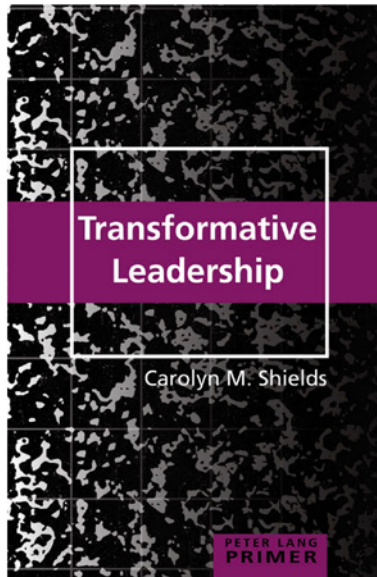


BOOK REVIEW

Transformative Leadership Primer

By: Carolyn M. Shields

Reviewer: Khanh Dinh, Ed.D. student, California State University, Sacramento



While the achievement gap has been a subject of concern for educational leaders, policy makers, and researchers for quite some time, Carolyn M. Shields (2016) reframes the issue as an *empowerment gap*. The focus is expanded beyond acknowledging that low socioeconomic

status negatively affects student outcomes to recognizing the hegemonic systems and assumptions that perpetuate the marginalization of the minoritized. Shields' use of the term *minoritized* is not meant to be mistaken as the group with the least numerical value, but rather the least power socially, economically, and politically. In *Transformative Leadership* the author calls upon leaders to challenge normalized beliefs that can be attributed to the imbalance of power and take action to bring about democratic improvements in public education. Educators, administrators, and other leaders in the K-12 space will find this primer thought provoking, as Shields provides an equity and empowerment lens to evaluate and address social injustices of the 21st century for the purposes of advancing inclusive, equitable student outcomes.

The book is composed of five chapters filled with references to seminal works, data, personal student stories, and Shields' experiences as a teacher and professor. The first chapter starts off as an

overview of socioeconomic problems, the impact of these challenges on education, and the need for a leadership theory that can deliver effective solutions. Here a transformative leadership model is introduced as a tool for leaders to affect change for improvements in public education. The following chapters provide further insight into the model in four segments: deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge frameworks; power and community; transforming action; and transformation underway.

Transformative Leadership

Acknowledging that there are many leadership theories and styles that have been studied and practiced, Shields emphasizes the need for a radical, critical theory to solve current socioeconomic inequities. According to Shields, conventional leadership theories have led to small, incremental changes at best. Previous approaches have been inadequate, as unfulfilled societal promises continue to threaten academic achievement and, more importantly, the development of informed citizens. Referencing the ideas of John Dewey and Thomas Jefferson, Shields maintains the responsibility of schools to prepare students to effectively participate in the democratic process. This is done through providing students with opportunities to critique learned assumptions, engage with conflicting perspectives, and understand how decisions affect not only them but their fellow citizens – locally and globally. Learning the interconnectedness and interdependence of the human and natural global environment at a young age builds a foundation that prepares students for collaboration with other cultures in school and the workplace (Douglas, Raynice, & Yanghee, 2015).

Drawing upon previous literature, theories, and models on transformative leadership, Shields developed eight tenets used to drive transformative leadership:

1. a mandate for deep and equitable change,
2. the need to deconstruct knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and injustice and to reconstruct them in more equitable ways,
3. the need to address the inequitable distribution of power,
4. an emphasis on both private and public good,
5. a focus on emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice,
6. an emphasis on interconnectedness, interdependence, and global awareness,
7. the necessity of balancing critique with promise, and
8. the call to exhibit moral courage.

As illustrated in Figure 1, this model is designed in the shape of an infinity sign to signify the continuous process for transformation. Additionally, the eight tenets are complementary and flow in a natural order, though visually the model may be difficult to follow. Shields states that leadership models are meant to be blueprints rather than instructions, and the proposed model does not include techniques relating to change management. Public education institutions are known to be bureaucratic and highly political – inevitably, significant change is often met with resistance (Berkson, 1968). As such, the lack of information about seeking buy-in from constituents is a limitation of the model.

Deconstructing and Reconstructing Knowledge Frameworks

Leaders begin the transformative leadership model at the first tenet, which involves establishing a mandate for change after recognizing the social, economic, and political inequities within and

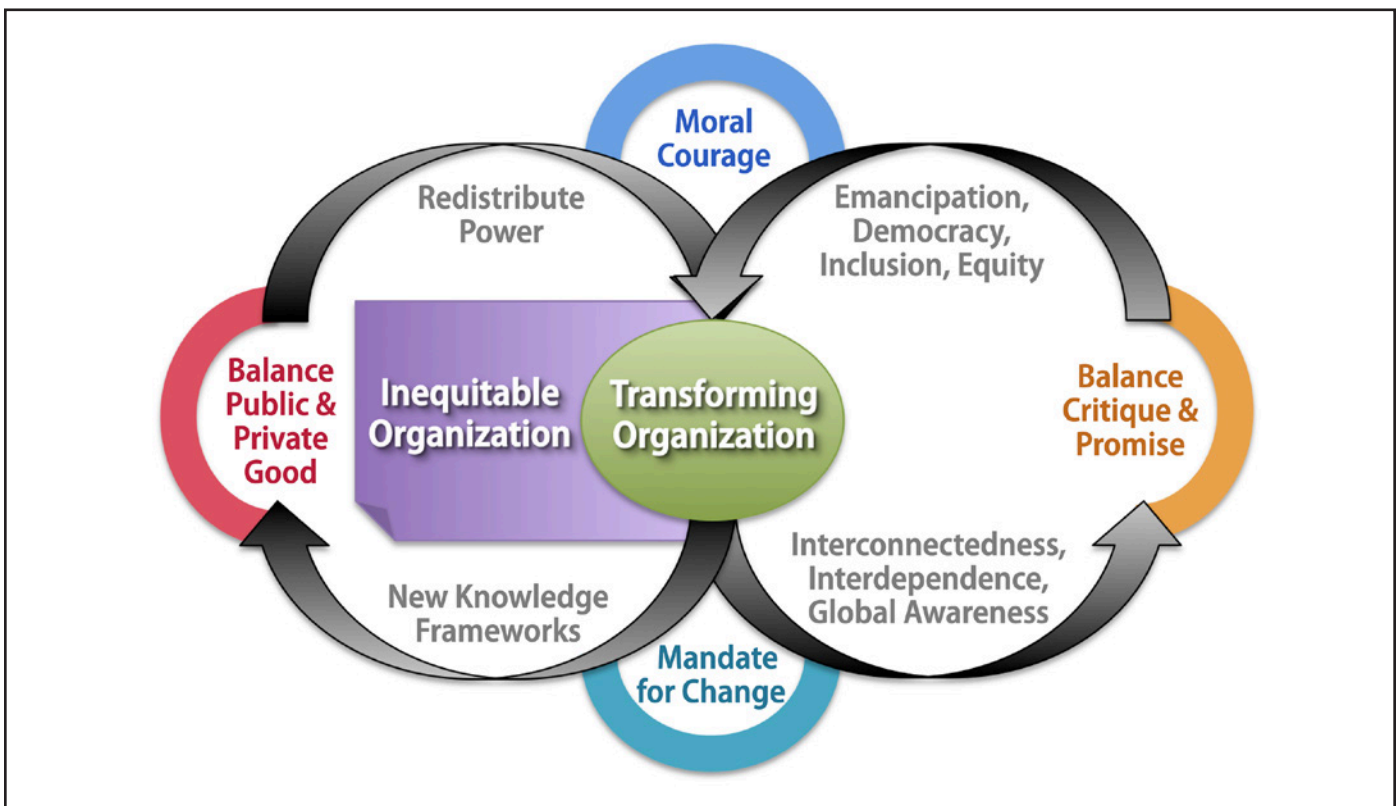


Figure 1. Transformative Leadership Model

outside of their organization. Shields briefly explains this step and neglects to address the importance of involving stakeholders. Shields could provide more comprehensive insight by discussing how the mandate for change should serve as the leader's vision for grounding the future seven steps. Additionally, it would be beneficial for leaders to communicate the mandate for change to other members in the organization. This could be done through storytelling with relevant data and eliciting feedback from various constituents. Studies have shown that it is difficult for an organization to sustain change after the leader leaves, and a possible solution to the issue is to create a system of multiple key players who believe in the need for change and will continue the effort (Williams, 2009). Thus, it is vital to include all participants early on in the transformational journey.

Once a need for improvement has been realized, the next step is vital to the process – requiring self-awareness, critical thinking, and empathy. To reiterate the nation's grave state of inequity, Shields provides examples of current injustices plaguing urban cities, such as Detroit, where she currently works as a professor in the College of Education at Wayne State University. Some examples are: 48% of preschool children who have been suspended more than once are Black, and 16 million children in the United States live below the poverty line, 33% of whom are Latino. Shields also speaks to the injustices faced by LGBTQ and Muslim students, expanding the issue beyond race and class to gender identity and religion.

The text prompts questions as to how educators are addressing inequities and the consequential effects on academic outputs. Shields explains the current framework is *deficit thinking*, where stereotypes are formed regarding students' ability and performance based on their background. Juxtaposing equality with justice, Shields criticizes the popular belief that children should all be treated the same for the sake of fairness, as it fails to take into consideration the incredibly influential

discrepancies in circumstances. She argues for differential treatment and advises schools to be mindful of each student's situation and to provide resources and thoughtful opportunities to combat disadvantages. The new framework proposed is one in which educational leaders are consciously aware of who is disadvantaged, marginalized, and excluded, while remembering that students cannot choose their race, gender identification, and class. Thereby, educators have a responsibility to view all children of different backgrounds and resources as having the same capabilities, encourage them to reach their potential, and advocate for them when necessary.

Power and the Community

Dispelling assumptions from deficit thinking paves the way for the third tenet, recognizing the imbalance of power, and fourth tenet, emphasizing the public good of education. Shields points to examples of how groups with power influence educational decisions about what is important and who can participate. The instance of exclusion that references a small percentage of women engineers in 1960 may not be surprising; however, the instance of Black children being asked to leave a Philadelphia swim club in 2009 strikingly reinforces the current existence of discrimination. Other cases include the removal of Mexican American history curriculum, teaching materials that challenge evolution, and test questions that require access to knowledge beyond the classroom. Shields associates these educational decisions that disadvantage certain groups with achievement gaps and low graduation rates, explaining the negative effects when students do not see themselves represented. Moreover, students who are in the groups of power are disadvantaged when they are not exposed to learning about the background and history of other countries. Infusing global literature into the curriculum allows students to appreciate the role of cultural experiences in their lives, respect the differences of others, and ultimately reject perceptions that are oppressive or

discriminatory (Martens et al., 2015).

The lack of diversity in curriculum becomes lack of diversity in the classroom as education is viewed more as a private good, evident through parents exercising school choice. Through time, the focus of educational goals has shifted more towards student achievement, college readiness, and career preparation due to parents directing their children to be socially mobile educational consumers. Moreover, *American exceptionalism*, a concept described by Shields as a phenomenon of America striving to lead the world in various areas such as academic achievement, further overshadows the democratic objective of developing students to become informed citizens. All of which leads to competition among students for advanced placement classes, gifted programs, and high-ranking universities. Naturally, many disadvantaged students will be excluded – perpetuating the cycle of inequality and power disparities.

Transforming Action

Going through the first four tenets will result in an understanding and awareness of the disproportionate landscape in education and society. In this part of the primer, Shields becomes more prescriptive with the fifth tenet in that suggestions are offered for incorporating emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice in curriculum. She refers to emancipation as freedom from physical and psychological restraints and cites Phillip Martin and Luis CdeBaca to reveal current day slavery practices of human trafficking and farm workers. While these topics can be controversial, Shields argues for students to be exposed to issues concerning equity. Furthermore, she proposes that justice be taught as the theme across various subjects. For example, racism can be discussed while reviewing literature from the past, and economic inequalities can be discussed during an analysis of air quality in different neighborhoods. In being taught how to listen, reflect, and critique,

students will be prepared to participate in the democratic process and advocate for human rights and equity.

The necessity for such curriculum is solidified in the following tenet that emphasizes interconnectedness, interdependence, and global awareness. All three topics are explained through relationships of people, places, and times. According to Shields, students need to understand individual and collective relationships, local and global relationships, and past and present relationships. In learning interconnectedness, students can be taught how to reinterpret history, as a flag from the past may be a symbol of hate in the present. They will understand how agriculture subsidies in one area can affect the cost of food locally. These topics can ignite their interests to the global landscape, and they can learn how tensions in one country can result in immigrants coming to another country. Beyond teaching, Shields urges teachers to connect with students to demonstrate the value of relationships, recounting her own experiences with middle school, high school, and university students.

Transformation Underway

The final chapter reinforces a commitment to action in the seventh tenet as leaders balance the previous activities of critique, analysis, and discussion with promise. Shields acknowledges that leadership is a collective effort, and fulfilling promised outcomes requires leaders to create communities. The term *community* is robustly defined, and some examples provided by the author include church groups, country clubs, and the NRA. In the context of education, Shields briefly mentions the necessity for schools to seek parental input. Families are vital inputs to the process of education and could have been woven throughout the model to strengthen the efficacy of tenets that influence student learning.

Moral courage, the last tenet, holds together the transformative leadership model. Shields suggests leaders begin the transformative journey with *spiritual grounding* to affirm beliefs and values that

will allow the empowerment of others. Incorporating this concept in the first tenet could provide a more comprehensive explanation of how a leader establishes the mandate for change. This last chapter of the primer also includes key strategies: examining data to inform discussions around inequities, engaging in dialogue around inclusion and justice, and maintaining the priority for change in the face of everyday challenges and emergencies. Beneficial to the process, these strategies could be discussed during the appropriate tenets along the way, allowing leaders to more effectively apply each tactic to the pertinent areas.

In Closing

Although primarily explained through educational use cases, Shields' transformative leadership model can be used by leaders in various fields, particularly those seeking to advance equity and inclusion within their organizations. Readers may need to augment the eight tenets with change management methodologies. Shields' main objective is to encourage leaders to remove learned assumptions and deficit thinking in the educational environment and create opportunities that will not only close the achievement gap but also prepare students to be informed citizens. The work done in schools cannot be successful if not reinforced in homes and communities. A limitation of this model is the lack of sufficient information addressing the role of stakeholders – teachers, parents, and community members – and their involvement in improving public education. Shields does discuss the necessity for leaders to engage in dialogue briefly in the last chapter; it would be more impactful if this strategy was immersed throughout the tenets. This would be particularly relevant to the first tenet, which could be expanded from a leader's mandate for change to a vision that is shared with constituents.

With over 50 years in the education field as a teacher, professor, and administrator, and a wealth of publications, Shields' experience is evident in the stories, examples, and data presented throughout the book. The transformative leadership model provides a framework that is a thorough approach for analyzing socioeconomic problems and the assumptions, practices, and systems that perpetuate inequity. Additionally, the suggested corrective actions can be of value for educational leaders. Overall, Shields presents information coherently connected to educational practices. This primer will be insightful to those seeking to better understand academic inequities and enhance democracy in public education.

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About the author

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