements contributing to her own development as an educational leader, Amy shared,

I think what's more important is teachers having, I guess it's called critical friends, or teachers being part of a group, a like-minded group that really work at something that those teachers are passionate about.... It's easier to change things when you see they aren't working ... I think there is so much learning that took place here. Good and bad.... You know what I wish I could do?... I wish schools had more of a teacher mentorship program within a school where we can think about all of these things we've learned and the things that we are great at and make sure somebody else is continuing them.

Amy emphasized the need for a collaborative approach to teacher development and in teachers' efforts to critically examine and change educational systems they found problematic. She noted the important impact that other teachers committed to social justice or who were "critical" had on her own pedagogy and work with students. The data collected in her interview and document collection highlighted Amy's work with other educators to develop schoolwide initiatives focused on increasing students' college opportunities and grade-level curricular projects emphasizing students' voices. For example, she and three other English teachers had led a senior book project for 3 years focused on 12th-grade students writing and publishing books about their communities, families, and aspirations. She also reflected on the importance of providing experienced teacher leaders with opportunities to

use their expertise to mentor more novice educators.

Several teachers in the study also reflected on the challenges of taking on additional non-instructional leadership responsibilities despite already existing high workloads at their school sites. When reflecting on the challenge of balancing all of her leadership roles with a full-teaching load, Lori, a Filipino American English teacher in her seventh year of teaching, shared,

I don't know if it's sustainable. I ask my colleagues every year and I feel like we're at the edge every day. We want to be here and it's a part of us. My good teacher friends want to be here and every day are kind of energized by the work we do and the kids and the extra work we do. But at the same time we are at the point that we do so much that you just want to throw your hands up and say "I don't want to do this anymore because I've done too much and you're [the district and administration] asking too much from me."

Lori's "extra work" which consisted of writing curriculum for her entire school's advisory program, organizing student-led conferences, participating on several committees, among other responsibilities, were taking a toll on her. Although she contributed her commitment and dedication to her students as energizing, Lori also felt that her increasing duties were threatening her sustainability for her and her colleagues.

Lisa, who as previously mentioned was running her school's college advising program (in addition to teaching full time), shared similar sentiments. She shared,

Also, being a small school, there's a real scarcity of resources. We don't have a college counselor. We don't have extra support staff who can work on stuff with the kids. And the teachers are spread really thin, I think. I have four preps and I'm doing all of this stuff [college program design and student advising] in my free time. It's really intense. People just have their plates really full and are wearing too many hats...

Like Lori, Lisa took on various "extra" leadership responsibilities in order to provide essential resources to her students, who were primarily working-class students of color. Lisa described a schooling context where teachers experienced "scarcity," were "spread really thin," had their "plates really full," and were "wearing too many hats." Other teachers in the study also expressed similar feelings about attempting to balance all of the responsibilities they had in their schools. Teachers' increased responsibilities rarely resulted in additional pay nor seemed to play a role in principal's decision-making around teachers' existing workloads.

Lastly, teachers cited the perceived lack of district support and a leadership disconnected from the realities of the classroom as thwarting their efforts with students and their work as social justice educators. It is also noteworthy to point out that the majority of the teachers in this study were community-focused teachers of color, who are more likely to leave the profession than white teachers due to often conflicting deficit frameworks exhibited in the schooling system (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016). Several teachers discussed their frustrations with ongoing neoliberal educational reform movements that emphasized high-stakes testing and evaluation of teachers without thoroughly addressing the educational realities facing students of color or having sufficient teacher input in the decision-making process. For example, Gloria shared that her district increasingly emphasized high-stakes testing and higher graduation requirements without properly supporting school programs or understanding the challenges that teachers faced in underfunded schools:

I feel that you have policymakers, some of them, a high percentage, that are making decisions when they have never really been in the classroom. I have a big issue with that. How are you making decisions when you have never been in the classroom or when you've never worked in the inner city, where you're facing budget cuts and you're faced with limited resources?

Gloria believed the district decisions handed down were out of touch with her reality and failed to thoroughly address the educational inequities facing her students. She spoke of the importance of having teachers at every level of decision-making to help ensure that school reforms and policies were developed with the realities of students in mind. Increasing teacher voice in larger systemwide decisions is indeed linked to sustaining high-quality teachers in the profession (Nieto, 2005).

Similarly, Lisa, also emphasized the importance of teacher leadership representation in educational reforms and district decisions, with a focus on supporting teachers' ongoing efforts rather than adding more challenges or work for them. She shared,

I think that in order for environments to thrive we need to ... really get into a place where schools can thrive through having enough resources to do so and consistency. I know that we're at the intersection of two really big educational changes with Common Core and teacher evaluation. Hopefully they can be leveraged so that they're incorporated into the work that we're already doing rather than be additions or add-ons to already full plates and that they use teacher leadership in ways that make that happen, rather than top down.

Lisa strongly advocated for having teacher input and voice in decision-making around the implementation of new educational initiatives that would inevitably directly impact teachers and their students.

One of the commonalities amongst all of the teachers was their belief and commitment to ensuring that their students, most of whom were students of color, had the schooling opportunities and resources they needed to be successful. In contrast to the literature that states that most teachers do not perceive themselves as leaders outside of their instructional roles (Wilson, 2016), these teachers were keenly aware of their out-of-the-classroom leadership responsibilities and believed them to be an ethical responsibility (Bradley-

Levine, 2018). Despite already existing high workloads, these teachers stepped into various leadership roles at their schools and advocated for equity-oriented schooling practices to challenge stratification and injustice.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study serves as a reminder that social justice teachers are indeed engaged in a variety of leadership practices at their schools and are instrumental in making schoolwide decisions that impact students' of color opportunities for educational resources and opportunities. Perceiving their teaching as a form of liberatory praxis (Freire, 2005), the teacher leaders aimed to dismantle school stratification systems such as tracking and worked to develop students' critical consciousness and agency. Still, some of the findings point to the ongoing challenges impacting teachers' satisfaction and leadership efforts at their schools. They shared ongoing feelings of frustration with high workloads, lack of district support, and perceived top-down out-of-touch educational decision-making. They also cited the importance of working alongside other supportive like-minded teachers.

This study also has several implications for future research on teacher leaders who are committed to educational equity. Given that teachers who are committed to combating the inequities that students of color face are likely to leave the profession at even higher rates than others (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016), it is imperative to learn more about the schooling practices that have a positive impact on their sustainability and leadership efforts at the school. Future studies focused on the structures that foster or hinder teachers' transformative leadership practices would provide insight into the ways that school leaders such as principals can better support and prepare their teachers for schoolwide equity-centered efforts.

The findings in this study also point to various implications for practice regarding

teacher leadership. First, the study highlights the value of reimagining the teacher leader identity to extend beyond instructional and curricular expertise, and instead center an equity lens in all leadership practices. The teachers' commitments to challenging the systemic injustices that their students of color faced provided a multitude of opportunities, including the possibility of a new way of schooling focused on students' of color identities, agency, and access to higher education. Recognizing and valuing the benefits of critical and transformative leadership practices for students and schools is a necessary step in schools beginning to dismantle the reproductive systems that perpetuate social and racial injustice. Likewise, organizations or entities attempting to define and assess teacher leadership must also explicitly frame discussions of teacher leadership to include advocacy for students and efforts to transform racist and oppressive structures.

Second, there is a need for school administrators and district officials to foster, validate, and compensate the efforts of teachers who go above and beyond instruction to support students. To place the sole responsibility on teachers for improving the lives of their students is unrealistic and unethical to a profession that is already overwhelmed due to budget cuts, large class sizes, and low salaries. Classroom teachers engaged in transformative leadership activities that extend well beyond their already full load of instruction should be compensated and recognized for their labor. Examples might include granting teaching time-release for leadership activities or providing monetary stipends, as many department chairs or sports coaches already do in schools. Providing teacher leaders with opportunities to take on hybrid roles, that of teacher leader and instructor, can better support their efforts and help prevent teacher burnout. Incorporating teacher leadership at all levels, from school site to district, state, and federal departments of education can help further reduce the policy-practice disconnect that often frustrates

classroom teachers and threatens overall teacher retention (Nieto, 2005).

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