



Journal of African American
Males in Education
Fall 2017 - Vol. 8 Issue 2

Transformative Leadership: A Multicultural Platform for Advancing African American Male Student Success

* Sarah Graham
California State University,
Sacramento

Carlos Nevarez
California State University,
Sacramento

Transformative leadership is a style of leadership that deliberately utilizes equity, social justice, and fairness to empower marginalized communities. Transformative leaders address the needs of diverse populations and empower individuals to challenge the status quo, affirm their identity, and serve as allies to communities facing oppression, subjugation, and discernment. In this article, the authors focus on the values of social justice, critically relevant pedagogy, and empowerment. These principles have a history of challenging injustices brought on by the education system and greater society. With these values as a focal point, we illustrate the benefits of a transformative leadership approach in the construction of a multicultural school culture. Specifically, highlighting how a transformative leader can influence a school culture and the greater community to transform in a way that supports the success of African American male students.

Keywords: Transformative leadership, social justice, critically relevant pedagogy, African American male student empowerment, multicultural school culture

Barriers faced by African American males in education are plentiful. African American male students face higher suspension rates, society misconceptions, pre-conceived expectations, referrals to the office, expulsion, and higher special education placement than that of their peers (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2005). The 2012-2013 national graduation rate for African American males was 59 percent. This was 21 percent lower than their White male counterparts (Black Lives Matter, 2015). These discrepancies serve to exacerbate the educational gaps experienced by African American males.

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sarah Graham, California State University, Sacramento. Email: sarah.graham@csus.edu
© 2017 Graham & Nevarez

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

Transformative leadership is a proactive approach well suited to close such gaps and advance students' educational achievements, specifically for African American male students. Transformative leadership is a style utilized by leaders when making changes or adjustments in their organization based on challenging inequities. According to Nevarez et al. (2013), "transformative leadership is a social-justice oriented approach undergirded by notions of democracy (e.g. opportunity, equity, fairness, freedom)" (p. 143). Leaders utilizing this approach look to create change and are concerned with inequities and injustices made on diverse populations (Keddie, 2006). Excuses for gaps in achievement are not made; instead transformative leaders construct change to meet the needs of the diverse population and acquire the necessary resources to do so (Shields, 2010). Transformative leaders address the needs of the diverse populations within their organization and create change based on what is recognized as inequity or social injustice (Keddie, 2006; Nevarez et al., 2013).

School leaders that lead with a transformative leadership lens position themselves to develop, implement, and sustain a multicultural education school culture. This culture is underscored by values of social justice, critical pedagogy, and empowerment. According to Banks (2006), "multicultural education reaches far beyond ethnic studies or the social studies. It is concerned with modifying the total educational environment so that it better reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity within a society" (p. 55). This style of education benefits a diverse student population especially when coinciding with Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy which celebrates African-American culture and provides leaders with practices that engage diverse groups of students in ways that are authentic (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition to the pedagogy, decisions and policies made must incorporate sensitivity to all stakeholders' cultures and experiences (Gay, 1995; Nieto, 2004). By creating an environment where leaders are encouraged to challenge the status-quo on behalf of African-American male students coupled with focusing on achievement and eliminating inequities, leaders will support the foundation for a multicultural educational school culture.

Creating a school culture that is absent of lasting inequities is necessary to ensure permanent change to the injustices in our school system. Transformative leadership guides the implementation and sustainability of a multicultural environment. According to Nevarez et al. (2013), "transformative leaders are aware of oppressive sociocultural norms and microaggressions (subtle discriminatory practices) which serve to reinforce the marginalization of nondominant groups" (p. 146). By focusing on the following three major constructs of transformative leadership in a multicultural environment, leaders can begin to construct an educational atmosphere that supports and encourages success for African American male students. Figure 1 illustrates the three major constructs (social justice, critical pedagogy, and empowerment) of focus for a transformative leader implementing a multicultural education school culture.

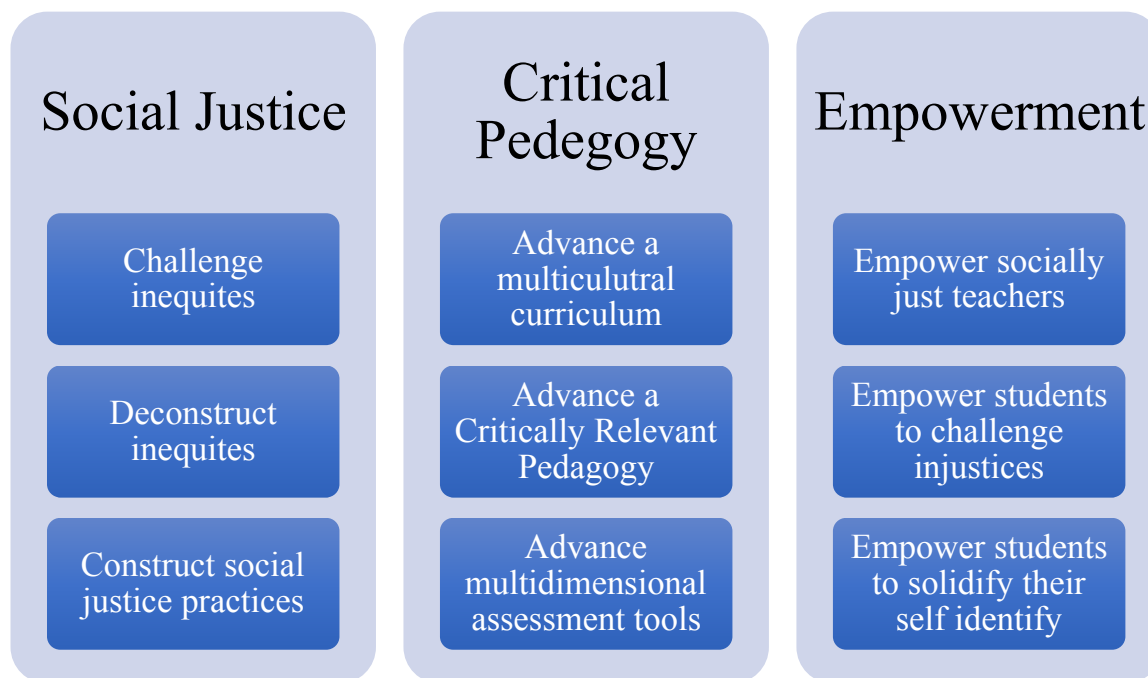


Figure 1. Three major constructs of focus for a Transformative leader

This synopsis of the three major areas of focus highlights key contributions to the development of an effective multicultural education school culture by a transformative leader. Although there are many other focal points that can be argued as necessary in the implementation of a multicultural education school culture, these three areas were chosen as a result of their impact on challenging the injustices experienced by African American male students. This leads to the development of a conceptual understanding of practices a leader takes when transforming a school environment for the greater good of all students. A more thorough explanation of each construct follows.

Social Justice

The first major construct of focus, illustrated in Figure 1, for a transformative leader building a multicultural education is to give rise to social justice. In a school system, social justice entails educating and empowering diverse populations effectively, recognizing and eliminating inequities, and closing achievement gaps (Banks, 2006; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). A transformative leader focuses on social justice as a guiding revelation for change. By implementing an exemplary multicultural education school culture, they seek to address such social justice inequities by including diverse ideas, strategies, educational approaches and individuals into the school community (Banks, 2006). In doing so, school affiliates secure a sense of belongingness, inclusion, and a sense of community. This type of school environment is conducive to advancing the educational success of African American males.

Challenge Inequities

A transformative leader recognizes equity in a multicultural school culture means all students are given what they individually need to succeed (Ford, 2015). The leader holds all students to high standards and challenges any inequities that hold particular students from obtaining such success. This would be the focus more so than equality which means that all students are treated the same (Ford, 2015). Because transformative leadership criticizes inequitable practices and inspires a vision for a just society, its link to education is seamless (Shields, 2010). By first identifying the inequities within the school community and deconstructing their foundation, a transformative leader is able to develop a basis for a school community that focuses on equitable practices specifically for African American males. Multicultural education recognizes the internal and external inequities and serves to deliberately dismantle such inequities (Banks, 2006). By having social justice as a focus to building a multicultural education school culture, the transformative leader is illustrating the need to deconstruct systemic inequities (Ayers, et al., 2009; Banks, 2006).

Deconstruct Inequities

A transformative leader seeking to create a multicultural education school culture looks to identify inequities by challenging traditional ideologies that serve to discriminate, oppress, and subjugate the most vulnerable of populations. The leader is quick to examine curricular and teaching practices that have a history of portraying differences as not being the norm, in this case, the call to deconstruct curricular and teaching practices becomes a priority for transformative leaders. Efforts to infuse culturally relevant pedagogy includes making deliberate efforts to promote varied cultural values, rituals, and ceremonies. Ultimately, this creates an inclusive school culture.

Construct Social Justice Practices

Shields (2010) explains that “transformative leadership ... recognizes the need to begin with critical reflection and analysis and to move through enlightened understanding to action—action to redress wrongs and to ensure that all members of the organization are provided with as level a playing field as possible—not only with respect to access but also with regard to academic, social, and civic outcomes” (p. 572). After ascertaining the inequities presently experienced by African American male students, a transformative leader implementing a multicultural educational school culture would look to construct cultural relevance that challenges the status quo. In education, this construction of new realities is inclusive of the entire school environment. For example, professional development of stakeholders can serve to develop individuals that are knowledgeable of promising and best practices for African American males (Banks, 2006; Nieto, 2004). In addition, the review of existing policies and procedures can lead to the development of equitable practices that are underscored by values of fairness, ethics, and advances the best interest of traditionally oppressed populations.

Critical Pedagogy

The second construct of focus for a transformative leader, as illustrated in Figure 1, is ensuring the inclusion of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy in a multicultural educational school culture encompasses a multicultural curriculum, culturally relevant pedagogy, and multi-dimensional assessments. Critical pedagogy means that the classroom is inclusive of materials and instruction that is culturally relevant and connects to students of all diversities. When students are able to identify with culturally relevant curriculum, students are validated in that their cultural values are accurately represented. Overall, critical pedagogy utilizes content and practice to empower learners (Gay, 2000).

Advance a Multicultural Curriculum

By involving the larger community in the development of critical pedagogy, the transformative leader will more effectively reach the entire school environment (Banks, 2006). Through this collaboration, the leader can make certain the school culture reflects the cultural values of the greater community. This inclusive approach to developing a multicultural school culture is an essential tool to connecting students to the curriculum. One of the tenets underscoring multicultural education involves active social justice participation. According to Banks (2006), “a major goal of multicultural education is to help students develop the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to participate effectively in their cultural communities and within the civic culture of the nation-state” (p. xvii).

Exposure to a multicultural curriculum in the primary grades (K-2) serves as a foundation for cultural acceptance. According to Wardle (2000) “developing a racial identity and concepts about racial and ethnic diversity begins in early childhood and intensifies during adolescence...a multicultural education approach that includes multiethnic and multiracial children must start in early childhood and continue through the entire K-12 curriculum” (p. 69). Cultural feelings and attitudes are developed in early elementary exposure, therefore the earlier we can teach using an exemplary multicultural curriculum, the better.

Advance a Critically Relevant Pedagogy

In its fullest form, multicultural education is an integrated curriculum that involves a multitude of cultures. These cultures are represented in various forms (curriculum, instruction, school vision, philosophical approach to schooling, school media, and culturally relevant professional development) throughout the school year (Landt, 2006). Specific to curriculum, the lesson plans include content being integrated from a variety of cultural groups that will enhance the subject or lesson(s). In operationalizing the lessons, teachers assist the students’ understanding of the content and “modify their teaching in ways that facilitate academic achievement” (Banks, 2006, p. 5). Such teaching practices are an integral part of culturally relevant pedagogy. According to Ladson-Billings (1994), culturally relevant teaching is a “pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 17–18). Teachers that utilize a culturally relevant pedagogy hold all students to higher standards of achievement while simultaneously utilizing a curriculum that students connect with and instructional strategies they respond positively to (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings (1995), summarized

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

characteristics or beliefs of three teachers' utilizing culturally relevant pedagogy in primarily African American classrooms. A highlight of these are:

- Belief that all the students were capable of academic success (p. 478)
- Saw their pedagogy as art—unpredictable, always in the process of becoming (p. 478)
- Saw teaching as a way to give back to the community (p. 478)
- Maintain fluid student-teacher relationships (p. 480)
- Demonstrate a connectedness with all of the students (p. 480)
- Encourage students to learn collaboratively and be responsible for another (p. 480)
- Teachers must be passionate about knowledge and learning (p. 481)
- Teachers must scaffold, or build bridges, to facilitate learning (p. 481)

Such beliefs and strategies benefit all students, but most relevant is that they have been found to benefit African American students in enhancing their learning and experience in school (Ladson-Billings, 1995). By identifying instructional strategies that help in the education of young African American males, transformative leaders work to develop, support, and enhance teachers' culturally relevant pedagogy.

Advance Multidimensional Assessment Tools

Assessments tools should be utilized in a way that benefits students' educational attainment. Due to the standardization of testing in K-12 schools across America, raising test scores has been a focus for many educators and leaders alike (Yeung, et al., 2006). Because of this, curriculum too often teaches to the test and assessments are utilized as pre-tests to the federal and state required assessments, which diminishes the cultural relevancy of both the curriculum and the assessments. The focus on meeting federal and state standards instead of authentically gauging the richness of the content leads to generic coverage, implementation, and assessment of culturally relevant practices. This watered-down approach to covering multicultural education is especially detrimental to African American males who suffer the greatest because it is their subgroup who have lowest achievement rates on state standardized tests and the lowest graduation rates in K-12 schools. This results in African American males being inadequately prepared to pursue higher education or to enter the workforce (CDE, 2016). Therefore, in order to benefit African American students, assessments must include a variety of instruments and methods (multiple choice, short answer, verbal, media base, and team based) that reflect a diversity of learners (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Banks, 2006). Still, assessments alone cannot be the focus. As Banks (2006) states, "It will, however, do little good for educators to create improved assessment procedures for students unless they also implement multicultural curricular and instructional practices" (p. 336). Noting the high stakes surrounding testing, the transformative leader advances an integrative approach to assessment practices. In this case, the leader provides educators a platform of support (exposure to varied assessment instruments, allocate time within their teaching load to collaborate among themselves, in class coaching, shared resources, focus on reflective assessment practices) that advances their knowledge on multiple approaches to assessment.

Empowerment

As illustrated in Figure 1, the third construct of focus for a transformative leader implementing a multicultural school culture is empowerment; empowerment of teachers and empowerment of students. Empowering individuals gives them the skills and belief in themselves to achieve. A transformative leader guides with the idea that they will inspire others and empower them to make changes based on inequities in society (Shields, 2010). Therefore, a transformative leader will lead all school affiliates in a way that enables them to challenge societal injustices.

Empower Socially Just Teachers

Transformative leaders understand the students they serve by making concerted efforts to familiarize themselves with their students' culture and community. Equally important is the leader's higher level of consciousness of best and promising practices that most effectively advance the educational success of African American male students. Transformative leaders are keen at empowering teachers through shared knowledge. They see themselves as servant leaders and use themselves as a tool to impart culturally relevant practices. As Gay (2000) points out, educators implementing a multicultural education need to be comfortable and confident in the curriculum but also must be knowledgeable about how to provide quality instruction to students from various cultural backgrounds. However, Good et al. (2010), found that teachers and parents agreed about the lack of teacher preparation in multiculturalism and effective instructional strategies. Such a deficiency in preparedness hinders student learning, the family and home connection, and the teachers' drive to continue educating students from diverse populations. Often, teachers who teach in diverse settings move schools as a result of the lack of resources of support, which then leaves these students with the newest or even least dedicated educators (Good et al., 2010). Therefore, empowering teachers with preparation, cultural knowledge, and culturally relevant pedagogy motivates quality instructors to stay and teach in schools with diverse populations (Banks, 2006; Good et al., 2010).

Empower Students to Solidify Their Self-identify

African American male students are empowered to take charge of their education and become vested in their future when educated in a multicultural education system (Banks, 2006; Gay, 2000). A transformative leader must first empower teachers with the instructional strategies, empathy, cultural competency, and multicultural education practices so that students will see the value teachers place on their education and culture. This is essential for African American male students because as Roderick (2003) stated in his study of African American students in Chicago, male students are not necessarily lacking the skills to achieve well in school, but rather the self-identity and belief in their future relating to the school environment. Therefore, the classroom environment must empower our young students to feel supported and respected. Once students feel teachers care about them, they will rise to the high standards that culturally relevant teachers set for themselves (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Empower Students to Challenge Injustices

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

The intentionality of transformative leaders to implement a multicultural education school culture empowers students by providing them the knowledge and tools needed to challenge injustices. By engaging in culturally relevant curriculum, conversations, and community outreach, students are empowered to challenge the status quo. Culturally relevant pedagogy aims to center and ground students in developing a strong sense of self-worth. This serves as a precursor to allowing students to secure their social political voice for the betterment of their and the greater community who is experiencing oppression, discrimination, and subjugation. Through the advancement of increasing students' self-identity, participating in a multicultural education system, enables students to speak of cross-cultural understandings, recognize injustices and empowers them to speak against injustices (Banks, 2006).

Section II: Transformative Leadership: Benefits of Advancing Multicultural Education

Developing a multicultural education in a school environment takes time and dedication from all those involved; however, when implemented effectively and sustained, it benefits all stakeholders' cultural competency and students' connection to their education (Banks, 2006; Grant & Sleeter, 2007; Huck, et al., 1997). The benefits accrued are plentiful when a supported comprehensive school culture is underscored by values of social justice, critically relevant pedagogy, and empowerment. These schooling practices serve to institutionalize a welcoming and inclusive school culture.

Figure 2 illustrates some of the benefits that transpire for young African American males in a multicultural education school culture setting, as well as for other stakeholders involved.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

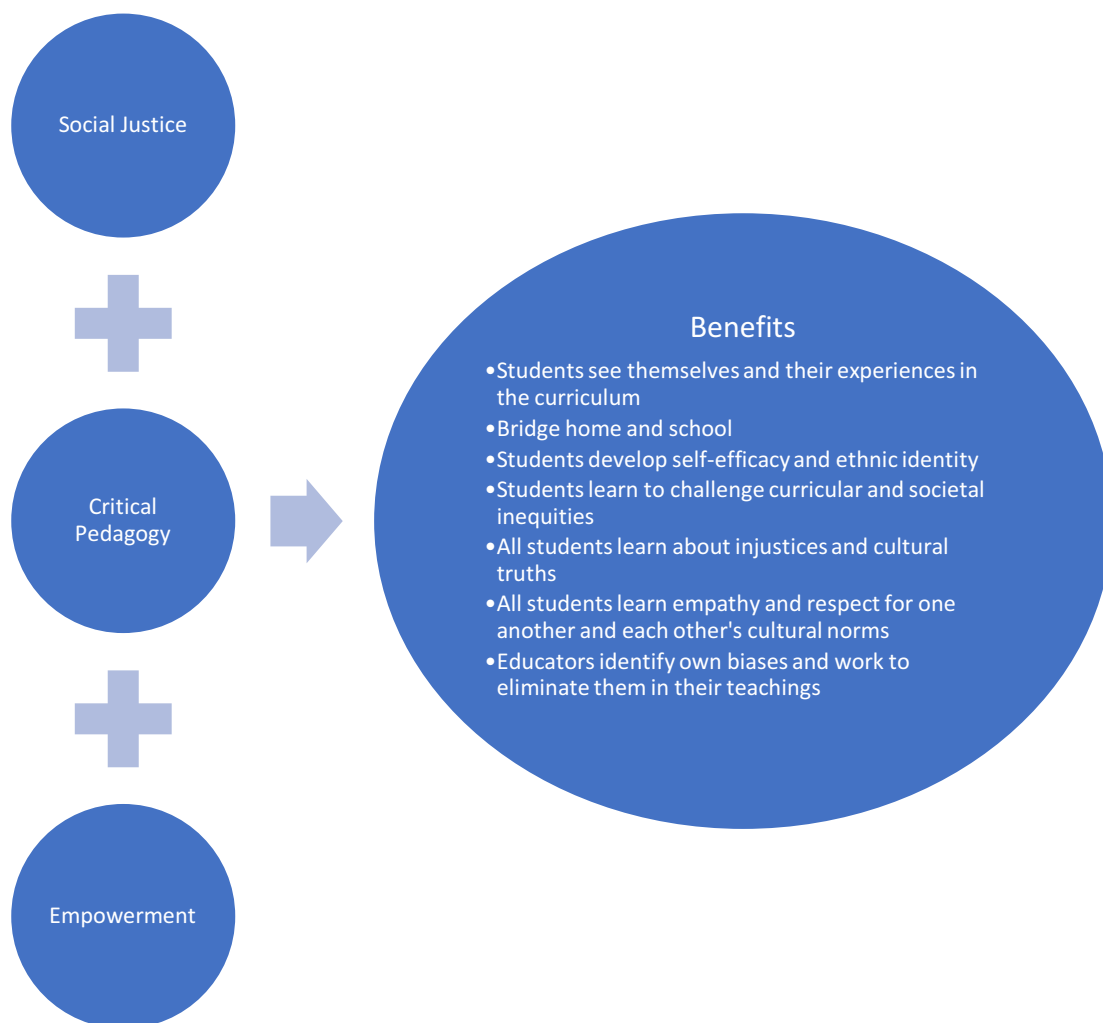


Figure 2. Benefits of implementing a multicultural school culture through the lens of a transformative leader

As illustrated in Figure 2, the benefits of implementing multicultural education through the lens of a transformative leader are plentiful. When advancing change using a transformative leadership lens, the focus on equality and justice is emphasized. This has the potential of transforming the educational experience of young African American male students by creating a comprehensive system where students see themselves and their experiences across all educational practices. A transformative leader looks to emphasize “deep and equitable change in social conditions” (Shields, 2010, p. 563); therefore, the multicultural environment collaboratively created under the guidance of a transformative leader would bring forth a shared vision of inclusion and equity. This collaboration with the home and community benefits African American male students, in particular, due to more accurately creating a curriculum that authentically represents their culture by bringing forth African American male role models, and educating stakeholders on cultural practices. By creating a bridge between community, home and school, families have a better opportunity to engage in their students’ education and support their educational attainment (Borba, 2009; Good et al., 2010). With this connection, young African American males can more easily form an affirming self-identity.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

One of the most protective advantages for African American youth is having a positive ethnic-identity (Phinney, et al., 1997). In securing a strong sense of identity, it serves as a “shield” from harsh experiences (stereotypes, discrimination, racism, and oppression) encountered by African American males. An ethnic identity is an important factor in their self-identity (Phinney, et al., 1997); therefore, it is vital for transformative leaders to collaborate with the community and students’ families to emphasize the effects of having a positive ethnic identity. This connection to one’s ethnic-identity helps enhance one’s self-esteem (Kerpelman, et al., 2007; Phinney, et al., 1997). According to Kerpelman, et al. (2007), a high self-esteem is strongly connected to academic achievement. Therefore, working together in the development of a multicultural education school culture benefits young African American males by empowering them to have a positive ethnic-identity and therefore a high self-esteem (Kerpelman, et al., 2007; Phinney, et al., 1997).

The development of a positive self-efficacy is also a part of forming self-identity. Self-efficacy refers to an individual being confident in their ability to accomplish the goals they have made (Bandura et al. 2001). Like ethnic identity, self-efficacy is connected to educational success and the belief of one’s ability to achieve (Kerpelman, et al., 2007). Therefore, by empowering young African American males to have both a positive ethnic identity and a positive self-efficacy they will more likely have a high self esteem and positive attitude toward school and their future pathways (Kerpelman, et al., 2007; Phinney, et al., 1997). With this connection to their education and individual empowerment, African American males will be more confident in their ability to engage in their own learning, question inequities and advocate for their future triumphs.

In addition to the benefit of empowering African American males’ self-identity through relationships and curriculum, critical pedagogy enhances their experience and education. However, it is worth noting that such an education will benefit all students and educators involved. As Huck, et al. (1997) points out, “American children of the twenty-first century will need to develop a worldview that appreciates the richness of other cultures at the same time as they preserve and celebrate their uniqueness” (p. 241). Implementing a curriculum that empowers students across cultures, reduces racism, and helps create a multicultural school culture which enhances cultural understandings, empathy, and respect for people (Banks, 2006). It is suggested that for this transformation to successfully take place nationwide, it needs to be present in all classrooms, in all schools, and for all students (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

In order for all students to gain the benefits from a multicultural education, teachers need to analyze their own cultural competencies and biases (Banks, 2006; Gay, 1994). This self-reflection should not be seen as a negative experience, rather a benefit to becoming a more culturally relevant teacher. Teacher biases, whether conscious or unconscious must be addressed to ensure their absence in the classroom and school culture. Transformative leaders can use this as an introduction to conversations about culture and critical pedagogy, which will benefit the growth of a multicultural school culture (Banks, 2006; Gay, 2000).

Conclusion

Transformative leaders have an obligation to their students and school community to create a fair and equitable experience for all through the development and sustainability of a multicultural school culture. In doing so, the education of African American male students, as well as all involved, is enhanced. This multicultural school culture is grounded on the values of

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

social justice, critically relevant pedagogy, and empowerment. This serves to combat inequitable practices, while serving to create a school culture conducive to positive learning, cultural inclusiveness, affirmation, and student success.

References

- Ayers, W., Quinn, t. & Stovall, D. (2009). *Handbook of social justice in education*. NY: Routledge.
- Banks, J. A. (2006). *Cultural Diversity and Education: Foundations, curriculum, and teaching (5th edition)*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Bandura, A., Barbarenelli, C., Caprara, G. V., & Pastorelli, C. (2001). Self-efficacy beliefs as shapers of children's aspirations and career trajectories. *Child Development, 72*, 187–206.
- Black Lives Matter: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males. (2015). Retrieved from <http://www.blackboysreport.org/2015-black-boys-report.pdf>
- Borba, M. (2009, October). Caring closes the language-learning gap. *Phi Delta Kappa, 90*, 681-685.
- California Department of Education (CDE). (2016). *Schools Chief Torlakson Reports Across-the-Board Progress Toward Career and College Readiness in CAASPP Results*. Retrieved from <http://www.cde.ca.gov/nr/ne/yr16/yr16rel57.asp>
- Ford, D. Y. (2015). Multicultural Issues: Recruiting and retaining Black and Hispanic students in gifted education: Equality versus equity schools. *Gifted Child Today, 38(3)*. 187-196.
- Gay, G. (1994). *At the essence of learning: Multicultural education*. West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi, an International Honor Society in Education.
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Good, M. E., Masewicz, S., & Vogel, L. (2010). Latino English language learners: Bridging achievement and cultural gaps between schools and families. *Journal of Latinos and Education, 9*, 321-339.
- Grant, C. A., & Sleeter, C. E. (2007). *Turning on learning: Five approaches for multicultural teaching plans for race, class, gender, and disability (4th ed.)*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Huck, C. S., Helper, S., Hickman, J., Kiefer, B. Z. (1997). *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*. Madison, WI: Brown and Benchmark Publishers.
- Keddie, A. (2006). Gender and schooling: Frameworks for transformative leadership. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 27*, 399-415.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

- Kerpelman, J. L., Eryigit, S., Stephens, C. J. (2008, September). African American adolescents' culture education orientation: Association with self-efficacy, ethnic identity, and perceived parental support. *Journal of Youth Adolescents*, 37(8), 997-1008.
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Ladson-Billings, G. (1995, Autumn). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(2). 465-491.
- Landt, S. M. (2006). Multicultural Literature and young adolescents: A kaleidoscope of opportunity. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 49(8), 690-697.
- Nevarez, C., Wood, J. L., & Penrose, R. (2013). *Leadership theory and the community college: Applying theory to practice*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Nieto, S. (1996). *Affirming Diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers.
- Phinney, J.S., Cantu, C.L. & Kurtz, D.A. (1997, April). Ethnic and American Identity as predictors of self-esteem among African American, Latino, and White adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 26(2), 165-185.
- Roderick, M. (2003). What's happening to the boys? Early high school experiences and school outcomes among African American male adolescents in Chicago. *Urban Education*, 38, 538-607.
- Shields, C. M. (2010). Transformative Leadership: Working for equity in diverse contexts. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(4), 559-589.
- Sirin, S. R., & Rogers-Sirin, L. (2005). Components of school engagement among African American adolescents. *Applied Developmental Science*, 9, 5-13.
- Wardle, F. (December 1999/January 2000). Children of mixed race-No longer invisible. *Understanding Youth Culture*, 57(4), 68-72.
- Yeung, S. A., Lee, Y., & Yue, K. W. (2006, July). Multicultural leadership, sustainable total school environment. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 5(2), 121-131.