

## BOOK REVIEW

# Transformative Leadership in Education

Carolyn M. Shields

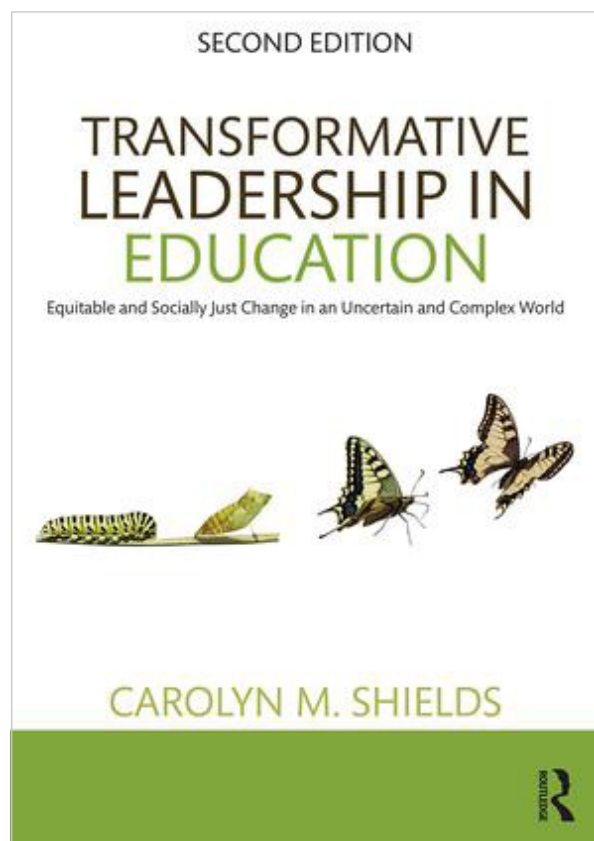
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## Introduction

At a time in our nation's history when rising above the forces of injustice and taking a stand as leaders have become not just moral imperatives but actions necessary for survival and persistence, Carolyn M. Shields (2018) offers a critical approach to transformative leadership, provoking leaders across the nation to rise against the inequities within their institutions. Shields (2018) illustrates how a changing political, environmental, and economic landscape, on both a global and national scale, have shaped social injustices for minoritized groups, leading to inequities for students within these groups. More egregious, she argues, is that those in positions of power often ignore or remain indifferent to the obvious inequities within our organizations, refusing to transcend the limits of our current perceived boundaries, perpetuating the hegemonic injustices of the greater society within the institutions designed to protect our most vulnerable members. Thus, Shields (2018) does not offer surface-level, one-size-fits-all solutions; instead,

she suggests a framework or perspective for approaching leadership mindful of the nuances and fluidity of education. In this framework she outlines the necessity for leaders to possess and balance several abilities. These skills, vision, understanding, clarity and agility are offered as a response to the current status of our society, which Shields describes as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA).

This review provides a general summary of Shields' arguments and its three basic ideas, then an analysis of the overall strengths as well as recommendations for the book. In this review, the authors suggest that Shields' work

is paramount to the field of educational research, highlighting the lived experiences of those in the field and the students they affect. Additionally, Shields (2018) elucidates the realities of certain situations that are often absent from leadership conversations, including the impact on global democracy and the effects that the geo-political climate has on students, schools, and leaders. Although the authors find that educators, administrators, and community leaders can all benefit from Shields' (2018) work, there are key areas which we suggest may be improved upon in later editions. These recommendations include expanding upon the discussion of self-knowledge within diverse transformative leaders and adopting a leadership inventory to serve as supplemental material for the book, allowing leaders to assess their abilities and identify areas for improvement, building upon Shields' (2018) contention that self-reflection is critical to transformative leadership.

*Transformative Leadership in Education* is in its second edition and follows several of Shields' previous books on transformative leadership. Shields (2018) includes an additional tenet to her transformative leadership principles, as well as providing additional qualitative data, and an overall more in-depth and detailed account in the latest book. Furthermore, Shields (2018) updates figures and data with additional qualitative data and consideration of two important minoritized groups: a) transgender students and b) refugees. Within these updates, Shields emphasizes the connection between transformative leadership and social justice, strengthening her claim that a transformative approach effectively attends to education's democratic promise.

As a lifelong educator and leader, both within schools and within her community, Shields has experience as a teacher, professor, and administrator, as well as a multitude of scholarly publications within the field of educational research. Her understanding of the nuances and hidden curriculum within the current model of education shapes her perspective and provides thoughtful insight to the book. She brings data and case study observations as support for her theoretical framework. Her work is set aside from other scholars within the discipline, as her utilization of these experiences creates a rich, detailed illustration of the reality of the experiences of both students and leaders. These leaders, Shields (2018) explains, consist of both teachers, administrators, and others who want to make a difference, as it is their moral imperative to actualize transformative leadership within schools.

### **Taking a Stand: Transformative Leadership in Education**

In her book Shields (2018) proffers three main arguments: The first, that understanding the educational context in which leadership operates within organizations is of the utmost importance. Second, that the leaders of organizations who wish to actualize effective, lasting, and truly equitable change must be highly reflective and self-aware. Last, Shields (2018) argues that leaders must adopt a transformative leadership approach, a critical, socially aware, and equity-driven method, for which she outlines eight tenets.

Using qualitative findings Shields (2018) illustrates how changes in geopolitics have shaped social injustices, leading to inequities for minoritized students. Shields (2018) uses the term minoritized not to describe the number of students within these groups, but to describe the ways in which their voices have been excluded from the conver-

sation and from participation in politics, education, and economics. To describe the unpredictable geopolitical landscape of our society, Shields (2018) offers an acronym borrowed from the military, VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous). Shields (2018) proffers that VUCA better encompasses the reality of education, pushing back against the conventional notion that schooling can be analyzed with rational, technical, and prescriptive measures. Shields (2018) cautions that it is this very approach to education reform which fails to address the true injustices and inadequacies of our organizations. To address these failures, she suggests that leaders must understand not only the social and cultural contexts of schools, but be critically self-aware of their own positions, perspectives, and biases. She posits two recommendations for educational institutions to adopt: a) to reorganize schools so that all affiliates benefit from the implementation of a transformative leadership style and b) to reimagine pedagogy to adopt a wholistic approach in which the student's natural intellectual curiosity is piqued, stimulated, and nurtured. Qualitative research methods allow Shields (2018) to highlight the voices of minoritized students, illustrating the often hard-to-read realities that they face. By doing this she outlines the harmful effect that homogeneity and its normalization can have on intellectual communities, including the othering and exclusion that result from this perpetuation of elitism and privilege. Additionally, qualitative data allows Shields to animate key terms from her research such as "moral courage," bringing her theoretical underpinnings to life.

### **Analysis of Strengths and Recommendations for Further Consideration**

Although this book offers many insights currently missing from the field of educational research, one element that could enhance the book is the adoption of a transformative leadership inventory, which would allow readers to actualize Shields' model for self-awareness. Second, while Shields enunciates the dynamics of diversity within the student population, she could extend the conversation to leaders, perhaps in her discussion of critical self-knowledge, in which she requires that leaders understand their own intersecting identities. Additionally, the proposed transformative leadership inventory could include opportunities for leaders to not only assess areas of improvement, but areas of strength, including the wealth of knowledge that springs from diverse transformative leaders.

In addition to this recommendation the authors found several major strengths in Shields' (2018) book. One is that following prescribed standards and curriculums that are based on ready-made programs and manufactured education packages which, although unintended, granulate the educational experience to a general panacea solution, ignoring the differences in students and perpetuating social inequities. The neglect of these differences disregards the culture, learning strategies, socio-economics, and traditions of individual students and their communities, and perpetuates a deficit-based approach.

Another strength of Shields' (2018) piece is her demonstration of transformative leadership. For example, Shields provides detailed information about the critical necessity for the facilitation of meaningful, positive relationships. This element of the work solidifies Shields' (2018) argument for the importance of rising above misaligned and underdeveloped policies as well as the emptiness of unsubstantiated theoretical frameworks. This critical

component, described as an example of activism or critical action, sets Shields' (2018) framework aside from other leadership perspectives, offering insightful examples rich with the details of leaders, whom Shields (2017) describes as transformative. These leaders surpass the perceived limitations of the hegemonic and elite norms typically present within their institutions and often modeled by their colleagues. In transcending these boundaries, these leaders fostered relationships through inviting students and parents to their homes for meals and for casual conversations, as well as making visits to students' homes. These leaders insisted that these relationships were the only way they could build trust and facilitate positive learning experiences and the achievement of success. These leaders understood that the benefit of creating learning communities which foster inclusivity acts for the greater good of the entire school community. In this way, Shields' model of transformative leadership not only seeks to transform the educational organization, but all of society. Furthermore, Shields' piece focuses heavily on several topics often neglected or absent from leadership frameworks, including transgender students, refugees, and language differences. Her critical lens is obvious in every detail of her book including her explicit and intentional use of language, which she argues is a critical aspect of transformative leadership. This precision is evidenced by her careful consideration and reasons for using the word minoritized.

Readers will find Shields' (2018) *Transformative Leadership in Education* to be loyally rooted in Freirean underpinnings yet refreshingly current with the unique challenges that contemporary leaders face. This edition particularly proves resourceful for the educational leader whose goal is to affect socially just, substantive transformation in education.

## Author Bios

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## References

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