

SAMPLE CHAPTER

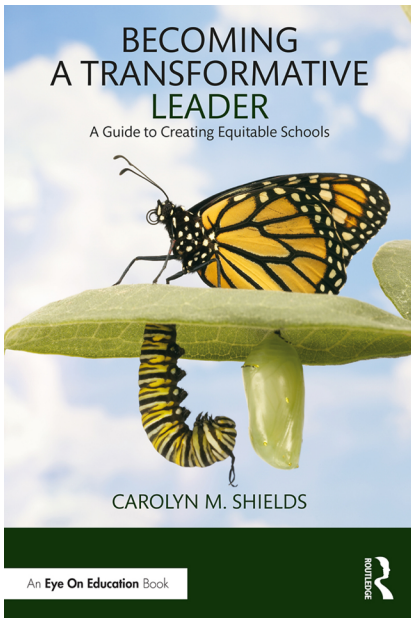
Activities for Deep and Equitable School Change



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Contents



1. Tenet One: Accepting the Mandate for Deep and Equitable Change



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from Becoming a Transformative Leader: A Guide to Creating Equitable Schools

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1

Tenet One

Accepting the Mandate for Deep and Equitable Change

Transformative leadership theory asks leaders to begin by carefully considering whether they are willing to expend the effort and to take the risks inherent in striving for deep and equitable change.

In order to do so, leaders will need to

- Reflect on their own beliefs, values, and assumptions
- Examine data from their school
- Understand the community context—social, political, and cultural within which they work

For further discussion of the importance of context, you may want to refer to chapter 3 of *Transformative Leadership in Education* (Shields, 2016).

Once we have spent time carefully reflecting on our situation and the needs of our community, we can determine whether or not we are ready to accept the mandate for what transformative leadership calls “deep and equitable change.” This is the kind of change represented by the cover image of these books—a caterpillar going through the stages of metamorphosis to become a butterfly. In other words, this change is permanent and not easily undone.

In this and other chapters you will find some specific activities intended to help you reflect together on the kinds of changes needed and to begin to implement them. Strategies, such as journaling, free writing, and the use of dialogue, will need to be repeated frequently.

The Need for Shared Vision

It is important to recognize that although this kind of deep and equitable change requires total commitment on the part of the educational leader, it also requires that the vision and commitment be shared throughout the organization. Hence, once the leader or leadership team has identified the need for equitable change and accepted the challenge, all activities to be discussed here and in subsequent chapters may be used during staff meetings and professional development sessions. The key is to ensure the vision is embedded throughout the organization and provides the focus for dialogue, policies, and activities. A one-time injection may work for a flu shot, but it does not work as a means of transforming schools. It is not enough to provide one session about equity, inclusion, excellence, and social justice in a designated professional development session. Dialogue about these topics must be threaded throughout every gathering of teaching teams, committees, or full staff meetings. It must be intentional and ongoing.

Let's get started.

Understanding Yourself

To begin, you need to know yourself. What guides you? What grounds you? Are there values or principles so important to you that you might be willing to risk your job for them? You may find it useful to keep a journal of your reflections and ideas you wish to explore further.

Perform a Cultural Inventory

One way to start might be to do a cultural inventory. If you were asked to share one item that reflects your cultural identity, what would it be? Would it be a piece of ethnic clothing? A souvenir from a recent trip? Something passed down from your great-grandmother?



Experiences with Diversity

You may also want to reflect on your own experiences with diversity by filling in the following questionnaire and sharing your responses with someone else.

1. I first met someone from a different ethnic group when I was _____ years old.
2. In my third-grade class, there were _____ people whose skin was a different color from mine.
3. There are _____ members of a visible minority who work in my organization (or school, or unit).
4. Have you ever been made to feel that you did not belong? What happened and how did you feel? _____

5. Have you ever caught yourself saying something that unintentionally expressed implicit bias? Write about what you did and how you realized it. _____

Thinking About Your Name

Another activity that is sometimes useful for raising issues of privilege, inclusion, and diversity when in a group situation is to give each person a sheet of poster paper and some colored markers and to ask them to draw images that suggest the significance of their name. Give each person no more than 10 minutes to explain their drawing and then post them around the room for further conversation.

It is interesting to consider where names come from, especially perhaps the names of those who were former slaves. First names were “given” to them upon arrival in America, despite the fact that all already had names.

Surnames were not considered important and so, after emancipation, a number of former slaves took the names of their former owners. Some, like Sojourner Truth, changed the names they already had (she changed from Isabella Baumfree); and others felt compelled to adopt names to represent their new freedom. One former slave, for example, when asked his name, indicated it was simply John. When asked, "John what?" the response was "simply John" to which reply he was asked the name of his former owner. When it was suggested he should be called by that name, his response was immediate, "Oh, no, master lieutenant, please don't put that down ... I've objections to that ... It will always make me think of the old ways, sir, and I'm a free man now, sir." The result was that he was henceforth called John Freeman.

Where does your name come from? What does it signify? Why is that important to you?

Reflecting on Your Beliefs

To begin this reflection, you might want to access the *Transforming Leadership Questionnaire* mentioned in both the Preface and Chapter 1. This survey is intended to provide information about the extent to which current beliefs and practices reflect a focus on equity, inclusion, excellence, and social justice and will provide a basis for reflection as well as for identifying progress as you move forward.

Toward Increased Understanding

When I was asked to bring a cultural artifact to a recent meeting, I was stymied. What could possibly clearly demonstrate my cultural situation, that of a privileged, middle-class, aging White woman. I was very sure that others on the diversity committee of my university would bring ornaments or garments that truly reflected their ethnic backgrounds, but how could I accurately represent myself? I thought about the time when I had been at a conference in Cyprus and attendees had received invitations to a reception

at the palace that stated “dress: formal or ethnic.” Since I had not packed formal attire, it was an easy choice. I would have to do “ethnic,” which for me, of course, meant that I would wear the western clothes I normally wore. However, when I explained my choice to my colleagues, I was met with blank and confused stares. They did not understand that my everyday clothes were in fact my “ethnic” apparel. These made me further reflect on an article by a former colleague called *White is a Color* (Roman, 1993). In fact, often when I ask participants in professional development settings to identify some aspect of their culture they want to pass on to their children, most White participants seem confused, and ask if I am talking about their religion.

Ultimately, for the meeting, I created my own “cultural artifact”—a collage of images of my great-grandmother sitting in a long dress at the oars of her rowboat at her summer cottage, of my own grandparents (my grandmother a university graduate and my grandfather a banker and school board president), and my own parents—each generation surrounded by a multiage bevy of relatives enjoying the summer at the cottage. For me, there was no better way to demonstrate the privilege from which I come, and hence the responsibility I bear in the perpetuation of the status quo that advantages some (like me) and disadvantages others. Moreover, when I share my story, I emphasize my privilege. I also recognize that privilege has not sheltered me from trials such as illness or divorce. Nevertheless, it has given me tremendous advantages that I am compelled to acknowledge. And, when I think about my name, it is these images from my collage I also attempt to draw because I cannot escape my heritage. And yet, I am forced to reflect on the experiences of some of my African American students who recount that they cannot trace their ancestry as I am able, because most of their records were lost or non-existent due to America’s legacy of slavery.

My own lack of experiences with diversity as I grew up often raises questions on the part of others about how I became committed to equity. Growing up in a Canadian town of about 10,000 people, I first recall meeting someone from another ethnic group (Chinese) when I was in eighth grade and it was not until I was into university that I met a Black or Brown person. There was no visible ethnic diversity in my school, although I can still close my eyes and see a large teenage German boy, wearing a shirt and jacket, sitting at the back of my third-grade class. How lonely he must have been and how I wish I could just talk to him and make him smile. My organization now is highly diverse, although our College of Education in a university located in the heart of Detroit could still enhance

its cohort of African American and Latinx faculty to more fully represent our community.

When I think about feeling as though I did not belong, I also recall an experience shortly after I, and my then husband, a clergyman, moved into a manse in a town in Newfoundland. As I walked home from the store, a local man said, “You don’t belong here, do you?” He then proceeded to ask my name and attempted to deduce my place of birth by saying, “No, you can’t be from that community because they are Catholic.” As he continued, I knew with certainty that for him, because I had not been born in Newfoundland, I would never belong. But for me, that experience was temporary. It was somewhat amusing and did not hit at the core of who I am. It was not a reflection of my skin color, my sexual orientation, gender identity, or home language (although I did think his accent was peculiar).

My early insensitivity to issues of belonging and exclusion still causes me embarrassment. I had grown up hearing the phrase “Indian giver,” but had never given any thought to its offensiveness and origins. At one point, I taught in a high school with many wonderful colleagues including a First Nations man who was the school’s art teacher (and a particularly good friend). One day this colleague had lent me a pen and then, when I was finished with it, reminded me to return it (I am terrible about remembering such things.) As I pulled it out of my purse, I caught myself thinking “Indian giver.” Why did it come to mind? What did it mean and what does it mean when said aloud?

Did you think of common phrases such as “einey, meeny, miny, mo ...” or “gypped” or “spaz” or even “gay.” Also check out the origins of the following: whitewash, basket case, sold down the river, welfare queen, call a spade a spade, jew down, or off the reservation.

Take a few minutes to identify some offensive terms you heard (or used) growing up and share your current response to them:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

All of my experiences and reflections have taught me how important it is to help everyone to investigate their own backgrounds, their assumptions, and their positioning because some of us have plenty of experience being marginalized, while many of us also have experience being the ones who marginalize—without even realizing it.

Once we have spent time engaging in the critically important reflection about who we are, we can move on to examine our contexts. Let's start with the school.

Understanding Your School or Organizational Context

Educational leaders are very familiar with the need for data. In fact, you likely spend a great deal of time filling out reports, analyzing test scores, and preparing budget and enrollment reports. But data can be useful for identifying inequities within your school as well. And if you discover that there are no major challenges, no glaring inequities, then you can likely stop reading right now. There is no need to accept a mandate for deep and equitable change if you are already doing everything right (although I have never yet encountered a situation where that is the case).

Collect Baseline Data

Some people (see Brown & Shaked, 2018; Skrla et al. 2004) call the kind of data collection I am recommending an “equity audit;” I have often called it a “school profile.” The key is to collect some baseline data so you have an accurate picture of where you started, and what you have identified as key areas of equity or inequity. It will be useful to use these data as a basis for dialogue and also to assess your progress as you move forward.

At the outset, as you collect data, it is important to be aware of the distinctions between the commonly used term *equality*—which implies that everyone is treated in the same way—and *equity*—which focuses on fairness and may require unequal distribution of resources. Which is your goal?



Develop a School Profile

Here are some of the questions you can ask and data you can collect about your school.

How many students do you have in your school? What percent are African American? Latinx? Asian? Indigenous? Middle Eastern? Other? What percent are LGBTQ+? How many students and which ones are assigned to special education programs or have individualized education plans (IEPs)? Do you have a gifted program and if so, who is in it?

How many students live in poverty? (How many students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunches?)

How many teachers do you have and what are their demographics?

What intra- or extracurricular activities do you have in your school? Which students participate in which activities? (In other words, it is important to know if all your football players are Black and all your band members are White and to ask why.)

What is your overall student achievement? Which groups of students are meeting expectations? Which groups are failing to attain the expected standards?

Examine your attendance, discipline, and suspension statistics. Which groups of students are under-represented? Who is over-represented?

Conduct a SWOT Analysis

Once you have collected the necessary data, they can be a useful basis for ongoing dialogue with the whole staff because they can speak for themselves. Sometimes during dialogue about student achievement, people can fall into the trap (to be discussed in the next chapter) of deficit thinking—i.e., blaming the students, family, or a particular group.

Starting with the data can help to avoid finger pointing and blame and identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats presented to your organization.

- S** strengths
- W** weaknesses
- O** opportunities
- T** threats

What do the data tell you about what you are doing well? Where are there imbalances and inequities? Where are certain groups of students disproportionately represented—for example, are Black and Brown students disciplined more than White students? Are White students over-represented in gifted and talented programs? And so forth. Where are the opportunities for improvement? And where are threats for declining enrollment or for discontent?

What Would You Do?

You discover that in your gifted and talented (GT) program, 95% of the students are White. However, at the beginning of the year you have one Indigenous student, two Latinx girls, and one African American boy in the program. Soon the Indigenous student quits, shortly followed by the African American boy. How can you explain this? What could or should you do?

Engage in Free Writing

Throughout this book, the concept of free writing will be suggested frequently. I am aware of one school in which the principal asked teachers to begin each staff meeting by writing for five minutes. At first they resisted,

hating the activity. But soon, as they learned how powerful it was in terms of developing understanding and generating new ideas, teachers began to suggest topics and to ask if the others could write a response to a challenge they had identified.

Here, for example, you might ask the teachers to respond to the question:

Why do you think we have so few under-represented minority students in our GT program?

Once people have written for a few minutes, there are many different ways to proceed.

1. You may open a general dialogue now that there has been some individual reflection.
2. You can collect all the responses, summarize them, and use the summaries as a basis for subsequent conversations.
3. You may ask them to discuss in small groups what they have written.
4. You may have them crumple up their pages and toss them around the room several times, ultimately opening one in front of them and using it as a basis for discussion. (This keeps all responses anonymous and adults are surprisingly energetic about throwing paper.)
5. You may distribute the responses for smaller groups to consider at grade-level meetings, or committee meetings.

Discussion

Many of the responses may suggest that the White students are better prepared, or that the White students are the ones who applied for the GT program, or that it is the White parents who want their children to excel so they can get into university. Here, some prompts are likely in order: Are White students genetically more intelligent than others? Have we tried to encourage other students to participate? How have we identified giftedness? What if we changed our identification criteria? Are we using grades as a basis for

admission and is our curriculum truly designed for gifted students or simply for those who have performed well in the past?

An Example

One curriculum director noticed that in her district of 2300 students (over 60% of whom were African American), the population of the gifted program was 100% White. She began to ask, “Are you telling me that we only have bright Caucasian children and we have no bright African American children and no bright Hispanic children?” Ultimately, she reinstated an ad hoc committee, conducted a study, revamped the identification procedures, and “low and behold we had African American kids qualify, we had Hispanic kids qualify” and so the program became more diverse and more representative of the whole student population.

Research has shown consistently that when teachers and parents are taught some of the characteristics of giftedness (highly developed curiosity, endless questioning, interested in experimenting and doing things differently, long attention span, advanced sense of fairness, etc.), they do a more accurate job of nominating and identifying gifted children than many tests.

In fact, in the previous situation, of a program with over 95% White students, it would have been important for staff to ask themselves how they were identifying giftedness, and how a single child from a particular culture might have felt excluded and singled out. Indeed, this is an excellent example of how a sense of not belonging can impede academic progress.

■ Understanding Your Community Context

Finally, as part of your initial reflections, it is important to scan your community. Where are your supporters? What resources are available in the neighborhood? Which businesses, non-profits, churches, mosques, synagogues, or temples are in the vicinity of the school? We often think about

low-income neighborhoods or areas with high concentrations of immigrants as being impoverished; however, it is important to identify all of the positive resources that are available. As we have often heard: **People are our greatest asset.**

A Community of Difference


Sometimes we think in relatively narrow terms about community. We are aware that those who share a common interest are often considered a community, such as a community of runners or card players. Sometimes we talk about a neighborhood as a community; sometimes the term is used to refer to those who attend a church or a mosque. Yet, when we think about schools and educational institutions, it is important to recognize that we are thinking about a *community of difference*—one that is made up of people who do not necessarily share a common language, heritage, beliefs, or goals. In fact, it is the diversity of people and ideas that comes together within a school that can be its strength if we permit all voices to be heard and everyone to be treated with respect. Hence, a school as a community-of-difference is truly a learning community in which all members learn *with* and *from* each other.

Community Mapping

One way of getting to know your community is to engage in an activity that McKnight and Kretzman (1996) call “community mapping.” They explain that “first, all the historic evidence indicates that significant community development only takes place when local community people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort” (p. 2) and second, that “there is very little prospect that large-scale industrial or service corporations will be locating” in local urban neighborhoods. Especially in many low-income urban neighborhoods, we tend to think in terms of “needs” rather than “assets,” with the result that we focus on problems: drugs, violence, poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, or unemployment. Community mapping takes a different approach. It identifies all of the local resources, or resources that are local but controlled outside the neighborhood, including

vacant land, service agencies, home businesses, schools, libraries, and so forth. Making an actual map of the neighborhood with the school in the center can actually demonstrate the talents and richness of resources that are available near the school. (Creating the map might be a good activity for a class of students.)

Mapping the assets of a community is important because communities are not built on deficits, but rather destroyed by the kind of thinking that suggests the only hope is to “get out” and leave. Hence, neighborhoods and neighborhood schools must rely on local assets and capacities if they are to regenerate themselves and be successful.

After actually mapping physical resources, in their article called *Mapping Community Capacity*, McKnight and Kretzman include both sample maps and an extensive capacity inventory of possible skills one might ask community members about—maintenance and construction skills, childcare or care-giving experience, office work, and so forth . Knowing the resources you might call on will help you to accomplish your goals of rebuilding your school in more equitable ways.

Accepting the Mandate

Once you have spent time individually and with your school staff considering your own beliefs, values, and positioning, as well as identifying the equity needs of the school and community, you are in an informed position to make a courageous decision to begin the task of transforming your school culture and the learning environment for all students. This is not a task to take on lightly, but the rewards are enormous. When students and families know they are accepted, welcomed, and valued, they are able to commit to fully participating in all of the learning activities and decisions of the school community. In addition to challenges, you may have emotionally rewarding experiences, as did one school principal who had gained a reputation for working with, and respecting, homeless parents. In fact, several new families came to enroll their students, saying, “We know you don’t judge us here and we know that this school supports and helps all families and students. We are so grateful.”

Bring a transformative leader is both exhausting and gratifying work!

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