

Article

Understanding the Widespread Applicability of Transformative Leadership

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Abstract

For too long, schools and other organizations have relied on what have come to be known as technical, rational, or functional approaches to leadership, stemming in the global north, from scientific management in the early 20th century. Schools have been hierarchically organized in the belief that only the “managers” were smart enough to know what is needed, with others (including teachers and students) needing to obey and comply with established regulations, curricular standards, and assessment tools. If we want more equitable, inclusive, and just outcomes, it is time for school leaders to reject the dominant scientific leadership paradigm and to employ a new paradigm, with new axiology, ontology, epistemology, and methodology focused on values, community, and cultures. Transformative leadership theory is described as an exercise of power and authority that begins with questions of justice and democracy. It critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others. This article reviews some of the origins of transformative leadership theory, identifies some of the most common approaches and principles, and argues that by fundamentally reorienting leadership towards justice, democracy, and equity, transformative leadership theory provides the essential ethical and practical framework for education in a fractured world.

Keywords: transformative leadership; equity; inclusion; justice; excellence

1. Understanding the Widespread Applicability of Transformative Leadership

In this special issue of the *Education Sciences* journal, you will find articles from various perspectives, all focused on enhancing your understanding of transformative leadership theory (TLT) and on demonstrating its utility in multiple and diverse contexts worldwide. Moreover, this is particularly timely in that our world is in crisis, with thousands of people displaced by wars and conflicts, and millions of people experiencing hunger, “some due to extreme weather conditions like drought, some due to rising conflict, and some due to war-fueled, human-made famine” (Save the Children, n.d.). In fact, current statistics indicate that, as of 2024, 8.2% of the global population (approximately 673 million individuals) are estimated to experience hunger with many others experiencing food insecurity (Global Perspective, n.d.). Further, it is estimated that at least 330 million people face absolute homelessness, with no discernable shelter, while over 1.6 billion people are without decent housing (Filipenco, 2023).

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Because schools are microcosms of the wider world, students with these same challenges can be found within the walls of our educational institutions. And it is there that people must learn to address them. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argues that the educational system is a mechanism for reproducing social and cultural norms, including social inequities. Yet Mills (2008, p. 80) argues that his notion of habitus is not only reproductive but also transformative. She argues that within his concept of habitus is a concept of agency that permits generating transformative action. Thus, although education is also in a global crisis, we must act.

In the 21st century, almost 60 million children of primary school age are not in school and many who attend learn very little. This is reflected in the United Nations sustainable development goals for 2030, adopted in 2015. Their intent is “to end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and to ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources” (United Nations, n.d., n.p.) Moreover, signees pledged to leave no one behind as they worked to create “a just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world in which the needs of the most vulnerable are met” (United Nations, n.d., n.p.).

The goals expressed in the 2030 agenda, including SDG4, the education goal, to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all,” (United Nations, n.d., n.p.) are lofty. Yet, many children still find schools to be unsafe and hostile spaces in which oppression, prejudice, and bullying often occur, and in which there is frequently a gap between the outcomes of students often considered “mainstream” and those who are not. Although the gap is often termed an achievement gap, there are many who suggest that more appropriate terms might be an “opportunity gap” (Milner, 2017) or an “empowerment gap.” These terms better reflect the presence of power elites in our societies and the reality that some have power and some do not, some are worthy and some are not, indeed, some are entitled and some are not.

For too long, schools and other organizations have relied on what have come to be known as technical, rational, or functional approaches, stemming in the global north, from the scientific management work of Taylor (1912/1990), Fayol (1916/1990), and others, in the early 20th century. Schools have been hierarchically organized in the belief that only the “managers” were smart enough to know what is needed, with others (including both teachers and students) needing to obey and comply with established regulations, curricular standards, and assessment tools. Moreover, because educational institutions were originally established for socialization purposes, they generally, and often unwittingly, perpetuate the existing norms of society including the need to protect one’s position and privilege, rather than to offer equitable opportunities and outcomes for all. Confronted with profound societal challenges within their walls, schools led by technical-rational paradigms, focused on compliance and standardized efficiency, are ill-equipped to respond. Such models lack the ethical core and critical capacity to disrupt the cycles of disadvantage students bring with them. This is where transformative leadership theory becomes salient.

Transformative leadership is described by Weiner (2003) as an “exercise of power and authority that begins with questions of justice, democracy, and the dialectic between individual accountability and social responsibility” (p. 89). Subsequently, Shields stated that transformative leadership

begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others. (Shields, 2011)

Transformative leadership therefore is an ethical approach to leadership that foregrounds equity and social justice (Langlois, 2011; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2021). It focuses on what happens in schools and universities and other institutions as well as in society as

a whole. Regardless of the specific form transformative leadership might take, it is a critical leadership theory grounded in the values of equity, excellence, inclusion, and justice.

Although it stands alone, the purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the theory of transformative leadership, to discuss some of the originating principles and approaches, and to provide a touchstone for the other articles in this issue. Although this article makes reference to some empirical work, largely completed in the last decade, it is a conceptual piece designed in part to demonstrate why transformative leadership theory can offer hope and optimism while other leadership theories may fall short. And although it may be possible at times to suggest some practical applications and strategies, these are limited here, in that transformative leadership is always dependent on the context and cultural norms where it is being practiced.

2. Some Originating Principles

The theory of transformative leadership itself is often traced to James McGregor Burns' seminal work *Leadership* (Burns, 1978), in which he posits the need for leadership to be revolutionary to accomplish "a complete and pervasive transformation of an entire social system" (p. 202). Moreover, Burns distinguishes between simple change and transformation that causes "a metamorphosis in form or structure, a change in the very condition or nature of a thing" (Burns, 2003, p. 24). Transformative leadership is more than helping an organization operate efficiently; it involves disrupting current patterns of beliefs, practices, and policies in ways that change the very structures of organizations and/or society; it makes radical changes that are sustainable and even permanent, as when a chrysalis changes to a butterfly.

Another person often associated with the origins of transformative leadership is Paulo Freire who emphasized the importance of context, the need for a deep understanding of culture, and conscientization or self-awareness (Freire, 1992). The development of critical consciousness requires a deep awareness of one's social reality and of the differing material realities of others. Nonetheless, Freire acknowledges that awareness does not in itself lead to change but rather requires political struggle. He stated

A more critical understanding of the situation of oppression does not yet liberate the oppressed. But the revelation is a step in the right direction. Now the person who has this new understanding can engage in a political struggle for the transformation of the concrete conditions in which the oppression prevails. (Freire, 1992, pp. 30–31)

In education, William Foster exercised early influence on the development of transformative leadership. He asserted that educational leadership should be "critically educative," that it should not "only look at the conditions in which we live" but decide how to change them (Foster, 1986, p. 185).

Subsequently Quantz et al. (1991) stated that "schools were in a state of confusion" and indicated that "of the commonly discussed theories, only the concept of transformative leadership appears to provide an appropriate direction" (p. 96). These authors then proceeded to identify five areas in which transformative leadership could help to clarify and guide leadership practice. They argued that schools are arenas of cultural politics, that organizations must be based on democratic authority, that transformative leaders should come from all levels of an organization, that they promote conditions and discourse which cultivate more leaders, and that TLT requires a language of both critique and possibility.

The commonalities among these early conceptions of transformative leadership are clear. As they emphasize the need to change the inequitable material conditions in which many people live, they all critique the presence of unequal and hegemonic power

structures. Additionally, they focus on democratic agency and on the need for ethical policies and practices. More recently, van Oord wrote that recognizing the conceptual murkiness among leadership theories

Scholars such as Shields (2010, 2012) have in recent years successfully endeavoured to define and theorize transformative leadership as distinctively separate from the transformational approach. Transformative leadership is characterized by its activist agenda and its overriding commitment to social justice, equality and a democratic society. (van Oord, 2013, pp. 421–422)

More recently, there has been an explosion of work related to transformative leadership in education as well as in other fields such as business (Caldwell et al., 2012), political leadership (Awang et al., 2020; Bukusi, 2020; Jacobs et al. 2020), journalism (Pavlik, 2013), or Indigenous leadership (Cole, 2024; Weerasinghe et al., 2023). Much work also began to address issues in higher education such as the formation of the Oaks Leadership program (Bruce et al., 2019), the focus on students' reading (Amaechi & Motalenyane, 2023), extension programs (Diaz et al., 2025), ethics (Drinkwater & Waghid, 2024) or higher education leadership in general (Caldwell & Anderson, 2021). In education, many empirical studies have focused on how transformative leadership can support student learning (Bieneman, 2011; Halim & Rofiki, 2022; Shields & Warke, 2010). Studies also examine the need to address challenges for African American students (Graham & Nevarez, 2017; Watson & Rivera-McCutchen, 2016), African American teachers (Generett & Welch, 2018; Wilson, 2016), to focus on queer students (Zook, 2017), and to ensure the inclusion of students with special needs (Carrington et al., 2024; Shields 2025). There has been research that emphasizes a particular aspect of transformative leadership such as identity (Kühn, 2025), entrepreneurship (Hoppe & Namdar, 2024), teacher excellence (Virgana & Fitriani, 2025), or a theory of action (Adams et al., 2023). And although many of these studies come from countries other than predominantly English-speaking ones (Nepal, India, the Netherlands, Indonesia, Sweden, for example), most draw on some of the early literature identified above. This includes the edited volume, *Transformative Leadership in African Contexts* (Swartz et al., 2024), with chapters by authors from various African countries who combined many of the concepts already discussed with traditional African values like ubuntu, kanju, and sankofu and drew on the wisdom of people like Bishop Tutu, Marguerie Barab-kitse, or the amaXhosa peoples. Their goal was to discuss how transformative leadership could be relevant in African contexts, and in some cases, even combat colonization and colonialism.

There are, however, other approaches to transformative leadership which appear to have been developed separately. One major formulation is that of Dr. Anello and colleagues, first elaborated at Núr University, Bolivia and now extending into much of Latin America. The book, *Transformative Leadership* (Anello et al., 2014), first emphasizes the need to transform understanding, and then to develop new capabilities. Similar to Shields' conception, they emphasize the need for new mental models, and for a paradigm shift. Their construct, Hernandez explains in a comprehensive article outlining its origins, grew from principles of the Bahá'í faith (Hernandez, 2018).

Transformative leadership theory, as articulated by the authors identified above, is inclusive of everyone even though it recognizes that there are many paths to achieving the desired goals. It is always firmly grounded in moral and ethical values about an institution or society. Regardless of the path taken, transformative leadership therefore must be emancipatory, and in some ways, revolutionary.

3. Ongoing Challenges

It is clear that transformative leadership is not new and that it now seems to be recognized world-wide; yet it has never become the dominant approach in education and school leadership. Moreover, there are still numerous challenges relating to transformative leadership. One is the ongoing confounding of two theories often thought to emerge from Burns' (1978) approach to transforming leadership: transformational leadership and transformative leadership. Both terms come from the Latin *transformare* and the French *transformer*. Yet, despite their almost synonymous use in common speech, they are conceptually distinct. *Transformative* focuses on the *ability* to bring about change or transformation and highlights the *outcome* (in this case equity), while *transformational* emphasizes the *process* itself (italics mine).

In leadership theory, transformational tends to focus on the seminal constructs of Bass and Avolio (1994) and in education, those of Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) who identify four specific constructs that help to create loyalty and efficiency within an institution. Thus, for example, in an article entitled *Transformative leadership: cultivating teacher excellence through satisfaction, environment, and self-efficacy*, one soon reads, "recognizing teachers as leaders in enhancing the quality of education, it becomes evident that transformational leadership, especially from school principals, has a direct impact on teachers' self-efficacy (SE)" (Virgana & Fitriani, 2025, p. 1066). Similar confounding of the two terms also appears in other recent articles. Awang et al. (2020) emphasize the "four transformational leadership dimensions" while Jacobs et al. (2020) and Mishra et al. (2024) use the word transformational in their texts, but the word transformative in their titles.

In 2023, Cheng and colleagues asked in an article, why only some new ideas seem to "become integrated into our collective understanding and knowledge base" (Cheng et al., 2023, p. 525). Indeed, there has been considerable recent research into the theory of idea diffusion (García-Avilés, 2020; Wani & Ali, 2015). García-Avilés states that this theory may be traced to the work of Rogers (1931–2004) who identified five attributes of an innovation that may influence its adoption: "relative advantage in comparison to existing technologies, compatibility with the organization workflows and knowledge, complexity to implement, trialability, and observability" (p. 2).

Transformative leadership demonstrates considerable advantage as it emphasizes not only producing better academic achievement but also the creation of a more equitable global community. Yet in some ways it may seem incompatible with other educational approaches such as the neoliberal accountability movement, or the human capital theory in education. It is also incompatible with the ideas of the group of educators who gathered in Chicago in 1956 to chart a course for educational leadership and who determined that "ought" questions had no place in science, and therefore no place in educational administration and leadership (Culbertson, 1995). This "objective" stance has led to multiple problems, including the erasure of history, the denial of culture, and the disregard of societal issues such as power, privilege, bias, or prejudice. Thus, the values basis of transformative leadership may be difficult for some to accept. The fact that transformative leadership has multiple different approaches and tenets and numerous implementation strategies may make it seem too complex to guide educational leadership. Nevertheless, the results of implementing transformative leadership are relatively observable, as one can identify increased motivation, satisfaction, inclusion, and success according to chosen criteria. Finally, because transformative leadership is not a prescriptive theory, it may seem that trialability is difficult at best. Nevertheless, although one cannot impose a fixed trial protocol, the emphasis on contextual diagnosis, action, and reflection represents progress over more mechanical approaches.

4. A New Paradigm

Despite the previous challenges, the brief overview of literature presented above indicates that there has been considerable diffusion of transformative leadership. Yet, there is still a need to clearly demonstrate both its advantage and its compatibility with the goals of education in order to promote its further adoption and implementation. Earlier, more technical and mechanistic approaches to educational leadership focused on socializing students into society as it was, encouraged obedience and rote learning, and thus discouraged innovation and creativity. Yet, as Morgan (2006) stated, “the mechanistic approach to organization belongs to the mechanic age” (p. 31). If we want more equitable, inclusive, and just outcomes, it is time for school leaders to reject the dominant scientific leadership approaches and to employ a different theory. In fact, I argue here that one way to proceed is to call transformative leadership theory a paradigm and to clarify its axiology, ontology, epistemology, and methodology, (see Table 1). Although transformative leadership has not previously been termed a paradigm, clearly identifying it as such will help to emphasize its underlying assumptions. Moreover, as a new leadership paradigm, it will be seen to be ethically, contextually and culturally relevant, relational, and values based.

Table 1. Leadership Paradigms.

	Old Leadership Paradigm	New Leadership Paradigm
Influences	Scientific management, new managerialism	Critical perspectives; cultural & contextual awareness
Axiology	Value-free, objective	Emphasizes values & ethics; culturally responsive; foregrounds equity, inclusion, justice
Ontology	Accepts world as it is; social hierarchies are inevitable; only tinkering as improvement is required	Challenges injustices; multiple versions of reality; material inequities in world require redress & action
Epistemology	Hierarchical frameworks and assumptions have long been established & often reflect domination, colonialism, and power inequities	Not hierarchical; need for relational & multiple perspectives; dialogic, requiring all voices to be heard; recognition of interconnectedness & inter-reliance
Methodology	Seek theoretical understanding, no inherent action identified	Attends to contextual & historical factors; includes multiple perspectives; relational; goal is justice & human rights

Regardless of one’s context or culture, all forms of transformative leadership theory will demonstrate some common aspects of a paradigm shift. Transformative leadership theory is not objective, but rather its dominant axiology (values stance) emphasizes equity, inclusion, and justice. Transformative leaders value the voices and perspectives of all, regardless of culture, religious belief, gender identity, etc. It is consistent with Burns statement that the outcomes of transformative leadership should be a revolution that requires complete and pervasive transformation of the conditions that leave “billions of the world’s people in the direst want” (Burns, 2003, p. 2). And as Anello et al. (2014, p. 25) posit, “the well-being of humanity is impossible without regard for moral and ethical obligations.”

The ontology or worldview of a new leadership paradigm acknowledges that there are multiple perspectives and versions of reality, but that all should challenge inequity and injustice where they may be found. It is critically important for transformative leaders to embrace approaches that lead to peaceful and prosperous co-existence and to reject

those that involve oppression. Thus, for example, it may be appropriate to criticize the approach of a government, condemning racism or anti-semitism, but to support its citizens. This is not a relativistic, “anything goes” approach, but one that builds relationships based on mutual respect. Ideas must be subjected to the truth of the evidence that increasingly demonstrates the interconnectedness and interdependence of world events.

Epistemology, the nature of knowledge, is also multiple. It values both traditional knowledge and indigenous knowledges and rejects a hierarchy of knowledges. It recognizes the critical importance of mental models and mindsets and takes seriously the findings of Johnson (2008, p. 85). that “what separates successful leaders from unsuccessful ones is their mental models or meaning structures, not their knowledge, information, training, or experience per se.” As Anello and colleagues suggest, “Transformative learning challenges our ways of thinking and helps us to critically examine the fundamental assumptions underlying our worldview or mental models, resulting in life-changing insights” (Anello et al., 2014, p. 3). Few leadership theories take the need for challenging our knowledge frameworks and mindsets seriously.

The methodologies for transformative leadership are committed to deep and equitable change, rather than a perpetuation of the status quo. Because they emerge from a worldview that is holistic, they reflect the need for cooperation, wholeness, and inclusiveness. Thus, multiple approaches to leadership, curriculum, pedagogies, and research are acceptable as long as they rest on moral, and not avaricious principles.

Fritoj Capra, called for a new balance, a “radically different social and economic structure,” and concluded that “the survival of our whole civilization may depend on whether we can bring about such a change” (Capra, 1977, p. 298). Transformative leadership may help to usher in such a balance.

5. Frameworks for Transformative Leadership

When we concur with the many scholars who argue the need for new, innovative approaches (Berryman & Eley, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2020; Makaiau et al., 2023; Milner, 2017, 2021) and when we affirm a complex understanding of our world, we recognize the need for adopting a new approach to educational leadership. Because we acknowledge that education itself must be holistic, incorporating elements of many disciplines focused on creating intellectual, social, ethical, cultural, economic, and spiritual well-being, we must ground educational leadership itself in an integrative and holistic approach. Although there are many other formulations I could include, some of which you will read in this special issue, I mention here a few representative approaches from various countries and continents in order to demonstrate the wide applicability and interpretive flexibility of a theory that is not prescriptive but values based. I then conclude with a more extensive examination of the ways in which I have, over my career, articulated the theory of transformative leadership.

As previously indicated, there are many different versions of transformative leadership, all values-based, and all focused on improving the conditions of humanity. Wheatley (1992, p. 133) emphasizes that effective leadership is built on the governing principles of “guiding visions, strong values, and organizational beliefs” which permit individuals within the organization to shape their own behaviour.” These are consistent with all versions of transformative leadership I have encountered. Anello and colleagues (previously mentioned from South America) identify the dual purpose of their form of transformative leadership as “personal and social transformation” (Anello et al., 2014, pp. 91–92). They posit the need to develop “qualities and capabilities that perfect us as human beings” and then to contribute to “the advancement of civilization” (Anello et al., 2014, pp. 91–92).

In 2012, Gumbonzvanda (from Africa), then general secretary of the world’s Young Women’s Christian Association, asserted that to be transformative, leaders have to

“address the root causes and the underlying factors that create inequalities, disempowerment or women’s lack of enjoyment of their human rights” (Gumbonzvanda, 2012, p. 5). In her summary of the characteristics that make leadership transformative, she identified a commitment to the transformation of “underlying social, economic, political, cultural and other factors that sustain the subjugation, discrimination and disempowerment of women,” a clear and robust vision for making change happen, a recognition of power dynamics, a commitment to collaborate and share knowledge, and listening to the voices of others who may be marginalized, including one’s adversaries. Her pre-occupation with transformative leadership generally, and women and girls in particular, continues in her present role as UN Assistant Secretary-General and UN Women Deputy Executive Director for Normative Support.

Van Oord, writing as director of studies at the United World College of Southern Africa in Swaziland, accentuates what Anello et al. call in their approach, “capabilities.” Thus, van Oord emphasizes critical agency, deliberation, knowledge creation, student participation, and action. He states that “education is never a neutral and indifferent activity” (van Oord, 2013, p. 429) and offers a protocol for decision-making and deliberation that, he argues, may generate significant commitment to the “critical collaboration and inclusive action research needed to foster genuine transformation” (p. 433).

Earlier, I quoted from Weiner’s (2003) discussion of Paulo Freire’s work as Secretary of Education in Brazil from 1989 to 1991. His discussion of the risks and benefits of adopting strategies of transformative leadership undoubtedly indicate how the guiding principles of conscientization, curiosity, hope, critique, and radical democracy can lead to “a political, social, individual, and spiritual horizon not yet known” (Weiner, 2003, p. 90). He argued that to effect change, transformative leadership “must have one foot in the dominant structures of power and authority, and as such become “willing” subjects of dominant ideological and historical conditions” (p. 91). As he acknowledged the push back and struggles that faced Freire in this role, Weiner posited that

transformative leadership, to be transformative, must confront more than just what is, and work toward creating an alternative political and social imagination that does not rest solely on the rule of capital or the hollow moralism of neoconservatives, but is rooted in democratic struggle. (Weiner, 2003, p. 92)

He further emphasized that transformative leadership has a responsibility to link “not only the private and public, but also the empirical and theoretical, the everyday and the future, the imaginative and the real, the past and the forgotten, history and tradition, power and knowledge, and learning and life” (Weiner, 2003, p. 98).

In other words, the task is immense. As all of these frameworks demonstrate, regardless of the context, transformative leadership requires commitment, moral courage, and a strong vision of both current reality and the possibility of an alternative, more equal future. It thus always involves a critical engagement with local power structures and a commitment to amplify marginalized voices. Moreover, as Weiner (2003, p. 100) acknowledged, transformative leadership is “anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, and responsive to class exploitation” and to that list, one could add several other “antis” including anti-xenophobic, anti-transphobic, anti-ageist, and so on.

6. Shields’ Conception of Transformative Leadership

Drawing on the many other scholarly writings that mention transformative leadership (see for example Bates, 1995; Bennis, 1986; Capper, 1989; Foster, 1986, 1989), I determined that my task was to articulate it as a theory. A theory is an established model that explains why or how specific outcomes occur. Given that a theory provides a systematic framework that helps to describe and predict outcomes, that it is based on evidence, and

that it may be subject to testing, I added two general (and predictive) principles to the original eight tenets I drew from literature and practice. (See Figure 1). The two foundational **principles** articulate the hypothesized outcomes of a transformative environment, while the eight **tenets** describe the commitments and practices required of leaders to realize those outcomes.

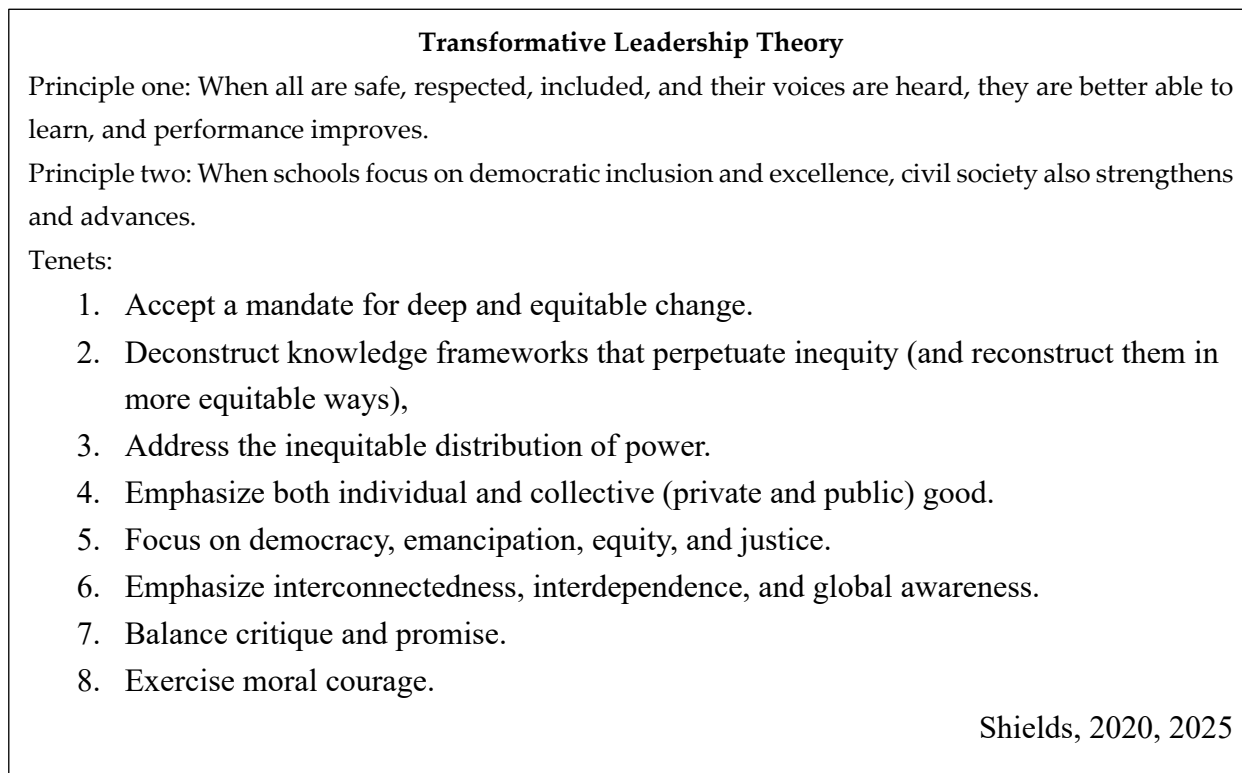


Figure 1. Transformative Leadership Theory (Shields, 2020, 2025).

The first principle or hypothesis is that when all are safe, respected, included, and their voices are heard, they are better able to learn, and overall performance improves (holistically and not just in terms of test scores). This individual principle, based on Starratt's (1991) notion of absolute regard is generally applicable to students and teachers in education as well as to employees in many other fields. A student who is worried about where she will sleep at night, about whether there will be food on the table, or even whether he will be bullied or teased at recess cannot adequately focus on the learning tasks at hand. An adult worried about an upcoming evaluation or meeting, wondering if there will be another paycheck, or stewing about the comment or microaggression of a colleague is unlikely to fully attend to the task at hand. Moreover, these aspects of TLT may easily be tested empirically.

The second principle pertains to the concept of community, or the collective, and draws on both Labaree's (1997) notion of "democratic equality" and Green's (1999) concept of mutually beneficial-deep democracy. It predicts that when schools or other organizations focus on democratic inclusion and excellence, civil society also strengthens and advances. Teaching and modelling approaches to strong relationships, civil dialogue, and to respectful collective action help to create spaces for work and learning which are conducive to both individual growth and societal improvement. As the title of a book edited by Bingham and Sidorkin (2004), posits, there can be no real education without relation. Moreover, as Hutchison (in their volume) argues, relations "strengthen a commitment to be active participatory citizens in a democratic community" (Hutchison, 2004, p. 73).

Taken together, the two principles indicate ways in which both education and society need to be reformed in order to fully and equitably include and value everyone and to emphasize both private and public good. In an age when civility seems to be declining, particularly in public and political discourse, when disrespect is rampant, and when trust in public organizations is rapidly decreasing, emphasizing these principles and the tenets which can guide in their development and implementation is essential. The eight tenets that follow are neither sequential nor prescriptive; however, they do highlight the need for a holistic leadership approach grounded in the values of equity, excellence, inclusion, and justice.

The first tenet, “accept a mandate for deep and equitable change” is reflective of these values. Here is where Freire’s (1992) conscientization holds sway as transformative leaders become critically aware of their own values and positions, those of their organization, and community context. They will need to determine where inequities exist and, perhaps, which to focus on first. Additionally, transformative leaders will understand (as Freire did) the risks inherent in attempting to challenge and overcome inequities and will carefully identify their non-negotiables.

To implement the second tenet, “deconstruction of knowledge frameworks that perpetuate inequity and their reconstruction in more equitable ways,” transformative leaders will first examine their own mental models, reject all forms of deficit thinking, and determine again, how to proceed. They will challenge all assumptions and actions that lead to marginalization and oppression. Hence, leaders will need a holistic approach that acknowledges such ideas as the sordid saga of exploration, discovery, and colonization, or the long history of global slavery which extends into the present in the forms of forced labour, human trafficking, and forced marriages. They will need to understand and address discrimination of all kinds, including homo- and trans-phobia, xenophobia, racism, and so forth. This will require the sensitive addition of these topics into the curriculum and the ongoing conversations of the institution. Until leaders acknowledge the persistence of systemic prejudice and implement new, more equitable knowledge frameworks, most changes will be performatory, similar to moving around the sets for a stage play, but will result in little sustainable transformation.

The third tenet, draws on the notion by Quantz et al. (1991) that the unequal distribution of power must be addressed. As previously noted, earlier forms of scientific management and leadership theories tended to be hierarchical and hence to devalue any approach, dictum, or advice that did not come directly from the top. In education, such approaches have led to some particularly unfortunate pedagogical approaches such as many direct instruction tactics that mandate that all classes be on the same page at the same time, or that all students respond simultaneously to the same writing prompt, regardless of skill level, interest, or experience (Englemann, 1968). Similarly, attempting to communicate rules and policy from the top without attending to the culture of the school or community can lead to unfortunate misunderstandings and outcomes. Requiring a principal to greet all parents with a handshake, for example, may lead Muslim families to mistrust the leadership or to feel marginalized.

Tenet four, the need to develop both individual and collective good will lead to a strengthening of the whole community as well as to individual growth and development. Thus, as students develop their own conscientization about the backgrounds and experiences of others, they will develop empathy rather than criticism of those different from themselves. The focus will no longer be on a student eating with his hands during a school lunch period, but on the global cultures where this practice is common. Similarly, no individual or sub-group will be singled out and blamed for a school’s under-performance on a test, but the whole organization will be strengthened as all work together to remediate the scores.

In tenet five, a focus on democracy, emancipation, equity, and justice, leaders will ensure that institutional norms emphasize the values of democracy, emancipation, equity, and justice, rather than standards, assessment, and competition. Instead of focusing on equality, in which all act and think similarly, leaders will stress dialogue and understanding of difference. Just as it would be irrational to require all students to wear glasses simply because one child is short-sighted, it is unreasonable to treat everyone in exactly the same way. Rather, each should be supported and encouraged according to their need. Too often, one thinks of diversity as a value, while in fact, it is simply our reality. Unfortunately, it is the disparity that often emerges from diversity that is problematic and untenable. Hence, in both schools and other social institutions, everyone will learn how to address disparity to ensure that deep democracy is mutually beneficial (Green, 1999).

This leads to the sixth tenet, which emphasizes interconnectedness, interdependence, and global awareness. It is not adequate to focus on equity, democracy, and justice within a specific location. Rather, transformative leaders will highlight interconnectedness, interdependence, and global awareness. All will recognize that what happens in one part of the world has implications for others, thousands of miles away. They will no longer argue that “we must look after our own first,” because there will be a general recognition that all global citizens are our neighbors. They will accept, not only their responsibility to those they know, but also to all who, for example, do not have safe, clean drinking water or adequate food to eat. In other words, education for social justice does not simply involve creating a safe environment where one is but also informing citizens who understand their global responsibilities for ensuring safe and equitable environments globally.

The seventh tenet of my version of transformative leadership, balance critique and promise, comprises two actions. Critique and criticism are not synonyms. Criticism involves allocating blame while critique involves a careful systemic analysis of the root causes and the underlying factors that create inequalities and that marginalize and disempower others. But then we must act. And our action needs to convey hope and a surety that what will emerge will be an improvement for all. Promise—as both a noun and a verb—signifies our commitment to act for the benefit of our fellow citizens, wherever they may live.

The need for transformative leaders to exemplify moral courage is the final tenet, although it also pervades all the other principles and tenets. After carefully examining TLT holistically, courage becomes particularly salient. All must have a clear sense of their ethical compass and hence their personal identity. If a leader wants too much to be liked, or if he or she takes every slight personally, it is almost impossible to be transformative. Transforming unjust and inequitable situations requires that leaders be prepared for conflict and backlash. They must be willing to take a stand even in the face of opposition because redressing wrongs will often mean that those who are already privileged and powerful will feel a sense of loss when others, who have typically been on the outside, are brought into the center of the organization. Thus, transformative leaders will need to find allies and work collaboratively in order to sustain the work and resist possible burnout when resistance is high.

One’s starting point may be different, given the various contexts and cultures within which leaders work, but the underlying values of equity and inclusion are constant. Thus, if one is a leader in an indigenous context in Australia, Canada, or New Zealand, for example, one might wish to begin by addressing the knowledge frameworks that exclude indigenous knowledges and to address the ongoing impact of colonization on their constituents. In some cultures, where girls as young as 11 or 12 are forced into marriage, as the work of Gumbonzvanda (2012) demonstrates, one’s concern may begin with addressing equity for women. Elsewhere, perhaps in a rural community in Scandinavia or North America, the inequity one tackles first might be poverty exacerbated by a lack of public

transportation that prevents some students from participating fully in the activities of the school. In an American urban school, one might decide that fighting racism, homophobia, or xenophobia (or all three) are pressing issues. What matters is that transformative leaders identify and take steps to address the inequities in their organizations.

After examining many descriptions and experiences with transformative leadership, Anello et al. asserted, with certainty, that they

Have seen from experience that transformative leadership has universal validity and is successfully practiced in different cultural and national settings. The diverse experiences naturally contribute to a growing understanding of the concepts implicit in each element. (Anello et al., 2014, p. 124)

As transformative leadership is exercised in various contexts, it is the consistent commitment to the core values of equity and justice that exemplifies its “universal validity.” Moreover, although universal validity may not yet have been achieved, it is clear that values-focused transformative leadership theory has wide applicability to many cultures and contexts even though the enactment may differ. Transformative leaders will choose which inequities to address and which strategies and practices to use depending on the context and culture where they work.

7. Assessing the Potential of Transformative Leadership

Given the very real challenges with which society is confronted, it becomes clear that to address them, particularly those that oppress or marginalize children and youth, leadership with clear vision and values is needed. Moreover, given the need for a holistic paradigm of educational leadership, it is important to assess the potential of transformative leadership theory as compared with other dominant theories. To do so, I use abductive reasoning, a type of reasoning that seeks the most likely conclusion from a set of observations or principles. It embeds data in an inferential network, in this case, about the need for socially just education and overcoming the presence of an uneven playing field. It justifies a generalization because “it explains the observed empirical data and no other alternative hypothesis offers a better explanation of what has been observed” (Evers & Wu, 2006, p. 513). Thus, after examining the principles and tenets of transformative leadership theory as well as those of other theories, I believe TLT best leads us to discover ways of addressing marginalization and oppression, and of creating institutional and social environments that are equitable, inclusive, excellent and socially just. In abductive reasoning one works backwards to find the theory that encompasses the majority of desired outcomes, hence I start with the need to foreground equity and inclusion.

Many theories of educational research, including managerial, transactional, or hierarchical theories fall within what might be called the positivistic paradigm. Of these, Su-Keen et al. (in press, n.p.) have stated that the ontology of positivism was both reductionist and determinist in its demand for generalization. Moreover, they assert that “it reduces the findings (and the persons within the study) to cardboard cutouts” (Su-Keen et al., in press) rather than enhancing identity and justice.

In addition, many earlier theories, such as transformational or distributed leadership, tend to focus on the effectiveness and efficiency of the organization as a whole, and do not necessarily foreground equity or social justice for individuals or sub-groups. Other theories that one might describe as less hierarchical and less deterministic, such as democratic or servant leadership still do not foreground equity and inclusion. Democratic leadership tends to highlight processes such as voting, arguing that each person is entitled to one vote. However, such a process does not guarantee that the rights of the minorities are respected or considered. Servant leadership focuses on helping others and is often associated with doing something *for* them rather than *with* them. In addition, as Kuhn argues,

servant leadership “may obscure the persistence of power asymmetries and institutional inequalities” (Kühn, 2025, p. 535).

Transformative leadership theory emerges as the most compelling way to systematically dismantle inequitable structures, to distribute power more equitably, and to ground action in deep democracy, justice, and inclusion. The theory of transformative leadership alone aims to correct social, political, economic, and cultural structures that perpetuate systemic inequities and injustices, and hence, it appears to best exemplify the leadership theory required to address the global crises and challenges of the 21st century.

Further, transformative leadership theory does not focus solely on the formal leaders of an organization, but as Quantz et al. (1991) wrote, “leaders do not gather followers, but help promote conditions and discourse which cultivate more leaders” (p. 108). Transformative leadership theory goes beyond addressing the culture of the institution within which a leader may work in order to help all members to recognize inequities wherever they may be found and to understand their responsibilities for addressing and overcoming them. It therefore works to create conversations around emancipation and domination, around justice and democracy, and to enhance the critical understanding and sense of responsibility of all members of an organization (Adams et al., 2023; Generett & Welch, 2018). As we saw earlier in this article, transformative leadership centers the power that comes from respectful and meaningful relationships and collaboration that includes and values the participation of every member of the organization. It includes identity work (Makaiau et al., 2023; Amaechi & Motalenyane, 2023), hope Kühn (2025), and ethics (Drinkwater & Waghid, 2024) and emphasizes relationships and community (Diaz et al., 2025; Edwards et al., 2021).

Since the beginning of formal education, there have been debates about its goals and overarching purpose, with some arguing for the custodial function and others positing the need for socialization into existing norms. However, a quarter of a century ago, Astin and Astin wrote:

We believe that the value ends of leadership should be to enhance equity, social justice, and the quality of life; to expand access and opportunity; to encourage respect for difference and diversity; to strengthen democracy, civic life, and civic responsibility; and to promote cultural enrichment, creative expression, intellectual honesty, the advancement of knowledge, and personal freedom coupled with responsibility. (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 11)

This is the vision and version of leadership proposed here, and which is exemplified by transformative educational leadership. Transformative leadership has no rules or prescriptions to follow, but it does rely on principles and values that will advance the conditions of all humanity. If we accept the articulation of Astin and Astin, then it is clear that transformative leadership theory has the potential to promote it. It also has the ability to advance the United Nations goal of equity, inclusion, quality, and lifelong learning for all.

We offer this special issue, therefore, as a provocation and a resource. It is a call to researchers to deepen empirical and philosophical inquiry into transformative praxis, and a call to practitioners to exercise the moral courage to begin this necessary work within their own spheres of influence. The challenges delineated at the outset of this article demand nothing less than a transformative reimagining of leadership itself.

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